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Inside a Safe Place: The perception of LGBTQ+ urban spaces' role in shaping feelings of identity, community, and security

Anna Capretta, Bianca D'Anneo, Giacomo Polignano

University of Padova — anna.capretta@studenti.unipd.it, bianca.danneo@studenti.unipd.it, giacomo.polignano@studenti.unipd.it

ABSTRACT

The influence of LGBTQ+ spaces in defining the urban experience of people belonging to the LGBTQ+ community has become the subject of a growing literature in the field of urban sociology. Our present research focuses on the perception of these urban spaces by their attendants and analyses how different LGBTQ+ spaces shape a sense of identity, community, and security among them. Using the tools of ethnographic research, such as participant observation and in-depth interview, we analysed two LGBTQ+ friendly spaces located in Padua, an Italian medium-size city with a noteworthy LGBTQ+ history. The selected spaces each have a different social function: political or recreational; one space is the headquarters of a political association, and the other one is a club. Our results show that an LGBTQ+ urban space, especially the political one, can have a positive influence on the perception of a sense of identity, community, and security. This is both thanks to its social function, because it allows for the creation of solid bonds inside a safe place, and thanks to its history, which makes it a point-of-reference for the local LGBTQ+ community.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, urban spaces, identity, community, security, Padua, Italy

Looking at urban spaces through the lens of the LGBTQ+ community is a perspective that has been neglected by urban sociology for decades. Starting from the second half of the 20th century, sociological studies on gay neighbourhoods started to flourish with scholars mainly focusing on the urban experiences of gay men living in metropolises located in the Global North (Castells 1983; Chauncey 1994). In recent years, scholars have developed new perspectives on the urban life of LGBTQ+ communities as multiple gender and sexual identities have been analysed in the context of small-medium cities (Myrdahl 2013; Brown 2019; Forstie 2020; Jubany et al. 2021). Our research aims to build off these recent works.

In this study, we offer an analysis of the perception of the role played by LGBTQ+ urban spaces in shaping feelings of identity, community, and security amongst their attendants. In particular, we investigate variations in the role played by LGBTQ+ spaces with a different social function. The three analytical dimensions of identity, community, and security will be used in this research as separated notions, given their distinction at a theoretical and conceptual level (Chen, Orum and Paulsen 2018). We are aware of their interdependence on an empirical level, as we will show in our conclusions, but we believe that analysing each of these dimensions separately can best bring out the features that we aimed to detect in our research. Specifically, separating these three analytical dimensions helped us in making a comparison between the two LGBTQ+ urban spaces which we studied.

To focus our analysis on LGBTQ+ urban spaces with different social functions, we decided to use a comparative approach. This choice also enabled us to answer the call cast

by Brown-Saracino (2018; see also Forstie 2020), who warns scholars from avoiding inaccurate generalisations. Indeed, scholars indicate generalisation as one of the flaws of previous research on LGBTQ+ urban spaces which often follows the assumption of spatial singularity (Ghaziani 2019). Therefore, we decided to focus on two different spaces located in the same city. This choice allowed us to address our research question and to get a deep understanding of the hyper-local sexual identity culture of the city in which we conducted our research, which is Padua (Brown-Saracino 2018). This city, the history of which will be detailed later on, hosts about 200,000 inhabitants and is located in the North-East of Italy.

The different urban spaces in which we conducted our ethnographic research included a LGBTQ+ friendly club called *Free Spirits* (a pseudonym), which we categorised as a recreational space, and the headquarters of *Arcigay Tralaltro Padova*, a local political association fighting for LGBTQ+ rights, which we defined as a political space. We argue that an urban space, especially a political one, can play a positive role in the perception of a sense of identity, community, and security for its attendants thanks to its social function. On the one hand, this space allows for the creation of solid bonds inside a safe place; on the other hand, the history of the space makes it a point of reference for the local LGBTQ+ community. As far as the recreational space is concerned, this positive role has been observed only for the identity dimension; the roles of community and security did not seem to manifest clearly in the club space.

While the description and the history of these spaces will be detailed later through the results of our fieldwork, at this point of our analysis it is useful to consider what is their relevance for our research. The choice of the two urban spaces we analysed was informed by the notion of spatial plurality proposed by Ghaziani (2019; see also Myrdahl 2016), who invites scholars to consider LGBTQ+ urban spaces that go beyond the ones traditionally explored by research, such as gayborhoods and gay bars, and to move away from big megalopolises which have been the main focus of urban sociology research on LGBTQ+

community. This is done to avoid the risk of producing an “incomplete and distorted understanding about how queer people interact with the city” (Ghaziani 2019, 16). Thus, we decided to take into consideration the existence of a broad range of LGBTQ+ urban spaces (Myrdahl 2016). As well, we address the fact that little attention has been spent on political associations involved in the promotion of LGBTQ+ rights.

As noted in Bain and Podmore, “significant scope exists for scholars to shift analytic focus away from sexual territoriality, consumption, leisure and encounter in cities to better attend to the urban political” (2021a, 1308). By analysing Arcigay, its history, and the ways in which LGBTQ+ people experience its headquarters, we aimed to address this recommendation. Thus, by focusing on the urban experience of LGBTQ+ people involved in a political association, we contribute to the development of the marginal stream of literature which deals with political LGBTQ+ urban spaces. For example, Monro (2010) limited her focus on the institutional body of the city, while Currans (2021) only considered the urban experience of the organisers of a protest march and not on ordinary members of the association behind it.

Therefore, our research offers an important contribution to the field of urban sociology by investigating the urban experience of members of the LGBTQ+ community in an Italian city. First, we believe that our work enriches still marginal Italian sociological research on the urban LGBTQ+ geography. Second, by investigating a medium-sized European city and by adopting an intersectional viewpoint, which informed our selection of a heterogeneous sample, we offer a representation of the LGBTQ+ community that goes beyond the traditional models provided by urban sociologists over the last few decades. Last, our analysis shows that variations exist in the ways in which different LGBTQ+ urban spaces shape the perception of a sense of identity, community, and security, based on their social function and their history.

LGBTQ+ urban spaces: recent trends of analysis

The importance of urban spaces exclusively reserved for the LGBTQ+ community emerged in Western countries in the 19th century (De Leo 2021); the existence of clubs and neighbourhoods populated by LGBTQ+ people allowed this minority to find a sense of identity, community, and security. Indeed, these urban spaces allowed their inhabitants and patrons to express themselves without being stigmatised and to experience community-building processes (Bain and Podmore 2021b; Ghaziani 2014). Over the past few decades, scholars developed the notion of the ‘gayborhood’ (Castells 1983; Chauncey 1994). The term offers a unique insight on the role played by urban spaces in shaping feelings of identity, community, and security. This notion describes the emergence of exclusive ‘rainbow spaces’ defined by a high residential density of LGBTQ+ people and by the presence of businesses providing LGBTQ+-centric leisure opportunities and nightlife activities.

More recent works demonstrate that these early studies show several limitations which have led scholars to explore the notion of spatial plurality. Starting from the consideration that the gayborhood is “only one [possible] expression of urban sexualities”, alternative models have been elaborated (Ghaziani 2019, 15). Gayborhoods appear to be a “non-intersectional landscape” (Haritaworn 2015, 43; Gieseking 2020). Indeed, these early studies often only consider the urban experience of white, gay and cisgender men. Contemporary studies adopt the notion of intersectionality which takes into account previously neglected subjectivities (Forstie 2020). We followed this trend by selecting a sample as inclusive as possible based on the heterogeneity of the Paduan LGBTQ+ population.

Some interesting alternatives to the gayborhood model have been proposed by scholars who focused on the urban experience of underrepresented LGBTQ+ subjectivities, especially lesbian and queer people, and whose forms of territoriality are not always defined by residential concentration (Ghaziani 2019;

Giesecking 2020). We think that these analyses of urban experiences of fragmentation and territorial dispersion can offer useful insights in addressing Italian LGBTQ+ urban spaces since, in the case of Italy, it is not possible to apply the gayborhood model (Monaco 2019). Indeed, it is not possible to find urban areas with a high concentration of residential buildings or leisure activities which are lived and crossed exclusively by LGBTQ+ people (Corbisiero and Monaco 2021). Another important contribution offered by these alternative models is their insight on the relationship between urban spaces and their population, showing the importance of considering LGBTQ+ people's perceptions and interactions with specific places. In particular, Giesecking (2020) speaks of queer urban constellations which are defined by the use and the perception of the urban space by lesbian and queer people. These constellations refer to the perception of LGBTQ+ urban spaces which are fragmented and scattered across the city. Thus they "queer fixed, property-owned, neighbourhood-based models of traditional LGBTQ+[+] space as the primary spatial models" for queer and lesbian urban experiences (Giesecking 2020, 942). We think that this notion helps us to look at how people are shaped by specific urban spaces in developing a sense of identity, community, and security.

Another important limit of the research on gayborhoods lays in the fact that these works are affected by what Halberstam (2005) calls "metronormativity." That is, the tendency to display an intrinsic relation between LGBTQ+ life experiences and the big city, thus neglecting middle-sized or small-sized spaces (Forstie 2020). Indeed, these studies were often conducted in big metropolises. In recent years, studies which focus their attention on small-medium cities, intended as environments in which to analyse sexual and gender heterogeneity, are flourishing (Myrdahl 2016; Stone 2018; Brown 2019; Mattson 2020; Forstie 2020; Branton 2021; Jubany et al. 2021; Ghaziani 2021; Bain and Podmore 2021a). Research in small cities allows scholars to explore identity and community-making processes regarding LGBTQ+ people in new ways like we intend to do in this research. Indeed, considering LGBTQ+ place-making in

small towns "in their own terms" makes it possible to "expand our understanding of how queer lives are produced, negotiated, and experienced" (Myrdahl 2013, 298). This is one of the main reasons why we decided to focus our ethnographic research on Padua, an Italian medium-sized city.

The Italian and Paduan context

As mentioned above, in Italy, a concentration of rainbow areas, which would allow scholars to apply the notion of gayborhood has never existed (Monaco 2019; Corbisiero and Monaco 2021); LGBTQ+ communities are usually not very numerous and are constituted not by residential formations, but by heterogeneous groups of individuals that frequent the few existing LGBTQ+ recreational and associative spaces on specific city streets. Another element that marks the Italian rainbow landscape is the strong commitment of some local administrations in remedying the central state's lack of action and in implementing and enforcing legal protection and services for the LGBTQ+ community in cooperation with local associations and civil society. This peculiarity of Italian LGBTQ+ geography can be epitomized by the notion of "rainbow city," elaborated by Corbisiero and Monaco (2017; 2021). The important role played by some local administrations in promoting LGBTQ+ rights has led to the emergence of some differences in the integration of the LGBTQ+ community on a territorial level. This is the reason why we believe that studying the life and experiences of Italian LGBTQ+ people in an urban context is particularly relevant.

The city of Padua, even if medium-sized, plays a significant role in the Italian landscape. Indeed, Padua sees a strong cooperation between the local administration and some local LGBTQ+ associations, Arcigay for example. This cooperation is favoured by a relatively open position of the local church towards LGBTQ+ issues; a phenomenon which cannot be taken for granted in a city located in a region with a strong presence of Catholics and home to an important cathedral. The commitment of the local administration in offering legal protections to the Paduan LGBTQ+ community started from the dialogue between the community and political institutions during the

organisation of *PadovaPride2002*. This event was a national Pride parade, the promoter of which was Alessandro Zan, the then president of the local section of Arcigay. This dialogue intensified in the following years when Zan became a council member and in 2007 led Padua to become the first Italian city to guarantee a registry recognition as “family founded on affective links” to all *de facto* couples, both heterosexual and homosexual. It should be noted that this council ruling came almost ten years before the national law that recognized the right of homosexual couples to celebrate their union through a civil partnership (law n. 76, 20th May 2016).

In the following years, legal protections and services offered by the local administration to LGBTQ+ people and associations increased. Here follows a list of some noteworthy initiatives: the patronage to the annual Padova Pride Village since 2011, the creation of a rainbow sidewalk in front of Arcigay headquarters for representing the Pride parade during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019, and the win of a Ministerial announcement for the realisation of an anti-discrimination centre in 2021. The latter of which has been entitled to Mariasilvia Spolato, who originated from Padua and was the first Italian woman to publicly come out as lesbian in the 1970s.

Methodology and Research Design

We decided to conduct our research work in the city of Padua because we thought its urban context could answer our research question better than others. First, Padua attracts many members of the LGBTQ+ community and has a relevant rainbow history. Second, Padua respects our will to study the LGBTQ+ geography of a small-medium city. The choice of the spaces we studied was based on the necessity of analysing urban spaces which are perceived as relevant by the Paduan LGBTQ+ community. We wanted to respect the necessity of our comparative research to identify two LGBTQ+ friendly spaces with different social functions so we decided to focus our analysis on the members of a LGBTQ+ political association and on the customers of a LGBTQ+ friendly club.

Regarding the choice of the LGBTQ+ political space, we wanted to find a political association that was related to our research question, that was active in the Paduan territory and that was internally heterogeneous. This was done to address the notion of intersectionality in the selection of our sample. The association which fitted these criteria the best was the social club Arcigay Tralaltro Padua. Regarding the choice of the recreational space, we looked for an openly LGBTQ+ friendly club that was not dedicated to cruising activities, in which we did not want to get involved. The word “cruising”, which is related to gay slang, refers to “wandering around public spaces [...] looking for occasional sexual intercourses to consume on the spot”, usually without exchange of money (Arfini & Lo Iacono 2012, 329-330; see also Muñoz 2019). Our choice fell on Free Spirits, which was the only club fitting the above-mentioned criteria. We also made sure to choose two spaces located in two different areas of Padua in order to reinforce our comparative analysis. Indeed, while Arcigay is situated in the very centre of the city, Free Spirits is located in the municipal suburbs.

Following Myrdahl’s recommendation to consider “LGB[T]Q[+] lives and queer place-making in small cities on their own terms,” we adopted an ethnographic approach in our analysis (Myrdahl 2013, 285). We thus relied on participant observation and on qualitative interviews. The main instrument through which we conducted our research was the qualitative interview, aiming at accessing the interviewed subjects’ perspectives and ideas and at getting an insight on their feelings of identity, community, and security (Kvale 2007; La Mendola 2009; Lamont and Swidler 2014). In line with previous research, we chose the semi-structured interview for data collection. We relied on a common script with a double function. On one hand, we wanted to allow for some degree of flexibility to freely develop topics which arose during the interview, even if not present in the original script; on the other hand, we wanted to limit our subjectivity as researchers in relating with the interviewees using a pre-decided outline that was common to all of us.

The demographic of our sample, which was composed of 25 people, was mainly based on

the willingness of representing different subjectivities within the LGBTQ+ community to go beyond the tendency in the sociological literature to focus almost exclusively on gay and cisgender men (Jubany et al. 2021). To do so, we took into account some variables to have the maximum possible degree of heterogeneity; in addition to belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, we looked at differences in age, social identity and experiences, and gender expression. It has to be noted that, in relation to participants' gender identity, we decided not to ask the interviewees about this topic. In the same way, we chose not to investigate sexual and relational orientation as we considered them excessively personal issues and, above all, we did not want to put someone in the position of having to come out forcibly in front of us. Further references to these components of the sexual identity of our sample in this research respect the self-determination of our interviewees.

Considering the dimension of age, we wanted to reach a transgenerational sample, especially inside the political association. Indeed, many scholars refer to the importance of including age in an intersectional analysis of LGBTQ+ urban spaces (Moore 2015; Bain and Podmore 2021b). Dealing with a transgenerational sample allows for the understanding of the historical development of these spaces and of local activism. In this case, considering a wide age spectrum contributed to our understanding of how the historical relevance of a particular urban space can influence the perception of a sense of identity, community, and security for LGBTQ+ people. Arcigay helped us in reaching a transgenerational sample since the association divides its members by age through the creation of a Youth Group and a Senior Group.

In the first stages of our work, we contacted one person directly involved in the Arcigay Tralaltro Padova association who was one of its former vice presidents. They acted as an informant, putting us in contact with two privileged witnesses of our research: the then president of Arcigay (hereinafter president) and one of the owners of the Free Spirits club. In this way, through snowball sampling, we succeeded in obtaining a high number of our interviewed individuals. Concerning the

collection of our sample in the Arcigay association, the recruitment was made through the coordinators of the groups we analysed. Achieving the number of interviews we wanted at Free Spirits was more complicated. We recruited interviewees mainly during our participant observations at the club. To ensure we spoke to people that do not define themselves as regular patrons, we also used some social media of University of Padua students to contact members of the LGBTQ+ community, checking that they had been to the club or the association at least once. Our participant observation was conducted from October to December 2021, while our interviews were carried out from November to December of the same year. Due to the worsening of the Covid-19 pandemic taking place in Padua in the period of our study, some of our interviews and all the meetings of Arcigay in which we took part were held online, through the Zoom platform (Howlett 2021). For conducting these interviews, we adopted the Video Mediated Interview technique (VMI). Thus, the overall conditions under which we carried out our research work have led us to adopt the model of *hybrid ethnography* theorised by Przybylski (2021).

During our participant observation, we aimed at being perceived as discreet and trustworthy by our observed population in order to become familiar with the social context we were studying without making our sample feel uncomfortable. Indeed, our positionality differed from the ones of our participants; at the time of our research, two of us did not belong to the LGBTQ+ community, while a third researcher was only partially out of the closet. Still, we were welcomed in the spaces we analysed. For example, both the staff members of the club and some coordinators of the Youth Group of Arcigay often greeted us when they saw us at their events and asked us how our research was going. This perception of being welcomed helped us in conducting our research by making us feel at ease and by giving us the opportunity to obtain some feedback on our research work by privileged witnesses. This was more difficult in the case of Arcigay since we had to face the limitations on the interactions with our sample that are proper of online platforms. This did not allow us to have the

same kind of direct contact that we experienced with the staff of the club Free Spirits.

Arcigay Tralaltro Padova: A Political Space

History

Arcigay is the main Italian LGBTQ+ association. It was born in Palermo in 1980, two months after the so-called Giarre murder which led to the tragic death of two young gay lovers. The founder of the first headquarters of the association was Don Marco Bisceglia, a non-conformist Catholic priest who fought for the rights of homosexual people. Bisceglia promoted cooperation between the local homosexual radical movement, *FUORI!*, and the local branch of *Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana* (ARCI), a national cultural association linked to the Italian communist party. This led to the creation of Arcigay. In the following years, other local branches were formed in various Italian cities, including Padua.

The main aim of these political entities was to create a new activist project for the Italian LGBTQ+ community. In some cases, this allowed militants to get closer to leftist parties, such as the communist party. In other cases, it contributed to building a militant project intended to promote cultural interventions targeting civil society (Prearo 2015). Another important aim of Arcigay was to build and maintain a significant profile at a national level, allowing for the creation of a political and cultural space shared by local LGBTQ+ associations and movements. This process led to an institutionalisation of the Italian homosexual movement. Over the years, Arcigay organised many national congresses that aimed to present several legal proposals regarding LGBTQ+ rights to the Italian Parliament. It also organised numerous pride parades (the one organised in Rome in 1994 can be considered the first mass demonstration promoting LGBTQ+ rights ever held in Italy) as well as various national demonstrations. In the present day, there are more than thirty political and cultural branches of Arcigay across the country.

A local branch of Arcigay was created in Padua in 1985, under the name Arcigay Tralaltro Padova. In this beginning period, Arcigay included exclusively homosexual and

cisgender men since lesbian women met in a different association. As the president, who has been in the association for more than twenty years, told us, the Paduan LGBTQ+ community has changed a great deal over the last decades,

when I had just arrived, Arcigay was a *club della salsiccia* [a sausage party], we were only men [...]. When we arrived, only gays and lesbians existed, trans people were of an unknown planet, bisexuals [were] a sort of chimeras. We did not talk about intersectional topics, not at all, and HIV was an illness that, more or less spread, was still mortal... so it was a completely different world.

In 2006, the local administration assigned to Arcigay Tralaltro Padova its present main offices, located in the city centre. The last two floors of the building are reserved for Arcigay. Outside the building, it is possible to see rainbow flags and banners, which are very visible to the surrounding city area. This shows how Arcigay main offices have a strong symbolic presence in Padua, as the president stated, “over time, [it] has become a place which is recognised as a Paduan LGBT+ landmark. It is a bit like, I make a parallel, what the Cassero in Bologna was when I was twenty.” The *Cassero di Bologna* is a highly symbolic place for the Italian LGBTQ+ community. In 1980, it was the first urban space in Italy to be granted by a municipal administration to an LGBTQ+ association and it then became the national headquarters of Arcigay.

The present headquarters allow Arcigay to maintain the political importance in the city it aspires to have and to grow and expand, reflecting the changes which take place in the Paduan LGBTQ+ community characterised by the emergence of multiple, fluid identities. To quote again the president, “Arcigay has changed because the community it refers to has changed.” People who identify as a great variety of sexual and relational orientations and gender identities have recently joined the social club. The average age of people that attend the Youth Group, which at first was over 30, has decreased considerably, and a Senior Group was also created for people over 50 years old. The topics discussed in the social club have changed as well, becoming increasingly

intersectional. During our participant observation, we noticed that, even though Arcigay has a strong link with local political institutions, it remains independent in the choice of the topics discussed and often hosts queer and radical voices from the Italian panorama, encouraging debate and welcoming people with different opinions.

Youth and Senior Group

A part of our research took place within the Arcigay Youth Group which is dedicated to the discussion of LGBTQ+ related topics amongst people between 16 and 30 years old. The Youth Group meetings, taking place once a week, are free and, during our observation period, were held exclusively online. The topics discussed during the meetings were very different (trans* identity, chemsex, fatphobia, queer clubbing) and reflected an increasingly fluid community that looks at the world through an intersectional approach. The observed community was relatively small, between 15 and 20 people; we were told that participation decreased in the online meetings.

The coordinators of the group explicitly asked us to be very discreet in our observations such that participants would not feel uncomfortable or judged by our presence. They also asked us to produce a document in which we detailed the scope and methodology of our research project. They then sent this document to the other members of the group, who agreed to allow us into their safe space. We think that this special attention demonstrated by the coordinators of the group shows the commitment of all the members in creating a protected and safe environment. This request to be discreet and respectful towards the members of the group is the reason why we often turned our camera off during their Zoom meetings. As we wrote in our field notes, “we did not want to expose ourselves too much, knowing that the members of the group would have probably seen us as outsiders” and may have felt threatened by our presence.

The other part of our research was carried out in the Senior Group. 25 people are members of this group, plus 8 others who prefer not to join the group publicly and who, for this reason, are contacted privately by the coordinators. This data is quite interesting

since, as one coordinator told us, the Paduan Senior Group of Arcigay is the most numerous on a national level. Unlike the Youth Group, it was not possible for us to take part in the group meetings and to conduct our participant observation, not even on Zoom. This was for two main reasons: first, the Senior Group meetings took place only once a month. Second, some participants preferred not to out themselves in front of people coming from outside the group. However, the coordinators were very friendly with us and helped us to get in contact with our interviewees from the group privately.

We noticed that contact between the Youth and Senior Group is quite limited, both because of the age gap and for logistical reasons. Due to the restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the room that would have been used for shared activities, such as movie projections, was not large enough for both groups together. Another reason for this lack of shared experiences between the two groups could be found in the different needs that lie behind the participation of their members. During our research, we observed that people attending the Youth Group are looking for a community in which they can investigate and develop their own identity, while the members of the Senior Group already have a fixed identity that has been seen as “problematic” by their surrounding society and thus are looking for a community in which they can express themselves freely. Some differences between Senior Group and Youth Group members, concerning the perception of the three dimensions of identity, community, and security emerged during the interviews, though, overall, their opinions seem to move in the same direction.

Identity

From the analysis of the collected data, it is possible to confirm that individuals taking part in both the Youth Group and the Senior Group, whether regular members or occasional attendants, believe that Arcigay contributes to the definition and affirmation of their identity. All of the participants we interviewed stated that they feel welcomed, included, and free to express themselves in the social club and many people added that Arcigay has played a

fundamental role in their personal growth. For example, one person we interviewed told us that, "I have learnt more in Arcigay than at university. In some ways, at the university I would do theory and there I would [put that into] practice." Both the educational aim and the members' heterogeneity allowed for contact amongst very different people, fostering this personal growth. This can lead to various aspects of personal enrichment, "for example, learning to refer to people with the correct pronouns," as a coordinator told us.

It can be said that the opportunity to define one's identity that we observed inside the group is supported by the presence of a particular subculture which allows the association to be perceived as a safe place in which people can feel free to express themselves and share personal thoughts and experiences (Brown-Saracino 2015). This is something that we also perceived during our participant observation. Indeed, in our field notes, we described Arcigay as "a safe place open to discussion, where a non-violent communication and an inclusive language are used." In addition, this space allows people to express themselves freely in other contexts; thanks to the group experience, some Senior Group members were able to come out to friends and relatives and were encouraging of their fellow participants to do the same.

Community

The existence of a strong community feeling in the Youth Group emerges in a clear way, as is testified by the fact that regular members usually establish bonds that develop outside the association and become lasting relationships or friendships. Indeed, according to many interviewees, one of the needs that pushes people to become involved in Arcigay is "finding a home, a sense of belonging, creating a network." The existence of this strong community feeling is impacted by various factors. Primarily, the number of people that attend the Youth Group is small and they share similar interests. Furthermore, meetings include informal moments during which people can chat and get to know each other and even make friends. Before the beginning of each meeting, we observed very informal and friendly conversations amongst participants

who seemed to be very close and spontaneous while chatting and making jokes about various topics from haircuts to pronouns. We perceived a strong harmony and spontaneity amongst some members of the group. Especially at the beginning of our fieldwork, this made us feel a bit out-of-place as we felt that we were not part of their close network and we did not understand their inside jokes. However, as we said before, we soon felt welcomed in their meetings, even if we always kept some distance to be discreet as we were asked to be.

Some interviewees told us that, at the end of formal, in-person meetings, group members could stay in the social club headquarters to eat a pizza together. Many people interviewed highlighted the importance of this 'pizza moment,' which is seen as a fundamental occasion of sharing, discussion, and socialisation and that can be interpreted as a form of conviviality (Neal et al. 2019; Morelli 2019). A coeliac person told us, "I cannot eat pizza, but I stay anyway [...] just to chat." This reinforces the importance of the physical place of the Arcigay offices in building a sense of community amongst the local LGBTQ+ community. Indeed, many interviewees, when asked to describe Arcigay Tralaltro social club, used words such as "home," "family," and "friends."

Things are quite different for members of the Senior Group, who stated that their friendships are mostly located outside the group. However, they all told us that they contacted Arcigay for the first time with the hope of finding a community of people who had experienced a sense of loss and loneliness in a society that made them feel "wrong." Despite their friendships being located outside the group, we had the impression that the group is closely connected. This impression was confirmed when they told us that during lockdowns the group felt the need to meet online to hold the usual monthly meetings to alleviate the difficult experience of lockdowns and other restrictions.

Security

Some of the members of the Senior Group describe the association as a reference point for all the Paduan LGBTQ+ community members, "for any discrimination, you can go

through Arcigay to be defended.” This shows how the Arcigay headquarters is perceived unanimously as a safe place; one person interviewed described it as “another world, [...] a bubble of maximum security.” This holds only for inside the building, as we collected discordant opinions regarding the surrounding area from both groups. Some people, especially the coordinators, who have the keys to the social club, told us that they feel safe in the proximity of the building. For example, one of them reported feeling “reassured as next to my home’s door, because I know that I would have a shelter” if needed, while another participant added that the headquarters “has always emanated security for me.” In contrast, other people, especially those who identify as male, said they felt just as safe as in any other city area. Some interviewees highlighted the fact that the building is located in an area under heavy surveillance. This area is the monumental area of Padua and is quite crowded, being next to a big crossroad and to a public garden. Other people, especially those who identify as female, said they felt a bit unsafe outside the social club’s offices, especially at night since the building is close to the railway station, which is perceived as a dangerous urban area.

Free Spirits: a recreational space

History

Free Spirits is a club characterised by its openness towards the LGBTQ+ community and it was described by an interviewee as “a mix between a bar and a disco.” The following is a brief description of the club based on the notes we collected during our participant observation,

There is an area with sofas, then the bathrooms, that are supervised by a bodyguard, an area with tables, the bar counter behind which 5 or 6 bartenders work tirelessly and then the dance floor, with a small stage and the DJ console. The lights are dim, but it's not too dark. The furniture is very sober, it has simple lines and is in the colours of black and brown.

Once located in a central area of Padua, the club moved close to the suburbs in 2017 in order to facilitate parking for customers, to lower rental costs, and, with a closing time of

4AM, to be able to play loud music until late at night without disturbing anyone. In 2020, there was a change in the management of the club and the previous owners left control to the two current partners. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the consequent harsh lockdown imposed by the Italian government, the business went through a period of difficulty. From which, it has recovered as the pandemic situation improved; the number of customers increased with new patrons coming from all over the North-East of Italy. This trend seems to confirm what was stated by Miles et al. (2021) who had predicted a recovery in the attendance of LGBTQ+ spaces after months of lockdown and restrictions.

Our participant observation mainly occurred on Friday and Saturday nights which are the busiest nights for the club and in which special guests, such as DJs and drag queens, are hosted. We attended three of these events during which we tried not to reveal our identity as researchers and to blend with the clientele of the club, dancing and drinking and having fun with them. We would reveal ourselves as researchers only in the moment when we would ask a person to be interviewed in the following days. During this time, we made friends with a lesbian girl who helped us to become part of the social environment of the club and feel integrated.

During our participant observation, we examined how people who attend the club are very heterogeneous from different points of view: we met people of different ages, ranging from 16 to 50, and different gender expressions. This great heterogeneity may derive from the fact that Free Spirits is the only explicitly LGBTQ+ friendly club in Padua that is not dedicated to cruising activities. But beyond this, another important reason could be the fact that the club attracts people from a vast geographical area which extends past the city of Padua. As an interviewee told us, Free Spirits is “the only space in the whole North-East [of Italy], the only urban space in which an actual LGBTQ+ integration has developed.” The relevance of the club for the local and non-local LGBTQ+ community was confirmed to us by an unexpected meeting which occurred during our fieldwork. Indeed, one Saturday night we met at the club Alessandro Zan, the above-mentioned ex-president of Arcigay Tralaltro Padova and

one of the most influential Italian deputies who is fighting for the recognition of LGBTQ+ rights.

During our observations we also noted that, compared to what normally happens in a heterosexual disco, people seem less invasive and more respectful of other people's personal space at Free Spirits. Unlike what was described in Branton and Compton (2021), who reported aggressive flirting which was considered normal in the club that was the object of their research, patrons of Free Spirit did not do this. While we did see several people kiss and dance in an explicit manner, they never invaded other people's personal space. Still, it has to be noted that Free Spirit is not without issues. As we observed, both us and other patrons were victims and witnesses of episodes of sexual harassment.

Identity

The interviewees stated that they felt comfortable inside the club, being able to express themselves freely and feeling welcomed and accepted. For example, some male-identifying interviewees reported feeling free while dancing in ways defined as "feminine," which, in other clubs, could generate violent reactions from the other customers. In particular, it was highlighted that the chance of coming into contact with other people belonging to the LGBTQ+ community allowed them to understand that they were not alone and that they could feel free to experiment, especially with more experienced people. We believe that it is important to highlight the topic of freedom found in Free Spirits which is a cornerstone for the Italian clubbing culture (*Disco Ruin* 2020). Indeed, the club is perceived as an environment where everyone can express themselves freely regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, political opinion, or any other definers. This sentiment was shared in many of the interviews we collected. This seems congruent with the evolution of the LGBTQ+ community that populates the city of Padua which is made up of increasingly fluid identities that are hard to fit into pre-established categories.

It is interesting to observe how interviewees of older generations notice more freedom of expression in modern teenagers and young adults compared to when they were younger.

Because of oppressive social narratives that they still carry within themselves, older generations find it hard to enjoy such freedoms themselves. An older couple interviewed said, "we have been together for more than twenty years and we have never held our hands in public, you never know who is around." A sentiment that is emblematic of this transgenerational difference.

Community

In general, the interviewees do not relate exclusively to contacts created inside the club. Rather, they have an outside social network. Some people go to the club with their group of friends while others cannot do so because their friends may not know that they belong to the LGBTQ+ community. Differently from what we observed in Arcigay, the club is not described as a place in which you can develop a strong sense of community. For example, some people describe it as a place where you can have fun with contacts previously developed outside the club, whether through dating apps, school, or other means.

The data we collected is discordant about the existence of a sense of community at Free Spirits. Some people told us they perceived the club as an LGBTQ+ friendly environment, feeling a sense of belonging that is due to the certainty of finding akin individuals who share a particular subculture. According to one interviewee, what is shared is "a certain kind of music, a certain way of dressing and of relating to each other," the desire to dance and drink together. Other people expressed some criticism on this point, stating that Free Spirits, even if presenting itself as LGBTQ+ friendly, is actually very similar to any other club in the city.

Security

Many interviewees told us they felt safer at Free Spirits than in other clubs, especially because they can approach people they are interested in without the fear of physical repercussions. They can assume that, even if the person approached is heterosexual, they would still be respectful and tolerant. Being in an LGBTQ+ friendly space in which everybody is welcome, regardless of their sexual orientation or other factors which are socially linked to discrimination, has been underlined many

times by the owners and bartenders during our interviews.

In contrast with Arcigay, Free Spirits is not perceived as a safe place by our whole sample. Indeed, people in the club, us included, were the victims or witnesses of episodes of sexual harassment. Acts which were often perpetrated by heterosexual men. Regarding this, a girl interviewed told us, “the less men are present, the more comfortable I feel.” Some interviewees observed not only sexual harassment, which has been experienced only by a subset of our sample, but also observed “a kind of symbolic violence, such as shaming or gossiping.” Furthermore, multiple people told us that they did not feel particularly safe in the proximity of Free Spirits which is located in the industrial area of the city, even if the presence of alike people and of the music outside the club increases their sense of security.

Conclusions

This research aimed to understand the role urban spaces play for members of the LGBTQ+ community in terms of their perception of a sense of identity, community, and security. Through a comparative approach, we investigated two spaces that have a different social function, one being political and the other recreational, analysing their different influence on our sample. The selection, as observation sites, of a recreational and a political space was made in order to take into consideration the existence of a broad range of LGBTQ+ urban spaces, in accordance with the notion of spatial plurality proposed by Ghaziani (2019).

The comparative approach allowed us to analyse the role played by the two urban spaces, focusing on their differences. We argue that the political space creates a stronger sense of identity, community, and security. This positive role of the political space is due to its social function, which allows for the creation of solid bonds inside what is perceived to be a safe place, and to its history, which makes it a point of reference for the city of Padua. Regarding its social function, which is linked with the organisation of political and cultural activities, Arcigay offers a space for discussion, socialisation, and sharing of common experiences. According to our sample, this

allows for the creation of a strong sense of identity and community. The presence of a subculture based on respect and non-violent communication as well as the efforts of the group coordinators for the creation of a safe and protected space are two conditions which can be linked to the functioning of an LGBTQ+ political space and contribute to shaping a high sense of security amongst attendants. This positive role played by Arcigay headquarters is reinforced by the symbolic meaning attached to this urban space based on its history and on its strong cooperation with the local municipality.

On the contrary, this positive role in the perception of the three dimensions of identity, community, and security has not been observed in Free Spirits. As a club, its recreational function primarily allows for the creation of a strong sense of identity, which relies on the opportunity to experience freedom of expressing oneself. As far as the other two analytical dimensions are concerned, we collected discordant opinions amongst our sample. We thus concluded that Free Spirits is not perceived as a safe space and does not contribute in a significant way to community-building processes.

Reflecting on further developments of our research, we think it is important to highlight the fact that relevant transgenerational differences have emerged within our sample. Future research could evolve in this sense, using a comparative approach to highlight the different perspectives on LGBTQ+ urban spaces by different generations. This could be particularly interesting when exploring a small-medium city with a relevant LGBTQ+ history, like Padua. To conclude, we argue that urban spaces play a fundamental role for members of the LGBTQ+ community in terms of their perception of a sense of identity, community, and security. In particular, this positive role is influenced by the social function and the history of these LGBTQ+ urban spaces.

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