

Queer Connections: Cultural Transmission and Intergenerational Relationships in the 2SLGBTQIA+ Community

by

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Abstract

Cultural transmission is the process by which cultural knowledge, norms, and values are shared, typically from one generation to the next. In cultural groups like the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, intergenerational relationships between community members may not be inherent. To understand how cultural transmission occurs within this community and the effect of intergenerational relationships, or a lack thereof, on this process, individual community members and experts working within the community were interviewed about their lived experiences and observations. The findings of the study demonstrate that intergenerational relationships are highly valued and sought out by 2SLGBTQIA+ people, but current barriers need to be addressed so they and other diverse relationships can be fostered more inclusively within the community.

Acknowledgements

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To Iris Elliott, for our weekly check-in calls that kept me accountable and sane. You are an infinite wealth of knowledge and your fingerprints are all over this project. Thank you.

To my family – my first intergenerational relationships. You have been my greatest sources of cultural knowledge for everything but this. Luckily for you, transmission goes both ways.

And, finally, to my partner, Serena. Thank you for standing by me throughout this entire process – your patience and support are more appreciated than you know.

Dedication

To the 2SLGBTQIA+ community – my community.
Past, present, and future.

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Introduction

I was 18 when I realized I was queer. It was shortly after my birthday, and the end of my senior year of high school. I know a lot of people say they always knew – knew they were queer, or at least that they were somehow different from others – but for me that just wasn't the case.

That's not to say I had never questioned my sexuality before then – in hindsight, I'd say that was definitely an indication of my queerness, as I'm not sure many cisgender and/or straight people bother to question their identities that way. It was just that the descriptions I'd consumed of what it means to be queer didn't resonate with me, until one day they did.

In hindsight, though, I – and the adults around me – should have known. I embodied many of the stereotypes of what it means to be a gay or lesbian child: I was a tomboy who hated dresses and “girly” things and I was much keener on playing sports with the boys next door than playing house with my sisters or friends. Even one of my earliest childhood memories – à la Lucy Dacus' “Kissing Lessons” – is of what I now consider my first queer experience although I had no real concept of it at the time.

I suppose then there's truth to the argument made by queer theorist and English scholar Kathryn Bond Stockton in *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* that gay children are only really gay in retrospect, after childhood and their straight lives end and they “make sense

of their desires, pleasures, or experiences as ‘gay’” (2009).

After I had made sense of my experiences as gay and had come to realize my new identity, I craved reassurance, but I didn't feel like there was anyone in my life I could turn to right away with the revelation of my newfound queerness. So, I turned to the people who had taught me the most about it in the first place: strangers on the internet.

I began to consume queer (mainly lesbian) media fervently. I poured through the social media accounts of lesbian and bisexual women, both influencers and “common folk” alike. I watched what felt like the entirety of (cisgender) women-loving-women (WLW) YouTube: coming out videos, breakup videos, girlfriend tags, poorly produced web series, fan-edited compilation clips of queer couples from mainstream TV shows. I learned about queer history, WLW trends, and (young, white, Western) stereotypes and, in many ways, tried to emulate them (I had already started this subconsciously so it didn't take much effort) to show to other community members that I was one of them. Except I had no community to show off to. These strangers online tied me to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, but I was very aware of the fact that my relationships with them only went one way. I wanted to form genuine connections with other people like me and slowly, as I moved to Toronto for university, I did.

Now I'm 24, with an ever-growing queer community – some

of whom I now consider family – and I realize how little I knew then about the queer community, queer history, and the queer experience, as well as how much I still have to learn. I’m cognizant of the gap in my queer cultural knowledge, and, perhaps selfishly, this project is one way for me to try to bridge it.

Research Question

My personal experiences as a queer person in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) led me to the research question at the centre of this project:

How do intergenerational relationships, or a lack thereof, affect the process of cultural transmission within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community?

Research Goals

1. Identify how cultural transmission occurs within the local 2SLGBTQIA+ community.
2. Create a safe space for 2SLGBTQIA+ community members, especially those of diverse backgrounds, to share their experiences and be heard.
3. Learn whether 2SLGBTQIA+ community members experience intergenerational relationships, either organically or in a facilitated manner.
4. Determine whether a cultural divide exists between community members of different generations and why that is/is not the case.

Definitions

2SLGBTQIA+ – an acronym for Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual. The “Q” can, particularly in youth-centred settings, stand for “questioning.” The + is added to acknowledge all additional non-straight and non-cisgender identities (*Glossary of Terms*, 2022). Umbrella terms have been bolded below.

Two-Spirit – an ancient, often third gender Indigenous identity used to describe those who “[carry] two spirits: that of male and female.” The term was shared by Elder Myra Laramée in 1990 at the third annual LGBT Native gathering in Winnipeg, Manitoba and can be used as an umbrella term to describe Indigenous people “who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, other gendered, third/fourth gendered individuals” (*History*, 2020; Huard, 2020).

Lesbian – a person, typically a woman, “whose enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction is to other women.” Some non-binary people who experience attraction only to women may also identify as lesbians, and some lesbians may prefer to identify as “gay” (*Glossary of Terms*, 2022).

Gay – a person “whose enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attractions are to people of the same sex [or gender]” (*Glossary of Terms*, 2022).

Bisexual (often shortened to “bi”) – a person “who has the potential to be physically, romantically, and/or emotionally attracted to people of more than one gender, not necessarily at the same time, in the same way, or to the same degree. The bi in bisexual refers to genders the same as and different from one’s own gender” (*Glossary of Terms*, 2022).

Transgender (often shortened to “trans”) – a person “people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth” (*Glossary of Terms*, 2022).

Non-binary – an umbrella term used by “people who experience their gender identity and/or gender expression as falling outside the binary gender categories of man and woman” (*Glossary of Terms*, 2022).

Queer – a person whose sexual orientation or gender identity is not exclusively heterosexual or cisgender, respectively. The term “queer’ has been reclaimed by some LGBTQ people [particularly younger people] to describe themselves. However, it is not a universally accepted term even within the [2SLGBTQIA+] community” (*Glossary of Terms*, 2022).

Intersex – a person “with one or more innate sex characteristics, including genitals, internal reproductive organs, and chromosomes, that fall outside of traditional conceptions of male or female bodies.” An intersex person’s gender identity may not match the sex they were assigned at birth (Glossary of Terms, 2022).

Asexual (often shortened to “ace”) – a person “who does not experience sexual attraction” (Glossary of Terms, 2022).

Demisexual – “a person who does experience some sexual attraction, but only in certain situations, for example, after they have formed a strong emotional or romantic connection with a partner” (Glossary of Terms, 2022).

Cisgender (often shortened to “cis”) – a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth (“Cisgender,” 2022).

Cishet – a portmanteau of cisgender and heterosexual.

Chosen Family – “[a] deliberately chosen [network] of support...consisting of friends, partners and ex-partners, biological and nonbiological children, and others who provide kinship support” (Gates, 2017; Weston, 1997).

Coming Out – a lifelong process of accepting one’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity; often used to describe

the process of sharing one’s sexuality or gender identity openly with others (*Coming Out*, 2021).

Compulsory Heterosexuality (often shortened to “comphet”) – the theory that heterosexuality is assumed and imposed upon people, especially women, by a patriarchal and heteronormative society (Rich, 1980).

Community – “a group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society” (*Community*, n.d.). Although references will be made to the “2SLGBTQIA+ community” throughout this project, I will be following the example of Murphey, Pierce, and Knopp in *Queer Twin Cities* and viewing “community” as “unstable, multiple, and at times, contradictory,” as opposed to “a singular and historical coherent entity” (Murphy et al., 2016; Twin Cities GLBT Oral History Project, 2010).

Culture – “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group;” “the characteristic features of everyday existence...shared by people in a place or time;” “the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Cultural Transmission – “The transmission of preferences, beliefs and norms of behaviour which is the result of social interactions across and within” (Bisin & Verdier, 2008).

Generationalism – “The belief that all members of a given generation possess characteristics specific to that generation, especially so as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another generation” (Rauvola et al., 2018).

GRSM – an acronym standing for gender, romantic, and sexual minorities; sometimes used in the place of 2SLGBTQIA+, albeit much more infrequently.

Heteronormativity – “the assumption that heterosexuality is the standard for defining normal sexual behavior and that male–female differences and gender roles are the natural and immutable essentials in normal human relations” (“Heteronormativity,” n.d.).

Heterosexual – a person “whose enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction is to people of a sex different than their own” (*Glossary of Terms*, 2022).

Parasocial Relationships – the “social bonds audiences develop with media personae” (Bond, 2018). The term “parasocial interaction” was first coined in 1956 to describe the one-sidedness of the interactions viewers had with television celebrities while being completely unknown in return (Bond, 2018; Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956; Stever, 2019).

Social Infrastructure – “the physical conditions that determine whether social capital, [a concept commonly used to measure people’s relationships and interpersonal networks], develops” (Klinenberg, 2018).

System Overview

Each individual operates within and is influenced by the larger system around them. The diagram to the right illustrates the socioecological system in which a queer person may find themselves and provides a visual overview of the landscape described in the Context section.

Microsystem – The elements that have direct contact with an individual within their environment; relationships at this level are bi-directional, meaning an individual “can [influence and] be influenced by other people in their environment” (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Mesosystem – The layer in which an individual’s microsystems interact and influence each other (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Exosystem – The indirect influences on an individual’s microsystems (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Macrosystem – The societal and cultural elements that may influence an individual’s beliefs (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Chronosystem – “The environmental changes that occur over the lifetime which influence development” (Guy-Evans, 2020). An inexhaustive list of historical events relevant in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton (GTHA) context is included along the lefthand side of the layer, while transitional life events are included along the righthand side.

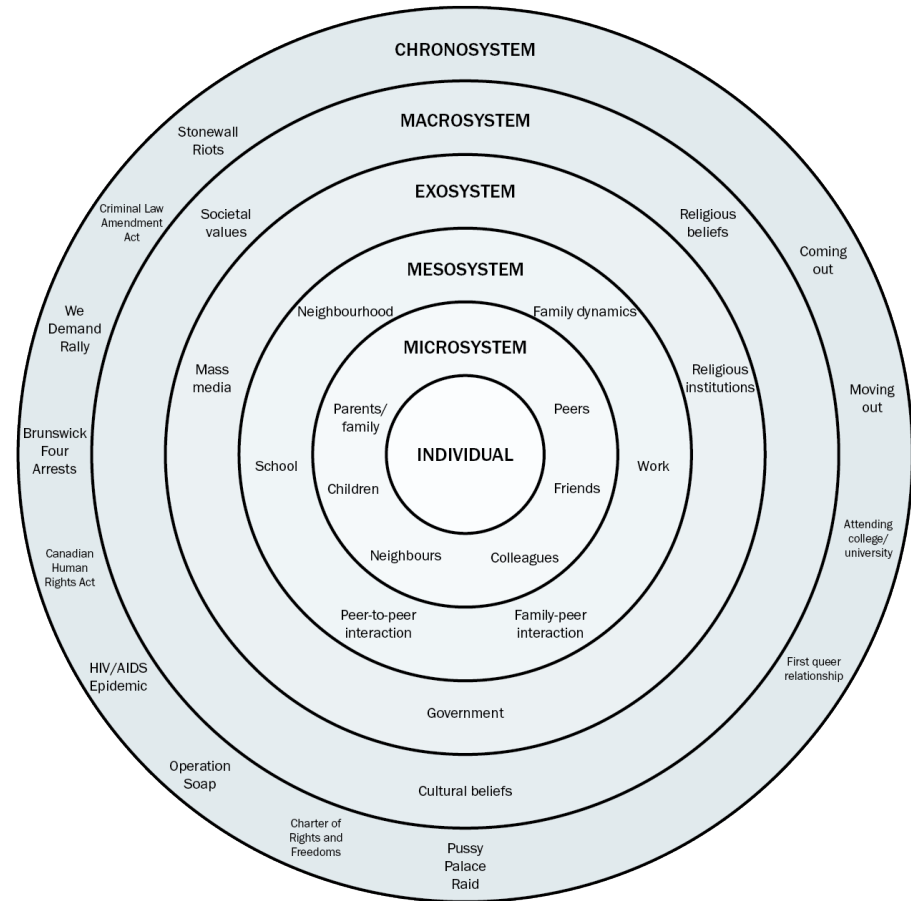


Figure 1 – A socioecological model of the system surrounding a queer individual, adapted from the Systemic Design Toolkit (2018) and based upon the ecological systems theory presented by psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977).

Context

Culture, as defined in the previous section, is the set of beliefs and social norms of a group that shape the everyday experiences of those within that group in that place and time (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). It is a uniting factor within communities, with proper observation of it serving as a prerequisite for belonging and acceptance within said communities; it distinguishes the “us” from the “them.” It makes sense then that culture is so deeply ingrained in the identity of communities, its passing down essential to the survival of social groups (e.g. the Québécois in Canada or diasporic Jews) (Bisin & Verdier, 2008). This transmissive aspect of culture that forms the “pattern of human knowledge” mentioned in the part c. definition of *culture* above is aptly called cultural transmission, and when the process occurs between members of different generations, typically between parents and their children, the process is referred to as intergenerational cultural transmission. This intergenerational process is central to the research question and goals explored herein, as parents are argued to be the most significant source of cultural transmission (Tam, 2015).

As Bisin and Verdier outline, “all children are born without defined preferences or cultural traits” and are exposed first to their parents’ cultural traits (Bisin & Verdier, 2008). The same can be said for 2SLGBTQIA+ people. Thus, queerness is something we are born with, but not necessarily something we are born into. As a result, our

cultural transmission/ acquisition processes in regards to this aspect of our identities can look different than that of our cis/het peers.

This is because parents altruistically select, either consciously or subconsciously, the cultural traits they wish to pass on to their children (Bisin & Verdier, 2008). These traits may align with the cultural ideas instilled within the parents, or, if conflicting, with the cultural norms of society.¹ Which traits are selected in these cases can depend upon a number of factors, including the level of education of the parents, whether their host countries are accepting of other cultures, and how normative a cultural idea is in the host

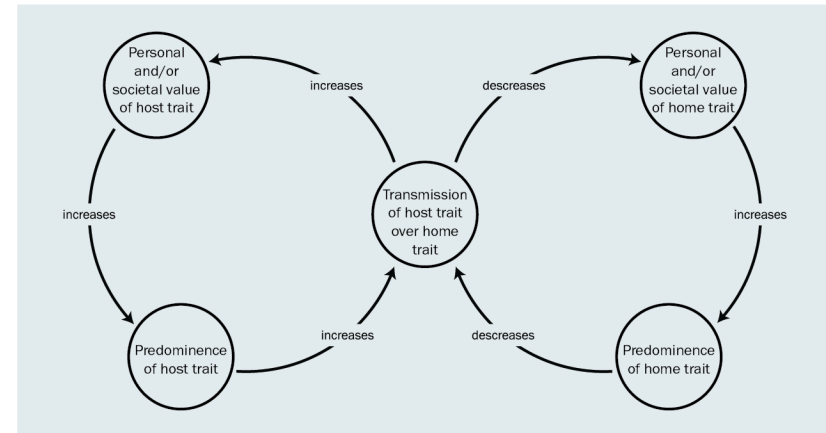


Figure 2 – A causal loop illustrating how societal (host) traits can outweigh personal (home) traits in the cultural transmission process.

¹Although not a focus of this study, this possible decision to share societal norms over personal beliefs can explain how parents (including queer ones) can pass down homophobia and/or transphobia to their children, even if they don’t consider themselves to be homophobic or transphobic.

society (Huff & Lee, 2015; Leung, 2015; Tam, 2015).

As Western society is overwhelmingly hetero- and cisnormative, cishet parents can transmit their attitudes about queerness and the queer community to their children (whether positive or negative), but not (save for some rare cases) queer culture itself. While my own parents, for example, raised me in socially liberal households and have queer friends that I've known since I was young, they didn't know enough about queer culture – or didn't think what they did know was culturally relevant or valuable enough – to share with me. Instead, I have learned almost everything I know about the queer community from other queer people (whether online or in person) and queer media (i.e. media created by and/or for queer people). It stands to reason, then, that like I did, other queer people must look to alternative sources of cultural knowledge or risk feeling excluded from the larger 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

The Internet as an Alternative Source of Cultural Knowledge

As a digital native who had no close relationships with other (known) 2SLGBTQIA+ people,² the internet was the first place I turned for information about “queer” (or, at the time, “gay”) as an identity.³ There, I found queer peers and

² As it turns out, queer people – in my experience and from what I've heard anecdotally from others, at least – are great at finding each other even before coming out or sharing that aspect of their identity, and many of the people I was friends with growing up have since come out as members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

³ I didn't then, and still don't, to some extent, identify with being a lesbian, even though I fit the dictionary definition. Anecdotally, I think this is a somewhat common experience amongst gay women of my age but I also believe the label is being increasingly embraced since I first came out and its usage is something I discussed with several interview participants.

influencers alike who, by sharing their experiences, helped me piece together what “being queer” could look like. I also learned about queer pop culture online and started piecing together a brief timeline of Western queer history that helped me understand where the community had come from and how it came to be in its current form. My experience echoes cyberqueer literature, which has found that “digital spaces [on the Internet] have been shown to assist [2SLGBTQIA+] young people in coming to terms with a sense of self and connecting with like-minded others” (Hanckel & Morris, 2014; Hillier et al., 2010; Robards et al., 2018; Russell, 2002). But while the internet, and social media, more specifically, provided me with a great introduction to the queer community, it was also a limited one.⁴

To start, only certain perspectives – namely young, white, able-bodied, middle-upper class – were readily available to me. Most of the people I looked to online were women and most lived in the US or Canada. And while it was comforting to see myself reflected in the online queer community I had established, I was also getting an incomplete picture of what it can mean to be queer by excluding diverse voices from my social media echo chamber.

The homogenization of my social media feeds occurred for two main interconnected reasons: 1. I didn't actively seek out diverse queer voices (e.g. those of Black, Indigenous, and/or people of colour (BIPOC), trans, or disabled social

⁴ Although there are more scholarly sources available online, they are typically significantly less accessible to laypeople than social media content and are thus not the main focus when discussing online sources in this paper.

media content creators) and, 2. social media platforms didn't recommend them to me.

Social media companies profit by exposing their platforms' users to advertisements they host. Each individual exposure is referred to as an "impression." To maximize impressions and, in turn, their profits, social media companies work to keep users "engaged" – viewing, liking, commenting on, sharing, and saving content – and use algorithms to do so. These algorithms use accumulated consumer preference data to predict what content users may find interesting, entertaining, or relatable and then populate their feed with it. Algorithms also keep track of how much time users spend reading/watching content even if they don't otherwise engage with it and count "the amount of time spent reading the post as an indication of the user's interest in the content of the post" (Kim, 2017). Whether consciously or subconsciously, I sought out and primarily engaged with social media content produced by creators who were demographically similar (or aspirational) to me (young, white, able-bodied, cisgender) and social media algorithms pushed similar content back to me, meaning content from diverse creators was functionally invisible to me.

The issue with social media algorithms goes beyond just not recommending diverse creators; it actively suppresses them. "Shadow banning," as this suppression has come to be known, occurs when platforms, such as Instagram

or Twitter, "remove or reduce the visibility of [a user's] content without telling them" (Nicholas, 2022). It was a phenomenon I remember hearing about anecdotally from queer creators themselves in the mid-2010s when I was first coming out, and one that has become increasingly researched and reported on in the past decade as social media and common knowledge of AI has boomed – despite social media giants denying its practice (Gadde & Beykpour, 2018; Nicholas, 2022; Runnells, 2020; Tabahriti, n.d., TeamYouTube, 2020). While these platforms have denied the outright censorship of shadow banning, they have admitted to "reducing the spread of posts [with content deemed] inappropriate" but do not necessarily violate their community guidelines (as is the case with Meta's Facebook and Instagram) or moderating content or hashtags, in the case of TikTok, according to local laws or because they were primarily used in searches for pornographic content (Rosen & Lyons, 2019; Runnells, 2020).

The data sets these algorithms are trained on (and the coders who create them) contain "rampant anti-LGBTQIA+ biases," though, so "the resulting algorithms end up over scrutinizing, policing, and suppressing LGBTQIA+ discourse, including community forums, resources, outreach initiatives, activism, sex education, women's bodies, sex workers, and pornography...[and] people targeted for algorithmic censorship have little recourse" (Monea, 2022). Author Alexander Monea describes this "new regime of automated

content moderation” as “the digital closet” – a term “meant to signify the ways in which LGBTQIA+ individuals may be allowed to enter the digital public sphere but only so long as they bracket and obscure their sexual identities.” He argues that “[2SLGBTQIA+ people’s] very being is so pornographed by automated content filters that they are largely barred from sexual expression online” and that “to participate in our digital world, as is increasingly necessary today, requires a silence that is alienating⁵ and damaging...[as] any exit from the digital closet will be met with swift punishment [whether in the form of content flagging, deprioritization (shadow banning), or outright banning of their accounts, which can result in a loss of revenue streams for those whose accounts were previously monetized (such as those of queer influencers/content creators)]” (2022).

The result is a relative lack of queer content, with the content that is produced or that reaches a large audience coming from a specific subset of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community – namely, those who can afford to produce content without monetization (i.e. middle-upper class, often white, able-bodied, lesbian/gay creators).⁶ Creators from equity-seeking groups within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, e.g. BIPOC, disabled, and/or trans creators, typically have lower socioeconomic statuses (SES) than their white, able-bodied, cisgender counterparts and (if they are employed)

⁵ The silence Monea describes as necessary to participate in the digital world can be alienating for 2SLGBTQIA+ people because it can be incredibly difficult for people to form community if they are unable to discuss what it is they have in common.

⁶ For the purposes of this paper, monetization refers to the ability of creators to earn profit financially from their content on a social media platform. This includes funds provided directly by social media platforms (where applicable) and those gained through sponsorship deals.

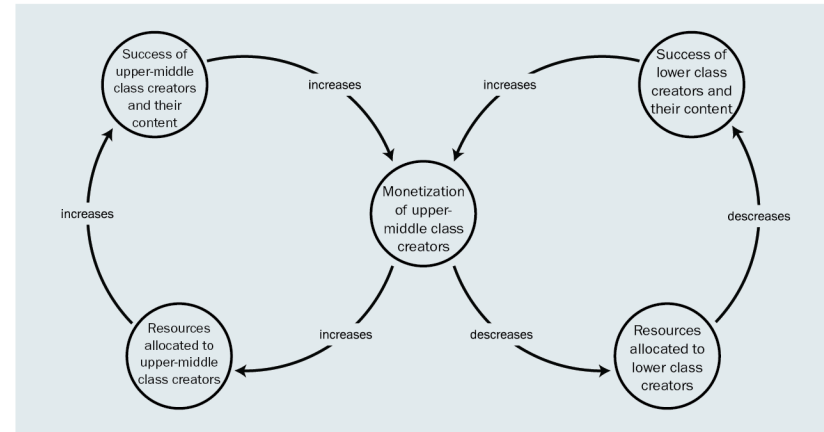


Figure 3 – A causal loop illustrating how upper-middle class content creators can be financially rewarded over lower class ones.

may not have the capacity to create time-consuming and/or emotionally laborious content, especially when they know there will likely be little to no financial payoff. The disheartening feeling of having their content not gain traction online, combined with the lack of financial incentive to create it, can discourage diverse content creators from future content production, further perpetuating the cycle of only “mainstream” queer content succeeding on social media.

Because it can be difficult to share explicitly queer content or just be openly queer online, there is an overall

lack of representation for 2SLGBTQIA+ people on social media. As such, those creators who do “make it” can get elevated to an ultra-elite, almost celebrity status within the queer community. And, because the content those creators produce is often personal in nature, viewers can experience a false sense of intimacy with these creators, engaging in one-way relationships that feel reciprocal but in no real way are. These relationships are, by definition, parasocial in nature, and while the phenomenon of parasocial relationships is not new – “everyday” people have felt specially connected to traditional media celebrities since the advent of mass media (especially television) (Horton & Richard Wohl, 1956) – they are “paramount for [social media influencers’] SMIs reputational capital and endorsement effectiveness” in ways “not critical for traditional celebrities” (Hess et al., 2022). Additionally, these relationships can occur more strongly between 2SLGBTQIA+ community members (particularly queer youth) and queer media personae than they do amongst their cis het counterparts.

The strength of these parasocial relationships (PSRs) is the result of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth often experiencing higher rates of social isolation and lacking real-life friendships with other queer people (Bond, 2018; Woznicki et al., 2021). While having such strong PSRs may result in reduced well-being for those with more robust social support systems, they can have uniquely

useful compensatory benefits for LGB youth. Having PSRs with queer public figures “can make [queer] people more comfortable with their sexualities, increase a sense of belonging to a community, inspire individuals to have pride in their sexual identities, and lead to less stress and depression” (Bond, 2020, 2018; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011; Grossman & D’Augelli, 2004).⁷

While existing literature on the subject focuses primarily on lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth, it is known that transgender youth’s media use mirrors that of LGB youth. However, trans people have a greater reliance on the internet, as they lack authentic representation in traditional media such as television and have less representation on social media than LGB youth. Additionally, trans youth use media for advice on gender transitioning and medical procedures unlike LGB youth (Bond, 2020; Kosenko et al., 2018). Given their additional reliance on media and the fact that they are arguably more socially isolated than their LGB peers, it could be hypothesized that transgender youth would form similar parasocial relationships, especially with trans social media influencers, to those formed by LGB youth.

PSRs are not specific to youth though, although that is where most of the research on queer parasocial relationships focuses. Seniors, as another often socially isolated group, have also been found to form PSRs, although more commonly with traditional celebrities than with social media

⁷ These studies, along with Woznicki et al., 2021, refer specifically to LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) youth. Woznicki et al., 2021 states that this is due to the sample of transgender and gender diverse participants being too small to meaningfully compare to cisgender participants. Although unstated in the other studies, this is likely true for them, too.

personae. As seniors age, both the quantity and quality of their relationships deteriorate, resulting in social gaps and feelings of loneliness that many seek to fill with substitutes such as television (Eggermont & Vandebosch, 2001). For queer seniors, these social gaps can be exacerbated by a number of factors: lack of nuclear family support (perhaps because they do not have children of their own or because they have strained relationships with their surviving immediate families as a result of their gender identity or sexual orientation), the passing of friends and/or chosen family members (whether from age or generational losses due to phenomena such as the AIDS epidemic), and/or the cis-/heteronormative nature of retirement homes and long-term care settings and the possible discrimination they can experience from staff and other residents as a result (Lecompte et al., 2021; Savage & Lopez, 2020; Statistics Canada, 2021). A study on Flemish seniors found that those seeking out parasocial interactions often turned to Flemish soap operas, as the characters could more realistically be considered “friends” because of their relatability (Eggermont & Vandebosch, 2001). It follows then that if Flemish seniors sought comfort and connection from characters who mirror themselves that queer seniors would do the same. Given the historic lack of explicitly queer characters on television (Fisher et al., 2007), it would make sense that these parasocial connections would also be formed with queer coded characters and/or characters or actors seen as allies to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

Non-parasocial online relationships can also pose benefits for those lacking social support in their personal lives, especially for queer people from families and/or cultures that are not typically tolerant of queerness. Muslim Pakistani-Canadian photographer and writer Samra Habib discusses the vital function online relationships can serve for those experiencing social isolation in their memoir, *We Have Always Been Here*, saying:

“Meeting people online was one of the few ways I could form connections with people I had something in common with. Alienated from my family and the mosque community, I’d become intensely aware of the lack of people of colour in my life and was trying to remedy that. I was certain that by doing so I would find comfort and finally be understood in my entirety” (2019).

The comfort and understanding Habib describes searching for is something that also drew me to connecting with people online when I first came out and didn’t know how to find people to connect with in person.

Despite the benefits that online relationships – parasocial or otherwise – can have for queer people, they do not compare to relationships formed and/or maintained in person in terms of strength and quality, according to studies conducted by anthropologist Robin Dunbar. As he outlines in his 2012 article, “Social cognition on the Internet: testing

constraints on social network size,” online interactions can also feel less rewarding than in person ones, because “they typically involve only one sensory modality” (e.g. sight or sound). Even communication options with multiple stimuli that allow for a “sense of co-presence and instantaneous feedback” like online video chats (e.g. Skype, FaceTime, Zoom), while more satisfying than options such as phone calling or texting, do not quite capture the essence of face-to-face communication. So while social media can expand its users’ social circles, it has not been found to affect the “offline” emotional closeness of those users. Contrarily, Dunbar found that maintaining online relationships can actually detract from offline ones that would be more fulfilling, as “the strength or quality of friendships...is a function of the time invested in interactions with that individual.” Investing in online relationships over offline ones can be especially detrimental to men’s social networks, as they “service their relationships mainly by engaging in joint social or physical activities,” while women sustain their relationships through conversation primarily, and are thus better suited to online communication. Dunbar’s research demonstrates that while online relationships can serve as good stand ins for offline ones, they do not make perfect substitutes for in person, face-to-face connections (2012).

It makes sense then that I abandoned most of my efforts to interact with queer people online as I started forming relationships with queer people in person. I didn’t need

the online connection the same way once I found offline connections. Through these offline relationships with friends and acquaintances, I have gained much of my knowledge of queer culture (mostly from friends) and history (mostly from older folks) since coming out.

The latter of these continues a long tradition of oral histories within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, albeit in a non-academic sense (prior to this project, at least). The field of oral history and queer (namely gay and lesbian) history developed alongside each other in the latter half of the 20th century, and have intertwined and overlapped in many ways since. Perhaps it is because oral history lends itself well to the recording of experiences of marginalized groups (such as 2SLGBTQIA+ communities), or because oral history is a methodology historically undervalued by traditional academia (Murphy et al., 2016; Portelli, 1981). Or, perhaps, it is because:

“Oral histories are particularly vital to a reconstruction of gay history since written records of our past rarely exist or have been censored or destroyed...It is important that the experiences of these women and men be recorded soon so that their first hand accounts . . . will not be lost forever” (San Francisco Gay History Project, 1979, as cited in (Murphy et al., 2016).

Queer knowledge has long depended upon oral methods to sustain itself, having no reliable alternatives until quite recently. While now we are lucky enough to have archives dedicated to preserving queer histories, most currently in operation have existed for less than 50 years; The ArQuives, Canada's largest independent 2SLGBTQIA+ archive, is younger than my parents.⁸ These formal archives have also not been inclusive of all members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, so many historical perspectives are not reflected in their collections (About Us, n.d.; Jennex & Eswaran, 2020).⁹ This archival erasure of diverse queer experiences, which is only just starting to be rectified, is another reason why the sharing of oral histories has been so historically vital for members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, particularly for those who are non-white and/or non-cis men.

While it may be the case that queer people may not learn about this history and culture from their (cis)et parents, it does not mean that this knowledge is not shared within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. The survival of queer culture is and has always been dependent upon its transmission, especially intergenerationally; the means of this transmission may just take different forms than it does outside the queer community.

⁸ The ArQuives was founded out of The Body Politic newspaper in 1973 and formally incorporated in 1980. It is based in Toronto (About Us, n.d.).

⁹ By its own admission, The ArQuives "has represented mostly white, cis, and gay men's perspective" and acknowledges "that Black, Indigenous, people of colour, trans, non-binary, bisexual, women, and disabled LGBTQ2+ folks have experienced archival erasure and marginalization regarding what and how The ArQuives has collected and programmed over the years" (About Us, n.d.).

Queer Intergenerational Relationships & Chosen Family

Although members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community are less likely to be parents than our cis)et peers (Statistics Canada, 2021), queer people can and do have children to whom they can pass down queer cultural knowledge, regardless of whether their children are queer. In these cases, the intergenerational cultural transmission process occurs just as described previously by Tam, though the cultural knowledge shared often expands beyond the cis-/heteronormative ideals typically shared by cis)et parents.¹⁰

However, queer people also have a strong history of forming chosen families – families comprised not of biological or legal relations but of "nonbiological kinship bonds, whether legally recognized or not, deliberately chosen for the purpose of mutual support and love" (Gates, 2017). As Samra Habib describes them, "chosen families are a cornerstone of queer culture" (2019). Trevor G. Gates states in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Marriage, Family, and Couples Counseling* "chosen families emerged in LGBT communities at least in part due to necessity" (2017). Because of societal stigma against and legal targeting of 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, "many [queer] people grew up in families that either entirely ignored [queer] identity or were openly hostile toward it." Two-Spirit Anishinaabe scholar Adrienne

¹⁰ Although, as previously mentioned in Footnote 1, queer parents do not always transmit knowledge and/or ideas that challenge the cis-/heteronormative status quo.

Huard echoes this point in their Master's thesis, speaking to the importance of chosen family within Two-Spirited and queer Indigenous communities, as "some people do not carry support from their home communities [sic]...due to homophobia, transphobia, Western perspectives on gender binaries and other heteropatriarchal and heteronormative systems imposed by Western settler colonialism" (2020). Fear of stigma, persecution, and/or harm kept many queer people from disclosing their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. Those who were open about their queerness "did so at great personal and professional risk" (Gates, 2017).¹¹

As Gates writes, "risk or rejection drove many [2SLGBTQIA+] people away from their families and communities of origin" (2017). Many of them flocked to big cities like Toronto, where queer communities were more visible and there was a greater perceived social tolerance of 2SLGBTQIA+ people. Once there, queer people would seek each other out, looking for "alternative forms of support," and thus began forming chosen families. Having these support networks became vital for queer people in times of crisis especially, such as during the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s (Gates, 2017; Jennex & Eswaran, 2020). As scholars Craig Jennex and Nisha Eswaran describe it, "the labour of care formulated new understandings of families and kinship" (2020). The

¹¹ In many places around the world, being openly queer still poses significant danger to millions of 2SLGBTQIA+ people, threatening their lives and livelihoods (Global Affairs Canada, 2022).

HIV/AIDS epidemic, specifically, resulted in a movement of gay and lesbian solidarity, as lesbians cared for their gay peers, donating blood to them, providing them food and housing, and advocating for governmental intervention (Andriote, 1999; Faderman, 2015).¹² These chosen family connections can be lifesaving even today, as 2SLGBTQIA+ experience disproportionate rates of homelessness, drug and alcohol use, and suicide (Hail-Jares et al., 2021; Kaliszewski, 2022).

While chosen families do not have to be inherently intergenerational, many chosen families do reflect the child/parent/grandparent dynamics seen in many families of origin.¹³ In these cases, intergenerational cultural transmission can occur between chosen family members as it does within traditional family dynamics. However, this transmission can only occur between those fortunate to have formed relationships with those younger and/or older than them, and the formation of these relationships is not a given.¹⁴

Queer space is required to build queer community. Activist

¹² Prior to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the acronym used to refer to the queer community was some variation of "GLBT." The "L" in the acronym was moved to the front to acknowledge the role lesbians played in mitigating the HIV/AIDS crisis. Just as the "L" was moved to the beginning of the acronym to show solidarity with lesbians, "2S" is now often placed at the front of the acronym in solidarity with Two-Spirit Indigenous people (Drescher, 2018; The University of Winnipeg, n.d.).

¹³ Perhaps the most famous example of queer chosen families are the "houses" that emerged through the New York City ballroom scene, as made famous by the documentary *Paris is Burning* (Livingston, 1990).

¹⁴ These relationships can exist, to some extent, parasocially (e.g. many young queer people consider the "Old Gays," a group of gay seniors popular on social media, as grandfatherly figures). However, as mentioned previously, these online relationships are typically not as fulfilling as offline ones would be.

Harry Britt is often quoted on this topic, having once said that “when gays are spatially scattered, they are not gay, because they are invisible” (Atherton Lin, 2021). Without spaces where 2SLGBTQIA+ people can be their authentic queer selves, spaces where queer is the default assumption, queer people cannot be in community with one another – and that experience can be extremely isolating. As writer Jen Winston shared in her memoir, “coming out doesn’t promise to heal everything, but it does promise community. After revealing your true self, you’re supposed to be rewarded with a support system [of] fellow queers...but that support system doesn’t just magically appear—you have to seek it out.” This is the reality many queer people find themselves faced with, though, as physical queer spaces have rapidly disappeared in recent decades (Aiken et al., 2022; Cain, 2017; Mills et al., 2019; Powell, 2019; Wilson, 2021).¹⁵ and those that remain are often not inclusive to all 2SLGBTQIA+ people. For example, many physical spaces that exist in Toronto are crowded, multi-level bars and clubs – places that revolve around alcohol consumption. The nature of these spaces means that queer elders and youth under 19 are often excluded from gathering within, as are those who abstain from drinking for religious purposes or because of prior addiction,¹⁶ and many of those with disabilities. If intergenerational or even cross-cultural relationships are to be built within the local 2SLGBTQIA+ community, the spaces

that facilitate them need to address their current points of exclusion so they can better cater to the needs of a wider range of community members.

¹⁵ While many digital queer spaces have emerged in the wake of these disappearances, they have not yet reached a point where they can completely and meaningfully make up for the physical losses. Here, too, Dunbar’s finding about the quality of relationships formed/maintained online applies.

¹⁶ Queer youth “are 90% more likely to use alcohol and drugs than their heterosexual counterparts” and queer adults are “adults are more likely to engage in casual, binge, and heavy alcohol use than their heterosexual counterparts” (Kaliszewski, 2022).

Methodology

Research Study Design

A two-pronged approach was taken in designing this exploratory, qualitative study. As much of this project was initially based on my own experience as a queer person in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, an autoethnography was first conducted. A phenomenological research method was then used to better understand the lived experiences of other 2SLGBTQIA+ community members in the GTHA.

Autoethnography

Shortly after coming out, I moved from Hamilton to Toronto to start university. I lived downtown, first on the cusp of, and later within, the Church Wellesley Village (“The Village”), Toronto’s historically gay neighbourhood and the geographic centre of its queer community. Spanning roughly from Gould St. to Charles St. E. and Yonge St. to Jarvis St., an area encompassing both my apartment and my school, walks through The Village were a staple of my life as an undergraduate student. Being in the physical company of other queer people daily made me feel close to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, but not connected to it. Despite the comfort I took in the neighbourhood’s presence, I felt mostly like a Village, an outside observer rather than a member of the vibrant community within.

I came to realize that, disappointingly, the disconnect I

felt from the queer community was a result of the social infrastructure of The Village. Although it’s home to invaluable queer cultural institutions such as Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, Glad Day Bookshop, and The 519, The Village is, in my experience, most notably reputed for its nightlife, with clubs like Crews & Tangos serving as “it” destinations for queer (and, increasingly, straight girls’) nights out. Because of this reputation, it seemed to me that The Village caters predominantly to one specific demographic of queer person – young, extroverted, middle-upper class, childless, white, gay men. This observation was and is rather unsurprising, as Western society as a whole is catered towards the same, albeit straight, demographic, but it was disappointing and disheartening to realize that even a space supposedly for the queer community, an equity seeking group, could be so heavily exclusionary to its own members.

In hindsight, the lack of diversity amongst the “ideal” patrons of The Village is disappointing for two reasons. First, 2SLGBTQIA+ communities have experienced a rapid decline in queer public spaces since their peak in the 1980s (Day, 2022; Powers, 2019). As such, it’s unfortunate that in a city like Toronto that’s lucky enough to have retained such a large queer neighbourhood, every effort has not been made to ensure that it is as inclusive to as many members of its diverse community as possible. Organizations and spaces that cater to intersectional community members do exist, such as the Unity Mosque for queer Muslims

or the 2-Spirited People of the 1st Nations for Two-Spirit Indigenous people, but they are still too few and far between and are often separate from “mainstream” queer spaces.

Designated queer space is also a prerequisite for many interactions between members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, including intergenerational ones. When elders and youth are excluded from the few queer spaces still left, it becomes incredibly difficult, if not impossible, for them to connect and build meaningful relationships with each other. As someone who myself felt quite isolated from the queer community and lacked knowledge of its history and culture when I was first coming out, it would have been invaluable to me to form ties with and learn from those who had been in my position before, had had the same experiences as me, and had come out the other side in a safe, welcoming environment. Even now, as someone with many close queer friends and an incredible partner, I still feel immense comfort when chatting with older queer people about our experiences, and hope to provide that same comfort to those younger than me.

Having now moved back to Hamilton, I have noticed once again and even more acutely the crucial role queer space plays in connecting members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, and in its absence have felt that familiar disconnect I felt walking through The Village years ago.

My lived experience as a queer person in the GTHA, specifically as relates to the capacity for developing intergenerational relationships and having inclusive spaces where queer people of diverse backgrounds can come together to form such connections, has come to form the basis for this study.

Phenomenology

As this study was centred around understanding the experiences of the local 2SLGBTQIA+ community, phenomenology was employed as the primary research method. A phenomenological study is defined in “Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design” as a study that “describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using this method, a phenomenon – in this case, cultural transmission within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community of the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA) – is identified and then data is collected from those who have experienced it to create a “composite description of the essence of the experience for all of the individuals” (2018). To create this “composite description,” members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community of different ages and generational cohorts were interviewed about their lived experiences, specifically as they relate to culture sharing/apprehension and intergenerational relationships within the community. Beyond belonging to different generational cohorts, interview

participants also differed in terms of sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as additional demographic factors such as race and (dis)ability to get a more holistic sense of how the intersectionality of one's identity affects their 2SLGBTQIA+ experience.

In addition to the 16 primary participants, I also conducted 4 expert interviews with representatives from public-serving organizations who work with members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in the GTHA to gain further insight into the fostering of relationships (intergenerational or not) amongst queer people in a more formal context.

Limitations

Participants of different backgrounds and lived experiences were explicitly recruited for this study in hopes of gaining a more holistic understanding of how the intersectionalities of one's identity affect the way they live in, interact with, and express themselves within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. As much of the historic research in this space and past archiving of queer history has centred around white, gay men, I wanted to ensure that this project did not perpetuate the marginalization of community members who do not fit this narrow demographic. That being said, I do understand that because of poor experiences with academia in the past, certain demographics of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community may have been less inclined to participate in this study – namely

trans and/or BIPOC community members. These voices are represented to the best of my ability in this study, but given that a majority of participants identify as cisgender and/or Caucasian/white, obviously much more work is needed to restore trust with these communities and much more research centring the experiences of these community members needs to be done.

This study also focused on the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ community members in the urban, metropolitan Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area. The GTHA was chosen as it is the area in which I have experienced what it means to be queer – the only area in which I have interacted (to any great extent) with other members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. As such, this study cannot speak to the experience of those living in rural communities, which undoubtedly influences the relationships rural 2SLGBTQIA+ people have with each other and the community at large. This community is also underrepresented in queer academia, and future studies would do well to better centre rural experiences alongside those of trans and BIPOC community members.

Findings

Individual Participants

In total, 16 individual 2SLGBTQIA+ people ranging in age from approximately 19 to 76 took part in this research study.¹⁷ A demographic breakdown of these individual participants is as follows:¹⁸

Generation: ¹⁹

Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964)	5
Generation X (born 1965-1980)	3
Millennials (Generation Y) (born 1981-1996)	4
Generation Z (born 1997-2012) ²⁰	4

Location:

Hamilton	7
Toronto	5
York Region	2
Peel Region	2

¹⁷ While participants' year of birth was documented, their exact age at the time of participating was not. The study's youngest participants were born in 2003 and the oldest was born in 1946.

¹⁸ For some of the demographic data recorded in participants' screening forms, some participants selected more than one response, which is why the total for some categories may be greater than 16 (the number of individual participants). Additionally, some participants may have specified their gender or sexuality but not both.

¹⁹ Generations were defined using the dates outlined by the Pew Research Centre (Dimock, 2019).

²⁰ For the purposes of this study, only those over the age of 18 years of age were eligible to participate. As such, all Generation Z participants were born before 2004.

Gender:

Cisgender Woman	8
Cisgender Man	3
Transgender Woman	2
Non-Binary (includes genderfluid & androgynous identities) ²¹	3

Sexuality:

Bisexual	5
Lesbian	8
Gay	3
Queer	4
Pansexual/panromantic	2
Demisexual/demiromantic	2
Asexual	2

Race:

Caucasian/White	11
South Asian	3
Latin American	1
Black	1
Mixed Race	2

²¹ Please note that while one or more non-binary participants identify as trans-masculine, no transgender men were interviewed for this study.

Disability:

None	9
Physical	2
Psychiatric/Psychological	5
Neurological	1
Hearing Impairment	2

Citizenship Status:

Canadian-born citizen	10
Foreign-born Canadian citizen	3
Canadian permanent resident	3

Participants were recruited through GTHA-based 2SLGBTQIA+ organizations, as well as through my personal networks – particularly on social media – and the networks of my family and friends. In total, 16 participants of the 31 respondents from personal and external networks were interviewed for this study.²²

Of the 16 individual 2SLGBTQIA+ community members interviewed, a majority (13) cited learning about queer culture and the queer community through other 2SLGBTQIA+ people, be they friends (4), former or current partners/spouses (3), peers (3), parents’ friends (2), or relatives (1). The people who shared this cultural knowledge with them were typically older than them or had been out/active within

the queer community longer than they had. Participants also learned about queer culture online (7), by attending queer community events (4), by consuming traditional media (3), and by visiting queer spaces (2). One participant did not answer this question.

Only one participant cited her parents/family as a source of queer cultural knowledge. Having many queer friends and relatives that they raised her around, her parents embraced queer culture and exposed her to it at a young age, despite living in a relatively small city (where such exposure, it was implied, is not the norm). By her own admission, this participant’s situation is “a bit unusual” and anecdotally does not reflect the experiences of other queer people she knows, nor those of other study participants.

Five participants stated that they feel up to date on queer culture, three felt somewhat up to date, four said they do not feel up to date, and three did not respond. Age was cited as the reason three of the participants felt out of touch with current queer culture. These participants belonged to three different generations: Generation X, Millennials, and Baby Boomers. The fourth participant who said they felt they were not up to date was a young Millennial (on the cusp of Generation Z) who cited socializing predominantly with cisgender, straight men as the primary reason for that cultural disconnect.

²² Nobody with whom I had a close relationship prior to the study was selected to participate so as to ensure there was no sense of coercion between myself and the study participants. Only one participant selected came from my personal network and they were explicitly reminded that their consent to participate could be rescinded at any point for any reason and that no harm to our relationship would come of it.

12 of the participants stated that they felt that they had found community with other queer people (primarily with those who shared their queer identities), while three said they had somewhat found community. Only one participant answered that they had not yet found community with other queer people. Participants found community through being involved with queer groups (5), being in queer spaces (5), mutual friends (3), attending queer events (3), their partners (2), school (2), work (2), online gaming (2), social media (1). Barriers to finding community mentioned, even by those who said they have found community with other queer people, include: fear for safety (2), lack of physical queer spaces (2), immigrating as an adult (2), being a parent (1), homophobia (1), COVID-19 (1), and geographic distance from people met online (1).

While the majority of participants claimed they had found community with other queer people, only five stated that they felt connected to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community at large. Another five said they felt disconnected from the broader community and three said they felt somewhat connected to the community at large. Three participants did not explicitly state their relationship to the community. The COVID-19 pandemic (2), fewer queer events/opportunities to connect (2), imposter syndrome (questioning whether they are “queer enough”) (2), transphobia (2), misogyny (1), racism (1), being busy (1), not being current on queer culture (1), and moving to a smaller city (1) were reasons some participants felt disconnected from the broader community.

Several participants also mentioned that other aspects of their identities affect how they interact with other queer people/within the queer community. Occupation was the greatest factor and was cited by four participants. One who worked in law enforcement said not all community members were open to someone who was “part of the establishment.” Another, a medical professional specializing in 2SLGBTQIA+ care, said they feel they cannot go to places they might expect to encounter patients due to privacy concerns. Finally, two former teachers said they had to keep their identities quiet for fear of losing their jobs and upsetting their students’ parents. Being a parent was a factor for two participants, who stated running in more cisnet social circles, having less time to attend queer events, having less disposable income to spend partying or travelling, having had a child through a former (straight) marriage rather than adoption or surrogacy (for one of the parents), and presenting as straight when with her child (for the other parent) affected their interactions with other queer people, including other parents in one case. Presenting as straight was an affecting factor for a bisexual woman in a relationship with a cisgender man, as well.²³ Other aspects of participants’ identities cited include: being religious/coming from a religious family (2), having a physical disability (1), having a psychological disability (1), being overweight (1), having a niche queer identity (1), moving to the GTHA from a much smaller community (1), being an immigrant (1), and being a person of colour (1).

²³ This experience of being “straight passing” and consequently invisible to straight and queer people alike is a common form of bisexual erasure and can result in negative psychological and physical health outcomes for bisexual individuals (Bing, 2018; Kirby et al., 2021; Yoshino, 2000).

When asked, 14 of the participants said they had intergenerational relationships with other members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Of those 14, six participants cited relationships with people older than them only, two cited relationships with people younger than them only, and four cited relationships with people both older and younger than them. Two participants stated that while they have these intergenerational relationships, they are not particularly close with the people older/younger than them. One participant said they were unsure whether they had intergenerational connections due to the nature of her relationships (online, through gaming, primarily) and one said they did not have any intergenerational relationships.

11 of the participants said they had positive intergenerational relationships and ten said if they had had intergenerational relationships when they were younger and/or first coming out, they think they would have had a positive impact on them and they likely would have realized and accepted their queer identities sooner. One participant stated that their intergenerational relationships were typically negative, as they often receive opposition as a result of their identity as a trans woman of colour (although some younger trans women can be more accepting than older ones). One participant from the group of 11 said that having intergenerational relationships with people who had had positive coming out experiences would have helped her have an easier time accepting and acknowledging

her identity. However, she also stated that if she had had intergenerational relationships with people who had had negative coming out experiences, it would have been detrimental to her.

Expert Participants

Additionally, four experts who serve the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in the GTHA were interviewed for this study. These experts were recruited by reaching out to community organizations and by referral. Two of the experts work independently or for organizations that exclusively work within the 2SLGBTQIA+ space and two work within 2SLGBTQIA+ serving divisions of broader public-serving organizations. Three of the participants work for/with organizations based in Toronto and one works for an organization based in Hamilton.

All four experts have been working within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community for at least five years and identify as queer themselves. They work with community members aged 16 to 80s and all facilitate at least some intergenerational programming through their respective organizations. Some of this programming is explicitly intergenerational, while some is just open to all ages. Only one of the participants stated working with youth under 18 years of age.

The programming facilitated by all four participants was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic and all four had to

shift their offerings online during the provincially-mandated lockdowns. While two cited lack of internet/devices, lack of technology know-how, and lack of safe spaces to join online programming as barriers to some people accessing this online programming (not exclusive to seniors), all four stated they had seen an uptick in attendance since offering online programming. Having an online format has made programming more accessible to people living outside of Toronto or Hamilton, with participants joining province- and nationwide, and in some cases, worldwide. The experts all felt their intergenerational programming was well received, as evidenced by the number of attendees, the feedback provided by them, and the lengths to which some people have gone to attend (e.g. joining from their car on their lunch break or during the middle of the night from around the world).

Additionally, cultural gaps or differences between younger and older 2SLGBTQIA+ community members (specifically regarding lived experiences) were noted by all four expert participants, with three of them (those explicitly asked) citing the fostering of intergenerational relationships as an effective means by which to bridge these gaps.

Discussion

This project was designed to explore the phenomenon of cultural transmission within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area and better understand how intergenerational relationships, or a lack thereof, affect the process as they are not inherent within the community. Through my interviews with all 20 participants, individuals and experts alike, a number of themes emerged that will be discussed herein.

Inter- and Intragenerational Observations

The greatest generational differences noticed between individual interview participants centred around lived experiences. Although the small number of participants in the study does not allow for enough data points to assign great value to any averages that could be taken, it is likely more than coincidental that the average age at which participants came out was progressively lower over time; 47 years old for Baby Boomers, 23 for Generation X, 22 for Millennials, and 18 for Generation Z. One participant who belongs to the Baby Boomer generation, a trans woman of colour, stated she did not have a formal coming out but rather just slowly became more herself.

Further, two of the Baby Boomers and one of the Generation X participants were married and had a child/children before coming out. The Baby Boomers (a cisgender lesbian and a transgender lesbian) were both in their 40s with multiple

children, while the Generation X participant (a cisgender gay man) was in his late 20s with only one child. None of the Millennial or Generation Z participants expressed having previously been in formally committed straight-presenting relationships. However, one participant from each generation aside below Baby Boomer (a cisgender gay man and two non-binary lesbians) did admit to dealing with compulsive heterosexuality to some extent, primarily through questioning whether they might be bisexual instead of gay/lesbian when first coming out to themselves.²⁴

Changes in societal culture, specifically around views of sexuality and gender diverseness play a significant role in the lived experiences of the study participants. When the Baby Boomer participants were born, the gay rights movement had not yet begun and gay and trans people were not yet protected from discrimination under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and Canadian Human Rights Act (*Bill C-16*, 2017; Global Affairs Canada, 2022; Government of Canada, 2022).²⁵ During this time and even in the following several decades, queer people who lived openly did so at great risk to their lives and/or livelihoods. The one Baby Boomer participant who was openly queer before her 40s was so because she had been outed at three different

²⁴ Although this questioning of their identity was the experience of the three participants referenced, bisexuality is a valid sexual identity of its own. “Bisexual” is not a transitional identity people adopt on their way to “gay” or “lesbian,” nor is it an identity for straight to adopt to experiment “before settling down in heterosexual relationships” (Kirby et al., 2021).

²⁵ Bill C-16, which “[amended] the Canadian Human Rights Act to add gender identity and gender expression to the list of prohibited grounds of discrimination,” was only passed in 2017, by which time even the youngest of the individual study participants (from Generation Z) would have been teenagers (Bill C-16, 2017).

points in her life: in university, to her family, and then again in her workplace. Even so, it wasn't until she retired that she felt more comfortable being open about her sexuality. Her wife, another Baby Boomer participant who shared her profession, did not start coming out more publicly until she had retired, despite getting married as soon as doing so was legal in Ontario, for fear of losing her job and being disowned by her family.

On the other hand, very few of the younger participants cited difficult coming out experiences. Experiences were described as relatively positive overall, with any resistance typically coming from one or two family members who had difficulties accepting the participant's gender identity or sexual orientation for reasons related to cultural background and/or religion. These cases exemplify the divide between home and host cultural traits discussed in the Context chapter, with families' views on queerness clashing with the broader societal views in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area.

Participants also discussed how the relative openness to and acceptance of queer identities in the GTHA has filtered into the public vernacular and the effect this change in language has had on people's experiences coming to terms with their own queerness. Overall, the sentiment shared by participants of all generations is that younger people (queer and cishet alike) have greater knowledge of queer identities

and labels from an earlier age and have the societal acceptance to publicly adopt these identities as they see fit. For example, one of the experts I spoke with said that they ran a seniors program attended almost exclusively by gay men, but acknowledged that some of the homogeneity seen in the attendees could be the result of the language around sexuality and gender available to that group historically (i.e. what identities they had labels to describe). As they explain, "more people who would have described themselves as gay men before [are] starting to talk about and explore more overtly their sense of their gender" and realizing that "tied up with [their] gayness is like actually a more fluid gender identity than [they] realized."

In the 2001 documentary *Miss Representation*, Miriam Wright Edelman, Founder of the Children's Defense Fund, is quoted as saying "you can't be what you can't see" regarding the underrepresentation of women in roles of power and influence (Siebel Newsom, 2011). While the same can apply to the effect queer role models (or the lack thereof) can have on other (typically younger) queer people accepting their gender or sexuality, it could also be said that you can't be what you can't name. Several of the participants that I spoke with said how they always felt they were different from their peers or family members but didn't know how until they learned about different terms used to describe diverse genders or sexual orientations and found they identified with them. It is possible that, in the example shared by the expert

regarding the seniors' program attendees, older queer people who learned about different sexual identities (gay, lesbian, bisexual) may have latched onto those labels, not knowing there were gender identities (e.g. transgender, non-binary, genderfluid) that might better match their feelings and experiences. In a conversation with an older lesbian (Baby Boomer) I spoke with outside of this research study, I explained what it means to be non-binary in discussing they/them pronoun usage, and they looked at me and said: "maybe I'm a they/them," implying that they could possibly identify as non-binary. They said they knew they weren't a man but had really never felt like a woman and had a hard time relating to other "female" experiences. Despite identifying as a lesbian, they had either never thought to question their gender before or had never had an accurate term to use to describe their experience of gender. Thus, they had never considered that they could be anything other than the gender assigned to them at birth.

Language also evolves over time, which is why someone who may have identified as "homosexual" or "gay" in the past may now opt for "queer," while someone who would have once been called or referred to themselves as "transsexual" may now use "transgender" instead. Even the acronym used to describe the community, 2SLGBTQIA+, has changed repeatedly over time and can differ depending on the context in which it is used. Language can also impact how queer people are treated, particularly by cisnet

people. One trans participant said that the gender identity terms used today (e.g. transgender) were not around in the 1960s or 1970s when she came to Canada and, as such, trans people like herself were labelled "freaks" and "crossdressers" and faced ostracization, bullying, verbal abuse, and physical violence. She did note, however, that she and her trans peers still face the same violence and discrimination today due to "enduring Christian colonialism" (O'Sullivan, 2021; Schiwy, 2007; Thorne et al., 2019).

Changes to the language used to describe the feelings and experiences of queer people, coupled with changes in societal attitude towards queer people and identities, can result in a sort of divide between older and younger 2SLGBTQIA+ people, as evidenced by some participants' responses to topics discussed during their interviews. On the language front, there can be disagreement around which labels to use and why (e.g. some advocate strongly about the use of "lesbian" while others are impartial or opposed to the term; some feel "queer" is an inclusive umbrella term while other still view it as a slur not worth reclaiming). Further, a "kids these days" effect can occur, a millennia-old phenomenon whereby older generations lament about the decline of younger generations because "when observing current children, [people] compare [their] biased memory of the past to a more objective assessment of the present, and a natural decline seems to appear" (Protzko & Schooler, 2019). Queer people are not immune to the kids these

days effect, and it can manifest in older generations feeling younger generations underappreciate how much more difficult their experiences often were and undervalue the amount of political organizing it took to create the cultural change from which younger generations have benefitted.²⁶ One expert also shared that, in return, younger people feel they do not need to have relationships with older people if they are just going to put down them and their experiences. This sentiment was not shared by the individual study participants, however, who spoke highly of intergenerational relationships, whether they had close ones of their own or just aspired to having them. Experts all noted that the community members they work with enjoy, seek out, and highly value opportunities for intergenerational connection, as well.

Without having close, intimate intergenerational relationships, it is easy for members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community to fall into the generationalism prevalent in regular society. Once people are able to look past the generation and see the individuals who comprise them, though, attitudes seemed to shift. From the interviews I conducted, I observed that those who had more close intergenerational relationships with people older than them tended to have a better sense of queer history and appreciation for the generations preceding them. As well, based on the responses I received from the individual interviewees and the observations shared by expert

participants, young people seemed to be open to and interested in broadening their knowledge horizons and often mentioned active efforts to further educate themselves on queer history and issues. Fewer people cited having relationships with people from younger generations, but those who did said younger people were able to provide company and a sense of community to older generations in addition to keeping them up to date on current culture. Participants also said they appreciated being able to provide safety, understanding, and moral support to younger queer people and relished the opportunity to pay forward the support they received from queer elders or, if they lacked such relationships, to be the person they wish they had had when coming out.

Non-monolithic Nature of Community

Despite my reference to the 2SLGBTQIA+ community throughout this paper, the community is not a monolith; it is comprised of subgroups of people with all sorts of social identities that intersect and affect their queer experience. One expert I spoke with, a mixed race, differently-abled queer elder stated: “I find it when people say the LGBTQ community, they’re referring to a white community and I’m not in that community. I’m in many communities.”

I had known this to be the case to some extent prior to beginning this study, which is part of the reason I sought

²⁶ It is worth noting that the kids these days effect was referenced more in the expert interviews than the individual ones.

out participants of different backgrounds. What I believe I underestimated, though, as a white, cisgender, able-bodied person, is how significant the impact of other social identities could be on 2SLGBTQIA+ people's experiences, even within the queer community. Several participants recounted to me how they feel their identity occupied such a small subset of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community that they have difficulties finding others who can relate to their experiences, and as a result can feel quite isolated from the community at large.

One participant, a trans woman from an Orthodox Jewish family, said that the queer community is already small in and of itself, and queer Jews are an even smaller subset of the community. Another, a trans woman of colour, shared that "when you're an immigrant and coloured, it's even worse. You're a subgroup within a subgroup...and the circle becomes so narrow so as to be a dot."

Two immigrants in their late 30s, one from Mexico and one from India, both shared how difficult it has been for them to form connections with others as people who moved to Canada as adults. An expert who works with newcomers also discussed the culture shock queer newcomers can feel when first arriving in Canada. Not only do many newcomers have to learn a new language, they also have to learn the acronyms, jargon, and slang people use even and especially within the queer

community.

Three participants with physical (2) or psychological (1) disabilities stated that they are, at best, conscious of their disability in queer spaces or when interacting with other queer people and, at worst, feel excluded from the community because of their disability. Andrew Gurza echoes this sentiment in *Any Other Way: How Toronto Got Queer*, writing that "almost every time [he goes to the Village], [he is] imbued with a sense of giddiness," but his hopes are dashed as he "[passes] all the bars, pubs, and kinky clubs...[knowing he] can't get [his] wheelchair inside these sacred spaces where [his] community comes" (Chambers et al., 2017). One expert participant said that the trans people with disabilities she works with have said they feel connected to the community in ways they never have before because of the online programming that began when the COVID-19 pandemic began and are worried about what will happen when things go back to normal. Another expert shared that queer people with disabilities also often have to decide whether "to be out and experience homophobia [or transphobia] or... hide and get reasonably decent healthcare." She also stated that queer seniors are often faced with this same dilemma, especially in long-term care (Drake et al., 2012; Teitel, 2014).

A transmasculine, genderfluid, bisexual participant on the

asexual/aromantic spectrum, said he also feels excluded from the larger queer (including trans) community because of this trans/non-binary gender identity and has a hard time finding people who can relate to his specific queer identities. Another participant, a non-binary lesbian, expressed a similar sentiment.

Although I understood through my own observations and secondary research that the same power structures that existed within larger Western society also existed within the queer community (Twin Cities GLBT Oral History Project, 2010; Winston, 2021), I, perhaps naively, assumed that as a group that has historically and does currently experience oppression and marginalization, 2SLGBTQIA+ people would be more mindful of the challenges faced by other socially marginalized groups and work to be more inclusive of others. I had a romanticized notion of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Citing *Against the Romance of Community*, Murphey et al. describe how Miranda Joseph argues “that communities, particularly queer communities, have often been romanticized as safe spaces of support and belonging that somehow exist outside of capitalism as an economic system and other structural forms of inequality such as racism, sexism, and heterosexism” (2002; 2016). What I heard from many participants, though, is that this is often not the case. Several transgender (including non-binary) participants said they had experienced transphobia from cisgender gay men and lesbians, while some also cited transphobia from

other trans people. Although not explicitly stated, biphobia, particularly from gay men and lesbians is also rampant within the community (Winston, 2021), which is perhaps evidenced by the fact that two study participants stated that while they identify as lesbians, “bisexual” probably better describes their sexuality.

Other participants, including some of the experts drawing upon their own personal experiences, shared “disturbing” experiences of racism, ableism, and ageism within the community. As one expert participant stated:

“The racism and ableism and ageism that’s playing out in in our communities just angers me and saddens me and disappoints me...people should know better...because [they] are just exhibiting the same qualities that [they] say [they] are feeling from out there and projecting it onto us [BIPOC, disabled, trans, etc. queer people]...People seem to think that just because we are queer we are enlightened and we behave better, [but] no, we don’t.”

Another individual participant echoed this statement, saying they were surprised by the discrimination they had seen and personally faced within the 2SLGBTQIA+ community as they expected more solidarity from their queer peers.

To me, the experiences described by these participants perfectly reflect the cycle of oppression as described in

Paulo Freire's seminal text, *The Pedagogy of Oppression*, whereby an oppressed group, in this case, 2SLGBTQIA+ people, internalizes the oppressive behaviour patterns exhibited by groups with more social, economic, or political power (e.g. young, white, able-bodied people) and then oppressed others, including members of their own group of lower social status (e.g. queer people of colour, queer people with disabilities, queer elders, transgender people) (2005). It is unsurprising then that interview participants cited feeling most comfortable with people who belonged to the same social groups as them. The majority of participants (9) explicitly mentioned that they had found community with queer people predominantly with others who shared their gender/sexual identity. No individual participants mentioned whether the community they had found was with people who were otherwise demographically similar to them, but one of the expert interviewees said she noticed that people tended to find/join groups based on their cultural backgrounds (e.g. Latinx people finding other Latinx people) because "people just gravitate to what is comfortable and where they feel that they belong."

However, that same expert also said, as many other participants' responses show, that it can be difficult to find those groups of people because of the cultures to which they belong. She said, for example, how most of her Black friends still have to be careful about being out in certain spaces, which could make it more difficult for queer Black people

to connect with each other. In their memoir, Samra Habib shares a similar sentiment around finding and building community with other queer Muslims (Habib, 2019). When social identities intersect in this way, those with these intersectional identities can be forced to compromise on one or many of them (e.g. be openly queer but lose contact with their Black/Muslim community in the examples above, or hide their queerness to stay a part of their Black/Muslim community). One individual participant, the medical professional who works largely with queer patients, described a similar situation during their interview, saying they feel they often have to avoid queer spaces so as to protect the privacy of her patients, but also feels they cannot participate in religious/cultural events with her wife and is thus left feeling isolated on both fronts. The consequently reduced visibility that comes with prioritizing one's other cultural identities over their queer ones is part of the reason it can be difficult for people from some social backgrounds to find queer role models who reflect their identities and/or experiences.

Queer Space & Connection

Queer spaces in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton area emerged out of necessity. In *Any Other Way: How Toronto Got Queer*, Allison Burgess discusses Catherine Jean Nash's article, "Toronto's gay village (1969-1982): plotting the politics of gay identity," in which she argues that "in the

1960s and early 1970s, gay activists resisted the creation of gay neighbourhood spaces [such as The Village], seeing them as both potentially segregating and a reinforcement of a conservative business-oriented identity. However, in the aftermath of the Emanuel Jaques' murder and the raid on *The Body Politic*, both in 1977, and the bathhouse raids in 1981, perceptions changed, and a dedicated gay space in Toronto was seen as essential to organizing” (Chambers et al., 2017; Nash, 2006). Queer spaces were also important for building relationships and fostering a sense of belonging, community, and collective agency (Jennex & Eswaran, 2020).

Dedicated queer spaces are as essential as ever to intimate connection for 2SLGBTQIA+ people. Not only are they often the only (public) spaces where (some) queer people can be their uninhibited authentic selves, they are also spaces where occupants can assume “queer” is the default identity for those around them, saving them the often-exhausting emotional labour of code-switching in cishet environments (Holden, 2019) and needing to determine whether they are in queer company in their daily lives (e.g. at work, school, etc.). Ten of the individual participants explicitly stated that they had found community with other 2SLGBTQIA+ people through queer spaces (both physical and digital) and seven expressed that if they were to form more intergenerational relationships, they would like to do so through queer spaces. Additionally, nine participants stated that a lack of (access

to) queer spaces, particularly physical ones, hinders their ability to connect with the community. Four of these nine individuals specifically mentioned COVID-19-related closures as sources of disconnection/isolation from the community. These pandemic closures are part of a larger trend of disappearing physical queer spaces, especially ones catered towards queer women, trans and non-binary people, and people of colour (Aiken et al., 2022; Cain, 2017; Day, 2022; Mills et al., 2019; Powell, 2019; Wilson, 2021).²⁷

One participant I spoke with questioned whether queer spaces do not exist where he lives in Mississauga because the people who would use them don't need them, and this might be somewhat true. According to queer scholar and activist Gary Kinsman, “traditional gay villages” are disappearing across Canada for three main reasons: increased tolerance of queer relationships in broader society, rising real estate prices, especially in large cities like Toronto, and the technological disruption of (gay-specific) hookup culture. He argues that having dedicated queer spaces is now less necessary “for protection from ostracism or outright violence” and “as hookup culture moves more to apps like Grindr,” queer people have less of a need to concentrate in central places like gay bars, which were once key cruising spots. Additionally, with increased housing costs, many queer people can no longer afford “to live in

²⁷ The pandemic has been a time during which queer people have found new community online, sometimes for the first time, as was the case for some of the trans women with whom one of the expert participants works. While I want to acknowledge the gap in connection that digital queer spaces have bridged for some, the focus of this section will be on physical queer spaces unless otherwise stated, for the reasons outlined in the Context section.

traditional gay neighbourhoods,” if they can afford to live in large urban centres like Toronto at all (Cain, 2017).

While I agree with the points Kinsman makes, I would argue that he speaks here only to the experiences of (young, white) gay men in gay villages and not to the experiences of all others across the 2SLGBTQIA+ spectrum, especially youth (under 19) and elders, people of colour, newcomers, people with disabilities, non-drinkers, and women, trans, and non-binary people. This large oversight leaves many feeling excluded from the queer community. He also does not address the “hetrification” of queer spaces, whereby cisgender and straight people “feel privileged to take over the spaces of [queer people]” (e.g. straight women having bachelorette parties at gay bars), which has also pushed queer people out of their once safe spaces (Gorman-Murray & Nash, 2021; Jones II & Essig, 2022). Based on how highly sought out and valued queer spaces were by participants of this study and attendees of the programs facilitated by the expert participants, I would argue that while the purposes of queer spaces may have changed for some, their importance within the queer community remains the same, especially in the face of their decline.

Conclusion

Recommendations

As romantic a view I may have held about the queer community, it is clearly no utopia. In the episode “Herland: Reimagine Utopia” from the podcast *Nice Try!*, host Avery Trufelman discusses José Esteban Muñoz’s seminal work, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. She states that Muñoz “positions utopia and queerness as a process; a process of examining the past in order to imagine the future. Utopia not as a concrete destination, but as a direction. A constant imagining and reimagining” (2009; Trufelman, n.d.). There is no one singular queer experience, and thus there cannot be one singular vision of what a better, preferable queer future may look like. That does not mean, though, that the pursuit of a more equitable and inclusive queer future is not a worthwhile endeavour. Perhaps the recommendations outlined below can point in the direction of a more utopic future for queer people of all backgrounds.

Prioritize inclusive queer spaces

Ensuring queer spaces are inclusive to as many community members as possible involves first being conscious of who is currently welcome (implicitly or explicitly) in these spaces and who is left out. As Samra Habib describes in *We Have Always Been Here*, “it seemed that no one in the queer spaces I visited—dance parties, art shows, Pride events—

was curious about why there were hardly any people of colour—and hardly any Muslims—in their midst. I felt even more invisible” (2019). If queer spaces are both vital for connection and have historically catered towards the needs of the small demographic that is young, white, able-bodied, upper-middle gay men, it is easy to imagine that any queer person who falls outside these dominant social classes can relate to Habib’s sentiment of feeling like an outsider within the community.

Offering free or low cost events/programs open to all ages, including and especially sober ones, in fully accessible places with childcare options, trans-inclusive practices such as gender-neutral bathrooms and pronoun stating, and zero-tolerance discrimination policies would be a big step towards creating more welcoming and inclusive spaces. Further, these such spaces would allow for community members to better empathize with one another, especially when they come from different social backgrounds, and would help address the power dynamics and subsequent sense of exclusion discussed previously.

Enabling trans, disabled, and BIPOC queer individuals, as well as queer newcomers, to assume leadership roles within the community would also help diversify and decolonize it, contributing to greater inclusivity.

Establish more culturally-specific queer spaces

Creating culturally-specific spaces allows for those who lay outside the queer mainstream to engage with their community and be their authentic selves more completely. Several participants described their difficulty finding others who shared their specific queer identities or social backgrounds. These spaces could be catered to specific racial or ethnic groups (e.g. Black or Latinx queer people), religious groups (e.g. queer Jews or Hindus), or disability types (queer people with limb differences or neurodivergence). In an Indigenous context, Adrienne Huard writes in their thesis that “introducing Two-Spirit-only spaces somehow seems revolutionary when our embodied experiences crave familiarity, kinship and relation-building” (2020). The revolutionary nature of these culturally-specific spaces, these reprieves from both society at large and the mainstream queer community, should be embraced in the quest for creating a more inclusive 2SLGBTQIA+ future. If a monetary investment is required to introduce such spaces in the form of events or programming, funds could be raised through crowdfunding within the broader community, perhaps in partnership with businesses in queer neighbourhoods like The Village, or through lobbying the local government. Queer businesses and organizations with accessible brick and mortar locations could also offer free use of their facilities (e.g. during times they would be closed and otherwise unoccupied) in a show of allyship.

Foster intergenerational relationships

Where there are more inclusive queer spaces, there can be more opportunities for queer people of all ages to interact more regularly and naturally. Although each expert relayed that their intergenerational programming was very well received, implying a demand for intergenerational relationships from community members, the majority of individual participants stated they would want to interact more organically, in physical spaces. As many participants described, older people can tell stories and share their experiences with those younger than them, continuing the queer tradition of oral history. Younger people can share their stories, too, as well as the latest in queer trends and pop culture. Doing so would help build the empathy required to counteract the generationalism mentioned in the Discussion. Above all, having inclusive, intergenerational spaces means that queer people can take comfort in being surrounded by their community and feeling they belong.

Enhance queer education in school curricula

Many participants discussed how they believe young people today have a greater understanding of queer identities than they did at their age and that if they had had that same knowledge when they were younger, they likely would have accepted their queerness sooner and come out earlier. If parents are unreliable sources of queer cultural knowledge

for their children, schools could take their place to a certain extent. Participants said having a greater sense of queer history made them value intergenerational relationships more highly and feel closer to their queer predecessors. Being introduced to this history through a decolonized lens in elementary and high school could normalize queerness for children, especially those whose parents may have negative attitudes towards it, and make them feel less alone should they realize they identify as queer. It would also let them know there is a community they can turn toward to help them better understand their identity and experiences, and, if there are age-inclusive and/or youth-focused spaces, they would be able to interact with those community members.

Improve queer care in retirement homes and long-term care

Because queer people are less likely to have children who can take care of them as they age, many who require additional assistance can find themselves in retirement homes or long-term care facilities to meet their care needs. However, as mentioned previously, many queer seniors have to hide their gender or sexuality to receive the health and personal care they require when in such environments. Facility staff should receive proper education on how to meet queer care needs and the cis-/heteronormative nature of such facilities should be challenged to make them more inclusive to queer seniors. In doing so, environments would be more conducive to queer seniors being open with each

other within their care homes and allow for them to more comfortably join online programming with other community members, reducing the amount of isolation they can feel from their community.

Future Research

As demonstrated by the responses of study participants, people's diverse social identities intersect with their queer identities and affect their experiences in society at large and within the queer community. Social identities like gender (specifically trans and non-binary identities), sexuality (specifically bisexual, asexual, and demisexual identities) race, ethnicity, indigeneity, national origin, geographic location (specifically rural inhabitants), religious belief, (dis)ability, and/or socioeconomic status could be studied in conjunction with queerness to more holistically understand of how people acquire queer knowledge, interact with/within the queer community, foster community with others, and form chosen families.

Additionally, as one participant pointed out, this study had only a small number of participants due to its case study nature and thus its findings are not necessarily representative of the local queer population. Future studies in this area, even those focusing on the same geographic location of the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area, could include a larger pool of participants to better capture the experiences of the queer population of that area.

Researchers of different social identities than myself would also likely provide a different perspective than myself and approach this research in a different manner that may result in different outcomes or findings.

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