

The infiltration of LGBTQ+ safe spaces

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Abstract

Purpose – LGBTQ+ spaces are often considered as safe havens for the LGBTQ+ community, as they can gather free from prejudice and fear. This research explores the effect that heterosexual people attending LGBTQ+ venues have on this community. This paper considers the impacts on the community, the importance of their safe spaces and identifies practical implications to be considered in protecting these spaces.

Design/methodology/approach – The study implemented a multi-method qualitative data collection approach with LGBTQ+ community venue attendees in the UK. Stage 1 utilised an online qualitative survey and collected data from 558 respondents. Stage 2 saw critical incident techniques (CITs) used with 12 participants. The data collected were analysed using a thematic system.

Findings – The LGBTQ+ community has experienced an increase in frustration and fear as a result of more heterosexual attendees infiltrating their safe spaces. Both participants and respondents discussed the importance that security personnel play in ensuring safe spaces. Finally, the findings demystified that not all attendees in LGBTQ+ venues are allies, and that there is a need for those outside the community to better understand the importance of these spaces for the LGBTQ+ community, as many heterosexuals do not consider how they should act.

Research limitations/implications – Limitations associated with the implementation of the CIT were identified. Further training is advised for researchers employing this method to prepare them for dealing with the emotional impact of participants' experiences.

Practical implications – This study highlighted the need for security and staff working at LGBTQ+ venues to undergo extensive inclusivity training, and for stricter door policies. Participants also argued for LGBTQ+ venues to educate heterosexual attendees about the community and their historical and present-day struggles and culture.

Originality/value – This paper is of practical value to those who organise and manage LGBTQ+ events, bars and nightclubs. An enhancement to the four types of space framework originated by Castilhos and Dolbec (2018) has been identified.

Keywords Community, Inclusivity, Safe spaces, LGBTQ+, Heterosexuals

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

LGBTQ+ people have been identified as having poorer physical and mental health outcomes due to the marginalisation and stigma associated with the community (Strongylyou *et al.*, 2022). It is also argued that those within the community can live in a perpetual state of fear due to the negative experience they face within society (Ecker *et al.*, 2019). Research demonstrates that community spaces positively support wellbeing and create a safe environment (Cattell *et al.*, 2008) and that such spaces are imperative to create a sense of belonging and value (Philpot *et al.*, 2021; Hammack *et al.*, 2022). Moreover, many will attend



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events and venues as their symbolic, and sometimes only tie to the community, as these spaces are often described as safe environments which provides a sense of belonging (Anderson and Knee, 2022).

Research is being conducted that demonstrates the need and value of LGBTQ+ venues for the community. Baxter *et al.* (2022, 2023) evidenced that there has been a changing dynamic of attendees at these venues, with the audiences becoming more diverse, and a trend towards more heterosexuals (“straight” people) visiting LGBTQ+ spaces (Casey, 2004, 2013; Pritchard *et al.*, 2000; Skeggs, 1999; Skeggs and Moran, 2004). While this change has been attributed to the proliferation of LGBTQ+ culture into the mainstream, such as drag, and the implicit acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community, few studies have yet to establish the impact this intrusion of heterosexuals is having on the community.

The purpose of this study is to analyse space frameworks and explore what a “safe” space embodies for the LGBTQ+ community. This research aims to understand the impact that increasingly heterosexual audiences infiltrating these spaces is having and to identify practical approaches LGBTQ+ venues should consider to remain safer spaces. Moreover, it gives a voice to the community at a time when these spaces are increasingly important.

Literature Review

What is a safe space?

Every society produces a collection of spaces, each with their own unique characteristics, that support communities and groups to have somewhere to come together with likeminded people (Lefebvre, 1991). Figure 1 depicts Castilhos and Dolbec’s (2018) four types of space: public, market, segregating and emancipating. Public spaces are heterogeneous, where consumers exhibit social differences as they “negotiate between consumption styles, behaviours, norms, and styles of etiquette” (Castilhos and Dolbec, 2018, p. 156). Market spaces include entertainment venues and shopping centres and attract those who can afford to be there. Market spaces are increasingly dominant in the contemporary urban landscape (Chatel and Hunt, 2003). These traditional urban spaces have not been developed with marginalised communities in mind and hence these communities seek alternative spaces where they can feel safe.

Segregating spaces include private clubs and residential neighbourhoods where they exist to benefit a community or cohesive group. They are characterised by “privacy, identity, security, and control” (Putnam and Newton, 1990; cited by Castilhos and Dolbec, 2018, p. 159). These spaces include individuals with social affiliation to like-minded members who have similar tastes, lifestyle, class, and culture (Tanulku, 2012). People will attend these spaces as they feel they have things in common and are reassured by the implied rules of conduct; “they

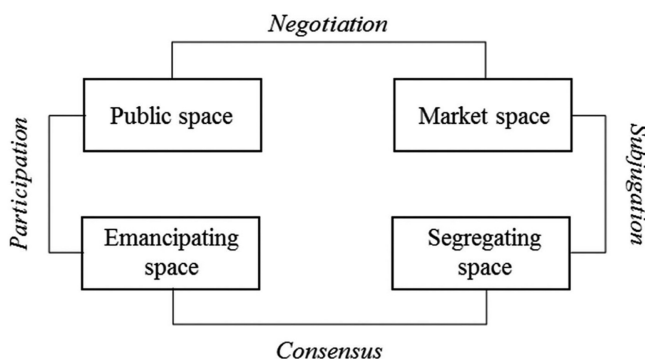


Figure 1.
Castilhos and Dolbec
four types of space
(2018, p. 156)

aim at mitigating the tensions arising from the diversity felt in public spaces by offering a space organised around shared and codified attributes” (Goheen, 1998; cited by [Castilhos and Dolbec, 2018](#), p. 159). Emancipated and segregating spaces are exclusionary in that, rather than being based on the logic of the market, exclusions are based on social affiliation. [Dalpian and Silveira \(2020\)](#) suggest further work is conducted to understand exclusion in spaces by incorporating a wider range of minority groups, such as trans women, trans men, lesbians, and bisexuals.

When applying the word “safe” to describe a space, it is important to recognise that no space is completely free from danger, and rather that certain “spaces” may be associated with a feeling of being “unsafe”. Reports of violence, abuse, discrimination, and harassment towards minority groups are widely reported. [Stonewall \(2020\)](#) found that in Britain over a 12-month period, one in five LGBTQ+ people and two in five trans people had experienced a hate crime because of their identity. The most recent hate crime report for England and Wales ([Home Office, 2022](#)) reported that LGBTQ+ hate crimes rose by 41%, the largest annual increase since reporting commenced in 2012. Transgender hate crimes rose by 56% over the same period, the largest percentage annual increase of all hate crimes. [Fox and Ore \(2010, p. 630\)](#) argue that “the need for LGBT safe spaces is clear, as high rates of violence, disproportionate rates of suicide and substance abuse and overall alienation continue to affect the lives of LGBT people”. [Cisneros and Bracho \(2020\)](#) state that safe spaces for the LGBTQ+ community have often been overlooked and ignored. Yet with a reported increase in harassment, safe spaces are necessary to ensure that the LGBTQ+ community has a place to feel safe.

LGBTQ+ safe spaces

[Castilhos and Dolbec \(2018, p. 160\)](#) discuss emancipating spaces which “are created by communities as spaces of subversion that allow for the challenging of hegemonies”. These are spaces of consensus and voluntary participation, allowing marginalised communities to express themselves safely. Emancipating spaces tend to be temporary in nature as they are often opposing hegemonic forces. Examples include festivals, carnivals, and organised protests, which can be crowded, unpredictable, and challenge mainstream societal norms. [Bradford and Sherry \(2015\)](#), cited by [Castilhos and Dolbec \(2018\)](#), (p. 160) argue that “they enable the turning of power structures upside down and can have elements of reversal of roles and social status”, meaning that they become a space to celebrate differences from mainstream society.

Over recent decades, the LGBTQ+ community has created their own spaces where they feel free from fear, judgement, and prejudice. [Hartal \(2018, p. 1056\)](#) suggests that the LGBTQ+ space “is portrayed as one of tolerance and acceptance, where difference is celebrated”. These spaces are open for those who feel part of the community or support the community, yet this poses its own problems. As [Baxter et al. \(2022\)](#) highlight, the LGBTQ+ community now feel that venues are exposed to more heterosexual attendees due to the popularisation of concepts such as drag culture and the perceived idea that attending these venues is essentially a “free for all”. The continued growth of hen and stag parties visiting LGBTQ+ bars and clubs has overshadowed the importance of these spaces for the community. According to [Cisneros and Bracho \(2020\)](#), some spaces can feel safe for members of particular groups (based on gender, sexuality, race, class, and age), but unsafe for others. [Baxter et al. \(2022\)](#) alluded to there being a feeling within the LGBTQ+ community that their safe spaces were now changing due to a shift in the demographic attending and suggested that this was making them feel unsafe.

[Myslik \(1996\)](#) found that feeling safe is the emotional and psychological safety that comes from being in a space in which one has some sense of belonging or social control. [Skeggs and](#)

Moran (2004), argue that feeling safe is about being shielded from threats from individuals outside of the LGBTQ+ community. Johnson and Chin (2016) suggests that a safe space enables sexual minorities and their allies to express themselves in a non-threatening environment. Allies are defined as heterosexual individuals “who fight for the civil rights of lesbian and gay individuals and . . . who challenge assumptions and jokes about gay people” (Fingerhut, 2011). Nightclubs and bars are often indicated as being the first safer spaces where the LGBTQ+ community would gather to engage in queer culture, in non-heteronormative spaces, where they could express themselves freely, without fear of prejudice and harm (Pritchard *et al.*, 2000; Cisneros and Bracho, 2020; Kaygalak-Celebi *et al.*, 2020; Moraes and Ferreira, 2021). What should be important to note, is that these spaces can transcend traditional in-person spaces, and also be digital spaces, and they do not need to be fixed or static. Overall, what can be deduced is that safe spaces provide a space for emotional, psychological and social safety.

Safe space frames

Hartal (2018) devised five safe space frames (Figure 2) which co-exist in one location: fortification, preserving participants’ anonymity, creating an inclusive space, a space of separation for distinct identity groups, and controlling unpredictable influences on the participants in the space. Fortification of the space refers to the physical safeguarding whereby a “guard” (security) provides a feeling of security. Their role includes psychologically establishing people’s identity, to see if they belong to the LGBTQ+ community or are an ally. This guard is seen as a “protective layer” by members of the community. Moraes and Ferreira’s (2021) study with the LGBTQ+ community found that security was a main contributing factor when choosing a nightclub, especially with regards to the welcome received and sense of belonging. However, Hartal (2018, p. 1061) found that “this combination of power and liminality made the experience of passing through the door an uncomfortable and even a threatening one, since the guard’s gaze forced on the attendees an external identification by a stranger”. Having the perceived “wrong” type of guard or the lack of a positive LGBTQ+ presence undermined the feeling of safety. Cisneros and Bracho (2020) discovered that scrutiny by security on the door was off-putting for some.

Countless people within the LGBTQ+ community have experienced discrimination and consequently keep their sexual orientation or gender identity concealed. Two-thirds of LGBTQ+ people feel uncomfortable about being their true self in public and 59% feel threatened by other people’s attitudes and behaviours towards them (BBC News, 2016). The

FRAME	POLICIES AND PRACTICES	BASIC REASONING	RELATED AFFECTS
FORTIFICATION	Physically safeguarding the space	The right to asylum or sanctuary	Fear of violence
ANONYMITY	Constructing a space where no questions are asked	The right to privacy	Fear of stigma and shame
INCLUSIVITY	Agreed upon policies and guidelines or communication	The right to dignity and privacy, non-objectification	Fear of violence, fear of stigma and shame, constituting belonging
SEPARATION	Segregation of a group’s time-space through social boundaries	The right to cultural life, the freedom to say what one wants	Fear of symbolic violence, constituting belonging
CONTROL	Creating clear boundaries by closing the space	The right to privacy, the freedom to say what one wants	Fear of stigma and shame

Figure 2.
Elements of LGBT safe space framing processes Hartal (2018, p. 1068)

Government Equalities Office (2018) found that 70% of respondents with a minority sexual orientation avoided being open about it for fear of a negative reaction from others. The anonymity frame constructs a space where no questions are asked and provides a place where LGBTQ+ individuals feel accepted and comfortable without undermining their anonymity in other spheres of their life, such as their family and work life. Hartal (2018, p. 1064) argues that this frame “encompasses constructing a space where no questions are asked . . . thus the reasoning behind this frame . . . is based on the right to privacy”. However, this necessitates non-identification of individuals when entering the space, which conflicts with the fortification frame. Whilst Hartal’s (2018) study specifically focussed on transgender individuals, the findings are relatable to the wider LGBTQ+ community and other marginalised groups, as they also experience issues of safety and security.

The fourth frame, separation, centres “on the construction of social boundaries, forming internal relationships of inclusion and exclusion based on identity” (Hartal, 2018, p. 1068). Separatism is one of the practices for creating safety for marginalised communities (Sibley, 1995) and maintains the need for a space of separation for distinct identity groups. This frame represents the right to cultural life and the freedom to say what one wants. With many LGBTQ+ spaces currently infiltrated by heterosexuals, it limits opportunities for the community to address issues in society and can limit freedom of expression.

The final frame, controlling unpredictable influences on the participants in the space, reflects the need to create a controlled environment to prevent exposure to outsiders’ gazes. The aim is to create clear boundaries to close the space, and to control and regulate it to reduce the “risk factor in forming an LGBT safe space in that it uncontrollably reveals who is in the space, and thus may conflict with the inclusivity, fortification, and separation frames” (Hartal (2018, p. 1067). Thus, this control could overlap with the fortification frame, as the “guard,” based on their judgement, determines who enters the space. However, it is this fifth frame that has been impacted greatly with the popularisation of concepts such as drag, and many people now wishing to engage in LGBTQ+ spaces. So, there is a need to consider how the community can reclaim spaces and create boundaries of control.

Infiltrating LGBTQ+ safe spaces

Heterosexuals are often perceived as a threat in lesbian and gay spaces (Casey, 2004, 2013; Pritchard *et al.*, 2000; Skeggs, 1999; Skeggs and Moran, 2004). Skeggs (1999) stated that LGBTQ+ spaces often offer an alternative place for heterosexuals to visit; specifically, they have become a space for heterosexual women to feel safe away from heterosexual men. Skeggs and Moran (2004) and Held (2015) agree by highlighting that heterosexuals, specifically men, can threaten safety. Casey (2004, 2013) states that heterosexual women attending LGBTQ+ spaces are now impacting the safety associated with these spaces. Whether they are attending the spaces as a way to liberate against the gendered norms experienced in traditional heterosexual venues, or as a place for escapism, they find LGBTQ+ spaces to be free from risk, and somewhere they feel safe. But there is limited awareness of the impact that this has on the LGBTQ+ community. What has become apparent is that many LGBTQ+ people will be extremely cautious and aware of how they act within typically heteronormative spaces, but heterosexuals entering LGBTQ+ spaces may not have the same consideration.

The concept of safe space is fluid, and while it has been defined within academic research, it remains a very subjective concept that is changeable depending on the participant of that space and their social, mental, and physical being (The Roestone Collective, 2014a). Many of the safe spaces that are explored and discussed in relation to the LGBTQ+ community are bars and nightclubs, which have been considered “safe havens” as they allow the community to congregate and celebrate away from the pressures of heterosexual society (Croff *et al.*, 2017).

Safe spaces in their very nature cannot be considered as inclusive, as the creation of the space comes out of pressure of society negatively affecting another (Battle and Bennett, 2005; Taylor, 2008; Reck, 2009 and Cisneros and Bracho, 2020). But, at what point does the creation of an exclusive space impact the ability to cultivate a community? While this is not the focus of this study, it has been considered when exploring the findings and discussion, posing if LGBTQ+ venues are too inclusive, the initial purpose of them being created has been lost and they now feel “unsafe” for some within the community.

Fox and Ore (2010) posit that there may be a need to reframe our understanding of the concept of safe spaces, and it should be considered as creating safe(er) spaces. In this respect, it moves the discussion away from the school of thought that a space can ever be totally free from risk. While safe spaces cannot be free from harm to those attending, they do need to engage interventions that reduce risk, and create a sense of inclusivity and diversity (Hartal, 2018). This does not mean that communities should not still strive to create safe spaces. Cisneros and Bracho (2020) support this and maintain that there is still a lack of LGBTQ+ public spaces.

Methodology

The multi-methodological approach adopted for this study was the use of a Qualitative Online Survey (QOS) followed by the Critical Incident Technique (CIT). The QOS was used to capture a snapshot of the issues within the phenomenon being explored and to purposefully select a further sample of the population to explore (Baxter *et al.*, 2023). It offered respondents the opportunity to opt into taking part in a CIT. The CIT technique was then used to allow for a greater level of exploration into the behaviour changes of those who rely on LGBTQ+ spaces. CIT encourages participants to recall their experience and the effect new audiences in these spaces have on them (Kostamo *et al.*, 2019; Bott and Tourish, 2016). This gave the participants a voice which allows researchers to gather more in-depth data on the key issues of the rise of heterosexuals in LGBTQ+ safe spaces. CIT gives greater insight into the implications of the phenomenon, as participants were able to share their own experiences producing data which is “rich in descriptions” and free from bias.

Clarke and Braun (2021) state that qualitative online surveys tend to be underutilised within qualitative research. Due to the traditional considerations of a survey, the perception is that this type of tool is more suited to quantitative studies. The online qualitative survey has been used in various surveys to gather rich, insightful data from larger samples (Clarke and Braun, 2021). The online survey allowed research to be collected, using more or less structured questions, in this study from $N = 558$ respondents (R). An invitation to complete the survey was circulated by LGBTQ+ venues across social media, and the only requirement was that respondents

	<i>n</i> (%)	Gender			Sexuality	
		Male	Female	Non-binary	LGBTQ+	Straight
All ages		175 (31.4%)	275 (49.3%)	108 (19.4%)	503 (90.1%)	55 (9.9%)
18-21	247 (44.3%)	51	133	63	225	22
22-25	138 (24.7%)	39	78	21	123	15
26-30	101 (18.1%)	42	40	19	88	13
31-40	51 (9.1%)	30	19	2	46	5
41-50	18 (3.2%)	12	3	3	18	0
51-60	3 (0.5%)	1	2	0	3	0

Figure 3.
Demographic data of
survey respondents

Source(s): Created by authors

should have attended at least one LGBTQ+ venue or event over the previous 12 months (see [Figure 3](#)).

Respondents were then invited to take part as participants in the CIT. 12 participants (P) were secured who represented a diverse range of genders and sexualities.

The CIT is traditionally recognised as being used predominantly within health-related research ([Viergever, 2019](#)). While it has been used in consumer related studies to better understand the experiences of customers, there is still limited research which has engaged CIT to understand the LGBTQ+ communities experiences of safe spaces. Aligned to the unstructured interview, CIT created an opportunity for participants to recall their lived experiences. [Lipu et al. \(2007\)](#) support that CIT is a valuable approach to collecting and analysing data on human interaction and assign meaning and understanding to these lived experiences, due to the technique enabling the participant to delve deeper into how the experiences affected them. [Fitzgerald et al. \(2008\)](#) further highlight the role of anecdotes using this approach and the value they have in understanding their practice. However, [Gillespie et al. \(2021\)](#) argue that unstructured questions can lead to participants' misinterpretation of what is being explored and can lead to forced invalid responses. This maintains that the role of open-ended questioning offers more nuance and substance than those that are closed, which is how this CIT was developed. CIT created a unique environment, unlike unstructured interviews, where the researcher was able to induce the direction of the conversation if it was going off topic ([Schulter et al., 2007](#); [Byrne and Flood, 2012](#)). Using both approaches enhances the credibility of the study as triangulation was implemented ([Natow, 2020](#); [Alamri, 2019](#)).

[Clarke and Braun \(2013\)](#) and [Saunders et al. \(2009\)](#) suggest that the researcher needs to be familiar with the data by engaging with it multiple times. This was achieved using the multi-stage approach, as it allowed the researchers to consider which of the themes trended across both collection methods. [Colghan \(2007\)](#) discussed that there are issues associated with CIT due to the possible effect the responses could have on the company or participant involved, specifically that the participant can be identified. This was an ethical concern, as ensuring that the participant is not subject to any risk is imperative. To ensure transparency with the data collected, specifically the CIT, once transcribed the participants were invited to review their transcripts. Creating anonymity using coding ensured the participant felt comfortable responding and sharing their experience and they could identify this when reviewing the transcripts. Anonymity and confidentiality are vital, and this was highlighted to each participant. Applying these processes ensured that the data collected did not compromise the participants' anonymity and was a true likeness of the findings being presented, whilst also offering the opportunity for the participant to withdraw.

The study ensured clarity and consistency when analysing the data by employing a thematic analysis. This was considered the most effective approach, as it allowed the data collected to be reviewed to identify, analyse, and report key themes. All data collected was subject to thematic analysis, by coding each conversation and survey response to identify key themes related to the research question. NVivo 12 was used to facilitate the organisation and storage of the data analysed. This system also allows the analysed data to be retrieved.

Findings

Understanding the role of safe spaces within the LGBTQ+ community

Members of the LGBTQ+ community feel that they have to mask their identities or personalities in life for fear of discrimination, hatred, and abuse ([BBC News, 2016](#); Government Equalities Office in [2018](#)). Thus, safe spaces have provided a place where they can feel safe, both physically and emotionally. It was critical this study sought out to understand how the LGBTQ+ community perceived a safe space:

I would define a safe space as somewhere where you are free from harassment, bigotry. Obviously, you are physically safe; your mental wellbeing is taken into account (P10, Non-binary, lesbian, age 26).

Being able to live freely and live openly and honestly and as themselves in these spaces without fear of being ridiculed (P7, male, gay, age 27).

Oh, I can do whatever I want here; I can be as gay as I want, as over the top camp, flamboyant and not have to worry about somebody punching me (P11, male, gay, age unknown).

It became apparent within these findings that many of the participants and respondents had encountered abuse (Fox and Ore, 2010; Home Office, 2022; Nash, 2011; Stonewall, 2020). Having places free from ridicule and fear was important for them and was how they viewed a safe space. For LGBTQ+ people, safe spaces are where they can be their authentic, unapologetic, true self; where they can express their identity and personality without having to adjust or tone down their behaviour, which is widely supported by the findings of recent research (Adams, 2018; Fox and Ore, 2010; Jugănar, 2018; Roestone Collective, 2014a; Shapiro, 2016; Hartal *et al.*, 2014).

The freedom and openness that comes with feeling safe in LGBTQ+ spaces leads to many of the respondents feeling a sense of belonging and community. This was further evidenced with participants highlighting that the environment needed to be free from judgement:

It's very much feeling as if you are in an environment that you are not going to be judged. There's an air of acceptance and camaraderie there which is I think integral to a lot of the queer experience (P4, male, gay, age 24).

When I think about safe space it's everyone collectively having the same sort of values, whether it's inclusivity, sexual orientation or hanging out with likeminded people, I think contributes to that feeling of it being a safe space (P7, male, gay, age 27).

This demonstrated that the spaces being described by the participants can be classed accordingly as segregated or emancipated spaces (Castilho's and Dolbec, 2018), as they are created by individuals with social affiliation to like-minded members who have similar tastes, lifestyle, class, and culture (Tanulku, 2012). What became apparent from the social cues when interviewing the participants is that they became more animated and emotive when they discussed the concept of what a safe space was, which demonstrated the importance to them.

The open and inclusive nature of LGBTQ+ safe spaces was a constant theme. Many respondents stated that it was important that the spaces felt "open" and somewhere that everyone could feel safe, with respondent 26 (female, bisexual, age 23) stating that:

it's important to create a space that's welcoming for the community and allies.

This was echoed by many of those who took part in the CIT:

For me I feel the safest when I see a bunch of different types of people, like a bunch of different ethnicities and races and identities within gender and sexuality (P5, female, lesbian, age 22).

This demonstrated that people saw value in the diverse range of people in LGBTQ+ safe spaces, and that everyone attending has the opportunity to feel that sense of belonging. Our findings aligned with research that explored the concept of what a safe space is, with the LGBTQ+ community emphasising the importance of the space being free from ridicule and prejudice (Pritchard *et al.*, 2000; Cisneros and Bracho, 2020; Kaygalak-Celebi *et al.*, 2020; Moraes and Ferreira, 2021). But what became clear was that many also wanted to share these spaces with those who consider themselves allies.

The role of allies in LGBTQ+ safe spaces

When respondents described what was important in creating and ensuring a safe space, the types of people who attend the space were important; particularly, the role that allies play within these venues. [Johnson and Chin \(2016\)](#) and [Kaygalak-Celebi et al., 2020](#) found that the inclusion of allies did not adversely impact on the space feeling safe. Many of the LGBTQ+ community who took part in this study welcomed the inclusion of allies into their space. One participant wanted to share these venues with allies to showcase the work the community has done to help create these safe spaces:

I have no problem when it's people who are there to be supportive and to be allies and who are aware that they get to enjoy this safe space because of all the hard work that LGBTQ+ people have put into it (P12, female, pansexual, age 31).

However, while there was support to include allies in LGBTQ+ spaces, issues were raised. LGBTQ+ respondents emphasised the importance of differentiating between heterosexual people generally, and allies.

(allies) know how to behave, they respect that it's not their space, that they're guests in it. Whereas I think that the average straight person coming in here I think doesn't necessarily have that same level of respect and knowledge (P1, male, bisexual, age 20).

Our findings suggested that the LGBTQ+ community could differentiate between those who were allies and those who were not. This distinction came in many forms; from practical linguistic factors like understanding and being mindful to different gender pronouns, to knowledge of the struggles LGBTQ+ people have faced throughout the years.

I think they just see it as a fun area, a different venue, not somewhere which we've had to fight for . . . I think a lot of straight people just see it as a different club to go to" (P2, non-binary, queer, age 18).

These findings align with the [Baxter et al. \(2022\)](#) study, showing that there is clear recognition of audience dynamics changing and more heterosexuals attending these venues.

LGBTQ+ safe spaces as a conduit for educating

There was an awareness amongst some participants of the opportunity for LGBTQ+ safe spaces to educate heterosexual people and strengthen their allyship:

Just small things like having gender neutral toilets or having people use pronouns for example normalises that kind of experience for (heterosexual) people in general (P8, male, bisexual, age 25).

It was suggested that this has transpired due to the sometimes complex and ever-evolving language associated with the LGBTQ+ community. Participants also recounted occasions that heterosexual attendees have twisted their "identity" to mock or belittle. In one case, this included a heterosexual man saying he "identified as a Spice Girl" as justification for being allowed entry to an LGBTQ+ venue in fancy dress.

You are just weaponising the language that queer people use (P10, Non-binary, lesbian, age 26).

While it is clear that not every heterosexual attendee is a true ally, those involved in this study did feel that everyone within an LGBTQ+ space should show respect. Respondents commented that this should start with a clear message that the venue they are entering is, first and foremost, a safe space for the LGBTQ+ community. Many suggested heterosexual attendees should understand they are a "guest" in someone else's space, with respondent 7 (non-binary, gay, age 20) proposing that there needs to be "*more discussion of ally etiquette in queer spaces*". Thus, these safe spaces can act as a place to educate and enhance the knowledge of those not within or directly aligned to the LGBTQ+ community.

With an increasing number of events targeting the LGBTQ+ community in non-LGBTQ+ spaces, different demographics are mixing more frequently. This suggests that the concept of maintaining safe spaces is multi-directional; that the same respect should be given to anyone entering a space that may not be traditionally associated with the communities they align with.

I think that gay people and queer people do feel safer in straight spaces . . . but also they want their spaces to remain intrinsically theirs and you can't have it both ways (P7, male, gay, age 27).

This creates further ideological considerations about perceived "ownership" of these spaces. Thus, the lessons learnt from studies such as this can help support those working in non-LGBTQ+ venues better understand how to create safe spaces.

Effect of heterosexuals infiltrating LGBTQ+ venues

Heterosexual women. Respondents acknowledged the impact of RuPaul's Drag Race in attracting more heterosexual women to LGBTQ+ venues, particularly when these venues host events featuring stars from the show (Baxter *et al.*, 2022):

(the)audience has definitely changed in the five or six years . . . from predominantly gay men to probably now 70% heterosexual women (P7, male, gay, age 27).

These once emancipated spaces are moving to market spaces due to the popularisation of gay culture (Castihos and Dolbec, 2017). From many participants there was specific reference to "arge groups of women" and "hen parties". Respondents further emphasised this, suggesting that "*straight girls go there to feel safe*". When probing participants of the CIT on this matter, it was suggested this was because heterosexual women perceived LGBTQ+ venues as "safer" with participant 1 (male, bisexual, age 20) stating that women "*feel that they are less likely to be subject to misogyny, and the fear any sort of sexual assault*".

Nonetheless, many indicated that they felt some heterosexual women appear to be attending LGBTQ+ safe spaces as more of a "novelty".

I'd say there's a lot of tokenism of the "gay best friend" thing and that is in large part down to straight women who will be like, "Oh yes, my gay best friend" (P1, male, bisexual, age 20).

I sometimes see lots of groups of girls, and I get the impression they are here for the novelty of being in a gay club (R36, male, gay, age 36).

Specifically, gay male respondents reported occasions where heterosexual women would try befriending them purely because of their sexuality and to have a "gay best friend". Some had even experienced groups of heterosexual women, often hen parties, placing bets as to who could kiss a gay man first. It has become somewhat of a tradition for hen parties to finish their night at a "gay club", and as a result many venues have banned these groups because of complaints from their LGBTQ+ clientele.

Heterosexual men. LGBTQ+ spaces have also seen an increase in heterosexual male attendees, often with predatory or sexual intentions towards the increasing number of heterosexual females. Respondents alluded to the fact that this can make LGBTQ+ venues feel unsafe and make them ostracised in their own spaces.

When large groups of straight (men) people are coming without LGBTQ+ friends I'm wary that they create an unsafe environment (R60, male, gay, age 21).

there have been a lot of straight cis women and men in the club, which is fine, but does cause a certain degree of tension, with people being quizzed in their gender and sexuality by heterosexual people who are "just asking" or lesbians getting flirted with and skeeved on by straight men (R25, gender-fluid, pansexual, age 23).

Some had witnessed heterosexual men acting strangely, sometimes even alone, behaving predatorily towards vulnerable, often intoxicated, women. Whilst some LGBTQ+ venues seem to take firm action against this, it seems a lack of security presence and insufficient training has meant this behaviour continues unchallenged in some spaces.

When I've been around town and there's young groups of lads, and they are like, "Oh yeah, let's go to [an LGBTQ+ nightclub] so we can watch all the girls make out (P12, female, pansexual, age 31).

Many straight men are found staring at lesbian couples and it makes us feel unsafe (R82, female, lesbian, age 18).

Some recounted experiences where they had received unwanted sexual advances, even when politely saying they are gay. Others described how they have been adversely affected by this heterosexual male presence in these spaces.

I think it's ingrained in every queer person's mind, some level of apprehension around particularly straight men because of this aggressive energy (P1, male, bisexual, age 20).

Straight people are making the space unsafe and uncomfortable for queer people (R58, trans, pansexual, age 24).

Whilst the increasing number of heterosexual women attending LGBTQ+ safe spaces is a nuisance to the community, heterosexual men pose a more serious threat. Gay male participants discussed past trauma suffered at the hands of such men. This included the impact of toxic masculinity on their mental health, being intimidated by "lad" culture, and being both verbally and physically attacked. Some gay participants recounted experiences where heterosexual men had mockingly flirted with them or physically touched them as a way to intimidate and assert their dominance over them. Seeing heterosexual men in LGBTQ+ venues removes the core concept of what it means to be a safe space for many.

Security

The importance of well-trained security personnel was one of the most frequent themes throughout this research. When asked how LGBTQ+ venues could be safer spaces, 65 respondents focussed on security issues, and every one of the 12 CIT participants discussed their importance. Often these security roles are filled by agency staff who have received little training in dealing with marginalised communities. Therefore, the role of security in creating a feeling of safety could conversely create feelings of apprehension and insecurity (Hartal, 2018). The hiring and training of security personnel is of utmost importance and needs to be aligned with a policy of valuing diversity (Morales and Ferreira's, 2021).

Most specifically I think an area that most queer venues are lacking in is training on their security in regards to trans people . . . it's your first interaction of walking into a venue and having queer phobic, transphobic bouncers is obviously the worst (P10, non-binary, lesbian, age 26).

In the UK, people can be refused entry to licensed premises for a number of legitimate reasons; for being too intoxicated, wearing inappropriate clothing such as fancy dress, or in a large group. They cannot, however, be refused entry purely based on a protected characteristic, as per the [Equality Act 2010](#), which includes gender and sexuality. Thus, LGBTQ+ venues have to be very careful in how to protect the integrity of the safe space and ensure the right sort of person enters, since they cannot explicitly refuse entry to someone simply because they are heterosexual. Some LGBTQ+ venues are navigating this challenge by asking people on entry if they are aware of what the venue is, and who it is aimed at.

It's vetting people on the door, asking those probing questions initially, Are you part of the community? Do you know that this is an LGBTQ+ venue? (P7, male, gay, age 27).

It is preferable for venues to refuse someone entry rather than remove them once they are inside. Even with visuals and signage indicating a venue is catering to the LGBTQ+ community, such as advertising posters or rainbow flags, some customers fail to see these.

To me . . . the first and most important thing, the first line of defence is the door . . . making sure that they know that it's a gay venue if they are straight (P6, male, bisexual, 75)

Some respondents praised venues who have visible LGBTQ+ staff, like drag performers, interacting with customers in the queue. This further promotes to heterosexual customers that it is an LGBTQ+ venue and helps to “vet” people before they reach the door.

For many respondents, the majority of abuse, discrimination, or non-consensual sexual contact they have faced has been inside venues in busy, high-density areas. A common suggestion was that LGBTQ+ venues need to have a larger and more visible security presence in these areas, such as dancefloors and by the bars (Hartal, 2018; Moraes and Ferreira, 2021). As well as acting as a deterrent to potential perpetrators, seeing uniformed staff, often familiar faces to regular customers within the community, provides further reassurance that it is a safe space. Participant 6 (male, gay, age 75), who has also worked as security at LGBTQ+ venues, stated:

The people that come in regularly know us all anyway, which is great, so we're all on first name terms . . . we're not people from a security agency who've been shipped in for the night and have no comprehension or appreciation or sympathy or empathy whatsoever.

Respondents wanted venues to take a firmer approach in how they manage reports of discriminatory behaviour.

a zero tolerance on any queer phobic behaviour—transphobia, misogyny, racism (P3, male, queer, age 34).

Venues who remove such individuals and issue lifetime bans were praised. Participant 7 (male, gay, age 27) talked about some LGBTQ+ venues which are implementing new approaches to make it easier for customers to report inappropriate behaviour.

They have what is essentially a series of panic buttons around the venue and at any point if you are feeling uncomfortable . . . you can push one of these buttons and a member of security or a marshal, a member of their safe space team will come over and get you the help that you need.

The overall findings highlighted that the considerations of a safe space from academic research is aligned to what the LGBTQ+ community seek. However, there are nuances specific to the needs of LGBTQ+ safe spaces, including a place free from prejudice and abuse. With the increase of heterosexuals within these spaces, the LGBTQ+ community feel that they are not as safe as they once were, as abuse, assault, and fear have been experienced. Although the word “infiltration” is highly emotive, this is how many view the increase in heterosexuals attending spaces that were once segregated spaces for the LGBTQ+ community. Moreover, the findings indicate how important the role of venue security is to maintaining these safe spaces. Finally, it is apparent from this study that there is a need to ensure those attending these spaces from outside the LGBTQ+ community are educated on the space they are entering.

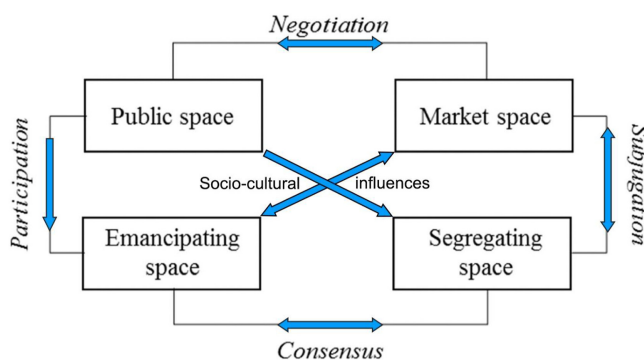
Conceptual framework: LGBTQ+ safe space development

This depiction of safe space has been developed to enable marketers to understand how best to commercialise spaces and how people consume these spaces to maximise profit (Castilhos and Dolbec, 2018). LGBTQ+ spaces are commercial spaces hence it was important to consider a model that explored spaces from a commercial perspective. Whilst there are

effective frameworks that explore the concept of space and place development, such as, sailing through marketing (Giovanardi and Lucarelli, 2018) möbius strip (Coffin and Chatzidakis, 2021) and spatial dimensions (Castilhos *et al.*, 2017), the LGBTQ+ spaces explored in this study were open as commercial venues, marketed in this way, and engaged consumers through concepts such as drag and pride, making the four types of space (Castilhos and Dolbec, 2018) framework valuable to explore in this research. What has been established is that there is further work to explore how this study could impact the other frameworks denoted previously. The four types of space framework, developed by Castilhos and Dolbec (2018), has helped in understanding the different typologies of space and for whom these spaces are created for. Researchers have demonstrated that new spaces have been created to manage the different communities within society, and the increasing gentrification within cities (Ilkucan and Sandikci, 2005; Rosen and Walks, 2013). Yet, there are complexities in understanding how these spaces are maintained as safe spaces, which are some of the limitations of the work presented by Castilhos and Dolbec (2018). They considered that public spaces were inclusive in nature but for marginalised communities this is often not the case. At times, they may be excluded or vulnerable when entering these spaces, hence not making them inclusive.

Considerations have been given to the challenges between how those consuming spaces participate within them and then how they are controlled and, at points, manipulated against those they are there to serve. This in turn has impacted the safety of these spaces, which can be evidenced by the increase in heterosexuals attending LGBTQ+ spaces (Baxter *et al.*, 2022, 2023). Moreover, while public spaces are open to all, those who use them need to negotiate how they use the spaces and, most importantly, how they interact with others using them. As such, this can often make public spaces difficult to navigate for marginalised communities, especially if they are in these spaces celebrating concepts like queer culture. With queer culture transcending into mainstream society and within what are considered public spaces, understanding how these are developed and who controls them remains important.

Building on Castilhos and Dolbec's original framework (2018), Figure 4 illustrates that the conceptualisation of space is not as simple as first conceived. What is presented here is building on the work shown in Figure 1, adapting it specifically to LGBTQ+ safe spaces, developed for marginalised communities. The transition of spaces is more fluid depending on who seeks to consume spaces, how the space is being consumed, or what has influenced the space to be created. Moreover, while Castilhos and Dolbec (2018) recognise there is fluidity to how space is created, specifically for those within marginalised communities, there is little emphasis placed on the role of these spaces being safe and what happens when they move



Source(s): Created by authors

Figure 4.
Enhanced four types of
space framework

from being segregated to market or public spaces. The conceptual framework presented in [Figure 4](#) demonstrates that LGBTQ+ spaces are developed initially as safe spaces and, as such, organised by and for the community they serve. Before LGBTQ+ people became accepted in wider society, these were often segregated spaces. Following that, the increasing presence of queer people and drag queens in popular culture ([Baxter et al., 2022, 2023](#)) transitioned many of these venues into emancipating spaces, where people from outside the community (allies) were welcomed into the inclusive space to celebrate alongside LGBTQ+ people. [Baxter et al. \(2022, 2023\)](#) work shows that RuPaul's Drag Race has been a force that has further popularised queer culture into mainstream society, creating demand from outside the LGBTQ+ community and into new spaces. These socio-cultural influences have transitioned venues and events from segregated/emancipated spaces to market spaces. This marketisation has then allowed for negotiations leading to drag being present in public spaces, such as libraries, schools, and public celebrations. This framework argues that for an emancipated or segregated space to transition into a public space, it must first filter through a market space due to socio-cultural influences. These transitions between spaces can also be applied to other LGBTQ+ events and celebrations, such as Pride, which have evolved from protests (segregated), to free concerts for all (emancipated), to ticketed and sponsored parades, concerts, and festivals (market), as well as organised parades for the all in city centres (public).

This study has demonstrated that there is a desire amongst the LGBTQ+ community to prevent emancipated and segregated spaces becoming market or public spaces. Moreover, due to the influx of heterosexual attendees to inclusive emancipated spaces, for some marginalised parts of the LGBTQ+ community there now seems to be a desire for more segregated spaces, exclusively designed for queer people and away from the threat or irritation felt by sharing spaces with people outside the community.

This enhanced framework will need to be tested against events for other marginalised communities, and will be explored in future research.

Practical implications of this research

The following table highlights the recommendations for those managing or organising LGBTQ+ venues and events (see [Table 1](#)).

Conclusion

This research explored the effect that an increasing heterosexual audience is having on the community that LGBTQ+ venues were developed to support and identified practical approaches venue and event managers should consider to ensure LGBTQ+ spaces remain safe. Additionally, the paper has presented a revised framework, based on [Castilhos and Dolbec's \(2018\)](#) four types of space framework. The study builds on this and presents the directional flows of how spaces can transition between the four types due to societal influence.

Studies have shown that there has been a growth in heterosexuals infiltrating LGBTQ+ safe spaces ([Baxter et al., 2022, 2023](#)) influenced by the interest and demand for access to concepts like drag. The LGBTQ+ community rely on these spaces for their well-being. Recognised for their openness and inclusive environments, LGBTQ+ spaces are also attractive to heterosexual consumers for these reasons ([Baxter et al., 2022, 2023](#); [Branton and Compton, 2021](#)). As groups of heterosexual men and women continue to descend on LGBTQ+ venues, this research has revealed that these spaces no longer feel as safe as they once did for the community. While these spaces remain important for creating community,

Infiltration of LGBTQ+ safe spaces

Practical implications	Proposed solution	Connection to findings
Security and Entry Policy	LGBTQ + event venues could ensure that security personnel have been trained in diversity and inclusivity, and how to use pronouns to ensure non-binary and trans customers are not misgendered. On entry, customers could be asked if they know the venue or event is for the LGBTQ + community, and then judge whether they can enter based on their response. Venues could offer loyalty schemes or membership benefits to regular customers, whether from the community or an ally. Venues can also ensure a sufficient and visible security presence in high-density areas, like dancefloors	Based on the findings, allies are generally welcomed by LGBTQ + people into their safe spaces. Security asking about customers' intentions and motivations on entry would help differentiate between allies and those attending to mock or threaten LGBTQ + attendees
Education and Communication	Venue art and décor could add both aesthetic and educational value by more clearly representing LGBTQ + culture and the struggles the community has endured through history. In marketing and online communication, LGBTQ + venues could place greater emphasis on raising awareness of relevant causes, charities and memorial days for the community. Safe space measures could be clearly communicated across multiple channels, to both reassure LGBTQ + customers and deter other non-allies who are not suitable	Participants and respondents spoke of the opportunity at LGBTQ + venues to educate heterosexual attendees of the struggles the community have faced, and in turn why safe spaces are so important. Importance was placed by participants on ally etiquette in queer spaces
Differentiated Events	Venues could host events for the wider, often underserved, parts of the LGBTQ + community, such as trans, female-identifying, or non-binary people. Performance line-ups should be diverse and not just predominantly male-to-female drag impersonation, with music featuring LGBTQ + artists. Venues could consider distinguishing between "allies" tickets and "LGBTQ + community" tickets, where the former pay a slightly higher fee; the difference of which is donated to an LGBTQ + charity	Participants spoke of discrimination in particular targeted at trans people and other marginalised parts of the LGBTQ + community. Events catered to these groups, with more diverse performers than the mainstream male-to-female drag from RuPaul's Drag Race which attract heterosexual female attendees, would provide further safe spaces

Source(s): Created by authors

Table 1.
Practical implications

they must be free from harm and promote openness and inclusion (Branton and Compton, 2021).

Our enhancement of Castilhos and Dolbec's (2018) four types of space framework identifies a fluidity between the spaces based on socio-cultural influences. LGBTQ+ venues are predominantly aligned to being emancipated and segregated spaces. However, as drag and queer culture has transcended into mainstream society, the increased exposure has allowed such spaces to transcend into the market and public spaces. This fluid movement into these spaces has led to those in the LGBTQ+ community feeling unsafe and seeking to reclaim their spaces. The conceptualisation of this model has created an opportunity for

researchers to explore if this is also the case for other LGBTQ+ and community events and spaces.

There were limitations to this study, one of which is associated with using the CIT. The importance of how the emotional responses of participants could impact on the researcher was underestimated. It was not expected this study would reveal the danger and harm that heterosexual males and females have caused the LGBTQ+ community as their spaces have become more open and inclusive. While all participants were directed to services to support them regarding the experiences discussed, as per the procedures when using CIT (Whitney and Evered, 2022), it is recommended that further training is implemented for researchers employing this technique.

Finally, it needs to be noted that the LGBTQ+ community spends so much time navigating how to act and behave in venues they visit that are outside of their community, so why are heterosexual people not reciprocating? Research is needed into the motivation and perspective of heterosexual people who frequent LGBTQ+ safe spaces and their knowledge of how important these spaces are to the LGBTQ+ community. There is now, more than ever, a need to protect LGBTQ+ safe spaces and better understand how spaces can transition from what they were once set out to be. Thus, analysing safe space development across other sectors and marginalised communities will be implemented applying the conceptual framework (Figure 4) developed from this study.

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