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# Placemaking and Community-Building among Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer (LBQ) Women and Non-Binary People during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

This paper draws on data collected through in-depth interviews with multi-generational participants recruited from various online sites to explore the place-making strategies among lesbian, bisexual, and queer (LBQ) women and trans- and gender-non-conforming people (tgncp) during the Covid-19 pandemic. Historically denied public space, placemaking in immaterial space (i.e., digital spaces) has been essential to the production and maintenance of communities for LBQ women and tgncp. Because these populations rely on non-traditional placemaking strategies that are not always instantiated in material space, sociologists often overlook their efforts to create place for themselves. This paper corrects this omission by exploring how communities create place through the deployment of subcultural capital onto *immaterial space.* Introducing four main strategies of community placemaking, *material-constant communities, material-transient communities, immaterial-constant communities, and immaterial-transient communities*, this article expands sociological conceptions of space to accommodate the placemaking strategies of marginalized communities who might lack the economic and political resources to foster communities in material spaces. Beyond the investigation of lesbian-queer placemaking, this research contributes to the growing sociological literature exploring the multifaceted, fluid, contested, and ephemeral nature of place and placemaking in the context of increasing Internet use.

## Introduction

Many scholars note that the increasing disappearance of gay bars and nightclubs in cities worldwide predicate the erosion of queer culture and placemaking efforts (Ghaziani 2017; Kelly et al. 2014; Mattson 2020; Owens and Dent 2017; Sibalis 2004; Sullivan 2007; Thomas 2014; Villareal 2020). Some argue that the rapid proliferation of a digital queer culture (e.g., dating applications) is "killing queer culture" (Norman 2015) by undermining the importance of physical place (Brown 2007; Renninger 2018; Thomas 2014). This assertion situates gay, bisexual, and queer (GBQ) cisgender men's placemaking efforts (e.g., gay bars and night clubs) as the blueprint for all queer community-building. Such a framing is predicated on the deployment of subcultural capital[1] onto physical spaces and reflects the traditional definition of space as material and grounded in physicality (Gieryn 2000). Scholars who follow this traditional conception of placemaking argue online communities are not *real* communities (Driskell and Lyon 2002; Gieryn 2000; Nie and Lutz 2002; Park and Burgess 1967; Suttles 1973; Van Dijk 1999). As a result, the practices and strategies of LBQ women and tgncp[2] are often ignored because they do not conform to traditional forms of placemaking, and their communities are not always instantiated in place. In this paper, I focus on LBQ and tgncp communities to expand sociological understandings of space and placemaking by arguing that groups construct place by performing community, rather than implanting subcultural meanings onto physical space.

This broader understanding of space is an important contribution to studies of placemaking, because it embraces underrepresented and non-traditional placemaking efforts

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[1] Subcultural capital is the cultural knowledge and commodities acquired by members of a subculture, raising their status and helping differentiate themselves from members of other groups (Thornton 2013).

[2] LBQ women stands for lesbian, bisexual, and queer women. Tgncp stands for trans- and gender-non-conforming people. I chose to use these two terms to account for the gender and sexual diversity within my sample. Occasionally, I will also refer to this population as "lesbian-queers," which is an umbrella term used to address both LBQ identities and tgncp (Gieseking 2020).

(often used by marginalized groups) that most scholars have continued to neglect. LBQ women and tgncp are one such marginalized group who are restricted in their placemaking efforts, and therefore employ nontraditional, creative, and often unrecognized, strategies (Brown-Saracino 2018; Gieseking 2020). This study expands upon placemaking scholarship both by providing insight into the structure, values, and culture within these historically overlooked places, and by introducing an analytical framework that includes both traditional and non-traditional placemaking strategies. I identify two properties that intersect to create different types of communities: the community's type of space (*material* or *immaterial*), and the community's placemaking strategy (*transient* or *constant*). Therefore, I propose four main types of placemaking: *material-constant,*[3] *material-transient, immaterial-constant, and immaterial-transient.*[4] Constant communities exercise complete ownership over the space, whereas transient communities gather episodically or fleetingly. A good indicator of a constant community is if the space retains the community's identity even when members are not present, as opposed to transient communities that revert to the status quo. *Material-constant communities*, therefore, craft place by claiming exclusive ownership over a physical space (e.g., gay bars). *Material-transient communities* also lay claim to physical space but can do so only momentarily and sometimes episodically (e.g., queer house parties). *Immaterial-constant communities* own a distinctive space on the Internet (e.g., a Discord server[5]), and *immaterial-transient communities* momentarily occupy digital space to gather (e.g., a Zoom[6] Happy Hour).

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[3] The term "material" is based on traditional placemaking scholarship that situates place as grounded in physical space (Gieryn 2000).

[4] The term "immaterial" is inspired by scholarly work on embodiment, disembodiment, and identity (see for e.g. Stone 1991; Turkle 1997).

[5] Discord is a group-chatting platform originally built for gamers that has since become a general use platform for many kinds of communities. Discord is divided into servers, each of which has its own members, topics, rules, and channels.

[6] Zoom is a cloud-based video conferencing tool that lets you host virtual one-on-one or team meetings.

In my analysis of these four types of placemaking, I will explore the following research questions: What are the similarities and differences between material placemaking and immaterial placemaking? Why do some participants prefer immaterial placemaking, while others are drawn toward material forms? What challenges arise in each type of placemaking? Even as the population of new media technology users increases across all age-groups (i.e., the Internet, wireless cellular devices, social networking site, computers, and laptops), teens and young adults are still most likely to go online.[7] This generational difference is very salient for this project, as the older cohort (26-68-years-old)[8] craft places on the Internet only when they have no other option. Since non-white, non-male queers are historically denied public space, older lesbian-queers who cannot develop skills to navigate the Internet may not be able to access queer community at all. Younger participants, on the other hand, are more open to immaterial placemaking as an opportunity to create more inclusive, democratic, and open communities that they find unavailable to them in the physical world.

In what follows, I provide an overview of placemaking within the LGBT community, situating this project in that body of research. After describing my data and methods, the results section details the four placemaking strategies that LBQ women and tgncp employ. Each section examines various advantages and disadvantages of the placemaking strategies, intergenerational differences, and the effect of these places on lesbian-queer and tgncp lives. I conclude the paper by offering a discussion of the results, including the limitations of this project and future directions for scholarship.

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[7] Anon. 2010. "Social Media and Young Adults." Pewresearch.Org. Retrieved May 13, 2021 (https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2010/02/03/social-media-and-young-adults).

[8] I grouped interviewees in my sample into two age cohorts, younger lesbian-queers (18-25-years-old) and older lesbian-queers (26-68-years-old). Within my sample, participants over 26-years-old did not grow up using the Internet, while those under 25 did. Therefore, I decided to separate them into two distinct age cohorts, hypothesizing they engage differently with digital space due to their experience navigating the Internet.

## **Literature Review**

### Placemaking in the LGBTQ+ Community

Scholars have traditionally defined placemaking as a group's ability to participate in the "appropriation of space and the production of its meaning" (Lefebvre 1991; Lew 2017). This definition emphasizes the socially constructed nature of place, particularly how communities transform *spaces* into *places* through imposing a set of patterns, practices, objects, and cultural representations (subcultural capital) onto physical, material space (Brown-Saracino 2018; Gieryn 2000; Harvey 2019; Molotch et al. 2000). More recently, scholars have explored the fluid and dynamic nature of place, whereby a place's definition can change over time as groups lay competing claims to the space (Greene 2019, forthcoming; Hunter 2010; Stillwagon and Ghaziani 2019). This project furthers the sociological understandings of space within placemaking by drawing attention to how placemaking does not necessarily require physical space. Immaterial spaces can also serve as sites of placemaking as communities create continuity through the appropriation of these spaces and the production of meaning.

This project expands upon existing scholarship on queer placemaking, which has privileged mainly white gay males (Brown-Saracino 2018; D'Emilio 1984; Gieseking 2020). Scholars align these efforts with traditional conceptions of space and placemaking to legitimate gayborhoods as sociologically valid, and to label the queer subculture creating this space as culturally valid (Greene 2014, 2019). However, in focusing their scholarship on white GBQ cisgender men, scholars overlook non-traditional placemaking efforts employed by marginalized queers. Up until very recently, sociologists cited the absence of explicit material evidence of

lesbian-queer placemaking to argue that queer women create communities of affect as opposed to gay men who must occupy physical space (Castells 1983).

My research contributes to the growing scholarship that debunks this myth of dissociation between lesbians and physical space. In fact, lesbians have repeatedly attempted to lay claim to material territory within a city (Gieseking 2020), and the culture of lesbian communities varies by city and generation (Brown-Saracino 2018). For example, LBQ respondents in Brown-Saracino's study in Ithaca, New York downplayed their sexual identity and formed friendships with heterosexual neighbors, while LBQ women in San Luis Obispo engaged in more insular identity politics, mobilizing "lesbian" identities to define their lives. In Portland, Maine, LBQ residents embrace expansive, varied, and specific gendered and sexual identities, while residents of Greenfield, Massachusetts adhere to traditional labels and post-queer identity constructions (Brown-Saracino 2018). Additionally, lesbian-queer placemaking efforts have contributed significantly to gay liberation movements, albeit in a less "visible" way to a capitalist-colonialist-patriarchal society (Gieseking 2020; Kennedy 1993; Krieger 1982; Wolf 1992). My research supports the idea that while lesbian-queers are engaged in placemaking, they cannot lay claim to public space in the same way as white gay men (Abelson 2020; Gieseking 2020). Instead, they employ non-traditional placemaking efforts to create places not always instantiated in physical space that have gone mostly unrecognized in sociological studies.

Historically, lesbian communities mobilize notions of sisterhood, solidarity, and unity, a shared sense of self, and radical kinship (Krieger 1982; Esterberg 1997; Wolf 1992). Furthermore, lesbians use the language of the community to refer to a sense of shared purpose and belonging (Elwood 2000; Esterberg 1997). However, these communities are not immune to systemic hegemonic forces of oppression such as racism and transphobia. Scholars have long

documented racialized, gendered, and classed tensions within lesbian-queer communities

(Aragón 2006; Robinson 2006; Welle et al. 2006). They identify how LBQ communities do not

achieve inclusivity because they fail to employ successful recruitment methods and instead favor

a celebration of their narrower, white, affluent lesbian identity (Ghaziani & Brown-Saracino

2009). Furthermore, lesbian-queer legal efforts for political liberation have historically

marginalized racialized and classed identities (Rosenblum 1994).

Younger lesbian-queers, queers of color, and tgncp actively work toward creating

inclusive spaces by centering "dyke politics," radical intersectional advocacy (Gieseking 2020),

within their community discourse and values. My data demonstrate when material queer

communities do not satisfy these queers' demand for intersectional inclusivity, they turn to the

Internet to achieve this goal. In contrast, older lesbian-queers in my sample begrudgingly turn to

the Internet to craft place for themselves when their material queer communities are not

available, due to structural barriers and the Covid-19 pandemic.

<div align="center">The Internet and Community Debate</div>

From the Internet to geospatial apps, the ubiquity of advanced communication

technologies has sparked a vigorous scholarly debate about whether online communities

constitute "true communities" (Hampton & Wellman 1999). Many scholars insist communities

must be tied to a physical location to be authentic (Driskell and Lyon 2002; Gieryn 2000; Nie

and Lutz 2002; Park and Burgess 1967; Suttles 1973; Tönnies 1957; Van Dijk 1999). Critics of

online communities worry these technologies further alienate people from community (Hampton

& Wellman 1999; Katz and Rice 2002), isolate people from physical sites that make up

community life (like bars, cafes, parks) (Oldenburg 2005), and advance "the trend of non-

communal domestic privatism just like suburbanization, the automobile, the television, and the

telephone purportedly had done" (Hampton & Wellman 2003 p. 279). Other sociologists counter-argue that even weak ties formed on the Internet serve individuals (Constant et al. 1999). The accumulation of small, individual acts of support can sustain a large immaterial community through maintaining a culture of generalized reciprocity and mutual aid (Lewis 1994; Rheingold 2000).

New theories of community contend the Internet reorganizes the social settings in which people interact and weakens the once strong relationship between physical space and social "place" (Chayko 2008; Levinson 2012). Scholars on this side of the argument contend that electronic media create different social "situations" which produce new cultural scripts (Goffman 1959; Meyrowitz 1985). Some even see virtual communities as an extension of human Internet use (Levinson 2012; Rheingold 2000), while others view these technologies in opposition to material placemaking and queer community (Brown 2007; Norman 2015; Renninger 2018; Thomas 2014).

This project answers the scholarly call to reconceptualize community through new communication technologies (Bloustien 2007; Cerulo 1997; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Meyrowitz 1985) by embracing the online realm as a legitimate space for placemaking. Therefore, this research accepts both material and immaterial placemaking as legitimate methods, and this advances the discussion by providing a comparative analysis. Scholars who fail to see online communities as real marginalize essential strategies for placemaking by underrepresented communities, who may lack the economic and political resources to occupy physical spaces (Brown-Saracino 2018; Day 2001; Flores 2014; Gieseking 2020; Gray 2009; Rush 2012; Sanschagrin 2011; Travers et al. 2018). As I will show through my empirical data,

The Internet, including social media, and mobile technologies provide alternate spaces for community organizing.

My work builds on scholarly literature that identifies how the Internet presents queer people with opportunities for community-building that were not available to them before the widespread dissemination of these technologies (Chayko 2008; Stein 2019). Transmen utilize the Internet to "[narrate] their life stories and [share] information...building emotional bonds with one another" (Stein 2019, pg. 42). Moreover, the Internet is not just employed by sexual and gender minorities, but it is also an important form of placemaking and community-building during national crises, such as in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Racial minorities, primarily Blacks who could not evacuate New Orleans utilized blog posts to seek emotional support, Craigslist[9] to assist with housing for those displaced by the natural disaster, and crowd-funding websites to raise money for those affected (Madden 2005). Similarly, my research provides an example of Internet use for community support during a global crisis - the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants in my study have also been using the Internet to seek emotional support and maintain their connections with one another during this crisis.

Further, because my sample is intergenerational, the results lend themselves to comparative claims about generational attitudinal differences to immaterial placemaking. Since Internet use only started becoming popular in the 1990s (Rheingold 2000), older lesbian-queers who prefer material placemaking begrudgingly engage in its immaterial form due to inaccessibility, specifically Covid-19 constraints on physical gathering. In contrast, younger lesbian-queers are experienced with the Internet, and they use this to carve out space regularly

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[9] Craigslist is an American classified advertisements website with sections devoted to jobs, housing, for sale, items wanted, services, community service, gigs, résumés, and discussion forums.

and enthusiastically on the online realm, crafting places for themselves. However, by foreclosing access to material spaces, the global pandemic has created conditions where immaterial placemaking allows more opportunity for queer connection, intersectional inclusivity, collective identity formation, storytelling, and support for old and young lesbian-queers alike.

## Methods and Settings

I draw on ethnographic and interview data collected from LBQ women and tgncp across the United States over a span of 5 months, from June 2020 to October 2020. Interviewees range from 18-68 years old, and I divide them into two categories: younger lesbian-queers (18-25 years old) and older lesbian-queers (26-68-years-old). My personal experience as a queer woman enabled me to identify over 15 social media sites that are used for purposes of queer community. Some sites are private (there is a barrier to entry), but most of them are public (e.g., anyone can access these sites). Community engagement in this research site can thus look different depending on the individual: scrolling through a Reddit[10] thread or a Twitter[11] feed can constitute engaging in community, as can attending a weekly virtual support group, "chatting" with other community members online, or sharing a post yourself.

I conducted 14 semi-structured interviews via Zoom with LBQ women and tgncp who engage, participate in, or moderate these target communities. I recruited interviewees through direct contact on the social media sites I selected for the study. In most cases, I posted on the page requesting interview participants and then followed up with individuals who expressed interest. In some instances when I found an online post I wanted to explore further, I initiated contact by messaging the individual who had posted it. The pandemic posed a challenge to my

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[10] Reddit is a social news aggregation, web content rating, and discussion website. It is a social media site based around communities, called subreddits, rather than individual people.

[11] Twitter is a free social networking microblogging service that allows registered members to broadcast short posts called tweets.

recruiting participants, especially of queers involved in material spaces. My research on online communities seeks to identify ways in which lesbian-queers strategically use these immaterial spaces to engage in place-making and community-building, especially in the absence of material space. Yet, interviewees also described in-person communities they frequent. These descriptions allowed me a peek into the way LBQ women and tgncp carve out physical space for themselves in their everyday lives.

As a result of constraints to physical gathering, I conducted my interviews via Zoom. I asked for information about the informants' background, education, and political views. I also used my interview questions to gauge informants' participation in LGBT community-building, social networks and leisure activities, and their understanding of how lesbian-queers create, shape, and maintain material and immaterial communities for their own use, both during the Covid-19 quarantine and during normal times. I also posed questions that sought to understand how my respondents' intersectional identity might inform their participation in these communities. I asked LBQ women and tgncp of color, who might find their racial identity to be at odds with the queer community, what effect their identity had on their participation in and acceptance within these spaces. Furthermore, when the Covid-19 pandemic created challenges to face-to-face interactions associated with material placemaking, participants' testimonies reflect how participants responded to protect their sense of community. To that end, I posed questions about how the pandemic impacted participants' efforts to create and foster community.

In addition to conducting interviews, I took extensive field notes during Portland's Virtual Dyke March, an international lesbian visibility march and protest, which took place in June 2020. I conducted this research on YouTube[12], a video-sharing platform where the March

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[12]YouTube is a popular video sharing service that allows users to watch videos posted by other users and upload videos of their own.

was posted. I observed the March itself, as well as the reactions to it, in the form of "comments" on the platform. This data will stand in conversation with two of my interviews, conducted with members of Dyke March Maine (DMME).

On the target sites described above, I observed the site's rules and regulations, exchanges between community members, topics of discussion, sources of conflict, and any vulnerabilities of the community. I used this field work to develop my interview questions, which I tailored for each individual interview, depending on the participant's community and their role within it. In the following section, I draw on these data to create a typology of the four types of placemaking.

## Performing Community and Creating Place

Based on my data, I argue that individuals and groups construct places by performing community, rather than the place itself possessing an inherent meaning. To demonstrate this, I identify two properties that intersect to create different types of communities:

1. The community's type of space: material versus immaterial

2. The community's placemaking strategy: transient versus constant

"Material communities" exist in the physical realm, while various individuals and groups construct "immaterial communities" on the Internet. A community employing "transient" placemaking gathers episodically, whereas a community employing "constant" placemaking lays exclusive claim of ownership to the space. Communities in my research exist somewhere along the spectrum between material to immaterial, and transient to constant. Drawing from existing literature and this data, this project establishes four ideal types of communities: *material-constant, material-transient, immaterial constant,* and *immaterial-transient.* Figure 1 provides a

visual demonstration of this framework, where each quadrant represents one of the four types of

community. Material-constant communities lay ownership to physical space, and thus reflect

commonly-held assumptions about space and placemaking. This category is also well-

established and documented in existing scholarship. Thus, my main contribution is in offering

the three additional categories that also reflect non-traditional placemaking methods. Material-

transient communities momentarily claim physical space, immaterial-constant communities own

space on the Internet, and immaterial-transient communities momentarily appropriate digital

space.

## Figure 1
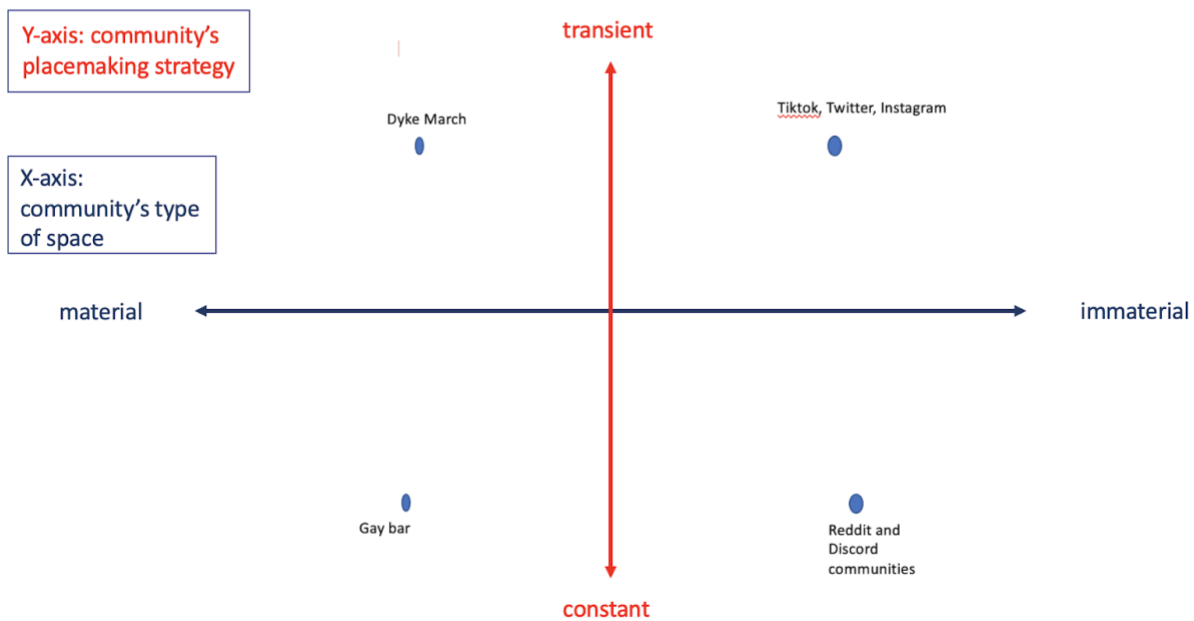


*Material-Constant Communities*

I will draw on existing literature to define the contours of this category before turning my

attention to the challenges that these spaces posed for my interviewees. Material-constant

communities align with the traditional conception of space and placemaking: communities

engage in placemaking through claiming ownership of physical space. Their placemaking

strategies render the location legible as queer, whether community members are inhabiting the space or not. This type of queer community can materialize in gay bars and nightclubs (Brown-Saracino 2018; Greene 2014, 2019), male-dominated gayborhoods (Castells 1983; D'Emilio 1984), and even lesbian-queer neighborhoods (Gieseking 2020). Although scholars think of these spaces as stable and enduring (Gieryn 2000; Nie and Lutz 2002; Park and Burgess 1967; Suttles 1973; Van Dijk 1999), this is not the case for gay people, and especially for marginalized lesbian-queers, who have historically been denied public space and place (Brown-Saracino 2018; D'Emilio 1984; Gieseking 2020).

As gay bars across the country close, many journalists and academics predict the end of LGBTQ culture as we know it (Brown 2007; Renninger 2018; Thomas 2014). During the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, public place closures exacerbated these concerns, and reignited the debate of whether queer institutions would survive (Mattson 2020; Savage et al. 2020). Despite the rarity of material lesbian-queer spaces, and the current threat of the Covid-19 pandemic, (Ghaziani 2017; Kelly et al. 2014; Owens and Dent 2017; Smith 2008; Sullivan 2007; Thomas 2014), my interview data demonstrates that lesbian-queers of all age groups idealize material queer spaces. Older lesbian-queers in particular value material-constant spaces because of what this type of space has historically allowed them to accomplish. There has been brief success forming lesbian neighborhoods, such as Park Slope in NYC (Gieseking 2020), and lesbian-queer placemaking efforts have contributed significantly to gay liberation movements (Gieseking 2020; Gould 2009; Krieger 1982; Kennedy 1993; Wolf 1992). Older lesbian-queers' commitment to and preference for material-constant placemaking is underscored by the older tgncp, queers of color, and rural lesbian-queers who lament a lack of access to them. Mary, a 50-year-old, newly-out lesbian in the process of divorcing her husband, describes her residential location in a rural

southern town as "isolating," and hopes to live near material-constant queer community

someday. Similarly, Dal, a 68-year-old transgender lesbian says, "I'm not universally welcome

in the women's community - there are places where I wouldn't go." Older lesbian-queers of

color, though absent from my sample, have also historically described exclusion from material-

constant queer spaces because of race or ethnicity (Gieseking 2020).

The historical value of these spaces, their rarity, and the challenge of finding inclusive

communities, spurs zealous commitment from older lesbian-queers when their space is

threatened. 36-year-old Alix attended a queer speed dating event at a local queer café/bookstore

when they first moved to the city. Alix cites this event as to where their "connections really took

off," and they currently host a weekly queer trivia event at the bookstore. Alix dejectedly notes

the Covid-19 pandemic led the bookstore to "[slow] down from their events though because

they've been focusing on just trying to stay afloat financially." This example demonstrates how

in material-constant placemaking, the space's security and the community's well-being are

intimately related: the bookstore's financial insecurity comes at the expense of the community's

ability to convene. As a result, as Alix explains, community members feel a sense of urgency to

remain loyal patrons to "save" their community. These perspectives demonstrate how older

lesbian-queers are clearly dedicated to protecting and maintaining their material-constant spaces.

Younger lesbian-queers, in comparison, express a more nuanced viewpoint to this placemaking

strategy.

On the one hand, the younger cohort also idealizes material-constant queer communities

because of the older generation's activism. But while they fantasize about having these spaces

for themselves, they also describe challenges to this form of placemaking. Jordan, a 21-year-old

Chinese American lesbian, expressed frustration that "there are no lesbian bars in the entire city

of Los Angeles." She hypothesizes the lack of women-run queer communities is due to gender-based oppression, because "women are not taught that they can take up space." Jordan's perspective demonstrates how the masculinization of public space and the feminization of private space poses a barrier to lesbian-queer attempts at material-constant placemaking (Flores 2014; Rush 2012; Travers et al. 2018). Mia, a 20-year-old Asian-American lesbian, identified the queer organizations near her home in Manhattan as "strictly white-male-dominated." When queer spaces are also *white spaces* (Anderson 2015), they may stigmatize and repress an intersectional group identity, which marginalizes queers of color. Jordan describes feeling like "an odd one out because [she doesn't] look like other people [in these places]." Joy, a 20-year-old black queer, echoed this experience of exclusion. She asserts "[some] understand how it is to be marginalized as a gay person," but they don't acknowledge their white privilege. In white male-dominated material-constant queer communities, this leads to "a lot of separation," especially on issues of "race or even sometimes gender." 23-year-old Lex, who identifies as white, and queer non-binary transmasculine, echoes this concern in their question, "What is it like to be trans in a primarily gay space? Do you have community there?" These perspectives demonstrate that even though younger lesbian-queers are frustrated with material-constant queer communities' failure to employ an inclusive structure and values.

Material-constant communities are not all created equal. In many circumstances, lesbian-queers cannot access a material-constant queer community due to gender-based discrimination, misogyny, living in a rural location, being "in the closet," and racism. Furthermore, my intergenerational analysis reveals that young and old lesbian-queers alike idealize these spaces and lament a lack of access to them. However, older lesbian-queers demonstrate a zealous commitment to this form of placemaking, whereas younger lesbian-queers may be more willing

to turn away from them because of their exclusionary nature. Unlike material-constant communities, *material-transient communities* do not own the space they use as their site of community. Instead, their placemaking constitutes a competing claim to the space that can result in a shifting and negotiated definition of the place, which lesbian-queers often capitalize on to create pockets of space for themselves.

### *Material-Transient Communities*

Material-transient communities lay claims to non-queer spaces through momentary, and sometimes episodic (Greene forthcoming) gathering. We can think of the space as a whiteboard: queer communities can erase and rewrite the space, transforming it into a queer space while they inhabit it. Material-transient communities thus create fleeting places that communities can reactivate as they need them. Events like Pride[13] and Dyke March[14], a queer book display at a local library, and a queer party on a college campus are examples of material-transient communities. In the absence of lesbian-queer-centered material-constant spaces, participants in this study rely on these strategies of placemaking,

Sometimes, material-transient queer placemaking has a lasting impact on the definition of the place by branding it "queer-friendly." The library where Morgan, a 28-year-old bisexual woman, works regularly holds queer book displays and a support group for queer youth and their families. As a result of these placemaking efforts, Morgan noticed more and more lesbian couples began to patronize the library, making her comfortable with coworkers, more than even close friends. Morgan described her town as a "rural suburb" of a Midwest city lacking many

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[13] Pride parades are international outdoor events in cities celebrating LGBTQIA+ social and self-acceptance, achievements, legal rights, and pride.
[14] Dyke March is a lesbian visibility and protest march, much like the original Gay Pride parades.

institutional queer spaces. Thus, the library remains "very protective" of their queer programming efforts, and they take special care to shield the identities of those who participate.

Through material-transient placemaking, locations like the library transform into a place of queer refuge. This dynamic serves as an example of *place rupture* (Greene forthcoming), how place is negotiated through competing claims to space. The library's queer events constitute a challenge to the normative structure of the space, which in turn challenges and rewrites the lasting definition of place. Material-transient placemaking therefore allows for queer communities to temporarily disrupt the dominant narrative of a place, potentially leaving a lasting impact on the reputation of the venue, as was the case for Morgan's library.

Although this strategy of placemaking allows lesbian-queers access to space and place for themselves, it can also render their communities vulnerable to infiltration by outsiders. Due to barriers to laying claim to physical space, queer women and non-binary people are forced to gather in *constellations*, episodic pockets of queer space (Gieseking 2020). Material-transient placemaking, therefore, arises both out of oppression and creativity. These communities often cannot achieve full insulation from the outside world; instead, they must engage in regular negotiations of space with other communities to maintain their momentary claims to space. Irene, a 22-year-old bisexual woman, describes this challenge in the material-transient queer community on her college campus when a debate arose over whether to advertise their queer parties. Many community members worried advertising would attract straight people, which was undesirable because "once you [got] any straight people in that room the assumption of queerness [would be] broken." Lesbian-queers on Irene's college campus had to choose between encouraging closeted and questioning queers to join their community, and risking infiltration from straights. This situation highlights how material-transient placemaking, although more

accessible, is not comparable to the sense of insulated protection lesbian-queers might feel in material-constant communities.

Because her community lays claim to the space momentarily, members of the dominant culture can challenge its exclusive claim to space. Jordan expressed the same concern about Pride parades, noting that the parades she attended included straight people and "felt very commercial." She asks, "is there any space that we can go to where we're actually the ones who matter and we're at the center?" Jordan's question relates to a recent trend. As companies capitalize on gay culture to generate tourism revenue, scholars note commercialization distances material queer spaces from the local queer community (Orne and Stuckey 2017). Jordan and Irene's testimonies show that lesbian-queers value the exclusive use of space and express resentment when straights infiltrate their places. The vulnerability to outsiders indicates a necessity for boundary-making and maintenance in lesbian-queer communities – a tactic employed by queers in immaterial communities, which I will discuss in a later section. This vulnerability is thus one of the major disadvantages to material-transient placemaking for lesbian-queers.

Comparing the material-transient queer events Pride and Dyke March Maine (DMME) sheds light on critical generational differences between older and younger lesbian-queers. Both momentarily "queer" parts of a city by facilitating a march of queer bodies from one part of the city to another, mobilizing lesbian-queers to occupy public space to resist oppression (Bruce 2016; Currans 2012; Ghaziani and Brown-Saracino 2009). DMME's membership comprises mainly of older lesbian-queers, whereas Pride often attracts younger lesbian-queers. Although both events originated in protest, only older lesbian-queers describe today's events in line with this tradition. Older lesbian-queers demonstrate their commitment to protest by the DMME

committee's plan to follow the march's historic route through Portland. Committee Chair Alix, a 36-year-old non-binary dyke, explains:

> We were trying to remember that Dyke March, like Pride, started as protest… this isn't just a party for people who are just feeling good and feeling happy. There are people out there whose rights are being disrespected and who the queer community should be standing up for, and we want to put that front and center and not ignore it to make other people comfortable.

Alix's emphasis that DMME remains firmly grounded in protest contrasts sharply with younger lesbian-queers' conceptualization of such events. Most younger participants either did not mention participation in political activism as gay liberation or only talked about Pride. Even the way they describe Pride, (as "fun") is indicative of a generational attitudinal shift. For them, as Jordan mentioned earlier, Pride has been popularized to serve as a "celebration." In contrast, due to their experience with activism, older participants seek to uphold the tradition of protest. Older lesbian-queers are still fighting for place and legitimacy within society, whereas younger lesbian-queers focus on finding a space to build a place for their community. These generational differences are essential context for the discussion of immaterial communities that will follow. They show that older lesbian-queers value having a space to themselves where they can resist the heteropatriarchy through the occupation of physical place. This value spurs older lesbian-queers' active participation in material-transient activist communities, and accounts for their hesitation to immaterial placemaking.

Material-transient communities "queer" non-queer spaces through laying momentary, and sometimes episodic, claim to the space. This can be seen as an act of resistance. It constitutes a

challenge to the dominant (heteronormative) cultural narrative of the place and can even have a lasting impact on the place's reputation. Respondents demonstrate how material-transient activist events provide meaningful contexts for immaterial-constant communities. Even as younger lesbian-queers flock to the Internet to carve out space through performing immaterial-constant community, the older generation is hesitant to trust immaterial forms of placemaking.

## *Immaterial-Constant Communities*

Immaterial-constant communities carve out space for themselves online by creating sites like Reddit pages, Facebook groups[15], and Discord servers. 20-year-old Joy, who reported exclusion from material-constant queer communities, describes logging onto her community's discord server as "a virtual version of walking through [the] town square and saying hi to your neighbors." Lesbian-queers who make use of immaterial-constant spaces apply place logics, the deployment of subcultural capital onto space, that define the operation of the community. In effect, their efforts constitute the same kind of placemaking found in material spaces. Much like material-constant communities, immaterial-constant communities are close-knit, have frequent and regular interpersonal interaction, a shared group identity, and a distinctive location in the online realm. Therefore, my respondents' perspectives build on the burgeoning scholarship that accepts online communities as real communities. Possibilities in the online realm are so broad that sometimes multiple different types of communities can be performed in and through the same app. Using various examples, I illustrate that it is not the online platforms themselves, but the ways in which they are used that creates a sense of place. Additionally, generational

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[15] Facebook is an online social networking website where people can create profiles, share information such as photos and quotes about themselves, and respond or link to the information posted by others.

differences within this category indicate an attitudinal shift among lesbian-queers that prioritize material placemaking to one that embraces immaterial placemaking.

Lesbian-queers' use of immaterial-constant placemaking creates places that possess similar qualities to material-constant communities. For example, on a popular new social media app called "TikTok,"[16] many younger participants generally boast being on "Gay TikTok." Although conceptualized as a distinct place, like material-transient communities, Gay TikTok remains vulnerable to infiltration from outsiders due to a lack of barrier to entry. Lex was creating videos on TikTok about pronouns, being non-binary, and questioning your identity, when they were confronted with members of "Straight TikTok" spreading transphobia. Other queers came to Lex's rescue in the comments, asking "How did the straggots ["straight faggots"] get here?" Lex quickly learned to hashtag Queer TikTok (#QueerTiktok) so that their videos get uploaded to Gay TikTok. Lex's experience sheds light on how TikTok provides a platform for real-world tensions to play out in the online realm by negotiating place. Although unintentional, Lex's mistake amounted to a place rupture, an act of rebellion, and a confrontation between the dominant culture and the resistant culture.

In contrast to material-constant communities, younger lesbian-queers are active participants in immaterial-constant communities, which can allow for intergenerational interaction. For instance, one day Caroline was "complaining [about] how [her] birth mother wasn't accepting of [her] being transgender," and an older community member offered her support and advice. They developed an intimate relationship with each another through messaging back and forth on the site, to the extent that Caroline started considering this

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[16] TikTok is a recent trending short-form, video-sharing app that allows users to create and share 15 to 60-second videos on any topic.

community member her mother. Caroline's involvement in an immaterial-constant queer community allowed her forge close (fictive) familial ties that are often associated with material communities because of their approximation of physical space.

Immaterial-constant placemaking also allows older lesbian-queers greater access to various queer communities than in the past. Mary, an interviewee introduced in the section on material-constant communities, joined an online group for queer women who came out later in life. She does not have easy access to a material queer community. Mary was thus drawn to immaterial placemaking because she could access queer support and validation whenever she needed. Through her engagement, Mary was able to get support from members with similar experiences as she initiated divorce from her husband of 30 years. Mary was shocked by such support, but it is in keeping with the ability to form like-minded support communities online with more ease than communities that are rooted in physical proximity (Cullen and Summer 2011; Hiltz et al. 1991; Johnson-Lenz and Johnson-Lenz 1991; Rice and Love 1987).

Mary's experience also shows that older lesbian-queers, while they may prefer material spaces, embrace immaterial placemaking when material community is unavailable. Many older lesbian-queers were involved in an immaterial community, but they were much more hesitant to form deep relationships with people they met online due to the threat of infiltration by outsiders. Part of Dana's responsibility as a moderator of a queer community on Reddit was to uphold the community's standards by blocking violators. The 38-year-old lesbian encountered relentless trolls or anonymous people who infiltrate the community to spread hate speech and homophobia. The trolls so frequently infiltrated and harassed the group that Dana stepped down from her role. This threat of infiltration by outsiders, also visible in material-constant communities, constitutes one barrier to immaterial placemaking for older lesbian-queers. In contrast, younger lesbian-

queers can create and maintain boundaries to protect their immaterial-constant communities,

providing the security for members to be vulnerable with one another. Like Dana, Claire

moderates a different immaterial-constant queer community that mostly caters to younger

lesbian-queers. Claire nonchalantly explains that part of her role as a moderator includes

managing the community's rules, and dealing with trolls, anonymous outsiders who infiltrate a

community to spread hate. For Claire, interacting with trolls is a daily occurrence that she

perceives as a small price to pay for a leadership role in the community. This is in contrast with

Dana's discomfort with trolls, to the extent that she is engaged only in limited interactions with

the immaterial-constant community.

While older lesbian-queers are not wedded to immaterial placemaking, younger lesbian-

queers describe many advantages to it. As we saw with Caroline above, Joy sees immaterial-

constant communities as more amenable to fostering close ties among community members.

Since the conversations are not in-person, Joy feels people are more willing to share vulnerable

information, "so you can make deeper connections than IRL" (in real life). For many young

lesbian-queers, immaterial-constant communities are places of refuge from the real world, where

they can "100% be themselves" (Madeline, 20-year-old bisexual woman) and more easily form

deep connections with other lesbian-queers.

Joy, who previously spoke about racial exclusion from material-constant queer

communities, is much more approving of intersectional inclusivity in her immaterial-constant

community. Because this form of placemaking does not necessarily depend on synchronous co-

presence (i.e., a person can respond to a post anytime), Joy could even form relationships with

queers from all over the world. In this way, Joy's immaterial-constant community challenges the

idea that simultaneity is necessary to produce safe spaces. It is telling that Joy did not speak

about issues of hegemonic whiteness in this community, and instead pointed to the very varied

topics the group discusses, which range from Black Lives Matter to the effects of emotional

labor on people who work in the hospitality industry. Joy's observations suggest that immaterial

placemaking allow younger lesbian-queers the opportunity to create a more democratic,

inclusive, and intersectional environment than available to them in the physical world.

Immaterial-constant placemaking challenges the notion of place as stable and exemplifies

how the Internet provides space for old and young lesbian-queers alike to create place. Yet, older

lesbian-queers engage in this type of placemaking only out of necessity, when they are left with

few other options. In contrast, younger lesbian-queers are eager to create immaterial

communities that they perceive as broad and inclusive. While immaterial-constant communities

lay claim to space on the Internet, *immaterial-transient communities* momentarily occupy digital

space.

### *Immaterial-Transient Communities*

Immaterial-transient communities lay momentary claim to space on the Internet through

carefully cultivating their social media feeds and engaging in fleeting digital events like virtual

trivia nights and Zoom Happy Hours. Like material-transient communities, an immaterial-

transient community uses space like a whiteboard, momentarily "queering" a digital space.

Community members maintain loose ties with one another through fleeting interactions. Like in

the other categories, the two generations express different attitudes toward immaterial

placemaking strategies. While younger lesbian-queers flock to the Internet to forge fleeting queer

connections, the older generation begrudgingly learns how to use the Internet as a tool for

community-building. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, older lesbian-queers' material

queer communities have adjusted to be immaterial-transient communities. Although these older

interviewees express nostalgia for material placemaking, they prefer to feel a part of a community, even if it is a diluted version, than not have any community at all.

Dyke March Maine (DMME) is one material-transient community that had to be transformed to immaterial-transient because of the Covid-19 Pandemic. DMME held a virtual event since they could not secure the necessary permits to have an in-person Dyke March during the pandemic. Alix and the DMME committee notably appealed to the history behind the event in their planning efforts, clearly invoking respect for the history of the fight for gay liberation. This provides yet another testimony to older lesbian-queers' continued commitment to political activism through material-transient placemaking efforts. Upholding the tradition of activism drives Alix's nostalgia for traditional material placemaking efforts.

To replace the planned march, the DMME committee asked for community contributions and created a video montage to celebrate Dyke March 2020. Dal, who has been involved in the Dyke March since moving to Maine in the 1990s, explains how the committee has kept in-touch: "Well, nobody's getting together right now. But we are doing Zoom gatherings. We get together once a month and we do a Zoom check-in and like you know, how's everybody doing, for a couple of hours." Dal spoke with a stand-offish tone that signaled her distaste about the committee's virtual planning process. Furthermore, she observed that "not everybody is best friends," and implies that the lack of material space has strained the collegial ties traditionally developed through material placemaking. Alix described having to "hound" community members to submit videos, which reflects older lesbian-queers hesitancy toward online formats, as described earlier. The 2020 virtual DMME included poetry, song, dance, short films, drawings and art, political statements, and Dyke March historical memorabilia. Although the DMME committee received positive feedback on their immaterial-transient substitution for the march, it

is clear from Alix and Dal's interviews that older lesbian-queers would have preferred to engage

in their traditional material-transient placemaking.

Directly contrasting Dal and Alix's testimonies, Lex, a 23-year-old queer non-binary

transmasculine individual, led an international virtual Pride event on Twitch.[17] Lex hosted a

party in a breakout room, where they were "trying to make Pride." Lex described how the

partygoers, despite being complete strangers, "stripped down...and [they] were in underwear

drinking and enjoying life." This exuberant energy contrasts sharply with DMME's difficulty

engaging their members, underscoring younger lesbian-queers' comfort in forming fleeting

relationships with unfamiliar queers on the Internet. Lex admits the event was "an attempt to

make Pride virtual, which isn't ideal." Since this was one of the few critiques of immaterial

placemaking expressed by the younger cohort, this suggests that younger lesbian-queers prefer to

have material *relationships*, rather than material *communities*. In other words, while immaterial-

constant queer communities often satisfy younger lesbian-queers' need for constant queer

community, immaterial-transient interactions may not be sufficient replacements for material-

transient ones.

There are many ways of engaging with digital space to craft an immaterial-transient

community. Through following queer celebrities and role models, setting notifications for

trending queer news and culture, and interacting with queer acquaintances on her timeline, Irene

integrates pockets of queerness into her social media feeds. Although "maybe two of [her]

Twitter followers are close friends," her placemaking allowed her "a place…away from the

governing culture." This can be seen as another example of place rupture: Irene's immaterial

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[17] Twitch is a live-streaming platform for gamers and other lifestyle casters that supports building communities
around a shared and "streamable" interest. Twitch streamers "broadcast" their gameplay or activity by sharing their
screen with fans and subscribers who can hear and watch them live.

queer placemaking allowed her to rewrite the definition of place on her social media by changing its characteristics, creating a sense of queer refuge for herself.

As these examples highlight, immaterial-transient communities can serve as a stand-in for material communities, just as they can stand alone. Liberated from physical space, immaterial-transient communities challenge the notion that only material communities are "real." To my participants, these immaterial communities are real because of their very real effects on their lives (Thomas & Thomas 1928). Although they may be coerced to engage in this type of placemaking due to constraints on physical gathering or a lack of access to other types of community, LBQ women and tgncp still find creative and resilient ways to connect with one another and facilitate a sense of belonging. Furthermore, the generational differences in attitude toward online formats predict an increased use of immaterial placemaking for future generations of queer community-builders. Although younger lesbian-queers fantasize about material-constant queer communities, they recognize the Internet as an opportunity to design more creative, inclusive, open, and accessible places for their communities.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This project has identified four types of community: material-constant, material-transient, immaterial-constant, and immaterial-transient to expand sociological understandings of space and placemaking. This framework asserts that groups construct place by performing community, rather than implanting subcultural meanings onto physical space. Intergenerational insights reveal changing values and goals within lesbian-queer communities, offering a much more varied landscape of lesbian-queer placemaking efforts than scholars have thus far considered. My findings reveal that older lesbian-queers still see themselves as fighting for space and legitimacy within society, and thus much prefer material placemaking efforts, although they

resign to immaterial placemaking when there are no other options. Younger lesbian-queers also idealize material placemaking but recognize that the best opportunity for them to create places that reflect their values is through immaterial placemaking. Based on this data, I hypothesize that more and more lesbian-queers will turn to immaterial placemaking as digital space becomes increasingly socially legitimate as a site for community-building.

This framework is an important contribution to the field, as traditional conceptions of space and placemaking often marginalize the placemaking efforts of underrepresented groups. This framework can be extended to contexts beyond queer communities, where marginalized groups may also employ non-traditional methods of placemaking. For example, because of barriers to societal participation, undocumented Latinx immigrants construct their homes as "safe havens" (Prieto 2018). This placemaking strategy allows immigrant activist organizers to transform personal networks into political networks, mobilizing very insular communities. My framework would provide a useful lens through which to analyze this process. Future research could focus on how and why immigrants choose material-transient placemaking over material-constant or immaterial placemaking for grassroots organizing. Additionally, scholars could research how immigrant placemaking strategies have shifted due to Covid-19.

This project also contributes to recent studies on the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on community-building and placemaking (Marston et al. 2020). For example, Covid-19 restrictions have led to an increased social reliance on immaterial-transient communities as a stand-in for material communities. This framework can thus also be used to examine how other crises such as environmental disasters and wars may shape shifts in placemaking strategies, and the centrality of the Internet in such placemaking.

Although intersectional, this study does not adequately reflect the diversity within the lesbian-queer community. Most of my interviewees are white and cisgender. Although the few non-white and tgnc participants testify to intra-group conflict, their experiences and my analysis offer only a starting point for examining racism, transphobia, and intersectional inclusivity in lesbian-queer communities. Future scholarship might build on my observations about intergenerational differences with a more extensive and more diverse sample. Scholars could track these intergenerational differences and examine how the return to normalcy after Covid-19 affects placemaking efforts in the two age cohorts. As more and more communities discover the Internet as a viable space to carve out a place for themselves, scholars can use this study as a springboard to further examine the impact of Internet use on our definition of place and perception of community.

In this paper I have argued that space is not limited to physicality. Instead, my argument pushes for a broader sociological understanding of space that includes digital space, and thus allows for an examination of more varied, non-traditional, and underrepresented placemaking efforts employed by marginalized groups. Additionally, the framework provides the opportunity to examine the fluid and contested nature of place through competing claims to space: which placemaking strategies have the largest impact on a place's culture, norms, and values? I have demonstrated how lesbian-queers' non-traditional placemaking efforts can challenge the dominant culture of a place and can even have a lasting impact on its definition. Ultimately, lesbian-queers are committed to performing community and finding space, as they resiliently navigate barriers to create places that reflect their values.

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