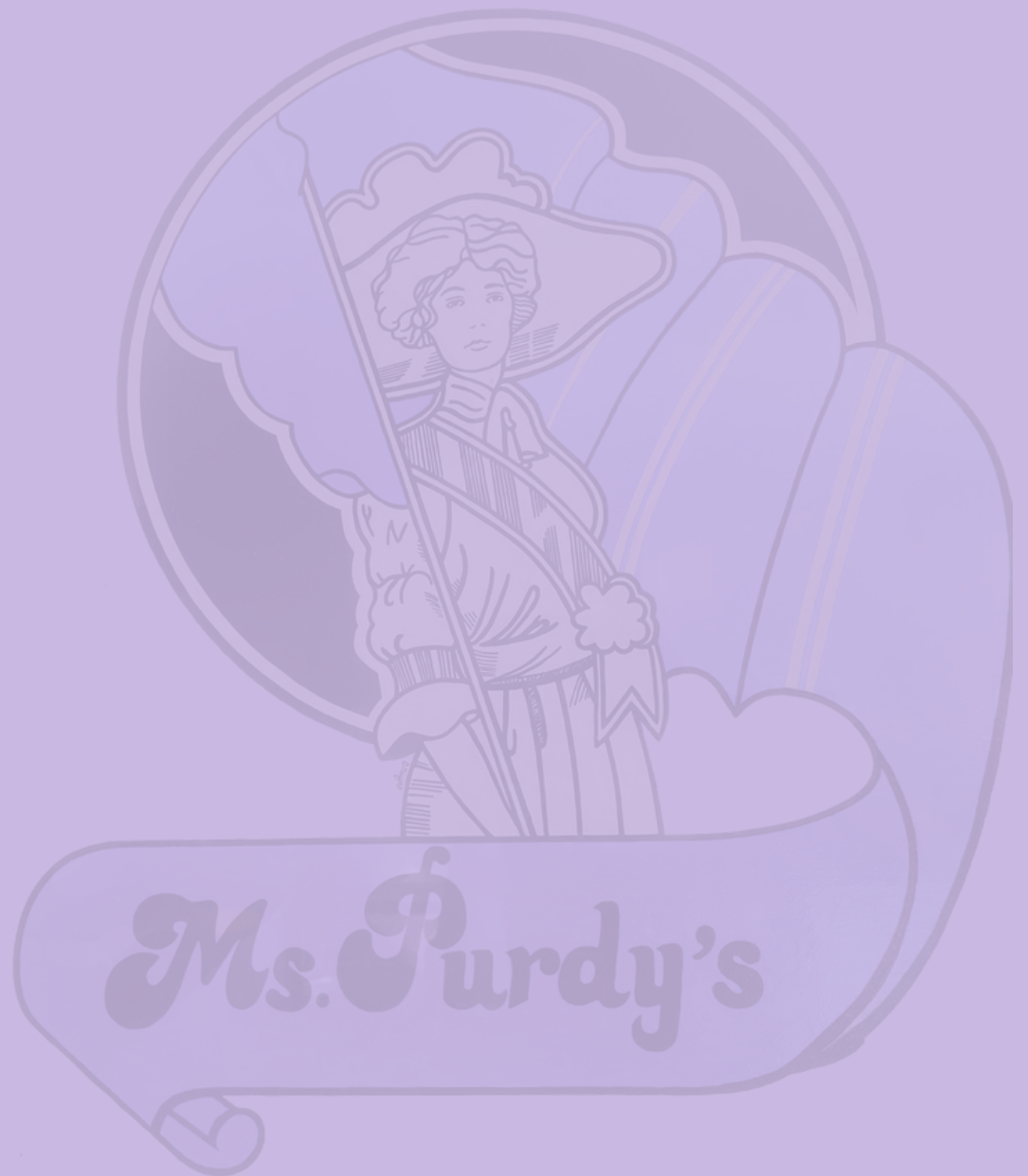


Out (and) On the Town

The Evolution of Queer Spaces in
Winnipeg, Manitoba



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Abstract

Queer spaces are vital locations for safety, community-building, and self-expression for queer people. These spaces offer a break from broader societal expectations and create an environment where queer people can be authentically themselves around others with shared experiences. First recordings of queer spaces in Winnipeg were primarily informal and hidden in plain sight; the railyards, the grounds behind the Manitoba Legislative Building, or “The Hill” as it was commonly known, and the washrooms at Eaton’s were all used for a similar purpose. These and other semi-private locations in the city allowed people, particularly gay men, to meet with less fear of being noticed. Such early examples of gathering highlight that, without official queer spaces, our communities will always find a way to meet one another and create their own space.

This research explores how people learned and learn about queer spaces in Winnipeg, how the spaces have formed, shifted, and been accessed, and by whom. Using semi-structured interviews with queer Winnipeggers and archival research spanning many decades, this study looks at the evolution of these spaces across historical and contemporary contexts.

With this said, not all spaces that are intended for queer community members are inherently safe or comfortable for people of all identities, specifically 2S and QTPOC as well as those who are bisexual, gender non-conforming, or transgender. This also extended to queer participants who described themselves as disabled or having a body that did not fit mainstream beauty standards. A few participants noted that within queer spaces, they felt watched, disrespected, or unwelcome, demonstrating that a “queer” space does not automatically equate to safety for all people. Such dynamics highlight the importance of intersectional approaches to co-creating space.

Abstract Cont'd

The findings have shown that both historical and contemporary spaces are commonly directed towards cisgender, white, gay men, with few lesbian spaces, and minimal spaces for 2S, gender non-conforming, and transgender individuals. Even to this day, intentional queer spaces are few and far between. There has also been a noticeable shift from physical to virtual locations for connection, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Glossary

BIPOC – Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour.

Contemporary – For this study, contemporary refers to time periods within the 2000s or relating to spaces or events that still exist at the time of writing.

Historical – For this study, historical refers to time periods prior to the 2000s and to spaces that did exist or events that did happen but no longer exist or happen.

Official queer space – A space that was created with the intention of being for queer people.

Queer – For the purposes of this study, I am using queer as an umbrella term for all 2SLGBTQ+ community members. If I am referring to a specific group within this umbrella [such as referring to lesbian bars], I will use that word. Additionally, if there is someone I spoke to who preferred a specific term over queer, I will use that instead. It is important to note that in 2026, the current year in which I am writing this paper, the word queer is widely accepted and used among 2SLGBTQ+ community members.

Sapphic – People with a femme gender identity who are romantically attracted to other people with a femme gender identity. Named after the Greek poet, Sappho, from the island of Lesbos, known for writing poetry to her female lover.

Unofficial queer space – A space that queer people made queer by being there in a group setting.

2SQTBIPOC – An acronym for Two-Spirit, Queer, and Transgender, Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour. It is only used in reference to queer individuals who are BIPOC.

2SLGBTQ+ – An acronym for people within the queer community “Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and more.”

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1 Introduction

1.1 Research Context and Scope

Throughout this study, I use the terms historical and contemporary to place emphasis on the difference between temporal and spatial contexts of queer life in Winnipeg throughout the past century. Historical refers to periods before the 2000s and to spaces that existed and events that occurred but no longer do. Contemporary refers to the 2000s to the time of writing (April 2026) or to spaces that still exist and events that still occur as of the time of writing. I also use the term queer as an umbrella term, which will be described in further detail in Section 3.1.1.

People often do not give Winnipeg much credit, seeing it only as a cold city with too many mosquitoes – while occasionally true, Winnipeg is much more than that. As the most populated city in Manitoba and the largest urban hub between Calgary and Toronto (a distance of about 3,400 km), Winnipeg drew many rural prairie queers in the 1930s–1950s (Millward, 2015 p. 157). This positioned Winnipeg as a space for anonymity and connection that was often impossible in smaller prairie towns.

This specifically rings true for many queer folks born into heteronormative and even hostile communities, finding themselves needing to migrate to a more private place to safely explore who they are (Millward, 2015 p. 157). Within the broader “rural-urban binary,” Winnipeg functioned as a place of refuge and anonymity, that many smaller towns could not provide (Millward, 2015 p. 157). Binnie explains that scholars, such as Kath Weston, argue that this migration is more than a dissonance between urban and rural life, but imagined as safe environments where queer identities have a chance to be expressed and understood (Binnie, 2004, p. 59). The weight of this information might allude to why so many framed Winnipeg as a step forward; although clearly many people found they needed a more progressive city as in the 1980s, this often meant Winnipeg queers left for the bigger cities – ie. Vancouver and Toronto (Millward, 2015 p. 157).

Queer community members in Winnipeg were able to make strong connections across the prairies, through events such as the Conference of Western Gay Clubs. All Prairie members’ clubs were represented at the first conference, demonstrating the strong connection between the central provinces, despite the distance between them (Millward, 2015 p. 85). Because of this connection,

provincially and regionally, Winnipeg was known to have a queer network, which drew people in (Korinek, 2018, p. 32) Queer folks also came for the University of Manitoba or the Royal Winnipeg Ballet (RWB); the ballet was seen as a very queer place to work (Korinek, 2018, p. 32). *Carousel Capers*, a queer newsletter from the 1960s and '70s, noted that the value in these conferences was the “feeling of solidarity achieved through sharing” (Millward, 2015, p. 86). The broader network within the prairies emphasizes the role of queer Winnipeg within the larger Canadian queer landscape. Those who did not leave in the 80’s made it clear that this decision reflected their pride and love for the prairies and they had connections to the queer people and spaces they knew (Korinek, 2018, p. 32).

Currently, Winnipeg’s queer history is not readily available, making it hard to know or understand. Often, much of a community’s history lies within the knowledge and memories of those who experienced it and is lost when someone dies, if it is not passed on. It is vital to record this history so that it is not lost or forgotten.

1.2 Research Questions

The research questions that provide the basis for this study are:

Q1. How have queer spaces historically been advertised and accessed in Winnipeg? How has that changed?

Q2. What are the differences between historical spaces and contemporary spaces in terms of community, representation, and how people learn about queer spaces?

Q3. What form do contemporary queer spaces take and what form did queer spaces take historically?

1.3 Positionality Statement

I am approaching this research as a Treaty 1, Winnipeg born and raised, fourth generation Finnish-Scottish settler. I have known I was queer since I was 12 and started learning about queer history, terminology, and place in society at that time. This knowledge occurred through observation of how queer individuals, including myself, are perceived in society at large, as well as conversations with people of varying life experiences. A great joy in life for me is learning about

how people experience space and place. One reason I began to study City Planning was to be part of creating an accessible public realm for those who often feel excluded from it.

Much of my young adult life thus far was spent in Halifax, Mi'kma'ki, so a lot of my experience in queer spaces has been informed by that local context, both before and after impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on public spaces. This knowledge has also provided me with the ability to compare queer spaces in Winnipeg and Halifax, allowing me to see what is being done for the creation of queer spaces, in two different contexts.

I move through most spaces, queer spaces included, with privilege that shapes what I see, value, and can access. My understanding of queerness, community, and space has been shaped by the ever-present white colonial histories and western frameworks of the public realm. For this reason, the goal of this research has been to look for the histories and record the experiences of queers from across the 2SLGBTQ+ spectrum, of varying ages, abilities, races, and backgrounds.

I am grateful to the queer elders who paved the way, who created clandestine spaces so that future generations could gather freely and publicly. It is my hope that this study can act as a show of appreciation for them and part of what I can offer future generations of queer folks.

1.4 Document Structure

This capstone is organized into seven main sections, which trace the historical and contemporary evolution of queer spaces in Winnipeg, aiming to center community knowledge and experience. The structure is intended to move from context, to empirical findings, to analysis, and reflections of future research.

Section 1 sets the scene for the research context and project scope. It contextualizes Winnipeg on a broader scale of conversations of queer people's migration in and out of the city, the anonymity that the city provides, networks within the Prairies, and the spatial quality of the city that makes it so unique. This section also includes the research questions for the paper, key terms used throughout the paper and their definitions, and a positionality statement to inform readers about my perspective and the lens I bring to this research.

Section 2 details the methods used for the study, including a qualitative, mixed-methods approach, combining semi-structured interviews and archival research. This section explains how I recruited participants, the structure of the interviews, how consent was obtained, and the ethical

considerations involved in the process. This section also discusses which archival sources were consulted, namely The ArQuives, the Two-Spirit Archives Collection, and the Manitoba Gay and Lesbian Archives Collection.

Section 3 presents the Literature Review, which situates the research within existing research on queer spaces. While there is some engagement with broader national and international literature, the section emphasizes Winnipeg-focused research, identifying aspects that are missing, specifically in representation of lesbians, queer people of colour, Indigenous queer communities, and transgender people. The review is organized by theme, first looking at how queer spaces were created historically, what shape they took (eg. bar, park, community space), and who gathered there, then looking at more contemporary examples of queer space.

Section 4 features insights from interviews with queer Winnipeggers. It looks at how participants define queer space, and how they have experienced queer space, throughout the time they have been engaging in queer spaces in the city. Subsections consider historical and contemporary spaces, demographics associated with these spaces, and perceptions of barriers to accessing these spaces. This section ends by looking to the future, including participants' visions for what queer spaces might look like in the future.

Section 5 includes findings from the archives, focusing on historical materials to understand how the creation of and access to queer spaces happened prior to social media and greater acceptance allowed queer spaces to be of broader public knowledge. This section looks at themes of safety, accessibility, physical queer spaces, and how people learned about the spaces.

Section 6 offers an analysis and discussion which brings together all the findings to create a bigger picture of the evolution of queer space in Winnipeg. This section also looks at what it means to create inclusive environments and the importance of honouring queer history, while imagining future possibilities for queer spaces.

Finally, Section 7 returns to answering the research questions, in a discussion of whether they have been answered and how. It summarizes the research findings and reflects on the importance of queer spaces, while acknowledging ongoing challenges. In this section, I highlight questions arising from my own research and end with reflections about queer community, care, and the importance of documenting this information.

2 Research Methods

Through semi-structured interviews with queer individuals 18+ and a review of sources found in archives, this study aims to investigate the evolution of queer spaces. The goal of the study is to understand which queer spaces did exist, exist today, how they were accessed, and their importance to queer community and more broadly, to the society of which they are a part. Each method was able to answer each research question in different ways. Where the questions ask about historical aspects of queer spaces, it was answered through interviews with 60+ participants, literature primarily by Dr. Korinek and Dr. Millward, and by documents in the archives. Contemporary aspects within the questions were mostly answered through interviews, as most of the documentation from the literature and the archives were older; participants were able to provide contextual information about their experiences in queer spaces today.

2.1 Disseminating Capstone Interview Information

The methodology for contacting participants was not entirely successful, as the QR code created to reach out to me was not accessible to all people, particularly older adults and those without smart devices. It was not until later in the process that I amended my ethics application to allow for directly emailing individuals, which was successful. Additionally, while a lot of information about queer spaces exists in the archives, it did not go nearly as far back as I had assumed or hoped it would; it also was not as diverse as I had wanted it to be. The majority of the information only focused on gay men and lesbian women, with the occasional mention of bisexuality; anyone else was left out.

2.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

To gain an understanding of queer Winnipegger's perceptions of queer spaces, it was important to speak to an array of community members. I carefully considered the design and ethical implications of the questions and the decision on how to invite people to study. I conducted the interviews in a relational manner, focusing on the feminist approach of Ethics of Care by Carol Gilligan (1977), as described by Israel and Hay (2006). They write that, for Gilligan, "an ethics of care... stresses people's relationships with one another, the importance of context and nurturing relationships," which is how I attempted to lead the interviews I conducted.

To share information about the project, I created a poster and an explanation of the project, which I then emailed to various organizations, many of which passed the information on to others or posted on their social platforms. Additionally, I brought these posters to a few businesses that kindly put them up for me.

People were able to contact me through QR code on the poster, my email located on the poster, social media, such as a queer Winnipeg Facebook page, emailing and messaging queer groups in the city who then spread the word, and eventually, through direct email. I was looking for people who were older than 18 and part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. In the end, I was in contact with over 50 people who expressed interest in participating in this research. The number of those who ended up participating was 14 within an array of ages between around 18 to around 80. This change from 50 interested to 14 participants was largely due to scheduling conflicts and limited follow-up responses after the initial correspondence, rather than active withdrawal.

I received consent forms from each participant after our initial contact; the forms were signed prior to our meetings. Interviews ran between half an hour and an hour and a half, depending on how much we spoke throughout. When meeting via the secure UM Zoom account, meetings were recorded and the audio was transcribed through the UM Zoom transcription service, which was automatically uploaded securely to the cloud and my personal UofM file storage system. After the transcript was generated, I reviewed it to ensure it was accurate. Recordings were heard only by me, and although I had already asked in the consent form, I reconfirmed that participants were comfortable being recorded. I also provided participants with the opportunity to read through their transcription and give it their seal of approval. For those I met in person, audio was recorded, then transferred to my UM secure account and promptly deleted from the recording device.

Participants were provided with the option not to be recorded. Participants were also able to choose how they wanted to be referred to within the study. For this reason, I go back and forth between using a first name, full name, or a general descriptor for those I interviewed.

During the interviews, I employed the use of a list of questions, which can be seen in Appendix A, though the order in which I asked them or if I asked them varied depending on the conversation. The benefit of the interview process was receiving contextual information and each person's perspective on the queer spaces they frequent or frequented. Demographic information was

collected before the interview, as a person's identity shapes their perceptions and experiences of space, and how they are perceived by others.

2.2.1 Participant Demographics

A person's identity, whether visible or not, impacts how they move through a space. As being queer is not a universal experience, the way that different queer people navigate through queer spaces can only truly be understood through an intersectional approach. Williams (2009) provides a metaphor to understand the importance of intersectionality.

“In order to fully see the picture depicted in a puzzle, the pieces must first be put together. Each piece of the puzzle has interlocking parts that connect to make the whole picture. Since every piece is joined to another, all the connections eventually create an entire picture and any missing pieces influence the end result” (Rhonda L. Williams, 2009, p. 83)

Williams goes on to explain that intersectional approaches bring together “constructs of race, gender, sexuality, and class,” [and, in my opinion, also ability] to see how they work together in daily life (2009, p. 83). Using an intersectional methodology is vital to answering each of the research questions being examined in this project, but particularly the second one. The second question examines historical and contemporary spaces in relation to who had access to them and who felt able to, and chose to, access them. It is for this reason that, with their consent, I kept track of the demographic data of those I interviewed. This data can be seen in Figures 1 through 5. I had a list of potential responses for each question as well as an “other” section, to leave it open ended for the participants to respond in the way that matched them best (see Appendix A).

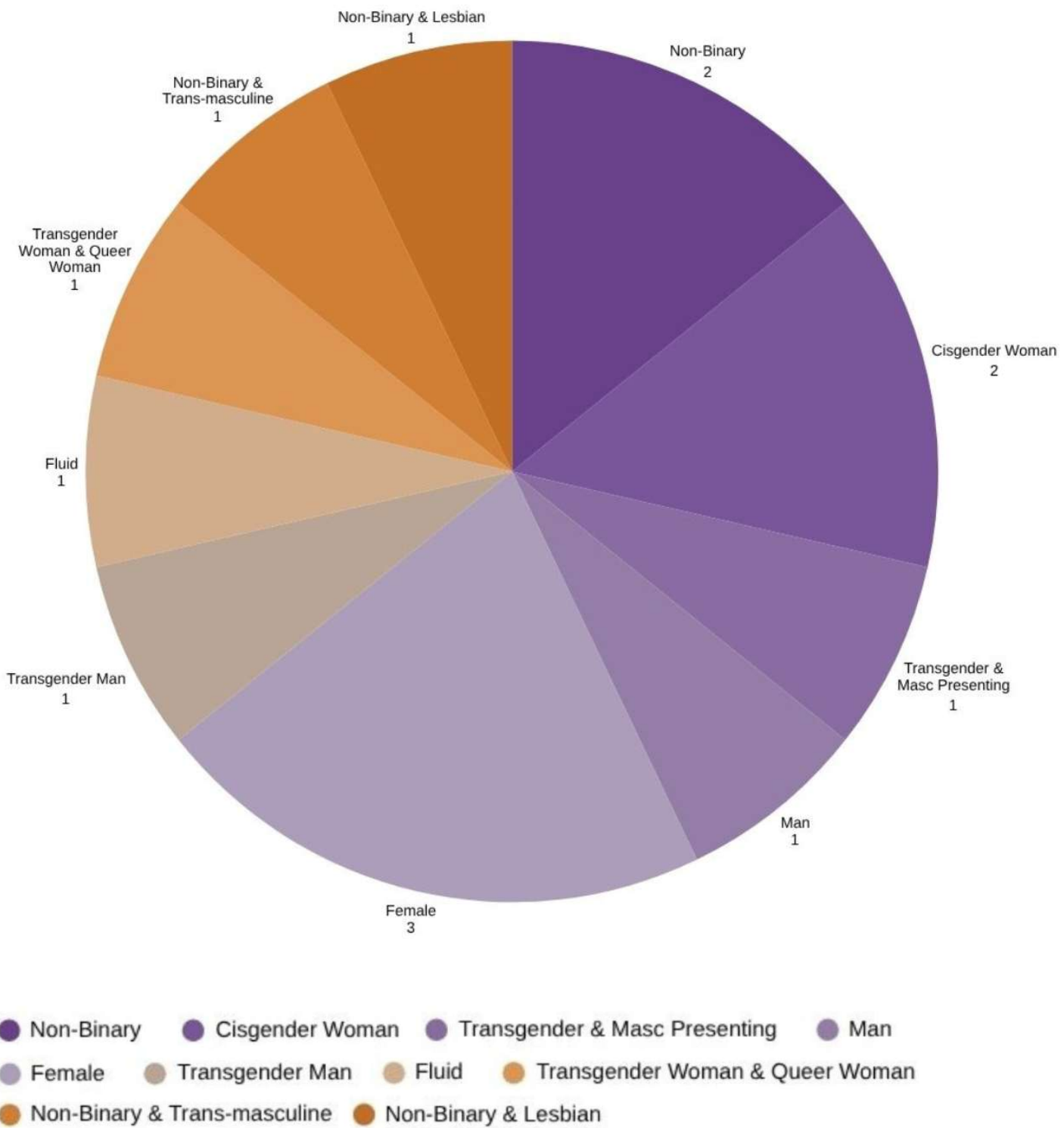
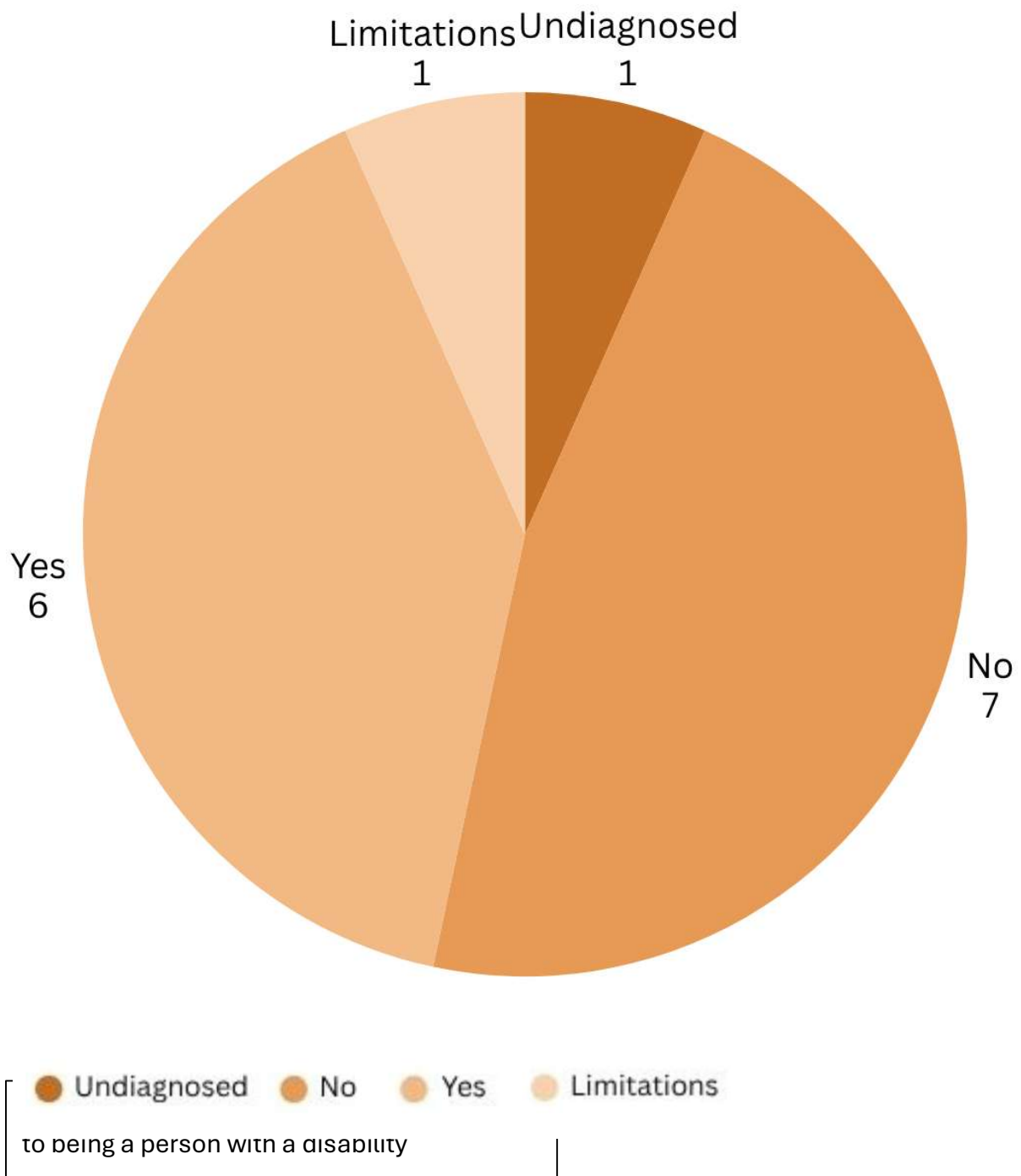


Figure 1: Graph with participant gender identities



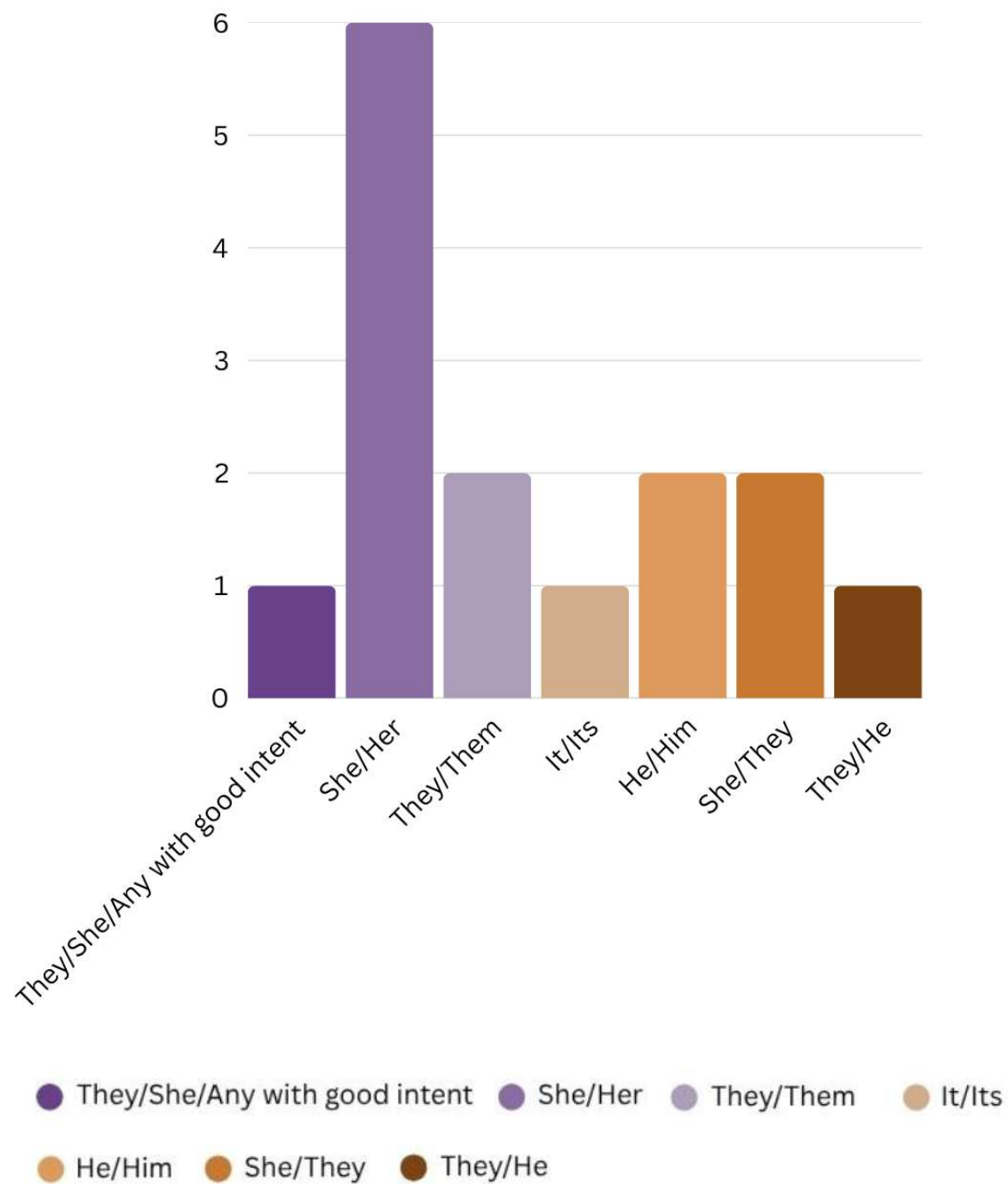
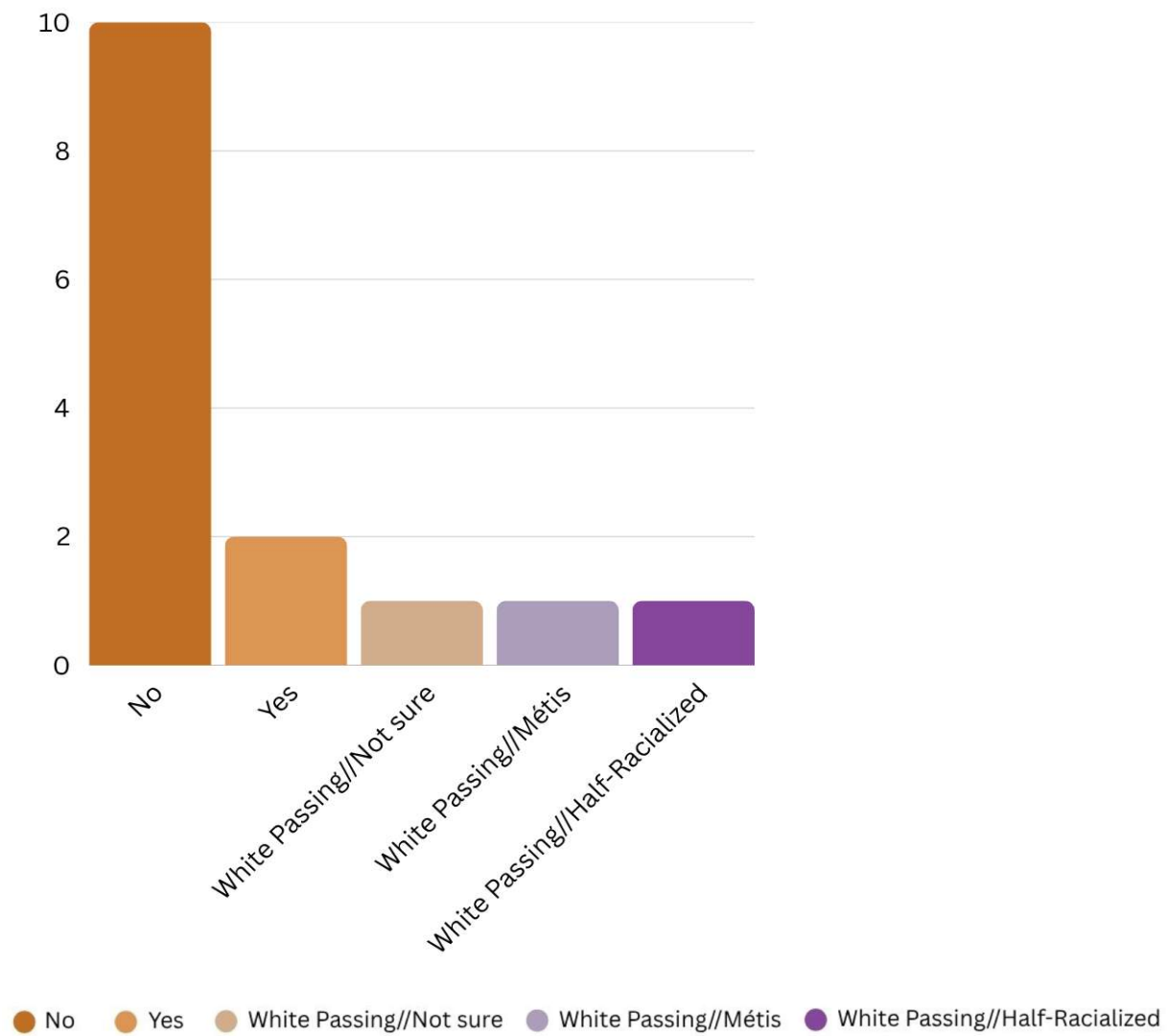


Figure 3: Graph with Participant pronouns



Graph 4: Participant responses to being a person who is racialized

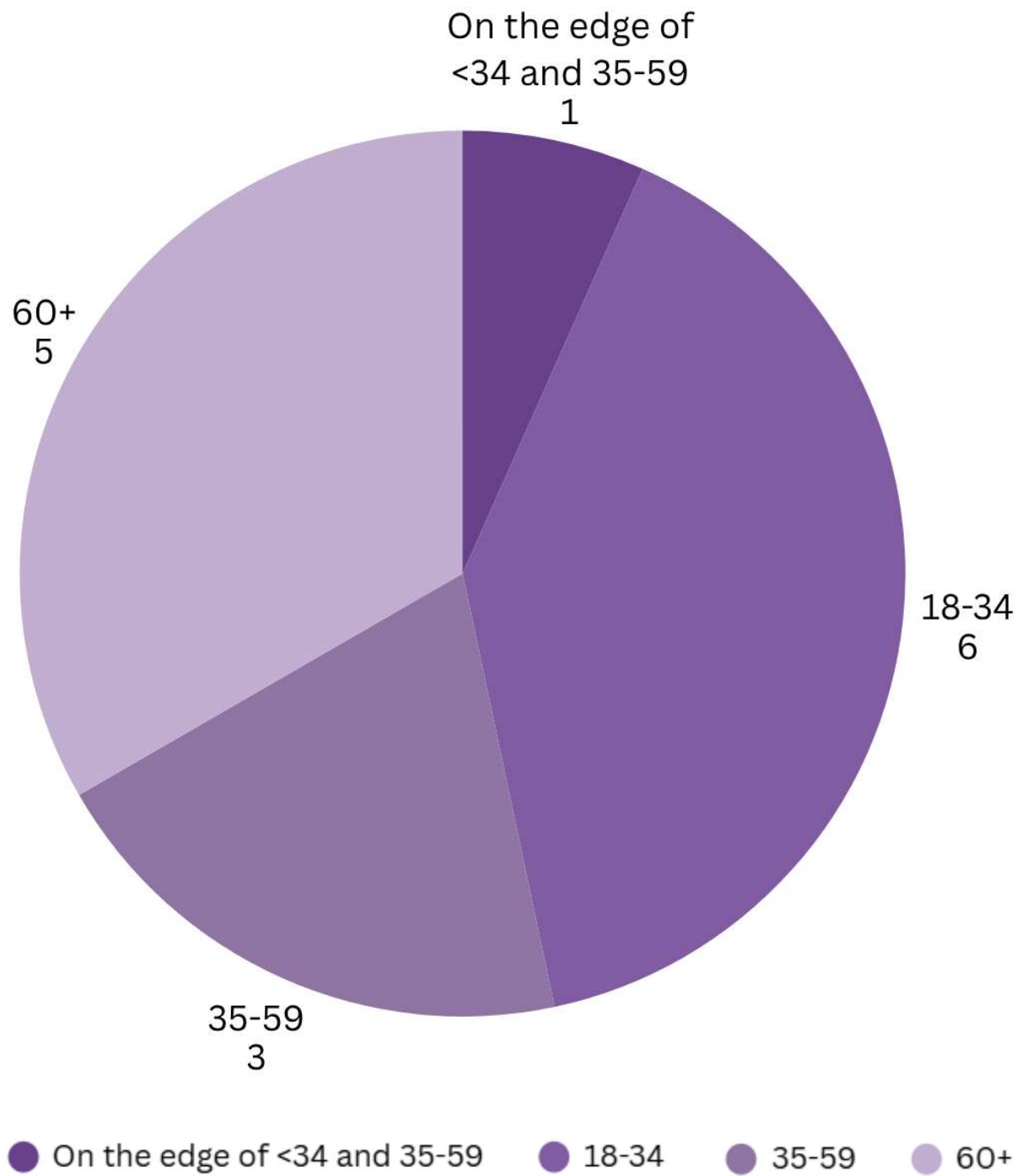


Figure 5: Graph with participant age ranges

2.3 Archival Research

To answer the historical aspect of my research questions, I had to look through the archives. Archival research was essential, as Ketelaar argues, “[a]rchives, libraries, and museums are all in the ‘memory business’, ensuring ‘time future [is] contained in time past’” (Ketelaar, 2014, p. 131). This perspective paints archival materials as a tool for storing collective memory, which shapes how history is understood. Guided by this perspective, I used both in-person and digital archives to uncover queer spaces in Winnipeg, how they were formed, accessed, and experienced in the last 80 years and how those things have shifted.

In November 2025, I was fortunate to spend a few hours in person at the ArQuives in Toronto, one of the largest and oldest 2SLGBTQ+ independent archives in the world (Payne, 2025). The ArQuives are in a beautiful old home in Cabbagetown. Files are stacked from wall to wall and floor to ceiling within rooms in the building. Prior to my visit to Toronto, I had been emailing the Reference Archivist, who kindly found relevant files for me to look through, before I arrived.

Online, I consulted the Two-Spirit Archives and The Manitoba Gay and Lesbian Archives Collection. The archival sources provided me with a range of materials, including journals, grant applications, event notes, and recorded interviews; each source offered a different lens into Winnipeg’s queer community. The archives provided a foundation for analyzing the evolution of queer spaces in general and within the city’s broader sociopolitical tapestry.

2.4 Data Analysis

Coding was done both deductively and inductively. Codes were created before interviews were conducted, and archives were collected, based on the research questions and assumptions about what would be discussed alongside literature I had reviewed. However, most of the codes I applied were created while analyzing the data. Employing both deductive and inductive coding methods allowed me to create a structure for initial coding while not boxing myself into what I assumed would be discussed in interviews and found in the archives (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Name of Code	Prevalence of Codes	Inductive or Deductive?
Community and Belonging	22	Deductive
Colonial Impacts and Structures	11	Deductive
Education and Knowledge Sharing	14	Inductive
Family	9	Inductive
Health and Sexuality	31	Inductive
Identity and Self-Expression	45	Deductive
Indigenous Queer Identities and Experiences	24	Inductive
Spaces: Queer and General	218	Deductive
Violence	9	Inductive

Table 1: List of Codes and Frequencies

2.5 Limitations within this Research

One limitation of the research was the lack of diversity among those 60+; all participants over the age of 60 were white and cisgender, limiting the scope of understanding possible with a broader array of participants. Future research would benefit from a scope that focused primarily or solely on the experiences of 2S and QTPOC Winnipeggers in queer spaces.

Additionally, the limited number of archival sources that I was able to find from before the 1970s shrank the hoped for 100-year time frame to an approximate 60-year time frame. While relevant and important information was found within this span of time, a larger time frame would have provided context that could not be included. I am uncertain as to why this information was difficult to find; it is not likely that queer spaces in Winnipeg, whether informal or formal, simply came into existence in the 70s. For this reason, I speculate that most of the information was kept under wraps by the queer community for safety or simply a lack of preservation. I was, however, able to find some of this information in texts by Dr. Valerie J. Korinek. For this reason, the majority of the information included from before the 1970s falls primarily within the Literature Review.

Finally, archival information did not provide much context into spaces and events specific to Winnipeg's transgender community. For the most part, archival sources only discuss gays and lesbians, without mention of transgender community members. However, in the interview I conducted with Lorri Millan and Shawna Dempsey, friends and performance art duo, they explained that there were people of many diverse genders, particularly at Miss Purdy's, the city's lesbian bar and pillar of Winnipeg's sapphic community from 1984-2002.

3 Literature Review

This literature review contextualizes queer spaces in Winnipeg with broader conversations around queer space, while emphasizing locally specific literature and gaps in existing research. The review is organized thematically, reflecting how queer space has been formed, accessed, regulated, and experienced and by whom. In this way, each section contributes to at least one of the three main research questions and builds the foundation for the analysis.

The first research question is, “How have queer spaces historically been advertised and accessed in Winnipeg and how has that changed?” This is addressed through literature that looks at informal queer networks, visibility and anonymity, membership-accessed spaces, and the roles of planning practices.

The second research question is, “What are the differences between historical spaces and contemporary spaces in terms of access, community, and representation?” This question is addressed through identifying patterns of exclusion in queer spaces, particularly from an intersectional lens. Relating back to Section 2.4, exclusion featured in many of the codes, including: Community and Belonging, Colonial Impacts and Structures, Family, Indigenous Queer Identities and Experiences, Spaces: Queer and General, and Violence.

The third research question is, “What form do contemporary queer spaces take and what form did queer spaces take historically?” This is addressed through historical accounts of cruising areas, bathhouses, cafés, and members-only clubs and contemporary analyses of nightlife, community organizations, intra- and post-pandemic contexts, and the pressures of capitalism on queer spaces.

3.1 Queering the City: Symbolic Inclusion or Embedded Access?

3.1.1 Decorative Diversity

What really makes a space queer? Is it a rainbow flag on the door or a sign on the window stating, “everyone is welcome here?” Bain and Podmore call this “rainbowization” and argue that these are “preliminary transformative initiatives” (2023, p. 147). Rainbowization may raise the comfort level for some queer individuals entering an establishment but lacks the substantial impact of true queer spaces; additionally, it may not provide comfort to queer people with intersecting identities.

One mere pride flag does not ensure a safe space for queer folks with marginalized intersecting identities. Lacking an intersectional approach, any attempt to “queer” a space is nullified, as the space will only ensure accessibility for those who are already privileged within the queer community (Bain and Podmore, 2023, p. 147).

3.2 The Evolution of Queer Space

3.2.1 Historic

3.2.1.1 Contextualizing Urban Queering

The creation of intentional and distinct queer communities is a relatively new concept. Short (2025, p. 237) explains that it was only under capitalism, when people began engaging in wage labour and living outside of a traditional family unit, that independent queer communities surfaced. I cannot help but wonder, however, how much of this perception of queer space as a “recent” phenomenon is due to a lack of, or intentional erasure of, archival information, historical data, or even stories about queer communities in history. While intentional queer spaces, theoretically, have thus only existed since around the 18th century, they did not begin with formal inclusion, but through necessity and creativity from those within queer communities.

However, broader colonial and racial policies decided who could access urban environments. As policies outlined in the Indian Act were used to enforce a pass system which required “Canadian permission” if Indigenous peoples wanted to leave reserves. This policy was physically enforced by the North-West Mounted Police, and it was not until 1951 that the pass system was removed from the Indian Act (Toews, 2018). Similarly, in the 19th century, Canadian authorities actively discouraged and even blocked Black people from immigrating to Canada (Toews, 2018). These actions kept Indigenous Peoples and Black people from having much presence within Winnipeg and other cities in Canada. For this reason, it began to make more sense to me why the participants saw a reflection of Winnipeg’s broader population at queer venues, because there had been policies, governing documents, and racial discrimination keeping Indigenous Peoples and Black people from the city and country. These exclusions shaped who could be present in Winnipeg’s queer spaces.

Policies and planning frameworks are also clearly used around access and barriers to queer spaces. Planning tools such as redevelopment, policing, and discourse around “safety” used to

“consolidate a dominant notion of sexual identity through space. In doing so, they [planning tools] further marginalized gender and sexual minorities within the LGBTQ+ community...” (Wendel, 2025).

Such discourses are used to define who is deemed an “acceptable” queer, typically those who are white and middle class, and who is an “undesirable” queer. Wendel (2025) states that within the discourse of “undesirable” queers is where intersections of race, class, and sexuality [and likely gender and ability] come into play. This further demonstrates the necessity for intersectional approaches to both planning history and contemporary planning frameworks, as well as recognition that exclusion exists even within spaces intended for inclusion.

This shift highlights a historical pattern in which queer communities have molded existing urban developments to suit their social, cultural, and political needs. As Short (2025, p. 233) argues, planning history has privileged white, heterosexual, cisgender men, in turn, reproducing colonial, racist, and sexist norms, erasing other voices from the conversation. The voices and opinions of women, and Short (2025, p. 237) argues this extends to queer folk as well, were perceived as “disorderly.” In Winnipeg, this exclusion can be seen through the lack of spaces for lesbians, which, while gay men occupied space in the city center, forced spaces for lesbians to under-resourced areas, in buildings that were not in good condition and required copious amounts of repair, leading to financial difficulty, such as the Winnipeg Women’s Building at Notre Dame and Sherbrook (Millward, 2015, p. 129).

Planning as an official discipline began post-WWII and was shaped by the ideals of modernists, reinforcing heteronormativity in urban settings; a term Frisch calls the “heterosexist project” (Short, 2025, p. 237). Despite increased awareness, queer urban planning has yet to be integrated into the “mainstream” work of municipal governance (Bain and Podmore, 2023, p. 145). Additionally, most research has focused on the creation of queer neighbourhoods and less on how planning practices might regulate queer experiences of urbanity through, for example, “bar licensing and health clinics” (Bain and Podmore, 2023, p. 145).

3.2.1.2 Post World War I and II

The development of queer spaces in Winnipeg reflects broader shifts in the socio-political fabric of the city. During the first half of the 20th century, downtown Winnipeg and resort destinations, like Winnipeg Beach, provided opportunities for queer connection. While these spaces were not

formally recognized as “queer,” they provided occasions for anonymous nonconforming expressions of gender and sexuality.

After decades of instability following World War I, marked by “postwar unrest and class conflict... [and] long-term effects of the Great Depression,” Canada in general, but particularly Winnipeg, faced a lot of economic “catch-up,” with rising incomes allowing more single adults to afford housing (Korinek, 2012a, p. 123). Economic growth allowed for greater opportunity for queer spaces, such as house parties, arts, culture, and music venues, and spaces for activism (Korinek, 2012a p. 123). More informal settings also led to increased lesbian visibility as women began to socialize more frequently with gay men (Korinek, 2012a, p. 124).

After World War II, new possibilities arose for queer men, due to rise in income, better rental housing, better employment opportunities, fewer restrictions on liquor laws, and a general expanse in the economy (Korinek, 2012b, p. 59). More subtle changes began post-war, particularly into the 1960s, as “gay culture” became more mainstream and more gays and lesbians started to openly identify as such (Korinek, 2012a, p. 146). This postwar time was thought of as a “safer” than the ‘70s and ‘80s that shortly followed, with more cases of murder, police raids, and violence targeting gay men in particular (Korinek, 2012b, p. 60).

3.2.1.3 Queer Spaces in Winnipeg

Queer spaces in Winnipeg have been part of the greater socio-cultural and economic fabric of the city, in many varying forms throughout the past century. In the early 20th century, the city was becoming a “gateway” to western Canada, with mainly single men as newcomers (Korinek, 2012a, p. 128). This shaped the early queer scene in the city, making Winnipeg’s main gay meeting places the CN railyards at The Forks, The Alexander Street docks, The Hill, and the Marlborough Hotel (Manitoba Gay and Lesbian Archives, 2020). These informal sites act as some of the earliest identifiable queer areas in the city.

In the 1930s, queer spaces extended to additional areas downtown. Beer parlours, such as the Marlborough and Alexander Hotels, Chinese Cafés, and a cruising area that spanned from “the west bank of the Red River from Union Station north to the Alexander Dock” (Korinek, 2012a, p. 130). In *The Golden Boy* episode of *The Secret Life of Canada*, Korinek spoke to the hosts, Falen Johnson and Leah Simone Bowen, about the growth of house parties at this time, as people

were looking to create space and community; however, the difficulty first is finding the “in,” needing to know someone first before getting an invitation to the party (Johnson & Bowen, 2019).

In the 40s and 50s, lesbians were meeting at the Mount Royal Hotel while gay men were still meeting at various Chinese Cafés (Korinek, 2012a, p. 138). In the late 50s, liquor laws in Manitoba changed, reshaping Winnipeg nightlife, with the beginning of mixed-gender cocktail lounges and adding to the number of spaces where queer people could spend their time (Barbour, 2000).

One of the new cocktail lounges, Moore’s, on Portage Avenue became the go-to spot in the 60s, with its closure leading queer folks to the Mardi Gras (Korinek, 2018, p. 147). Gay men were still cruising, but there was an increase in violence and police harassment toward gay men in the 60s (Korinek, 2012a, p. 149). The 60s is also when going to bathhouses became more popular for gay men, as it was a safer space in Winnipeg, even though in other cities, there was a wave of police raids in bathhouses at this time (Korinek, 2012a, p. 149). I assume that the reason it was safer in Winnipeg is because of Peter Carlyle-Gordge's observation that Korinek cited, “the city’s police force considered hippies and unspecified “undesirables” (we can infer drug users, transients, and the indigent) as posing more of a risk to citizens than homosexuals” (Korinek, 2012a, p. 148-149).

The 70s to 90s welcomed what would become some of Winnipeg’s most popular queer bars and clubs. In 1974, Happenings Social Club, around 1980, Giovanni’s Room (Gio’s), and 1984, Ms. Purdy’s (Millward, 2015, pp. 77-78). Throughout this time, too, The Hill remained a popular destination for gay men, however, by this time, the grounds no longer felt like a safe space to be; in the 70s, “queer-bashing” became a well-known phenomenon, especially on The Hill (Korinek, 2012, p. 141). Despite not being able to find literature on it, it was around this time that Winona’s Cafe opened, which I discovered through conversation with Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan. In an interview with CBC for the podcast, *The Secret Life of Canada*, episode *The Golden Boy*, the hosts speaks to one of the women who opened Winona’s Cafe, who stressed the importance of house parties and potlucks, since many people didn’t have much money at this time (Johnson & Bowen, 2019).

3.2.1.4 Member-Only Bars

Member-only clubs emerged in the 60s to 90s most prominently in the Prairies as a response to the limited availability of queer specific nightlife spaces, the unwillingness of bar parlour owners to

provide sections of the bar solely for their queer customers, and the straight customers who “provoked fears of exposure, created conditions of routine harassment, and led to potentially serious repercussions for the lesbian and gay clientele.” (Millward, 2015, p. 76). In smaller cities like Winnipeg, there was not enough profit incentive for exclusively queer public bars, so lesbian and gay community groups created their own private members’ clubs (Millward, 2015, p. 76). This concept began strong, with many members’ clubs gaining large numbers quickly, then started tapering off after a couple of years (Millward, 2015, p. 87). Due to a limited number of lesbian spaces, mixed members’ clubs were particularly significant for lesbians, as they provided a space where lesbians could not only create community, but have some control over the space as well (Millward, 2015, p. 77).

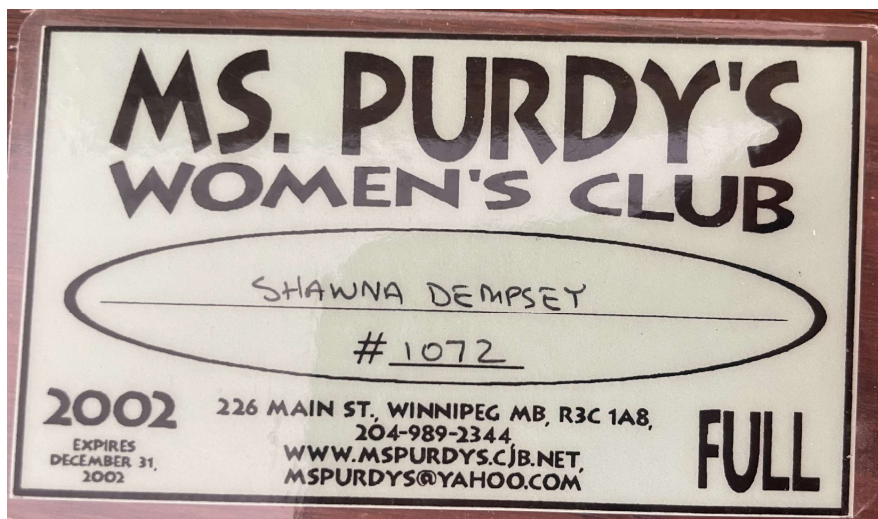


Figure 6: An image taken of Shawna Dempsey's member card from Ms. Purdy's Women's Club from 2002.

3.2.1.5 Lesbian Spaces

Lesbian spaces in Winnipeg have been and continue to be few and far between, especially compared to spaces for gay men. Historically, rather than relying on formal venues, women met through informal networks and events, such as softball teams or through work peers (Korinek, 2012a, p. 149). Workspaces themselves even functioned as key sites for meeting other lesbians; this was particularly notable within service divisions such as the Air Force, especially in the era of post-World War II (Korinek, 2018, p. 61). However, the relationships were not automatically safe

while working in a workforce with a higher concentration of lesbians. Korinek (2018) notes that, some women who were in relationships with other women in the Air Force were able to be discreet, however others were dishonourably discharged (p. 61).

As so few spaces existed for queer people outside of nightlife venues or resources for lesbians, bars typically became the default for gathering space (Millward, 2015, p. 59). Because of this, bars often acted as a refuge for lesbians as they were “the only places they could be their true selves in a world that despised them;” for this reason, patterns of alcohol reliance were prevalent within the lesbian community (Millward, 2015, p. 59-60). While queer bars in Winnipeg did exist, specifically Happenings, described as “raucous” and “like any loud bar,” and Gio’s, described as “more laid back,” lesbians typically avoided them as they were dominated by men (Millward, 2015, p. 109).

In response to such limitations, Millward (2015) writes that there were three primary routes lesbians took to make a space for themselves (p. 112). The first path was by working with women’s centers, such as the Winnipeg Women’s Building, the second was to create community centers for lesbians and gays, and the third was to buy or lease land for lesbians or women only (p. 112). While most of the original organizations that were created in one of the three ways no longer exist, Millward notes that the idea that queer community should have its own spaces continues; she also notes that there does not seem to be any connection to the “vision of lesbians from a previous generation” (2015, p. 112). However, I think it is appropriate that visions have changed from those of past generations; while their visions and actions were vital and led to where the queer community in Winnipeg is today, the community is not stagnant, and neither are our needs or visions.

3.2.1.6 Security and Safety

The literature has demonstrated that safety and security were constant concerns regarding queer space. Incarceration and “aversion therapies” were possibilities when it came to being queer, even into the 70s, as homosexuality was not removed from the American Psychiatric Association list of mental illnesses until 1973 (Korinek, 2018, p. 5). Understandably, this made going into and leaving queer spaces feel unsafe (Millward, 2015, p. 63). Because of this, anonymity and control over one’s visibility was essential for survival, as can be seen in debates over signage at Giovanni’s Room, which originally had the word “gay” in it, leading to fear of being seen entering the building; while

this signage was eventually changed, Millward (2015) stated that there was not one specific explanation for this change (p. 92).

Beyond institutional harm, there was also the risk of verbal and sexual harassment, physical assault, and police violence toward queer men who were younger, more obviously queer, or gender non-conforming; From the Depression era onward, queer men were targeted by “gay bashers” (Korinek, 2012a, p. 119). Millward also notes that, women, and therefore lesbians, experience high “levels of structural oppression, discrimination, ridicule, and threats of sexual violence,” and that often this would lead to anger which would lead to alcoholism as a way to allow themselves to express this anger (Millward, 2015, p. 62). While there were some cruising areas in the 40s and 50s that were remembered as relatively safe, this safety was dependent on the time of day, the landscaping in the area, and the policing of the area (Korinek, 2012a, p. 141). The landscaping and lack of patrons after 10pm at St. John’s Park, for example, created a space that made being queer and intimate in public safer (Korinek, 2012a, p. 140).

Queer bars and clubs could only offer partial protection. Community-run members’ clubs could regulate what happened inside their walls, but harassment would often occur outside these spaces, with police acting as complicit parties or even being the aggressors (Millward, 2015, 92-93).

Negative perceptions and hatred around lesbians were reinforced by broader discourse about lesbianism in cultural and medical fields. Culturally, magazines were describing lesbians as, “twisted, perverted, miserable, and dangerous,” while a 1954 “study” of lesbians described lesbianism as “the result of a deep-seated neurosis which involves narcissistic gratifications and sexual immaturity. It also represents a neurotic defense mechanism for feelings of insecurity” (Millward, 2015, p. 7-8). Such information was readily available, producing a widespread concept of the depravity of lesbianism. This led to police using various laws to control lesbians, such as, seeing women holding hands, so taking them to jail overnight due to “vagrancy” (Millward, 2015, p. 9). Even if such acts of violence were not occurring in Winnipeg, such incidents happening in the country and especially other Prairie cities demonstrates the threat that would have impacted how queer people navigated space. This literature demonstrates that safety was not guaranteed, but that a cultural understanding of how to act strategically in a potentially dangerous environment was necessary.

3.2.2 Contemporary

3.2.2.1 Transformational Times

Finding relevant information about queer spaces in Winnipeg is challenging. While there is substantial literature on contemporary queer areas in other cities, Winnipeg-specific scholarship remains limited. A recurring theme across the literature from other cities is the decline of physical queer spaces, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Amin Ghaziani (2024, p. 1) describes this decline of queer nightlife venues and gay bars as occurring in “alarming numbers.” Prior to the pandemic, queer gathering spaces had been struggling, but once the pandemic hit, many closed and have not reopened (Ghaziani, 2024, p. 2).

However, the decline in physical spaces does not equate to a disappearance of the queer community. Miles, Coffin, and Ghaziani, et al. (2021, p. 414) argue that, while the pandemic significantly impacted the shape of physical queer spaces, it also introduced new forms of community. Many queer communities came together through mutual aid networks, placemaking efforts, homesteading, shifts in interior design, and virtual engagements (Miles et al., 2021). They allude to the ability of queer communities to mobilize in this way for a pandemic may come from collective memory and strategies from the HIV/AIDS pandemic, noting the similarities between the two tragic crises (Miles et al., 2021, p. 398).

Building on this narrative, McCormack and Measham (2025, p. 701) explore how mainstreaming and commodification have changed queer nightlife in the post-pandemic era, in turn, often exacerbating existing inequality. Such changes highlight the importance of rethinking what queer space means, who it serves, who it might exclude, and whether it aligns with the intersectional values that a queer space should serve.

3.2.2.2 Gaps and Challenges in Contemporary Queer Spaces

While visibility has improved and queer scholarship has increased, queer spaces continue to prioritize cisgender, white, gay men, leaving queer women, transgender, racialized, disabled, and Indigenous queer individuals underrepresented and underserved. This imbalance highlights that, while these spaces might be gay, they are not necessarily queer. Queerness, as both an identity and a political framework, is inclusive and intersectional throughout the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

To fully understand queer spaces in Winnipeg, research must be done through an intersectional lens, accounting for interconnected levels of oppression and the diverse needs of marginalized queer communities. Doan (2015, p. 1) argues that city planning has historically ignored queer issues, often due to a heterosexist bias or political discomfort with addressing queer needs. Doan continues by arguing that this neglect has shaped the lives and recreational abilities of queer individuals through zoning restrictions, lack of access to social services, and the lack of preservation of 2SLGBTQ+ areas. When marginalized communities are excluded from planning, the result is not only invisibility, but erasure.

These barriers are tied to many buildings in Winnipeg. As the community advocate I spoke to recognized, “when it comes to our [Winnipeg’s] infrastructure, we love heritage statuses and we love history and we can’t let it go, it’s really challenging.” When I discussed the seemingly incessant need to preserve historical buildings in Winnipeg with one of my professors, she asked *what* and *whose* histories are being preserved (S. Hourie, personal communication, 2026)? This question points to the irony in the intense need to preserve colonial infrastructure on Indigenous land without similarly prioritizing Indigenous histories and infrastructures. As Smith (2006) states, “[t]he ‘heritage’ discourse therefore naturalizes the practice... to conserve and ‘pass on’ to future generations, and in so doing promotes a certain set of Western elite cultural values as being universally applicable,” reflecting colonial planning frameworks that continue to dominate narratives and decisions in urban space (p. 11).

Sylvia Massinon (2020, p. 77) highlights the concept of cultural safety, defining it as “an environment that is spiritually, socially and emotionally safe, as well as physically safe for people; where there is no assault challenge or denial of their identity, of who they are and what they need.” While Massinon’s work is focused on 2SLGBTQ+ youth in care within Manitoba, the concept can be applied anywhere attempting to create a safe and inclusive space. Similarly, Doan advocates for planners to think “beyond queer space,” or beyond simply tolerance, by addressing queer folks’ needs of places to work, live, and recreate (2015).

3.3 Literary Lacunae

3.3.1 A Single Author: Challenging a Sectional Lens

While the existing literature on queer spaces in Winnipeg provides ample insight on its history, much comes from a single author, Dr. Valerie J. Korinek. Her work outlines a comprehensive analysis of queer space and life in Winnipeg as they were in the 1930s to the 1980s, though a vast majority of the literature focuses on white, cisgender, gay men. This is not a critique of Korinek nor the research she has done; she herself acknowledges her limitations and urges future research to include a more intentional, intersectional approach to queer history.

An important lens is also added by Dr. Liz Millward in her work *Making a Scene: Lesbians and Community Across Canada, 1964-1984* (2015). While Millward's scope is national, there is an incredible amount of information about lesbians in Winnipeg in this period. This analysis provides a framework that is particularly relevant in understanding lesbian-specific space in Winnipeg. Korinek and Millward together provide an important foundation for understanding the gendered dynamics of queer spaces in the Prairies during the time periods each scholar included.

Michael Short (2025, p. 233) expresses that there has been an intentional exclusion of “women, Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC), and queer people and communities” from history and therefore within cities. My research aims to respond to this call by seeking the voices, experiences, and perspectives of lesbians and queer individuals with intersecting marginalized identities, including those of Indigenous, racialized, transgender, disabled, and working-class communities. Short (2025, p. 241) argues that the focus on “hetero-cis-normative and metronormative” planning policy for queer people and communities leads to ignoring “intersectional spatial injustices.” Understanding how queer Winnipeggers experience queer spaces today, from an intersectional and interconnected lens, can help identify what is currently missing and highlight how to ensure safer more accessible spaces.

3.4 Summary

Queer spaces have served as vital sites of resistance, community, and expressions of identity, often in response to exclusionary social norms and planning practices. These spaces have historically been informal, often in places such as bathhouses, bars, cafes, and even resort towns. However, access has not been equitable across the queer community, as working-class, racialized, and

Indigenous queer individuals have faced heightened levels of marginalization and exclusion, leading to the creation of their own gathering places.

Narratives around queer space in Winnipeg have continued to grow through research, such as that of Korinek and Millward. The literature provides a foundational understanding of Winnipeg's queer spaces, though it lacks an intersectional lens, focusing primarily on the white, cisgender, gay men and lesbians. Scholars like Michael Short and Petra Doan emphasize the importance of challenging "hetero-cis-normative and metronormative" planning frameworks and spatial injustices with an intersectional lens.

New challenges arise with contemporary queer spaces, such as the decline of physical venues and the rise of commodified and symbolic inclusion, with a lot of these changes being attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, queer communities have adapted by using virtual engagement and placemaking. Miles, Coffin, and Ghaziani (2021, p. 398) state that the queer community was able to take on these changes due to a collective memory and the similarities between COVID-19 and the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

To build an inclusive future, planning must address the diverse needs and identities within Winnipeg's queer community using intentional intersectional approaches. The documentation of queer experiences and spaces is vital for informing planning, inclusive policy, and community building in Winnipeg and beyond.

4 Findings from Interviews

For the interviews, I opted for a semi-structured process with queer Winnipeggers over the age of 18. The interviews provided insight into how participants' diverse experiences have shaped their definition, access, and experience of queer spaces throughout the span of time in which they have been accessing them. The reflections from participants explore both historical and contemporary spaces in the city and the visions for what the future of queer space might entail. Additionally, as is mentioned in section 2.2, participants were given the opportunity to choose how they would be referred to within the study. For this reason, the way I refer to each participant varies based on their preference for having their first name, full name, or a general descriptor used.

4.1 What is Queer Space

To ensure I was on the same page as all those I spoke to, the first question we discussed was what queer space meant to them. No two responses were the same, however there were similarities to be found. Firstly, most participants brought up the sense of safety around being oneself in a queer space; Carina, a white lesbian nurse, stated "... it's a place where I get excited about seeing how everybody feels comfortable being themselves." It is also a space with queer people, whether the majority are queer or there is simply an abundance of queer presence within the space; Lou expressed that queer spaces were, "... a space that is welcoming to, and or run by, and or frequented by queer people." A queer Métis artist I spoke to expressed their belief that a queer space, "... has to have a sense of understanding people's experiences, physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually. I think it has to be accessible for different demographics, whether it's age, financial, accessibility."

Many folks stated that spaces can be defined by what is happening in a space; the white drag performer participant stated that, for example, being in a church was not inherently gay, but being there for a trans orchestral group led the space to *feel* queer.

Finally, participants brought up symbols of safety for queers, both explicit and implicit, "... it starts with the greeting... the greeting is either the door front or the first person that you see... if you see... [a] progressive rainbow flag in the door, that already gives me like a sense of 'this is a safe place.'...

[T]he first person that's associated with that space [and] how I'm greeted [by] them is kind of the start of where I define [a queer space],” the white queer advocate participant told me. These responses do not necessitate that all spaces that deem themselves to be queer inherently have the qualities named by the participants. Instead, these attributes are those that queer people expect and desire to experience within what they qualify to be a queer space. These responses highlighted to me that while a space may define itself as queer or gay, it is really the people within it, whose identities, experiences, and personalities are acknowledged, who define the space.

The use of the space... when you center queer voices in a space, when you make us welcome and safe there, then it sort of becomes... a queer space, because everybody... expects every place to be... a cishet place... by the very nature of queerness not being purposefully included, protected, and respected..., then we flock there, and we love it, because how many places can you exist publicly... without thinking too hard about it...? (Drag performer participant)

Unlike historical queer spaces, which seemed to prioritize anonymity and protection, contemporary spaces emphasize visibility, accessibility, and emotional safety. However, they are similar in that the primary reason for their existence was, and remains, a connection with those who have similar life experiences. You can trust them to accept you as you are, nor do you have to hide or put your queerness to the side.

4.2 Historical Queer Space

To reorient folks to my definition of “historical” queer space, as reflected at the beginning of section 2, “*historical* refers to time periods prior to the 2000s *and* to spaces that did exist or events that did happen, but do not any longer.”

4.2.1 Queer Spaces

Across interviews, Giovanni’s Room (Gio’s) was brought up as a significant historical space. From participants in their 30s to 60s, Gio’s was mentioned as one of their first entrances into queer spaces. One participant, a queer Métis individual, reminisced about going to Gio’s, “I would walk in and just be like, so many lesbians, it [was] amazing!” They expanded, emphasizing the close-knit queer community that existed there, “it just created so many little... pathways for where I could go

with my sexuality, my gender... and almost like looking at the options of what my expression could be, but also what kind of options I would have as a person in terms of being attracted to people.”

When it first opened, Gio's was located on the second floor of a community centre on Sherbrooke Street. Don, a white gay man in his late 60s, began going to gay spaces in Winnipeg in the early 80s and described Gio's as a long and narrow space with a kitchen at one end, bar at the other, and dance floor in the middle, he remembered it as “very friendly and very cheap.”

Most participants expressed that their earliest and most accessible queer spaces were bars or clubs. Winnipeg's historic queer spaces were primarily nightlife locations, both because that was what was available and what could be accessed safely. The drag performer I spoke to pointed out that Club 200, known today as the main queer club in Winnipeg, is one of Canada's longest-running gay bars, something that most people do not realize. He emphasized the importance of this history, saddened by the fact that many Winnipeggers do not know about it: “I don't know how many people would be able to point to Club 200 or know that [it] is Canada's longest because they've been running for over 30 years, they've been in business for the longest continuous period of time... that's... a real piece of history that's right there on Garry.” The two of us joked about needing plaques around to show off the queer history around the city, similar to Vancouver, as seen in Figure 7. Though, it is worth noting the condition of the plaque displayed in Figure 7. It is only from around the 2010s, considering that is the most recent year brought up in the text, yet a lot of the image is torn and the text is small, making it seem like the information displayed is not important or worth noticing. This raises the question of the perceived importance of the queer spaces mentioned in the text of the plaque.



Figure 7: A plaque placed on a building in Vancouver, describing the importance of the building to the queer community.

Don also explained that a popular space to go when he moved to Winnipeg in the 80s was the bathhouses. Winnipeg had three, Obees on McGregor, The Office Sauna on Main Street, which is called Adonis today. The third bathhouse was unofficial, located under a tailor shop in Chinatown, initially made for single railway workers.

“in the basement, when that place was built, there were like old cloth wood bathtubs down there and a steam room and kind of an outer room. The woman who owned the tailor shop had beers that she would bring down if the doorbell was rung; it was clearly not a legal operation, but one that was very popular and memorable for the gay men that went there.” (Don)

In contrast to the largely male-dominated spaces, Ms. Purdy’s played a leading role as Winnipeg’s main lesbian bar from 1984 when it opened until it closed in the early 2000s. Participants described Ms. Purdy’s as more than a queer nightlife location, but as a vital space for cisgender women and transgender folks to meet and form community. Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan reflected on how the space brought people together from many walks and stages of life.

“We met people that are lifelong friends since then, or people in our community, right? And it was great... And what was really lovely about it is there were people of all ages at Purdy’s... You could watch... elder folks two-stepping

in their Birkenstocks, while youngsters were playing pool, and, you know, just like every kind of experience.” (Shawna Dempsey)

They told me that this experience contrasted theirs in Toronto, where they are both from, as the nightlife there was more separated by age, identity, or subculture. In Winnipeg, Ms. Purdy’s was one of the only dedicated lesbian spaces, “everyone was all together, so that was what was most striking,” Shawna Dempsey reflected. Lorri Millan added, “it felt meaningful, too... all sorts of queer things here have... [felt] more meaningful over the years, because it’s smaller and [there is] ... further to go. [Queer spaces] just had a different... struck a different chord here.”



Figure 8: The original image that hung in the window of Ms. Purdy's Women's Club and now hangs at Shawna Dempsey's home.

The duo pointed out that many queer bars in Winnipeg were community-owned cooperatives, making the dynamic feel “different from commercial ventures elsewhere,” Millan stated. Despite their differences, each space was remembered as places where queer people found community and made a space for themselves.

Spaces are not always located in a physical building or intentionally queer spaces. “There was a lot of cruising going on: parks, streets, you name it. The Ys were cruisy as hell, the department store bathrooms... Eaton’s and The Bay were busy, busy, busy,” Don told me. He also mentioned that it became too dangerous, which is why it stopped, “I knew people that would go down there and get beat up and stuff and robbed and all that.”

Generally, many gay men would enjoy a space that was discreet, like the bathhouse in Chinatown, or had been taken over by people in the community. Don reminisced about the North Star Hotel, which had a “straight” bar called the Silver Slipper, a space that was not intentionally queer, though it was typically occupied by gay men, creating this unofficial queer space. Across the street, the St. Regis Hotel, was an L-shaped building with straight people at the front and gay men at the back. He also told me about the Mardi Gras, which was a tiny little restaurant on Portage Avenue that began attracting a gay crowd after the closure of Moore’s next door (Korinek, 2018, p. 57-58). The Mardi Gras, or the “Madras” as it was often called, was one of the main places to meet and socialize in the city (Korinek, 2018, p. 57-58). It was well known that the Madras was a space that gay men spent time, including by police, who made occasional checks on the space, which shows how semi-public and unofficial gay spaces had to balance visibility and risk within the fabric of Winnipeg’s queer scene.

4.2.2 Demographics

Interviews with participants in the 60+ category and who frequented queer spaces in Winnipeg from around the 60s to the 90s show that demographics of queer spaces reflected the broader population of the city at the time. They also described spaces as predominantly white and dominated by cisgender gay men, with little representation of women, transgender people, and BIPOC. As Don explained, while women were present, there were “not a lot, but some,” adding that women were seen more prominently in queer spaces in the last few decades. This dynamic demonstrates that many “queer” spaces, particularly bars and clubs, were places created by and for men. There is nothing inherently wrong with spaces by and for gay men, the difficulty comes from

having so few queer spaces in a city, that the majority being only for one part of the community, leaves most other queer people without a space to gather.

Don remembered that there were “always native guys” and “there were always black guys,” but followed this with, “there wasn’t a lot [of BIPOC] around,” estimating that the population was 90% plus Caucasian,” framing this as a reflection of the city’s demographic makeup rather than deliberate exclusion. All those I spoke to in the 60+ category were white, so I did not get to hear the perspectives of any BIPOC on whether they agreed with this frame or not. Other participants echoed these observations. Kate described the spaces she attended, primarily the Rainbow Resource Centre (as it is known today), as “white, I would say, for sure,” though she also noticed that there were more women than men in this community-based environment. At Ms. Purdy’s, Winnipeg’s lesbian bar from the 80s to the 2000s, Shawna and Lorri described the space as almost exclusively women, with some transgender people present, though few transgender men. They attributed this, in part, to the lack of gender-affirming care and lack of existing open gender diversity than there is today.

Club 200 was remembered as one of the more diverse queer spaces in the city; yet, Shawna and Lorri pointed out that today at Club 200, and in queer spaces generally, it is “very predominantly gay men.” They attributed this to economic structures as well as patriarchal norms and male privilege, shaping who feels “entitled” to take up space, including within queer communities.

Such accounts demonstrate that historical intersections of race, gender, and class shaped who was seen in Winnipeg’s queer spaces. While many participants remembered the spaces as relatively welcoming within the notable limitations of the time, each space was not equally inclusive or representative of the full spectrum of queer identities. Rather, historical queer spaces mirrored more the structural inequalities of the city and province more broadly, emphasizing the need to understand queer space on a social and historical basis.

4.3 Contemporary Queer Space

To reorient folks to my definition of “contemporary” queer space, as reflected at the beginning of section 2, “*contemporary* refers to time periods within the 2000s *or* relating to spaces or events that still exist.”

As many physical queer spaces in Winnipeg are limited or inaccessible to people within the queer community, whether due to a lack of physically accessible infrastructure, cost, perception of safety attending a queer space, or other factors, virtual spaces have become increasingly important for connection and self-discovery. While digital platforms are a relatively new form of space compared to bars, community gathering spaces, or informal gathering places, they have grown significantly over the past decade, especially in the wake of COVID-19. For some participants, online platforms such as Discord, dating apps (eg. Grindr, HER, or Tinder) Facebook groups, Instagram, and older-style chat rooms, have provided entry into queer networks, specifically for those who may be looking for others with niche identities or those who have not found in-person community. Scholars such as Miles (2021) argue that these platforms, while not replacing physical space, create “hybrid” environments, or the “layering, synthesizing, or collapsing of digital and physical realities,” as Miles puts it (2021, p. 205).

Participants described such spaces as both beneficial and limiting, providing opportunities for connection, with careful navigation required for safety. The queer advocate I spoke to also emphasized the role social media plays in circulating events and resources; many participants expressed that this was the main way they learned about events happening in the city. The queer advocate also expressed a responsibility to share posts, so those who may not be aware of an event or space can discover them.

4.3.1 Queer Spaces

Many participants reflected on the limited availability of queer spaces in Winnipeg that feel welcoming or comfortable for people over the age of 40. Don explained that many older gay men that he knows now avoid traditional queer nightlife, often opting for safe straight bars, such as Club 60 on River Avenue. Don described this space as age-inclusive and accepting, noting that many of the staff at Club 60 were gay. He noted that groups of older gay men often gather during early “happy hour” times, since quieter environments allow for better conversation, which they feel is missing from nightlife oriented toward younger clientele. Don also emphasized that, in queer clubs, older queers feel as though the younger queers, “don’t want those old guys here,” leading to feelings of self-consciousness and exclusion. He stressed that, while other cities have age-inclusive queer spaces, there are none to be found in Winnipeg.

The queer Métis artist I spoke to shared similar concerns, wondering whether Club 200 is the only option as they age, though worrying that, even there, they do not want to intrude on the social worlds of younger queers. Carina expressed that there are queer organizations and activity-based groups, such as Pitch for Pride and queer water polo, that are often attended by an array of ages, though especially 55+ lesbians.

Some folks brought up the niche-interest groups they were part of, typically started by community members noticing a need and trying to fill that need, such as fitness groups. From this conversation also came many ideas about the potential for sober queer spaces. Suggestions included: ski nights, dance workshops, outdoor recreation groups, niche-interest groups, cafés that don't serve alcohol, bookstores, sexual health stores (or a combination of bookstores and sexual health stores, such as Venus Envy in Halifax). One participant said about spaces and activities that are not necessarily sober, but not alcohol-based, "anytime I see anything like that, I'm jumping on it right away."

Many participants emphasized that, while nightlife plays an important social role, it does not meet the needs of all queer people, particularly those who do not drink, those in recovery, younger queers, and people who crave community without the expectation to purchase or drink alcohol. Lorri Millan and Shawna Dempsey explained that this pattern erupted in the lesbian community due to nightlife spaces being some of the only spaces to meet other lesbians. In a similar vein, one participant brought up a book that they read about lesbians and the culture around drinking stemming from stereotypes from a period when bars and clubs were a few of the only spaces lesbians had to meet, though this is more clearly explained in section 5.3.1.6 *Security and Safety*, "if you're a little bit butch... this... craft beer... drinking, 'I'm gonna carry my Leatherman around and have a cold one'." They expressed that, while a stereotype, it holds true for a lot of more "masc" presenting lesbians, "in terms of all those stereotypes... I spent years checking all of those boxes." An additional interesting point that this participant brought up was the 'foodie' culture we have in Winnipeg and that this carries through to queer spaces in Winnipeg, "I think that in queer spaces, there is... a lot of rich conversation about different cultural aspects, and things like beer and wine and food pairings is one of them. So, I think that it's a little bit hard not to be seduced by alcohol in queer spaces."

Queer spaces are clearly not one-size-fits-all. Don's views particularly highlight how expectations and desires around queer spaces can shift across life stages. While some participants expressed a

strong desire for sober queer spaces, Don made it clear that this was not a universal experience. When he goes out, he still wants to have a drink, emphasizing that he finds sober spaces “boring” or overly centered on narratives around recovery and sobriety rather than social connection. Such varying perspectives show that there is a need for diverse queer spaces, acknowledging and planning for generational differences and relationships to nightlife, alcohol, and how people want to socialize. However, some people discussed spaces that felt queer that didn’t ever or didn’t always have alcohol. Sydney, a white lesbian in her 20s, stated that one of the best events she’d ever been to was Club 200 on a dry night, “[it] was everything... we didn't realize it was happening and it was fantastic... I've never yelled so much in my life and then had no voice the day after. It was great. It was fantastic.”

These reflections demonstrate noticeable gaps. Firstly, while queer spaces exist, few are created to intentionally serve older queer adults. This leaves many people with the need to navigate straight venues or no space at all, rather than designated queer spaces. Another gap that was brought up across interviews was the recognition of the scarcity of sober or non-alcohol-centered queer activities and spaces. The community advocate I spoke to talked about the necessity for reimagining space in order to create sober spaces, “I feel that, the future for... queer spaces in Manitoba and Winnipeg... the ability just to reimagine... and to dare to try.”

4.3.2 Demographics in Queer Spaces

While many spaces may present themselves as inclusive with a pride sticker on their door or zero tolerance policy for harassment or discrimination, comments from participants reveal that representation within these spaces is not typically equally accessible or comfortable. My second research question alludes to how people access space in Winnipeg today, who in the community is typically there, and what demographics are represented. To learn how to improve space, it is important to understand how and where it might be lacking.

Most participants described contemporary queer spaces as primarily white and cisgender. One participant, who describes themselves as white-passing, mixed-race, and transmasculine, expressed that some queer spaces “genuinely think they are [inclusive] or would like to be but aren't prepared to actually do the work [that goes] into enforcing that.” I asked this participant what changes they thought could be done by these spaces in order for them to be genuinely inclusive, and they brought up the intersection between race and class. They noted that, at the end of the day, a lot of

queer spaces are businesses, often small businesses, who can't necessarily offer a voucher program or give their goods away for free, "they have a bottom line and they need to stay existing... and then how do you reconcile... how do you, administrate that system... So, it's not actually going to be accessible." In turn, this creates a space that does not allow patrons to experience space in a way that is equitable.

In a similar vein, the drag performer I spoke to added, "I think that any space can be welcoming or unwelcoming, and sometimes, unfortunately, it's as simple as who's working the door that night. I can't speak for the experiences of racialized people other than what I've heard, from friends and stuff... but I have to imagine... I know that I feel safer when a trans person is working somewhere, so I... imagine that that's the same for racialized people." The drag performer also touched on age demographics that he sees, "it's mostly younger people under 30, I would say. Depending on the time of day, though, because [at] Club 200... if you go from 4 to 8, you get the regulars and they're... more in their 40s to 60s... but, generally, mostly white people." He expressed that this demographic was not representative of Winnipeg's queer community. Another participant expressed the lack of older queers, "I think about when I'm older... is Club 200 the only place to go...? I don't want to be, like, the country bumpkin scarecrow in the back... young 20-year-old that are trying to be cool, and I'm like, 'hello, would you be interested in this activity with me?' Fuck, I don't want that! So, I mean, I do think about that, because it kind of caps at a certain age... Where are all the elder queers? Are they [at] home? I don't know... it's more I notice an absence of that, than anything."

Another participant, who describes himself as a Black, queer, non-binary femme, expressed that almost all the spaces they have been in have been white, so they frequently have to "put my blackness to the side," to safely and comfortably fit into queer spaces where whiteness is the default. He also explained that throughout his life, he often had to put his queerness aside for safety, so now that they are out, they choose not to put their queerness aside as often. This exclusive nature of queer spaces was echoed by other participants as well. Margaret, a white lesbian working at a community health care space, noted the discrimination she sees within some queer people and spaces, stating, "it's much more inclusive now, but even still... there are... assholes within our own... LGBTQA army... it's kind of shitty."

On the other hand, a young participant, who described themselves as a racialized non-binary person, explained that, at Rainbow Resource Centre, their experience is one that is diverse, “they have a lot of inclusivity there... even just their staff, which is amazing. And, they do have a lot of accessibility to people with disabilities. Everyone is welcome there.” Similarly, the community advocate I spoke to observed that “if they [posters about events] [are] aimed at [people] under the trans umbrella, and... like under 30 [years old], the language of inclusivity is like, there's a lot of words that need to be put into... promoting it... they will say how many steps there are, they will say if there's a quiet zone, if there's an interpreter.”

Don noted that in other, bigger, cities, there are many subdivisions of spaces that exist for whatever your interest might be, “if you like cowboys, cowboys, if you like... leather people... whatever you like. Here it's not big enough so you have to get along [with all other queer people].” Many participants brought up the lack of respect toward bisexual community members by other members of the community, “if a bisexual is in a queer relationship, they are just gay or lesbian... and if a bisexual is in a straight passing relationship, they're just, like, [perceived as] not even queer,” one participant noted, going on to say “I think, from the community, that when there are queer spaces, there's an entire subset of the community that aren't welcomed.”

More responses were similar, “it does tend to skew, one way, and it does tend to be more able-bodied, lighter skinned queers,” “mostly because of the barriers... people who have disabilities. I [also] recognize that quite a few of the queer places that I've been to are predominantly white,” “there's not really a big lesbian bar scene here, and I do think that it's important for women to have spaces to be where they're not going to run into a bunch of men,” “it's very hard to find a specifically Indigenous queer space.”

4.3.3 Barriers to Queer Spaces

To find out how spaces are accessed in Winnipeg today, I asked participants about the barriers they experienced either personally or learned about through conversations with others. Participants identified several interconnected barriers that limited their ability to access and feel comfortable in queer spaces across Winnipeg, including: physical accessibility, financial constraints, and experiences of discomfort or unsafety. Many participants noted that most queer spaces in Winnipeg lack basic accessibility features. This includes ramps, elevators, automatic door openers, wheelchair-accessible washrooms, accessible tables, and barrier-free entrances, which results in an

absence of visibly disabled community members. Some spaces were described as “physically impossible to get into if you have a wheelchair or mobility-assisted device.” Even when buildings are technically accessible, internal environments often are not, participants noted high-top tables, cramped seating, or size-exclusive booths. For others, broader environmental factors made it difficult to take part in queer spaces and activities, such as Winnipeg’s harsh winters, wildfire smoke in the summer, long travel distances, and inaccessible transit routes.

Financial barriers have also impacted people’s experiences of queer spaces. Many noted that queer events often occur in venues where purchasing drinks or tickets is expected, which can leave those with limited income or individuals who experience the interconnected impacts of race, disability and class having to navigate the space in a way that is accessible or choose not to go. Participants noted the frustration of feeling pressured to spend money to be in a social environment, with one participant stating that they did not necessarily want to “have to eat a thing or drink a thing in order to be in a place.”

Experiences of discomfort and safety concerns add an additional layer of exclusion. Many participants noted that they had experienced, either personally or had witnessed, that for many Indigenous and racialized people, simply approaching a queer venue could feel dangerous due to the high rates of violence they have faced in the city, especially at night or on transit. These rates of violence toward queer people and BIPOC are exacerbated when interconnected (McCown & Platt, 2021). Other individuals described feeling less safe when straight patrons, particularly cisgender men, entered. Interpersonal dynamics added to the feeling of unease in queer spaces, such as encountering ex-partners or ex-friends or friend groups, as Winnipeg is a relatively small and interconnected community. Participants brought up the general tensions and exclusion of bisexual, non-binary, and transgender people that they had either personally experienced or witnessed. This demonstrates that safety issues do not simply involve “external” threats but can encompass the queer community’s own “internal” dynamics.

4.4 Imagining the Future of Queer Space

My favourite question to ask participants was about how they saw the future of queer spaces. This question was intentionally broad, allowing folks to be as creative and utopian as they desired. Answers about the evolution varied. For some, the future felt uncertain. Don, for example, predicted a decline in physical queer spaces, stating that bars and cruising spaces have died out.

With a lot of connections happening online, rather than in person, he did not think that many new queer bars would open. However, he dreamed about options for 40+ queers, which he said Winnipeg is missing.

Other people imagined the possibilities for expanding the types of queer spaces that exist. One participant pictured a future with more sober, low-cost, activity-based options that do not revolve around either nightlife or therapeutic events. They expressed the importance of creating spaces that are accessible, fun, and inexpensive, “I feel like Queer social life is becoming increasingly bourgeoisie. It's like, okay, it's a restaurant, and it's not a fancy restaurant, but you still need, like, \$50 to participate,” they told me. This participant also reflected on the current challenge of visibility, how queer spaces and events need to be promoted widely enough for community members to find them, but not so widely that they begin to attract hate or harassment.

Many participants brought up the need for more inclusive, intergenerational, and physically accessible spaces. The drag performer I spoke to first highlighted that he is a white queer person, then emphasized that, to succeed, queerness in general needs to be anti-colonial, as colonialism is inherently a hierarchical heteronormative structure. Tiberious hoped for larger, more visible multigenerational spaces, while stressing the importance of environments where people can speak openly about stress or identity without fear of judgement.

“The only way to move forward is to break through all of that [colonial structures], and I think that land back and Indigenous sovereignty are important parts of how Winnipeg has to move forward... something has to change, and I think that giving land back to Indigenous stewards [on Turtle Island] is a small... thing... in the grand scheme of things, that would set us on a much better course.” (Drag performer participant)

Other participants expressed optimism about the future of queer space. Sydney imagined queer spaces flourishing, noting how many more exist now than when she first came out, and expected continued growth. Similarly, Kate described a utopian vision where queer spaces are commonplace throughout the city, easy to find, blended into everyday life, and welcoming to all.

These conversations show that, while many participants differed in their predictions, many shared a desire for queer spaces that are more diverse, less night-life dependent, intergenerational, and

inclusive. These should be settings that honour historical spaces, value existing community needs, and support the future generations of queer Winnipeggers.

4.5 The Impact of Queer Spaces

Participants described queer spaces as having shaped their sense of identity and belonging. Many expressed that these queer places provided relief from expectations placed upon them in other spaces. Margaret reflected on how entering into queer spaces allowed her to present herself comfortably for the first time, easing body dysphoria and creating a sense of familiarity, seeing others who shared her style, interests, and experiences. She noted that these spaces provided freedom from pressures around gender expression and allowed her to choose spaces where she felt safe and affirmed.

Several participants noted the role queer spaces play in confidence-building. The Métis artist I spoke to explained that being in queer spaces has allowed them to feel more comfortable being social, asking questions, and meeting people in a way that feels safe. However, this participant expressed that even spaces that are intentionally queer require ongoing care and accountability to stay welcoming. For others, queer spaces created opportunities for self-expression, Carina shared that participating in events, from everyday get-togethers to sillier activities, such as lesbian lube wrestling, helped her experiment with different aspects of her identity, including her masculinity. She described queer spaces as environments where it felt possible to try new things without fear of judgement. The queer activist I spoke to highlighted the importance of purpose and contribution to community. They stated that they found a deep sense of value through volunteering with Rainbow Resource Centre and Pride, sharing that this was a way to use their existing skills in ways that felt meaningful. The reciprocity in this relationship made their connection to the queer community that much stronger.

For those with intersecting marginalized identities, that impact is felt on a different level. The Black queer trans-masc femme I spoke to stated, “[are] queer spaces, important? Absolutely. With the caveat that any marginalized group needs a place to feel safe within that marginalized group. So, it'd be really nice if [no one was] marginalized so that those spaces aren't necessary.” He went on to explain that the necessity for Pride comes down to the fact that, a lot of the time, queer people are taught not to be proud. Similarly, the necessity for Black History Month exists because “11 months of the year, you are not learning about Black history.” When someone has intersecting ideas, it is

important to have places to find support, understanding, and care, “it is really isolating if you are one of the only ‘insert identity,’ especially when there are multiple identities involved.” They stressed that, while queer spaces are important, the bigger issue is that outside of those spaces comes the threat of violence and microaggressions. Though, it is not as simple as queer spaces just existing, they need to be accessible, “I am also plus size, so another thing is, going to a place where they only have skinny chairs or benches that are stuck to the floor... as a fat person, I want to go to a place where they have [big] chairs, I don't want marks in my legs in order to go to this coffee shop.” Finally, he emphasized that, often, in order to enjoy a space as someone with multiple intersecting identities, they need to put one to the side, in order to enjoy himself in the space. This participant explained the importance of intersectionality in a queer space perfectly:

“[I]f the quote-unquote ‘only thing for you,’ is that you are a lesbian, then you would be looking for space that's welcoming to lesbians. Then you add intersectionality, you add being plus-size, being black, being queer, all [different identities], now you're desperately searching for spaces that are accepting for all of them, and... it's getting better, I would say, but a lot of places will pick a couple, [which leaves patrons] having to choose which [identity they're] willing to sacrifice in that moment. And so I think that another reason why queer spaces are important is because right now, as people are trying to deconstruct what is quote-unquote ‘normal’... queer spaces... have always been a place... to... encourage people to be, whatever, and... break down...preconceived notions... So, I think that it's really important to make them [queer spaces] better. [In] non-queer spaces you'll go to a store that doesn't focus on queer accessibility in terms of clothing, so then you'd [ask for] straight-cut jeans that fit my butt, but then it's just women's jeans... You can't have a men's cut if you've got hips, if you've got a butt... or... you go... to salons, but nobody knows how to do a fade, so now I have to go to a men's barbershop. But then, with a queer space, people are learning more disciplines. So that's why I think queer spaces are important, because... there's the invested interest to include more people from all walks of life that doesn't exist in non-queer spaces.” (Black queer trans-masc femme participant)

One participant brought up that there is still animosity toward queer people, although it is often quieter, “people are just too afraid to say it out loud because they think they're going to get in trouble, and that's a good thing, but that's not enough, because we need those views to actually be undermined and go away and they haven't gone away,” they told me. They also expressed that having friends, family, and coworkers in your life creates an “island” of safety, but being in a space filled with queer people leads to a sense of belonging and community that cannot be found elsewhere. “Personally, it was so powerful to go to a queer space and just feel, like. I don't know a single person here, but these are my people. I can tell. I haven't even spoken to them, but just, like, the energy I'm feeling in this room, and how I don't feel people staring at me.” The performer I spoke to brought up that many religions and cultural groups have dedicated spaces, such as the Scandinavian Cultural Centre, the Punjab Cultural Centre, or the Centre Culturel Franco-Manitobain; why would queer communities not also have a dedicated space? He expressed that they also can be combined, such as queer churches or a cultural space for queer people to be, “every space that's able to be should be queer, because queerness represents freedom in a really big way, and I think that that's what society needs, is the idea that the rules aren't so rigid, and you can play and experiment, and figure out who you are and what it means to be who you are” He emphasized that queer spaces exist so people can express themselves, which is exactly what many identities are, a performance of self-expression: “if you're not allowed to perform that identity safely in public, it gets smaller, and it gets squashed.”

Many participants shared that queer spaces are vital in that they offer community and support for those who may not have it within the spaces they frequent or the people they often interact with. Participants brought up that queer spaces provide connection, validation, and a sense of collective identity that they may struggle to find elsewhere. The queer Métis artist described queer spaces as an environment that “validates that collectivity and that strength of voice” as well as a place where you can “find your family, find your people.” Similarly, Carina brought up looking for spaces that validated who she was prior to coming out, explaining that without that, she likely would still feel lost. Kate, a woman in her 80s, added a longer-term view, noting that queer people have always existed, even when their identities or relationships were not public. She told me that, growing up in Winkler, Manitoba, two women were seen as “old maids,” believed not lucky enough to find a husband, or that they were simply unwanted by men; Kate remembered being a child thinking, “maybe they [don't] want to be married or wanted to be with each other.” These reflections

demonstrate that queer spaces are not only essential for safety and belonging, but also for understanding oneself and others.

4.6 Summary

The interview findings show how queer spaces in Winnipeg have evolved. Historically, queer spaces in Winnipeg, such as Gio's, Ms. Purdy's, and the Winnipeg Gay and Lesbian Centre served as places to find a sense of belonging and understanding of oneself. Interviewees in the 60+ age group brought up the intimacy that they felt in queer venues. Participants stated that the venues reflected the city's broader demographics (predominantly white), which was shaped by racist colonial and racial policies that excluded Indigenous and Black peoples from the city.

Regarding contemporary queer spaces, participants emphasized the lack of many queer spaces and the inaccessibility of those that do exist, noting barriers such as cost, infrastructure, and lack of sober spaces. Some participants brought up online platforms for finding queer community and entry points into the city's queer networks, especially for those unable to find in-person communities. The interviews demonstrate how queer Winnipeggers imagine and reimagine space: as a venue that supports the act of care toward Winnipeg's queer community.

5 Findings in Archives

The archives used were from three different collections *The ArQuives* in Toronto, the *Two-Spirit Archives* at the University of Winnipeg, and the *Manitoba Gay and Lesbian Archives* at the University of Manitoba. I had hoped to find information from the early 1900s, but was not successful in this endeavor, only finding information beginning in the 1970s.

5.1 Safety

Archival materials from the 1970s reveal that safety, or more accurately, a lack thereof, was a concern shaping the experience of queer spaces in Winnipeg. Certain documents describe how queer gathering spaces were often accompanied by the threat of violence and harassment. These dangers were not hidden but widely known and normalized within the socio-cultural tapestry of the city.

One archival source identifies the grounds of The Hill as a known meeting place for gay men, as was discussed earlier (and features later as well), though the source also acknowledges that the site is one of repeated violent attacks (The LAMBDA Letter, 1991). The document describes these attacks as “the work of gangs out for the sport call[ed] ‘queer-bashing,’ emphasizing that this danger was ‘common knowledge in Winnipeg’” (The LAMBDA Letter, 1991). The way this has been framed is important to recognize. It demonstrates that violence against queer people, specifically gay men in this instance, was not only frequent, but recognized publicly, thus necessitating queer folks to navigate their visibility within public space in a discrete fashion to remain safe.

Another archival account details harassment directed at customers entering Giovanni’s Room and moving between bars, presumably Gio’s and Happenings Social Club, as they were across the street from one another. The writer describes events in which they had to delay leaving Gio’s as there was a group of men targeting lone pedestrians (The LAMBDA Letter October, 1991). This narrative demonstrates that harassment not only occurred within parks or more isolated locations, but in the space between and around queer venues. While the bars were relatively safe on the inside, going in and out of the spaces made the patrons vulnerable.

5.2 Accessibility

One document, a Gay and Lesbian directory from the 80s, highlighted the accessibility of different queer venues using a code to indicate how accessible a space was (see Figure 9) (Winnipeg Gay Community Centre, 1984). Out of 16 spaces that had their access type listed, nine were one step or level entrance, with one of the nine also having an accessible washroom, six had stairs, and one had a ramp (Winnipeg Gay Community Centre, 1984). So, while many queer spaces had physical barriers, they were acknowledged, rather than ignored. This document also noted that the Gay Community Center was not conveniently wheelchair-accessible and that someone requiring assistance should request support in advance (Winnipeg Gay Community Centre, 1984). The Board of Directors asked that these individuals also arrange for a member to accompany them while at the center. While this approach shows an intentional recognition that those with physical disabilities had the right to access queer space and that the center was intended for them as well, it also demonstrates the responsibility placed on disabled individuals to ensure they are accommodated, rather than it being guaranteed or automatic.

Through embedding information about the accessibility of a space directly into where queer spaces were shared shows that a proactive approach on behalf of queer community members in Winnipeg that, in some ways, surpasses contemporary practices, as this information is not always readily available.

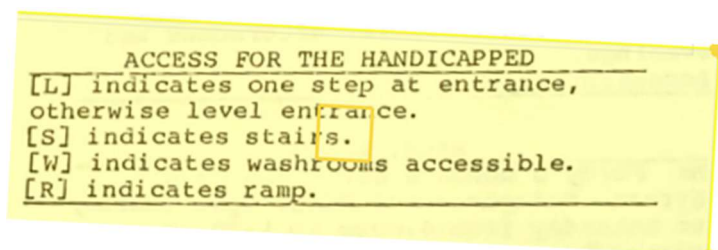


Figure 9: A legend for the accessibility of queer spaces in Winnipeg from the Winnipeg Gay & Lesbian 1984 Directory (Winnipeg Gay Community Centre, 1984).

5.3 Queer Spaces

Through analyzing archives, it seems as though queer spaces, both official and unofficial spaces, were created for many reasons and took many shapes. There were some unofficial public gathering spaces, nightlife spaces, community organized events, and spaces that were not queer, but were safe, and therefore community members would congregate there. They were spaces of connection, responses to crises, and sometimes methods of collective survival.

One archival document reflects on the creation of Tea and Bannock socials, which happened in the mid-1980s, after the deaths of two young Indigenous queer men in Winnipeg who took their own lives (Assiniboine College, 2024). Albert McLeod was quoted in the article saying that the losses spurred the gathering of dry Sunday gatherings at Giovanni's Room where Indigenous queer people could gather in community (Assiniboine College, 2024). The gatherings led to the creation of Nichiwakan, the Native Gay Society, and even led to the broader recognition of the term Two-Spirit (Assiniboine College, 2024).

Other archival sources mentioned unofficial and semi-public queer spaces. For example, The Hill was a common space for gay men to meet; a space made queer through frequented use rather than through a formal designation. This type of space shows how queerness embeds itself into a city's urban fabric, as even spaces that were never intended to function as a queer gathering space may still serve that purpose.

One archive documented queer space extending beyond the boundaries of the city through a larger-scale community event. A SEED grant request from 1983 for the Seventh Annual Gay Community Canada Day Picnic at Bird's Hill Provincial Park described an all-day event with an expected attendance of 250 people (Vogel, 1983). The request particularly emphasized the importance of transportation access, asking for funding to rent a bus for those who could not afford a car, specifically mentioning women, single parents, and young people, or who could not drive (Vogel, 1983). This shows how queer space could be intergenerational and intentionally inclusive, moving beyond simply bars or clubs as queer spaces.

There was also the 1984 Gay and Lesbian Directory, which highlighted queer spaces as a network of locations (Winnipeg Gay Community Centre, 1984). The directory shows where there are bars, cafés, bathhouses, community events, volunteer opportunities, media, health care, legal services,

religious groups, and advocacy organizations and even included a map (see Figure 10) (Winnipeg Gay Community Centre, 1984). This directory would have allowed queer people to more easily navigate social and support spaces.

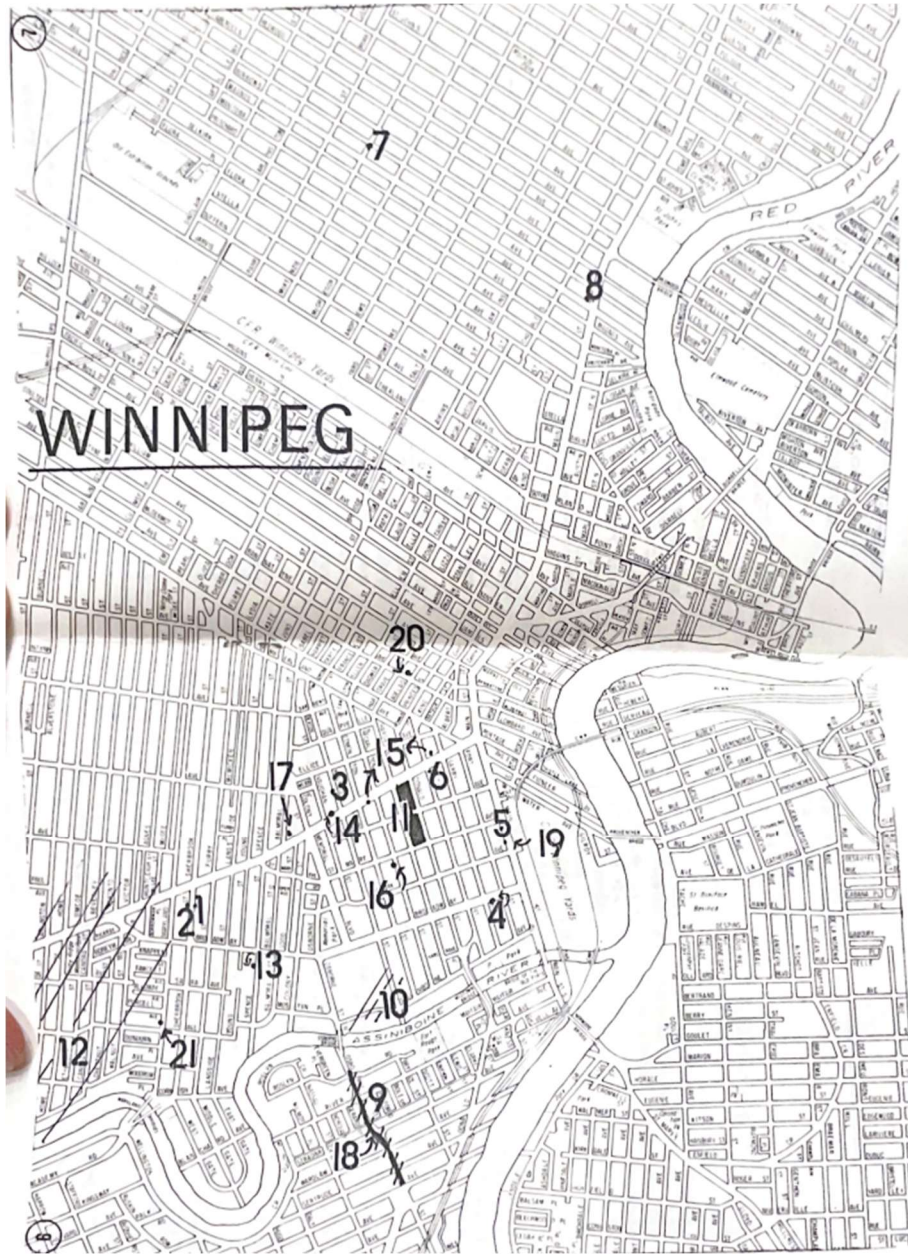


Figure 10: Map of queer spaces in Winnipeg from the Winnipeg Gay & Lesbian 1984 Directory (Winnipeg Gay Community Centre, 1984).

5.3.1 Learning About Queer Spaces

It appears, other than word of mouth, a common way to find out about Winnipeg's queer spaces was through community-produced directories and newsletters. Such publications would have been essential tools to communicate information about where people could gather and find support in the city.

Newsletters and publications such as *The LAMBDA Letter*, *Down & Out: The Winnipeg Magazine for Indigent Gays*, *Keesaywatissiwini*, *Swerve*, *The Winnipeg Leather/Levy Club*, provided event listings, venue information, art, community updates, and more. Some of the publications were for specific subsections of the queer community. *Keesaywatissiwini*, for example, centered Indigenous queer voices, and the Winnipeg Leather/Levy Club, focused on primarily gay men who liked leather or kink (Keesaywatissiwini, 1995; Winnipeg Leather/Levi Club, 1994). Queer knowledge-sharing was therefore able to be both universal and specifically tailored. Certain information could be found in these newsletters when it was hard to find elsewhere, such as side effects for those with HIV/AIDS on medication, as can be found in one of the *Keesaywatissiwini* newsletters (Keesaywatissiwini, 1995).

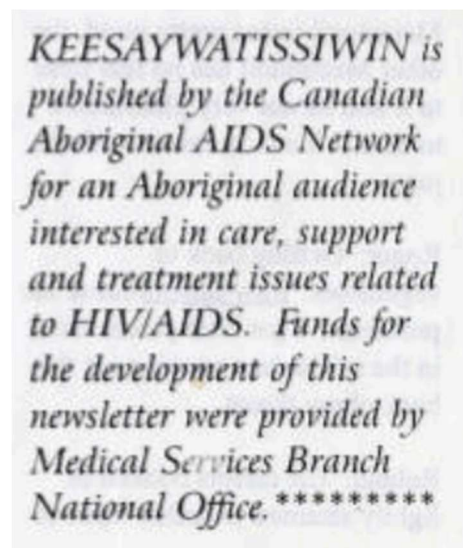


Figure 11: Text from Keesaywatissiwini newsletter in 1995 (Keesaywatissiwini, 1995).

6 Analysis and Discussion

6.1 The Evolution of a Community

The history of queer spaces in Winnipeg is ever evolving and shifting, seeming to move cyclically, depending on the general acceptance of queer presence in the city's society at the time. Earliest examples of queer space were from those who said that spaces felt "relatively safe," but by the mid to late 20th century, this was no longer the case (Korinek, 2012, p. 141). Early gathering spaces for queer people were typically covert, in informal and unofficial spaces, such as parks, bathhouses, railyards, and washrooms. These spaces relied on coded behaviours and anonymity, relying on insider knowledge to discreetly discover who else might be queer. Around the 1970s is when official queer spaces began to emerge, with bars, clubs, community organizations, and member-run spaces. It is likely that the emergence—and consequent visibility—of queer spaces increased public awareness, which in turn contributed to heightened harm directed toward queer people.

Participants in interviews described the late 20th century as a time when many queer spaces existed; nightlife venues were particularly thriving and functioning as primary spaces for building community. However, following this period was a noticeable decline of queer spaces. Many participants expressed their disappointment and frustration at the current lack of official queer venues in Winnipeg. Conversations with Lorri Millan and Shawna Dempsey provided me with some clarity as to why the decline of queer spaces occurred. They explained that the spaces met a specific need at that time, but that a shift in community priorities and economic hardship changed how queer people chose to gather.

6.2 Perception of Historical Queer Space

I found the perception some interviewees had that the demographics in historical queer spaces primarily "reflected the broader population of the city" (as written in Section 4.2.2) shocking, but when reading and learning more historical information, it made more sense that this is how it felt to many patrons. As mentioned earlier, systemic barriers limited the presence of Indigenous and Black peoples within Winnipeg (and other cities in the country). The pass system restricted First Nations movement off reserve and racist immigration policies discouraged and did not allow Black people to migrate to Canada (Toews, 2018) (see Section 3.2.1.1). Understanding systemic

exclusions such as these adds clarity as to why historical queer spaces in Winnipeg seemed to reflect the city's demographics.

6.3 Tensions Around Queer Nightlife

Although nightlife spaces have played a large role in queer community-building, many participants brought up that queer space should not be reduced to bars and clubs. Many expressed wanting spaces that are not alcohol-based, are intergenerational, and are accessible physically and financially. Some participants near or around 50 described feeling as though they were no longer fitting into the queer nightlife scene and were feeling unwelcome or out of place and having to attend spaces that did not fit their needs.

The emphasis of nightlife is a broader societal expectation around spending money to socialize. This does not leave much room for spaces for people to simply connect and build community without consumption. Such tensions do not suggest to eliminate nightlife spaces altogether; rather, they point to the limits of relying on these spaces as the primary means for all queer people to meet and connect.

6.3.1 Physical Accessibility

Physical accessibility is a large barrier for people seeking to access queer spaces. Participants describe challenges related to stairs, narrow layouts, limited seating, and inaccessible washrooms. As mentioned earlier in relation to Winnipeg's love of architectural heritage, many of these barriers are tied to the city's built environment and prioritization of preserving colonial infrastructure over accessibility and inclusion (see Section 3.2.2.2).

Tiberious's discussion of navigating spaces while living with chronic fatigue shows that accessibility goes beyond physical barriers. This is especially true in our post-pandemic era, with chronic fatigue being a major side effect for those living with Long COVID.

6.3.2 Financial Accessibility

Financial accessibility also shapes who can access queer space. Many participants believe that expectations around drinks, food, or tickets can be prohibitive. This led to conversations about alternative payment options and "queering" financial access, such as Pay-What-You-Can models or volunteering in exchange for participation.

Another example that came up in conversation with one participant was about Camp Aurora's sliding-scale model, which demonstrates that alternative financial models are possible and effective. Such approaches challenge capitalist norms around access and participation

6.4 Honouring Queer History and Futures

Most participants in the interviews expressed excitement when discussing the future of queer spaces. Participants also acknowledged the importance of recognizing the struggles of queer community members, appreciating those who created spaces under the conditions of potential risk, leading to the more accepting society that we have today.

Honouring queer history does not mean replicating said history, but learning from it. Participants imagined future queer spaces that were multigenerational, intersectional, accessible, and varied, along with an everyday, everywhere queer presence embedded into the fabric of the city. Such visions reinforce that queer spaces are not simply about the physical venues, but about the relationships and values shared within them.

6.5 The Benefit of Queer Connection

Across all discussions, archival documents, and existing literature, connection and community seemed to be the primary importance of queer space. Queer spaces provide a sense of belonging and validation, acting as somewhere people can express or experiment with who they are and how they want to present themselves. Even as there are fewer physical queer spaces, the desire for connection remains; whether gathering is happening at people's homes, online, or in unofficial queer spaces, queer networks continue. This reinforces the capacity for care and resilience within queer communities. Such connections are often more than friendship, they are chosen family. For this reason, queer space goes beyond fixed locations but exist within a web of relationships.

6.6 Summary

Historically, queer spaces seemed to be in more informal and unofficial locations, until the 70s when official venues started to appear. The late 1900s had many flourishing queer venues, primarily around nightlife activities. Yet a decline came soon after; many participants told me that they were not happy with the number of official queer spaces in city. This disappointment is exacerbated by barriers to queer space, specifically around age friendly, sober, affordable, and physically accessible venues.

Interview findings revealed a perception that the demographics of queer spaces largely reflected that of Winnipeg's broader population, which was shaped by systemic exclusions, limiting Indigenous and Black presence in the city.

Despite many challenges and barriers, participants expressed optimism about the future of queer space. They imagined multigenerational and inclusive environments that honour the history of queer Winnipeg and that fosters connection and community as its primary purpose.

7 Conclusion

This capstone set began with the intention to explore the evolution of queer spaces in the Prairies from the early 1900s to today, changing to the evolution of queer spaces in Winnipeg. It met its final match in the evolution of queer spaces in Winnipeg from around the 1930s to today. The goal has always been to discover how queer spaces have been formed and accessed, how spaces have differed across time, and what forms queer space takes today. Through reading existing literature, conducting interviews, and looking through archives, this research highlights both continuity and change in how queer spaces create space, lose space, and imagine space.

7.1 Answering Research Questions

7.1.1 How have queer spaces historically been advertised and accessed in Winnipeg? How has that changed?

Historically, queer spaces in Winnipeg were advertised primarily through word of mouth and community-produced materials such as newsletters and directories. They were accessed through informal networks and coded behaviours, as anonymity and discretion were essential for safety. Over time, increased visibility and digital platforms shifted how people learn about queer spaces, with social media now playing a central role. As discussed in Section 4.3, digital platforms have become an important mode of connection and self-discovery, especially as many physical spaces are inaccessible. Online queer space creates an opportunity for hybrid environments, combining digital and physical space, broadening access especially for those who may have more difficulty accessing in-person community (Miles, 2021, p. 205).

7.1.2 What form do contemporary queer spaces take and what form did queer spaces take historically?

Historically, queer spaces included both official and unofficial, typically semi-private, meeting places such as bars, bathhouses, member-run clubs, and community centres. They were spaces that provided a sense of security and connection within the broader city. In contemporary Winnipeg, a few traditional venues remain, such as Club 200 and Rainbow Resource Centre, yet queer spaces have shifted to include virtual platforms, activity-based groups, one-off events, and temporary or shared spaces. This shift reflects an adaptation and constraint regarding the shape queer spaces

take, while many spaces are not explicitly queer, they are experienced as queer through their atmosphere, aesthetics, and presence of clientele who are queer or exist outside heteronormative norms.

7.1.3 What are the differences between historical spaces and contemporary spaces in terms of access, community, and representation?

While queer spaces often emphasized protection through anonymity and privacy, providing space away from broader societal expectations or judgement, yet it was limited primarily to cisgender, white community members. Additionally, as entering queer spaces could be dangerous, it was also limited to those who were willing to face judgement or harassment upon entry or exit. Finally, from the interviews I conducted with those 60+, it also seemed as though historical queer spaces were more age-inclusive than those that exist today.

Contemporary spaces emphasize visibility and inclusion, using a public presence as a form of empowerment. Despite this shift, access is not equitable. Both historical and contemporary spaces have primarily centered white cisgender gay men, with cisgender lesbians, transgender people, Indigenous queer communities, disabled queer people, and queer people of colour facing constant exclusion. Such barriers often present themselves through physical inaccessibility, financial inaccessibility, and ageism.

7.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, I have several key recommendations to those aiming to create queer space or improve queer space in their cities.

1. Move beyond nightlife

Queer participants made it clear that there is a need for sober, intergenerational, daytime, low-cost spaces.

2. Prioritize accessibility

In both new and existing venues, it is important to consider and implement methods of physical, sensory, financial, and social accessibility.

3. Support different finance models

High-cost venues with expectations to purchase food and drink makes attending events inaccessible or uninviting for people. Ideas include implementing Pay-What-You-Can, sliding scale, or volunteer opportunities.

4. Honour queer histories

We would not be where we are today without the queer people who came before us.

Remembering their struggles and celebrating their successes allows us to move forward in an intentional way. This includes remembering and honouring histories of BIPOC community members, both queer and not, and the history of trans community members.

I also have several key recommendations to those aiming to conduct more research or write about queer spaces.

1. Centre 2SQTBIPOC spaces and experiences

Intentional focus on space created by and for Two-Spirit, Queer, and Transgender Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour, ensures that this history is represented. This information is not as readily available as information about white queer people, so the research would likely take much longer.

2. Attempt to find information from before the 1930s

There is not as much easily accessible information from before the 1930s in Winnipeg. This may require alternative methodologies or deeper investigations, given the limitations of the archival sources I found. Perhaps going to city or provincial archives, speaking to queer historians, looking through images, or partnering with local queer organizations to help interpret the findings.

3. Focus on spaces for older queer adults

Future research could examine how older queer people experience space and community, and what types of spaces might better support their needs.

4. Focus solely or primarily on transgender spaces

Future research would benefit from focusing on spaces created by and for transgender community members. Dedicated time to finding these resources would be constructive to understanding the needs and opportunities for queer space.

7.3 Questions After this Research

This project has raised many opportunities for future research.

- Is there a cyclical connection between the visibility of queer space and more prominent harassment toward queer people? This is a potential pattern hinted at in my interviews, and it bears further investigation.
- What types of coding (signaling to other queers that you are queer) existed for queer people? There are many examples that I have heard of (eg. The use of matchbooks as discreet ways to advertise queer locations; the use of the question “are you a friend of Dorothy,” to ask if someone else might be queer; a lesbian getting a nautical star tattoo to flag to other lesbians) that did not come up in the research.
- How can queer spaces be better supported, without reproducing capitalist expectations and financial exclusion? When discussing the difficulties people have in accessing queer spaces because of affordability, this was something I kept coming back to.
- Where do reconciliation and decolonization enter within the future of queer space? This is something I was hoping to explore but found that it required more dedicated time and intentional attention than I found I was able to provide for this project.
- Where do broader systems of housing, health care, and social support intersect in relation to queer space, and how can planners respond to this overlap? Throughout my research, I found it hard to disentangle these systems, as they are all so interrelated. I did not know how to talk about one without talking about the other.

7.4 Final Reflections

This project began with an interest in physical queer spaces and an excitement about the potential for a more relational understanding of queer space. Allowing participants to share their experiences in, memories of, and hopes for queer space became the true importance of the project, to me. While there have been clear limitations, particularly around representation and scope, and I had hoped that this research could be more intersectional than I was able to make it, I believe it can provide a baseline of lived experiences that can support deeper, more critical conversations moving forward.

There are many ways in which this research could continue, such as was noted in the above section. Maybe this project can become one that is iterative, a living document that grows with community input and changing needs.

Ultimately, this research will continue to inform the ways in which I practice planning. Queer spaces are not fixed, but ever changing and adapting. Paying attention to the ways in which people gather, who is welcomed, and who is missing is not just an academic question, but an intentional responsibility of those who create space, a responsibility that I intend to continue to work toward.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

General questions:

- a. How do you define a “queer space?”
 - i. Can you remember your first or an early experience of discovering or going to a queer space in Winnipeg? How did you learn about it?
 - ii. What qualities do you look for in a safe space as a queer individual?
 - iii. How do you learn about queer spaces in Winnipeg?
- b. Comfort/Safety
 - i. Have you ever felt unwelcome or uncomfortable in a queer space? If you are comfortable, can you share this experience?
- c. Accessibility
 - i. What barriers still exist within queer spaces in Winnipeg that make these spaces inaccessible to some members of the community?
- d. The Impact of Queer Spaces on Winnipeg
 - i. How do you think the visibility of queer spaces has shaped public perceptions of the queer community in Winnipeg?
 - ii. How do you picture the future of queer spaces in Winnipeg? What changes would you like to see?
 - iii. Are there any other stories, memories, or experiences related to queer spaces in Winnipeg that you would like to share?
 - iv. What role do you think queer spaces play or have played in the creation of political and activist movements in Winnipeg?
- e. For older generations (60+):
 - i. When you first started going out, how did you find out about queer spaces in Winnipeg?
 - ii. If you were part of the underground queer scene, can you share your experiences with these spaces?
 - iii. How did you navigate the risks of attending queer spaces before decriminalization, equality, and anti-discrimination laws were put in place?
- f. For middle generations (35-59)
 - i. How did you first experience queer spaces in Winnipeg? Were they physical spaces or did digital spaces play a role in community building?
 - ii. How did access to queer spaces shift after discrimination laws were put in place in 1996, if at all?
 - iii. Do you feel as though there were noticeable differences between spaces for lesbians, gay men, and transgender individuals, if yes, how so?

- iv. How did queer spaces in Winnipeg contribute to your sense of identity and sense of belonging when you began accessing them and how do they do so today?
- g. For younger generations (18-34)
 - i. What types of queer spaces do you frequent in Winnipeg?
 - ii. How do you engage with queer spaces in Winnipeg both in person and virtually?
 - iii. Do you believe queer spaces in Winnipeg today are safe and accessible for people of all intersecting queer identities, such as race, class, disability, and gender identity?

Demographic Questions

This research will benefit from the inclusion of information from people of all identities. If you are comfortable, please disclose personal identifying factors. This is not required.

- a. Gender Identity
 - i. Transgender Woman
 - ii. Transgender Man
 - iii. Two-Spirit
 - iv. Non-binary
 - v. Gender Diverse
 - vi. Gender Queer
 - vii. Cisgender Woman
 - viii. Cisgender Man
 - ix. Prefer not to answer
 - x. Or please specify: _____
- b. Sexual Identity
 - i. Aromantic
 - ii. Asexual
 - iii. Bisexual
 - iv. Demisexual
 - v. Two-Spirit
 - vi. Gay
 - vii. Lesbian
 - viii. Pansexual
 - ix. Queer
 - x. My sexual orientation is not listed above
 - xi. Or please specify: _____
 - xii. Prefer not to answer
- c. Are you a person with a disability?

- i. Yes
 - ii. No
 - iii. Prefer not to answer
- d. Do you identify as a racialized person?
 - i. Yes
 - ii. No
 - iii. Prefer not to answer