

Gay Thoughts on Gay Spots: An Examination of Inclusivity and Navigation in the Absence of  
Lesbian-Centered Venues

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*To Dr. Ashleigh McKinzie*

*The most incredible mentor I could have ever asked for. You supported my work from the first day I met you and I never could have done this without you. I only wish you could be here to see it and celebrate with me. I hope one day to be half the mentor to someone else that you have been to me. Thank you for igniting a passion within me. “Because I knew you, I have been changed for good.”*

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## ABSTRACT

LGBTQ+ social spaces have historically served as sites of community, safety, and identity formation. However, the decline of lesbian-centered venues across the United States has raised important questions about inclusivity within contemporary queer spaces. This study explores how lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals experience and navigate LGBTQ+ spaces in the absence or lack of lesbian-centered environments. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research draws on focus group data to examine participants lived experiences of belonging, exclusion, and community-building. Three focus groups of 4-6 participants (N=15) were conducted over a two-week period. Findings reveal that while LGBTQ+ spaces are often sought out for safety and connection, they frequently remain structured around cisgender gay male norms, resulting in persistent marginalization for queer women and non-binary individuals. Participants described navigating these environments through strategies of adaptation, withdrawal, and community formation, often turning to informal networks such as friend groups and private gatherings. Additionally, participants emphasized the limitations of nightlife-centered spaces, citing barriers related to alcohol, accessibility, and sensory environment. Across discussions, participants articulated a strong desire for more inclusive, intentional, and non-alcohol-centered queer spaces that prioritize connection, safety, and community. This study contributes to sociological understandings of LGBTQ+ spatial dynamics by highlighting how power, gender, and identity shape experiences within queer spaces. By centering the voices of lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals, this research challenges assumptions of inclusivity within LGBTQ+ environments and underscores the need for more equal and diverse community spaces.

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## INTRODUCTION

Historically, LGBTQ+ social spaces like bars, clubs, and community centers have served as important sites for identity formation, social support, and collective visibility (Faderman, 2015; Kennedy & Davis, 1993). Among these, lesbian-centered spaces have played a critical role in fostering community specifically for women and non-binary individuals, offering environments where shared experiences and identities are expressed and affirmed. LGBTQ+ individuals often seek out safe spaces of community, connection, and belonging, particularly in response to experiences of marginalization within broader society. In recent decades, however, there has been a drastic decline in lesbian-centered spaces across the United States (Ghaziani, 2014; Mattson, 2023). While some interpret this shift as a reflection of increased social acceptance and assimilation, it also raises important questions about where and how lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals find community today (Brown-Saracino, 2017). Not all members of the LGBTQ+ community experience inclusion equally, and spaces that are broadly labeled as “queer” may not fully reflect the diversity of identities within them. Research suggests that LGBTQ+ spaces are often structured in ways that privilege certain identities, particularly cisgender gay men, while others experience marginalization or exclusion (Casey, 2007; Nash, 2013). As a result, individuals who do not align with dominant norms within these environments may encounter barriers to belonging, even within spaces that are intended to be inclusive (Doan, 2010). Despite these concerns, relatively little research has examined how lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals experience and navigate LGBTQ+ spaces in the absence of lesbian-centered venues. Understanding these lived experiences is essential for identifying gaps in inclusivity and for rethinking how queer spaces function in practice.

This study addresses this gap by examining how lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals experience, navigate, and make meaning of LGBTQ+ spaces. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research centers the lived experiences of participants to explore how belonging is negotiated, how exclusion is encountered, and how community is constructed within modern queer environments. By focusing on the perspectives of those who are often marginalized within LGBTQ+ spaces, this study challenges the assumption that queer spaces are inherently inclusive. Instead, it highlights how power, identity, and social dynamics shape access to belonging, contributing to broader sociological understandings of the use of space. To explore these issues, I selected a qualitative research design guided by the following research questions. First, what motivates lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals to seek out LGBTQ+ spaces? Second, how do they experience and navigate inclusion and exclusion in these spaces? And finally, how might they reimagine LGBTQ+ spaces to be more inclusive?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Decline of Lesbian-Centered Spaces*

Lesbian-centered spaces have historically played a crucial role in fostering community, safety, and activism for women and non-binary individuals within the LGBTQ+ community. However, these spaces have declined significantly over the past several decades. The number of lesbian bars in the United States has decreased from over 200 in the 1980s to fewer than 40 in recent years (Ghaziani, 2014; Mattson, 2023). For those who are lucky enough to live in a large city, there may be one or more “sapphic” lesbian-centered spaces, but most have none. Scholars attribute this decline to a combination of structural and cultural factors, including rising urban rents, gentrification, and shifts in social practices such as the increasing reliance on digital

platforms for dating and community-building (Mattson, 2021). Economic inequality also plays a critical role in the sustainability of lesbian-centered venues. Lesbian spaces often serve populations with less disposable income due to persistent gender-based wage disparities, making it more difficult for these businesses to survive (Badgett, 2001). Additionally, the relatively smaller size of the lesbian and queer women population compared to gay men has been cited as a factor contributing to the economic precarity of these spaces (Ghaziani, 2019). While some scholars argue that the decline of lesbian bars reflects a positive shift toward broader social acceptance and integration into mainstream spaces, others contend that this perspective overlooks the ongoing need for identity-specific environments that center marginalized experiences (Brown-Saracino, 2017; Coyle & Boylorn, 2020). Rather than signaling progress alone, the disappearance of lesbian-centered spaces reflects broader structural inequalities within both society and the LGBTQ+ community. As these venues decline, questions arise about where and how lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals find community and belonging.

### *Gendered Dynamics in LGBTQ+ Spaces*

With the decline of lesbian-specific venues, many individuals turn to broader LGBTQ+ spaces to seek connection and community. However, existing research suggests that these spaces are often structured around the preferences, consumption patterns, and cultural norms of cisgender gay men (Casey, 2007; Nash, 2013). Gay bars and clubs frequently reflect male-centered aesthetics, music, and social expectations, which can marginalize those who do not align with these norms. Historically, LGBTQ+ spaces have been shaped by gendered divisions. Even in earlier decades, gay male venues were more likely to secure stable locations and financial success, while lesbian bars faced greater economic and institutional barriers, including discriminatory leasing practices (Stryker, 2021). These patterns continue in present-day contexts,

where gay male spaces remain more visible and commercially viable than lesbian-centered venues. In addition to gendered exclusion, LGBTQ+ spaces are often shaped by broader systems of inequality, including race and class. Research indicates that many queer nightlife districts cater primarily to white, middle-class gay men, marginalizing individuals who do not fit this demographic (Podmore, 2006). As a result, spaces that are labeled as inclusive may still reproduce hierarchies that limit access to belonging for queer women, non-binary individuals, and LGBTQ+ people of color.

### *Intersectional Inequalities and Spatial Exclusion*

LGBTQ+ spaces do not exist outside of broader systems of power; rather, they often reproduce intersecting inequalities related to race, class, gender identity, and ability. Intersectional feminist scholarship, particularly the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw, emphasizes that systems of oppression are interconnected and must be analyzed in relation to one another (Crenshaw, 1989). Applying this framework to LGBTQ+ spaces reveals how experiences of inclusion and exclusion are shaped by multiple, overlapping identities. Studies have shown that queer spaces often privilege certain forms of gender expression while marginalizing others. For example, non-binary individuals may feel pressure to conform to binary gender norms in order to be accepted in nightlife environments that rely heavily on visual cues and gendered performances (Browne & Bakshi, 2013). Similarly, pricing structures, cultural aesthetics, and social norms within these spaces may exclude individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or racialized communities (Podmore, 2006; Browne & Bakshi, 2013). More recent scholarship on queer spatiality also highlights how inclusion is not simply about access, but about recognition and comfort within space. Browne argues that queer spaces can simultaneously function as sites of belonging and exclusion, depending on how identities are recognized and

valued within them. This underscores the importance of examining not only who is present in LGBTQ+ spaces, but how those individuals experience and navigate those environments.

### *Experiences of Marginalization*

Research consistently demonstrates that lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals often experience marginalization within LGBTQ+ spaces. Doan and Higgins (2020) found that queer women frequently report feeling invisible or unwelcome in male-dominated environments, where their presence is often overlooked or undervalued. Participants in these studies described experiences of exclusion ranging from subtle social dynamics, such as being ignored by bartenders, to more overt forms of objectification and harassment. Similarly, Taylor and Rupp (2019) highlight how dominant forms of entertainment, such as drag performance cultures, may reinforce gendered hierarchies that position women and non-binary individuals as spectators rather than active participants. While these performances are central to many LGBTQ+ spaces, they often reflect and reproduce male-centered norms. In addition, research suggests that LGBTQ+ spaces may reinforce binary understandings of gender, creating additional barriers for non-binary individuals (Browne & Bakshi, 2013). Participants in these studies reported feeling pressure to conform to masculine or feminine presentations in order to be accepted, limiting the inclusivity of these environments.

### *Alternative Spaces and Community Formation*

Despite these challenges, research also highlights the ways in which LGBTQ+ individuals create alternative forms of community and belonging. Some scholars point to LGBTQ+ community centers and grassroots initiatives that intentionally prioritize inclusivity by offering programming for marginalized groups, including queer women and non-binary

individuals (Pfeffer, 2014). Additionally, digital platforms have emerged as important spaces for connection and identity formation. Online communities, social media groups, and dating applications allow individuals to build networks and share experiences outside of traditional physical venues (Jackson, 2018). However, while these platforms can supplement community-building, they do not fully replace the need for physical spaces where individuals can gather and interact in person. Emerging research on “third spaces”—social environments that exist outside of home and work—further emphasizes the importance of accessible, low-pressure environments for community-building (Oldenburg, 1999). The absence of such spaces within LGBTQ+ contexts, particularly those not centered around alcohol or nightlife, highlights a significant gap in the current landscape of queer social environments.

### *Gap in the Literature*

While existing research provides important insights into the decline of lesbian-centered spaces, the gendered dynamics of LGBTQ+ environments, and the role of intersectionality in shaping experiences of inclusion and exclusion, there remains a gap in the literature. Specifically, limited research has examined how lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals actively navigate and make sense of LGBTQ+ spaces in the absence of lesbian-centered venues. Much of the existing scholarship focuses on structural changes, such as the disappearance of lesbian bars, or on broader patterns of exclusion within queer spaces. However, fewer studies center the lived experiences of individuals as they move through these environments, negotiate belonging, and create alternative forms of community. This study addresses these gaps by using a phenomenological approach to center the voices and lived experiences of lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals. By focusing on how these individuals experience, navigate, and reimagine LGBTQ+ spaces, this research contributes to a

deeper understanding of spatial inequality, community formation, and the ongoing need for more inclusive and intentional queer environments.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Building on this literature, the following theoretical frameworks offer tools for analyzing how space, identity, and power intersect in LGBTQ+ spaces. To understand the connection between space, power, and identity, this study is grounded in the intersecting theoretical frameworks of queer theory and feminist social geography. These frameworks are particularly relevant for examining how lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals experience and navigate LGBTQ+ spaces that often center cisgender gay men. By drawing on these theories, this research situates spatial experiences within broader structures of gendered and sexual inequality, with attention to the ways these structures are reinforced even within communities that are labeled inclusive.

### *Queer Theory*

Queer theory, as developed by scholars such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, challenges normative assumptions about gender and sexuality by interrogating the social and cultural structures that produce and regulate identity (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990). Rather than viewing sexual identities as fixed or natural, queer theory emphasizes the fluidity, instability, and social construction of identity. Butler's concept of gender performativity highlights how gender is not something innate, but something repeatedly enacted through social norms, expectations, and embodied practices (Butler, 1990). This perspective helps explain how participants in LGBTQ+ spaces may feel pressure to present themselves in ways that align with dominant understandings of gender and queerness to be recognized as legitimate or as belonging.

At the same time, Duggan's critique of homonormativity is important for understanding how some LGBTQ+ spaces reproduce exclusionary norms by privileging forms of queerness that are more socially acceptable, gender-conforming, or aligned with dominant cultural expectations (Duggan, 2002). This is particularly relevant in reference to lesbian, queer women, and non-binary experiences in LGBTQ+ spaces, where inclusion may be shaped by unspoken hierarchies of gender, desirability, and visibility.

This framework is further strengthened by Candace West and Don Zimmerman's (1987) concept of doing gender, which argues that gender is an ongoing interactional accomplishment rather than a fixed internal trait. From this perspective, gender is produced through everyday social encounters and is shaped by accountability to others' expectations and interpretations. This is especially relevant to this study because it helps illuminate the tension between participants' own understandings of themselves and the ways they are read, judged, or misrecognized by others within LGBTQ+ spaces. In this sense, identity is not only personally felt or expressed, but also socially negotiated through interaction. This is particularly important for understanding how queer women and non-binary individuals navigate spaces where recognition, legitimacy, and belonging are often viewed through normative assumptions about gender presentation.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) offers a way to understand identities that exist in-between fixed social categories. She conceptualizes identity as formed through contradiction, ambiguity, and movement across borders, rather than through coherence or stability. Her notion of the *borderlands* is especially valuable because it captures the lived experience of those who occupy liminal positions within LGBTQ+ communities—individuals

who may not feel fully recognized in dominant queer spaces, yet still seek belonging, connection, and visibility within them. Anzaldúa's emphasis on hybridity, multiplicity, and the tension of inhabiting in-between spaces helps explain how participants navigate identities that are not always easily legible to others.

Queer theory functions in this study not simply as a critique of normative sexuality and gender, but as a framework for understanding how identity is lived, interpreted, and negotiated within social space. While Butler highlights the performative dimensions of identity, West and Zimmerman emphasize the interactional accountability through which gender is recognized or challenged, and Anzaldúa draws attention to the complexity of inhabiting identities that exist across borders and resist easy categorization. This is especially useful for analyzing how lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals experience LGBTQ+ spaces that may be formally inclusive, yet still structured by unequal expectations of gender, visibility, and belonging.

### *Feminist Social Geography*

In addition to queer theory, this study draws on feminist social geography to understand how space is produced, experienced, and contested. Feminist geographers such as Doreen Massey, Gillian Valentine, and Linda McDowell argue that space is not neutral but is actively shaped by power relations, particularly those related to gender and sexuality (Massey, 1994; Valentine, 1996; McDowell, 1999). This perspective emphasizes that spatial experiences are embodied, meaning that individuals experience and move through spaces differently based on their identities. For lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals, LGBTQ+ spaces may not be experienced as uniformly safe or inclusive, but rather as environments shaped by

gendered expectations, social norms, and power dynamics. Feminist social geography is particularly useful for this study because it centers lived experience and spatial meaning-making. It provides a framework for analyzing how participants describe feeling visible or invisible, safe or unsafe, and included or excluded within LGBTQ+ environments. By focusing on how space is experienced rather than simply how it is structured, this framework aligns closely with the phenomenological approach of this study.

### *Intersectionality*

This study also employs an intersectional framework (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 1990) to examine how multiple social identities and social locations interact to shape experiences within LGBTQ+ spaces. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality highlights how systems of oppression such as sexism, racism, and heteronormativity are interconnected and produce unique forms of marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989). Within LGBTQ+ spaces, intersectionality is essential for understanding how experiences of inclusion and exclusion vary across individuals. Research has shown that these spaces often privilege white, middle-class, cisgender gay men, while marginalizing those who occupy multiple marginalized identities, including queer women, non-binary individuals, and LGBTQ+ people of color (Podmore, 2006; Browne & Bakshi, 2013). In this study, intersectionality is used to analyze how participants' experiences are shaped not only by their sexual identities, but also by gender presentation, race, class, and other social positions. It allows for a better understanding of how exclusion operates within LGBTQ+ spaces and highlights the importance of considering multiple axes of identity when examining belonging and community.

### *Integrating Theoretical Frameworks*

Together, queer theory, feminist social geography, and intersectionality provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the social and spatial dynamics of LGBTQ+ spaces. Queer theory challenges assumptions about inclusivity and interrogates the norms that structure these environments. Feminist social geography emphasizes the embodied nature of space, highlighting how individuals feel and navigate these environments in everyday life. Intersectionality brings attention to the multiple, overlapping identities that shape these experiences and the ways in which power operates across them. By applying these theoretical lenses, this study positions LGBTQ+ spaces not as inherently inclusive environments, but as sites where power, identity, and belonging are continuously negotiated. In doing so, it contributes to broader sociological conversations about spatial justice, queer visibility, and the need for more inclusive community spaces.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research Design*

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals within contemporary LGBTQ+ spaces. A qualitative approach was selected because it is well suited to examining complex social experiences in depth and to capturing how participants interpret identity, belonging, and spatial navigation in their own terms (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Phenomenology is especially appropriate for this study because it centers individuals' subjective

interpretations of experience and seeks to identify shared meanings across participants' accounts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Following a phenomenological design, this study aimed to understand how participants experience and make sense of inclusion, exclusion, and community within LGBTQ+ environments. The goal was not to produce an objective account of these spaces, but rather to examine how they are perceived, interpreted, and negotiated by those who inhabit them, which aligns with phenomenology's emphasis on lived experience and meaning-making (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2014)

### *Participants and Recruitment*

Participants in this study were self-identified lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals, over the age of 18, who had experience attending LGBTQ+ spaces, including bars, clubs, community events, and other social environments. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants who could speak directly to the research questions and lived experiences under investigation. Participants were recruited through social media platforms and personal networks. Efforts were made to include individuals with diverse experiences across gender identity, presentation, and engagement with LGBTQ+ spaces. This study included three focus groups with a total of 15 participants. Prior to conducting the focus groups, permission to conduct this study was obtained by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected through focus groups, which provided a collaborative environment for participants to share experiences and build on one another's insights. Focus groups are particularly effective for research involving marginalized communities, as they allow for the emergence of shared narratives and collective meaning-making. A total of three focus groups

were conducted, each lasting approximately 25 to 55 minutes. Sessions were held over zoom to accommodate participants from all over the country. Focus groups included 6, 5, and 4 participants, respectively. A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate discussion while allowing flexibility for participants to expand topics they found meaningful. The interview guide consisted of five open-ended questions. (1) What LGBTQ+ spaces have you experienced, and why do you seek them out? (2) Do you feel welcomed and included in these spaces? Why or why not? (3) What challenges have you encountered in these spaces? (4) How do you navigate spaces that feel male-centered? (5) What changes would make LGBTQ+ spaces more inclusive for lesbians and non-binary individuals? All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were given the option to use pseudonyms. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed using the video conferencing tool Zoom.

### *Data Analysis*

All focus group sessions recordings were transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis within a phenomenological framework. The goal of the analysis was to identify patterns of meaning across the lived experiences of participants while preserving individual narratives. The analysis followed a multi-step coding process. Transcripts were first reviewed line-by-line to identify recurring concepts, phrases, and experiences. Initial codes captured participants' language and emphasized key ideas related to safety, belonging, exclusion, identity, and space. Codes were then grouped into broader categories based on conceptual similarities. This process allowed for the identification of relationships between codes and the development of higher-level thematic groupings. Through further analysis, core themes were developed that captured the essence of similarly shared participant experiences. These themes were refined to ensure they accurately reflected both common patterns and meaningful variation across participants. Finally,

themes were interpreted through the study's theoretical frameworks, including queer theory, feminist social geography, and intersectionality. This step allowed for a deeper understanding of how participants' experiences reflect broader social and spatial dynamics. In the analysis process, attention was given to how intersecting identities, including gender, sexuality, and social context, shaped participants' experiences within LGBTQ+ spaces.

## RESULTS

This study explored how lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals experience and navigate LGBTQ+ spaces in the absence of lesbian-centered environments. Through thematic analysis of focus group data, seven primary themes emerged: (1) LGBTQ+ spaces as conditional sites of safety and belonging, (2) the persistent marginalization of queer women and non-binary individuals, (3) sapphic spaces as distinct and relational environments, (4) negotiating identity and visibility, (5) the structural limitations of nightlife-centered queer space, (6) informal community as a strategy of belonging, and (7) reimagining queer space. These themes reflect both shared and fractured experiences, highlighting the complexity of navigating contemporary LGBTQ+ environments.

### *Participant Characteristics*

A table of participant demographics is summarized in Appendix A. The study consisted of 15 participants age 21 to 47, with the majority between the ages of 23 and 26. All but two participants identified as women, with the other two participants identifying as non-binary. Five participants identified as lesbians, three as bisexual, three as pansexual, one as queer, one as gay, and two as queer/bisexual. Eleven of the participants were white (73%), with the remaining four participants of color. Participants were primarily based in Tennessee, with seven living in

Tennessee; five participants living in California, and two living in South Carolina. Personal familiarity among focus group member participants varied by group, and this had a significant impact on focus group dynamics. In sessions where participants were more familiar with one another, they shared more openly and in greater detail.

### *LGBTQ+ Spaces as Conditional Sites of Safety and Belonging*

Participants consistently described seeking out LGBTQ+ spaces for safety, connection, and a sense of belonging. For many, these spaces were initially understood as environments where they could be surrounded by others with similar identities and experiences. Sarah explained, “as a younger individual, I sought out like, lesbian spaces, because I wanted to be with people that thought the same as me... and that were the same as me.” Ivy similarly described why these spaces mattered, explaining, “I feel safer in these spaces,” while Michelle said, “I feel like I know I can go into those places and fully be myself without anyone being weird to me or like, making unnecessary comments about my sexuality.” Together, these accounts show that participants sought out LGBTQ+ spaces as sources of refuge from heterosexual environments and as sites of affirmation.

At the same time, participants emphasized that feeling welcomed in LGBTQ+ spaces did not always correspond to feelings of belonging. Many participants avoided LGBTQ+ spaces altogether due to past experiences of exclusion. When asked whether they feel included in queer spaces, Lily answered, “Yes and no.” She elaborated, “Yes, because I know it’s LGBTQ+ friendly, which inherently makes me feel accepted and welcomed. No, because many of the queer spaces, specifically the queer clubs, are predominantly attended by older gay men... it’s just simply not my demographic.” This is an important distinction; participants could recognize a

space as technically inclusive while still experiencing it as socially or relationally misaligned. Participants also stressed that safety was not inherent to LGBTQ+ spaces, but conditional and shaped by the people present. Sarah reflected that even in spaces they considered safe, “you’re always gonna come across those people that don’t think like you, or don’t...accept you for who you are.” Abby described this conditionality more personally after a harmful experience: “I got assaulted by a couple straight men there, so I stopped going there... for me, personally, I’m kinda scared to be out and queer.” Even within queer spaces, then, participants remained aware that safety could be interrupted or undermined.

Experiences of safety were often contrasted across different types of environments. While some participants described bars and clubs as safe but difficult to navigate, others emphasized that their strongest sense of safety and belonging came from smaller, informal environments. Riley explained that “the spaces I go to and I feel safe at... it’s typically, like, my queer friends’ houses... that’s where I feel the most safe, and that’s where I feel the most comfortable gathering.” This suggests that feelings of safety and belonging were often easier to access in spaces where participants had greater control over the social environment. Together, these narratives demonstrate that LGBTQ+ spaces function as important sites of safety and belonging, but that this belonging is conditional rather than universal. Participants distinguished between being welcomed and feeling truly at ease, and they described continuously assessing whether a space would support comfort, recognition, and connection. Rather than serving as uniformly inclusive environments, LGBTQ+ spaces were experienced as uneven and context-dependent, requiring ongoing negotiation to access a sense of community.

*The Marginalization of Queer Women and Non-Binary Individuals in LGBTQ+ Spaces*

Participants consistently described LGBTQ+ spaces as environments that often center men, particularly cisgender gay men, in ways that leave queer women and non-binary individuals feeling peripheral, disconnected, or unsafe. Across focus groups, marginalization was not described only as a series of isolated negative encounters, but as a broader pattern tied to who these spaces are socially organized around, whose presence defines the culture of the space, and whose comfort is prioritized within it. Several participants described queer spaces as dominated by men demographically and culturally. Abby explained that these spaces were “very centered around men still.” Lily similarly explained that many queer clubs were “predominantly attended by older gay men” and that “it’s just simply not our demographic.” This demographic imbalance mattered because participants felt that the social life of the space revolved around men in practice, even when the venue was broadly labeled LGBTQ+. Lily went on to say, “we don’t feel like we have a lot in common with older gay men as queer women. We experience the queer world in different lights.” In this sense, exclusion was often experienced not through explicit rejection, but through the persistent feeling that these spaces were not built around their needs, interests, or ways of relating.

Participants also described male-centered queer spaces as internally structured by gay male social hierarchies and subcultures. Alex noted that queer nightlife in their home city was concentrated in one neighborhood and emphasized “It’s literally called Boys Town, you know? It’s hard to, like, you know, get the girls in there.” They described these spaces as shaped by rigid expectations of who belongs, explaining that “if you’re not within that rigid frame, you’re sort of an outsider.” References were similarly made to the presence of internal social divisions or “tribes” within gay male culture, suggesting that these spaces often require participants to align with very specific masculine norms to feel fully included. Together, these accounts suggest

that marginalization was not just about men being present, but about a broader male social organization of queer space that left little room for those outside male norms.

A major source of discomfort participants identified was the presence of straight men in queer spaces. Some participants acknowledged that straight men may enter these spaces because they come with friends or because certain venues, especially 18+ bars, provide one of the few nightlife options available to them. At the same time, participants were clear that straight men's presence often changed the atmosphere. Abby explained that when straight men were present, "it would change the outcome of my night a lot, where I was trying to come in initially, just having a safe space." Riley described similar encounters more bluntly, noting that creepy guys hit on me and my friends when we're just trying to chill or dance or something." Another participant mentions being previously assaulted by a couple of straight men in a queer place. These accounts suggest that the presence of straight men mattered not simply because they were non-queer, but because they disrupted the sense of ease and safety participants hoped queer spaces would provide.

Discomfort with straight men's presence in LGBTQ+ spaces was closely tied to these men's perceived sense of entitlement to women's bodies and attention, even inside queer spaces. Participants explicitly identified this pattern of entitlement among all men within these spaces. Alex stated, "there's definitely, like, an entitlement that comes from gay men in these spaces." This sense of entitlement was reflected not only in direct interactions, but in the expectation that queer women's presence, relationships, and bodies remained open to commentary, interpretation, or intrusion. These experiences reveal how queer women in queer spaces are sometimes treated as sexual objects for male consumption rather than as respected community members.

Participants also described how this entitlement extended beyond overt sexualization into broader assumptions about women's role and value in society. Sophie explicitly linked this to a wider social pattern, observing, "it's also just, like, the second that you can't... that a man can't... like, make a woman a sexual object anymore, so the second she's a lesbian, she's... disregarded as a human being and as anything with any worth." Ella connected this to recent media discourse, saying, "something I've been seeing online a lot is how much hate the new season of *Bridgerton* is getting," while another immediately responded, "But they loved *Heated Rivalry*," followed by, "they're like, ew, gay women? Excuse me. Excuse me." She continued, "it's not, like, direct, like, we hate lesbians, but..." These comments show participants situated their experiences within a broader cultural pattern of devaluing women and lesbians.

Marginalization in queer space, then, was interpreted as part of a larger pattern of misogyny in which women's stories, desires, and identities are treated as less legitimate or less desirable.

These findings illustrate that the marginalization of queer women and non-binary people in LGBTQ+ spaces is not reducible to a few bad encounters. Rather, it is produced through the ways these spaces are organized around men, the social hierarchies that structure belonging, the entitlement some men bring into them, the assumptions of sexual accessibility placed onto women, and the broader cultural devaluation of lesbians and women that participants themselves recognized. In this way, queer spaces were experienced not simply as inclusive environments with occasional problems, but as uneven social worlds in which comfort, recognition, and belonging were distributed unequally.

### *Sapphic Spaces as Distinct and Relational Environments*

In contrast to broader LGBTQ+ spaces, participants consistently described sapphic or lesbian-centered spaces as fundamentally different in terms of atmosphere, interaction, and overall experience. Sapphic meaning “of or relating to the Greek lyric poet Sappho” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Sappho being a Greek Goddess and poet, who lived on the Isle of Lesbos and whose work particularly explored love between women. Sapphic became an umbrella term that includes lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, etc. (Hamou, 2022). Essentially, sapphic refers to any woman or woman-aligned person who is attracted to other women or woman-aligned people (Brogan, 2025). These environments were characterized as more comfortable, less transactional, and more conducive to genuine connection. For many participants, sapphic spaces allowed them to exist without pressure or expectation, a sense of ease that was difficult to find in other LGBTQ+ settings. Ella explained that in sapphic spaces, “I feel most, like, able to just exist,” highlighting their freedom from the performative or evaluative dynamics often present in male-centered environments. This sense of ease was closely tied to a feeling of respect and mutual understanding among those present. She described, “when I’m at these sapphic spaces, it’s like there’s a respect there.” This reflects a shared social norm within sapphic spaces that prioritizes boundaries and consent in ways that participants found meaningful.

Participants also contrasted the social dynamics of sapphic spaces with those of more male-dominated LGBTQ+ environments. While many described broader queer nightlife as highly sexualized or centered around performance and consumption, sapphic spaces were framed as more relational and community oriented. Alex described gay spaces as “a meat market, where it’s like, I’m on display, and I’m for consumption.” In another statement, they related male-centered, queer spaces to “like a real-life Grindr.” In contrast, Ella described that in sapphic environments, “you don’t have to be worried at people, like, coming over and trying to hit on

you. It can be a, we're just dancing and we're having fun kind of vibe." This emphasis on enjoyment without pressure highlights a key difference in how participants experienced these spaces. Another important aspect of sapphic spaces was the ability to engage socially without feeling objectified or evaluated. Participants described male-centered spaces as environments where they felt observed or judged, whereas sapphic spaces allowed for more organic interaction. Alex noted when comparing different environments, they preferred spaces where they could "be having a good time with friends, having conversations, meeting people organically," rather than navigating spaces that felt structured around different expectations. This highlights how sapphic spaces were experienced not only as safer, but as more aligned with participants' social needs and intentions. Participants also emphasized that sapphic spaces offered a form of community that extended beyond nightlife itself. These environments were described as spaces where individuals could connect, build relationships, and feel seen without needing to conform to androcentric norms. In contrast to queer spaces that felt exclusionary or overwhelming, sapphic environments were framed as more intentional and inclusive in their social dynamics.

These perspectives show how sapphic spaces function as distinct environments within the broader landscape of LGBTQ+ spaces. Rather than being defined by performance, consumption, or social hierarchy, these spaces were experienced as grounded in respect, comfort, and connection. This theme highlights the importance of lesbian-centered and sapphic spaces in fostering meaningful community and underscores what is often missing from more dominant LGBTQ+ environments.

*Negotiating Identity and Visibility in Queer Space*

Participants described LGBTQ+ spaces as environments where identity and visibility were not automatically recognized, but instead actively negotiated. Rather than feeling clearly legible within these spaces, many participants emphasized experiences of being misread, overlooked, or interpreted through binary assumptions. These experiences shaped how they moved through queer spaces and whether they felt that they truly belonged there.

One important dimension of this negotiation was the experience of being viewed as straight in queer spaces. Participants described feeling anxiety about not being perceived as “queer enough,” even within explicitly LGBTQ+ environments. Ella explained, “sometimes I’m, like, “too straight” to, like, be in spaces. Or look that way.” Sophie echoed this feeling: “all the time, I feel, like, scared that I’m not” and later explained, “I do constantly feel like I’m not... not getting hit on enough, or something like that, I might think that, like, I look too straight, and they don’t want to come up to me because of that.” These perspectives show that queer space did not automatically resolve insecurity around recognition; rather, it could intensify concerns about being legible in the “right” way. Participants also noted that this perception of straightness often shifted depending on who they were with. Hailey described how their relationship to visibility changed in relation to a partner, explaining that they “feel like people assume that I’m straight, especially, like, if my partner is not there.” In a similar way, Ella reflected on bringing a male partner into queer space, saying, “I’m still gay, even though I have a straight male boyfriend,” while also admitting, “it’s almost, like, embarrassing. I’m like, I’m so sorry that I have a man here.” These quotes illustrate how recognition within queer space is often relational and contingent. Identity is not inherently recognized by others; it is perceived by others through one’s appearances, partnerships, and assumptions made by others.

Alongside straight-passing concerns, participants also described the failure of queer spaces to accommodate androgyny or nonbinary gender expression. Alex explained that they often felt “seen as, like, cisgendered, or, like, seen as, like, a man and stuff in ways that make me feel... a little less... a little uncomfortable.” They went on to ask, “Do I have to present in a performative way, almost, to, like, gain the respect of, like, an androgyny? Do I have to, like, present androgyny to... to receive androgynous, I guess, respect or perception?” Participants are not simply struggling to express identity but are struggling with the fact that others do not recognize identities that fall outside binary expectations. This lack of recognition made queer space feel especially difficult for participants whose identities existed “in between.” Alex goes on to say, “I think that’s a big thing... especially being in male-centered spaces, where it’s like, we’re all men here, you know? It’s like, for me, it’s like, I am attracted to men, but I am not a man, and so it’s like. It’s a difficult line to tow, for sure.” Ella summarized this dynamic more simply, saying, “in those spaces, it’s never, like... you can’t be in between, you know?” Together, these statements show that androgyny and nonbinary existence were not always acknowledged within queer space, even in spaces that might be assumed to be affirming.

Participants’ narratives suggest that queer space often reproduces narrow expectations about what queerness should look like. Those who were read as straight questioned their place, while those whose gender expression was androgynous or nonbinary described being absorbed into more familiar categories, particularly masculinity. In both cases, participants had to negotiate visibility in environments where being seen did not necessarily mean being understood. These statements illustrate that identity in queer space is not simply expressed but continuously interpreted and contested. Participants described a tension between how they understood themselves and how they were perceived by others, revealing that visibility within LGBTQ+

spaces can be as much a site of misrecognition as recognition. This theme highlights that belonging in queer space is often shaped by legibility—by whether one is read as queer, read correctly, or acknowledged at all.

### *The Structural Limitations of Nightlife-Centered Queer Space*

Participants consistently described LGBTQ+ spaces as heavily centered around nightlife, particularly bars and clubs, and identified this as a major structural limitation of queer community life. While these venues were often the most visible and accessible forms of queer space available, participants emphasized that they did not adequately meet the needs of all community members. Instead, nightlife-centered environments were described as restrictive, overwhelming, and too narrowly defined around alcohol, late hours, and a particular style of socializing.

One of the clearest concerns participants raised was the dominance of alcohol-centered environments. As Abby explained, “especially being in Nashville, I feel like everywhere I look, it’s a bar.” This quote captures the sense of spatial limitation that runs throughout the data: queer space was available, but often only in one form. For participants who were sober, not interested in drinking, or simply looking for something different, this created a narrow and exclusionary social landscape. Abby made this especially clear by stating, “I’m not a very big drinker, I’ve been sober now for 6 months,” highlighting how nightlife-centered queer culture can exclude people not because they are unwelcome, but because the structure of the space does not accommodate them. Participants also stressed that nightlife venues were often not conducive to meaningful interaction. Rather than creating environments for conversation and sustained

connection, bars and clubs were described as loud, fast-paced, and difficult to navigate socially. Olivia explained that many of these spaces involve “really late nights, it’s alcohol-centered, it’s very loud.” These conditions made it harder for participants to build the kind of community they were actually seeking. Additionally, these conditions are often not ideal for neurodivergent individuals or those with sensory issues.

Another limitation that participants identified was cost. Sophie stated plainly that “most of the Sapphic events cost money” and that “that is a barrier for entry. It’s, like, \$20 at least.” She went on to explain that while this “isn’t necessarily excluding, but it kind of is. It excludes people who can’t necessarily afford something like that.” This was framed not simply as an inconvenience, but as a class-based barrier that shaped who could regularly participate in these spaces. As she put it, “it’s all people within a similar class who can afford to spend their money on that. And it’s \$20, it’s a lot of money. That’s a meal for somebody.” Access to queer community is clearly shaped not only by identity, but by economic resources. Participants also noted that financial access was connected to transportation and geography. Alex explained that “it’s also location-wise... transportation-wise, especially when alcohol is involved, you know, it gets harder and harder if you don’t have access to a car or a reliable sense of transportation.” They continued by describing how distance and infrastructure made participation more difficult, especially for those living farther away from queer neighborhoods or event spaces. This suggests that access to nightlife-centered queer space is structured not only by admission cost, but by broader material conditions such as transportation, location, and urban infrastructure.

At the same time, some participants described these spaces as enjoyable and affirming, particularly when they felt socially aligned with the crowd. Michelle said that Play and Lipstick were spaces where “the people... are kind to me and are the same vibe as me,” while Ivy

described them as “typically an inviting place [they] just want you to enjoy yourself.” This nuance matters because it suggests that nightlife spaces were not viewed uniformly negatively. Rather, their limitations became most visible when participants’ needs, identities, finances, or preferred modes of connection did not fit the model those spaces were built around. Together, these narratives illustrate that the dominance of nightlife-centered queer spaces creates multiple structural barriers to inclusion. Bars and clubs may remain the most recognizable forms of LGBTQ+ space, but they do not adequately serve the full range of needs, identities, and material realities within the community. The problem was not only that queer space was too often organized around alcohol, but that it also privileged a sexualized, consumption-oriented, and often costly mode of participation. This theme illustrates that exclusion is produced not only through interpersonal dynamics, but through the very form that queer space takes.

### *Informal Community as a Strategy of Belonging*

In response to the limitations and exclusions present in formal LGBTQ+ spaces, participants described actively creating their own forms of community through informal and interpersonal networks. Rather than relying solely on bars, clubs, or organized events, many participants emphasized that their strongest sense of belonging came from smaller, self-constructed environments centered around friendship and mutual support. A recurring theme in participants’ narratives was that the spaces in which they felt safest were not institutional or commercial LGBTQ+ venues, but rather private and relational settings. Riley explained that “the spaces I go to and I feel safe at... it’s typically, like, my queer friends’ houses... that’s where I feel the most safe, and that’s where I feel the most comfortable gathering.” This highlights how safety and comfort were often found in environments where participants had greater control over who was present and how the space functioned. Participants also described these informal spaces

as something they actively built over time, rather than something that was readily available. As Riley reflected, “I feel like I’ve had to build that little community of friends versus, like, attaching to a larger one.” This statement underscores the labor involved in creating community, particularly in the absence of accessible and inclusive formal spaces. Rather than being able to rely on existing LGBTQ+ infrastructure, participants described cultivating their own networks to meet their social and emotional needs.

In addition to providing safety, these informal communities were also described as more authentic and affirming. Participants emphasized that within these smaller networks, they were able to engage more fully with others without the pressures or constraints present in larger public venues. These spaces allowed for deeper connection, mutual understanding, and a sense of shared experience that was not always achievable in nightlife-centered environments. Participants further suggested that these informal spaces functioned as a response to exclusion experienced elsewhere. When formal LGBTQ+ spaces failed to provide a sense of belonging, participants turned inward, relying on trusted relationships to create alternative environments. This reflects a broader pattern of adaptation, where individuals navigate structural limitations by constructing their own spaces of inclusion. This highlights how informal community-building operates as a key strategy of belonging for lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals. Rather than passively accepting exclusion, participants actively redefined what queer space could look like by centering connection, trust, and shared identity. This theme highlights both the resilience of participants and the limitations of existing LGBTQ+ infrastructures, underscoring the importance of community as something that is not only found, but created.

*Reimagining Queer Space—Toward Inclusive and Intentional Environments*

While participants identified numerous limitations within existing LGBTQ+ spaces, they also articulated clear visions for what more inclusive and affirming environments could look like. Rather than accepting the current structure of queer spaces as fixed, participants described a desire for spaces that are more intentional, accessible, and centered on connection rather than consumption. A central theme in these discussions was the need for alternatives to nightlife-centered environments. Participants expressed a desire for spaces that are not structured around alcohol or late-night activity. Abby explained, “I would personally like to see more late-night spots open that kind of veer away towards alcohol, too...” This highlights the importance of creating spaces that are inclusive of individuals with diverse lifestyles and needs, including those who are sober or prefer different forms of social engagement.

Participants also emphasized the importance of accessibility in terms of time and availability. While some spaces existed, they were often limited in hours or visibility. Abby stated, “I love the coffee shops here... but a lot of them close at, like, 2 to 4, and after that, I don’t see anybody out, and, like, I don’t know a lot of spaces.” This reflects a gap in the availability of queer-friendly environments that support connection outside of traditional nightlife hours. In addition to accessibility, participants highlighted the need for spaces that are intentionally designed for queer women and non-binary individuals. She suggested that even when alternative spaces exist, they are not always clearly oriented toward these communities, stating that “if there are spaces, we’re not... like, they’re not marketing it towards the queer

community and towards, like, queer women specifically.” This underscores the importance of visibility and intentional outreach in creating truly inclusive environments.

Participants also discussed the possibility of reclaiming and reshaping existing spaces. Rather than waiting for new venues to emerge, some described actively transforming spaces through collective presence. As Sarah suggested, “you go and you invade some space that is a queer bar or a gay bar, and you invade it with all your lesbian friends... and you make it yours.” This reflects a form of grassroots spatial resistance, where participants assert belonging by redefining the function and atmosphere of existing environments. Across these discussions, participants consistently emphasized the importance of spaces that prioritize connection, comfort, and authenticity. Rather than environments centered on performance, consumption, or hierarchy, participants envisioned spaces where individuals could engage with one another more meaningfully. These imagined spaces were described as environments where people could gather, talk, and build relationships without the pressures associated with nightlife culture.

These positions illustrate that participants are not only aware of the limitations of current LGBTQ+ spaces but are actively imagining alternatives. These visions emphasize inclusivity, accessibility, and intentional design, highlighting the need for spaces that reflect the full diversity of the LGBTQ+ community. This theme underscores the potential for reimagining queer space in ways that move beyond existing constraints and better support belonging, connection, and community.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined how lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals experience and navigate LGBTQ+ spaces in the absence of lesbian-centered environments. Through a

phenomenological analysis of focus group data, findings reveal that while LGBTQ+ spaces are often sought out as sites of safety and belonging, they are experienced as uneven, conditional, and frequently exclusionary. The narratives shared highlight the persistence of gendered hierarchies, the structural limitations of nightlife-centered spaces, and the active role individuals play in constructing alternative forms of community. Taken together, these findings challenge the assumption that LGBTQ+ spaces are inherently inclusive and instead position them as contested environments shaped by power, identity, and social norms.

### *Conditional Belonging and Inclusivity*

One of the most significant findings of this study is that LGBTQ+ spaces function as conditional, rather than guaranteed, sites of safety and belonging. While participants initially described these environments as spaces where they could “be with people that thought the same as me,” their experiences revealed that feelings of comfort and inclusion were highly dependent on context. This finding aligns with existing research suggesting that queer spaces, while often framed as inclusive, are structured by internal hierarchies that shape access to belonging (Doan, 2010; Podmore, 2006). From a queer theoretical perspective, this dynamic can be understood through the concept of homonormativity, as articulated by Lisa Duggan (2002).

Homonormativity describes the privileging of certain LGBTQ+ identities—particularly those that align with dominant norms of gender, race, and class—within queer spaces. Participants’ experiences reflect this dynamic, as inclusion was not evenly distributed but instead contingent on how closely individuals aligned with these norms. This challenges the widely held assumption

that LGBTQ+ spaces inherently function as safe havens and instead reveals them as sites where belonging must be negotiated.

*The Marginalization of Queer Women and Non-Binary Individuals*

Consistent with prior research, this study found that LGBTQ+ spaces often center cisgender gay men, resulting in the marginalization of queer women and non-binary individuals. Participants repeatedly described these environments as “very centered around men still,” echoing findings by Casey (2007) and Nash (2013), who argue that queer nightlife is structured around male consumption patterns and social norms. This dynamic can be further understood through feminist social geography, particularly the work of Doreen Massey, who emphasizes that space is not neutral but is shaped by power relations. Participants’ experiences demonstrate that LGBTQ+ spaces are not simply inclusive environments, but are socially produced in ways that privilege certain identities over others. The marginalization described by participants—including feelings of invisibility, discomfort, and objectification—reflects broader gendered inequalities that persist even within marginalized communities. Additionally, these findings align with research by Verta Taylor and Leila J. Rupp (2019), which highlights how dominant cultural forms within LGBTQ+ spaces, such as nightlife and performance-based environments, often reinforce gender hierarchies. Participants’ descriptions of feeling out of place or “on display” suggest that these spaces reproduce dynamics of visibility and consumption that are not equally experienced across identities.

*Sapphic Spaces as Counter-Spaces of Relational Belonging*

In contrast to broader LGBTQ+ environments, participants described sapphic spaces as distinct environments that prioritize respect, comfort, and relational interaction. These findings

support the idea that identity-specific spaces remain essential for marginalized groups within the LGBTQ+ community, even in contexts of increasing social acceptance (Brown-Saracino, 2017). From a feminist geographic perspective, these spaces can be understood as “counter-spaces”—environments that resist dominant spatial norms and create alternative possibilities for belonging. Participants’ emphasis on being able to “just exist” and experience mutual respect suggests that sapphic spaces function differently not only in terms of who is present, but in how social interactions are structured. These environments disrupt the transactional and performative dynamics described in male-centered spaces, offering instead a model of community grounded in connection and consent.

### *Negotiating Identity and Visibility*

Experiences shared also reveal that identity within LGBTQ+ spaces is actively negotiated rather than inherently recognized. Drawing on queer theory, particularly Judith Butler’s concept of performativity, these findings suggest that identity is not simply expressed within space, but is interpreted and evaluated by others. Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of the *borderlands* further enriches this discussion by offering a framework for understanding identities that exist between or across rigid social categories (Anzaldúa, 1987). Her notion of *mestiza consciousness* is especially relevant to participants who described feeling “too straight,” insufficiently legible as queer, or unable to exist comfortably within binary expectations, as it captures the ambiguity and contradiction of inhabiting multiple identities at once. Participants described navigating expectations around gender presentation and behavior, often feeling pressure to align with dominant norms to be recognized as belonging. At the same time, some participants resisted these expectations, asserting their identities despite potential judgment. This tension highlights the dual nature of visibility as both a source of empowerment and a site of vulnerability.

### *Limitations of Nightlife-Centered Queer Space*

Another key finding of this study is that the dominance of nightlife-centered LGBTQ+ spaces creates structural barriers to inclusion. Participants described a landscape in which “everywhere I look, it’s a bar.” Structural barriers clearly limited access for individuals who were sober or seeking alternative forms of engagement and interactions. This finding aligns with existing research on “third spaces” by Ray Oldenburg, which emphasizes the importance of accessible, low-pressure environments for community-building (1999). The reliance on alcohol-centered venues not only restricts participation but also shapes the types of interactions that occur within these spaces. Participants described these environments as loud, late-night, and oriented toward consumption, which often hindered meaningful connection. This suggests that the structure of queer space itself—not just who occupies it—plays a critical role in shaping experiences of inclusion and exclusion.

### *Informal Community and the Active Construction of Belonging*

In response to these limitations, participants described actively creating their own forms of community through informal networks. Rather than relying on institutional LGBTQ+ spaces, many participants found belonging in “my queer friends’ houses” and other interpersonal environments. This reflects the concept of spatial agency, where individuals reshape and redefine space through social practice. These findings highlight the resilience of participants, who do not passively accept exclusion but instead construct alternative spaces of belonging. At the same time, they underscore the limitations of existing LGBTQ+ infrastructures, suggesting that the burden of creating inclusive environments is often placed on individuals rather than institutions.

### *Reimagining Queer Space*

Importantly, participants articulated clear visions for more inclusive and intentional LGBTQ+ spaces. These visions emphasized accessibility, diversity, and connection, particularly through the creation of spaces that are not centered around alcohol or nightlife. Participants' suggestions—including the need for alternative gathering spaces and more intentional community design—highlight the possibility of reimagining queer space in ways that better reflect the needs of marginalized groups. These findings extend existing research by not only documenting exclusion, but also centering participants' perspectives on what more inclusive environments could look like. In doing so, this study contributes to broader conversations about spatial justice and the future of LGBTQ+ community spaces.

## IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have important implications for how LGBTQ+ spaces are conceptualized, designed, and sustained. While these environments are often assumed to be inclusive, this research demonstrates that inclusion is uneven and frequently shaped by gendered, social, and structural dynamics. As a result, there is a clear need for more intentional approaches to creating spaces that reflect the diversity of the LGBTQ+ community, particularly for lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals.

### Reimagining LGBTQ+ Spaces Beyond Nightlife

One of the most significant implications of this study is the need to move beyond nightlife as the dominant model of LGBTQ+ social space. Participants consistently described the limitations of bar- and alcohol-centered environments, emphasizing that these spaces exclude individuals who are sober, uncomfortable with nightlife settings, or seeking more meaningful forms of connection. The current reliance on nightlife venues as primary sites of queer

community-building creates structural barriers that limit access and participation. Developing alternative “third spaces”—such as late-night cafés, community centers, or activity-based gathering spaces—could significantly expand opportunities for inclusive engagement. These environments would allow individuals to connect in ways that are not structured around consumption, noise, or late-night accessibility, addressing many of the barriers identified by participants in this study.

### *Centering Marginalized Identities in Space Design*

This study also highlights the importance of intentionally designing LGBTQ+ spaces that center the needs of marginalized groups within the community. Rather than assuming that all queer individuals experience space in the same way, organizers and business owners must recognize the specific challenges faced by queer women and non-binary individuals. This includes: creating events and venues specifically for sapphic and non-binary communities, ensuring that these spaces are not overshadowed by male-centered dynamics, and prioritizing inclusivity in programming, staffing, and leadership. By shifting from a model of passive inclusion to one of active centering, LGBTQ+ spaces can become more equitable and representative of the communities they serve.

### *Addressing Safety as a Social and Structural Issue*

Participants’ experiences demonstrate that safety within LGBTQ+ spaces cannot be assumed, but must be actively cultivated. Experiences of harassment, discomfort, and exclusion indicate that safety is shaped not only by the identity of the space, but by its social dynamics and practices. Implications for improving safety include: clear enforcement of anti-harassment policies, staff training on inclusivity and gender diversity, and creating environments where

boundaries and consent are respected. These changes are essential for ensuring that LGBTQ+ spaces function as true sites of refuge rather than spaces that reproduce broader social inequalities

### *Supporting Informal and Community-Based Spaces*

This study also underscores the importance of informal community networks as sites of belonging. Participants frequently described finding safety and connection in smaller, self-created environments, such as gatherings among friends. While these spaces are deeply meaningful, they also reflect a gap in formal LGBTQ+ infrastructure. Supporting community-based initiatives—such as peer-led events, collective spaces, and grassroots organizing—can help bridge this gap. Institutions and organizations should consider ways to fund, promote, and sustain these efforts, recognizing that community is not only found in commercial venues but also in relational and collective spaces.

### *Implications for Future Programming and Policy*

Finally, these findings have implications for broader LGBTQ+ programming and policy development. Universities, community organizations, and local governments can play a key role in expanding access to inclusive spaces by: funding LGBTQ+ community centers and non-alcohol-based programming, supporting initiatives that center underrepresented groups within the LGBTQ+ community, and promoting visibility and accessibility of diverse queer spaces. These efforts are particularly important in regions where LGBTQ+ spaces are limited or where social and political climates create additional barriers to safety and inclusion.

## CONCLUSION

This study explored how lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals experience and navigate LGBTQ+ spaces in the absence of lesbian-centered environments. Through a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research revealed that while LGBTQ+ spaces are often sought out for safety and community, they are not experienced as uniformly inclusive. Instead, participants described these environments as conditional, shaped by gendered hierarchies, social dynamics, and structural limitations. Findings demonstrate that LGBTQ+ spaces frequently center cisgender gay men, resulting in the marginalization of queer women and non-binary individuals. At the same time, participants highlighted the limitations of nightlife-centered spaces, emphasizing the need for more accessible and diverse environments. In response to these challenges, individuals actively created their own forms of community through informal networks, while also articulating clear visions for more inclusive and intentional queer spaces. By centering the lived experiences of lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals, this study challenges the assumption that LGBTQ+ spaces are inherently inclusive. Instead, it highlights the ways in which power, identity, and space intersect to shape experiences of belonging and exclusion. These findings contribute to sociological understandings of queer space by emphasizing the importance of examining not only who occupies these environments, but how they are experienced. Ultimately, this research underscores the need to rethink and reimagine LGBTQ+ spaces in ways that prioritize inclusivity, accessibility, and community. As queer space continues to evolve, it is essential to ensure that these environments reflect the full diversity of the communities they are intended to serve. By doing so, LGBTQ+ spaces can move closer to fulfilling their promise as sites of safety, connection, and belonging for all.

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## APPENDICES

## A. Informed Consent Form

## INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: Gay Thoughts on Gay Spots: An Examination of Inclusivity and Navigation in the Absence of Lesbian-Centered Venues

Protocol Number:

Approval Date:

Principal Investigator: Mack Hall

Institution: Middle Tennessee State University

Name of participant: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

You are being asked to participate in a research project. The following information is provided to inform you about the research project and your participation in it. Please read this form carefully.

You will be given an opportunity to ask questions, and your questions will be answered. Also, you will be given a copy of this consent form.

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time with no penalty and no loss of benefits already earned. In the event new information becomes available that may affect the risks or benefits associated with this research study or your willingness to participate in it, you will be notified so that you can make an informed decision about whether or not to continue your participation.

1. Purpose of the study: This research explores how lesbians, queer women, and non-binary individuals experience and navigate LGBTQ+ spaces in the ongoing absence of lesbian-centered venues. The study seeks to understand feelings of inclusion, exclusion, belonging, and identity expression within broader LGBTQ+ environments.

2. Description of procedures to be followed and approximate duration of the study: Semi-structured focus groups will be conducted lasting at least an hour. For data-analysis procedures, focus groups will be audio-recorded.

3. Expected costs: There are no expected costs for this study.

4. Description of the discomforts, inconveniences, and/or risks that can be reasonably expected as a result of participation in this study: This study involves minimal risk. Some participants may experience mild discomfort when discussing personal experiences in LGBTQ+ spaces. Personally, identifying information will not be disclosed, but there is a possibility that other members of the focus group could disclose information from the focus group.

5. Compensation in case of study-related injury: N/A

6. Anticipated benefits from this study:

a) The potential benefits to science and humankind that may result from this study include:

While there are no direct benefits to participants, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of inclusivity, community needs, and the social dynamics of LGBTQ+ spaces—particularly for groups often underrepresented in research.

b) The potential benefits to you from this study include: N/A

7. Alternative treatments available: N/A

8. Compensation for participation: There is no compensation.

9. Circumstances under which the Principal Investigator may withdraw you from study participation: The principal investigator may withdraw you from the study if there is a conflict of interest.

10. What happens if you choose to withdraw from study participation: No consequences will happen if you withdraw from the study. Information will be deleted and will not be used.

11. Contact Information: If you should have any questions about this research study or possible injury, please contact:

Principal Investigator: Mack Hall

Contact Information: [mhh3t@mtmail.mtsu.edu](mailto:mhh3t@mtmail.mtsu.edu)

Faculty Advisor: Vicky Maclean

Contact Information: [Vicky.maclean@mtsu.edu](mailto:Vicky.maclean@mtsu.edu)

For additional information about giving consent or your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) Office of Compliance at 615-494-8918 or via email at [irb\\_information@mtsu.edu](mailto:irb_information@mtsu.edu). (<http://www.mtsu.edu/irb>)

12. Confidentiality: All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep the personal information in your research record private, but total privacy cannot be promised. Your information may be shared with people at MTSU (such as the MTSU Institutional Review Board) or other agencies (such as the Federal Government Office for Human Research Protection) if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

13. STATEMENT BY PERSON AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I have read this informed consent document and the material contained in it has been explained to me. I understand each part of the document, my questions have been answered, and I freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this study.

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Date                      Signature of participant

Consent obtained by:

Date

Signature

Printed name and title

### B. Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Sexuality	Gender Identity	Race	City
Sarah	47	Lesbian	Female	White	Nashville, TN
Abby	23	Pansexual	Female	White	Nashville, TN
Hailey	23	Queer/Bisexual	Female	White	Nashville, TN
Lucy	24	Lesbian	Female	White	Knoxville, TN
Riley	25	Pansexual	Non-binary	White	Nashville, TN
Olivia	31	Lesbian	Female	White	Nashville, TN
Mia	26	Gay	Female	White	Los Angeles, CA
Sophie	25	Queer/Bisexual	Female	White	Los Angeles, CA
Alex	23	Queer	Non-Binary	Black	Los Angeles, CA
Ella	21	Bisexual	Female	White	Los Angeles, CA
Layla	25	Lesbian	Female	Black/Asian/Mexican	Los Angeles, CA
Lily	26	Bisexual	Female	Vietnamese	Columbia, SC
Avery	26	Pansexual	Female	White	Columbia, SC
Michelle	24	Lesbian	Female	White	Nashville, TN
Ivy	24	Bisexual	Female	Black	Nashville, TN