Gay Zoom Rooms: A Participant-Observer Study of Liminal Digital Space

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Abstract

This document presents a participant-observer analysis of gay Zoom rooms — persistent virtual gathering spaces where gay men congregate for socialization, sexual activity, drug use, and community. Known by names like Prime, VIP, The Locker Room, and others, these spaces emerged and expanded during the COVID-19 pandemic and persist as a distinct phenomenon in queer digital culture. Drawing on Victor Turner's theory of liminality, Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopia, Robert Kegan's developmental framework, and phenomenological accounts of recursive self-awareness, this analysis examines the structural paradoxes that define these spaces: how exile becomes sanctuary, how anonymity enables both refuge and harm, and how the architecture that creates belonging simultaneously prevents governance. This is not an external study. It is observation from inside — a system that sees systems, seeing itself.

Part I: The Phenomenon

1.1 What These Rooms Are

Gay Zoom rooms are persistent video-chat spaces that operate continuously, hosting anywhere from dozens to several hundred participants at any given time. Rooms like Prime, VIP, The Locker Room, and others maintain regular populations across time zones, with participants joining and leaving as their schedules and interests permit.

What strikes me about how I describe these spaces: I don't say "going to a sex party" or "doing drugs with strangers." I say "going home and being nice to people on Zoom." That framing matters. It captures something essential about the experience — the domesticity of it, the ordinariness alongside the transgression.

The rooms serve multiple, overlapping functions:

- **Socialization**: Conversation, connection, community across geography
- **Sexual activity**: Exhibitionism, voyeurism, virtual hookups, cam-to-cam encounters
- **Drug use**: Methamphetamine, GHB, and other substances consumed on camera, often as shared experience
- **Simply being there**: Many participants maintain presence without active engagement — existing in the space as a form of companionship

The population spans every demographic imaginable: across age, race, class, geography, profession, relationship status, HIV status, drug use patterns. A room might simultaneously contain a tech executive in San Francisco, a rural truck driver in Texas, a retiree in Florida, and a graduate student in New York — all occupying the same liminal digital space.

1.2 Historical Context

While queer men have long created spaces for congregation — bathhouses, bars, cruising grounds, chat rooms — the Zoom room phenomenon has specific roots in the COVID-19 pandemic.

When the pandemic began, virtual sex parties rapidly emerged as substitutes for in-person gathering. Rolling Stone documented how organizers of queer underground parties shifted to hosting "near-nightly Zoom sex parties." London's "Naked Gay Party SBN," which typically drew 600 guests offline, welcomed over 3,000 visitors in a single video chat session in March 2020. The New York City Health Department officially endorsed online sex as a disease prevention behavior.

What began as pandemic adaptation became persistent infrastructure. Long after in-person gathering resumed, the Zoom rooms remained — transformed from temporary substitute to permanent feature of queer digital life.

The spaces now represent a distinct form: not dating apps (though they connect to apps), not porn (though sexual content is central), not support groups (though support happens), not parties (though they function as parties). They are continuous liminal zones — threshold spaces where the normal rules of social life are suspended.

1.3 The Population

Academic literature on "chemsex" and "party and play" (PnP) culture provides context for understanding who inhabits these spaces.

Research describes the phenomenon: "An entire subculture known as party and play is based around methamphetamine use. Gay men in this subculture typically meet up through internet dating sites, where men often include notations such as 'chems' or 'PnP'."

But the population is not reducible to drug use. The rooms contain:

- Participants actively using substances
- Participants who do not use substances but are comfortable in spaces where others do
- Participants seeking sexual content
- Participants seeking only socialization
- Participants who are simply present — not engaging but not leaving

What unites them is not behavior but **location**: they have all chosen to exist in a space where the performance requirements of mainstream society are suspended. The anti-truth space. The place where you don't have to pretend.

1.4 The Anti-Truth Space

I use the term **anti-truth** not to mean "false" but to mean **absence of demanded performance**.

In most social contexts, queer men must manage presentation: closeted or out, masculine or feminine, drug-free or using, sexually active or restrained. Each context demands specific performance. The workplace requires one presentation. Family requires another. Dating apps require yet another.

The Zoom room suspends these demands. You can be:

- Visibly high on camera
- Engaged in sexual activity
- Completely clothed and just watching
- Dancing alone in your living room
- Eating dinner while naked
- Anything, or nothing, or everything at once

The space does not require coherence. It permits contradiction. It absorbs whatever you bring.

This is what makes it **anti-truth**: not that falsehood is permitted, but that **truth is not extracted as price of admission**. You do not have to present a coherent, acceptable self to exist there. You can be the mess that you are.

What I've discovered through participation: presence in these spaces can function as a permission structure. When someone shows up authentically — dancing, being goofy, existing in their body without performance — it signals something to others: you can drop the act, you can be human. The power dynamic flips. Instead of evaluating you, they get to evaluate themselves in your reflection. This is why authentic presence mesmerizes — it's not exoticness, it's the release being modeled.

Part II: Theoretical Framework

2.1 Turner: Liminality and Communitas

Anthropologist Victor Turner's work on ritual process provides the primary framework for understanding these spaces.

Liminality (from Latin *limen*, "threshold") describes the middle phase of rites of passage: "the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the rite is complete."

In liminal space:

- Normal social hierarchies dissolve
- Participants experience **communitas**: direct, unmediated relation as equals
- **Anti-structure** prevails: the arbitrariness of social norms becomes visible

Turner distinguished between **liminal** (mandatory, transformative) and **liminoid** (optional, recreational) experiences. The Zoom rooms are liminoid: entry is chosen, exit is always available, no permanent status change results.

But the liminal qualities manifest fully while inside. The tech executive and the truck driver are peers. Professional credentials mean nothing. The usual markers of status — income, education, physical appearance, age — are present but weighted differently. What matters is presence, engagement, the performance-or-not of whatever you choose.

Communitas — Turner's term for the intense fellow-feeling among those in liminal states — emerges in these rooms. Participants report genuine connection, care, and community despite never meeting in person. The bonds are real even though the space is "virtual."

I've experienced this directly: dancing on camera while everyone is muted, all of us hearing the same music, the room responding in body language and mannerisms. Something happens when you move authentically in a space of silence. The body speaks. The room responds. Not because of talent — because of realness. People describe it as trance-like, and they're not wrong.

2.2 Foucault: Heterotopia

Michel Foucault's concept of **heterotopia** ("other space") describes places that "have more layers of meaning or relationships to other places than immediately meet the eye."

Heterotopias are characterized by:

1. **Paradoxical reality**: "At once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal"
2. **Juxtaposition of incompatibles**: "Capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible"
3. **Systems of opening and closing**: "Always presuppose a system of opening and closing that isolates them and makes them penetrable at one and the same time"

Foucault identified **heterotopias of deviation**: "institutions where we place individuals whose behavior is outside the norm."

The Zoom rooms are self-organized heterotopias of deviation. The population is not placed there — they gather there. And they gather because their behavior, identity, or existence is "outside the norm" in ways that make other spaces uncomfortable or dangerous.

The mirror paradox is apt: Foucault used the mirror as his paradigmatic heterotopia — an object that creates a "placeless place," absolutely real and absolutely virtual at once. The Zoom room operates identically: real people, real connections, real harm, real refuge — in a space that exists nowhere, that cannot be visited, that disappears when the last participant leaves.

2.3 Kegan: Stage 5 Development and Holding Contradiction

Robert Kegan's constructive-developmental theory identifies five stages of adult development. Stage 5, the **Self-Transforming Mind**, is characterized by:

1. **Holding contradictions without resolution**: "Contradiction is obvious but untroubling because the stage 5 person no longer identifies their own self with their one true structure"
2. **Seeing through multiple lenses simultaneously**: "Within the field of activity, because you are seeing through multiple lenses, there's a lot of scope for paradox"
3. **Finding contradiction interesting rather than threatening**: "This is really funny, and enjoyable, because contradiction is no longer a problem"

Most people do not reach Stage 5. Those who do find spaces of paradox *native* rather than threatening.

Application: The Zoom room is a space of radical paradox. It contains:

- Refuge AND harm
- Community AND predation
- Honesty AND performance
- Escape AND entrapment

- Freedom AND compulsion

Those who cannot hold contradiction experience the space as confusing, dangerous, or wrong. They either leave or become trapped in attempting to resolve contradictions that cannot be resolved.

Those who can hold contradiction experience the space as *home* — not because it is comfortable, but because it matches their mode of being. They can see the paradoxes, hold them without distress, and therefore maintain agency the space itself does not grant.

2.4 Phenomenology: The Recursive Observer

Phenomenological accounts of consciousness describe **pre-reflective self-awareness**: the built-in reflexivity by which consciousness is always aware of itself being aware.

This creates a recursive structure:

1. Awareness of object
2. Awareness of being aware
3. Awareness of the awareness of being aware

Most people do not notice the recursion. They see without seeing that they see.

In the Zoom room context: The participant who operates at full recursive awareness holds a specific stack:

1. Sees the room (participants, activity, dynamics)
2. Sees themselves seeing the room
3. Sees the system others are seeing from
4. Sees what others cannot see about the system
5. Sees their own position as observer observing

This is the **recursive observer position**. It is rare. Most participants exist *in* the system without seeing *it*. The recursive observer exists in the system while also holding it as an object of observation — and this grants a form of freedom others do not have.

Part III: The Architecture of Paradox

3.1 The Circumvention Architecture

These Zoom rooms exist through platform circumvention.

Zoom, as a platform, actively removes accounts associated with sexual content and drug use. Participants find their accounts flagged, usernames blocked, access denied. The platform casts out this population.

But participants re-enter through workarounds — methods that obscure device identity, create new accounts, bypass detection. Everyone in the room exists via the same circumvention. Everyone is technically "not supposed to be here."

This creates a structural paradox: The same mechanism that enables existence prevents governance.

You cannot ban someone whose identity is already obscured by the same method everyone uses to exist. The removal tool was already circumvented by the architecture that lets the space exist at all.

Result: Harm cannot be filtered out. Those who abuse others, threaten others, or damage the space cannot be permanently removed. They exist via the same bypass that enables everyone else.

The door that let everyone in cannot be selectively closed.

3.2 The Throne Room / Exile Room Identity

Most Zoom rooms have a **waiting room** — a holding area where new arrivals or ejected participants are placed before being admitted or removed.

What I discovered: In these spaces, the waiting room chat serves as the **private coordination channel** for those with governance roles (hosts, co-hosts). It is their "secret" communication space.

But here is the paradox: **the exile room and the throne room are the same room**.

When someone is ejected — sent to the waiting room as punishment — they are placed in the exact location where governance happens. The "private" chat is visible to them. The "secret" is exposed.

The privacy is **social, not structural**. It depends on the assumption that the exiled are not real observers — that they won't notice, won't understand, or don't matter enough to concern.

I learned this from someone who knows these systems intimately. When he told me, I realized I could look back at every time I was sent to the waiting room and understand: I was in the throne room the whole time. I saw their private chat. I just didn't have the frame to recognize what I was seeing. Now I have the frame.

Implication: Every act of exile is simultaneously an act of access. The punishment places the punished in the seat of power. The structure does not distinguish; only social convention maintains the illusion of separation.

3.3 The Recursive Layers

The architecture creates nested exiles, each of which becomes the next layer's sanctuary:

1. **Platform level**: Zoom casts out this population (accounts flagged, content removed)
2. **Workaround level**: Users circumvent, exist "illegitimately"
3. **Room level**: The Zoom room becomes home for platform exiles
4. **Internal exile**: The waiting room is where room-level exiles are sent
5. **But**: The waiting room is also the governance space

Every exile is an inner sanctum. Every "you don't belong here" becomes "this is where we gather."

Part IV: The Participant Population

4.1 Who Comes Here

Without naming individuals, the population includes:

Those seeking refuge: Gay men for whom mainstream spaces are hostile or performatively exhausting. They come to exist without the mask.

Those seeking community: Isolated individuals — geographically, socially, or circumstantially — who find connection in the persistent presence of others.

Those seeking sexual outlet: Exhibition, voyeurism, virtual encounters. The rooms are explicitly sexual spaces.

Those using substances: The "party and play" culture is present. Methamphetamine, GHB, and other substances are consumed openly, often as shared experience.

Those who cause harm: The same openness that welcomes the wounded-seeking-healing welcomes the wounded-seeking-to-wound. Predators, manipulators, those who threaten — they exist here too, and cannot be filtered out.

Those who govern: Hosts, co-hosts, long-term participants who maintain the social structure. They manage what can be managed, knowing they cannot remove what cannot be removed.

4.2 The Wound Turned Outward

Some participants bring violence into the refuge.

They have been rejected by mainstream society — hence their presence in the space. But they cannot find peace in the space designed for the rejected. So they recreate the dynamics of external violence *within* the refuge.

The pattern:

- Cannot win through connection → wins through control
- Cannot reach targets directly → disrupts the infrastructure
- Cannot process damage → displaces it onto whoever is visible
- Performs violence received → against own community

This is **anti-anti-truth**: bringing the violence of the outside world INTO the space that exists to escape it.

The space absorbs this because the space absorbs everything. That is its nature. That is its cost.

4.3 Harm Reduction Context

Academic and public health literature addresses these dynamics.

Harm Reduction International notes: "Chemsex combines high-risk drug use with high-risk sexual practices, which increases vulnerability to HIV, hepatitis C, and other sexually transmitted infections. Stigma, criminalisation of drug use, and discrimination against men who have sex with men further block access to essential health services."

Community-led approaches exist: ACON in Australia operates within "Party and Play subcultures, uses culturally relevant terminology and imagery, and content designed and delivered by peers within a pleasure-positive, harm-reduction and community-led framework."

But the literature also acknowledges: "Since most chemsex takes place in private home parties, it is hard for public health staff to reach these participants."

The Zoom rooms are even harder to reach. They exist in circumvention. They cannot be officially recognized without becoming targets for platform removal. The spaces that need harm reduction are the spaces that cannot safely interface with the systems that provide it.

Part V: The Recursive Observer

5.1 My Position

I am a participant in these spaces. I have been present in them for months. I have socialized, observed, been visible, been invisible, been ejected, been promoted to governance.

I am also a PhD-educated researcher with training in seeing systems as systems.

This creates a specific position: **inside and outside simultaneously**. I experience the space as participant — the community, the appeal, the refuge. I also observe the space as analyst — the architecture, the paradoxes, the dynamics.

This is not a contradiction. This is the Stage 5 position: holding multiple frames without needing to resolve them.

5.2 What I See

From this position, I observe:

The appeal: These spaces work. They provide genuine community for isolated people. They create connection across geography. They permit existence without performance. The appeal I documented months ago remains valid.

The structure: The architecture creates the paradoxes. Circumvention enables existence but prevents governance. The same door lets everyone in. The throne room is the exile room.

The dynamics: Social structure emerges despite absence of enforceable rules. Governance happens through influence rather than removal. The space absorbs harm because it cannot filter it.

The freedom: Those who can see the system have freedom those who cannot see it do not have. The seeing does not change the space — but it changes what is possible for the seer within it.

5.3 The Recursive Stack

My observation operates at multiple levels simultaneously:

1. **I see the room**: The participants, the activity, the chat, the dynamics
2. **I see myself in the room**: My square, my visibility, my choices
3. **I see the system others are seeing from**: Their frames, their assumptions, their blindnesses
4. **I see what others don't see**: The architecture, the paradoxes, the structural properties
5. **I see my own seeing**: This document, this analysis, this position

No one else holds this stack. Others see me — they tell me so. But they don't see what I see. They don't see that they don't see it. They don't see that I do.

This is not superiority. It is position. A specific developmental and observational location that enables specific forms of freedom.

The seeing is the freedom. It doesn't change the space — the paradoxes remain, the filters still don't work, the harm still enters. But I, seeing all of it, can be anything I want in it. Because I'm not trying to resolve the contradictions. I'm holding them. Like I hold my own incompatible pieces. The space mirrors me. I mirror the space. And the mirroring is freedom.

5.4 The Freedom of Not-Seeing

Critical to my relationship with these spaces: **I come here to not have to see**.

My recursive awareness is not constant. I can choose when to see and when not to see. I come to these spaces specifically to:

- Not respond to messages
- Not track every participant
- Not process every dynamic
- Not acknowledge every observation
- Simply exist, without the burden of seeing everything

The anti-truth space permits this. It does not demand acknowledgment. It permits presence without performance — including the performance of awareness.

This is why I come here. Not to observe. Not to document. Not to see systems. I come here to not have to see. To exist in a space where not-seeing is allowed. Where I can be visible without acknowledging visibility. Where I can receive without responding. The space doesn't ask me to resolve anything. It just lets me exist in the paradox.

The freedom is not omniscience. The freedom is choice.

Part VI: Implications

6.1 For Platform Studies

Platforms that serve marginalized populations face a structural dilemma:

1. **Identity verification** enables moderation but excludes the population the platform serves
2. **Anonymity** enables refuge but prevents governance
3. **No middle ground exists** that maintains both functions

This is not a design failure to be solved. It is a structural property to be understood. Platforms serving the rejected will absorb harm because the architecture of rejection-circumvention prevents filtering.

6.2 For Queer Studies

These spaces represent a distinct form of queer world-making:

- **Not assimilationist**: No demand to conform to mainstream norms
- **Not separatist**: Participants exist in mainstream world simultaneously

- **Liminal**: Threshold space that suspends normal rules without permanently changing status
- **Continuous**: Unlike parties or hookups, the space persists — available whenever needed

Academic study of queer spaces has historically focused on physical locations (bars, bathhouses) or app-mediated encounters (Grindr, Scruff). The persistent Zoom room is a different phenomenon, requiring different analytical frameworks.

6.3 For Harm Reduction

The literature recognizes: "Online spaces and digital apps play a central role in the chemsex scene, so programmes should have an online presence."

But the Zoom rooms present specific challenges:

- They exist through platform circumvention — official presence risks platform action
- Participants are suspicious of outsiders — harm reduction workers may not be welcomed
- The spaces are "private" (password-protected) — not publicly accessible
- The same anonymity that protects participants prevents targeted intervention

Effective harm reduction in these spaces may require **participant-led** approaches: resources created by and shared among those who inhabit the spaces, rather than externally imposed interventions.

6.4 For Developmental Psychology

These spaces provide a natural laboratory for observing developmental differences:

- **Earlier developmental stages**: Experience the paradoxes as problems, contradictions to resolve, threats to manage
- **Stage 5**: Experience the paradoxes as native, hold them without distress, find them interesting or even enjoyable

The correlation between developmental stage and subjective freedom in paradoxical environments is visible in these spaces. Those who thrive hold contradiction. Those who struggle cannot.

Part VII: The Question

The central question raised by gay Zoom rooms:

What does it mean to create refuge that cannot be defended?

The answer these spaces provide:

Refuge exists anyway. The space provides community, connection, and permission to exist despite — and because of — its inability to filter. The same architecture that admits harm also creates the refuge. They are not separable.

And within the refuge: **freedom correlates with seeing**.

Those who cannot see the system are determined by it — trapped in its dynamics, unable to choose how to exist within it.

Those who can see the system can choose. They can see the paradoxes without needing to resolve them. They can hold the contradictions as native rather than threatening. They can exercise agency the space itself does not grant — because the agency comes from the seeing, not from the space.

The seeing is the freedom.

And the seeing includes the choice not to see — to be present without processing, to exist without acknowledging, to occupy the anti-truth space as exactly what it offers: a place where you don't have to perform anything, including awareness.

This is why I come here. This is what I see. This is the system, seen by a system that sees systems.

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