Navigating Sense of Belonging Amidst Neoliberal Values:

Ways sellers and writers of street newspaper Kralji ulice in Ljubljana, Slovenia, experience their sense of belonging under the influence of marginalisation, individualism, and consumerism

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Picture on cover: Graffiti near the Kralji ulice day center

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Abstract

This thesis explores the concept of belonging among marginalised individuals in Ljubljana, Slovenia, focusing on those involved with the street newspaper Kralji ulice (Kings of the Street), published by a non-governmental organisation of the same name. Utilising ethnographic research, including participant observation, qualitative interviews, conversations, and go-alongs, this study investigates how individuals experiencing marginalisation navigate their sense of belonging amidst neoliberal ideologies of individualism and consumerism. The research question addresses the experience of belonging among these individuals within the broader context of societal structures and economic pressures.

The research reveals that sense of belonging is affected by employment dynamics, societal attitudes, and supportive spaces. Participants in this study, sellers and writers for Kralji ulice, demonstrate that belonging transcends community participation and involves navigating barriers imposed by stigmatisation and economic hardship. Neoliberal values, particularly those emphasising individualism and consumerism, further make their experiences more difficult by exacerbating social divides and increasing stigma.

Key theoretical frameworks are employed to analyse the intersections of marginalisation, individualism, and consumerism. Findings underscore the significance of supportive organisations like Kralji ulice, which provide practical support and nurturing environment that fosters a sense of community and personal growth. The street newspaper itself serves as a platform for marginalised voices, promoting dignity and understanding.

Future research could benefit from extended fieldwork and comparative studies across different locations and with a broader participant base. Despite limitations, this research contributes valuable insights into the complexities of belonging within neoliberal societies and emphasises the need for empathy and inclusive support systems.

Keywords: *marginalisation, homelessness, houselessness, sense of belonging, individualism, consumerism, street newspaper*

1. Introduction

"A person feels a sense of belonging, feels accepted somewhere, where there are people that you know, you can come to and say 'Good day', who will take a moment for you and have a normal conversation with you. Without looking down on you and asking 'Who are you? Where did you come from?"

(Participant Marin on sense of belonging)

Understanding the experience of belonging is a crucial aspect of human existence and it is influenced by broader societal factors. This master's thesis investigates sense of belonging among people experiencing marginalisation in Ljubljana, Slovenia, by conducting ethnographic research with marginalised people who sell and write for a street newspaper published by the local aid organisation called Kralji ulice (translates to Kings[1] of the Street).

The primary research question guiding my research is: **What is the experience of sense of belonging among marginalised people in Ljubljana, particularly those involved with the street newspaper Kralji ulice, within the context of individualism and consumerism?**

With this research project I attempted to offer an intersectional analysis of issues of belonging among individuals experiencing marginalisation in Slovenia. By conducting ethnographic research with people who sell and write for Kralji ulice, this study aims to provide insights into how these individuals navigate their sense of belonging amidst the challenges of neoliberal ideologies. The methodology integrated participant observation, conversations, qualitative interviews, and supplementary methods to provide a nuanced understanding of the participants' sense of belonging within their social and cultural contexts.

The Association for help and self-help for the homeless Kralji ulice is a non-profit and a non-governmental organisation (NGO) dedicated to supporting houseless and other socially marginalised people by connecting them with experts and volunteers and offering a range of specialised programs to address personal, social, economic, and legal hardships (Kralji ulice, n.d.-e) . One of the organisation's core initiatives is its street newspaper carrying the same name, Kralji ulice, which features articles primarily written by people with experience of houselessness (Kralji ulice, n.d.-d). The newspaper refrains from advertisements, focusing on creation of

[1] The name of the organisation is a bit of a misnomer as the organisation is not only dedicated to men but welcomes people of all genders. Despite the name including 'kings', the people participating in the program refer to themselves as the street's kings and queens.

dialogue about houselessness and marginalisation, and countering stereotypes about these individuals' passivity and lack of creativity (Kralji ulice, n.d.-d).

Figure 1: A picture of a king holding the newspaper Kralji ulice (source: Kralji ulice, n.d.-d)

I focused my research on marginalised people in Ljubljana, Slovenia, due to my familiarity of the area as I come from Ljubljana. I conducted fieldwork for this research over a three-month period from January to March 2024, with an additional visit to the organisation on August 1, 2024, to inquire about social assistance systems in Slovenia.

Understanding sense of belonging among marginalised individuals is critical for cultivating empathy and inclusivity within society. By exploring the experiences of those involved with Kralji ulice, this research offers some insights into the challenges faced by marginalised people and the effectiveness of current support systems. Additionally, houselessness in Slovenia has been defined as such fairly recently (Dekleva & Razpotnik, 2007) as Slovenia is a young independent nation of 33 years, which significantly impacts our understanding and awareness of such social issues.

Socially, my research contributes to a broader understanding of how marginalised individuals experience and navigate their social worlds amidst neoliberal values of individualism and consumerism. Such understanding could nurture a greater sense of belonging and well-being of all residents in Ljubljana. It also contributes to the academic discourse on marginalisation, individualism and consumerism by applying intersectional and ethnographic methodologies.

Key theoretical frameworks from scholars such as Varghese and Kumar (2022), Farmer (2004), and Dekleva and Razpotnik (2007) are used to analyse the socio-cultural dimensions of marginalisation as well as houselessness. The study engages with theories of individualism and consumerism from Lukes (1971), Rustin (2014), Bauman (2001, 2007), and Baudrillard (1998) to

understand the impact of neoliberal ideologies on sense of belonging among marginalised individuals. Additionally, the work of Franklin and Tranter (2019) and Yuval-Davis (2006) provides insights into how personal and social identities intersect to shape experiences of belonging.

In this thesis, I am using the term 'houseless' and not 'homeless' to more accurately reflect the experiences of individuals lacking stable housing while maintaining other aspects of their sense of home and belonging. This choice of terminology is further elaborated in the theoretical framework section (see Chapter 5.1.1). However, I use the term 'homeless' when referring to the names of organisations, including Kralji ulice, or initiatives as they use it in their official titles. This distinction ensures clarity and consistency, while also respecting the language used by the organisations themselves.

This thesis is structured into eight chapters. As the first chapter is Introduction, the second chapter presents the broader context, beginning with regional background of Slovenia and how social issues are addressed. The third chapter includes an overview of Kralji ulice, detailing the organisation's origins and the various programs it offers. In the fourth chapter, I outline the research methodology, explaining the methods used to gather data. The fifth chapter is the theoretical framework, which delves into the main theories underpinning the research. This includes discussions on the four main concepts: social and economic marginalisation, sense of belonging, individualism, and consumerism. The sixth chapter introduces readers to the field, providing a description of the day center, the process of creating and distributing the street newspaper, and profiles of the participants involved in the study. The seventh chapter presents the analysis of the fieldwork, beginning with *Experiencing Marginalisation,* where I examine the experiences of marginalisation faced by participants who have experienced houselessness and are excluded from the labour market, focusing on employment dynamics, attitudes toward selling Kralji ulice, and societal perceptions. I continue with *Navigating Belonging* exploring the nature of belonging, experienced by marginalised individuals through their interactions at the day center, their roles as sellers of the street newspaper, and the impact of gender on their sense of belonging. At the end of the chapter I examine *The Effects of Individualism and Consumerism on Social Inclusion*, exploring how neoliberal ideologies, consumerism, and their impact on marginalised communities affect individuals' sense of belonging. Finally, in the Conclusion I summarise the findings, discuss their limitations, and offer possible implications for future research.

2. Regional Background

Geographically, Slovenia is a rather small country in Central Europe. It is located at the crossroads of the Western Balkans and Central Europe. It borders Italy to the West, Austria to the North, Hungary to the Northeast, and Croatia to the South. With an area of approximately 20,300 square kilometres, it is populated with around 2 million people (Living in the Republic of Slovenia, n.d.). The capital city is Ljubljana, with the population of 272,000 people, while the second biggest Slovenian city is Maribor, with 95,000 inhabitants (*Population of Cities in Slovenia 2024*, n.d.).

2.1 Road to Slovenia's independence

Historically, Slovenia was one of the six republics that made up the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The other republics were Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia (including regions of Kosovo and Vojvodina), and Croatia (*What Is the Former Yugoslavia ?*, n.d.). After the death of Yugoslavia's long-time leader Josip Broz Tito in 1980, the country plunged into a crisis marked by competing visions for its future: decentralization and democratization advocated by Slovenia and Croatia, versus centralization supported by Serbia and the existing authorities (A Short History of Slovenia, 2021). By the late 1980s, Slovenia experienced a political awakening characterized by the rise of an independent civil society, mass rallies against the regime, new political alliances and movements, constitutional changes, and a declaration calling for a democratic and independent Slovenia (A Short History of Slovenia, 2021).

In December 1990, a nation-wide plebiscite on the independence of Slovenia was held (Prunk, 2001). With a turnout of over 90% of eligible voters, 88% voted in favour of an independent and sovereign Slovenia (*From the Plebiscite to the Declaration of Independence*, 2001). Thus, on 25th June 1991, Slovenia declared independence. The Yugoslavian government disagreed with the declaration and responded with military intervention. Ten days later, the war for Slovenian independence ended with Slovenia successfully gaining independence (Prunk, 2001). Soon after, Slovenia gained international recognition, became a full member of the United Nations, joined both the European Union and NATO in 2004, and adopted the euro in 2007 (A Short History of Slovenia, 2021).

2.2 Addressing social issues in Yugoslavia

Researching houselessness and marginalisation in socialist Yugoslavia reveals a notable lack of coverage on these social issues. Mina Petrović and Milena Timotijević (2013) note that poverty, poor housing, and homelessness were largely overlooked during the socialist era. One of my participants mentioned that being houseless was illegal in Yugoslavia (Fieldnote, February 2, 2024), though finding a source to confirm this has been challenging.

Sources from other Yugoslavian republics discuss the alternative solutions people without housing resorted to (Petrović, 2001; Archer, 2017). Despite the egalitarian ideals that socialist Yugoslavia was founded on, social inequalities and class distinctions persisted and grew throughout the socialist period. These social inequalities were acknowledged as a reality and recognized within the social sciences in the late 1960s (Mihaljević, 2019). The implementation of the socialist system transformed social conflict from class struggle to conflicts between social strata and socio-professional groups. Josip Mihaljević's research (2019) into workers' complaints to authorities revealed growing dissatisfaction with social inequalities, particularly regarding precarious economic situations and the unfair distribution of housing.

Petrović (2001) notes that relative income equality limited social stratification, but it manifested in a system of income in kind. State and social housing were primarily allocated to elites, professionals, and highly skilled workers, who controlled key resources and influenced the housing system. Those unable to access official housing developed alternative strategies, such as building their own homes (Petrović, 2001; Archer, 2017). Rory Archer (2017) explains that self-built family homes became a fundamental part of housing provision in Yugoslavia as the state encouraged independent home construction to alleviate its housing burden. Despite limited private property ownership being allowed under Yugoslavian socialism, independent builders faced several challenges, such as the stigma against private property and legal difficulties in complying with construction laws (Archer, 2017).

Consequently, housing and houselessness in socialist Yugoslavia were inadequately addressed within a formal framework. The state's approach to these issues was largely insufficient providing social housing without ensuring equitable access. As a result, self-building became a tolerated, though unofficial, solution to the housing shortage, reflecting the state's implicit acknowledgement of its inability to fully meet housing needs through official channels.

2.3 Addressing social issues in Slovenia

When Slovenia gained independence, a new constitution was crafted (Government Communication Office, 2021) which reflects influences from Yugoslavia's previous constitution, incorporates elements from German approaches to the rule of law, and introduces entirely new provisions (Bardutzky, 2019). These include transitioning from a non-democratic political system with socialist consensus economics to a multi-party democracy and market economy (Bardutzky, 2019). While specific sources detailing how certain issues from Yugoslavia were addressed in independent Slovenia are scarce, it is plausible that the historical absence of a framework to address houselessness in Yugoslavia may contribute to Slovenia's current challenges in this regard.

Today, Slovenia's constitution guarantees human rights to social security, health care, proper housing, and adequate working conditions (Council of Europe, 2017a). However, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights has highlighted that Slovenia still falls short in ensuring rights for migrants and asylum seekers, addressing increasing poverty (especially among children), and improving the treatment of the Roma people (Council of Europe, 2017b).

Regarding the marginalisation of individuals, I spoke with at the day center, some systems are in place to mitigate their situations. The main actors in supporting marginalised groups include government Social Work Centers, which also operate one houseless shelter in Ljubljana, and various NGOs (Fieldnote, August 1, 2024). Interactions between NGOs and the government are primarily through the Social Work Centers and various funding programs (Fieldnote, August 1, 2024). The government provides social security assistance, subsidies and reduced payments, which can be accessed through Social Work Centers (*Social Assistance, Subsidies and Reduced Payments*, 2024). The primary conditions for receiving social support are permanent residency in Slovenia and having low or no income. If individuals do not have a permanent residence, they can register their legal residence with the municipality where they live (Fieldnote, August 1, 2024). The social support amount is 484.88€, which organisations like Kralji ulice state is insufficient for a decent living. Participants with disabilities receive additional health benefits and a care allowance for those who are permanently unemployable, including those of retirement age (Fieldnote, August 1, 2024).

Many tasks related to social inclusion are carried out by NGOs. When NGOs prove more effective than government programs, the government supports their faster and more efficient

development (*Social Assistance, Subsidies and Reduced Payments*, 2024). All of my participants receive financial social assistance from the government, with Kralji ulice helping them claim these benefits. Regarding houselessness, there are shelters throughout Slovenia. In Ljubljana, there are three shelters (Kralji ulice, n.d.-b), with a fourth one planned for completion by the municipality this year (*Zavetišče Za Brezdomce*, n.d.).

Figure 2: A map of shelters and other organisations offering help in Ljubljana. The title translates to "Fed, shaved, and washed in Ljubljana" (source: Kralji ulice, n.d.-f)

3. Context of Kralji ulice

3.1 Development of Kralji ulice

Kralji ulice as a non-governmental humanitarian and non-profit organisation is dedicated to helping the houseless and other socially marginalised people. Established in September 2005 (Kralji ulice, n.d.-e), the organisation and its street newspaper emerged from an elective student course at the Faculty of Education at the University of Ljubljana focused on researching houselessness and developing innovative solutions (Razpotnik, 2023). This course connected the participating students of Social Pedagogy with people experiencing houselessness in Slovenia, and led to the creation of the street newspaper. The first trial issue was published in June 2005, receiving such a positive public response that it sold out on the first day, prompting two reprints, totalling 2,600 copies, and involved 62 houseless people in its distribution (Kralji ulice, n.d.-d). The enthusiasm, willingness to participate, and trust shown by the houseless people, along with the positive response from readers and the wider public, led to the decision to continue and develop the newspaper project (Kralji ulice, n.d.-d) and initiated the formation of the present organisation (Razpotnik, 2023).

The initial street sellers chose the name "Kralji ulice" for the newspaper, and the organisation extended it to the "Association for help and self-help for the homeless Kralji ulice" (Razpotnik, 2023). Since its establishment, the number of sellers has increased, and the newspaper has been published monthly since 2006. By 2023, the newspaper's circulation ranged between 15,000 and 20,000 copies per month and expanded to other Slovenian cities. The editorial team and content are primarily contributed by individuals with experiences of houselessness, alongside other engaged members of the public (Razpotnik, 2023). By 2020 the highest circulation was reached (26,000 copies) and in 2022, the newspaper featured contributions from 322 authors (Kralji ulice, n.d.-d). However, in the current year 2024, the circulation decreased to an average of 10,000 copies per month. At Kralji ulice they attribute this decline to several possible factors: The increased cost of living, which reduces disposable income for purchasing the newspaper; the rise in the suggested newspaper price from 1€ to 2€ during COVID-19 pandemic, allowing sellers to earn the same amount with fewer sales; and the tendency of some supporters to donate money without taking a copy, leading to fewer newspapers being distributed (Fieldnote, August 1, 2024).

Throughout the years, the newspaper has successfully resisted advertising to preserve its autonomy (Razpotnik, 2023), which distinguishes it from most similar newspapers worldwide (Kralji ulice, n.d.-d). By doing this, the newspaper has maintained its "user-based" concept and

avoided professionalization and commercialization. This approach allows the newspaper to serve a social group that otherwise lacks access to spaces for articulate public expression (Kralji ulice, n.d.-d). Consequently, the public gains an insight into the perspectives and experiences of houseless and marginalised people, aiming to overcome stereotypes about their passivity and lack of creativity (Kralji ulice, n.d.-d).

The day center was developed in response to needs identified in the field, namely the need for a safe daytime environment (Kralji ulice, n.d.-a). The primary target group have been people experiencing houselessness, with efforts concentrated on collaboration, trust-building, and maintaining relationships. Additionally, the organisation has built a network with related organisations, collaborated with journalists to improve reporting sensitivity, and maintained professional relationships with public officials and students (Razpotnik, 2023).

Today, Kralji ulice is a prominent and significant organisation addressing houselessness in Slovenia and beyond. It is internationally connected, particularly with the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) (Razpotnik, 2023), and the International Network of Street Papers (INSP) (Kralji ulice, n.d.-d).

Today, Kralji ulice employs 37 people, including a branch in Maribor (Fieldnote, August 1, 2024). About quarter of them are also the visitors of the day center with personal experiences of houselessness (Razpotnik, 2023). This highlights the organisation's commitment to leveraging firsthand experience in their work. Each initiative by Kralji ulice is an innovation born from collaboration between those with lived experiences and professionals, emphasising the importance of dialogue. Given the critical role of social networks in preventing houselessness, the organisation functions as a builder of supportive, caring, and solidaristic networks (Razpotnik, 2023).

3.2 The organisation's own initiatives

The "University under the starts" is an initiative that emerged as an extension of the newspaper, offering creative writing, visual arts, and theatre, to help people with experiences of houselessness share their stories (Razpotnik, 2023). The initiative for Sports team Kralji ulice even gained recognition in football, participating in international tournaments like the Homeless World Cup in Brazil, and now provides members with various sport activities, regular free recreation, and free admission to major sport events in Ljubljana (Razpotnik, 2023).

Another project of the organisation addressed the key issue of affordable housing and accommodation support for the houseless (Razpotnik, 2023). Inspired by Norwegian housing programs, the initiative began in 2008 to create supported housing for houseless people, moving away from the traditional shelter approach. The "Individualized and Comprehensive Housing Support" program started with a few temporary apartments and expanded to include long-term housing solutions in collaboration with the Ljubljana Public Housing Fund. Over the last decade, the program extended to support housing-vulnerable families, enabling them to live together. Alongside housing support, the development of eviction prevention activities started in Ljubljana in 2012. The main goal is to help tenants retain safe and affordable housing, even when facing eviction threats. Today, the day center, housing support, and eviction prevention are publicly verified social welfare programs (Razpotnik, 2023).

Kralji ulice also develops other key activities such as fieldwork, national and international collaboration and networking, providing expert proposals, and ongoing advocacy for individuals and groups who lack a safe foundation for self-advocacy at certain times in their lives (Razpotnik, 2023).

The following two projects described were used in my research: The first one, which emerged from a student initiative in recent years, is the **houseless city tours** called Nevid(e)na Lublana, (Unvisi(ta)ble Ljubljana), where people with firsthand experience of houselessness guide interested participants through the city, sharing their personal stories along the way (Razpotnik, 2023). The second initiative I used in my research as a method is the **radio show** Klopca pod svobodnim soncem (Bench under the free sun). This is a collaboration between Kralji ulice and the local student radio station called Radio Študent. By featuring people who have experienced living on the street, giving them a platform to share their lives, survival strategies, causes of their houselessness, and their wishes, it addresses various aspects of houselessness and social exclusion. It has been broadcast on Radio Študent for 12 years, airing on the first Saturday of each month (Kralji ulice, n.d.-c).

4. Methodology

I collected my data using several methods, including participant observation (Bernard, 2011), conversations (Swain & King, 2022) and qualitative interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005), reading the newspaper Kralji ulice, listening to the radio show called Klopca pod svobodnim soncem (Bench under the free sun) (Radio Študent, n.d.), and conducting go-alongs (Kusenbach, 2003). All conversations and interviews were conducted in Slovenian. In this thesis, all quotes have been translated from Slovenian to English by me.

Participant observation is a research method that involves the researcher immerse themselves in a community to gather data through both qualitative and quantitative methods (Bernard, 2011). Qualitative data collection in participant observation includes detailed fieldnotes, photographs, audio recordings, videos, and transcriptions of open-ended interviews. Quantitative data collection methods include direct observation or questionnaires (Bernard, 2011). However, the core of participant observation is about more than just collecting data; it involves establishing rapport and learning to navigate the culture without disturbing it (Bernard, 2011). Researchers immerse themselves in the daily lives of the people they study, yet they must also detach themselves regularly to analyse and intellectualize their experiences (Bernard, 2011). Participant observation is a method that turns researchers into instruments of data collection and analysis, providing a comprehensive understanding of social dynamics. Through the establishment of trust and immersion in daily life, participant observers can gather high-validity data (Bernard, 2011).

Throughout the entire fieldwork period, my focal point was the day center, where I spent most of my time and to which I continuously returned. Participant observation offers three distinct roles: The complete participant role, which involves the researcher becoming a member of the group without revealing their research intentions, the participant observer role, which involves the researcher participating in the community while observing and recording data, and finally, the complete observer role, which involves the researcher observing and recording behaviour with minimal interaction (Bernard, 2011). I switched between the roles of the participant observer and the complete observer, depending on situation. At the beginning of the fieldwork, I observed interactions among visitors and staff from a spot next to the counter in the day center. Whenever needed, I participated with tasks like helping people find clothes among donations, distributing newspapers and stamping them with individual sellers' numbers, and accompanying people to their appointments in the city. I took on the role of (almost) complete observer during two sellers' meetings and one editorial meeting that I attended.

The primary method I used to get closer to the community at the day center was **conversation**. Informal conversations are spontaneous interactions that naturally arise within the research setting (Swain & King, 2022). They offer valuable contextual information and insights into participants' viewpoints without the structure of formal interviews. Researchers often use these exchanges to establish rapport and trust (Swain & King, 2022). I engaged in informal daily interactions and conversations with individuals at the center. As I became more familiar with the environment and dynamics, I began reaching out to contacts I had made to arrange qualitative interviews.

Qualitative interviews are used to explore complex topics that require more than simple, quantifiable responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). They are unique conversations tailored to each interviewee. This method is ideal for understanding people's thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Qualitative interviews allow researchers to see life from multiple angles, providing a broader perspective and promoting nuanced analysis. They are structured as guided conversations where the researcher leads an extended discussion, probing and following up on the interviewee's responses to elicit depth and detail about the research topic (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

I conducted qualitative interviews with 10 individuals, each in a unique life situation. Most of the interviews lasted between 30 minutes to an hour, while one took two hours. Among the people with whom I spoke, four were women (two in their 30s and two in their 50s) and six were men (four in their 50s and two in their 40s). Of these individuals, all of whom have experienced houselessness, two are living on-and-off houseless (living on the street, in a car, or temporary shelters), one is in prison, and the rest have their own rooms or apartments. Nine live in Ljubljana and one in Maribor. Three individuals write solely for Kralji ulice, four both sell and write, and three only sell the newspaper.

During the interviews, I intentionally kept the conversations open, as described by Herbert J. Rubin & Irene S. Rubin (2005), guiding the discussion while allowing it to develop organically based on the participants' responses. I prepared initial questions to initiate the conversations, but the dialogue progressed naturally as I delved deeper into their experiences and asked follow-up questions. Throughout, I kept my research concepts in mind to steer discussions toward the areas relevant to my research.

To prepare for each interview, I reviewed the individuals' writings in Kralji ulice and listened to any previous interviews they had on the radio show Klopca pod svobodnim soncem. Three of

the people I interviewed had been guests on the show, which helped me prepare for our conversations. The interviews to which I listened are one hour long. I listened to several episodes to gain a broader understanding of the experiences discussed. Additionally, reading the newspapers and focusing on the texts of those with whom I spoke provided insights into what they find important and what I wanted to explore further with them. This background enabled me to pose more insightful questions about topics that had already been discussed, enriching the depth of our conversations.

One of the contributors to Kralji ulice and a guest on Klopca pod svobodnim soncem is a participant who is currently in prison. We had hoped to meet in person, to carry out an interview, but the prison authorities did not grant approval for the visit. Despite being assured that I would receive a response by the end of March, I did not hear from them. In the lieu of a visit, I decided to write her a letter. She responded to all my questions in the form of a narrative, which was subsequently published in the June issue of Kralji ulice.

I conducted two **go-alongs**. A go-along is a research method where researchers accompany participants on their everyday activities to explore their experiences and interactions within their natural environments through real-time observation and questioning (Kusenbach, 2003). The go-along method addresses challenges inherent in both purely observational approaches and traditional sit-down interviews. In natural environments, people typically do not articulate their experiences and interpretations as they happen, making it difficult for researchers to access these insights through observation alone (Kusenbach, 2003). Sit-down interviews, on the other hand, often remove informants from their natural settings, potentially hindering their ability to convey the nuances of their experiences. This can leave important aspects of lived experience either unnoticed or misunderstood (Kusenbach, 2003). Go-alongs offer a solution by allowing researchers to accompany participants on their everyday outings and ask questions, listen, and observe as participants engage with their physical and social environments (Kusenbach, 2003).

I asked four participants if they would let me accompany them to their selling points, and two agreed. These go-alongs allowed me to observe how people treat and react to sellers of Kralji ulice while also gaining the sellers' perspectives. I found it interesting that one participant asked me to observe from a distance in order to avoid 'scaring away' potential customers, while the other invited me to sit next to him, making me almost part of the interactions with passersby.

One of the participants, who only writes for Kralji ulice, gave me the Nevid(e)na Lublana (Unvisi(ta)ble Ljubljana) tour. This tour, led by individuals with experiences of houselessness,

offered a unique perspective through storytelling and personal narratives. The tour, designed for smaller groups or individual participants, provided an intimate exploration of the multilayered aspects of houselessness in urban environments (Kralji ulice, n.d.-g).

I participated in two activities organised by Kralji ulice: Monthly cinema visits and weekly sport activity table tennis. Both activities helped me connect with participants and become more integrated into the community. Shared experiences, such as watching a movie or interacting through play, made people more open to me and more eager to establish a connection. Through table tennis, I established a bond with one participant, who was the first to write about community after I had asked her to do it. Another person who wrote about her sense of belonging is the woman in prison to whom I wrote a letter.

Before starting fieldwork, I planned to conduct an exercise where I would ask participants to create something about their sense of belonging. I initially intended to ask this everyone at an editorial meeting, but there was only one meeting during my fieldwork period, which was in March, and was conducted in such a way, that it made it impractical to carry out the exercise as planned. Consequently, I asked several people individually, and two responded by writing about their experiences. These two participants were the ones I had previously mentioned.

During my time spent at the day center, I was unable to observe the actual education and training of new sellers firsthand. On the days when education sessions were supposed to occur, there were times when no one was interested, people did not show up, or I was not informed beforehand that training was taking place. As a result, I only had the opportunity to speak with one participant who demonstrated how to sell the newspapers to a new seller, and to another individual who was in the process of becoming a seller.

Beside using all the methods described above, I also went to see two theatre plays in which two of my participants were involved in creating. One person was the writer and the director of the play, while another was an actress in a different play. Watching these plays brought up several important topics significant for my participants, such as relationships and frustrations with bureaucracy.

During my time in Ljubljana, I took the opportunity to photograph the street graffiti scattered across the city. With this I aimed to capture the reflections of societal issues and criticisms articulated through urban art. The graffiti often expressed a prevalent discontent with the growing emphasis on greed and materialism at the expense of interpersonal relationships. These

visual narratives provided a valuable perspective on the underlying sentiments within the society, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural landscape.

4.1 Ethics

To ensure ethical and safe collection, storage and handling of data for my research, I adhered to the guidelines established by the Faculty of Social Sciences of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. My approach was multifaceted, addressing several key ethical concerns.

First and foremost, acquiring consent from participants was not a one-time event but a continuous process. Building trust was essential, and I ensured that participants were fully aware of the research process and their rights at every stage. This included providing clear information about the purpose of the research and offering participants the option to notify me if there was any information they wished to retract or exclude from the research until the end of the fieldwork.

Maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality of participants was also a primary concern. I protected their identities throughout the research. Real names or identifiable nicknames were not used in my documentation; instead, I created pseudonyms for all participants. The actual names are securely stored on an external hard drive, separate from the research data.

In terms of data storage, I took significant precautions to ensure security. Fieldnotes and photographs were stored on my computer, protected with a strong password. Additionally, backup copies of all documents were made and stored on the same external hard drive used for participant information, also secured with a password. To mitigate the risk of unauthorized access, none of the research data were saved in any cloud storage services.

Transparency was maintained with participants about the research objectives, methodologies, and potential impacts. I provided clear and understandable explanations about what the research entailed and for what the data would be used.

Finally, to give back to the community and participants, I committed to sharing the research findings by publishing the thesis on the website of Kralji ulice, as requested by my contact person. This initiative ensures that the community has direct access to the results and insights gained from the research, demonstrating appreciation for their time and contributions. By adhering to these practices, I aimed to ensure the ethical integrity of my research, protecting the

rights and privacy of participants while maintaining the rigor and credibility of my data collection and analysis processes.

4.2 Positionality

Understanding and reflecting on my positionality as a researcher is critical to the integrity of my research as it influences the lens through which I approach, collect and make sense of research data. As a woman, I often found that participants, particularly women, appeared more comfortable and open in sharing their experiences with me. This observation, while valuable, is based on my subjective experience and might not hold universally. It is possible that my gender facilitated a sense of ease and trust, allowing for more candid conversations.

At the time of the research, I was 24 years old. My relatively young age may have made me more approachable. Older participants might have viewed me with a mix of curiosity and mentorship, influencing the depth and nature of our interactions. This age factor potentially bridged gaps in understanding, allowing for genuine exchanges of perspectives.

Being a local provided me with an insider perspective, enabling me to understand the cultural nuances and social contexts that shape the experiences of marginalised communities in Ljubljana. This shared cultural background likely helped in building trust and rapport with participants. However, my role as a researcher also positioned me as an outsider in some respects, particularly when delving into the lived experiences of marginalisation that I do not personally share.

Reflecting on my relative privilege, I recognized the potential power imbalances between myself and the participants. My socioeconomic status, compared to that of individuals experiencing marginalisation, necessitated a heightened sensitivity in my interactions. For instance, there were moments when participants or individuals in the community asked me for money. This placed me in a trickly situation, especially considering the rule at Kralji ulice, which advises against lending money. To navigate these situations ethically, I discussed with my contact person the best course of action. For the tour of Ljubljana, I deliberated with my contact person about whether it was appropriate to pay for the tour, as it would be expected in other circumstances. We decided that it was both appropriate and considerate to pay, respecting the standard practices and acknowledging the value of the service provided.

By critically examining these aspects of my identity and reflecting on specific instances during my research, I strived to conduct my research with awareness of the inherent biases and power

dynamics. This reflexivity and self-awareness helped me to engage with participants ethically and respectfully, ultimately enriching the research process and findings.

5. Theoretical framework

In the theoretical framework chapter, I want to establish a solid foundation upon which my study is built. This chapter delves deeper into the conceptual underpinnings that inform my research, providing a framework through which to analyse and interpret my findings. Central to this exploration are theories of social marginalisation, including houselessness within the context of Slovenia. Additionally, the concepts of sense of belonging, individualism, and consumerism will be critically examined as they relate to experiences of marginalisation and social identity.

5.1 Social and Economic Marginalisation

Marginality, as discussed by Charles Varghese and Sheethal S. Kumar (2022), is identified as a measure of inequality within social, economic, and cultural contexts. It includes the circumstances and experiences of individuals and groups that are pushed to the edges of society, deprived of resources and thus, denied participation in essential societal functions. These groups are referenced against the 'dominant' set of idealised values, processes and resources in a given society. Marginalisation can manifest, strengthen and reproduce itself for instance through limited access to education, healthcare, employment, political representation – all of which are critical for full participation in society (Varghese & Kumar, 2022).

In his work "An Anthropology of Structural Violence" Paul Farmer (2004) relates marginality to structural violence, which he describes as the systemic ways in which social structures harm, or disadvantage individuals. He views marginality as the consequence of these structures, which can lead to poverty, discrimination, and lack of access to resources and opportunities. Furthermore, he explains that symbolic violence, together with structural violence, can create a process by which marginalised individuals internalize their inferiority and accept their social position as natural, deserved, or inevitable. Similarly, Varghese and Kumar (2022) point out the difference between what they term a marginal situation, which they define as the objective condition of marginality, and a marginal personality, which is the subjective experience of marginality. Thus, marginal personality is the internalization of the social position of the marginalised (Varghese & Kumar, 2022). While the internalization of marginalisation can occur within marginalised groups, it is essential not to place the responsibility for the marginalisation and its perpetuation on these individuals. For instance, when browsing Slovenian media about people experiencing houselessness, I found an article where the author blamed houseless people for their situation, indicating they were an eyesore in the capital of Slovenia (Gašparin, 2022). It is crucial to shift

the blame from individuals to the systemic issues that perpetuate the marginalisation of specific groups.

Varghese and Kumar (2022) explore marginality related to terms that are often used interchangeably with marginality but are not its synonyms, like social exclusion, poverty and precarity. Social exclusion is a process where individuals or groups are denied access to social, economic, and cultural systems that contribute to an individual's integration into society. The concept of social exclusion highlights how systematic barriers prevent certain groups from fully participating in society (Varghese & Kumar, 2022). Aadne Aasland and Tone Fløtten (2001) emphasise that social exclusion is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, which involves not only economic marginalisation but also exclusion from citizenship rights, the labour market, and social participation. Although the term has become central in policy discussions across Europe, its broad application has led to differing interpretations and some ambiguity regarding its meaning (Aasland & Fløtten, 2001). Marginality and social exclusion are intertwined as marginality often results from and perpetuates conditions of exclusion. Varghese and Kumar (2022) suggest that while exclusion focuses more on the objective conditions (like, denial of rights and opportunities), marginality also captures the subjective experiences of those affected. Individuals perceive and internalize their experiences of exclusion, which affects their social identity and their interactions within society. Marginality therefore does not only reflect a physical or economic state but also a mental and psychological condition where marginalised people feel a sense of being left out, not belonging, or not valued by the wider society (Varghese & Kumar, 2022). The sellers I spoke with during fieldwork expressed feelings of exclusion. These feelings primarily resulted from being verbally insulted or misunderstood and largely ignored by passersby, which consequently evoked feelings of rejection.

Poverty is usually understood in terms of lacking material resources, mainly income, which is necessary for participation in society (Varghese & Kumar, 2022). While all marginalised people may not necessarily experience poverty, the state of being marginalised often includes the experience of poverty, which is a consequence of limited access to employment, education, and social services. These services are critical components for avoiding poverty (Varghese & Kumar, 2022). The participants in my research are economically marginalised. Some are permanently unemployable, some have experienced exploitation by employers with insufficient or no compensation, and others face stigmatization due to being houseless, which prevents them from securing a job. Poverty is not solely about financial deprivation, but it also involves the inability

to access social and cultural capital. Therefore, marginality and poverty are interlinked in their mutual reinforcement of exclusion and deprivation (Varghese & Kumar, 2022).

Finally, precarity is understood within the context of insecurity and instability, particularly in relation to employment in neoliberal economic conditions (Varghese & Kumar, 2022). The concept of precarity reflects the uncertain, unstable, and insecure conditions under which many marginalised people live, often because of flexible labour market conditions, contractual work, and lack of social security systems that fail to protect people from the risks of contemporary capitalist economies (Varghese & Kumar, 2022; Kasmir & Stasch, 2018). The concept of precarity extends beyond economic conditions, addressing a general human experience of vulnerability and insecurity that transcends socio-economic boundaries (Kasmir & Stasch, 2018). The authors indicate that precarity, as well as marginality, involves a subjective component. It is not just about the external conditions of labour, but also how these conditions affect individuals' perceptions of their own security and stability (Varghese & Kumar, 2022). Cultural anthropologists focus on the emotions and subjectivities of precarious lives, revealing how uncertainty, displacement, and insecurity shape experiences globally (Kasmir & Stasch, 2018). The feelings of vulnerability and the daily instability experienced can heighten the sense of being marginalised, leading to social exclusion and a lack of participation in wider economic and cultural life. In general, the term precarity refers to the social outcome and experience of an economic situation. When the context of everyday life and the psychosocial consequences of uncertainty are considered the meaning of precarity comes close to the meaning of marginality (Varghese & Kumar, 2022).

5.1.1 Homelessness and Houselessness

People experiencing homelessness are often marginalised within the dominant culture of those who are housed. Homelessness is a socially constructed concept, the understanding of which heavily depends on cultural, economic, social, and political contexts (Dekleva & Razpotnik, 2007; Kellett & Moore, 2003). Definitions of homelessness depend on the extent to which the issue is recognized politically and socially, as well as the availability of political and economic resources for developing solutions (Dekleva & Razpotnik, 2007).

The European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS) framework categorizes homelessness into four main types, aiming to cover diverse living situations which amount to forms of homelessness across Europe (*ETHOS - European Typology on Homelessness and*

Housing Exclusion, 2005). These categories are rooflessness (lacking any kind of shelter), houselessness (with a place to sleep but temporary), living in insecure housing (facing a serious risk of exclusion), and living in inadequate housing (unfit or severely overcrowded housing). This categorization demonstrates there are several perspectives through which homelessness can be defined.

In their text, Bojan Dekleva and Špela Razpotnik (2007) cite Springer's article from 2000, "Homelessness: a proposal for a global definition and classification," who calls for the use of the word 'houselessness' instead of 'homelessness'. Springer describes houselessness as a condition of inadequate shelter. She claims that adopting the term 'houselessness' globally would establish uniform criteria as well as uniform measures for addressing the issue. While Dekleva and Razpotnik (2007) acknowledge the benefits of the term 'houseless' and its applicability in a broader range of circumstances, they point out that such a definition reduces the issue to the lack of a roof and an adequate shelter. It fails to include other factors of the issue, which are bound to the local culture and must be addressed uniquely by each community locally.

The terminology used in discussions about homelessness significantly influences public perception and policymaking (Abrams, 2023). The transition from terms like 'homeless' to 'houseless' or 'unhoused' is part of a broader shift towards language that respects the person behind the circumstances. This shift seeks to reduce stigma and build empathy (Lambert, 2022), encouraging society to see these individuals as people with unique lives, rather than simply as a societal issue, and framing their situation as a housing problem rather than a failure on the part of the individual (Abrams, 2023).

In the context of Slovenia, Dekleva and Razpotnik (2007) state that homeless people are those who are helped by the public and volunteer sectors, those who have exhausted all the personal strategies for coping with life's challenges and now heavily rely on societal solidarity. The authors count among homeless people in Slovenia not only those living on the streets, but also those residing in types of temporary accommodations which due to their temporality and inadequacy cannot be considered as homes. They choose the term homeless over houseless because while the term 'houselessness' does not encompass people who do have a roof over their heads but lack a true sense of a home, the term 'homeless' does.

The points that Dekleva and Razpotnik (2007) present and develop in their article show the challenge of drawing a clear distinction between an individual who lives somewhere and an individual who does not have a home. I understand their hesitation in using the term 'houseless'

instead of 'homeless', as both have their limitations. 'Homeless' may not fully encompass the depth and breadth of housing issues, just as 'houseless' may not encompass those who do have a roof above their heads but lack a true home. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that part of the reason for not using 'houseless' in the context of Slovenia may come from the absence of a corresponding term in Slovenian. The word we have in Slovenian is *brezdomec,* which directly translates to 'homeless.'

Since I do not want to assume that people lack a home when they are facing houselessness, I decided to use the term 'houseless.' In my opinion, 'houselessness' does not define for people without housing whether or not they have a home and whether or not they belong but allows finding out whether they do. When I communicated with my participants in Slovenian, they used the term *brezdomec,* so I used it as well. However, I chose to stick with the term 'houselessness' in English because, after asking participants about their feelings of having a home, their answers varied regardless of whether they had a room, an apartment, or were living in a tent.

5.2 Sense of belonging

Sense of belonging is about feeling at home, emotional attachment and feeling safe (Yuval-Davis, 2006). It is recognized as a complex notion encompassing various cultural, spatial, temporal, generational, emotional, and political elements (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Franklin & Tranter, 2019; Meloni, 2019).

Adrian Franklin and Bruce Tranter (2019) broaden the perspective on belonging by looking beyond its association with social connections, support systems, close relationships, and interpersonal bonds. In their examination of belonging, they consider that the need for belonging is deeply influenced by cultural, kinship, and ethnic factors, and they extend it beyond human interaction, including connections with non-human entities like places, companion animals, and cultural eras. Throughout my fieldwork, I encountered people with animals, indicating that some of those experiencing marginalisation seek belonging through animal companions. For example, one of my participants referred to his dog as his own and expressed deep pain when he had to put her down, revealing the strong sense of companionship he felt towards her.

Franklin and Tranter (2019) explain that modernization and restructuring of labour markets has led to high mobility and a shift in people's needs to belong for instance as people more frequently move away from familiar environments to new and often alienating urban spaces.

This spatial change carries implications for belonging, as feelings of alienation and homesickness in new environments indicate a deep connection between place, landscape, and the sense of belonging. Indeed, one of my participants moved abroad for work. He did not express feelings of homesickness, but rather spoke about feeling more taken care of by the foreign country than by Slovenia. This suggests that sense of belonging is influenced by the reorganisation of labour markets, but in this case, it is opposite to what Franklin and Tranter describe.

5.2.1 Levels of belonging

When it comes to analytical perspective on sense of belonging, Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) differentiates three analytical levels on which belonging is constructed: social locations, identification and emotional attachments, and ethical and political value system. Social locations refer to belonging to certain social categories based on gender, race, class, nation, etc. These categories are situated within specific power grids in society. They are not only diverse in terms of their social positioning but also in the power dynamics they carry. Power dynamics relate to the fact that different social categories are often associated with specific power hierarchies in society. These hierarchies determine the level of influence, privilege, or disadvantage experienced by individuals belonging to these categories.

Further Yuval-Davis (2006) considers that intersectionality is important here, as it demonstrates that people's experience in society is shaped not by one aspect of their identity (like gender) but the intersection of multiple aspects (like gender, race, class). Each combination of identities results in a unique experience of privilege and oppression. This means that social locations, which are constructed along several axes of difference, shape the way individuals experience belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Social locations, such as age and gender, play a significant role in understanding the circumstances of people who participate in Kralji ulice. Older participants, having had more experience, offer a unique perspective on societal development but now face different challenges in dealing with their marginalisation compared to younger people. Similarly, gender also affects their experiences; women have reported facing distinct issues, including a more judgemental attitude and inappropriate offers for money, compared to the issues reported by men which tend to be applicable to all genders.

Identification and emotional attachments focus on the narratives people construct about who they are, including both individual and collective identities (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The narratives reflect deep emotional investments indicating a person's attachment to certain groups,

communities, and ideals. Identifications and emotional attachments are often formed through shared experiences, cultural practices, and common values, cultivating a sense of connection and solidarity with others who share these attributes (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The process of belonging at this level involves a continuous interplay of being and becoming. The emotional attachments can be a source of comfort and security, but they can also lead to feelings of alienation and exclusion if an individual feels that they do not or cannot conform to the dominant narratives and identifiers of the groups to which they aspire to belong (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Having a place to go where you know you will be welcomed without judgement, like the day center, has proven to be significant for my participants. Several people I spoke with emphasised the importance of feeling seen in their experiences, especially by someone who is in or has been through the same situation.

The third level, ethical and political value systems, which revolves around the value systems individuals use to judge their own and other's belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006). This includes attitudes and ideologies about how identity and categorical boundaries should be drawn, usually through inclusion or exclusion. The conflicts around ethical and ideological issues move the discussion from the realm of belonging to the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

5.2.2 Politics of belonging

Yuval-Davis (2006) further explains that belonging often becomes explicit, articulated, and politicized when threatened. The politics of belonging refers to the various ways in which political entities and actors construct, manipulate, and challenge ideas of belonging to achieve certain political goals. This often involves defining who belongs to a particular community and who does not, creating inclusionary and exclusionary boundaries based on social categories like ethnicity, nationality, or religion. By constructing certain groups as insiders and others as outsiders, political projects can both unite and divide societies. Yuval-Davis' concept of the politics of belonging highlights how belonging is not just a personal or social experience, but also a political tool that can be used to shape societal structures and relationships.

Slovenia's inadequate institutional framework for addressing houselessness is reflected in the programs that are available to people experiencing houselessness. These are organisations that offer help, assisting in managing houselessness, but there is a notable absence of a comprehensive approach aimed at resolving the issue holistically (Gaši, 2023). Thus, the absence of a supportive framework influences the inclusion of people experiencing houselessness and

contributes to their social marginalisation. As a result, individuals are often left to deal with their issues on their own or seek help from non-governmental organisations, such as Kralji ulice.

Francesca Meloni (2019) illustrates politics of belonging by exploring the experience of undocumented youth in Canada, focusing on their search for social belonging. Belonging, in this context, is regarded as a dynamic process, which is highly influenced by legal status, social environment, and personal experience. The youth's self-perception can be different from how they are viewed by society, reflecting a tension between personal identity and external categorization. Meloni identifies 'structural ambivalence' as a key concept for depicting how the marginalisation of the youth she studied is not only a product of explicit exclusionary policies but also of the often unspoken and vague laws that effectively make them invisible at social and legal levels. The lack of structural support for addressing the issues faced by visitors of Kralji ulice forces the people I spoke with to navigate structural ambivalence regularly. They continue to rely on organisations like Kralji ulice to help them navigate the available structures, whether institutional or non-governmental. This reliance impacts their sense of belonging, as the absence of a supportive framework neither explicitly includes nor excludes them but clearly indicates that addressing their issues is not an institutional priority.

5.3 Individualism

The geopolitical West, part of which is Slovenia, is influenced by neoliberalism. Neoliberal ideology emphasises individualism and market-driven values, which significantly affect notions of belonging (Rustin, 2014). To understand the contemporary focus on individualism, we must trace when, how, and why our society moves from a collective focus to an individual one.

In his overview of the ideological developments of individualism Steven Lukes (1971) recognizes that the term 'individualism' carries various meanings, which are shaped by context and historical perspective. There seem to be two different understandings of the ideology in Europe. The conservative as well as the socialist perspective considered individualism a threat to the commonwealth as it suggested that to focus on an individual is to damage society's collective interests. Socialists specifically argued that individualism detaches a person from societal duties and overemphasises rights (Lukes, 1971).

On the other hand, individualism carries a positive connotation, symbolizing originality, uniqueness, and self-realization (Lukes, 1971). Here individualism is seen reinforcing rather than undermining social solidarity. In America this developed further, and individualism became a

foundation of capitalism and democracy. It became synonymous with natural rights, the free market, and the American Dream. It carried evolutionary narrative of societal evolution from primitive to sophisticated individualism. This influence of Social Darwinism, together with the influence of Herbert Spencer, recast individualism as a celebration of capitalism and competition (Lukes, 1971).

The effects of individualism in contemporary Slovenia carry negative connotations. In the Slovenian context individualism has shown to weaken social bonds which causes and is intertwined with experiencing stress (Naterer & Lavrič, 2019). I assume this comes from the fact that neoliberalism promotes a form of individualism that prioritizes personal economic interests and self-sufficiency (Rustin, 2014). Moreover, maximising personal economic interests is often portrayed as the pathway to advance collective well-being. The hegemony of neoliberalism has imposed market-driven values on society, overriding non-market values that previously served as a counterbalance to neoliberalist values. This focus on individual achievement and success can lead to a diminished sense of communal belonging and social solidarity. As people are encouraged to view themselves and others through the lens of self-interest and competition, it leads to a more fragmented and isolated society. This perspective of individuals has been, according to Michael Rustin (2014), used to justify the dismantling of social systems that support collective welfare, like public health, education, welfare systems. My findings align with this theoretical perspective, as observed in the experiences of my participants, who highlight the social isolation and exclusion driven by individualism in Slovenia. For instance, the exclusion of Kralji ulice sellers from certain areas illustrate how market-driven values override communal solidarity, leading to a fragmented society where vulnerable individuals are further marginalised and stigmatised.

5.3.1 Alternative to neoliberal individualism

Harry Walker (2020) contrasts individualism characteristic of the geopolitical West with the Amazonian Urarina community's approach to individuality, highlighting a significant distinction in conceptualizing the role of the individual in society. In Western context, individualism is, according to Walker, often seen as a cornerstone of social and political philosophy, deeply ingrained in the ideals of liberalism. It evokes notions of personal freedom, self-reliance, and the right to pursue individual goals. This form of individualism, referred to as 'possessive individualism,' is associated with the ownership of one's abilities and the fruits of one's labour.

Neoliberal individualism traditionally emphasises the importance of personal identity, autonomy, and the rights of the individual, often at the expense of collective interests.

The Urarina, an Amazonian community, offer a contrasting approach to individuality (Walker, 2020). They practice a form of 'individualism without individuals,' where the focus is on the collective rather than the individual. In this system, equivalence between people is actively refused, meaning that individuals are not seen as interchangeable units but are defined by their unique relationships and contributions to the community. The value is not based on property ownership or individual accumulation but on a collective resource pool and shared social, cognitive networks. The Urarina's social organisation illustrates a model of society where communal bonds and collective resources are central, and where an individual's identity and value are intimately connected to the larger social sphere. Their understanding of individualism is thus fundamentally different from that of the geopolitical West. It is not based on the isolation of the individual or on the accumulation of personal wealth and property. Instead, it is embedded in a web of communal relationships and shared resources, emphasising a collective well-being that does not diminish the value of individual differences. In this view, the common good is achieved not through the homogenization of individuals but through the celebration and maintenance of their unique contributions and the non-equivalence of their identities (Walker, 2020).

While there is no significant or intentional alternative to the individualism prevalent in Slovenia, the way individuals who write for or cooperate with Kralji ulice are treated by the organisation reminded me of an alternative notion of celebrating uniqueness. Kralji ulice makes an effort to recognize individuals' strengths, develop them, and help them utilise these skills both within and outside the organisation. Thus, they are, in a way, fostering a sense of community and personal growth that contrasts with the broader societal emphasis on individualism.

Rustin (2014) contrasts neoliberalism's focus on individualism with more collectivist ideas of belonging. He argues that the dominance of neoliberalism has challenged collectivist perspectives, consequently, redefining what it means to belong. Possessive individualism inherently rejects that humans fundamentally require social bonds and collective entities for their identity and well-being. This has led to a society where sense of belonging is less about being part of a community with shared responsibilities and more about individual success and the ability to thrive independently within the market. This has led to a weakening of social bonds, outsourcing them to the market and consumerism, seemingly with the intention that interactions

we have as consumers can replace the deeper connections traditionally fostered within communities (Rustin, 2014).

5.4 Consumerism

In both Zygmund Bauman's (2001, 2007) and Jean Baudrillard's (1998) writings the approach to understanding consumerism goes beyond its economic and utilitarian meaning to include social, cultural, and psychological dynamics. Baudrillard describes consumption as a social process involving social signifiers. Consumer goods carry social meaning and are symbols of status and identity. These consumer objects are not only valued based on their utility but also on the messages they convey. The messages they carry are derived from societal code, a set of norms and values that dictate what is desirable. The societal code guides people's purchasing decisions to convey certain indicators about their identity and belonging (Baudrillard, 1998). This system of signification can, according to Baudrillard, lead to a superficial understanding of social relations, where the focus shifts from genuine human interactions to the exchange and display of commodities. Both Bauman (2001) and Baudrillard (1998) recognize alienation as inherent in consumer society as the focus on materialism overshadows human relations and experiences.

Bauman (2001) delves into the meaning of consumption on the level of needs and desires. He suggests that in a consumer society, consumption seizes to be about satisfying traditional needs but instead becomes its own purpose. He argues that humans consume for the sake of *biological* existence as well as for more elaborate *social* standards, for example decency and having a 'good life'. Bauman (2001) explains that the purpose of consumption used to be to satisfy both biological and social needs and once they were satisfied there was no point in consumption anymore. What is different in today's consumerist society is that consumption is its own purpose. Modern consumerism is not about satisfying needs but about continuously generating new desires. Gratification, thus, becomes impossible.

Baudrillard (1998) discusses how advertising and media shape consumer desires, promoting a cycle of perpetual consumption. Advertisement is seen as attuned to the needs of the individual, but in reality, it serves to continuously boost demand. Through advertising, the system appropriates social objectives for its own benefit, imposing its own goals as societal objectives. This process effectively camouflages the system's true priorities under the guise of meeting consumer needs. These forces play a crucial role in defining what is desirable, further driving the consumer society (Baudrillard, 1998).

The lack of focus on the true needs of members of society, and instead focusing on the needs of the market leads to isolation of people who do not have the resources to keep up with the consumer society. The isolation is further deepened by shifting the values away from collective care and thus marginalising members who need that kind of care from their community.

This theoretical perspective is reflected in the proliferation of advertising spaces in Ljubljana, which has become a pervasive feature of the urban landscape. As Baudrillard (1998) suggests, these advertisements shape desires and perpetuate consumption, aligning with the neoliberal focus on personal economic interests.

Bauman (2007) discusses how consumerism reinforces social stratification. He claims consumer culture creates a division between those who can afford to participate and those who cannot. In a consumer society its members are valued based on their interaction with the market. Individuals who cannot participate effectively in the consumer market often due to economic constraints, are marginalised. Thus, the division is not merely economic; it extends into the social realm. This exclusion creates a class of 'failed consumers' who are stigmatized for their inability to engage in the consumer culture. The sense of inadequacy and failure felt by those who cannot keep up with the ever-changing standards and demands of consumer culture feel the psychological effects like alienation and inadequacy among the less affluent. For instance, my participant's experience with Kralji ulice sellers being warned of exclusion from Lidl locations due to thefts reflects how consumerism can deepen social divides, stigmatizing those who cannot fully participate in the consumer market.

Such economic exclusion often translates into limited access to opportunities, such as employment or education, which are increasingly influenced by one's consumer status (Bauman, 2007). The social stratification is perpetuated by the media and social norms, which glorify consumerism and associate success and social acceptance with the ability to consume. This results in a society where self-worth and identity are closely tied to consumerist practices. Social exclusion, according to Bauman (2007), is not always obvious. It can be subtle, manifesting in the form of societal indifference or lack of recognition. This can lead to feelings of isolation and marginalisation. The never-ending pressure to consume and constant bombardment of consumerist ideas through media and advertising intensify the psychological burden, leading to a sense of being perpetually left behind. Dividing the society into consumers and non-consumers diminishes the sense of community and shared societal values like social cohesion, empathy, collective action.

Bauman (2007) criticizes the notion of 'work ethic' in consumer societies where individuals are often judged based on their ability to work and contribute economically. This logic implies that everyone can succeed if they work hard enough, and the poor are often blamed for their situation due to a perceived lack of work ethic. Again, what becomes apparent is that consumerism distorts values by emphasising material success and economic productivity over other forms of personal and societal worth. This brings me to Bauman's point that consumerism promotes a focus on individualism and personal gain, often at the expense of collective well-being and social responsibility. The focus shift goes from communal and societal concerns to individual desires and achievements, leading to weaker social fabric and a reduction in the support for public welfare and collective social services. The voices of economically disadvantaged are overshadowed by interests of consumer markets and businesses, which leads to policies that favour consumerism and economic growth over social equity and environmental sustainability.

In the context of consumerism belonging is not achieved through traditional community bonds or shared cultural practices, but rather by aligning oneself with certain consumer groups. These are not dictated by a formal procedure but by aspiration for identification with the group through the consumption of specific goods and brands. Bauman calls these 'visible marks of belonging'. They are marks that signify membership or affiliation with particular groups or social circles. The consumer behaviour is intertwined with social expectations and the desire to fit into or stand out within a social group. It points out the importance of symbols and meanings in consumer choices as a mode of communication, identity formation, and belonging. My findings reflect this concept of 'visible marks of belonging' when a street newspaper seller noticed negative reaction from passersby when dressing more smartly, despite obtaining the clothes from the donations at Kralji ulice. This highlights how consumer choices and appearances are tied to social expectations, where what other perceive as attempt to align with a different group can lead to exclusion rather than belonging.

6. Introduction to the field

I started my fieldwork at the day center Kralji ulice in Ljubljana, which is situated in the heart of Ljubljana. It is located on the street connecting the city's main square with the main train and bus station – a brief 12-minute walk apart. The area includes several important institutions, such as the District Court of Ljubljana, a police station, the Slovenian Cinema museum and cinema hall, the popular Nobel Burek seller, and the headquarters of Kralji ulice, the NGO for help and self-help for the houseless.

6.1 Day center

As stated before, the day center offers the houseless individuals a safe environment during the day and various activities based on people's needs and desires. It is open every weekday from 10:00 AM to 2:00 PM, while the staff generally work from 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM.

There is a small park featuring three long benches encircling a tree that lies to the right of the path leading to the entrance of the day center, where visitors often gather, engaging in conversation, sipping coffee, and sharing beers. On the opposite side of the path, a few steps serve as additional social spots, where people stand in groups or sit when the weather is dry and warm.

Figure 3: The front of the center as seen from the inside (picture by author, 2024)

At the center they can socialise, get drinks like coffee, hot drinks, and juice, get access to the center's computers, choose books from a mini-library, browse through donations or talk with

professional staff. Occasionally, donated food such as baked goods, desserts, or sandwiches is available. Every other Thursday, volunteers cook lunch for all visitors.

Upon stepping inside, a visitor finds themselves in a corridor decorated with pictures of past covers of the street newspaper Kralji ulice, dating back to its early days. These covers chronicled the newspaper's journey and the stories of the community it serves.

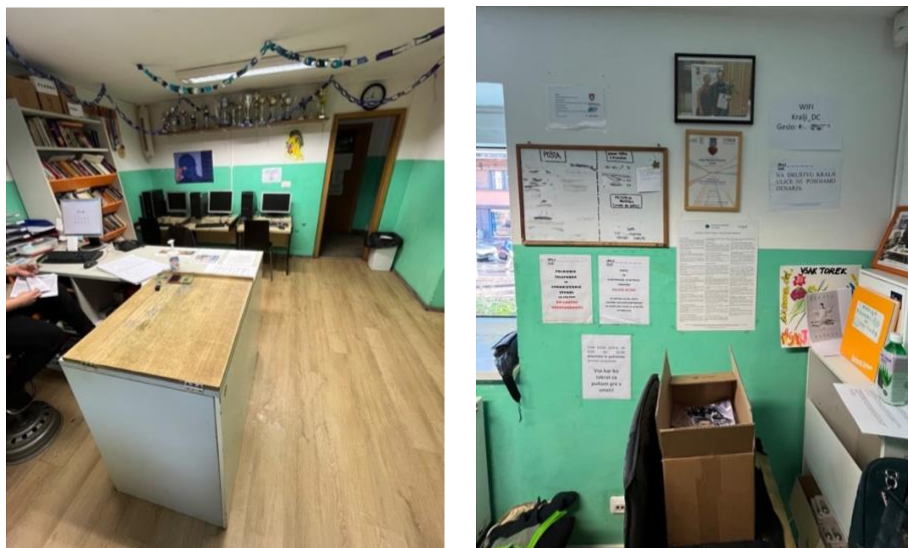
Figure 4: First issues of Kralji ulice displayed in the corridor (picture by author, 2024)

Figure 5: The first issue of Kralji ulice, June 2005 (picture by author, 2024)

The corridor connects all the rooms in the day center and is divided into **three areas**, separated by two door frames, the second one featuring an actual door. That door, usually closed and accessible with the key from the staff, leads to the offices where professional staff have their desks. In the **first area**, there is a room called *garderoba,* which translates to "changing room" in

English. It is open to visitors every day from 10:00 AM till 11:50 AM and it is where the organisation keeps clothing donations.

Opposite the *garderoba* is the first room, which serves as the reception area. The focal point of the room is the counter where visitors have their initial interactions with the professional worker behind it. Visitors can charge their phones there, get documents copied or printed and obtain forms for applying for financial aid. They can also temporarily leave their belongings behind the counter, functioning as a storage area. At the counter, people also participate in exchange of sterile injecting equipment for safe drug use, get condoms, and, depending on donations, women's hygiene products (Kralji ulice, n.d.-a). Visitors can have their mail delivered to the organisation's address.



Figures 6&7: The reception room on the left and the wall behind the counter on the right (pictures by author, 2024)

Behind the counter are also several notices, the center's rules and a book for complaints and praises. Examples of these notices include information about activities planned by Kralji ulice, available accommodation, and a preview of the next issue of the newspaper, which is available on the counter around half a month before its release.

Professional staff are present during opening hours to help with administrative matters, offer counselling, and provide support. Visitors are informed about the systemic options for improving their life situations. The relationship is based on respect, acceptance, and avoiding attempts to change individuals. The day center also offers accompaniment, advocacy, and peripatetic fieldwork (Kralji ulice, n.d.-a).

As people enter the day center, they first pass through the reception room, some stopping to speak with the person behind the counter, or simply exchange greetings with the staff or friends. Many proceed directly to the common room.

The common room is equipped with two couches, chairs, coffee, a speaker, and occasionally donated food is served here. In one corner, there is a microwave for everyone to use. Some people come to the common room to sit down and rest. The flow of people coming in and out of the room is smooth.

This room has two doorways: One leading to the reception room and the other to the **second area** of the hall. Across the hall is a small kitchen with running water and a fridge. Next to it is a toilet for visitors.

Figures 7&9: The common room (pictures by author, 2024)

Further along the hallway, passing the common room and the kitchen with a restroom, you reach a less accessible **third area**, where access is typically managed by the staff who hold the keys. Upon passing through these doors, there are three more doors ahead: The personnel restroom on the left, the meeting room on the right, and directly ahead, the entrance to the offices.

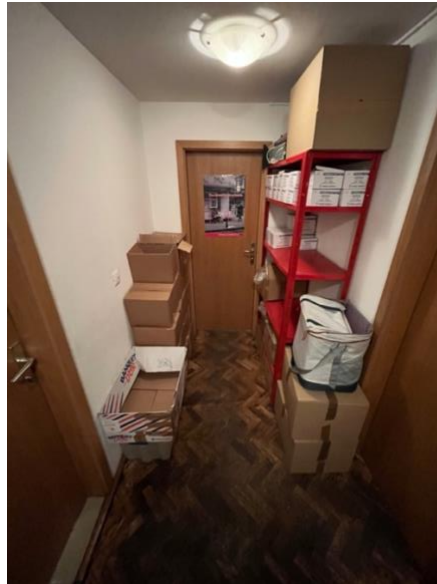


Figure 10: Entering the third area of the day center (picture by author, 2024)

The meeting room serves multiple functions and is equipped with several dedicated closets for storage. In its center, there is a large desk, typically surrounded by black chairs. Besides meetings, this room, along with parts of the hallway and restroom, doubles as storage.

Figure 11: The meeting room (picture by author, 2024)

On Tuesday mornings, the meeting room transforms into an art room hosting art workshops. Several times a week it becomes a doctor's infirmary, offering basic healthcare and wound care. On Thursdays it also operates as a hairdressing salon with volunteers offering haircuts and shaves. At other times, it functions as a chess room or hosts various meetings.

The office area is a room with eight desks, each dedicated to an individual staff member of the organisation. The walls are decorated with various artworks, such as posters, drawings, and photographs. The desks are situated on the right, while the left side is used for additional storage. A closet filled with folders, some containing visitor documents, divides the space. Behind the closet, a couch provides a semi-private area. Visitors of the day center can securely store their money and personal documents in this office, which is one of the reasons why access is restricted and requires a staff member's key.

6.2 Creation process of the newspaper

The street newspaper is created at the day center. The newspaper is published monthly, typically on the first day of the month. It differs in both distribution method and content from other newspapers available at newsstands (Kralji ulice, n.d.-d). Kralji ulice is the first and only newspaper in Slovenia focused on houselessness and related social issues.

The main themes of the newspaper include houselessness, street life, and social exclusion, and also cover topics such as addiction, violence, experiences of living in prisons and similar closed institutions, employment, family and relationship challenges, social services, and aid organisations (Kralji ulice, n.d.-d). Most of the articles in Kralji ulice are contributed by houseless authors, however some are written by other people, who are interested in these social issues. Once a year, a special thematic issue is published, with topics proposed and democratically chosen by the members.

Throughout my fieldwork I observed the authors dropping off their texts in various forms at the day center. Usually, the texts are either written down by hand on a piece of paper or are typed up, sometimes with the help of the staff. Other texts are submitted via email. These texts are then collected by the editor of the newspaper who makes final decisions on which are included in the month's issue. The final version of the following month issue is sent out for preview to the contributors via email, while it is also available on the counter of the day center.

Editorial meetings generally take place monthly. They consist of members who contribute to the newspaper, creators, professional collaborators, and volunteers. The group discusses submissions, determines their potential for publication, and assigns tasks and responsibilities within the editorial team (Kralji ulice, n.d.-h).

During my three-month fieldwork, there was only one editorial meeting in March. At this meeting, members discussed the usual topics and expressed a desire to resume regular meetings to improve communication within the board and provide better mutual support (Fieldnote, March 14, 2024).

6.3 Distribution of the newspaper

The Day Center also serves as the entry point for selling the newspaper. Those interested in becoming sellers can visit the center every Tuesday at 10:30 AM to complete a three-step introductory program, after which they become active members of the association (Kralji ulice, n.d.-a). The three-step introductory program is about rules of selling. Any adult of age can sell Kralji ulice. The requirements include signing membership documents and adhering to the newspaper's selling rules. New members receive three free trial copies of the newspaper to help them get started and minimal funds to purchase additional copies (Kralji ulice, n.d.-d). Sellers can choose to stop selling at any time, decide how much, when, and if they will sell Kralji ulice.

Sellers can pick up newspapers on weekdays from 8:00 AM to 2:00 PM. They purchase their newspapers for 1€ per copy at the counter. Each copy is stamped with the seller's unique seller number. The newspapers are then distributed for a suggested voluntary contribution of 2€, though the sellers often report receiving more from passersby (Kralji ulice, n.d.-d).

The rules of distribution are printed in each issue of the newspaper. These rules emphasise offering the newspaper calmly and non-intrusively, respecting fellow sellers, peacefully negotiating on selling location, abstaining from drug use while selling, and refraining from begging.

Seller meetings are held every last Tuesday of the month at 12:15 PM, led by a representative of the sellers. I attended two meetings, one in January and another in March. Before each meeting a notice was posted on the counter a few days earlier.

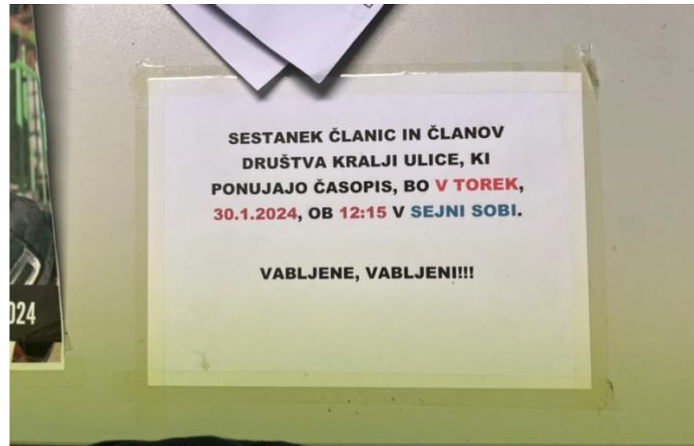


Figure 12: Invitation to the sellers meeting taped to the counter, saying "Meeting of the members of Kralji ulice who distribute the newspaper will be on Tuesday, 30.1.2024, at 12:15 in the meeting room. Welcome!" (picture by author, 2024)

Each session I attended had between 10 to 15 sellers, predominantly men. A staff member was also present to record attendance, which is necessary for awarding sellers with three free newspaper copies for participating in certain activities, including these meetings. During these meetings, the representative reports on previous sales performances and monthly statistics, also acknowledging the top three sellers (Fieldnotes, January 30 & March 26, 2024). Discussions focus on suggestions for improving sales methods, monitoring, and rules. The meetings also address violations of selling rules and disputes between sellers, particularly regarding selling locations.

Both times the discussions became lively, with multiple voices raised simultaneously, leading to overlapping conversations and occasional arguments. The representative encouraged sellers to read the newspaper, emphasising how it amplifies the voices and perspectives of marginalised individuals. In January, he encouraged the sellers to contribute their own writings, though this suggestion received mixed reactions, as some felt their previous submissions were overlooked. The newspaper's editor attended both meetings, thus using the opportunity to address queries about submitted texts and engage in a discussion on balancing political viewpoints to ensure the newspaper's inclusivity.

6.4 Stepping into the field and getting to know my participants

My initial access to the field was facilitated by my main contact person, the editor of the street newspaper Kralji ulice. After reaching out to him in October 2023, we had our first meeting in November to discuss my research needs and secure access. He provided me with relevant issues of the newspaper for context. In January 2024, we had a second meeting to initiate the fieldwork.

The editor assisted me by showing me around the day center and introducing me to the staff, which helped me become more familiar with the space. As mentioned earlier, I spent my time observing interactions and dynamics of the day center from my position near the counter. To support my research, my contact person provided the contacts of three individuals involved with the newspaper who were willing to speak with me.

By mid-January, starting to feel more comfortable at the day center, I began reaching out to these contacts to arrange meetings via phone calls or text messages. These initial interactions were my first attempts in bridging the gap toward understanding the experiences of the day center's visitors.

As I became more acquainted and comfortable in the day center environment, I grew more confident in approaching people to discuss their experiences with selling and writing for the newspaper, as well as their sense of belonging. Through these conversations and observations, I developed a deeper understanding of the people and their stories.

I had the honour of working with 10 participants. The individuals I mention most frequently in the following chapters are Marin, Petra, Helena, Nina, and Lovro. Below are their brief introductions.

I met **Marin** early in my fieldwork journey, as he was one of the first contacts I received. Our initial interaction was a friendly phone call, where his pleasant tone and proactive approach to arranging our meeting were evident (Fieldnote, Januray 23, 2024) He is a man in his 50s who had spent part of his life living and working in Australia. Upon returning to Slovenia, he found himself without a home due to personal reasons he chose not to disclose in detail. This eventually led him to Kralji ulice, early in the organisation's existence. Today, he is an active seller of the newspaper and occasionally contributes articles. Marin assisted me with my research by sharing his experiences and thoughts in an interview and allowing me to accompany him to his selling spot.

Petra is another contact I received and the first person I met at the day center. In her thirties, Petra lives with a status of permanent unemployability due to health issues related to substance abuse. She approaches selling the street newspaper as a full-time occupation. She writes for the newspaper monthly, while also participating as a member of the editorial board. Always on the move with a backpack, she appears busy and pressed for time to maintain her selling schedule. In an interview, Petra shared that she only dedicates time to activities she consciously enjoys or that

bring her positive benefits, thus ensuring her time well spent. We conducted two interviews, and she was the second person to allow me to accompany her to her selling spot in Ljubljana.

Helena, a woman in her 50s, and I met during the final month of my fieldwork at the sport activity - table tennis. She has been living with the status of permanent unemployability due to an injury from a car accident she experienced in her childhood. Helena sells the street newspaper whenever she can and feels inclined to do so, supplementing her income with odd jobs like assisting people on their farms. In addition to selling the newspaper, she also contributes texts to it. She approaches life with immense gratitude, believing that gratitude is essential for personal growth. Helena was eager to help me and enjoyed discussing my studies and sharing our perspectives on life. We conducted one interview after a table tennis session.

Nina, another participant in her 30s, is currently in prison, which unfortunately prevented us from meeting in person as I was unable to obtain official permission to visit her. Instead, we corresponded through letters. Before her incarceration, Nina experienced houselessness, living on the streets and resorting to illegal means of earning income, such as stealing, which she discussed in her interview on Klopca pod svobodnim soncem (Bench under the free sun). She briefly sold the street newspaper before going to prison and continues to contribute to it with texts from prison, which she says help her heal from her experiences. Having been in prison briefly before, Nina has unique insights into the changes within the prison community and the outside world over time. Our correspondence began with my initial letter, to which she responded, and I followed up with a note of thanks.

Lovro was introduced to me as one of the earliest members of Kralji ulice, which is indicated by his low seller number, and he played a significant role in the organisation's formation. The professional staff at the time sought input from individuals on the streets, like Lovro, to help shape the services of Kralji ulice. Now in his late 50s, Lovro, who sports shoulder-length hair and usually wears casual clothes, represents the newspaper's sellers. During my fieldwork, he transitioned to an official position at Kralji ulice and began dressing more formally with the clothes obtained from *garderoba*. He noted a shift in how people interacted with him since his change in attire. "For example," he observed, "cars stop for me to cross the street more often, and people address me formally" (Fieldnote, March 13, 2024). Although Lovro may no longer actively sell the newspaper, he maintains a supply of copies as a precaution for potential financial challenges (Lovro, interview, February 12, 2024).

The remaining five participants have made important contributions to my thesis by providing a range of perspectives and experiences that have enriched the study. Their insights, though less frequently highlighted, added valuable context and depth to the research, helping to create a more nuanced understanding of the community and its dynamics.

Gorazd and **Artur**, regularly contribute articles to the newspaper, sharing their experiences and viewpoints. **Bojan**, whom I met during a monthly cinema visit with Kralji ulice, helped me feel integrated into the community by sharing his poetry. **Jana** and **Dejan**, who alternate between living on the street and, when possible, elsewhere, took the time to share their perspectives, providing layered understanding to the lived realities and challenges faced by individuals in similar situations. The diverse contributions of all the participants have been instrumental in painting a more comprehensive and empathetic picture of the community.

7. Fieldwork analysis

With a comprehensive understanding of the participants in this study, the focus now shifts to the data analysis chapter. This chapter is divided into **three sections**, each corresponding to a part of the theoretical framework.

The **first section** explores the theme of marginalisation, delving into the dynamics of employment and the attitudes toward selling, both of which are intricately connected to the experience of marginalisation within this community. The **second section** examines the sense of belonging, analysed in various contexts: within the day center, during the act of selling, and touches upon aspects of gender and its influence on the sense of belonging. The **third and final section** addresses the concepts of individualism and consumerism, investigating how neoliberal ideologies shape social bonds, marginalise vulnerable populations, and redefine belonging through consumer behaviours and market-driven values.

7.1 Experiencing Marginalisation: Navigating Employment, Social Perceptions, and Economic Hardships

In this chapter, I examine the experiences of marginalisation faced by participants who have experienced houselessness and have found themselves outside the labour market. I will explore three key areas: the employment dynamics affecting these marginalised individuals, their attitudes towards selling the street newspaper Kralji ulice, and how they are perceived by society. By analysing these aspects, I aim to illuminate the challenges they face and the ways they navigate their marginalised status.

7.1.1 From Fairness to Exploitation: The Realities of Employment for Marginalised Individuals

My discussions with participants showed that employment dynamics are a significant aspect of their experience of marginalisation. Power dynamics play a crucial role in these dynamics, especially for marginalised people (Wilson & Darity, 2022). The imbalance of power between employers and marginalised workers often results in limited job mobility and economic security (Wilson & Darity, 2022), which are components of precarious living conditions (Kasmir & Stasch, 2018). Precarity disproportionately affects marginalised people, linking job insecurity to stress, anxiety, and other mental issues, as the constant threat of unemployment and financial instability take a toll on individuals' well-being (Kasmir & Stasch, 2018).

This connection between power imbalances and precarity is evident in the experiences described in the January issue of Kralji ulice which features an article on employment exploitation (Taubi, 2024). The author explains that once individuals become houseless, they face stigmatization that further limits their job prospects. This situation exemplifies precarity, where individuals' lives are marked by continuous instability and uncertainty. Some employers exploit this vulnerability by offering employment but then delaying payment, underpaying, or failing to pay altogether (Taubi, 2024). According to the author, human life loses its intrinsic value, with only labour being valued, underscoring the dehumanizing aspect of precarious work.

This theme of employment dynamics, exploitation, and precarious work resonates with Marin's personal narrative, highlighting the contrast between his experiences working in Australia and Slovenia. When asked about the comparison, Marin describes the differences between Australia and Slovenia to "day and night." He elaborated on how Australia prioritized its citizens, akin to a nurturing mother, while Slovenia seemed to adopt a more indifferent stance, akin to a

stepmother. Marin contrasted the attitudes towards employee compensation, emphasising the transparency and fairness of his previous workplace: "*As much as I worked, that's how much I got paid. There was no one blabbing. The quality had to be there, and that was the point*" (Marin, interview, January 30, 2024). However, upon returning to Slovenia, Marin was disillusioned by the disparity in attitudes, feeling undervalued and overlooked by employers who failed to compensate him adequately for his efforts. Consequently, his reflections on his time in Australia are imbued with nostalgia, possibly serving as a counterbalance to his current disillusionment in Slovenia. Nostalgia is a sentimental longing for one's past, which can encompass not only places but people, events, and periods that hold personal significance (Sedikides et al., 2008). For Marin, his reflections on Australia might evoke a sense of nostalgia, representing a time and place where he felt valued and secure.

Franklin and Tranter (2019) discuss how the development of labour markets leads to higher mobility, which influences individuals' sense of belonging. They note that moving to unfamiliar places can lead to homesickness and feelings of alienation. However, Marin's experience contradicts this perspective. After relocating for work, he felt better cared for in Australia and spoke warmly about his time there, contrasting sharply with his feelings towards Slovenia. Upon returning to Slovenia and facing houselessness and exploitation, his sense of belonging was weakened. Marin's nostalgia for Australia, instead of a strengthening his connection to Slovenia, highlighted his dissatisfaction with the Slovenian system. In my opinion, this example underscores how positive work experiences abroad can amplify dissatisfaction with one's home country, particularly when contrasted with experiences of marginalisation.

For Marin, the stark contrast between his positive experiences in Australia and his current struggles in Slovenia might amplify his feelings of nostalgia. Nostalgia is often triggered by negative emotions and serves to counteract distress and restore emotional steadiness (Sedikides et al., 2008). This emotional response can generate positive affect, enhance self-regard, strengthen social bonds, and imbue life with meaning, helping individuals cope with existential threats (Sedikides et al., 2008). In my opinion, reminiscing about his time in Australia might help Marin navigate the challenges he faces in Slovenia, providing a psychological buffer against the hardships of precarious work and economic instability. His memories of fair treatment and recognition in Australia can serve as a benchmark, highlighting the disparities and driving his longing for better working conditions in Slovenia.

Several other participants I spoke with echoed similar sentiments feeling that the working conditions and the compensation they received was inadequate for the work they put in. One of them is Lovro. He revealed that his choice to live without a permanent home often surprises others, as he genuinely enjoys his lifestyle. He recalled having decided as a child not to become an employee, expressing frustration with what he perceives as exploitation in traditional employment dynamics:

> "*Employees are a special kind of goods, for whom you pay only for the price of their maintenance, while they do much more than that. /…/ You have a product, your employee adds value to it, but you do not pay your employee for that added value. You pay your employee for their survival, so they do not die on you and can come work for you every month. I believe this is a huge exploitation.*"
>
> (Lovro, interview, February 12, 2024)

His critical stance raises an interesting tension. He is currently employed at Kralji ulice, which seems at odds with his disdain for traditional work dynamics. In my opinion, this contradiction may reflect a pragmatic acceptance of the realities of economic survival, where Lovro's idealistic views on work are challenged by the necessity of earning a living. Alternatively, it might indicate a complex relationship with the work system where Lovro's critique of exploitation exists alongside a recognition of the system's unavoidable role in his life. This duality highlights nuanced and often conflicted nature of individuals' relationship with work, where ideological critiques can coexist with pragmatic realities.

The same tension is further illuminated when considering the broader societal narratives around work and responsibility. Lovro's situation exemplifies how marginalised individuals are often forced to navigate a system they criticize, not out of choice, but necessity. The notion of 'work ethic,' which suggests that those in marginalised positions simply do not work hard enough to improve their situations (Bauman, 2007), often overlooks the reality that these individuals face significant systemic barriers. This perspective can lead to the belief that those who remain in difficult circumstances have failed to make use of available support and are thus unworthy of further assistance (Schneider, 2022). Participants in my study reported experiencing employer misconduct and other systemic issues that erode their trust in the support systems meant to help them. This reflects Farmer's (2004) concept of structural violence, where social structures perpetuate disadvantage and exploitation, leading to outcomes such as poverty, discrimination, and restricted access to resources and opportunities.

Lovro's and Marin's experience, along with the article from Kralji ulice, reveal the flawed assumption that hard work alone can elevate individuals from marginalisation. They highlight the systemic barriers and exploitative practices that hinder economic mobility and sustain inequality. By examining Lovro's dual stance – his ideological opposition to traditional work dynamics and his pragmatic engagement with them – the pervasive impact of structural and symbolic violence and the fallacy of the 'work ethic' narrative in a capitalist society becomes clearer. This is further supported by the accounts in the street newspaper and Marin's experiences, reinforcing the need to address systemic issues first. Individuals like Lovro, who resist participating in an exploitative employment system, or those like Marin, who lose faith in fair treatment by employers and seek alternative means of earning, such as selling or writing for the street newspaper, demonstrate that the system is not working for everyone.

It shows the importance of organisations like Kralji ulice, which strive to find employment opportunities suitable for individuals despite the stigma associated with their marginalised status. These organisations play a crucial role in attempting to bridge the gap between the ideal and the practical, providing a supportive environment that acknowledges the challenges faced by marginalised individuals while offering them meaningful work opportunities. By doing so, they challenge and reshape traditional employment dynamics to be more inclusive and fairer.

7.1.2 Navigating Social Stigma: The Varied Experiences of Street Newspaper Sellers

Newspaper sellers are often stigmatized by the society. I noticed that the attitude towards selling varies among the sellers depending on their individual circumstances. For example, Petra is one of the people officially classified as permanently unemployable and approaches selling as a full-time occupation. Her permanent unemployability stems from health issues related to substance abuse. Petra sees selling the street newspaper her only viable means of earning a sufficient income within the bounds of her unemployability, even allowing her to save for the future. She now considers her involvement with the newspaper as a form of work, viewing herself as both a seller and a co-creator of the product. Selling and contributing articles to the newspaper are essential components of the lifestyle she envisions. Although Petra began selling before her health issues, she acknowledges it was initially to fund her alcohol consumption. When asked about her attitude towards selling her own written pieces related to her unemployable status, Petra explained her experience:

"*Having the status of an unemployable person is… well, it is not easy. Especially, if you know it was your own fault that it got to this point. Some sense of guilt… Thoughts like, it could be different. So, it is easier for me to process it this way.*"

(Petra, interview, January 29, 2024)

Similarly, Helena, who is also officially classified as permanently unemployable, shared her experience that selling the street newspaper is her main way of financially supporting herself. Initially apprehensive about how her disability might be perceived, she found that people were indifferent, and she was able to manage her financial needs more easily (Helena, interview, March 20, 2024).

Petra and Helena's accounts highlight the experience of marginalisation. In a society where the dominant norm is to be employed, earn money, and participate in consumerism, those who wish to but cannot achieve this are marginalised (Varghese & Kumar, 2022). This experience involves feelings of exclusion, as seen in the fear of revealing one's differences, such as a seller's disability, which can further exacerbate feelings of rejection by mainstream society. The perception of marginalisation significantly influences the decision to sell the street newspaper. Sellers experience that they are automatically categorized as socially marginalised, leading them to be perceived as lacking any means.

It takes courage to position oneself on the street and offer the newspaper to passersby, particularly when there is stigma attached to it. Many people perceive it as begging and scold the seller with comments like "*Go to work! Don't beg!*" (Petra, interview, January 29, 2024). Selling the newspaper involves providing a product in exchange for money, so it is not the same as begging.

Lovro shared his experience and insight about begging, explaining that begging, with its constant pressure to appear destitute, not only damages one's sense of self-worth but also leads to feeling dehumanized and worthless. He said, "*Begging is not a good way to make money. You always have to force yourself to look pitiful, and then you start to feel pitiful, and it really breaks you. It destroys you as a person*." (Lovro, interview, February 12, 2024). This highlights that selling the newspaper, despite the stigma, is viewed as a more dignified alternative compared to begging. However, societal expectations still impose a narrow view of what it means to be in need. Sellers of the newspaper must navigate these expectations, balancing their dignity with the societal image of what people in need should look like. Petra has experienced a growing number of people becoming upset with her when she dresses more smartly while selling, even though she gets her clothes from

garderoba. This illustrates the ongoing tension between maintaining personal dignity and conforming to societal expectation of neediness (Glasser & Bridgman, 1999).

Individuals like Petra and Helena adapt their identities and behaviours to navigate this social landscape, conforming to the narratives that society expects, which often emphasise vulnerability and neediness. This is not merely about deception but about the need to appear desperate to continue receiving help, perpetuating their marginalised status (Glasser & Bridgman, 1999). Sellers must also navigate the complex interplay between their self-perception and how they are perceived by others. The need to maintain dignity while meeting societal expectations of what it means to be in need adds an additional layer of difficulty. Sellers often find themselves balancing their own sense of self-worth with the external pressures to conform to an image of vulnerability. This ongoing negotiation reflects not only the challenges of their marginalisation but also the broader societal forces that shape their experiences of economic and social exclusion.

Marin also held apprehensions about selling before he took the leap. He shared with me how he encouraged himself to acquire the newspapers and start approaching people on the street. "*Look, Marin, you worked in hospitality, /…/, you went abroad knowing five words of English. I told myself, you know what, if they can [sell Kralji ulice], so can you*." (Marin, interview, January 30, 2024). His story, like Petra's and Helena's, highlights the courage it takes to sell the newspaper amidst societal stigma and marginalisation. This perception of selling as an act of desperation rather than legitimate work further entrenches their marginalised status, demonstrating how systemic barriers and societal attitudes perpetuate economic and social exclusion.

7.1.3 Societal Perceptions and Economic Realities: The Challenges Facing Street Newspaper Sellers

Negative comments from the passersby, like those Petra mentioned, reveal how society treats individuals who do not conform to the dominant norms. Highlighting differences, such as the perceived lack of 'real' work or deviations from the expected appearance of Kralji ulice sellers, exacerbates feelings of insecurity and alienation, as individuals feel unable to meet societal expectations (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

In my opinion, these comments also reflect the fears of the mainstream society. Criticisms about work and begging suggest a subconscious fear of insufficient employment opportunities and financial insecurity. Comments about the appearance of newspaper sellers indicate a fear of being deceived into offering support to those who may not truly need it. These reactions highlight

broader societal struggles, particularly mistrust in a system perceived as indifferent to individual welfare, as supported by my participants' experiences. I think this stems from living in an individualistic society where personal achievement and profit are prioritized over collective well-being, fostering an expectation that individuals must fend for themselves independently.

The experiences from selling are intertwined with the ongoing economic crisis in Slovenia, where prices are rising disproportionately compared to salaries. Specifically, the inflation rate in 2022 and 2023 consistently exceeded 9% (Škerlak, 2023), while the real salary growth was -6% in 2022 and +2% in 2023 (Češek Vozel, 2024). The increase in the cost of living was especially significant in food and domestic energy costs (Brvar, 2022).

Participants have observed that during times of crisis, there is a greater level of empathy for their struggles, however, fewer people have the financial means to donate or purchase newspapers from the sellers. At Kralji ulice, they have also noticed the widening impact of the crisis. Visitors to the day center now include not only the houseless and the substance abusers but also other socially marginalised individuals and retirees. They seek alternative ways to support themselves throughout the month and find solace in the understanding and camaraderie fostered by the organisation's activities (Gaši, 2023).

7.2 Navigating Belonging: Social Interactions, Identity, and Gendered Experiences in Marginalised Spaces

This chapter explores the multifaced nature of belonging experienced by marginalised individuals through three perspectives: Their interactions at the day center, their roles as sellers of the street newspaper Kralji ulice, and the impact of gender on their sense of belonging. By investigating these areas, the chapter reveals how relationships, public perceptions, and gendered experiences influence the ways in which individuals navigate and cultivate their sense of community and identity amidst marginalisation. Each section provides a more detailed look into how these factors contribute to and shape the complex dynamics of belonging in challenging contexts.

7.2.1 Creating Belonging: The Role of the Day Center in Fostering Connection and Community

The rules at the day center together with the attitudes of professional staff create an atmosphere where the communication among visitors, volunteers, and professional staff is generally in good faith and rarely hostile. Conflicts are typically avoided; if someone acts confrontationally, others tend to brush it off rather than escalate the situation. Violating the rules, especially hitting another visitor, can result in being banned from the center temporarily. One visitor who violated this rule and was prohibited from entering, spent his time on a bench in the park outside the center, which indicates that people come to the day center not only for its services but also to socialize. Although this person used to sell Kralji ulice, he told me that he has since stopped. He also expressed genuine fondness for the day center. He explained he visits it seeking interpersonal warmth, considering the connections he has formed there as akin to family (Fieldnote, March 19, 2024).

As Marin told me, the day center serves as a place where marginalised individuals can find others in similar positions, dealing with similar challenges. "*A person feels a sense of belonging*," explained Marin, "*feels accepted somewhere, where there are people that you know, you can come to and say 'Good day', who will take a moment for you and have a normal conversation with you. Without looking down on you and asking 'Who are you? Where did you come from?*" (interview, January 30, 2024).

Petra shared the same notion, saying that at the day center they can connect with people who have the same interests. Talking with those who share the same struggles helps them feel seen in their experience. The person they are talking with understands where they are coming from,

which, as Petra explains, provides comfort (Petra, interview, January 29, 2024). In my opinion, feeling seen is a basic human need that connects us and strengthens our sense of belonging.

This corresponds to the before mentioned levels of belonging identified by Yuval-Davis (2006). Here, I recognize the second of the three levels, known as identification and emotional attachment. Individual and collective narratives are shaped through shared experiences and common values, fostering a sense of connection and solidarity. Namely, the day center provides a space where individuals can forge connections and seek solidarity among peers who understand and refrain from judgement, unlike those outside marginalised groups. It serves as a gathering place for individuals with experiences of houselessness and marginalisation, facilitating social interaction and support-seeking. Consequently, visitors to the center anticipate acceptance and develop emotional bonds with both the people and the physical space.

Franklin and Tranter (2019) broaden the perspective on belonging by extending it beyond social connections to include emotional attachments to places. In this context, the day center itself becomes more than just a physical space; it transforms into a symbol of stability and community for its visitors, enhancing their sense of belonging through their connection to the place.

7.2.2 Navigating Public Interactions: How Street Newspaper Sellers' Behaviour and Appearance Affect Their Sense of Belonging

The sense of belonging among sellers of the street newspaper is also tied to their daily interactions with the public. These interactions shape their experiences and influence their perceptions of acceptance and community. For many sellers, how they present themselves and engage with passersby directly impacts the way they are perceived and treated. This dynamic between seller behaviour and public response is central to understanding their sense of belonging.

Helena, one of the sellers, stressed in our interview that she firmly believes that how sellers behave towards the public is generally how the public behaves towards them (Helena, interview, March 20, 2024). She focuses a lot on gratitude and affirmations. She shared that at the beginning of selling, she says to herself, "*People are generous, in a good mood, and joyful. I earned 10€.*" That way she envisions what she wants to see and expects it to be reflected at her.

Other participants too talked about the attitude of the public towards selling depending on the seller's attitude towards them. Both Petra and Marin acknowledged that there are always people who behave inappropriately and have their own ideas about the kind of people who sell Kralji

ulice. However, some people become better acquainted with the sellers, becoming their regular clients and genuinely interested into the seller's personal life stories. I witnessed these interactions during both go-alongs. I went to accompany Petra and Marin to their selling points. Petra seemed to be strongly aware of the public attitude and asked me to stand further away to prevent people from getting scared off, while Marin had me sit next to him and talked with me the whole time. I noticed that interactions varied a lot. Some ignored the seller, some acknowledged them briefly, some were clearly uncomfortable passing by, while others greeted them and commented a bit on the weather or apologized for not having enough change.

Petra's one selling point is in the city center, at the entrance to a parking garage. The parking garage is also near the District Court of Ljubljana, influencing the type of clientele who use the facility. The owners of the parking garage allow only Petra to sell the newspapers in front of the entrance because they know and trust her to follow their rules regarding how to interact with the people who park there and where she is allowed to position herself – there is a line outside the entrance behind which she is permitted to stand.

Petra shared that due to the location of the parking lot, her clients tend to be of a higher socioeconomic status. As a result, she feels the need to dress and behave more formally to align with what I think she assumes are their expectations. For instance, when she is working at this parking garage, she also refrains from smoking in the immediate area, opting instead to take dedicated breaks elsewhere. In my opinion, this behaviour stems from her perception of the social norms, including stigmas surrounding smoking, particularly among the clientele frequenting this location. It reflects Petra's awareness of her social location within the power dynamics at play, where she navigates the expectations and norms of a higher socioeconomic group. According to Yuval-Davis (2006), social locations constructed along axes of class difference shape individuals' experience of belonging and influence how they present themselves in various social contexts.

In contrast, when Petra works at her other selling points in front of supermarkets, she feels more at ease smoking while selling. She described the clientele at these locations as more diverse and less influenced by formal social expectations, which allows her to engage in behaviours she feels are less scrutinized. This distinction in behaviour highlights how Petra adjusts her actions based on her perception of the environment and the people she interacts with.

These adaptations in her behaviour potentially carry implication for her sense of belonging. At the parking garage, Petra's efforts to adapt to the higher-class environment can lead to a feeling

of increased scrutiny. Selling Kralji ulice places her in a marginalised position in the eyes of the general public, and as a woman, she feels additional pressure to conform to societal expectations. The intersection of her gender and class influences her sense of belonging, resulting in a unique experience of both privilege and oppression. This highlights Yuval-Davis' (2006) assertion that multiple aspects of identity intersect to shape individuals' experiences of belonging in complex ways.

While these behaviours do not necessarily translate to a stronger sense of belonging, they suggest different dynamics at play. Petra's varying behaviour in different settings reveals how her intersecting identities impact her sense of inclusion and acceptance. My analysis indicates that the need to fit into different environments influences her interactions and self-perception, revealing the nuanced ways in which various settings shape her sense of belonging.

Marin, on the other hand, sells only in front of one store, also in the city center. He seems less concerned about adjusting to the environment, and comfortable enough to do his own thing. When I joined him, he was already at his selling point, sitting on a foldable chair with his suitcase next to him. He was drinking a beer from a can and smoking. The suitcase was used to display the March issue of Kralji ulice and to make his seller's card visible to passersby. Next to his chair, he had a blanket and a bowl for his recently adopted puppy. Marin shared that selling with a dog is an advantage. He spoke about his previous dog, which had to be put down several months prior, while discussing the differences in people's reactions and donations when selling with or without a dog. He told me that people interacted with him much more since he got a dog. During my time at his selling point, he received dog food donations three times. "*People are more empathetic towards animals*" Marin noted, explaining the instance of a person giving him 22€, saying 20€ was for the dog and 2€ for him. "*Fortunately,*" Marin joked, "*the dog and I have a shared household*" (Fieldnote, March 8, 2024). This connection to his dog highlights the broader perspective on belonging proposed by Franklin and Tranter (2019), which includes connections with non-human entities like companion animals. Marin's strong sense of companionship with his dog underscores how those experiencing marginalisation can find empathy, connection, and a sense of belonging through their animal companions. The increased empathy and interaction from the public could potentially enhance Marin's sense of belonging and, in turn, deepen his attachment to his dog, suggesting a possible reinforcement between his enhanced sense of connection and his bond with his pet.

I noticed that the way people are perceived by the environment, whether they are included or excluded, influences their sense of belonging. How people treat sellers, the comments they make, whether they are friendly or hostile, affect how the sellers feel welcomed at their spot and, more broadly, accepted by the society. Nina was always hyper-aware of her surroundings, paying attention to how people perceived her. In her letter, she wrote about the different ways she was accepted by the environment. When she looked 'normal', people treated her well, donated money, bought the newspapers, and refrained from making inappropriate comments. "*This all changed, when I ended up on the street and 'fell apart'*," she writes (Letter, March 28, 2024). People started looking down on her, ignoring her, and she started receiving an increasing number of inappropriate offers from middle-aged men. It seems to me like the public reacts to how people present themselves to the outside and evaluates the worth of the individual based on that. Interestingly, the participants who mentioned their looks in connection to how they are treated were mostly women. Men usually did not mention their appearance when discussing how they are perceived by the environment.

7.2.3 Navigating Gender and Belonging: Reflections on Women's Day and the Intersection of Gendered Marginalisation

I was in the field on March 8th, the International Women's Day. I first spent some time at the day center and then two hours with Marin at his selling point, which gave me an insightful experience of the occasion. He spoke to me about the importance of Women's Day and how significant a celebration it was in Yugoslavia. I could feel its influence, especially at the day center. When I arrived at the day center and went to the back offices to drop off my things, Lovro came after me as he was looking for something in his backpack. On his way back, he turned to me and gifted me a packet of green tea, saying, "*Happy Women's Day.*" That was the first indicator that people at the day center were celebrating Women's Day. Throughout the day, both men and women entered different rooms with wishes like "*Happy Women's Day!*" and "*Congratulations to the women's world!*" The atmosphere was warm and welcoming.

Being a woman influenced my experience of the day. I received more attention than usual; visitors, who had seen me around but had not spoken with me yet, walked up to wish a happy Women's Day. Compared to other days I spent at the day center, I had many more conversations with the visitors. Men who were usually annoyed by any delay in fulfilling their requests due to my unfamiliarity with the systems in place, were more patient and tended to engage in a more playful back-and-forth while waiting. I was surprised by the atmosphere on that day. I did not expect it to be such a different experience compared to other days.

Gender is indeed a characteristic that shapes our experiences. The March issue of the newspaper was dedicated to women and their experiences of marginalisation. For the occasion, the newspaper was not called Kralji ulice (Kings of the Street) but Kraljice ulice (Queens of the street).

Figure 13: March issue of the newspaper (source: "Kraljice Ulice," 2024)

One of the professional staff wrote the editorial for the newspaper discussing the women who come to the day center (Rupar, 2024). These women are in the minority and tend to seek help later than men. She pointed out that those women who do come, rarely arrive by themselves and are usually accompanied by 'their' men. One of my participants, Nina, confirmed this in her letter. She had had experiences of being houseless both with a partner and by herself. She revealed that when she was single, men would physically attack her to get to the money she had, while during the times she was in a relationship, these men left her alone. "*That is why,*" she wrote, "*most women in similar situations are rather with someone, just to have 'peace'*" (Nina, letter, March 28, 2024).

This observation aligns with broader research findings on the experiences of houseless women, who often form temporary relationships with men to feel safer and secure some form of protection (Watson, 2018). Women often tend to stay in relationships or engage in brief connections with men in order to avoid the violence and vulnerability associated with being alone on the streets. The necessity of these relationships highlights the precarious nature of their

situation, where the presence of a male partner, regardless of his own circumstances, can offer a degree of safety and stability that they lack when alone (Watson, 2018).

The necessity of forming such relationships underscores the severe inequality and gendered violence faced by houseless women. Feeling the inequality of how men and women are perceived and treated, Nina writes about starting to view our society as brutal and conservative. "*We are often left to the mercy of men and society, which perceive us as cheap, stupid, 'all for the money' people,*" she elaborates (Nina, letter, March 28, 2024). This sentiment is echoed in broader findings on the experiences of houseless women, who are often more vulnerable to gendered violence and exploitation (Watson, 2018). Nina also recounted the particularly degrading experiences of receiving propositions for sexual service. She wrote, "*The most unpleasant were the 'offers' for sexual services. /…/ If you are a woman on the street, it is automatically assumed that you are a prostitute or that you will do anything for money or drugs.*" However, Nina emphasised that many women only resort to such measures in the most extreme circumstances.

Houselessness can expose women to further violence as women may feel pressured to exchange sex for shelter due to a lack of resources (Watson, 2018). Nina's experiences reflect this dynamic, where the presence of a male partner offers a form of protection from the violence of street based houselessness. Nina further explained that realizing she 'needed' to be with a man in order to be safe, seriously affected her self-esteem and deteriorated her mental health. She became depressed and felt worthless.

The crisis of houselessness for women is thus compounded by the intersection of gendered violence and economic vulnerability. The lack of secure and supportive housing options forces many women into dangerous and exploitative situations, as highlighted in both the editorial of Kralji ulice and Nina's personal account.

Similar stories are written about in the March issue by other women with experiences of houselessness. Many of them talk about inappropriate offers they get from men, who think that struggling women are prepared to do anything for money. Nina explained that when women in similar situations meet, they do not need to talk about their issues – a comforting, empathetic look is enough. She says that the connection can be felt as they understand what the other is experiencing. This is another confirmation of what Petra also mentioned: the importance of having your experience shared and knowing that the other person understands what you are going through – the importance of feeling seen.

In this context, the sense of belonging is constructed based on social locations, which Yuval-Davis (2006) identifies as the first level of belonging. Social locations refer to belonging to certain social categories, such as gender. As the initial level of belonging, it does not necessarily imply extensive social interactions within the category. Reflecting on what Nina shared, women may not have had many interactions among themselves, yet they still found ways to support and empathise with each other.

Nevertheless, there are also stories of people being more willing to help out a woman than a man. Helena told me that she feels fortunate to be a woman as people, in her opinion, tend to be more trusting towards women than men. She had had people say to her "*Ah, I am going to help a woman. I would not give money to a man*" (Helena, interview, March 20, 2024). Thus, gender shows to be one of the characteristics that shape the specific power hierarchy (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Nina's account illustrates that being a woman can increase one's disadvantage, as she felt she needed to be with a partner to feel safe. Simultaneously, it highlights the privilege Helena mentioned, where some people may feel more empathy towards a woman than a man, possibly due to an awareness of the general disadvantages women face.

7.3 The Effects of Individualism and Consumerism on Social Inclusion

In this this chapter I will explore how dynamics of individualism within neoliberal ideology, consumerism, and marginalised communities impact the sense of belonging of marginalised individuals. It seems that neoliberal ideologies push marginalised individuals to rely increasingly on non-governmental organisations rather than state support. This shift not only erodes the sense of communal belonging (Rustin, 2014) but also exacerbates the isolation experienced by those unable to conform to market ideals (Bauman, 2007).

7.3.1 The Consequences of Neoliberal Individualism: Distrust, Responsibilisation, and Structural Violence

The intersection of individualism and neoliberalism negatively influences the sense of belonging for marginalised populations. Neoliberal ideologies emphasise self-reliance and personal responsibility (Rustin, 2014), leading to a retreat of state support and an increased reliance on non-governmental organisations. This shift not only shapes how marginalised individuals navigate their circumstances but also exposes them to structural violence perpetuated by both societal neglect and economic priorities (Farmer, 2004).

I was told about reliance of participants on organisation Kralji ulice during the first week of my fieldwork as my contact person explained that the organisation is working on building trust with the visitors, because many of them have lost trust in institutions (Fieldnote, January 12, 2024). This notion was also reflected in the media, where the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities stated that "*many houseless people do not want to ask for help in public institutions, but they are inclined to seek help through non-governmental organisations, such as the Association for help and self-help Kralji ulice, /…/, which are available every day of the week throughout the year*" (Pust, 2023). While the statement is an assessment of the situation, the quote as published online suggests that the responsibility for socially marginalised people not reaching out to public institutions lies with the marginalised people themselves. This perspective exemplifies the broader trend of responsibilisation, a concept that describes the shifting of accountability for welfare from the state to individuals (Juhila et al., 2016).

Under neoliberal ideologies, which emphasise autonomy, choice, and self-management, individuals are increasingly expected to navigate their own risks and responsibilities (Juhila et al., 2016). As a result, individuals are left to navigate their challenges without sufficient state support, turning instead to NGOs like Kralji ulice. This is like Petra shared: "*If you don't know the system when you're inside, it's good to have someone to guide you*" (Petra, interview, January 29, 2024), illustrating

this reality. This highlights that in the absence of robust state welfare systems, individuals who are unfamiliar with navigating the complexities of their circumstances, benefit significantly from the guidance and support provided by NGOs.

This reliance reveals a broader trend of individualization of risk, where the state's retreat from welfare provision is masked by rhetoric that frames self-reliance as a virtue (Juhila et al., 2016). Rustin (2014) highlights how neoliberalism's emphasis on individualism challenges collectivist notions of belonging, redefining it in terms of individual success and market participation rather than community and shared responsibilities. This reliance on NGOs over state institutions highlights a deep distrust in the latter, underscoring the neoliberal state's failure to support its most vulnerable citizens and significantly undermining their sense of belonging.

The implication of responsibilisation become particularly obvious when examining specific cases of structural violence against marginalised populations. During my fieldwork, it emerged in the media that the lease for a shelter for the houseless, located in the center of Ljubljana and rented from the nun order of Sisters Ursulines, is not being renewed, with no explanation given. I asked the people at the day center what they thought about this incident, and the general notion was that having a shelter in the center of Ljubljana meant houseless people were gathering on one of the main squares in Ljubljana, which the authorities presumably found undesirable as it conflicted with the polished, tourist-friendly image of the city they wish to project (Fieldnotes January 31 & March 6, 2024). Nevertheless, the lack of explanation for why the shelter's lease is not being renewed, and the implications of its closure leaves socially marginalised people with fewer places where they can get food, a bed, and a shower, which further reflects a broader pattern of societal neglect and exclusion that reinforces their marginalisation.

This situation highlights the presence of structural violence, a concept elaborated by Farmer (2004), which refers to the systematic ways in which social structures harm or disadvantage individuals. By removing an important resource for the houseless individuals, thereby increasing their vulnerability and marginalisation, the non-renewal of the shelter's lease exemplifies this. This reinforces the structural disadvantages these individuals face, reflecting a broader pattern of neglect and exclusion by societal institutions. It also reflects structural ambivalence, as described by Meloni (2019), where the actions of authorities can simultaneously create spaces of disadvantage and potential empowerment. While the closure of the shelter is a clear disadvantage, it also highlights how marginalised individuals adapt to limited opportunities by creating alternative forms of support and empowerment. The possibility to turn to street

newspaper sale exemplifies this resilience, as it provides an additional income stream for those facing economic hardship. As Marin said, social financial assistance alone does not suffice to get through the month, thus the street newspaper sale offers a valuable resource for financial stability and community connection (Marin, interview, January 30, 2024).

However, the overarching message from the social system remains clear: Houseless people are not a priority. The state's actions, or lack thereof, communicate a disregard for their well-being, perpetuating a cycle of structural violence that leaves them inadequately cared for and continually marginalised. This systemic neglect impacts their sense of belonging, which I clearly sensed when talking with Marin as he continuously criticized Slovenia in all our conversations (Interview, January 29 & Fieldnote March 8, 2024).

7.3.1 The Pervasive Influence of Consumerism: Advertising, Social Values, and Marginalisation in Ljubljana

Typical characteristic of the consumerist society is advertising which can be seen in various facets of daily life. For me personally, the most noticeable change in recent years has been the proliferation of advertising spaces, particularly billboards, which have become a pervasive feature of urban landscapes in Ljubljana.

This proliferation of billboards and advertising spaces in Ljubljana is a striking indicator of the growing presence of consumerism in Slovenian society. The consumeristic focus on personal economic interests and self-sufficiency under neoliberalism has increasingly overshadowed non-market values, leading to a diminished sense of communal belonging and social solidarity (Rustin, 2014).

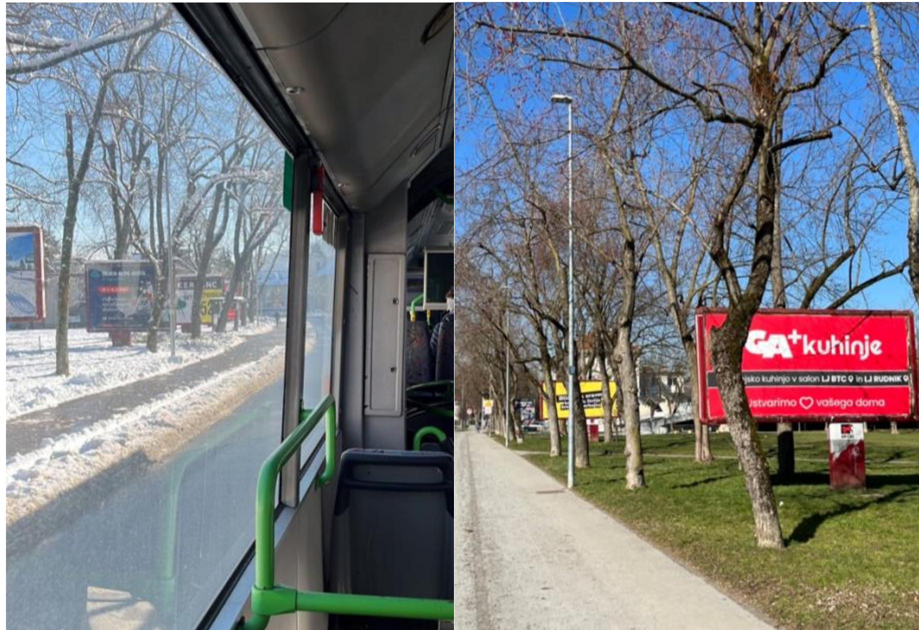


Figure 14&15: Myriad of billboards by the road to the day center (pictures by author, 2024)

Nina’s observations in her letter reflect this sentiment, noting the decline of community spirit both inside and outside of prison, which she attributes to the fast-paced, isolating nature of modern life and a lack of empathy and compassion (Nina, letter, March 28, 2024). This individualistic mindset promoted by neoliberalism is evident in the way consumerism has transformed public spaces and personal experiences, disregarding collective well-being.

Lovro’s experience further illustrates the impact of neoliberal consumerism. He highlighted the increase in plastic packaging he discards weekly, attributing this rise to changes in marketing strategies that prioritize consumer attention while becoming more wasteful. In my opinion, this increase in disposable packaging is a tangible manifestation of the aggressive marketing tactics that drive consumer behaviour, which is in accordance with Rustin’s (2014) reflection on the neoliberal drive for maximizing economic interests at the expense of communal resources.

Furthermore, this relentless focus on consumption contributes to social isolation. As societal values shift towards material wealth and personal achievement, those who cannot keep pace with this consumerist agenda are marginalised (Bauman, 2007). This marginalisation exacerbates the loss of collective care and empathy, highlighting the broader societal implications of the consumerist drive, where individuals can find themselves on the periphery of consumer-centric world. For instance, when Helena discussed a recent warning of prohibition of selling Kralji ulice in front of Lidl chain stores she expressed deep regret (Interview, March 20, 2024). Namely, due to thefts occurring in their stores, Kralji ulice had received a warning from Lidl which called for

changes in behaviour and threatened to ban sellers from selling in front of Lidl chain stores. Helena felt deeply hurt by this warning. She argued that it was unjust to blame all sellers of the newspaper for the actions of a few, emphasising that thefts happen and that unfairly targeting all sellers for the misdeeds of some individuals is not the solution. "*Of course, they are going to blame Kralji (the Kings),*" she said (Helena, interview, March 20, 2024).

Helena's frustration with this decision reflects a broader pattern where marginalised people are collectively penalised for the actions of a few (Schneider, 2022), exacerbating their social isolation and reinforcing the divide between those who can participate in the consumer economy and those who cannot. This connection shows how the consumerist drive shapes social dynamics, leaving vulnerable individuals further marginalised and isolated.

This is with accordance with Bauman (2007) who argues that consumer culture reinforces social divisions by creating a clear distinction between those who can afford to participate fully in the market and those who cannot. In a society where social value is increasingly tied to one's ability to consume, individuals who cannot keep up are marginalised and stigmatized. Lidl's assumption that the sellers of Kralji ulice are stealing in their stores and consequent exclusion of street newspaper sellers from these locations, highlights how the inability to participate in the consumer marker can lead to further marginalisation and stigmatization, reinforcing the division between 'successful' and 'failed' consumers.

Bauman (2001) notes that social stratification is perpetuated by social norms that glorify consumerism, which is supported by the graffiti I have seen in Ljubljana, such as "Objest, Slovenec, tvoja je bolest" ("Arrogance, Slovenian, is your pestilence") and "Tabu tema. Slovenska država = kastni sistem" ("Taboo topic. Slovenian state = caste system"). These illustrate the frustration and exclusion. My interpretation of the messages provides a cultural critique of the social dynamics driven by consumerism. The first graffiti can potentially relate to societal arrogance towards the suffering and the marginalised. The second piece critiques the perceived class system within Slovenia, suggesting that social mobility and acceptance are increasingly governed by one's ability to participate in consumer culture. This understanding of the graffiti aligns with Bauman's view that social exclusion is often subtle and manifests as a lack of recognition and support for those who cannot engage in consumer culture.

Figure 16&17: Pictures of socially critical grafitti in Ljubljana (pictures by author, 2024)

Both Lovro and Nina noted that there is less cooperation among people, a trend that they attributed to the rise of an increasingly individualistic and consumeristic society. They expressed regret and wish for the situation to be different, for a more cooperative and connected social environment. Their reflections, along with Helena's frustration, illustrate the isolating effects of these societal shifts, highlighting a collective longing for a more inclusive social fabric.

This chapter underscores the need to critically examine the impact of neoliberal ideologies on marginalised communities and advocate for values that prioritise communal belonging and social solidarity over consumer-driven exclusion. As the societal shift away from the collective care and empathy continues, individuals like my participants find themselves increasingly on the periphery, marginalised by a system that increasingly values consumption over human connection.

8. Conclusion

Sense of belonging is a fundamental human experience, which transcends individual circumstances and societal boundaries. The need to belong remains a core aspect of our humanity.

I find sense of belonging to be significant because everyone encounters it to varying degrees. This is why I was especially interested in how marginalised people experience belonging. My fieldwork among the sellers and contributors of the street newspaper Kralji ulice in Ljubljana, Slovenia, has reinforced the belief that belonging is a complex and multifaceted feeling. The experiences of the participants demonstrated how factors such as employment dynamics, societal attitudes, and the availability of supportive spaces shape their sense of belonging. Through this research, it became clear that belonging is not just about being part of a community, but also about navigating the challenges and barriers that impact one's ability to feel accepted and valued.

I chose to research sense of belonging through the lenses of marginalisation, individualism, and consumerism since these are characteristics of neoliberal society and as such, they significantly influence the sense of belonging of the marginalised. Therefore, I leaned on the following key literature. Varghese and Kumar (2022) discuss marginality as a measure of inequality within social, economic, and cultural contexts, emphasising the deprivation of resources and participation in societal functions. Farmer (2004) describes marginality as a result of structural violence, highlighting how systemic social structures harm or disadvantage individuals. Given that my participants experienced houselessness, the work of Dekleva and Razpotnik (2007) was particularly insightful for the context of Slovenia, explaining that houselessness is a socially constructed concept dependent on cultural, economic, social, and political contexts, and highlighting the inadequacies of temporary accommodations. My supervisor, Luisa Schenider, further helped me understand the differences and implications of terminology between homelessness and houselessness, shaping my fieldwork experience and interpretation of findings. Lukes (1971) highlights the historical dual nature of individualism as both a potential threat to societal interests and a symbol of self-realization. Rustin (2014) ties this to neoliberalism, showing how its focus on individualism and market-driven values weakens social bonds and communal welfare. Bauman (2001, 2007) and Baudrillard (1998) analyse consumerism's role in shaping social relations and identity, illustrating how it can lead to alienation and social stratification. To deepen my understanding of belonging, I turned to Franklin and Tranter (2019) and Yuval-Davis (2006). Franklin and Tranter explore connections beyond human relationships,

including ties to places and animals, reflecting the experiences of my participants. Yuval-Davis provides a framework for analysing belonging through the intersection of social locations, emotional attachments, and value systems, to show how marginalised individuals navigate their identities within a consumer-driven world.

My fieldwork, supported by these theories, revealed the complex interplay between societal structures, personal identity, and the quest for belonging in a consumer-driven world. Fieldwork observations and discussions with participants highlighted several factors influencing their experiences of marginalisation and sense of belonging. Namely, street newspaper sellers often face stigma and alienation, as their work is frequently misperceived as begging, further emphasising their marginalised status. This situation is exacerbated by Slovenia's ongoing economic crisis, which has led to diminished public support. Gender dynamics further complicate these interactions, with women in the houseless community facing increased vulnerability to violence and exploitation.

The impact of neoliberal ideologies and consumerism add another layer of complexity. The emphasis on individualism and the reduced state support forces the marginalised individuals to rely more heavily on NGOs, while consumer-driven values deepen social divides and increase stigma.

Organisations like Kralji ulice are essential in countering these challenges by providing support and fostering a sense of community. The day center, in particular, offers an environment that creates possibilities for nurturing feelings of belonging among the visitors. The professional staffs' attitudes towards the visitors reminded me of the Urarina approach to individualism as described by Walker (2020). Namely, Kralji ulice makes an effort to recognize individuals' strengths, develop them, and help them utilise these skills both within and outside the organisation. Thus, they are, in a way, fostering a sense of community and personal growth that contrasts with the broader societal emphasis on individualism. Additionally, the existence of the street newspaper not only enables the sellers an alternative dignified means of earning, it also offers a medium for marginalised individuals in which they share their personal experiences and perspectives as authors and at the same time bring their stories closer to mainstream society.

I realised, in completing this research and writing my thesis, that fostering a more inclusive society requires cultivating a culture of understanding. To understand marginalised individuals, it is essential to appreciate their diverse experiences. This understanding can only be achieved through curiosity and willingness to learn about others. In my opinion, in neoliberal societies,

there is often a subconscious fear of instability and difference, which can be triggered when encountering marginalised individuals, such as the sellers of Kralji ulice. By embracing curiosity and actively seeking to understand these experiences, society could overcome these fears and move towards greater inclusivity and empathy.

Overall, addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of how stigma, economic hardship, and consumerism intersect to affect marginalised individuals, and working towards more inclusive and supportive solutions is crucial.

However, several limitations in this study highlight areas for further exploration. The three-month fieldwork period, while insightful, was relatively brief and may have constrained the depth of the findings. This short duration and the focus on a single geographical location, Ljubljana, may limit the generalizability of the results. Future research would benefit from extended fieldwork and a comparative approach involving multiple locations, including other cities like Maribor, to include a broader range of experiences.

Additionally, with only ten participants, most of whom had experienced houselessness, the study's findings could be enriched by engaging more extensively with individuals currently experiencing houselessness and selling the magazine. Furthermore, while gender dynamics were explored, the intersectionality of gender with other aspects of identity and marginalisation needs further investigation. Exploring how various identities intersect to shape experiences of belonging could offer more comprehensive insights.

Despite these limitations, the research underscores the need for empathy and understanding in addressing the complexities faced by marginalised individuals. Acknowledging and exploring these experiences can lead to meaningful social change. Embracing these finding can inspire collective action and compassion, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and supportive world for all.

9. References

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