

LGBTQ+ youth in Montreal's Gay Village: Understanding the subjective perceptions and experiences of a changing neighborhood



Lewis's Club Tropicana (2017)

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	1
SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION	2
SECTION 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK	3
SECTION 3: METHODS	4
3.1 Positionality statement	4
SECTION 4: RESULTS	5
4.1 Dataset collection overview	5
4.2 Description of themes	6
4.2.1 Community dynamics	6
4.2.2 Commercial spaces	9
4.2.3 Non-commercial infrastructure	10
SECTION 5: DISCUSSION	12
5.1 On the importance of ephemeral spaces	12
5.2 Limitations of study	13
SECTION 6: CONCLUSION	14
SECTION 7: APPENDIX	16
REFERENCES	18

ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, under the pressure of rapid urban development and gentrification, Montreal's famed LGBTQ+ neighborhood, the 'Gay Village,' has been gradually drained of its communities. We conducted walk-along interviews with LGBTQ+ youth to understand how the new generation perceives and engages with the neighborhood. In this article, we identify some of the core social, cultural, and infrastructural deficiencies of the Village. We also provide suggestions for improvement regarding the local services of public institutions and organizations. Last, we advocate the use of alternative qualitative methods such as walking interviews, which are particularly well-suited to researching the lived experience of marginalized communities and individuals.

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

From urinals to saunas, public parks to ports and warehouses, the history of the queer community is intrinsically linked to urban history. Indeed, until the turn of the 2000s, most places of socialization and solidarity between LGBTQ+¹ people were informal urban spaces (Eribon, 2013; Martel, 2018). Most large western cities have a known, either formal or informal, LGBTQ+ neighborhood (Montreal's Gay Village, Paris' Marais, Berlin's Nollendorfplatz...). Yet, in the past two decades, LGBTQ+ urban spaces of socialization have undergone radical transformations, mainly because of gentrification, but also because of the emergence of online dating networks (Miles, 2021; Doan and Higgins, 2011).

Originally an industrial and working-class area, the Centre-Sud neighborhood of Montreal became increasingly attractive to the LGBTQ+ population starting from the 1900s. Termed the Gay Village, but commonly referred to as the Village, it was historically geared towards gay men from an older generation (Hinrichs, 2011). Since the early 2000s, the Gay Village has been undergoing rapid transformation, mainly characterized by the significant gentrification process afflicting the neighborhood. These changes occurred alongside the increasing use of digital spaces to connect with others and the lessening of social stigmatization towards marginalized sexual orientations and gender identities (Miles, 2021). The Gay Village is therefore being progressively abandoned by the LGBTQ+ community. Our aim is to understand the changing dynamics between this neighborhood and the LGBTQ+ community, by looking at the Gay Village through the eyes of young members of the community. Our research project will be guided by the following research questions:

1. In which spaces do young people (18-25) identifying as LGBTQ+ engage in Montreal's Village? From which spaces do they feel excluded?
2. What factors contribute to LGBTQ+ youth's sense of inclusion in or exclusion from Montreal's Gay Village?
3. How do LGBTQ+ youth perceive, relate to and engage in the Gay Village?

By exploring the current relationship between LGBTQ+ youth and the Gay Village, we can examine where the neighbourhood succeeds or fails to provide a place of solidarity and gathering for new generations. This could serve as a starting point for considering potential routes of adaptivity for the Gay Village, comprising of steps to evolve in order to remain relevant within a changing society and community.

Many services in the Gay Village are restricted to an 18+ audience. In order to ensure that all interviewees have full access to the neighborhood's services, our target age group was young, LGBTQ+ adults (18-25 years old). This age group was largely brought up with access to the internet, and by extension was able to seek out others of their community without use of a geographic neighborhood. They also grew up in a time where being a visible member of the

¹ LGBTQ+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and other sexual and gender identities.

community in public was both legal and more largely accepted by the greater population. Already, these two factors show a stark difference from the society in which the Gay Village was originally formed. The dynamic of abandonment LGBTQ+ neighborhoods and spaces can be observed globally in the countries of the West (Martel, 2018). Thus, if the Gay Village is to continue to be a place of identification and pride for the LGBTQ+ community, it is to this dynamic that it must adapt.

SECTION 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our research project is multidisciplinary, and our approach aims to be intersectional and critical. We thus draw from a variety of conceptual bodies to better address the complex issues of LGBTQ+ perceptions of space, embodied experiences of space, and phenomena of discrimination, exclusion, visibility, and inclusion.

First, we invoke a body of literature in history and urban studies specific to the Village to better understand the history of the neighborhood (Giraud, 2012, 2013; Hinrich, 2011; Miles, 2021; Podmore, 2006). Critical literature on the topic of gentrification in the Gay Village (Van Crielingen & Decroly, 2003) as well as on community dynamics within the neighborhood (Rose, 2004) is central to our understanding of the topic. This body of literature allows us to better frame our research project and anchor our analysis in the specific social, political, historical, and geographic context of the Gay Village.

Second, by focusing on embodied and subjective experiences of space, this research project is rooted in cultural geography and the phenomenological approach to environmental experience (Kusenbach 2003, p. 455). Cultural geography (Entrikin 1991; Relph 1976; Tuan 1977) forms the theoretical basis for this project. We approach questions of embodied experiences and subjective perceptions of space through the prism of two key concepts: ‘sense of place’ and ‘place-making.’ ‘Sense of place’ refers to subjective and personal or cultural relationships to specific spaces. ‘Place-making’ refers to processes by which, through engagement with and alterations of a specific space, an individual or a community forges it, appropriates it, and identifies with it.

Finally, from queer studies, we draw on the literature relating to questions of power/knowledge relations and control of marginalized individuals and sexual minorities (Foucault, 1976; Spargo, 1999). Butler (2002) offers a complex critical reading of Foucauldian theory as applied to queer bodies and lived experiences (Bert & Lamy, 2014, p. 240). The question of queer spaces has also been widely addressed in cultural geography (Ghaziani, 2015; Rushbrook, 2002; Miles 2021), which allows us to solidify our multidisciplinary approach. We also ground our analysis in the literature on gay neighborhoods around the world, including the fundamental work of Martel (2012). Finally, we invoke various theoretical essays on the history and evolution of queer cultures, and notably Eribon (2013).

It should also be noted that we invoke queer literature and theory but do not use ‘queer’ as a general term to describe the interviewees. Queer identity is above all a political identity, pertaining to the lived experience of abnormality, namely being perceived as ‘weird’ and treated as such. Beyond the question of sexuality, it is a profoundly political and reclaiming identity which, according to many scholars and activists, should not be considered as a simple synonym or umbrella term for LGBTQ+ (Boucrier, 2021). Thus, unless the mentioned interviewee identified as such, we did not use the word ‘queer’ to describe them.

SECTION 3: METHODS

Research on subjective experiences of neighborhoods in cultural geography brings together a wide range of different methods. Unfortunately, these methods are too often census-based or consist of observational methods where the researcher is an external observer, an outsider to the studied environment and social group (Cummins et al., 2005; Carpiano, 2009, p. 263). These static interview methods have been criticized on certain grounds, including that they prevent interviewees from engaging in activities, topics, and behaviors within the context of the environment being studied, as they are focused on the interview (Kusenbach, 2003, p. 459).

Parallely, ‘Mobile methods’ (Hein et al., 2008) are gaining attention and have been used in many landmark studies on the subjective experience of urban space (Lynch, 1960; Kozol, 1995). They allow for a better understanding of the context (social, cultural, historical) of the subject, and help to fully ground the study in the subjective experiences of the participants (Carpiano, 2009, p. 263). These methods are particularly prized for studying young populations (Rivera et al. 2021; Van Hecke et al. 2016; Veitch et al. 2020), as mobility makes the interview less formal and therefore less intimidating. Additionally, mobile methods are frequently employed within gender studies and feminist studies to study marginalized populations (Rosenberg 2021; Evans, and Jones 2011) as they help provide critical and “rich narratives of place and emphasise embodiment in the spatial context” (Rosenberg 2021, p. 7).

To better understand and contextualize the subjective experiences of young LGBTQ+ people in the Gay Village, we therefore chose to mobilize a mobile method, the walk-along interview. This method consists of accompanying the interviewees through the neighborhood under study, usually while they guide the interviewer and describe the space (Carpiano, 2009, p. 264). The mode of interview is similar to semi-structured interviews, as the interviewer asks questions and guides the conversation but allows the interviewee the freedom to expand on or change topics.

3.1 Positionality statement

Regardless of the nature of the conducted project, researchers can never remain neutral, nor claim objectivity in their work, especially when studying complex topics of personal and

interpersonal experiences of discrimination, unsafety, and exclusion. Throughout the research process, we thus deemed fundamental to maintain a critical reflection on our identities and positions in social, cultural, racial, and academic spaces. As all students of the group project identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, we decided to focus on a social group whose history, cultures, and practices we are familiar with. As our project also includes a partial focus on the experiences of racialized people, the group members who are white were careful not to induce bias or discrimination, either in the interviews or in the analysis. Finally, we recognize that this project takes place in an academic setting, and more importantly that we are students at McGill University, an institution whose history and fortunes are rooted in a complex colonial context.

While this project remains grounded in academic resources and frameworks, we believe it is crucial to acknowledge that marginalized communities are not always fully, objectively studied and represented in academic works. As this project focuses on the subjective experiences of LGBTQ+ youth, it is fundamental to include diverse alternative sources and voices while conducting this project. This inclusion effort must be reflected in the selection of interviewees, but also in the included literature, as well as in the methods.

SECTION 4: RESULTS

4.1 Dataset collection overview

In this research project, a singular interviewee was accompanied by one interviewer, who recorded the conversation using their cell phone, after receiving their verbal consent. Interviews were conducted in French or English, depending on the interviewee's preferred language. The starting point of the interviews was the Berri-UQAM metro station, while the rest of the itinerary was determined by the interviewee. We interviewed 12 people, all identifying as LGBTQ+ and aged between 18 and 25 (cf. Appendix, Figure 4, 5, 6). Interviews each lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and were recorded using the interviewer's cell phone (with the informed consent of the participants). The interviewer asked guiding questions to understand how the person perceives and experiences their direct environment; however, the majority of the conversation was determined by the interviewee. Itineraries were noted and mapped (cf. Appendix, Figure 2).

After the interview phase, all interview recordings were rigorously transcribed and anonymized before the analysis phase began. We collectively identified recurring themes and sub-themes in the discussions and constructed a thematic analysis table (Figure 1). Each interview transcript was then read and coded by three reviewers, and quotes were added to the table. We met regularly during the analysis phase to review and modify the table. This work allowed us to identify specific factors of exclusion / attraction, discrimination / inclusion, visibility / erasure, etc.

<p>I - COMMUNITY DYNAMICS IN THE VILLAGE Section 1 - Perceived actors of exclusion <i>1.1 Straight people</i> <i>1.2 Homeless communities</i> <i>1.3 Older generations of gay men</i> Section 2 - Excluded groups and manifestation of exclusion Section 3 - Dynamics of engagement with LGBTQ+ spaces <i>3.1 Recognition of engagement with LGBTQ+ spaces</i> <i>3.2 Inadequacy of the Village to meet the needs of LGBTQ+ youth</i> <i>3.3 New LGBTQ+ gathering spaces in Montreal</i></p> <p>II - SPACES OF INVOLVEMENT Section 1 - Commercial spaces <i>1.1 Of flags and the commodification of queerness</i> <i>1.2 Spaces are centered around nightlife</i> <i>1.3 Daytime spaces of consumption are not queer</i> Section 2 - Non-commercial infrastructure <i>2.1 Permanent infrastructure</i> <i>2.2 Ephemeral spaces, structures, and events</i></p>	<p>III - EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE VILLAGE Section 1 - Perception of the space and engagement in it <i>1.1 Only passing through the Village</i> <i>1.2 Village perceived as empty</i> <i>1.3 Nightlife experience</i> <i>1.4 Work experience</i> <i>1.5 First impressions of the space</i> <i>1.6 People who emigrated: insights on the Village</i> <i>1.7 Walk-along interview: live experiences and comments on the walk through the Village</i></p> <p>IV - OTHER COMMENTS Section 1 - Comments on Covid-19 Section 2 - General comments on safety Section 3 - Other comments</p>
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Figure 1. Themes extracted from thematic analysis table

4.2 Description of themes

4.2.1 Community dynamics

First, despite being established on the concept of inclusivity, Montreal's Gay Village has become a space of intersectional exclusion for many groups. Multiple actors are perceived to contribute to this exclusion: namely, straight people, homeless people, and older generations of gay men.

Interviewees perceived straight people as a threat to the Gay Village's sense of community as they have a notable presence, especially in nightlife. Many interviewees noted experiences where they, or their friends, felt unsafe around straight men making sexual advances in clubs. Indeed, an interviewee recalled how her friend experienced "straight guys grabbing her" at Unity, a popular gay nightclub. Another interviewee felt that straight people "threaten the sense of ... safety" in this supposedly safe space. As more straight people come to consume in this space, there is a perceived gentrification, and shift of businesses' target demographics, as stated by one of our interviewees. He claimed that nightclub owners take advantage of the increase in wealthy, straight clientele to increase prices and progressively "care less about pushing for that inclusive brand." LGBTQ+ youth – and especially lower-income individuals – hence feel excluded and increasingly desert the Village.

Many public and green spaces in the Village were noted by interviewees as occupied by homeless populations. This presence in the public spaces has created a competition for space with LGBTQ+ youth who feel excluded from these non-transitory areas. Those who wished to

use these areas felt like they were encroaching on the living space of the homeless community. The public areas were further avoided as LGBTQ+ youth, and especially women, feel unsafe in the presence of homeless people. One of our interviewees, who identifies as a woman, explained that the space “gets especially crowded with homeless people at night” and that she “wouldn’t really feel comfortable walking alone at night.” Another recalled an experience of “see[ing] people screaming” and, subsequently, getting “pushed” near the Berri-UQAM metro station. As underlined by one of the interviewees, a large part of this unease stems from their association of alcohol and drug abuse with the homeless community in the area: “at night, it’s a little bit sketchy. You [don’t] feel very safe. Because there is a lot of alcohol abuse, consumption abuse.”

The Gay Village was also found to have an overrepresentation of older generations of white, gay men by a majority of participants. This overrepresentation is observed in both the demographics of the inhabitants of the Village and the fact that a majority of consumption is tailored to gay men:

[Translated] Personally, I don't have a sense of belonging to the Village. Because I don't find people like me. It's really more, like you said, gay men, a little older, so I love them and everything, they're part of the community, but... I don't recognize myself in them.

Interviewees also told us that “the clubbing scene is a lot more focused on gay men,” and that “[Translated] there are many spas, saunas strictly for men.” Our participants desired “more places that focus less on the strict, male, gay community.” The gentrification of the Gay Village follows the maturing of its original population, many of whom have more income. As an interviewee commented, the Gay Village “is often older men, because now it is quite expensive to rent an apartment here.”

The communities mentioned above have created an environment that LGBTQ+ youth feel excluded from. This sentiment of exclusion is especially present in conversations with women (“[Translated] there’s not a lot of representation of women”), BIPOC² (“[Translated] The racialized aspect is so not visible in the Village, zero, zero”), and lower-income interviewees (“I haven’t been in a while because the price tag kind of scared me away”). In most cases, our interviewees identify as two or more of these groups, and feel intersectionally mis- or non-represented by the Gay Village. One biracial, lesbian woman interviewee felt especially overlooked and ignored in the Gay Village as a result of her overlapping gender identity, ethnicity, and sexual orientation that compound and lead to further exclusion:

I'm half-black so obviously, like even in the campaigns that they make, they don't really do it with black people. It's mostly white people. So. So yeah. And because I'm a woman, I'm obviously less important so I don't get represented as much.

² BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, people of color

Last, interviewees found they were excluded from the Gay Village in various physical and symbolic ways.

Indeed, the majority of participants felt that the businesses and bars are run by, and catered mostly towards gay men or straight people. One of the interviewed woman stated that you can find “nice little bakeries that are owned, run by queer people for queer people, but again, mostly men.” She added, “I would rather give an advantage to female-run businesses [...] over men. They’ve been here forever; they can share the space with us.” This exclusion extends to community services offered, and a participant complained that there are no LGBTQ+ women-centered clinics. Instead, and by default, they have to go to male-centered clinics where they are “accepted” but report feeling uncomfortable. On top of that, there is a prevailing sentiment of lack of safety that makes women feel out of place and dismissed by the Village. One of our participants mentioned that, “having a higher concentration of men doesn’t exactly create the safest space.” Another interviewee commented that “spaces are hostile towards women” in the Gay Village. Additionally, respondents commented on the exclusionary effects of the gentrification of the Gay Village on lower-income youth. As one interviewee said “prices are getting more unaffordable in the Village” and multiple others reported avoiding clubs as “the price tag scared [them] away.”

Moreover, the LGBTQ+ youth we interviewed felt symbolically excluded by the lack of representation in the Gay Village. A woman interviewee denoted that this space “reflects a lot on men... There’s very little reflection on women”. Overall, “it doesn’t necessarily feel like a place where you’re going to find a very diverse community”. In a nutshell, a BIPOC, lesbian woman participant stated that she is “not misrepresented,” as “I don’t think they’re trying to represent me.”

Despite feelings of exclusion, LGBTQ+ youth still recognized the historical and cultural significance of this space and attached meaning to it:

It's so deeply in Montreal, like it's a part of history. And I don't think you can replace a part of history and I think a lot of people who are older and who are part of the movement and like, created this place and built this place would be really, really sad about [moving on from the Village], which I can understand.

Some also felt safer as there are a larger amount of LGBTQ+-presenting people in the Gay Village than in other parts of the city: “I like, do sometimes feel uncomfortable walking around some parts of Montreal dressed in a queer way, but I don't really feel that here. Because I'm, rarely, like, the queerest dressed ... I feel pretty safe here.”

However, there is a sentiment that there is a lesser need for a gay village in contemporary society than there was in the past. Our interviewees associated this to the fact that “Montreal is a very inclusive city ... a very open-minded city.” Very few participants noted feeling unsafe because of their gender or sexual orientations in spaces other than the Gay Village. Furthermore,

an interviewee noted that “a lot of queer dating at this point doesn't even really happen at bars in younger crowds ... a lot of people find dates on social media apps, on Hinge, on Tinder, Grindr, all those.”

Youth, and especially marginalized youth, do not feel well-represented by the Gay Village. This lack of connection to and identification with the space and its inhabitants leads them to seek other spaces to express their identities. LGBTQ+ youth has moved to other physical and virtual spaces of socialization in which their community feels less commodified and superficial. Mile End, Hochelaga and the Plateau neighborhoods were named by multiple interviewees as places where young adults congregated. They felt these spaces were more representative of their diverse backgrounds and identities.

4.2.2 Commercial spaces

The rainbow symbols and flags decorating the space throughout the Gay Village, or at least the main street of Sainte-Catherine, are largely provided by companies decorating their commercial space within the area. One interviewee acknowledged an overall positive association with these symbols, but skepticism towards their use from commercial spaces: “It’s good to put the pride flags out, you know. It is a Gay Village. But I think it’s just become a commercial symbol of sorts. [...] Community isn’t supposed to be necessarily commercial.” The same interviewee continued, “true representation is not commercial.” The company-sponsored efforts of representation were also criticized as lacking true depth or meaning. This sentiment was echoed throughout various interviews, examples including, “I don’t feel like putting a flag is really representative of the queer community in Montreal”, “It’s just a [dépanneur] but they’re here so they threw a basic pride flag, a rainbow. There are no real other associations”, “It just kind of feels like a neighborhood of Montreal where they put up pride flags more.” These sentiments culminated in a criticism that connected the perceived superficiality of the rainbow decorations to the larger spirit of the Gay Village:

For me I guess, queerness feels more than just that visual display? [...] I guess that's kind of what the Village feels like too. It kind of, at least for me, doesn't have a deeper community connection and feels more like it's trying to show people that it's something.

The nature of commercial spaces within the area were also described as centered towards nightlife, with one interviewee proclaiming that “[*translated*] the only reason you come here is to go out at night,” and another admitting, “I find it hard to find queer activities in the Village that don’t involve just, like, consumption.” Within the interviews, there was appreciation for the nightlife of the district. Many pointed out their favorite bars and clubs, with a few expressing a sense of community and representation within these spaces. However, those who with a lack of interest in these types of activities felt that the focus on nightlife excludes them from this space.

While interviewees have had pleasant experiences at other services in the area, such as restaurants or cafes, there was a sentiment that “they don’t feel queer enough”. Daytime commercial spaces seemed to fail even in relation to other area of Montreal, one interviewee describing a “cafe on Mont Royal that is very obviously gay. It has a bunch of flags, it's painted bright pink with unicorns all over the place. Very clearly queer-themed.” Connected to the lack of attractions outside of nightlife, different interviewees described the daytime atmosphere within the Village as lacking life. One expresses, “People come and go and, like, they pass through but there's, that's it.” This sense of disengagement with the space was further exacerbated by shut down and vacated commercial premises that were noticed throughout the interviews.

4.2.3 Non-commercial infrastructure

A large part of the spaces and infrastructures mentioned by the interviewees are “non-commercial” spaces, meaning that their function is not related to a sales activity, but rather to the provision of public services (health infrastructure, green spaces) and/or to local community activity. We distinguish two types of non-commercial spaces: *permanent* and *ephemeral*.

Permanent infrastructure (or the ‘built environment’), a term we chose to refer to built spaces whose activity (and accessibility), is maintained both throughout the seasons and over the long term. This includes health infrastructure (clinics, testing places), green spaces (parks, green alleys and paths), community centers, municipal spaces (library), etc. Our analysis of the interviews seems to reveal both the importance of permanent spaces and the serious problem of their scarcity. Many of our interviewees lamented the lack of access to green spaces, both because of their limited number and size, and because they are often occupied by homeless populations. Health infrastructure, in this case clinics and other spaces for sexual healthcare, is described as lacking, especially for women. One lesbian woman described this gap and explained that, apart from the Réseau Lesbien Québec (RLQ), little or no infrastructure is available to lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women. However, there seems to be progress in this area: “[*Translated*] They are accepting, it is starting to be more and more noticed.” The permanent, non-commercial infrastructure is thus presented as crucial and yet missing.

Interviewees spoke highly of *ephemeral spaces*, a second term we chose to describe spaces whose existence, activity and maintenance are only planned for the short term. These spaces within the Village include the pedestrian street during the summer, art exhibitions, Pride events, or other municipality and organization-led events. Though none were occurring in the late fall when our interviews were conducted, most interviewees nevertheless made a point to express the positive impression they retained from them.

The summertime festival pedestrian street was described as “a really nice, open, welcoming environment. It’s a place where people can kind of walk on the streets, dance, and

whatnot.” Another interviewee describes the pedestrian street as feeling “like a little community gathering.” This sense of place was augmented with the rainbow ball decorations that used to drape over Sainte-Catherine, which many interviewees mentioned in association with the pedestrian road. Many felt the absence of these decorations, one interviewee explaining:

They removed [the decorations], because it's like a contract with the artist. So it was up for a certain amount of years. And then when the contract is over well, it's over. But my personal feeling is they should have renewed it somehow, or just kept it going.

Other art exhibitions previously set up on the street were described with equal affection. One outdoor gallery that would play music from queer artists was described as a “cool, queer, non-alcohol thing.” Interviewees described engaging with outdoor art exhibits, one recounting a friend lying underneath a dome as they took videos.

Ephemeral spaces encompass not only temporarily built environments, but also spaces that are transformed through events. One interviewee drew attention to a park she is fond of due to its history of hosting ballrooms. Another described a weekly event within the Village and its effect on his engagement with the area:

[Translated] They offered you to draw a drag queen for free. And there were drawing instructors who offered to help improve your drawing. It was a good experience. [...] When I realized that every Tuesday they offered drawing a drag queen, I came. Regularly.

Another notable ephemeral space is the annual Pride week, hosted majoritarily within the Village. One interviewee noted that the Village was “still full of pride” during Pride. The event also allowed some of our interviewees to participate in and experience the Village at a young age. Two interviewees discussed seeing Pride events for the first time with parents and siblings. One described her experience as:

a really beautiful day. Like, that one was one of my best memories from the Village. [...] When I saw all those people enjoying themselves and, like, being themselves, I was like oh wow. That's what I wanna be. That's what I wanna do. So that's why it was so beautiful to me. At that time.

Important to note within this commentary is the fragility of ephemeral spaces. As interviewees stated, these spaces are no longer accessible, and there is often no guarantee that they will be re-established. This uncertainty also applies to annual, established events such as Pride Week. One interviewee expressed hurt at the cancellation of Pride in the past, along with the feeling that the reasons for cancellation were insubstantial.

SECTION 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 On the importance of ephemeral spaces

Through the interviews, we are led to understand not only the importance of ephemeral spaces and events for LGBTQ+ youth, but also that ephemeral spaces help fill in the gaps of permanent infrastructure.

Indeed, a key point that came up in all the conversations was the necessity of ephemeral spaces in revitalizing the Village. The importance of these types of infrastructure such as artistic expositions, cultural events, or even the seasonal pedestrianization of Sainte-Catherine Street, was systematically pinpointed. In that matter, people seem to surprisingly define and identify to the Gay Village through its ephemeral spaces, rather than its permanent ones. Indeed, not only do these ephemeral spaces and structures seem to compensate for the permanent infrastructure's lack of life, but they also serve as major landmarks of the Gay Village. This can be exemplified by the *18 Shades of Gay* installation, which were hanging rainbow balls that stretched over a kilometer on Sainte-Catherine Street. Despite having been taken down in 2019, this art installation is still perceived to this day as a major defining structure of the Gay Village's urban landscape, and is therefore a symbol contributing to the sense of belonging of the space by its users.

Secondly, still in contrast to the built environment, a majority of these ephemeral spaces or events are highly valued in regards to the great diversity and inclusion they allow. They are indeed accessible to everyone as they do not require charges for admission or consumption, unlike bars, clubs, or restaurants. However, a majority of these ephemeral infrastructure aren't resilient to the seasonal changes of the weather. That is why the Village must rely on the revitalization of its built environment. It was recognized that the Gay Village needed permanent infrastructure that goes beyond simply commercial spaces, and have to rely on other types of structures, such as health specific infrastructure (clinics for women), green spaces, and community or cultural centers. Furthermore, those new forms of permanent spaces must serve as hybrid structures. Despite their success, ephemeral events and structures simply cannot exist without a pre-established built environment that would allow such installations. In order to preserve, or rather restore, the dynamics of the LGBTQ+ community in the Gay Village, it is therefore essential to emphasize the creation of hybrid, year-round spaces, that would also render the Gay Village resilient to the colder periods of the year, preventing the "seasonal death" of the spaces as identified by our interviewees.

Lastly, despite forming a large portion of the permanent urban fabric of the Gay Village, the commercial infrastructure has been seen as highly unstable on the long run, as explained by some interviewees. Indeed, many commercial spaces are either available for rent, or existing stores are shutting down due to a lack of profit. This 'foreclosure' phenomenon strongly impacts the urban perception of the Village, as people notice the recurrent and constant change in the

commercial landscape of this space. The consequent lack of stable clientele then reinforces the impression of inactivity and emptiness within the Gay Village. This dynamic is in itself part of a self-reinforcing vicious cycle: the unstable commercial spaces paints the Gay Village as a dull and unwelcoming space, therefore limiting its appeal to people. This lack of regular clientele then leads to low revenues for existing shops, which accentuates the unstable nature of these commercial infrastructure, and perpetuates this circle once again. In this sense, the alleged permanence of permanent infrastructures is therefore to be questioned. We argue that the reinforcement of ephemeral spaces and events could help to compensate for the strong variations in clientele and the lack of commitment of young people in the Village, which could bring a more stable clientele to local businesses.

Based on the critical analysis of the interviews, we advance a second crucial point of discussion, which we identify as a potential guideline for revitalizing the Village. There is a real need to create *hybrid community spaces*, that is, spaces that combine permanent infrastructure (the core building) and ephemeral spaces and events. For example, a sexual health and testing center that hosts conferences on sexual health, prevention and care; an LGBTQ+ archive center that serves as a library and provides a screening room for an independent film club, a community drop-in center that provides a work space (no consumption required) and resources for questioning youth, etc. The possibilities for creating hybrid spaces are endless, and do not necessarily require the construction of new buildings, simply their transformation. It is this need for hybridity, opportunities to freely engage in community spaces and actions, that emerged from our interviews.

5.2 Limitations of study

Our study still faces a number of limitations, which do not jeopardize the strength of our findings, but perhaps induce some biases that are worth mentioning, namely: our limited sample, the Gay Village as a limited geographic space, and the very format of our walking-interviews.

Firstly, a majority of our interviewees are international students, and 75% of them have lived in Montreal for less than 4 years. In that matter, only a few of them spent time in the Gay Village prior the COVID-19 pandemic, which had drastically reshaped the Gay Village's urban and commercial landscape. The minority of locals in our study limits our points of comparison to pre-COVID period, and only offers a relatively novel perspective on the Village. by focusing on the LGBTQ+ youth in Montreal, linked to our 'snowball' sampling process, our sample was characterized by a relatively specific demographic. 11 of the 12 interviewees are students, and all of them possess roughly a similar economic background as well as social sphere.

Then, as a geographical space during a specific period of the year, the Gay Village itself had its own limitations. On a practical note, during many of our walking-interviews, construction works were taking place in areas of the Gay Village, which for recording purposes, restricted the path the interviewees could potentially follow. This restriction in space limited our areas of

observations and therefore scope of analysis. Moreover, as only two of our interviewees currently or previously lived in the Gay Village, most were not particularly familiar with its spatial configuration, especially beyond Sainte-Catherine Street, further limiting the itineraries they chose, as shown in the convergence of routes around and on Sainte-Catherine Street mentioned earlier (cf. Appendix, Figure 2). Our perception and understanding of the space was also restricted by a temporal limitation. Indeed all 12 of our interviews were carried out during the month of November, by the end of Fall. In that matter, the perception of the space by both the interviewees and the interviewers were specific to the urban landscape, climate, and social life of this period of the year. Our study of this geographical space could have drawn on much larger and diverse analytical material had our study extended over a longer period of time, allowing the interviewees to observe and reflect on the infrastructures and dynamics of the Village during warmer seasons of the year. An unexpected issue our interviewers also faced, though not being the case in all interviews, was a change of tone and content of our interviewees' speech depending on their surroundings. A recurring phenomenon was the subdual of the contents of our interviewees' speeches as onlookers passed by within hearing distance.

Finally, a number of limitations also persisted in the method of our walking-interviews. As this format demands, the interviewers must remain relatively neutral and removed from the interview itself in order to avoid leading questions or biases in the answer of the interviewees. However, most of our interviewees were not familiar with the concept of walking-interview, and would sometimes have a difficult time leading the interviews themselves, and then expected or waited for questions, creating potential bias within our interview process. In a similar manner, as interviewees were aware of the general context of our study, they might have been tempted to reply with content they thought we wanted them to provide, mainly through hypothesized themes. This has potentially affected the content of their answer, and therefore potentially created biases within our analysis.

SECTION 6: CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the critical thematic analysis of the in-depth walk-along interviews allowed us to better understand the complex and fragile sense of place LGBTQ+ youth have with the Village, as well as the processes of place-making to appropriate a space from which they often feel excluded.

Their commentary portrayed the Gay Village as what seems to be a sort of geographical paradox. Indeed, this is a neighborhood that strongly lacks any major defining landmark or edges, and yet seems to have a very strong spatial identity and awareness. Despite this spatial awareness, a majority of our interviewees still did not seem to relate or identify to the space. On a smaller scale, a majority of our interviewees did not seem to enjoy or appreciate the commercial aspect of Sainte-Catherine, yet kept bringing and orienting the interview back to this street. Finally, being so near to downtown, the Village is composed of preexisting and dense

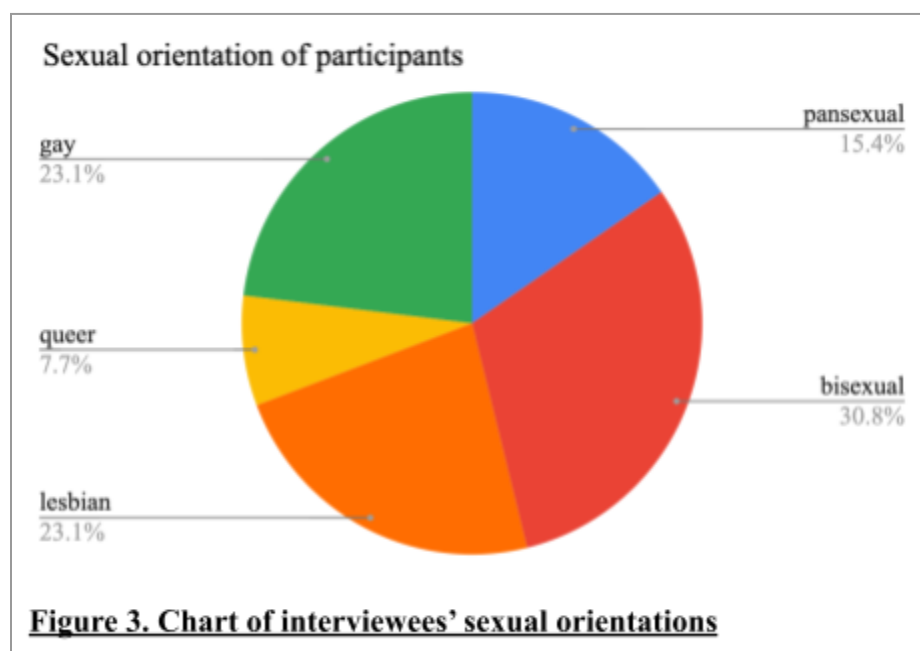
infrastructure, yet is characterized by instability and inconsistency, as well as a strong reliance on ephemeral activities and structures to breathe life into the space.

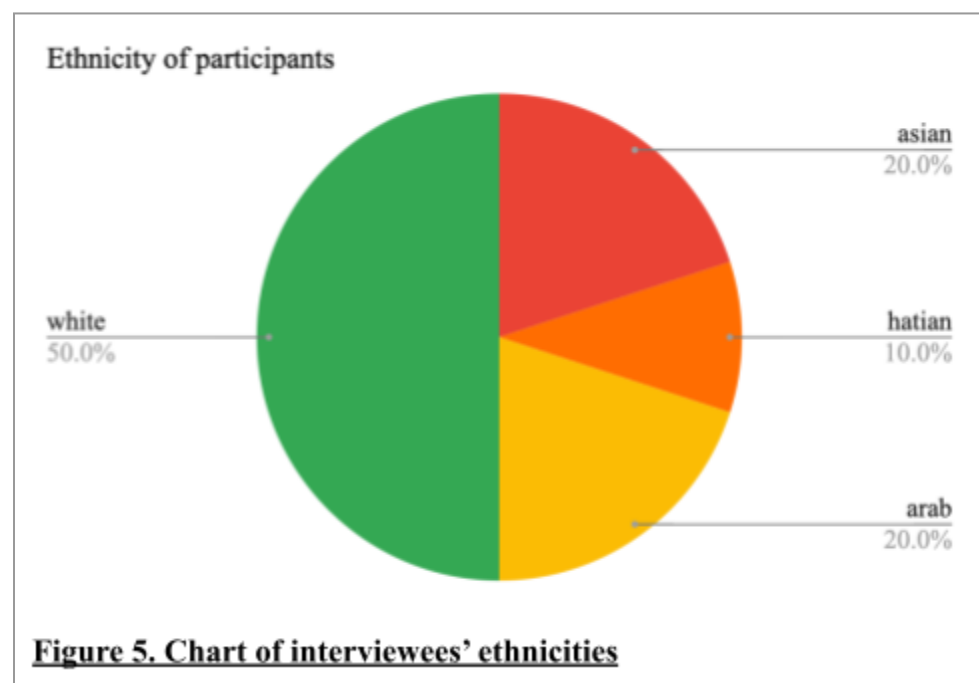
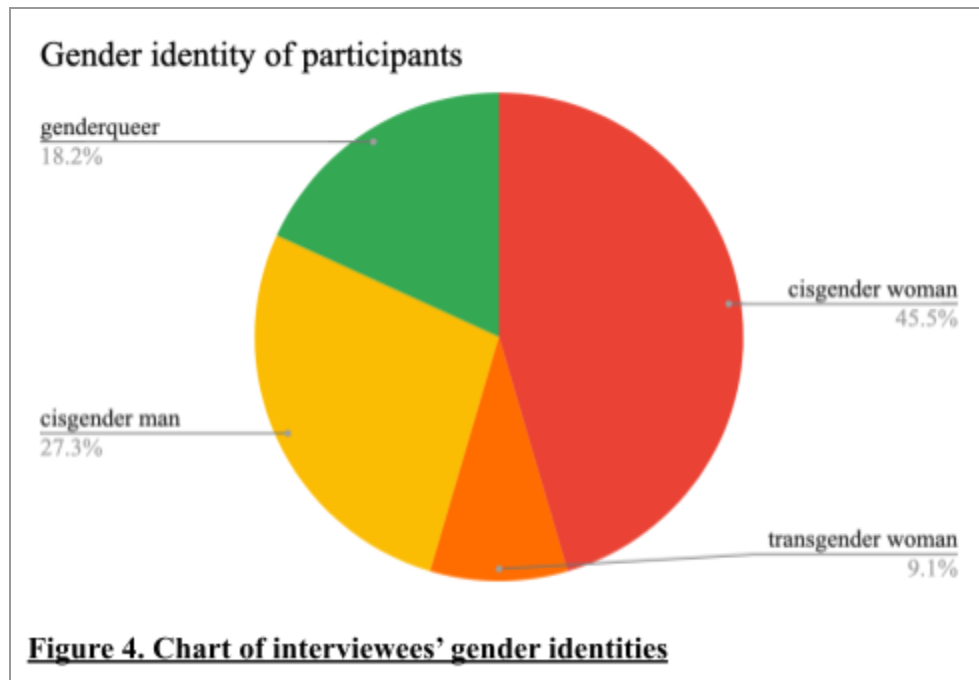
The overall feelings expressed by study participants was not rejection of the Village, but nonetheless a sense of disengagement and exclusion. As we joined them on their introspection towards their experience of the space, we drew from their discussion several possible paths forward that could allow a greater atmosphere of interaction and representation within the district. We suggest further inquiry into both permanent infrastructure and ephemeral spaces that could target the inclusivity of marginalized populations within the LGBTQ+ community.

Through this research project, we have identified some of the determining factors of the neglect of the Village by LGBTQ+ youth and targeted various points on which the public authorities and organizations involved (notably, the organization 'Village Montreal') could focus. Finally, we sought to demonstrate that the walk-along interview method is particularly relevant to the study of subjective and embodied experience of a space. Despite the limitations of this method, it allows us to gain relevant and critical insight, especially when dealing with a marginalized community.

In future studies, with more time, resources, and participants, these research questions and methods could be addressed in multiple ways. Firstly, expanding the age of analysis of walking interviews within Montreal's Gay Village would create a more robust set of results. These results would allow for interesting, direct comparisons of intergenerational perceptions of and experiences in the space. Additionally, it would be interesting to conduct walking interviews with young LGBTQ+ people in various gay neighborhoods throughout the world. Though there have been cross-comparisons between the Gay Village and, either other neighborhoods/districts in Montreal (Podmore, 2021), or other Gay Villages around the world (Giraud, 2012; Martel, 2018), neither of these use the walking interview as a research method. Therefore, it would be a novel research subject.

SECTION 7: APPENDIX





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