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

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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 is 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;

Gieseking 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, Gieseking (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 (Gieseking 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 Padova. 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.

Acknowledgements

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Changing Identities of Indian Migrants in the West: Sanjana Sakhrani on Arranged Marriages

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to initiate a broader discussion concerning the identities of Indian migrants and their perceptions of arranged marriage. Through an oral testimony and a detailed life history of one interlocutor, my research explores my mother's marital experiences, including the involvement of her family, the arrangement of the marriage itself, and the challenges that come with adjusting to marital life. Within the framework of this topic, larger theoretical and cultural phenomena are addressed such as the role of immigration, acculturation, changing notions of individualism, and identity in relation to diaspora. Such topics shed light on how Indian marital practices and related societal perceptions of identity such as gender norms, are changing for Indian migrants.

Keywords: Arranged marriage, family, gender norms, acculturation, India

I was thirteen years old when I learned that my grandfather had what we colloquially call in India a 'love marriage.' This came as a surprise to me since I thought that everybody in my family had had their weddings arranged; my own parents' relationship was arranged. Typically, in Indian arranged marriages, parents select their child's future spouse based on their cultural background and "social and economic standing [...] there is little or no contact between the prospective spouses prior to marriage" (Allendorf and Pandian 2016, 435). In contrast, in Western marital customs, individuals traditionally select their own spouses "on the basis of compatibility or affection, usually gained through interactions before marriage" (Allendorf and Pandian 2016, 435). As such, my maternal grandparents' marriage reflected Western standards. This made me wonder why my mother had *chosen* an arranged marriage, despite her parents being more lenient regarding the matter. My mother's justification was that, as she put it, "I always wanted my parents to select [a] boy for me." As a second-generation Canadian, this made me question the values and beliefs behind Indian matrimonial practices and views on romantic relationships.

Allendorf and Pandian (2016) discuss that, although modernization theory had predicted the decline of arranged marriage in non-Western countries, India's current marital practices showcase that traditional values hold across the country (458). In addition, it appears that such matrimonial customs are prevalent even outside of India (Bhopal 2011; Pande 2016). This research therefore focuses on the experiences of those who *choose* an arranged marriage over a love marriage. More specifically, this paper looks at the case of my mother, Sanjana Sakhrani, whose overall

experience is — for lack of a better word — layered. Indeed, in addition to selecting an arranged marriage for herself despite having other options, her narrative showcases the multifaceted, overlapping perspectives of a daughter, a wife, and a mother.

My mother, Sanjana, was born in Mumbai, India, in 1971. Despite the fact that her parents had a love marriage and shared "a very good relationship," Sanjana's mother was quite "strict" and conservative about relationships. She believed in traditional Indian socio-centric norms, such as cultural endogamy, the practice of marrying within the same cultural group. My grandfather, on the other hand, has always been understanding and "liberal." As my mother articulates, "They both balanced off." I think that Sanjana's beliefs are in part a combination of both of her parents' mindsets and personalities. Moreover, she "always looked up to [them]." This resulted in Sanjana wanting her mother and father to arrange her marriage. Thus, at the age of 27, my mother got married in India. For the first few months after her wedding, she lived with her husband and mother-in-law, taking care of chores and her first-born daughter. In 2000, my parents decided to start a new life in Canada. Moving to a Western country, as well as the challenges that come with immigration and being an Indian woman, have certainly played a role in not only shaping Sanjana's marital life, but her principles as well. All of these factors are worth interpreting as they might shed light on not only my mother's identity, but potentially the overall shifting identities of Indians living in a Western setting.

The aim of this paper is to learn about the significance of an arranged marriage to my mother to obtain a sense of why this tradition, even amongst many families living outside of India, persists. While the practice of arranged marriage extends to multiple religions in India, this paper specifically focuses on Hindus given that my mother comes from a Hindu family. Furthermore, my research aims to dismantle ongoing stereotypes associated with this tradition. One such stereotype comes from my own past biases, such as the idea that arranged marriages are regressive. This misconception is also promoted in the recent reality television series *Indian Matchmaking* on *Netflix*. For

instance, it portrays arranged marriage as an outdated practice in which astrology is more influential than the agency of the individuals involved in the arrangement of the marriage. More importantly, however, are the gender stereotypes depicted in Indian society, despite changing values in recent decades. One such example from the series is the idea of discouraging women from pursuing their goals and dreams in order to find a suitable partner. Ankita, a young fashion entrepreneur, was advised by a middle-aged matchmaker to prioritize marriage over her career. While the stigma surrounding single women is a common issue in patriarchal countries, Indian women's priorities have changed, especially when considering the increase in female literacy rates in India in recent years (Chandra 2019, 3). Ankita was open to having an arranged marriage, but her leaving the show indicates that modern values like hers no longer align with the old marital customs depicted in *Indian Matchmaking*. Times have changed, resulting in the standards within arranged marriages changing as well. Indeed, arranged marriages can be quite elastic, especially when considering the families' individual experiences and values.

This example showcases the shift in Indian marital trends in recent decades. Ethnographic research allows for people to share their different and unique marital experiences which adds to the discussion surrounding Indian arranged marriages. Therefore, my paper specifically addresses arranged marriage in Western countries. Most researchers focus on people living in India, where societal norms and values differ from Western societies. Recent studies have looked at the cultural values that shape the experience of pre-marital relationships in modern India (Bhandari 2017), the reasons why many young Indian students choose an arranged marriage (Nanda 2015), and three main factors, family, faith, and happiness, that contribute to the experience of arranged relationships amongst Indians living in India (Bowman and Dollahite 2013). My mother's story, however, provides a different perspective on arranged marriages which highlights how diasporic identities are shaped by processes of migration and acculturation. Therefore, this research introduces readers to a

female immigrant's perspective on arranged marriages.

Through my oral history research, this paper will explore the importance of family involvement in matrimonial practices, the arrangement of Sanjana's marriage, and the challenges that come with adjusting to a new life in Canada. One of the reasons why life history research was chosen for this paper is because it reflects "a specific set of values and aspirations" (Goodson and Gill 2011, 42) on the interviewee's part. In effect, an individual's past experiences contribute to the shaping of their social imagination. This phenomenon, combined with our current lived realities and expectations for the future, becomes an ongoing process, which "involves…the co-construction of meaning and a re-constitution of selfhood" (Goodson and Gill 2011, 42). This, in turn, is what shapes a person's values and hopes. Such phenomena were articulated by my mother when telling her story. Both her principles and experience have shaped her identity, which may also reflect the contemporary identities of other Indian migrants. Overall, Sanjana's narrative is only one of the many untold stories of arranged marriages that may contribute to clarifying misconceptions about the practice and enlightening readers on why numerous Indians choose arranged marriages.

Marital Trends and Changing Practices

Despite India's shifting notions of marriage, gender, and family, changes in marital practices have been quite slow, meaning that the majority are still arranged (Allendorf and Pandian 2016, 459). Yet, when looking at national trends, Allendorf and Pandian (2016) showcase the increasing choice women have when it comes to marriage. Indeed, "the increasingly dominant pattern [is] for both parents and daughters to be involved in the selection" (Allendorf and Pandian 2016, 443). Despite such changes and the rise of the importance of "love [and] interpersonal compatibility" (Allendorf and Pandian 2016, 435) between man and woman in recent years, love marriages are not nearly as popular as arranged marriages with love marriages

constituting only six percent of all marriages in India (Allendorf and Pandian 2016, 444). Inter-caste marriages are also less common, and similar to the rates of arranged marriages also account for only six percent of all marital relationships (Allendorf and Pandian 2016, 444). Despite this shift in marital practices, these numbers indicate that India still "express[es] the most contractualistic value-orientations" (Theodorson 1965, 24). As a matter of fact, in their study, Srinivasan and James (2015, 4) highlight that the "religio-caste variable has the most effect on Hindus" and holds more importance than "achieved variables such as place of residence, education, and wealth." In effect, 85% of Hindus marry within the same religion (Srinivasan and James 2015, 5). Even today, most people view inter-caste and inter-religious marriages as socially unacceptable. The preference for marriages within the same caste and religion is mainly linked to their "economic and emotional benefits" (Srinivasan and James 2015, 5). Therefore, "the stability of the institution of marriage in India [is rooted] in religion, caste, and the high social and economic costs of marital breakdown" (Srinivasan and James 2015, 6). My own mother's experience is reflective of this. Despite the increasing flexibility of arranged marriages over the years, my research shows that such principles are still prevalent amongst the younger generations of Indians.

Although traditional marital practices are shifting slowly, the changes thus far have been quite significant, especially when considering the trends among various Indian diasporas. For instance, Raksha Pande's (2015) research explores the beliefs and experiences of first and second-generation Indo-British which posits marriages have become "increasingly flexible" (383). Indeed, the spectrum of arranged marriage includes four trends: traditional, semi-arranged, love-cum, and arranged weddings. Traditional arranged marriages do not allow acquaintanceship before the wedding. Semi-arranged marriages involve the parents and the child jointly selecting a potential spouse and allowing the couple to court before the wedding. Love-cum arranged marriages consist of self-selecting a spouse and then seeking parental approval.

Finally, in arranged weddings, the only role parents have is planning the wedding ceremony. Pande's (2015) research shows that the two former types of marriages were more common among the first-generation Indo-British. The latter two practices were more popular among the second-generation Indo-British (Pande 2015, 388-390). As for my own parents, their marriage can be described as semi-arranged.

What differentiates all these types of marriage are the level of parents' involvement and the degree of freedom the children have. However, these various degrees and levels of arrangement in arranged marriages depend on the families' preferred practices as well as the children's own values and beliefs based on their cultural identity. The second-generation participants stated that no matter the choice they make regarding the type of marriage, parents' wishes are also important to consider. Such a perspective was reiterated in Parul Bhandari's (2017) research which highlights that pre-marital relationships among the youth of India, although based on emotional compatibility, also "abide by the moral framework set by the family" (3). Hence, both individual choice and parental influence guide the selection of a partner among participants from both studies. Pande (2016) notes that the second-generation participants also chose to incorporate "the demands of modernity such as the ideas of romantic love" in their practices, therefore embracing both tradition and modernity (394). Pande (2016) concludes that the Indo-British's modern identity could be described "as a progressive self but within the limits of religious and community boundaries" (395). Similar ideas are also reflected in Bhopal (2011) in which the highly educated Indo-British women are accepting of both the traditional practices of arranged marriage and the changes it has undergone in recent years, thus embracing both British and Indian norms. In the end, "whilst respondents were describing a change in interpersonal circumstances, they were also detailing a social structure in which the prioritisation of family and community capital remained important" (Bhopal 2011, 444).

Identity, then, is integral when it comes to the choices Indians make regarding marriage. While Srinivasan and James' (2015) research reveals more contractualistic practices among Indians living in India, the Indo-British interviewees in Pande (2016) and Bhopal (2011) incorporate both Indian and British values, showcasing the flexibility of arranged marriages. Therefore, one should consider how acculturation affects the identities of the various Indian diasporas and the choices they make. Pande (2016) is only one example of the fusion of different values and practices. In addition, the interviewees revealed how marital trends differ from one generation to another. Indeed, the first-generation Indo-British were associated with more traditional practices. Perhaps this has to do with the fact that they were born in India, where, unlike Britain, people often prioritize cultural endogamy and the fulfilment of their parent's wishes over individual desires. As for the second-generation participants who were born in Britain, Pande (2016) shows that their values aligned with Britain's individualist culture. However, because these participants grew up in an Indian family, their beliefs incorporated traditional Indian principles as well. The children therefore abide by a more acculturated perspective. As for the immigrant parents, the immediate thought might be that cultural values remain static amongst diasporic communities. In effect, first-generation immigrants, unlike their second-generation children, often have a harder time adopting the norms of their host country. This acculturation gap, also known as intergenerational cultural dissonance, can lead to family conflict, among other things (Kane et al. 2019). However, my paper looks at whether my mother, a first-generation Indo-Canadian, is open to bending her principles for the sake of her children, namely when it comes to marriage. Indeed, part of better comprehending the change in Indian arranged marriages is to explore whether parents are willing to adopt the acculturated values of their children.

Gender Norms

Despite the evolving trends' breaking of societal standards, one important thing to mention is that the practice of arranged marriage is still rooted in traditional gender norms (Santhiveeran 2005, 27). Because "Indian women tend to be valued by society in relation to their role in a family—as a wife, daughter-in-law, and mother" they face greater pressure (Srinivasan and James 2015, 5). As a result, Indian women are often controlled by their partners and in-laws (Raval 2009; Bhandari 2017). Unfortunately, in a society where "family pride is partly based on the conformity of the girls to family tradition and by the standards set by the family and the community," women are far from attaining gender equality in marital relationships (Santhiveeran 2005, 33). In sum, these gender norms are what defines a woman's status in society. India's socio-centric culture therefore also plays into marital customs, namely arranged marriages.

Methods

This paper was initially written for my research method class focused on family history, which is why I chose the topic of arranged marriages. Arranged marriages are very common in my family, and this research paper was an opportunity to provide further insight into what it means to have an arranged marriage. The aim of my research was to contribute to the scholarship of a specific historical topic, in this case, Indian arranged marriages, by capturing the unique life experience of a family member. Indeed, because this paper was written in the span of one college semester, I was asked to conduct my research with one family member only. While focusing on a single individual can be prone to overgeneralization, I made use of several forms of scholarly literature to draw parallels with my mother's experience to further the discussion on Indian arranged marriages outside of India.

My research involved interviewing my mother. Before undertaking my interview, she signed a consent form provided by my professor, which mentioned that her name and experience would be discussed for academic purposes. I also asked permission to use photographs. I made it known to her that she had the right to withdraw from the interview at any point in time. Throughout our discussion, I made sure to remain sensitive and respectful to mitigate any possibility of harm. Finally, I would

like to mention that I only interviewed my mother once, as instructed by my professor given the time constraint.

To learn more about my mother's experience, I conducted an in-depth semi-structured interview with open-ended questions. Not only did this allow my interviewee to produce "elaborated and detailed answers" but it also gave me the freedom to improvise some of the questions when interesting points were brought up during the conversation (Griffin 2013b, 186). I prepared about twenty questions beforehand. Some of them were inspired by my literature review, and others were more specific to my mother's case. These questions were asked chronologically; the first questions were mostly lighthearted and pertained to her life before marriage, such as "did you have a crush or boyfriend growing up?" whereas the latter questions, some of them being heavier, were more in relation to her marriage and her life after marriage, like "what was going through your mind on the day of your wedding?" I was also advised to ask questions pertaining to her regrets, achievements, and changes in perspective, which allowed me to get a sense of how my mother may feel towards her personal experiences. The interview was recorded and was almost ninety minutes long. I later listened to the recording and transcribed bits from our conversation, which were divided into three broad themes: family involvement in marriage, the arrangement of my mother's marriage, and her marital challenges. These were recurrent topics throughout the interview, which represent the key themes of my findings.

These subjects are discussed alongside my findings from the literature review. Bhandari (2017), Nanda (2015), and Bowman and Dollahite (2013) address the marital experiences of those living in India, whereas Bhopal (2011) and Pande (2016) discuss marriage amongst the Indo-British. These authors provide insightful information on contemporary Indian marital experiences and expectations and also provide a sense of how these aspects differ between the different diasporas. While there is abundant research on Indians living in India, there is not robust literature on Indians outside of India, especially in Western countries. Indeed, because my paper addresses the Indo-Canadian diaspora, the most relevant articles, ones that concerned Indians living in a more Western setting, were those of the Indo-British (eg. Bhopal 2011; Pande 2016). My mother's story, then, is a further contribution to the study of Indian arranged marriages and diasporic identity.

Oral history research and life history research were appropriate methods for discussing arranged marriages with my mother. Even though my research only focuses on one individual, a single life history can reveal a lot about the society in which the person lives. In effect, when it comes to oral research, the discourse is often invested, meaning that it "contributes to the (re)production of power relations in society and to the interpretive schema operating within a given society" (Griffin 2013a, 98). The subject of family involvement, for instance, reveals the significant and influential role of family within Indian society, including marriages. Indeed, my mother's consistent use of the words 'boy' and 'girl,' rather than 'man' and 'woman,' when speaking about future spouses, suggests the reinforcement of the parent-child dynamic in the context of her marriage arrangement. More importantly, the reason why an interview was more efficient for my research topic is because people have different experiences and perspectives on the matter. My mother's story itself is quite unique as it sheds light on her experience as a woman and migrant. Oral history is "therefore [...] necessary for a history of the non-hegemonic classes" (Portelli 1981, 104).

This leads me to address the ethnographic aspect of oral history. Both ethnographic fieldwork and oral history, while being separate fields, aim "to give voice to the voiceless" (Di Leonardo 1987, 3), or the unheard. In the context of ethnographic practices, however, interpreting oral history can be tricky. Contemporary ethnographic theorists are concerned with ethnographic authority, the idea that anthropologists have a "right to describe others' realities" (Di Leonardo 1987, 8). In order to conduct ethnographic research more ethically and efficiently, Di Leonardo (1987) highlights the importance of one's self-

consciousness, meaning being aware of one's preconceived notions, one's sense of unease when conducting ethnographic research, how one might affect what the interviewee says.

In this vein of self-reflexivity, the reason I selected the topic of arranged marriage is because I was unsure whether I opposed the practice or not. Most of my relatives have had an arranged marriage, but as a second-generation Indo-Canadian, I have long been confused about this custom. I always understood arranged marriage as something that was done strictly to please the family, namely through ensuring that parental requirements and expectations are met, and through maintaining endogamy, given that most of my own relatives married within the same ethnicity, religion, and caste. Given that India is a society wherein most women have no status without a husband, I perceived arranged marriages as an obligation, rather than a choice, imposed on women (Srinivasan and James 2015). While I have always cared about my family's happiness, when it comes to romantic relationships, I believe in prioritizing my own choices and happiness, which is why I viewed arranged marriage as being conservative and backwards. As a result, I have always been curious to know why my mother, whose parents shared some of the same values as me, selected an arranged marriage.

Knowing that my stance on arranged marriage could bias my research, I tried my best to keep an open mind and disassociate myself from my own views as well as my knowledge on the matter. The whole marital system in India is a socially complex phenomenon, with nuances and customs varying from one region to another. Things also become more complicated when considering the various factors that come into play: family, caste, religion, social benefits, gender norms, and so forth. In particular, when it comes to oral life history research, Di Leonardo (1987) emphasizes "the self-conscious analysis of the intersubjectivity of the interview" (20). One example she gives is how interviewees say different things to different interlocutors on the same topic, because of differing perceptions of social power, or other reasons (Di Leonardo 1987). In the case of my paper, Sanjana may

have been speaking to me as my mother. Her positionality and "complexity of social life" as a wife and daughter-in-law is also important to consider in the interpretation of our interview (Germeten 2013, 615). Being aware of such things allowed me to distance myself from my preconceived notions and better "grasp [my mother]'s point of view, [her] relation to life, to realize [*her*] vision of [*her*] world" (Malinowski 1922, 19), which in turn contributed to my understanding of shifting identities of Indians living outside of India.

Findings

During our interview, my mother addressed the role of her family in the arrangement of her marriage, the arrangement of the marriage itself, and the challenges she underwent throughout her marital life. By bringing up these topics, I gained an understanding of how immigration, acculturation, individualism, and identity are interwoven. These aspects not only reveal what Sanjana's marriage means to her, but also shed light on why this custom is still significant and practiced in our ever-evolving society.

Family involvement

My mother claimed that, before her marriage, she had never fallen in love with anyone else or even "had a crush as such." Rather, Sanjana preferred letting her parents, whom she trusts, do the worrying of finding the right spouse. My mother selected this route, despite having open-minded and understanding parents. As previously mentioned, my grandparents had a love marriage, which was not common back in their days given that India was not accepting of such individualistic ways when it came to marital practices. In fact, Sanjana shared that at the time of her parents' marriage, there was "too much objection from [her] dad's side [of the family]." "The whole family [...] were against the marriage," so much so that almost none of their relatives "went for the wedding." For my mother, however, times had changed. Her parents did not impose an arranged marriage on her. Yet, because she described herself as being the most "obedient" child as well as being her "*maan kee betee*," 'her mother's daughter,' Sanjana trusted her parents in selecting a suitable husband for her.

Given that she was the second daughter in the family, it was her turn to get married, "the oldest girl [...] usually get[ting] first priority" (Santhiveeran 2005, 30). She had no objection to it because "even [her] sisters, [her] cousin brother [...] it was all arranged marriage [s]." Besides, my mother claimed to have always wanted her family's support in whatever she did. One might argue that Sanjana's choices may simply be a product of societal standards. However, her story reveals that she was always close to her relatives. The relationship she had with them might have in part influenced her decisions and strengthened her familial values. That is to say, this choice was made, in part, to make her family happy. Furthermore, Sanjana believes that an arranged marriage is more than just two people being united; it is a "bond between two families." When asked about love marriages, she said, "Because I think... I think in a love marriage ... The boy and the girl they only think about themselves, like *their* happiness, what *they* want." At first, it may seem as if my mother was criticizing her own parents' relationship, which she initially described as being "strong" and "loving." However, when she talks about the supposed selfishness of a love marriage, she is simply referring to the idea that the individuals in that relationship do not necessarily consider their parents' wishes and requirements. Once again, Sanjana made it clear that in her case, she wanted her parents' happiness and approval over anything else.

Even so, it is important to note that generally in Indian arranged marriages, much agency ultimately rests with the man and the woman who are about to get married, no matter how much they involve their parents. In my mother's context, there was no forcing individuals into arranged marriages, despite what the term *arranged* suggests. Parents and relatives merely facilitate things for the children by introducing them to people and financially contributing to their wedding (Pande 2016, 385). When asked about whether she had the ability to back out of the relationship before the wedding, Sanjana answered affirmatively. Arranged marriages do involve some degree of individuality, which dispels the idea that the individuals involved have no agency in the matter.

This level of choice is also reflected in Sanjana's expectations of her future husband.

Typically, Indian parents have very specific requirements when it comes to selecting the right partner for their child. Religion, ethnicity, and caste are usually the most important factors. As mentioned earlier, marrying within the same religion and ethnicity is more advantageous. Caste is an important factor to consider because it displays one's inherited social status (Sharma 2021). People from higher castes are generally more respected in society as they are associated with purity. The caste system is obviously more complex, but the important thing to note is that parents are more likely to follow the custom of caste endogamy when selecting a spouse (Allendorf and Pandian 2016). The same can be said about my mother's parents. However, one thing to note is that Sanjana wanted that as well; she wanted to marry someone from the same caste background. As she articulates, "if your culture and religion are same, it becomes more easier" to adjust because you know what to expect. If I want to get married, I want to get married to a *Shikarpuri*," was my mother's condition given that her own father is a *Shikarpuri*—a subcategory of Sindhis, originating from the Sindh province of Pakistan. Sanjana even believes that Indians should continue with this tradition to prevent any cultural clashes between a wife and a husband.

In a way, my mother ended up following societal standards by being endogamous to her culture and religion, even though it was her decision. Despite the fact that she has been living in Canada for over twenty years, she still remains firm in her identity and her principles: wanting the support of her family. To this day, my mother thinks that involving family in whatever you choose to do is important. "If your parents don't agree with [your choice], make them understand, make them agree, make them see *your* point of view." This is exactly what she expects of her children. She acknowledges that times have changed and that the younger generations do not necessarily favour socio-centric marital practices. This goes to show that Sanjana is accepting of individualistic ways, all the while wanting to preserve aspects of her Indian identity. Pande (2016) states "The [Indo-British] approach to modernity was more in line with a desire for an identity that could be described as a

progressive self but within the limits of religious and community boundaries" (395). Overall, Sanjana's identity and beliefs include both traditional and modern values. My mother's case, and those of the Indo-British in Pande (2016) showcase the shifting principles of Indians, which is partly due to immigration and the fusion of different cultural values.

In the end, Sanjana's values include abiding by her parents wishes. That is a choice she made. While it might also be in part a product of India's societal norms, Sanjana exercised her individuality to a certain extent. The importance she attributes to individuality extends to the expectations she has of her children as well. Indeed, she does not expect her daughters to get an arranged marriage as she is understanding of their beliefs. She simply wishes that they involve family in their decisions, just like she did. Once again, Sanjana's principles incorporate both Indian and individualistic, in this case Canadian, values. Perhaps this is what defines many other first-generation Indian migrants. As such, the shifting identities of Indians are also based on their children's wishes. My mother, and many other Indians, are accepting of change partly because of that. Family involvement in marital practices, then, does not necessarily prevent Indians from exercising their choices, but simply allows them to preserve their Indian customs and values by having their families' support.

The Arrangement of My Mother's Marriage

The arrangement of my mother's marriage took place over six months. Despite some moments of hardship, everything that led up to her wedding day worked out perfectly for her. The arrangement started with a matchmaker. The matchmaker was given my mother's biodata as well as her pictures and a list of requirements regarding potential matches. The matchmaker later called Sanjana's house to announce that a family living in Mumbai was interested. After both my parents' families met for the first time, my father asked to meet my mother alone. It was rather uncommon for an unmarried man to meet with an unmarried woman unaccompanied back in the 1990s, which is why Sanjana's parents were reluctant at first. Being

permitted to talk before marriage was something that many Indians were not accustomed to, certainly not in my parents' days. For a woman to meet her future husband, especially alone, before their wedding was a privilege (Santhiveeran 2005). However, my grandparents acknowledged that times were changing, and therefore my mother met my father at a restaurant not too far from her neighbourhood. While such detail might seem small, it was a significant change from the standard practices within traditional arranged marriages. Indeed, unlike traditional arranged marriages in which couples are not allowed to court before the wedding, my mother, after agreeing to get engaged to my father, courted her fiancé for six months before their wedding.

During their first meeting, my mother realized that she and her potential suitor shared quite a few things in common apart from their cultural background. Sanjana added, "he also — your father, at the age of seventeen, he started... like, he lost his father, so there was a responsibility on his shoulders to take care of his sisters [...] so your father took a big responsibility at a very young age. Me too." This responsibility, though not explicitly stated, also consisted of getting married as nearly every Indian parent wishes for their child to be wed. This is especially true for their daughter since a woman's status and value are defined by her role in a family (Srinivasan and James 2015). These kinds of societal gender norms were important to my mother's family.

Although Sanjana did not quite mention it, my father's story might have touched her. Given that my grandmother's health was not the best at the time, Sanjana also believed that it was her responsibility to get married before it was too late. My mother put her own mother's needs first because she valued her over anything else. Sanjana noticed that her suitor shared the same principle. As a matter of fact, the reason why my mother agreed to marry my father is because both prioritized their families. Once again, my mother made a choice that aligned with her upbringing, yet she exercised her individuality by marrying a man whose beliefs matched with hers.

After their engagement, my parents often went out together, and eventually "there was

more and more bonding between the two of [them]" prior to the wedding. Given her own pre-marital experience, Sanjana believes that it is important for a couple to establish trust and build a loving relationship before getting married. This shows that my mother's views differ from the traditional Indian ones. Despite the fact that her marriage was arranged, Sanjana adopts a perspective which prioritizes love. My parents' courting came to an end due to my grandmother's increasingly deteriorating state, and it was important for everyone that she be present for their wedding (see Figures 1 and 2). Although her wedding was a moment of joy for her, Sanjana was still tense given her mother's health. Unfortunately, my grandmother passed away nine days after the ceremony. However, my mother ensured that her last wish was fulfilled.

Overall, my mother's experience suggests that India, at least in large cities such as Mumbai, was slowly becoming more modern, and that marital practices were changing. For one, despite her family's involvement, Sanjana was still able to take part in the selection process, and court her suitor with her parents' blessings. Such things were uncommon in my grandparents' days. In addition, while my mother's views reflect traditional values, her decisions can be considered individualistic in and of themselves. She was able to cultivate a relationship with a man whom she liked and respected, which is partly why today her opinion on marriage aligns with relatively modern views. Lastly, my mother's expectations of my sisters and I reveal that she is accepting of change.

Marital challenges

Because many couples in North America live together before their marriage, getting married does not bring much change to their lives, but in the case of an arranged marriage, it is a completely different story. My mother talked about some of the challenges that she had to go through that are particular to arranged marriages:

> You are going in a new place, in a new house, surrounded by different people… You leave your home where you are protected, and you're surrounded by your sisters and brothers and aunts and uncles and father

Figure 1: Sanjana's wedding ceremony. Photo by Sanjay Nichani.

Figure 2: Sanjana's mother is seen in a wheelchair during the wedding ceremony. Photo by Sanjay Nichani

> and mother, and you go to a new place. You don't know if you'll get the same love, same affection, same uh… what do you call? Protection.

In India, most children stay with their parents even as adults and are close to their extended families as well. They live in the same environment for years which is why adjusting to a new family can be difficult, especially for women, according to my mother. In effect, women are the ones to leave their homes and are expected to adapt to the lives of their in-laws. My mother explained that when she lived with her husband and mother-in-law during the first couple of months after their wedding, she too had to change her ways. For instance, although she knew how to cook, she still had to learn to make food the way her mother-in-law did. She also had to adopt new manners such

as praying in the morning, offering sweets to the Gods and the elders first before eating them herself, and so on. This cultural and familial adaptation is similar to the experiences of many Indian women. The female participants of Bhandari (2017) reported that even before marriage, they would be tamed by their partners in order to fit the expectations of their families. This did not sit right with most of these women. Even today, familial expectations are in part shaped by gender norms. Sanjana acknowledged this fact but seemed to be indifferent to it, perhaps because her own experience was not traumatic. In effect, she claimed that adjusting to her new family was rather easy as she felt welcomed by everybody.

Even though my mother got closer to my father during their courting months, things became rough between them once they started living with each other after their marriage. Sanjana stated that, in arranged marriages, it takes time for the wife and the husband to build understanding and to get along. She added that one cannot fully understand a person until one lives with them. Although she did not go into much detail about the early years of her marital relationship, Sanjana mentioned that her "ego" and "immaturity" often got in the way, which created bigger rifts in her marriage. Sanjana did not mention any other problem that might be caused by her husband or her in-laws. She claimed that overall, her marital life was not that challenging. I believe that that is not entirely true. Indeed, Sanjana's life before marriage was quite different. She was independent and earned for herself, and she did not have the responsibilities that come with being a wife and a daughter-in-law.

When she came to her new home, things changed a lot. She entered as a stranger and had no choice but to adapt and conform to the role given to her by her husband's family (Bowman and Dollahite 2013). Over the years, my mother asserted that her understanding grew, and she assumed her role as both a wife and daughter-in-law by learning how to adapt to her new life. Her experience is quite similar to the participants of Raval (2009) in which the Gujarati women claimed, "that as daughters-in-law, they had to find a way to deal with

[inconvenient] situations, and that it was their responsibility to negotiate in these difficult situations without being disrespectful or disobedient" (498). Even though my mother's experience was seemingly not challenging, the case of the Gujarati women shows that for some, it can be difficult. Women are the ones expected to compromise their needs, but whether that is a problem particular to arranged marriages or Indian society as a whole is not definitive. Some arranged marriages do in fact have their downsides, but it is also important to consider that experiences may differ from one family to another.

Immigrating to Canada in 2001 was another challenge for my parents, both financially and emotionally. Being away from their families was not easy. Not only that, but they had to leave behind their first-born daughter in India because they were unsure whether they would be able to provide for her in a new country. This is probably the biggest sacrifice my parents had to make coming to Canada. They were only able to reunite with their first child in 2007, nearly seven years after having left her. Despite these hardships, Sanjana and her husband were able to work things out together. Today, my mother has a good relationship with her in-laws as well as her husband. She describes her marriage as being "smooth," "stable," "strong," and "loving." My parents have been together for over twenty years, and despite all the challenges she had to encounter, my mother claimed that everything, including her arranged marriage, was "very much worth it."

Suggestions for Future Research

Sanjana's narrative is just a small fragment of Indian immigrants' experiences and perspectives regarding arranged marriage. There are numerous stories to be heard. For future studies, researchers could also document the challenges of Indian men living outside of India to be able to compare their issues to those of women. Secondly, this scholarship could also benefit from learning about the beliefs of older generations to be able to highlight the evolution of Indian values and mindsets. Another suggestion would be studying how immigration affects the marital lives of couples. My own research barely

addresses Sanjana's experience as a migrant, but there is a lot to be said about the challenges that migrants, particularly Indian couples in arranged marriages, deal with when moving to a new country.

Finally, the last suggestion is a bit more complex. I believe that throughout the interview, my mother's positionality affected the way she talked about her arranged marriage. In effect, I think she only wanted me to hear about the good side of her marriage, which is why she barely spoke of the initial struggles in her marital life. She did mention them, but she refrained from going into too much detail. Perhaps she did not want me to have any doubts about arranged marriages in order to avoid any conflict. Narrators often tend to "unconsciously [slant] their accounts" (Yow 1995, 56) when they either identify strongly with something or want their loyalty to remain unquestioned. Either that or the fact that my positionality as her daughter might have prevented her from talking about certain aspects of her marriage. Whatever the reason may be, this "unconscious advocacy" (Yow 1995, 55) is a common issue when it comes to oral and life history research. Nonetheless, this positioned perspective can be quite telling. I speculate that, no matter how much Sanjana's views might have changed, her core principles still lie in traditional values, meaning India's socio-centric principles.

Because India is a collectivist society, "men and women are required to honor the choice of their parents and elders in their family" (Santhiveeran 2005, 28). Moreover, women are often taught to accept their husbands "as is" no matter what (Santhiveeran 2005, 28). This is probably why Sanjana refrained from complaining about her marital life. The same can be said about the Gujarati participants in Raval's (2009) research. They, too, tended to silence themselves by trying to negotiate their needs and desires with those of other members of the family instead of being upfront about their issues. This leads to the question: what socio-psychological effects does this have on Indian women? Though I am no expert in the field of psychology, future researchers could find a way to study these

effects to further talk about the challenges of Indian women.

Conclusion

Sanjana's story is one example of the changing identities of Indians, especially when it comes to migrants. Her identity can be described as a mix of both traditional Indian values and Canada's individualist principles. This incorporation of both socio-centric and individualist values is the product of Sanjana's experiences. Her close relationship with her family is in part what shaped her familial values, which is why she always put her family's happiness before her own. Sanjana therefore believed that it was her duty to have an arranged marriage. This is why, even today, Sanjana believes that it is important to involve her family in whatever decisions she makes.

In addition, her pre-marital relationship with her fiancé reveals that love is, in fact, an important factor to her, which was not common back in my grandparents' days. Another thing to note is that, throughout the interview, Sanjana spoke very positively of her marriage, and even encouraged the idea of marrying within the same culture. However, because she is aware of the fact that her own children's beliefs might not align with India's socio-centric norms, she is accepting of modern ways. Besides, Sanjana has been living in Canada for almost 23 years. Surely the effects of acculturation had an impact on Sanjana's mindset, similar to the Indo-British in Bhopal (2011) and Pande's (2016) accounts. Overall, it is safe to assume that this mixing of cultures is partly responsible for the evolving customs within marital practices amongst Indians.

Given all her experiences, one cannot deny the role Sanjana's arranged marriage had in her life. In effect, her marriage has in large part defined who she is today. Her marriage is also responsible for the expectations she has of her daughters. Furthermore, the fact that she speaks so positively of her marriage, without once mentioning the issues she might have had with her husband or her in-laws, is quite telling. Sanjana does seem to regret her decisions, which showcases how significant her marriage is to her. Given the importance of family in Indian society, even younger generations agree

with considering their parents' wishes and desires, no matter the type of marriage (Pande 2016). Indeed, "in a country where every resource in life—a job, a house, a social circle—is gained through family connections," it is essential to maintain one's family support (Nanda 2015, 127). Therefore, arranged marriages in today's society, at least in large Indian cities and amongst Indians living outside of India, preserve such notions, but do not prevent individuals from making their own choices.

In effect, Sanjana's marital experience does, in fact, reflect some level of individuality. For one, going forward with an arranged marriage was *her* decision. Sanjana deeply values her family, which is why she wanted to include her relatives in her marital decisions. Furthermore, I believe that her core principles still lie in socio-centric values, which is why she wanted to marry someone from the same cultural background as her. Secondly, when it came to selecting a spouse, my mother actively engaged in the selection process. As a matter of fact, she agreed to marry my father because she found him compatible. Lastly, throughout the whole process of arranging the marriage, Sanjana clearly stated that she still had the possibility to back out of the relationship is she wanted to. My mother's arranged marriage, then, was not restrictive, as is the case for many other Indians, indicating a shift in marital practices. Sanjana was able to exercise both her individuality by making choices that aligned with her principles and her sense of family by including her parents in that decision.

It is important to mention, however, that many arranged marriages do have their downsides. While my mother does not speak of her own marriage's shortcomings, her marital experience, as well as those of other women, was still affected by India's gender norms. Even today, women are often the ones expected to adjust to their husband's lives. While expectations differ from one family to another, this phenomenon is still important to keep in mind. Whether this issue is related to Indian society as a whole or specifically to arranged marriages is not certain, but there is a need for change. However, times are evolving, and with that, mentalities and customs are slowly shifting too. Over the years, arranged marriages have become more flexible, and the proof of that is the changing identities of Indian migrants in the West.

As for my own views, at first, I did not know whether I opposed this tradition or not. I still am unsure, but I can say that reading several articles discussing the experiences of others and interviewing my own mother has broadened my perspective on arranged marriages. I initially had a negative opinion of this type of marital union, but I know now that arranged marriages are not inherently meant to be oppressive or restricting. Rather, they are meant to deepen familial bonds, or at least that is the way I see them. As mentioned before, family is important in Indian society, and today's ongoing practices, even in other countries, demonstrate that this principle resonates with many people.

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Seeking Stability in China's "Involuted Generation"

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the word "involution" (*Nei Juan*) has become a popular word in Chinese society to refer to the great competitive pressure young people in China now face in their life such as passing the college entrance examination and searching for a job. They are called the "involuted generation." To study the involution phenomenon, I conducted eleven semi-structured interviews with students, parents, and teachers in Zhejiang Province in China. This study also explores the causes and effects of the phenomenon of involution by combining online research and a literature review. I argue that the pursuit of stability produces the present involution while the college entrance examination and differences in family background create different degrees of involution which intensifies the stress of competition. The effects of involution include anxiety and tension for both students and parents brought on by competition, the devaluation of academic qualifications in the job market, and the gap young people experience between their interests and careers.

Keywords: Involution, stability, competition, Zhejiang, China

I hate *Nei Juan*, it always makes me exhausted and annoyed, but I cannot avoid participating in it," one of my interviewees said. Nowadays, " *Nei Juan*," 'involution,' has not only become a popular word used in daily conversation but has also become a social phenomenon in Chinese society. The word "involution" was created by anthropologist Alexander Goldenweiser (1913) and it describes a culture model which does not transform into a new form or remain steady after reaching a certain stage; instead the culture continues to develop in the direction of internal complexity and inefficiency. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1963) then used this word to describe the agriculture of Java Island. When the people of Java put more labor into agricultural production, it did increase agricultural output, but it could not bring real progress and renewal. It only brought the phenomenon of intensification of labor as the operation of the irrigated agricultural system became much more complicated with relatively little growth of output. In the Chinese context, sociologist Zongzi Huang (2002) used involution to describe a situation in which farmers input time and effort into their fields and produce a surplus which supports a growing population. Since the amount of land is fixed, however, when each new person is added to production after the carrying capacity has been reached, the output they produce can only meet their own survival needs, no matter how hard they work. This is because there is not enough land for them to produce a surplus. As a result, involution results in a decrease in benefits over time wherein inputs and profits are not positively proportional.

Now, when Chinese people talk about involution in their lives, it is usually explained by a typical example: when a group of people is watching a movie in a cinema, if the audience sitting in the front row stands up to watch it, everyone behind them must stand up as well, while in fact everyone could have watched the movie seated. Interestingly, in many interview conversations, involution becomes either an adjective or a verb to use, such as,「法律行业找工作可太卷了」 "now the recruitment in the legal profession is too involuted" or「我同学XXX每个周末有六个辅导班，卷死我得了」 "my classmate XXX actually attends six private tutoring courses every weekend, which really involutes me. I want to die!" It is always tied to inevitable struggle and gnawing anxiety in conversations. Therefore, it is obvious that the phenomenon of involution usually occurs in situations of competition, and it tends to increase the anxiety that people feel in these competitions. Anthropologist Biao Xiang (2019) said in the TV program titled 'Shi San Yao,' "People in Chinese society are under pressure not only to move up but also not to move down." Therefore, no one can quit the competition, rather they must keep trying to climb up as people seek to meet the same goals: getting into a good university, finding a good job, earning more money, buying a car and a house, getting married, and having children. The younger generations in contemporary China are the main victims of this phenomenon and they inevitably suffer from the pressures of involution from the beginning of their studies into entering society and finding jobs.

In this paper, I explore questions of how involution affects young people and how do they respond to it. I conducted a literature review, online research, and semi-structured interviews to study this. Involution in the Chinese context has developed over a long period and the present phenomenon discussed by the public involves many aspects of daily social and economic life. For example, the scores of college entrance examinations are increasing year by year and the threshold, in this case the academic degree, for getting a job is becoming more stringent. I argue that the pursuit of stability produces present-day involution; college entrance examinations and differences in family backgrounds, in turn, foster different degrees of involution which

make the competition crueler. Extreme involution has devalued academic degrees to the point where students are having difficulty finding jobs that align with their interests and talents, resulting in significant mental health impacts.

Methodology

Since I grew up in China and spent a lot of time in the Chinese public educational system before attending college in the U.S., I have experienced two completely different feelings about education. My relatively relaxed educational experience in the U.S. compared to China motivated me to explore the reasons for the emergence of the involution phenomenon among the younger generation in China and to reflect on myself as a member of this involuted generation. Although the involution phenomenon in China is the result of the interaction of many social aspects and it took a long time to develop, the use of the term 'involution' to refer to this phenomenon only became widespread in recent years; although it has aroused wide and popular discussion, there are few systematical analyses existing in academic literature. Consequently, I allowed the experiences and views of my interviewees to lead my research. Since many voices are now talking about involution in China in different contexts, I combined participants' experiences with the public conversation about the issue and the academic literature available.

My research process included three parts: a literature review, online research, and semi-structured interviews. First, as the college entrance examination policy has changed in recent years, I did research on the government education website to understand the latest college entrance examination policy in Zhejiang Province. Second, I read academic articles in Chinese and English to look at theories about the involution phenomenon and how it relates to issues like the social ideology of stability and the college entrance exam policy. Third, I conducted eleven interviews in Shaoxing and Hangzhou, two cities in Zhejiang Province. The interviewees included three high school seniors and three college seniors to compare the two age groups' responses to the involution phenomenon as well as three high school

seniors' parents and two high school teachers to see their responses to the involution phenomenon among their children and students. I found the above interviewees through my high school teacher in Shaoxing and a relative of mine who teaches at a high school in Hangzhou. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between thirty and sixty minutes each. I used an Informed Consent Statement at the start to explain the risks of participating in the research, such as discussing ethics policies, and how I would protect the data they provided. The purpose of the questions posed was threefold: to understand participants' idea of involution, to discuss their life in a time of involution, and to ask whether solutions exist. I used audio recording or handwritten notes, as determined by the preference of the interviewee, and I asked follow-up questions through WeChat.

The Conditions that Formed Present-Day Involution

Although the word involution has only become popular in people's daily conversations in recent years, this phenomenon developed within the context of long-term social reform in China. China experienced a period of reform and opening up in the 1980s. During this period, China shifted its focus to economic development, and gradually transitioned from a socialist economy to a market economy (Liu 2020) which brought obvious advantages of rapid economic development as well as significant instability. In particular, the desire to establish a new economic system brought about by the neoliberal transformation of Chinese society in the 1990s and the early 21st century conflicts with pre-existing, deep-rooted political interests. Most obviously, the fear that a more efficient economy would lead to mass unemployment (Breslin 2006). The insecurity brought by the threat of unemployment to individuals and families urged people to master more advanced skills and knowledge, thus fostering competition based on experience and skills in the workplace.

Also, neoliberal market reform has heightened competition for some highly valued jobs. For example, new policies not only have expanded the public supply of education, social

pension, health, and unemployment insurance but also have gradually eliminated the long-standing urban-rural segregation in China. This has resulted in more generous treatment in urban areas for civil servants and people with formal labor contracts over that of informal workers and unemployed people which has brought about complicated new social segregation and income inequality (Duckett 2020). Therefore, it is precisely because of the emergence of these new dark sides that people are eager for some jobs labeled with high income and stable formal labor status.

Moreover, during the period of neoliberal reform, China experienced significant higher education expansion and the government has made it an important goal to train young people with skills and knowledge suitable for promoting the country's economic and social development (Mok 2021). However, the one-child policy pressures families to pin their hopes on their only child; in an environment where the country advocates higher education, it is the goal of every one-child family to help their child win the education competition. Winning this competition would benefit children to achieve a future external stable life, which aligns with the traditional Chinese ideology of stability.

People's Common Desire: Stability

Different people have different understandings of stability and I classify these understandings into two broad types: external and internal stability. For most Chinese parents, the broad meaning of a stable life for their children is to have a life-long job that guarantees a sustainable source of income and security of life (the "five insurance and one fund" system, includes endowment, medical, unemployment, industrial injury, maternity insurance, and housing provident funds). This idea of using economic and material conditions to achieve external stability is the most basic expectation of parents because they ensure that their children do not lack the material necessities they need to survive. Therefore, it has become very popular among young people to enter state-owned enterprises or to find a job "within the system." One college student said, "you can die with an iron rice bowl once and for all if you become a civil servant or a doctor or teacher."

While external stability refers to the ability to secure food, clothing, shelter, and transportation, internal stability can be summarized as a sense of spiritual stability and happiness, and students, especially college students, were more likely to focus on this kind of stability. College seniors who are about to graduate not only want a job that meets their basic financial requirements, but they are also a job with better career prospects and personal development opportunities which does not require employees to work too many hours. This is in contrast to the recent popularization of the 996 working system which requires employees to go to work at 9 am, get off work at 9 pm, and work six days a week. In the Chinese context, working overtime does not just mean working outside the usual work hours with no extra pay. According to a university student I interviewed, it also implies making a "hard worker" impression to the boss and supervisor to ensure a good relationship with them. This kind of overtime work is actually less efficient because the worker's goal is not to create value and outcomes; instead, they spend time sitting and pretending they are working to give their boss a good impression of them. Especially in China's Internet firms (Zheng and Qiu 2023), the 996 working system became normal and made a good impression by reflecting employees' loyalty through their working hours. Because of this, college seniors see working overtime as meaningless and a waste of time; they feel they cannot achieve internal stability in jobs which expect this kind of overtime.

The happiness and spiritual stability that students seek in life also comes in part from the emotional support brought by the geographical closeness to parents. For example, senior year high school students will consider whether to go out of the province when choosing a university after the college entrance exam because there is only one prestige university in Zhejiang Province and the required score is very high. It is a dilemma to make this decision because it is related to the choice between internal stability and external stability — a university close to parents but with a worse reputation or a university with a better reputation but far from parents.

The younger generation desires and even expects stability to follow the traditional ideology associated with the characteristics of Chinese society. According to Fei (1992), Chinese society is fundamentally rural and contains three characteristics: it is rooted in the soil, has a non-flowing population, and is an acquaintance society. In traditional Chinese society, the concern with stability began as a matter of survival. Chinese society has a long history of farming which extends into the recent past or even the present for many people, as such, Chinese people understand the importance and value of the soil. Moreover, the land was cultivated with crops and, as the crops did not move, human societies were rooted in place. While industrial workers can choose to move depending on their jobs, flowing across the land like a river, people who have been farmers for a long time cannot move their land and crops; they are non-flowing (Fei 1992).

This characteristic has been rooted in the hearts of Chinese people for thousands of years, so it is very difficult to change. This culture influences the lifestyle of people in Chinese society and gradually abstracts into an ideology connected to stability. Furthermore, stability can be associated with a society of acquaintances. Due to the traditional thinking of collectivism, people live in one place from birth to death and everyone grows up not only watching the people around them, but also being watched by the people around them. The social circle is relatively fixed (Fei 1992). Thus, the choice of stability also follows the usual way of life in which life and work will not have a great change during each person's lifetime and people expect their lives to follow a familiar, traditional pattern.

It is the widespread pursuit of stability that has led to the gradual rise of involution. For example, state-owned enterprises and jobs "within the system" are called "iron rice bowls, —as mentioned previously—literally meaning rice bowls that can never be broken. These kinds of jobs can have lifelong security; for as long as employees do not break the red line of the law, they will not be fired. The work pressure of these jobs is relatively low which allows people to have more time for their personal life. Thus, this kind of job is the symbol of stability in Chinese society. In modern Chinese society, where overtime is so widespread, it is hard not to aspire for a stable job that is both financially secure and relatively easy. However, when more and more young people want to get this "iron rice bowl," the competition gradually grows out of control. Every year, there is a limited number of positions the state and state-owned enterprises hire for, but the number of applicants is ever-increasing which brings about a higher base standard for jobs. A master's degree (not just a bachelor's), two foreign languages (not just one), advanced technical programming skills, and other qualifications are the standard. But, in fact, the job content is the same as before, so if talented people with outstanding experience are recruited, they will not be able to make full use of their talents on the job.

In this case, the increasing recruitment requirements are meaningless in the context of the jobs people are hired to do. For example, people now need a PhD degree to serve as practical advisors for college students in public universities, even though the research and teaching skills developed in a PhD program are not necessary for this job. Zhejiang University's recruitment plan for 2024 (2023) listed the need to recruit 15 full-time practical advisors, and the proportion of doctoral students is not less than fifty percent. But this unnecessary requirement cannot be changed because a larger number of candidates must be sorted. Even the people who win the competition only achieve external stability, but not internal stability because their talents are wasted in jobs that do not require them to use their full abilities. Worse, involution cannot bring positive significance to the whole society.

Fierce Competition: College Entrance Examinations (*Gaokao*)

Even before entering the competition for careers, high school students seeking stability must face another fierce competition: the college entrance examinations. As one senior high school teacher put it, "The college entrance examination is the first big difficulty that students need to overcome in life, which not only tests students' mastery of academic courses, but also their mentality when facing

challenges." Indeed, the college entrance exam is a fateful rite of passage for Chinese students (Howlett 2021). The results of the college entrance examination will determine what level of university (high level, intermediate level, and relatively low level) students enter and what kind of academic qualifications they will be able to earn there, which then affects their competitiveness in the job market. Chinese society attaches great importance to the ranking and fame of universities. Therefore, students who are admitted to a good university not only receive praise, but, more importantly, are made to feel they have demonstrated strong competitiveness early in life. In general, the college entrance examination attaches great significance to Chinese people's life because the result impact future career prospects, which results in examination fever spreading in Chinese society (Howlett 2021).

A notable example of the significance of college entrance exams is the concept of "first degree" in the labor market. A college student who majors in Law told me during her interview that, in the legal field, there is a strong emphasis on the "first degree" awarded by the university from which the student received his or her undergraduate education. Many first-tier law firms or large corporations recruit legal counsel with clear requirements for the quality of their undergraduate institute, not just their law school and internship experience. Students with "first degrees" from the most prestigious "five colleges and four departments" have an outstanding advantage over undergraduate students from other schools in the recruitment process. Like the Ivy League in the United States, these programs have an important status in the Chinese legal education sector and have a significant impact on the development of the Chinese legal system and the construction of law.

The entrance examination scores required for acceptance to these universities are usually very high so students who want to enter these universities must have very outstanding results on the entrance examination. The pursuit of scores by students is manifested even more clearly in the fact that no point can be lost. There is a very popular metaphor recounted by a high school teacher, that is, "getting one point

can throw off whole playground competitors," meaning that a single point can distinguish winners from losers.

Although Zhejiang Province has a developed economy and rich educational resources, the college entrance examination in Zhejiang Province is still famous for its fierce competition. The reason is because of Zhejiang's special exam structure (students have two chances to take exam), scoring rules (the actual scores of the three required subjects plus the highest curved scores of three elective subjects), and limited choice in top university (there is only one 985 University: Zhejiang University). Due to the desire for the highest possible score, students often retake the exam even when they have already achieved very high scores in their first attempt. "For most students, this is two tortures," said a high school teacher.

In addition, when admitting students, universities not only have requirements for the total score of the college entrance examination, but different majors also have clear requirements for specific elective subjects. Therefore, it is difficult for students to choose subjects according to their interests; instead, they choose subjects they are good at since the first task for students is to ensure high scores in the college entrance examination. Zhejiang University only admits 3140 students from Zhejiang each year, but there are about 350,000 annual examinees in Zhejiang Province each year and this number is growing. Because of this fierce reality, involution in scores has worsened.

It is important to distinguish between students who actively choose to participate in involution and those who are forced to participate in involution. Some high school students with clear goals think that if they do not put in the effort, they will easily be overtaken by other competitors whose abilities and efforts are unknown to them. The increasing number of students taking college entrance examinations every year is a major source of anxiety in students' minds—the fear of being surpassed. A senior high school student told me that he wanted to be admitted to the Zhejiang University medical department, but the scores in the medical department were

very high every year and the number of candidates taking the college entrance examination was increasing year by year. To enhance his competitiveness, he had to care about the gain and loss of every point, because, if he did not, someone could overtake him at any time. Other students are forced to participate in involution because of their surroundings. Some parents know the cruelty of competition in the social and career market, so they know the importance of college entrance examination scores. Therefore, they have strict requirements for their children's scores and for the university they attend, which forces their unwilling children to participate in the involution of scores. The crazy pursuit of scores may lead students to achieve the goal of entering a good university, but no one can guarantee that this pursuit will ensure a happy life for them. The only fact that can be determined now is that this pursuit has caused endless anxiety and tension for students and parents.

The Starting Line: Family Backgrounds

In China, there is a saying, "all roads lead to Rome, but some people are born in Rome." This sentence can be understood as saying everyone can succeed through hard work, but different family backgrounds create different starting lines. When people are studying at school, students are judged by their academic performance. Family background does play an important role in academic performance, but students also have some opportunity to develop and compete through their own hard work. Once they leave the ivory tower of the school, however, young people who enter society find that their own efforts are far from enough, and their family background and network resources become much more important factors if they want to get a job that allows them to remain in their social class or move into a higher social class. Due to differences in family background, both the competition in schools and the competition faced by college students in finding jobs are full of inequality and involution.

Although all students have the opportunity to develop their abilities in school, some have

had the advantage of private tutoring classes until a recent policy shift made them illegal. Family background was a very important factor as parents decided whether to send their children to attend private tutoring classes and in this decision-making process, involution happened, deepening educational inequality (Li 2021). Private tutoring classes had advantages that cannot be ignored. Not only did they help students consolidate what they had already learned in school, but they also improved students' ability to respond flexibly to knowledge and helped them gain an advantage in grades. Thus, when parents heard that other people's children were attending private tutoring classes, they worried that their children would fall behind, so they too tried their best to get their children into private tutoring classes as well. Therefore, whether or not to send their children to private tutoring classes became an involution phenomenon among parents.

This phenomenon was the product of shadow education, a term widely used in East Asia for private supplementary education such as cram-schooling and private tutoring (Choi and Park 2016; Yu et al. 2022). As parents sought more and better education resources to improve their children's competitive advantage in learning, the result was increasingly unequal educational opportunities. The reason was that, with private tutoring classes, a large amount of capital poured into the education market, which led to more serious educational unfairness (Yu et al. 2022). For instance, Howlett (2021) posits that families with resources can use their social connections, social capital, to get their children into good schools, their academic knowledge, cultural capital, to prepare their children to do well in school, and their money, economic capital, to pay for private tutoring. Moreover, families with sufficient economic advantages can help their children overcome any deficits in cultural capital by paying for private tutoring classes (Howlett 2021).

A high school student I interviewed was assigned to a special competition class. Because of his father's job, his family has connections to some university professors, so his parents helped him find a professor who specializes in mathematics and the Information Olympics to tutor him at weekends for a fee of one

thousand RMB every hour. Therefore, he was not only assigned to the special competition class because of his excellent math and physics scores but also joined the school's Information Olympics team because of extra training, which allowed him to participate in the national Information Olympics competition. Winning an award in the Information Olympics competition improves his chances to be pre-admitted to some prestigious universities. Children from families who invest in shadow education, like my interviewee, are expected to convert their cultural capital into economic capital when they go into the job market.

The family background also played a significant role in what level of tutoring classes they attended. There were significant differences between private tutoring classes. Some tutoring classes were run by teachers themselves. This kind of class usually required parents to use their own interpersonal relationships to negotiate entrance for their children and the fees were relatively high. However, the results would be remarkable because those teachers usually did not accept too many students, so their attention to each student was high, which was more conducive to student learning. Therefore, this filled gaps and improved their grades. Another kind of tutoring class was run by private tutoring agencies. These private tutoring classes only needed parents to pay money to sign up; parents did not have to draw on their personal social relationships to get their children into the classes. The teachers and the curricula were all determined by the agencies; the teaching ability of teachers in those agencies was not equivalent to those teachers who set up tutoring classes privately, who could even predict the trends of college entrance examinations. Thus, the efficiency of tutoring was relatively low in the classes offered by agencies. There seems to have been an informed ranking of those tutoring classes and the classes run by teachers were ranked higher than those run by agencies. Therefore, attending either kind of tutoring class became a competition among families.

The Chinese government, however, noticed that the existence of these private tutoring options was leading to inequalities in education, so they banned any form of outside-school tutoring in late July 2021. This policy is the so-called "double reduction policy (2021)," where "double reduction" means effectively reducing the heavy homework burden and after-school training burden of students in the stage of compulsory education. Overall, this policy is beneficial, because private tutoring agencies exploit and amplify parents' anxiety, thus causing greater pressure and manufacturing competition (Li 2021). But, due to the limited quality of public education, which focuses on basic theories and simple applications rather than the deeper understandings and more flexible applications required for success on exams, students and parents are now looking for other ways to improve their grades. This policy only transforms the phenomenon of involution from frantically attending private tutoring classes to seeking other ways to boost scores.

Furthermore, family background also has a great influence on graduate careers. One of my interviewees, a parent, told me that he hopes his child can live close to him in the future because he can help his child to find a stable job and, later, help out with the grandchildren he hopes to have. Nowadays, it is not easy to win in a competitive job market. Therefore, the help of parents like this will undoubtedly determine the outcome for many graduates. Although people in today's Chinese society hold negative views of those who rely on their parents' interpersonal relationships to get positions in the job market, it is undeniable that compared with those who are still seeking jobs, these people have easily achieved the "stability" that many people want. Therefore, differences in family background also intensify the involution phenomenon in the job market for people from families with weaker backgrounds. People with good family backgrounds are more likely to be at the top of the pyramid because they take the best jobs and make the already scarce job positions even scarcer. Even for people at the top, however, there are often more well-connected applicants than there are positions and decision-makers must make fine distinctions in determining whose family background is more favorable. In the job market, in addition to the family background, which will affect the final employment decision, the applicant's academic background is also

one of the thresholds for getting a job. However, the phenomenon called the devaluation of academic degrees makes the competition fiercer and more terrible.

Devaluation of Academic Degrees

Nowadays, under the background of China's social involution, competition in the job market is intensifying. The fierce competition of higher education graduates in major labor markets leads to the phenomenon of over-education and the unprecedented increase in higher education enrollments has resulted in the continuous devaluation of university degrees in China (Fan and Ding 2013). As I have already discussed, as more and more people get higher degrees, increasing the supply of job seekers in the job market, the minimum requirements for the educational level of job applicants are also rising. At the same time, when more and more people get a certain educational diploma or degree, the degree's value will decrease because the number of jobs available for those degree-holders is relatively fixed. Fuller (2017) calls this phenomenon "degree inflation," which also happens in the United States, and he thinks this phenomenon makes the labor market more inefficient. The phenomenon of academic degree depreciation can be regarded as a manifestation of involution.

The phenomenon of devaluation of academic degrees is not only due to the surplus of academic degrees caused by the popularization of higher education, which leads to oversupply in the job market, but also to the change in people's purpose of obtaining academic degrees (Xue 2021). In China, people refer to the students who get degrees higher than bachelor's degrees as 研究生 *yanjiusheng* 'graduate students,' which refers to both master's students and doctoral students. In Chinese, 研究 *yanjiu* means research, so graduate students can be understood as students who do research, and doing research is the basic purpose of graduate students. However, today's *yanjiusheng* care less about the research itself or about the skills and experience they gain when doing the research, and more about earning a graduate degree they can use as a bargaining chip in exchange for a job that will give them stability.

I once saw a professor post on a social platform in China that he does not like teaching graduate students because they do not have the mind to immerse themselves in research, and they do not have the ambition to pursue results in research; they just want to make sure that their grades meet the graduation requirements so they can get academic certificates and then exchange that for a job. "Graduate students are no longer pure," some people say, and doing research is no longer the main reason these students want to obtain higher academic qualifications. For example, students pay more attention to the university's reputation and the program's reputation when they choose during their postgraduate study, and some technical and job-oriented graduate programs, such as master of Finance Management, are more popular (To et al. 2014). People regard a "stable" life and work as the ultimate goal, but now the pathway to achieve this goal and find a place in an involuted society through higher education has become very difficult. Still, getting a higher degree is the most common way to achieve this goal, and it is also the only way for people to achieve it through their own merits. Therefore, more and more people are pursuing higher academic qualifications, earning academic degrees as a springboard to achieve stability.

The criteria for judging whether academic degrees are devalued are not only economic but also personal. The public's criteria for judging the value of academic qualifications is based on the economic return that degrees can bring. Therefore, when people cannot exchange their high academic degrees for a job with a satisfactory economic return, the value of academic qualifications is reduced. One of my interviewees told me that choosing to study as a graduate student in law and being educated in a famous law school will lead her to a job with high economic returns so that she can achieve external stability. In her case, the value of the academic degree she plans to pursue has not decreased. However, on a personal level, she does not like law. What she really likes is researching different languages. Therefore, the academic degree she will get after three years will not help her realize her personal value. Therefore, it can be said that the value of this degree, to her, is meaningless. Her situation,

and her decision to pursue a degree and career she does not enjoy, is very common among young people in China who desire both external and internal stability but find it almost impossible to achieve both at the same time.

A Dilemma: Gap between Interests and Careers

I have observed two completely different ideas about the relationship between occupation and interests: some people think that hobbies and interests should not become occupations because occupations could ruin interests; others think that only by taking interest in a career can people be happy and achieve success. Hobbies, in the most popular sense, are things that people can persist in doing for a long time for the sake of happiness, while jobs are tools to make a substantial living. There are two situations which seem to combine interests with careers in an ideal fashion. First, some students pursue certain careers because they have a yearning for those careers. One of my interviewees has always admired dentists, so he is trying his best to enter an excellent medical school and become a dentist in the future. Second, some people have no specific interests or career preferences to begin with. They find their interests through work, get positive feedback such as the boss's commendation and promotions, realize their own value, and conclude that their jobs are their interests.

In reality, however, most people end up in more difficult situations because of the pressures of involution. In some cases, interests and jobs lead to contradictions. The reason is that many interests and hobbies do not have hopeful employment prospects. As such, it is difficult to bring economic security to life and ensure external stability by pursuing them. One of my interviewees told me that, despite her interest in English, she had to double major in law. She believed that, because of the widespread knowledge of the English language in China and the development of new translation technologies, an English major alone was insufficient to ensure external stability in her life. The other way interests and jobs may come into contradiction is that getting a job connected to a hobby is bound to consume the interest a person once had in their hobby. At work, people will inevitably deal with unpleasant situations such as maintaining relationships with leaders and interacting with people they do not like. These situations are called "office politics" in Chinese, and it is hard for people who have been in a job for a long time not to resist doing the work because of pressure or irritability.

Another ubiquitous situation is that many young people do not know what they like, so they choose to follow their parents' opinions when choosing a major. Their parents usually choose majors which, according to their own experience and reasoning, will lead to easy-to-find jobs with high social status and considerable returns. Many students find that they dislike the majors chosen by their parents, but, in Chinese universities, it is difficult to change majors, so many students have no choice but to continue studying majors they do not like. On the subsequent job-hunting road, their academic record shows their specialty, and it is taken as the best proof of professional knowledge. Since it is almost impossible for people to find a job without proof of systematic study, they have to continue to work in jobs they do not like.

Moreover, an increase in people choosing the same small number of majors and jobs with high economic returns leads to homogenization of talents and skills and to the reduction of diversity in society. This increasing homogeneity in society does not just happen because students choose the same majors and jobs, as Li (2021) proposes, but also because parents are choosing majors and jobs for their children. As we have seen, involution happens in the college entrance examinations and the job market, and it affects almost all young people in China, whether they are high school students or students about to graduate from college or recent graduates early in their careers. The most striking impact of involution is widespread mental health problems.

Terrible Consequence: Mental Health Issues

The psychological issues of the younger generation have attracted popular attention in Chinese society in recent years. The psychological issues of high school students are

taken extremely seriously by the public, and the concern for mental health has increased much more than when I was in high school. One parent of a senior high school student told me, "staying healthy is a first thing for children; it's much more important than grades." Every year, there are numerous stories about senior high school students jumping off buildings or committing suicide because they cannot handle the academic pressure. Thus, the issue of the mental health of senior high school students is at the top of the public's mind. The culprit for this issue, according to everyone I interviewed, is the phenomenon of involution.

For most students, involution happens because everyone wants to achieve higher grades, yet most students are close to average in intelligence and memory. Because grades are relative, this means more students are getting higher grades, so the first student has to work harder to stand out; when others see this student work even harder, they will try to work harder than their peer, so the cycle repeats itself, forming the phenomenon of involution between students. Moreover, I have observed that students who are comfortable just being average and do not set high requirements for grades for themselves may avoid participating in the involution for a time but seeing both stronger and weaker students working harder inevitably produces a kind of panic psychology, as they fear that they are left behind. No one wants to fall behind, and when they see everyone else around them doing something, they just follow this behavior (Li 2021). In this way, they, too, are forced to participate in the involution.

It is true that some students driven by the pressure of involution can get grades good enough to get into their desired universities, but this cannot be all students because educational resources are limited and there is a limit to the number of students that can be enrolled. Senior high school students know this fact very well, so they cannot avoid having internal anxiety and stress about the college entrance exams and grades, and when this stress and tension accumulates over time and is not properly managed, mental health problems naturally occur. Moreover, these mental health problems often lead to lower grades. A high

school teacher told me, "the more you want to get a high score, the less you actually get that score, and some students will even be depressed." She meant that due to their strong desire for high grades, students put tremendous pressure on themselves and end up feeling nervous and anxious during the exam. If excessively nervous and anxious, students may be flustered during the exam, and the scores they get may be lower than they expect — they may even fail. The accumulation of negative emotions can lead to mental health issues and even some more serious consequences. When students find that the means to cope with anxiety and stress are exhausted, they even have suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Sun, Dunne, and Hou 2012).

Other psychological problems of senior high school students are brought about by the involvement of parents in involution. Some parents have expected plans for their child's life after graduation, so they want their child to follow their predetermined path step-by-step. When parents see how competitive the job market is, they feel forced to participate in involution requiring their children to have excellent academic performance and multiple skills, which will undoubtedly increase the pressure on their children. Parents may feel anxiety, worry, panic, and other unpleasant emotions in relation to their children's education because of their high expectations, uncertainty about the results of their children's education, and fear of failure (Wu et al. 2021). Among them, parents of senior high school students are under the most pressure; they desperately want their children to have good grades, because with good grades their children can enter a good university and eventually find a good job. Their urgency of achieving the expectations and their anxieties are constantly transmitted to the students, resulting in increasing pressure on the students. Therefore, students may feel that their parents only force them to work hard instead of understanding them, so they cannot deal with the pressure by communicating with their parents. In fact, if the parents had solutions and suggestions to deal with the pressure, they would not be so anxious and expose their anxieties in front of their children; that is also the reason why students do not choose to communicate with their

parents, because they suspect that their parents actually have no solution. Also, according to Bandura (1989)'s social learning theory, children can learn their parents' action patterns. Therefore, if parents show great anxiety when they face pressure in front of their children, then, when their children encounter stressful situations, they may also show a series of reaction patterns imitating their parents, resulting in nervousness and anxiety.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the younger generation in China is known as the "involuted generation." They are not only involuted in college entrance examination scores but also in academic degrees when looking for a job. Whether they actively or passively participate in involution, members of the involuted generation in China often suffer from anxiety and tension in mental health. The desires of young people and their families to achieve stability not only raise the threshold of the "Iron Rice Bowl" industry—comprised of teachers, doctors, and civil servants—higher and higher but also bring the undesirable trend of social homogenization. Living with the many negative effects brought by the phenomenon of involution cannot help but make people feel frustrated and wonder if there is a solution. In fact, no one I interviewed seemed to be able to give specific effective solutions even though they felt life would be better without involution, but there are some efforts to respond to the problem at both societal and individual levels.

At the level of the whole society, the government can carry out policy reforms to regulate this phenomenon, but it takes time to design and implement new policies and then to test whether they are effective. The implementation of the "double reduction policy" discussed above, for example, was an attempt by the government to alleviate the competition and pressure faced by students. However, it is doubtful whether a one-size-fits-all policy approach can really be effective at alleviating involution and reducing anxiety. In response to the double reduction policy implemented in 2021, for example, some schools extended the school year so their graduates would be more competitive, and some individuals are pursuing private tutoring illegally. If the government could keep refining and updating its policies according to the evolving situation, that would be a sustainable way to slow down the involution becoming more complex. Not only should the government keep working to improve policies, but the individual could also do something when in the face of involution. At the level of the individual, keeping a healthy attitude towards competition, not feeling excessively inferior or overconfident, and/or finding and pursuing the field that you are good at and like regardless of the economic rewards are ways not to be involuted.

Although most young people in contemporary China are caught up in involution, there is an opposite phenomenon in Chinese society, which is called "lying flat/lying down." Lying flat seems to mean giving up competition and everything that comes along with it. But one of the reasons why many people are worried about the future seems to be that they want to "lie flat" on the one hand because the competition is too fierce, but, on the other hand, they are forced to take part in involution because they cannot give up the "stability" they desire. In the same television interview cited in the introduction, Professor Xiang Biao (2019) also said in TV show, "lying flat is a kind of resistance of contemporary young people to involution, and they quit the competition by giving up their efforts that they think are meaningless. This shows that society and people have begun to reflect on the past development model, which is actually a good thing." The "past development model" Xiang refers to is also the common belief and value among Chinese people today, which is that people can get success only if they put time and effort into working hard. But now, in real life, although people put in endless efforts, they may still not achieve what they want, and so some resist competing at all. Even if some young people are lying flat, however, most Chinese people reprimand them for lying flat and uphold the efficient and hard-working traditional culture. Therefore, how to solve the problem of involution still needs to be discussed, but fortunately, people have begun to reflect on it now.

Acknowledgements

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Carving in and "Carving Out" Space: Gender in the Halifax Skateboarding Subculture

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ABSTRACT

Skateboarding is a subculture with an ideology that counters normative authority and standards of masculinity. Yet, it continues to uphold persistent misogynistic perspectives and gender discrepancies in participation (Beal 1996; McCarthy 2022). Therefore, it is critical to understand the experiences of marginalized genders in the skateboarding subculture to discover how ideas of authenticity are formed and upheld in the skate subculture and how these standards impact skateboarders of marginalized genders. This qualitative study examines the unexplored skateboard subculture in Halifax, Nova Scotia through an analysis of its symbolic membership and physical and social space. This study identifies a disassociation from 'typical' masculinity and outwardly favourable attitudes towards gender diversity within the Halifax skateboard community; however, gender barriers remain within this still hyper-masculine setting disguised through support. Nevertheless, the historically resistant and rebellious attitudes that coincide with skateboarding may provide a space for female and non-binary skaters to counter subcultural and societal gender norms.

Keywords: Skateboarding, gender, authenticity, entitlement

Skateboarding, today and over the course of its rebellious history, is often characterized as an activity without rules (in the sense of sport), confinement, or regulation (Beal 1996; Dupont 2014; Glenney and Mull 2018; Tsikalas and Jones 2018; Woolley et al. 2011). Moreover, it is understood as a subculture with standards of admission and authenticity (Dupont 2014) and with ideological principles that counter normative authority and standards of masculinity (Beal 1996). Yet, skateboarding also continues to perpetuate misogynistic perspectives and gender discrepancies in participation (Beal 1996; McCarthy 2022). In this paper, I present the findings of a 2022 study of gender and authenticity in the skateboarding subculture in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Overall, the findings of this study represent a step toward understanding how binary gender constructs and systematic misogyny manifest in current subcultures. Research on skateboarding is essential to grasp how a subculture asserts anti-ideologies and antagonizes 'typical' masculinity yet preserves the same misogyny it claims to oppose. Building from the theoretical approaches of Judith Butler, Erving Goffman, and Pierre Bourdieu, as well as existing research on skateboarding, this study used participant observation and semi-structured interviews to examine skateboarding subculture through an analysis of its symbolic membership and physical and social space. More specifically, it sought to gain insight into the gendered nature of skateboarding which, more than a sport or hobby, is a principal identity for many (Snyder 2011).

Literature Review: Anti-Authority or (not so) Hidden Hierarchy?

Authenticity, Identity, and Gender in Constructing Symbolic Subcultural Membership

As with many subcultures, entrance to skateboarding is not an effortless undertaking. Despite its anti-authoritarian values, skateboarding has a hierarchal structure based on experience, skill, and perceived authenticity (Dupont 2014). 'Core' skateboarders, or those perceived by skateboarders as authentic, are regulators of social mobility and producers of specific subcultural knowledge (Dupont 2014). Admission hinges on being perceived as authentic as anyone seeking acceptance must attempt to adopt the socially constructed skateboarding norms and present visible traits and skills or manifestations of cultural knowledge and anti-authoritarian values (Driver 2011; Dupont 2014; Harris and Dacin 2019; Palmas 2013). The 'core' skateboarders socialize, accept, or reject new members based on their discretion of whether an individual is authentic or upholds the culture's values (Dupont 2014; Lombard 2010; Palmas 2013). Individuals constantly search for cues on how to act and belong, adjusting their own 'presentation of self' to avoid scrutiny (Goffman 1959; Newman and O'Brien 2008). Thus, the authenticity of a skateboarder is directly tied to their identity through a "physical and mental commitment" to the culture. This is often substantiated through clothing, language, and videography as forms of "identity claims" (Snyder 2011, 314; Dupont 2019).

As skateboarders resist authority, conventional attitudes, and archetypal masculinity (Beal and Weidman 2003), notions that the subculture rejects gender norms naturally emerge in the literature. Some female, fem, and non-binary members use the skateboarding subculture to challenge the heteronormative and cis-gendered — an individual's gender identity aligns with their sex or gender assigned at birth (Bosson et al. 2021) — understandings of femininity and gender (MacKay and Dallaire 2012). While the term non-binary is an umbrella term for many forms of identity, for the purpose of this study, it refers to an individual whose gender identity falls

outside the gender binary, identifying as neither distinctly male nor female (Bosson et al. 2021). However, while hegemonic masculinity is at the root of skateboarding subcultural norms, skateboarders assigned female at birth (AFAB) are also scrutinized if they do not display enough normative femininity as the binary conception of gender performance penalizes those who present 'incorrectly' (Atencio et al. 2009; Butler 1988; Hardy 2014; Kelly et al. 2006).

Rooting in the work of Gramsci regarding the perpetuation of class position and hierarchy, hegemonic masculinity represents the "most honored way of being a man, it [requires] all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically [legitimates] the global subordination of women to men…achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005, 832). While male skateboarders may distance themselves from their perception of "ideal types of masculinity", the reality is that they still engage or are complicit with hegemonic masculinity (Dupont 2014, 561). As skateboarding subculture reproduces and readapts such societal hegemonic masculinity and male-domination, additional obstacles to admission emerge for skateboarders of marginalized genders due to broader gender norms; male skateboarders often perceive their fem counterparts as unable to take risks or as skateboarding for 'inauthentic' reasons and are frequently shown entrance to the community by a male skateboarding contact (Atencio et al. 2009; Beal and Weidman 2003; Kelly et al. 2006). Based on this literature, gaining admission, mastering authenticity, forming identity, and evidently, practicing hegemonic gender remain critical in symbolic membership to this subculture.

Restriction, Resistance, and Gender in Physical and Social Skateboard Spaces

Skateparks are used to form social capital and gender identity wherein members gather and perform their cultural knowledge and practice "ritual and initiation" (Tsikalas and Jones 2018); however, some skateboarders view regulated skateparks as a method of control embodied by public space and architecture (Glenney and Mull 2018). Skateboarders utilize streets and structures in ways that the capitalistic construction of space does not intend (Chiu and Giamarino 2018; Tsikalas and Jones 2018), breaking societal and monetary norms of space and engendering conflict with the public (Chiu 2009; Snyder 2011). For instance, skateboarding on sidewalks is to take up "pedestrian space;" however, if sidewalks are used by retailers, it is excused due to their economic purpose (Chiu 2009). Cities attempt to hinder street skateboarding with legal measures and "defensive architecture" such as metal attachments on benches, ledges known as 'skate stop[s],' or the use of gravel to prevent rolling (Glenney & Mull 2018; Glover et al. 2019).

For fem skateboarders attempting to participate in this male-dominated culture, there are different, additional barriers (Atencio et al. 2009). For one, they experience discouraging and intimidating behaviour from male skateboarders, such as testing their knowledge, questioning their authenticity, and persistent harassment (Atencio et al. 2009). Consequently, many fem skaters feel intrusive when using male-dominated skate spaces and thus feel limited to private spaces (Kelly et al. 2006). Thus, it is critical to consider how gender impacts comfortability or feelings of entitlement in such spaces.

Gendered Entitlement to Space

Entitlement is essential when considering the gender differences in access to and use of space (Backstrom and Nairn 2018). The lack of 'female' entitlement to space is not exclusive to skateboarding; urban spaces frequently display male domination by inducing fear, such as patterned violence, verbal abuse, sexual assault, and the excess use of physical space by men (Beebeejaun 2016). Backstrom and Nairn (2018) define the concept of *strategic entitlement* as assuming there is, and aspiring towards, an ideal of equality in entitlement to space as opposed to creating separate spaces for fem individuals. While fem skateboarders have regularly disclosed their comfortability with "women-only" skate events (Atencio et al. 2009), the notable gap in this approach is that it maintains hetero-normative and cis-normative views of gender and creates unequal access for non-binary or gender-diverse skateboarders.

Filling in the Gaps

Although many publications address gender discrepancies regarding participation in skateboarding, most fail to connect the norms of authenticity in the subculture with gender and they adhere to a binary view of gender (Atencio et al. 2009; Backstrom and Nairn 2018; Kelly et al. 2006). Recent studies are shifting focus to increasing popularity and gender diversity in the competition side of skateboarding, dismissing the evolving subculture (D'Orazio 2020; McCarthy 2021). Finally, this study found no sources that considered the Halifax skateboard scene specifically.

Research Methods: Finding a Subculture Scattered in the City

This study relied on two instances of participant observation at the Halifax Commons Skatepark and nine semi-structured interviews lasting between 60 and 90 minutes with participants in the skateboarding subculture. Participant observation documented the layout of space, organization of people, gender presentation, and various noteworthy occurrences. Observation notes were later cross-referenced with descriptions gathered from the interviews. The interviews were conducted from January 21 until February 14, 2022, following approval by the Ethics Review Board at Dalhousie University. As skate culture extends past sole participation in the activity, the study was not exclusive to skateboarders; it was open to any self-described member, aged 18 or older, of the Halifax skate community, and one participant in Cape Breton. The objective was to obtain information on experiences and understandings of gender in the skateboarding subculture, so individuals of all gender identities were welcome to contribute. Recruitment relied primarily on social media posts with some snowball sampling.

The sample consisted of five cis female, two cis male, and two non-binary participants, all self-identifying their gender. Regarding gender identity, Jamie, Emily, Abby, Blaire, and Jay identify as fem or female, Sophie and Isaac identify as non-binary, and Charlie and Max identify as male (Table 1). All participants skateboard, apart from Emily, a member of the skate community who does not partake in the physical activity itself. When relevant, if the quote or data includes or excludes Emily, it is noted. The age of participants ranged from 21 to 34, with further details on participants in Table 1. Once interviews were transcribed, the names of participants were anonymized through the use of pseudonyms and the data was analyzed similarly to Glover and colleagues (2019): all were coded in NVivo 12, while quotes and relevant patterns were placed into a separate document to "give shape to themes" (Glover et al. 2019, 42-56).

When identifying applicable patterns, this study noted the recurrent experiences of participants regarding the skateboarding culture, norms, and hierarchy while cross-examining these patterns with the participant's gender. In addition, the study asked direct questions concerning gender within skateboarding, identifying any overlapping sentiments and experiences. After identifying significant patterns, this study applied inductive reasoning to address the research questions, seeking to understand if experiences within the subculture differ depending on gender and if the perception of authenticity played a role in constructing gendered experiences within skateboarding spaces.

Limitations

Despite using non-academic social media platforms for recruitment, almost all participants indicated having post-secondary education or an interest in sociology. This unanticipated limitation may result in the participants having supplementary knowledge of topics of gender and subcultures, perhaps increasing their self-reflexivity. Likewise, I could not provide financial compensation for participation, which might have benefitted and appealed to those who work full-time or have dependants. During recruitment, many self-identified male skateboarders interested in the study declined to proceed to the interview stage, explicitly noting that they did not feel they could add to a discussion of gender as they are cis male. Those who did participate were more hesitant to answer some questions that explicitly discussed gender.

I did not explicitly ask participants to self-identify race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Nevertheless, participants noted the skateboard scene as overwhelmingly white, with two participants noting their own "whiteness" as a source of privilege within the scene. Additionally, participants frequently observed an increase in queer skaters, with four participants identifying as such; however, other participants noted the prevalence of homophobia and transphobia within the skate community. Although this study was open to all gender and non-binary identities, no participants distinctly self-identified as transgender, or an individual whose gender identity does not align with their sex or gender assigned at birth (Bosson et al. 2021). While the terms "transgender" and "non-binary" are umbrella terms, neither are all-encompassing nor mutually exclusive. The two terms attempt to describe identities that cannot necessarily be categorized or explicitly defined. So, while the two participants in this study did not explicitly identify themselves as transgender, the definitions of non-binary and transgender intersect and are fluid with individual identities. In addition, these identities are not stagnant; thus, while the two participants in this study identified as non-binary, this does not indicate that they still identify with this particular classification today. This study does not consider these critical intersectional experiences but identifies them as potential patterns that require consideration in future studies. Further limitations are referred to throughout this analysis when applicable.

Analysis: A Repurposed or Rebranded Subculture?

Analyzing the data with attention to the aforementioned, interrelated concepts of symbolic subcultural membership, physical and social space, and gender entitlement allowed four themes to emerge from the interview data: (1) skateboarding subculture and space must be unlocked, and obtaining the *key* at an older age is more difficult; (2) gatekeeping is subtle and protects a 'core' group of skateboarders; (3) skate authenticity *accommodates* hegemonic masculinity, which is upheld through perceptions of other skateboarders; (4) *constructing* skate identity and gender

identity are interrelated, achieved through presentation, and solidified through identity claims; (5) public and skateboard spaces are restrictive and dominated by those who are entitled to *claim space.* Through my research, I found that there are gendered barriers that remain disguised as outward gestures of support for fem and gender-diverse skateboarders displayed through verbal affirmation and inordinate, unsolicited instruction or advice. These barriers further perpetuate the male-dominated construction of the skateboarding subculture. Understanding the experiences and roles of gender in a male-dominated subculture is necessary for understanding whether 'alternative' masculinity is a façade (Beal, 1996), while listening to the experiences and locating patterns of gender discrepancies in skateboarding may aid in creating a more equitable subculture.

Square Key Round Lock

Every participant identified an individual or a group who introduced them to the skateboarding scene; many described a male figure in their lives as making this introduction, aligning with the results of Kelly and colleagues (2006). Despite the wide range in age of initiation, starting at an older age was a recognized barrier to gaining social acceptance within the subculture. Participants explained that it was "challenging" or "awkward" learning at an older age with heightened levels of fear of falling, injury, and embarrassment. Notably, the average starting age was far later for fem participants who skateboarded than the other participants.

While describing how they began, all fem skaters and one non-binary skater recalled feeling hesitant or uncomfortable joining or accessing skateboarding until recently. Jay reported learning at a skatepark, but the skatepark was intimidating for most. Jamie, Abby, and Sophie explicitly mentioned going to the skatepark at certain times to avoid other skateboarders being there. As Sophie mentioned, "I go to the skatepark really early in the morning generally, or there [were] a couple of times in September I went during a school day. I go when I hope that nobody is going to be there unless I'm going with other people."

The lack of comfort may explain the later starting ages of the fem skateboarders and why almost all fem skateboarders learned in more discrete settings until building 'confidence' to go to the skatepark (Kelly et al. 2006). However, this does not account for the male and non-binary participants who started in more private settings or the fact that three of these skaters experienced intimidation when moving to a new skateboarding scene. Regardless of gender, new skateboarders must establish and present their authenticity through skill and cultural knowledge to gain access (Palmas 2013). In turn, this may explain why these three skateboarders described their feelings of intimidation as subsiding once they established themselves within the community.

Digging deeper, some of the reported intimidation appears to result from the presence of a group of skateboarders recognized as the 'core' (Dupont 2014); participants specify this clique as experienced and devoted male skaters of varying ages who are consistently at the skatepark. Despite the common understanding that the 'core' skateboarders are outwardly supportive of the increasing gender diversity, most fem and non-binary participants described experiences of feeling "intimidated," "judged," "excluded," "patronized," "treated differently," or "questioned" by the (cis) male skateboarders. Nevertheless, those who described these experiences also believed they were "unintentional," and the male skaters were "well-intentioned" and "supportive." Some, like Blair, did not feel anything negative about initially meeting the 'core.' As she described it, "… skating the park and stuff, it was good. I don't think I ever really had any negative experiences. I felt really welcomed, and I often question whether my gender identity and the way that I present myself had to do with why I was warmly welcomed." Other participants who interacted with the 'core' had varying experiences. For instance, Isaac has mixed feelings about the group, as they explained:

I know a few of them. Some of them are welcoming; others are just very, "if you suck, don't come." That's the type of vibe that they have; "if you're not good, if you suck, just don't show up. This is our park type of thing.

If you're good, that's fine. Don't get in anybody's way." I've definitely been questioned for wearing nail polish, that type of thing. But for the most part, it's been good.

In addition, some participants noted that older skateboarders obtain less encouragement or acceptance, especially if they are male. Since fem skaters receive 'overly' enthusiastic support compared to their male counterparts from 'core' skaters, three fem participants suggested this feels unearned or demeaning. Despite the foregoing variation in feelings of acceptance or intimidation and different paths in arriving at the skateboarding subculture, most participants described experiences of *gatekeeping* or barriers to accessing the community.

A Gated 'Core'
As previously established, age and gender appear to be decisive conditions for feeling accepted. While the presence of the 'core' group may cause intimidation, it does not directly inhibit individuals from entering the general skateboard community. Nevertheless, participants frequently noted gatekeeping, especially when discussing the 'core.' Participants who started, or joined the community, at a younger age, Emily, Charlie, Max, and Isaac, described interacting or associating with the 'core.' Except for Charlie, who skates with the same friends he made at the age of 12, the other three participants reported instances of gatekeeping that subsided once they began to prove their social connections.

While Emily, Abby, and Blair understood themselves as intertwined with the 'core' skaters, they felt their acceptance was contingent on a romantic relationship with a member. Blair formed a romantic relationship following her entrance into this group, but the 'core' group no longer invited her around once her relationship ended. As Jay mentioned, she had previously "dated" male skaters and did not start skateboarding earlier as others may perceive her as the "tag-a-long girlfriend that is trying it because [her] boyfriend was doing it…." These anecdotes allude to a gendered barrier of access carried out through perceived authenticity (Beal and Weidman 2003). This

barrier hinders the ability of fem and non-binary skaters to join at a younger age.

Likewise, a shared experience of gatekeeping, expressed by Jamie, Abby, Blair, Jay, and Sophie, consisted of receiving unsolicited advice at the skatepark from male skateboarders. Four of them equated this 'advice' to their marginalized gender identities and mentioned that it negatively affects them. Moreover, as the following excerpt from Abby's interview demonstrates, unsolicited advice is not just annoying, but it creates a barrier to the scene for fem and non-binary skateboarders.

> Sometimes the way they [approach] situations makes you more uncomfortable without them realizing they are making you uncomfortable, so I encountered that a lot. I find even when I skate now, I have to put up major boundaries with people I know and don't know who want to give me advice or come and comment on everything I am doing. When men are in the skatepark, they don't seem to have the same reaction. I feel talked down to a lot, and I feel I get 'mansplained' every time I go...

Furthermore, participants noted the 'core' group as comprised of who they invite to gatherings, parties, filming sessions, and street skateboarding locations. Their accounts of gatekeeping were primarily related to gender and skill. As Blair detailed, "I feel like you're more highly regarded and start to integrate more socially as you do get better, which is shitty. I'm like, 'I want to hang out with all the boys too.' I feel like if I was better, they would invite me around as their friend."

Atencio and colleagues (2009) display how male skateboarders act as "gatekeepers" in street skating spaces and found that access to this specific sphere for "women," extending to all skateboarders of marginalized genders, is limited and only facilitated through invitation by male skaters. Male skateboarders are privy to these subculturally significant facets of skateboarding, sustained through the 'dissuasion' of other skaters (Atencio et al. 2009). The gatekeeping in skateboarding is subtle yet prevents skaters of marginalized genders from gaining access to a 'deeper' level of the culture, such as street skating and

videography, and impedes entry to the 'core' group.

These narratives align with Bourdieu's (1984) concept of cultural capital and how 'core' skateboarders control the admission of participants based on perceptions of authenticity (Dupont 2014). Bourdieu (1984) asserted that 'authenticity' is cultivated and sustained by those with structural power through the socialization of those with less power; in this case, the 'elite' or the 'core' skateboarders socialize new skateboarders, establishing what is necessary for authentic participation in the subculture and governing their acceptance or rejection (Dupont 2014). Thus, the subcultural values of skateboarding influence the perception of authenticity necessary for acceptance (Dupont 2014). The subculture is enthusiastic about the rise in fem skaters, yet gender norms discourage fem and gender-diverse skateboarders from joining; this sustains a lack of representation and creates barriers to accessing cultural knowledge (Atencio et al. 2009). Therefore, the gatekeeping within this subculture is not necessarily through direct means upon entrance but through levelled prevention. As conveyed by participants, the male skaters display enthusiasm and support; however, these same skateboarders gatekeep access to the 'core,' achieved incidentally through authenticity, as further expanded upon in the following section.

However, it is necessary to consider that those who decided to partake in the study may influence the patterns of age observed in the study. For instance, there were no male participants who began skateboarding recently, perhaps due to the lack of entitlement they may feel to possessing skateboarding identity yet or those beginning may be too young to participant in the study. Further studies could alleviate this bias by defining 'new' versus 'experienced' and recruiting skateboarders by their level of experience, then comparing gender differences to their starting age. Nevertheless, based on the capabilities of this study, a later starting age appears to be a relevant barrier to being perceived as authentic. However, as all fem and one non-binary skater started at older ages, it is essential to consider gender. Perhaps these skaters did not join

earlier due to the deeply embedded societal gender norms and stereotypes of femininity that conflict with the standards of authenticity in the skateboarding subculture.

(Un)accommodating Authenticity

Establishing, upholding, and developing authenticity or legitimacy is a pivotal facet of subcultures (Beal 1996). Participants answered questions that aimed to uncover how the skate community, other skaters, and they themselves recognize authenticity. Their responses display a general understanding of authenticity as determined by the perceptions and standards of others. Hence, when asked if they considered *themselves* authentic skateboarders, most participants were more hesitant to answer than when referring to others; as Charlie emphasized, "...that's for other people to answer."

Reflecting on what authenticity 'looks like,' participants tended to point to risk, dedication, skill, and norms. Participants establish risk as a necessary form of authenticity; this aligns with nearly all existing literature on the skateboarding subculture, including Beal and Weidman (2003). One measure of risk frequently and implicitly introduced by participants was the use of helmets in skateboarding. Nearly all participants recognized that wearing a helmet is seen as "taboo" or "not cool." Furthermore, as Jay explained, "... there's not too many people that are wearing helmets besides the kids because their parents are [nagging them to]."

Apart from risk, participants often referred to dedication in terms of bodily exertion when considering authenticity, illustrated through words such as "determination" and "perseverance." As Charlie explained, "I'll be exhausted and sweaty and bloody, and I'm like, yeah, probably should have called it an hour ago." Likewise, all participants mentioned dedication in terms of time. Participants frequently recognized the 'core' group of skateboarders as devoted to skateboarding. Whereas Sophie understood their 'lack' of time-commitment as an obstacle to self-identifying as authentic, stating, "...at the beginning, I always felt that I was not a real skater because I'm not that good, and I don't skate every day."

Shifting from physical displays of authenticity, all participants indirectly and directly discussed cultural dedication through commonly shared beliefs, norms, and attitudes, such as being "rebellious," "tough," "carefree," "anti-capitalist," "anti-establishment," "anti-authority," "anti-police," "willing to risk their life," "not a Trump supporter," and "supportive of other skaters."

Furthermore, this 'core' group was explained through many accounts as fully immersed in skateboarding culture and as engaging in substance use and partying, another historically relevant aspect of skateboarding that speaks to the defiant disposition of the subculture (Atencio et al. 2009). Seeing that it is the dominant group controlling approval, 'core' members of any subculture may create intimidation (Atencio et al. 2009); however, this skate group has the added layer of gender. The male-dominated nature produces further unease for the participants of marginalized genders who were historically denied from these spaces, creating additional barriers to proving the same level of authenticity. Participants who interacted with this group discussed the challenges of access or, as previously touched on, fears of being perceived as 'just joining because of their male partner,' which Blair noted would be "incredibly inauthentic." In Beal and Weidman's (2003) findings, this common gendered perception prevents fem skateboarders from being regarded as authentic.

While participants commented on "the best" or "really good" skaters in terms of the risk, skill, and dedication discussed above, overwhelmingly, this was in direct reference to male or to the 'core' skaters. While describing her "guy" friends, Abby said, "Pretty much all my guy friends are into street and park, and a few are super 'shreddy' in the bowl, and they can do both and are just gods and so good at everything."

Despite all participants describing the subculture as predominantly male and referring to male skaters as the most authentic, only six participants stated that there are gender norms in skateboarding. In contrast, two male-identified participants mentioned that they could not think of any, and Jay stated that none

existed. Although some participants did not identify gender norms or stereotypes, many implied them. Max, for example, narrated the following about skate culture, misogyny, and homophobia:

> I just think about the old sexist skateboard ads that you would see with skimpy-clad women all the time and all the misogynistic jokes that I remember seeing in magazines when I was growing up when I was reading the skate stuff...I don't see much argument against women skating anymore, and that's good. I still see a lot of pushback from people with homophobic stuff, which I can't stand.

As per the results of this study and the existing literature, gender norms in skateboarding require deliberating in two overlapping ways. These include an analysis of the perceptions that coincide with the gender norms of broader society versus those that counter such hegemonic expectations of gender. When directly asked, the gender norms that six participants specified surround the male domination and participation of the activity and skate community, masculine aesthetics, and descriptions that depict hyper-masculinity. For those who did not identify gender norms when explicitly asked, all three participants described gendered depictions throughout their interviews, such as how the subculture consists primarily of male members. Perhaps a valuable consideration is that the understanding of the word 'gender' may be generally distanced from cis men, resulting in the male skaters dissociating with the subject, deeming it inapplicable to them in discussion.

When considering gender norms relative to the subcultural standards of authenticity, the primary principles of authenticity often conflict with the societal guidelines for marginalized genders. More specifically, binary gender norms in society typically label women and girls as having less risk-taking capabilities (Beal and Weidman 2003). Yet, risk is a primary trait of the subcultural authenticity that remains firmly in the perceptions of the participants. Access and encouragement of sports from a young age become gendered and designates aggression, risk, and physical capability to masculinity (Schaillée et al. 2021). Within the gender binary,

this is only acceptable for cis men. The gender norms and discouragement surrounding risk may explain why fem or non-binary participants who had an interest in skateboarding decided not to join.

In addition, most fem and one non-binary skater interviewed implicitly alluded to these gender norms while discussing topics of not wanting to be perceived as 'bad' or hiding in these spaces until they learn. The overlap between gender norms and fear of inadequacy may imply a 'stereotype threat' where "members of negatively stereotyped groups often feel anxiety around the possibility of confirming negative group stereotypes. This anxiety, in turn, can undermine performance in high-stakes testing situations" (Bosson et al. 2021, 133). This phenomenon likely stands as a barrier to skill development, as it may prevent someone from skating where they would progress or 'test' their skills, such as the skatepark or events.

In addition, the frequently mentioned rise in fem (and, to a lesser degree, queer and non-binary) skateboarders in their 20s or 30s may come with the continual progression and trends of opposing gender norms and emboldened feminism. Currie and colleagues (2011) allude to an overall direction of a "redefined" feminism where fem skateboarders alter perceptions of gender norms through skating. Participants recognized this increase during the last two or three years or around the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The start of the pandemic was a noticeably "active" time for social movements (Pleyers 2020) and a politically reactive time through the presidency of Donald Trump and the re-election period in the United States. Kolod (2017) marks this as a perceived disruption to the accretion of feminist movements and progress where a reactive rise in feminism occurred. Perhaps the neighbouring politics and increased attention to political movements extend to further encouragement of breaking gender norms and increased representation of fem and non-binary skaters during this time.

Additional barriers crop up once fem and non-binary folks join the skate scene. Helmets are not often worn and generally frowned

upon; thus, fem and non-binary skateboarders must choose between looking authentic and being safe, which is a challenging dilemma for beginners. Additionally, the perception of confirming or displaying gender stereotypes appears to be a common concern among fem and non-binary participants; not only must they prove themselves through subcultural entry but gendered conceptions.

Constructing Identity

As the earlier literature clarifies, forming and enacting identity is a primary tenet of subcultures. Drawing from Goffman (1959), individuals construct subcultural identity and identity performance by perceiving the self in relation to the acceptance and authenticity of others (Newman and O'Brien 2008). As previously determined, a subculture's 'core' group produces and upholds these standards through which an individual forms their identity. This skateboarding identity is influenced by and simultaneously impacts gender identity. In skateboarding subcultures, gender identity and presentation are obstacles for some yet a channel of expression for others. This study observes and examines the intersections of skateboarding identity and gender identity while considering criteria, "claims," and presentation of identity.

When regarding criteria of skateboarding identity, commitment to the culture is critical (Snyder 2011). Participants described their cultural commitment through the number of friends or relationships and their social depth with other skateboarders, most of whom described over half of their friendships as being within the skate community, while four fem participants noted romantic relationships with skaters.

Additionally, most participants related their identity to skateboarding and its subcultural values, which are critical criteria to consider before being accepted or rejected by others (Harris and Dacin 2019). Participants also included personality characteristics as well as political and social values as markers of skateboarder identity. For instance, Max described his identity as "an ally to the community, the LGBTQ, and the female community" and "a white, socialist skateboarder." He continued, "I use

skateboarder as the description for pretty much the 'authentic' as well with the 'rebellion attitude' that skateboarding comes with."

When considering the expression and performance of skate identity, participants described specific knowledge, attitudes, and skate and clothing styles. All participants displayed direct and indirect skateboard-specific cultural and technical knowledge, including where to shop, norms, values, terminology, popular bars, events, etiquette, videos, and numerous other standards. In addition, participants mentioned 'inside jokes' that create a sense of 'insider' and 'outsider' and other presentations of identity claims (Dupont 2019). Abby expanded this through her understanding of identity claims stating, "I also feel like skateboarders' flex on people or each other with their lingo, like they are talking about tricks in a way that is almost exclusive if you don't know them; or, they will make references to old skate videos that are obscure."

As previously referenced, offering unsolicited advice, possessing, or enforcing skate etiquette, and making specific cultural references may serve as a means for members to present their knowledge. These performances may aid in proving authenticity and status to gain social capital within the boundaries of the skatepark (Tsikalas and Jones 2018). Furthermore, these 'identity claims,' perhaps incidentally, maintain an 'insider' and an 'outsider' (Atencio et al. 2009) on multiple levels of the subculture.

Shifting to identity presentation, participants recognized a typical, outwardly presented attitude as carefree, with seven participants using words and phrases such as "go with the flow," "chill," and "relaxed." The attitude of 'trying too hard' is discussed by Beal and Weidman (2003) regarding new skateboarders, however, participants recognize this to extend past just new skaters and to the subculture as a whole. Goffman's (1959) impression management is applicable as participants frequently posited this attitude as performative; skateboarders must try hard without appearing to do so. Although participants distanced themselves from this attitude, it was overtly present in almost all interviews.

Seven of the eight skateboarders recognize tricks and different styles of skateboarding as an essential component of forming and presenting skateboarding identity. For instance, a person can have "surf style," or as Blair described, a skateboarder with loose and flowy movements resembling a surfer; as Isaac elaborated, "there's definitely different styles of skateboarding, and a lot of people have created identities from their style." Discussions of clothing style also arose in eight interviews, with participants describing the attire as "baggy" and "comfortable," with many tying the style to the practicality of the activity and displays of 'alternative masculinity'. As discussed by Hellman and Odenbring (2020), skateboarders find ways to display and redefine "white, middle-class ["subversive"] masculinity through bodily performances" (47) including by appropriating hip-hop clothing style to adopt the persona of "being bad" or "aggressive" (Hellman and Odenbring 2020, 47-48), thus engaging in acts of alternative masculinity (Beal 1996).

When considering the impact of gender, all participants implied that their gender shaped their skateboarding identities, five of whom mentioned their gender identity as having a discernible impact on their skateboarding experiences. While many related to the previously discussed skate identities, three fem participants dissociated with risk, negligence of life, and substance use; as Lombard (2010) discussed, some 'feminine' skateboarders may not want to associate with this perceived deviance in skateboarding.

In terms of performance, six participants reflected upon their gender expression through skateboarding. Abby and Blair felt pressure to present themselves as more masculine to fit into the skate scene. However, both participants also stated that it is "powerful" or "fun" to express femininity in a masculine space, and they provided examples of when they consciously chose to wear particularly 'feminine' clothing to the skatepark. In contrast, Sophie felt pressure to present as more feminine in certain skate scenes. For instance, when describing their experiences in the local skate shop, Sophie stated, "I feel like I have to be a girl skater in those spaces, and my inclination is to be more fem to appeal to the

very masculine skate bros who are in there. I feel very at odds with it, and I don't really feel myself."

Blair, Jamie, and Isaac saw their gender or 'queer' presentations as possibly an inadvertent advantage. Isaac explained that they are male-presenting, and other skaters may not know they identify as non-binary, insinuating this shields them. Blair and Jamie discussed how their 'straight-passing' or 'cis fem' presentations were possible reasons they experienced an "easier" or more "welcoming" entrance to the space. While reflecting on their presentation in the skate scene, Jamie said, "I guess the [fact] that I'm femme and straight presenting, and also white, just basically makes for an easier journey to exist in that space, where it's more difficult for someone else."

As Butler (1988) articulates, an individual must present their assumed gender 'correctly' according to society's binary norms; this may account for participants who felt they could not present as 'too' feminine or 'too' masculine. Butler (1988) emphasizes that gender is a public performance by which there is a script that can be interpreted in different ways, yet stray too far, and there are social consequences. Skateboarders may distance themselves from normative masculinity; however, their gender presentations must still fit within the gender binary. Likewise, the predominance of heteronormativity in the skate scene may explain the perceived advantage of passing as straight. However, as four participants indicated, skateboarding spaces may allow these members to counter cis-gendered and heteronormative norms (MacKay and Dallaire 2012). Some fem and non-binary skaters utilize the 'alternative' subculture to "reject an appearance-based femininity" (Currie et al. 2011, 303), while others employ femininity to reimagine skateboarding.

Furthermore, those who present their gender 'wrong' are often penalized (Butler 1988), as portrayed by Isaac's description of being questioned and criticized at the skatepark for wearing nail polish as a male-presenting person. Thus, participants explained that managing gender presentation is required to receive approval (Butler 1988). Skateboarders must present themselves as authentic through

their skate identity, but if their gender does not align with the required cis masculinity, they encounter further obstacles in their identity presentation.

Claiming Space

As the existing literature confirms, claiming space is fundamental to skate culture and is a sustained gendered barrier. This section explores how people of different gender identities use space while examining entitlement and resistance in skateboarding and public spaces.

Skateboarding extends to several settings as an activity and a subculture. Street skateboarding predominantly occurs on 'public,' yet regulated, properties and utilizes the architecture to find creative ways to skateboard and perform various tricks (Woolley et al. 2011). Eight participants referenced skateboarding as a marginal activity in public spaces, including negative public perceptions, 'defensive architecture,' forced ejection, and altercations with the public or authority. These descriptions illustrate the social exclusion of groups that use space in 'inappropriate' ways (Glenney and Mull 2018). The subsequent conflict allows skaters to exercise the subculture's rebellious ideologies, as noted by five participants; however, it is necessary to consider *who* is most comfortable or able to enact these anti-authoritarian ideologies dependent on the threat that resisting may pose.

Participants characterized street skating as distinctly male-dominated. Historically, social norms "restrict" marginalized genders from using public space (Beebeejuan 2017). As well, these norms frame femininity as intrinsically subdued and unobtrusive. As street skating occupies substantial physical and auditory public space, it is conceivably gendered. Consequently, fewer participants partook in street skating than anticipated; therefore, the discussions primarily considered skateparks. However, the difference in participation in street skating may also depend on the number of years participants have skated and the different skills or styles they retain.

Unlike street skateboarding, the skatepark is a designated space with various features to aid in progressing and displaying skills (Glenney

and Mull 2018). Skateparks also serve as a physical space for members to converge and perform cultural knowledge (Tsikalas and Jones 2018). This could explain why participants primarily depict experiences of acceptance, authenticity, and identity performance at the skatepark. Eight of the nine participants have gone or consistently go to Halifax Commons skatepark. Six participants illustrated a 'new side' of the skatepark, which has smoother ground, more features and a large ledge that faces the city, while the 'old side' has worse pavement and fewer features.

The narratives were almost synonymous in terms of the spatial organization of people; the 'new side' is predominantly claimed by skaters who were "male," "good," or 'core,' while the 'old side' consists of "scooter kids," "beginners," and "queer" or "fem" skaters. Descriptions frequently illustrated 'the ledge' as a hangout, for many 'core' male skateboarders and their bags, characteristic of a locker room. The common sentiment of this group was that they were "not actually" judgmental of others but rather an overbearing or intimidating presence. The participants' descriptions of the physical and social organization of the Halifax skatepark in the Commons correspond to the observations made by this study.

Eight participants depicted physical and social skateboard spaces as male occupied and dominated, while five mentioned it is overwhelmingly white, cis, and heteronormative. Many fem and non-binary participants described themselves or others as feeling designated to the 'old side.' That said, some skaters of marginalized genders may use the skatepark to develop a sense of belonging and visibility (Atencio et al. 2009). Abby and Blair suggested actively 'taking up' space within the male-dominated areas by skating on the 'new side.' However, for others, the attention generated from being fem-presenting or not cis-male induced feelings of being an outsider, resulting in an undesired sense of visibility with no alternative but to seek further invisibility (Atencio et al. 2009).

All participants considered the scene as "changing" in favourable ways with increased gender diversity. Whether directly or indirectly, most participants supposed this was due to the

increased cultural representation of 'fem' skateboarders. Seven participants referenced distinct fem, gender-inclusive, or queer skate groups and events, or fem and non-binary skaters as "taking" or "carving" distinct spaces within the skate scene.

Reflecting a specific event dedicated to fem and gender-diverse skateboarders, Blair and Abby had nearly indistinguishable accounts of the space as challenging to claim. Although many 'fem' skaters attended, a "surprising" number of "guys" showed up. Ostensibly, they were there to show their support, but they took up the space instead. Blair recounted how "it ended up being essentially what felt like us watching all the guys all night." Abby explained this further:

> Even in those events, [the guys] still dominated the space, which wasn't intentional; their intention was to come and support us and show their support by just being there, but then they're hitting ramps, flying around, jumping over shit and doing kickflips off this and that. We're just trying to have a girl's day and take the space [and] they are here to support us; can't they just sit on the sideline for this? ...God love them, they mean well; I guess because they never walked in our shoes, they don't understand.

Emily made a point in her interview that helps to contextualize this event and suggests it reflects something larger:

> That is typical, carving space and not waiting for men to give the space. They are like, "Okay, we are going to carve our own space and going to have our own events and were going to make it okay so that women, or gender diverse people, can feel okay to start doing this." I think it is a really positive thing, but unfortunately, women or gender-diverse people have to take the responsibility to do that themselves. I think it is just reflective of our society in general.

The historical and social designation of and entitlement to space extends to the skatepark and explains the composition of the 'new' and 'better' side as dominated by male and 'core' skaters.

Conclusion: Deceptive 'Equality'

The skateboarding scene is still a subculture in Halifax; it maintains conditions of acceptance, authenticity, and identity distinct from dominant society; however, it is evolving. With the increase in fem, non-binary, and queer skaters, more independent groups are forming and utilizing the subcultural space to serve a different meaning. Perhaps the historically resistant and rebellious attitudes that coincide with skateboarding provide a space for fem and non-binary skaters to counter the gender norms in the larger society and the skateboarding subculture. But this potential is stymied by hollow support and assumptions of equal space.

This unique subculture dissociates from 'typical' masculinity and seemingly supports gender diversity. Advice may be a perceived display of this support; however, when this advice is unsolicited, as experienced by all fem and one non-binary skater, it serves as a reminder of inferiority. These 'supportive' gestures may allow male skaters to solidify their authenticity by asserting cultural capital over others. Despite describing male skaters as well-intentioned, much of the praise and support was seen as rather tokenistic and patronizing as the bar was set far lower than their male counterparts.

While the idyllic subcultural transformation dissolves gender norms once the space is declared equal, it is a misconception that ignores the historical barriers of gender. Although the skate community is outwardly in favour of fem and non-binary skateboarders, it does not automatically convert this into an accepting space. This issue is where both understandings of equity and "strategic entitlement" are pertinent; the assumption that there is an achievable ideal of equal entitlement rather than creating separate space (Backstrom and Nairn 2018). Atencio and colleagues (2009) found that fem skateboarders have expressed comfort in designated spaces. Evidently, the only fem participant who did not recognize gender norms or experience intimidation in skateboarding attended separate nights for fem skateboarders at their local indoor skatepark in Cape Breton, a controlled setting notably absent in Halifax. Furthermore, participants

illustrated much value in the designated event intended to allow fem and non-binary skaters to 'take up' the ordinarily male-dominated space; however, it was disheartening when the male skaters imposed on the space instead.

Although skateboard spaces that acknowledge and work to mitigate misogynistic and heteronormative customs can reduce the challenges 'fem' skateboarders endure (Carr 2017), this is not (yet) the case in Halifax. It may not be conscious marginalization by male skaters; nonetheless, there are gender barriers within this hyper-masculine setting disguised as support. While many fem, non-binary, and queer skaters found identity in distinct groups outside the 'core,' they still felt relegated to the 'old side' of the skatepark, and kept out of the way, less 'in sight.' It is evident that the skateboard community has collective importance for all participants; it is an encouraging and often safe space for many skaters. Yet, the skate event and the Halifax Commons skatepark depict gendered exclusion and entitlement to space maintained through the façade of support. Exploring these gender barriers further is essential as those trying to skate their way into the 'new side,' the better side, the authentic side, are responsible for "carving out" their own space.

Name	Gender Identity / Pronouns (at time of interview)	Age	Skateboarder or non-skateboarder	Number of Years "Really" Skating or in Skate Comm unity	Frequently Referred to Location	Mentioned Skate Group Affiliation or Interactions
Jamie	Fem (she/her)	20-25	Skateboarder	Initial: 15 yrs. 'Really:" 2-3 yrs.	Halifax	Queer skate group
Emily	Fem (she/her)	30-35	Non-skateboarder	Initial: 20 yrs. (est "a kid") 'Really:" 4 yrs.	Halifax	'Core' group
Abby	Fem (she/her)	30-35	Skateboarder	Initial: 9 yrs. (est. in com.) 'Really:" 3 yrs.	Halifax	'Core' group/ fem skate
Blair	Fem (she/her)	20-25	Skateboarder	2 yrs.	Halifax	Queer skate group/'core' group
Jay	Fem (she/her)	20-25	Skateboarder	Initial: 3-4 yrs. (est. in com.) 'Really:" 1 yr.	Cape Breton	All fem skate group
Sophie	Non-Binary (they/them)	20-25	Skateboarder	Initial: 2-3 (est. in com.) 'Really:" 1-2 yrs.	Halifax	Queer skate group
Isaac	Non-Binary (they/them)	20-25	Skateboarder	7-8 yrs.	Halifax	Non-specified
Charlie	Male (he/him)	20-25	Skateboarder	14-15 yrs.	Halifax	Tied to 'core'/ outer 'core
Max	Male (he/him)	20-25	Skateboarder	11-12 yrs.	Halifax	Non-specified/ interacts with 'core'

Table 1: Detailed Participant Characteristics & Group Affiliation

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