

**Gay Bar Culture and Drinking in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex,
Asexual and Two-Spirited Community**

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Abstract

Gay bars have long been a staple of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and Two-Spirited (LGBTQIA2S+) community. They were often the only spaces for LGBTQIA2S+ individuals to meet others, connect with their community, and engage in activism (Escoffier, 1997). Yet today the LGBTQIA2S+ community engages in disproportionately high levels of drinking (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2017). This study examines the impact of gay bar culture of drinking in the LGBTQIA2S+ community through a survey of 60 participants from Minnesota who identify as members of the LGBTQIA2S+ community. The majority of participants reported no change in their drinking behavior between LGBTQIA2S+ and non-LGBTQIA2S+ spaces. Yet many expressed a need for more sober LGBTQIA2S+ spaces. Participants also expressed feeling safe in LGBTQIA2S+ spaces and enjoying their time in them. More research is required on the need for sober LGBTQIA2S+ spaces and the benefits they bring.

Gay Bar Culture and Drinking in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and Two-Spirited Community

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and Two-Spirited (LGBTQIA2S+) community engages in disproportionately high levels of drinking. Young sexual minority men have been found to have high levels of alcohol consumption, with 21% of the sample having binge drank in the last month (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2017). Sexual minority women are more likely to have an alcohol use disorder than their heterosexual counterparts as well (Green & Feinstein, 2012). Transgender populations experience similar levels of heavy drinking. Heavy episodic drinking has been found to be 1.5 times higher for transgender individuals compared to their cisgender counterparts (Schiem et al., 2016). There is a clear issue when it comes to high levels of drinking in the LGBTQIA2S+ community.

Many factors may contribute to this. Minority stress, the stress experienced as a result of discrimination, has been attributed to these high levels of drinking (Lee et al., 2016). Supporting this claim is research done by Drabble and their colleagues (2021) that found there was a decrease of alcohol use in the LGBT community in states with more “progressive” policies around sexuality and gender. Felner and their colleagues (2020) further supported this claim in their interviews with members of the LGBT community, as many of their participants reported homophobia was a cause for their substance use.

Similarly, the lack of resources for LGBTQIA2S+ people contributes to their increased rates of alcohol and substance use. Research from Eisenberg and their team (2019) found that when supportive resources are available for LGBT adolescents in their community, their substance use declines. Yet according to Chonghui (2020), less than 1 in 5 agencies that claim to offer LGBT-specific substance use treatment actually do. There is a gap in services for the

LGBTQIA2S+ community that is leading to this increased use of alcohol. This may be particularly relevant in smaller, rural communities.

The culture of the LGBTQIA2S+ community is an additional factor. Felner and their colleagues (2020) found that the availability of substances in the sexual minority community influences substance use. This culture even exists in the younger LGBT communities. Demant and their colleagues (2021) reported that LGBT youth were more open-minded about substances than their heterosexual peers. There is a culture that encourages substance use and drinking.

Part of this culture is the direct result of the historical and modern importance of gay bars to the community. McKirnan and Peterson (1989) argue that bars are one of the only social resources available to the LGBT community. Before the gay rights movement happened, and when LGBTQIA2S+ people were criminalized and faced violence in their daily lives, gay bars were one of the only places they could seek refuge (Escoffier, 1997). Even today gay bars provide a refuge from the homophobia of the rest of the world. LGB individuals can safely make sexual advances on other patrons with the assumption that they are also homosexual and without the fear of violence as a result of their advance (Warren, 2013). There also is a certain level of privacy provided by a gay bar, and one's identity as a member of the LGBTQIA2S+ community is protected (Warren, 2013). Gay bars are an important resource to the LGBT community, yet it is a resource built on the back of alcohol consumption.

Gay bars hold a vital role in a community impacted by disproportionately high levels of alcohol use. It is vital that we understand the impact of these spaces of this at risk community. Based on the research covered here, this study asked how does gay bar culture affect drinking in the LGBTQIA2S+ community?

Methods

This study took the form of a survey. The survey asked a number of questions, some Likert-scaled and others open ended. The participants took the survey privately on their own without assistance for the researcher, using the University of Minnesota's Qualtrics System. All participants opted to take the survey online, although a paper copy was made available.

Following the initial survey, participants were given the option to fill out a separate form to share their contact information and be entered into a random drawing for a \$25 gift card. This survey was reviewed and approved by the University of Minnesota's Institutional Review Board.

Participant Criteria

Participants for this study were screened based on two primary criteria. The first was that they were over the age of 18 as many 18 year olds engage in drinking in informal settings. The second criteria was that they identified as a member of the LGBTQIA2S+ community. If a participant stated they met both of these criteria and consented to participate in the study their responses were recorded. In total, 60 participants completed the survey.

Survey Locations

This survey was conducted and advertised in a number of locations. The first of which was through a number of LGBTQIA2S+ organizations at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. These clubs included the Queer and Allied Student Union and Open Arms of Christ. Researchers attended the meetings of these clubs and discussed the research and following these meetings the clubs sent the survey link to their members. The survey was also posted on a number of Facebook groups for LGBTQIA2S+ people in Minnesota. Other Minnesota based organizations were contacted but did not respond to the survey request.

Survey Questions

The survey included both open answers and scaling questions. The scaling questions are based on a modified version of the Alcohol Relief Questionnaire and the Alcohol Dependency Scale (Lac & Luk, 2023; Addiction Research Center, n.d.). These scales are widely used to determine causes of drinking and the severity of drinking. For my purposes, these scales will be modified to include questions pertaining to the drinking done in gay bars and other LGBTQIA2S+ community. The open ended questions were used to create a narrative around participants' drinking and the contexts they do it in. The following open ended questions were asked:

- How would you describe your sexual identity?
- How would you describe your gender identity?
- How many years have you been out?
- What is your age?
- How would you describe your race/ethnicity?
- Have you ever been to an LGBTQIA2S+ space where drinking was present? If so please describe
- Do you drink when you are in these spaces? If so, how many drinks would you have?
- How many times per month have you been to an LGBTQIA2S+ space where drinking was present?
- Describe your experiences in LGBTQIA2S+ spaces where drinking was present.
- What are your motivations for going to LGBTQIA2S+ spaces where drinking is present?
- Do you drink in LGBTQIA2S+ spaces? What are your motivations for doing so?
- Who do you typically go to LGBTQIA2S+ spaces with?

- What other queer spaces do you visit regularly?
- How does your drinking compare in queer spaces where alcohol is present vs in non-queer spaces where alcohol is present?
- What are your typical motivations for drinking?
- Do you drink alone or with friends?
- How many drinks would you have on a typical night when you drink?
- How do you feel about your drinking habits?

Participants were asked to rate the following scaling questions on a scale of one to five with one being definitely false and five being definitely true:

- I am more comfortable talking to other queer people when I drink alcohol.
- I would not go to a LGBTQIA2S+ space if I were sober.
- I feel pressured to drink when others are drinking around me.
- I drink more in queer spaces than in non-queer spaces.
- I am often hung over after drinking in a queer space.
- I am often hung over after drinking in a non-queer space.

Analysis

The results were evaluated using coding and basic statistics (e.g., measures of central tendencies and percentages). The open-ended questions were evaluated looking for common themes in the responses. These themes were then reported in the results section. The quantitative questions were then evaluated finding the percentages of respondents that responded each way. A number of bar charts were also used to represent the results.

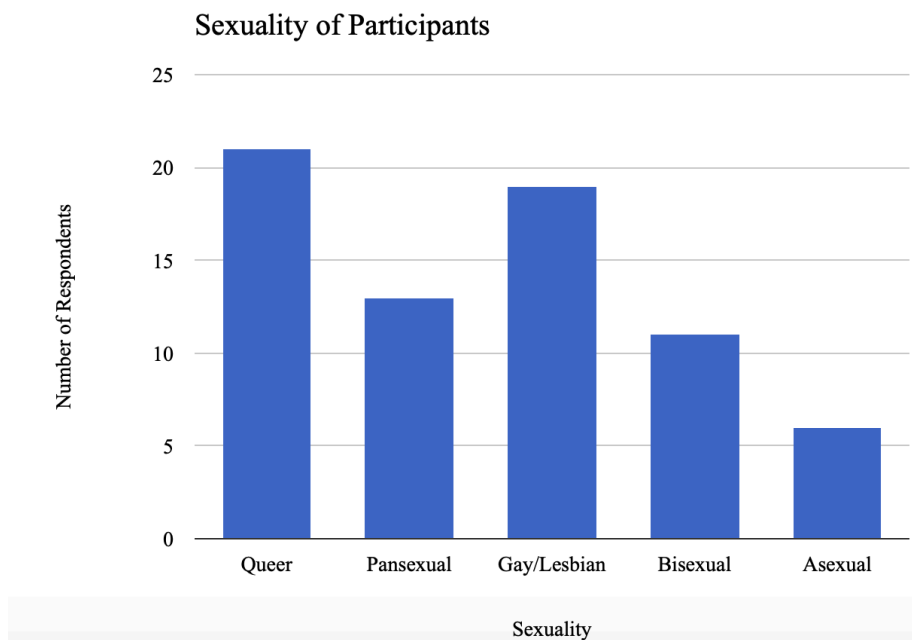
Results

Demographics of Participants

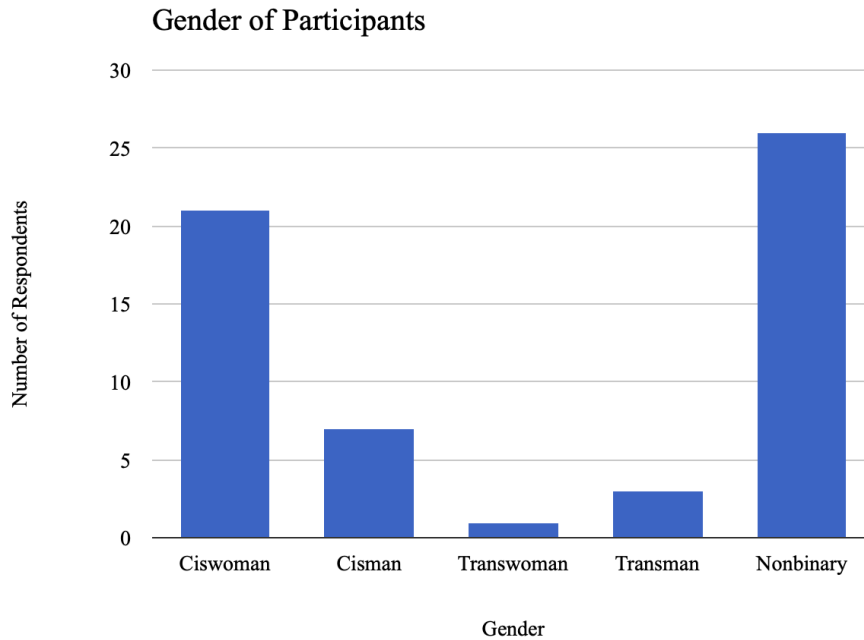
The participants of this study were diverse. The median age of the participants was 26 years old with a 45 year age gap between the oldest and youngest participants. Sexuality and gender identities of participants also varied. They are represented by Figure 1 and 2 below.

Figure 1

Participants Sexualities



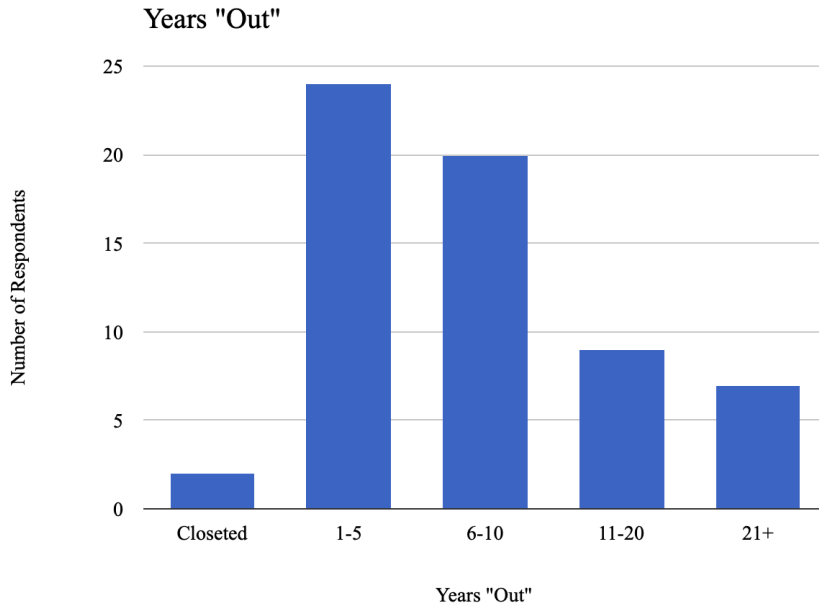
Participants' sexual identity was diverse. Most identified as queer, gay or lesbian. Many participants identified as pansexual or bisexual and some identified as asexual.

Figure 2*Participants Genders*

Non-binary was the most common gender identity for participants, followed by ciswomen. Some identified as cismen or transmen but very few identified as transwomen. Participants also had varying levels of experience with the LGBTQIA2S+ community. This is shown in the varied number of years “out” as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

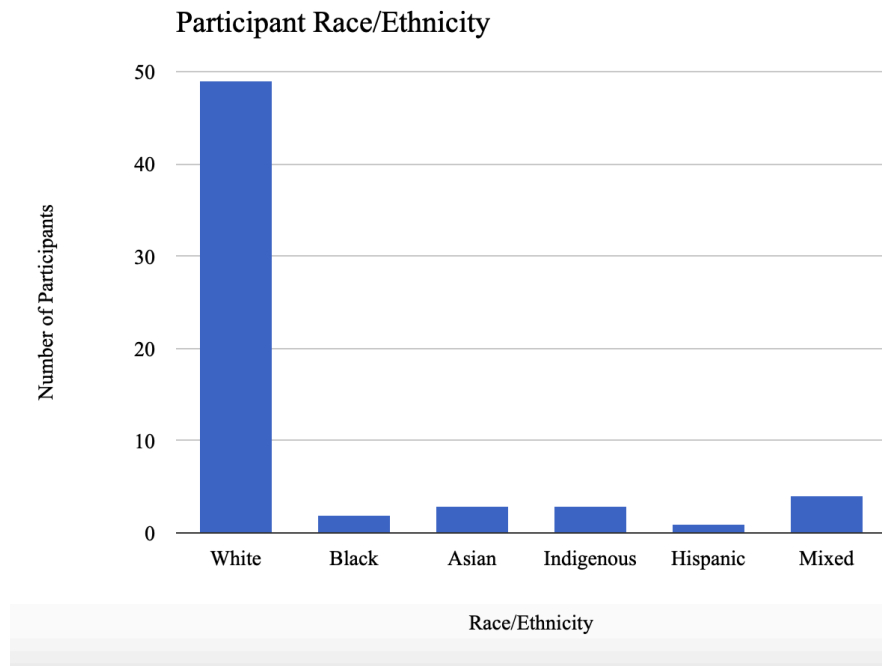
Years Participants Have Been “Out”



Most participants were newer to being out, having only been out 1-5 years. Similarly a high number had been out 6-10 years. Others were out more than 21 years and a few were still in the closet. There was less racial diversity. Figure 4 displays the racial diversity of participants. The vast majority of participants identified as White. There were participants who identified as other races but there were very few.

Figure 4

Racial Identities of Participants



LGBTQIA2S+ Spaces Where Drinking is Present

Settings

There are a number of spaces that cater to the LGBTQIA2S+ community and serve alcohol. Participants were asked what types of spaces they frequented. 84% of participants who reported going to LGBTQIA2S+ spaces with alcohol said they visited gay bars. Many participants also reported attending parties and festivals.

Motivations

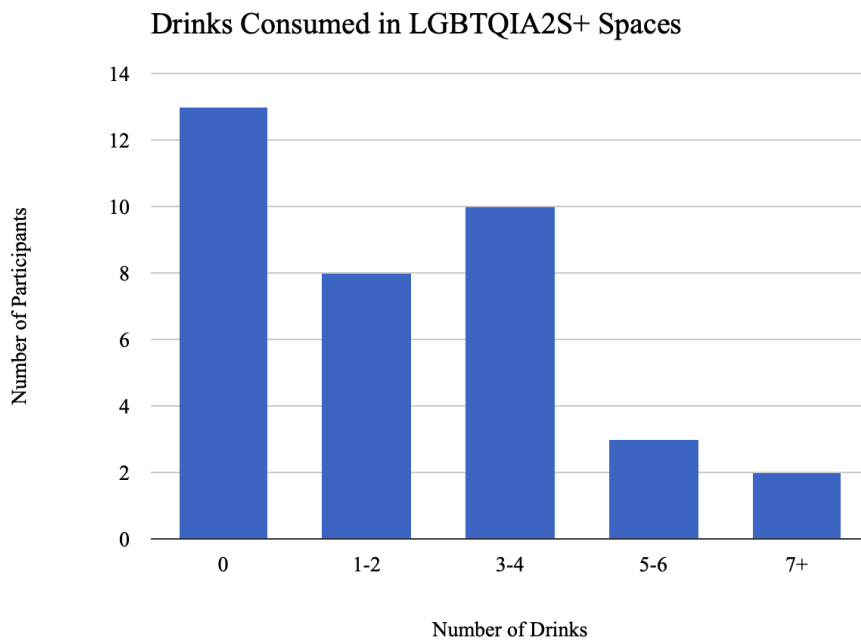
Participants expressed a number of motivations for visiting spaces where drinking is present. Common themes were a sense of safety in LGBTQIA2S+ spaces, connecting with the LGBTQIA2S+ community, socializing, and having fun. One participant stated that these spaces are “the only place [they] know of to find [their] community.” Another participant expressed

similar experiences saying that they go to LGBTQIA2S+ spaces with drinking as they like to have “a space that is safe to be queer in a small midwestern town.” The majority of participants attend these spaces with friends, 76%. Only 12% reported going alone and 17% went with a partner.

When in these spaces 66% of participants said they drank. The majority said their motivations for doing so were having fun, socializing, relaxing, and because they felt safe to do so. Figure 5 shows the amount participants reported drinking in these spaces.

Figure 5

Number of Drinks Consumed in LGBTQIA2S+ Spaces



The amount participants drank varied. Many did not drink while a high number had 1-2 drinks or 3-4 drinks. Some had 5-6 drinks or 7+ drinks but this was a smaller subset of respondents.

Frequency

The frequency of visits to LGBTQIA2S+ spaces with drinking present also varied. 63% of participants reported going to these spaces 1-2 times a month while others reported going up to 20 times a month. Some participants reported attending bars less after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Experiences

The experiences in these spaces also varied for participants, although most responses were positive. Seventy-four percent of participants reported having had positive experiences. Many participants reported feeling safe and having fun. As one participant wrote, “people appeared to be more comfortable with their sexuality than they would have been in a non-gay bar.” Others described the feeling of safety they feel in these spaces. Participants reported feeling “safer/ more comfortable than at a typical bar” and feeling “more safe to drink freely.” The enjoyment of drag shows was also mentioned by many participants.

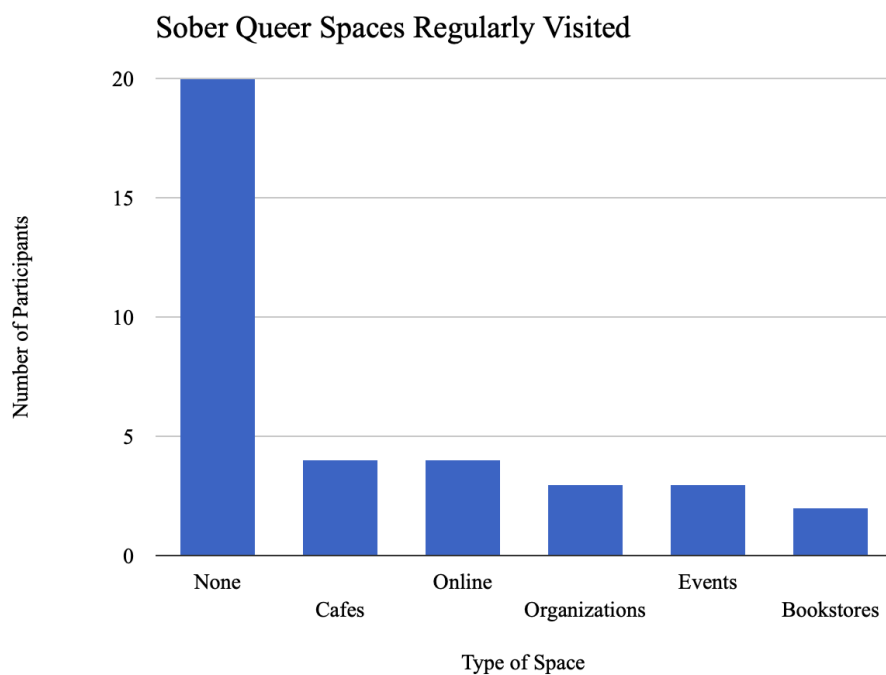
Not all participants expressed enjoying their time in LGBTQIA2S+ spaces where there was drinking. One participant reported that with the consumption of alcohol “consent gets blurred and lots of de-escalation has to happen.” Similarly another participant stated “alcohol seems to be consumed in excess by those around me in queer spaces... I often feel these spaces are too loud and overstimulating with limited options to connect to others.” Other participants also expressed that they no longer visit these spaces as they are in recovery from addiction issues.

Sober LGBTQIA2S+ Spaces

Many participants reported not having access to sober LGBTQIA2S+ spaces. Forty seven percent reported that they do not visit any sober LGBTQIA2S+ places. Figure 6 displays the sober LGBTQIA2S+ participants reported visiting.

Figure 6

Sober LGBTQIA2S+ Visited



The vast majority of participants did not have a sober queer space they regularly visited. Those who did have sober queer spaces were evenly spread between cafes, online spaces, queer organizations, events, and bookstores.

In response to being asked about sober LGBTQIA2S+ spaces, many participants expressed wanting more sober queer spaces. One participant noted that “there really are not queer spaces not involving alcohol!” Others expressed the need for these spaces in their

communities stating “I wish there were more drinking-free queer venues in the Twin Ports” and even questioning what sober spaces the survey was referring to.

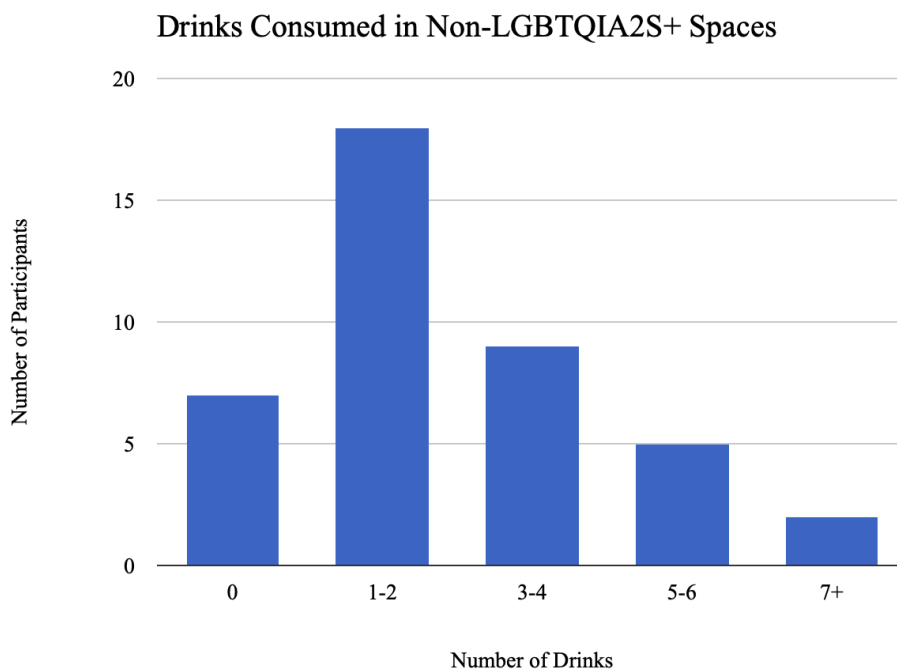
Respondents also expressed that they would still go to LGBTQIA2S+ spaces if alcohol was not present. 95% of participants said that the statement “I would not go to LGBTQIA2S+ spaces if I was sober” was false or definitely false.

Comparison to Non-LGBTQIA2S+ Spaces Where Drinking is Present

The majority of respondents stated that they drank the same amount of alcohol in LGBTQIA2S+ spaces and non-LGBTQIA2S+ spaces, with 78% reporting their drinking did not was the same. This is supported by the number of drinks consumed in non-LGBTQIA2S+ spaces, as represented by Figure 7.

Figure 7

Number of Drinks Consumed in non-LGBTQIA2S+ Spaces

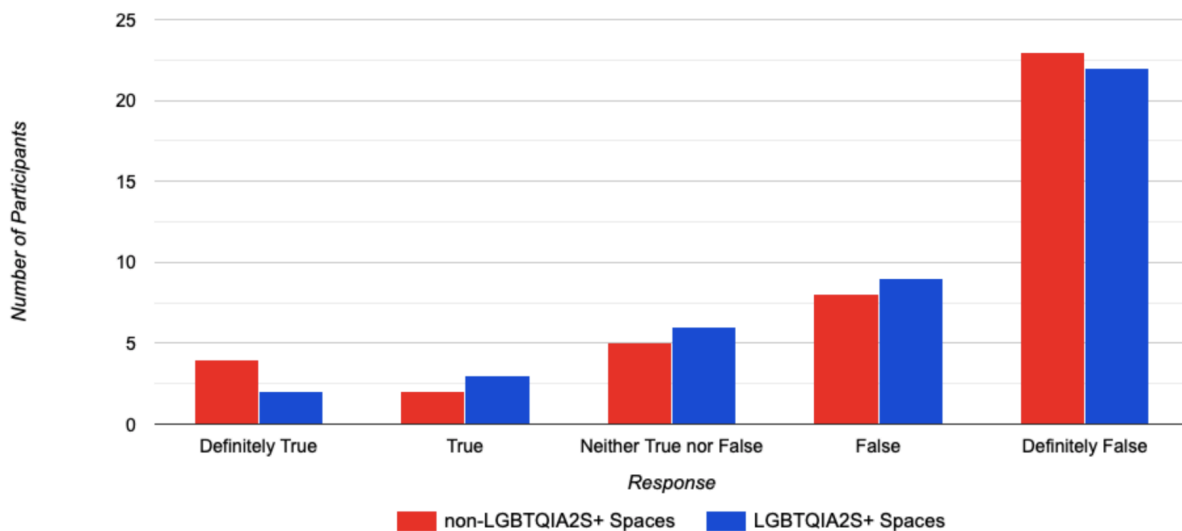


Some participants did not drink in non-LGBTQIA2S+ spaces but most participants has 1-2 drinks. Many had 3-4 drinks and a few had 5-6 drinks or 7+ drinks.

This data is further backed by the data from the scaling questions. When asked to rate the statement “I drink more in queer spaces than in non-queer spaces.” 42% of respondents said the statement was “definitely false” and 11% said the statement was “false”. Only 16% of respondents said the statement was “true” or “definitely true.” Respondents not only report drinking the same amount, they also reported similar levels of hangovers. Figure 8 represents the responses to the statement “I am often hungover after drinking.”

Figure 8

Responses to the Statement “I am Often Hungover After Drinking”



Participants reported the amount of hangovers between LGBTQIA2S+ spaces and non-LGBTQIA2S+ spaces. The majority of participants responded that it was false or definitely false that they were “often hung over after drinking.” Some reported the statement was neither true nor false and a few reported that the statement was true.

There were participants who said they drank different amounts in the different environments. One participant stated that they “notice when [they are] around gay men, [they] drink more to feel like [they are] ‘keeping up.’” Some reported drinking more as they “feel safer drinking in queer spaces.” Others responded that they drank more in non-LGBTQIA2S+ spaces. As one participant put it “I drink more in non-queer spaces to tolerate straight people easier.”

Overall the results showed that while the majority of participants drank the same in both LGBTQIA2S+ and non-LGBTQIA2S+ spaces. LGBTQIA2S+ spaces also were spaces where participants felt safe and found community. Finally participants expressed a need for more sober LGBTQIA2S+ spaces.

Discussion

These results offer a mixed response to the guiding question of how gay bar culture affects drinking in the LGBTQIA2S+ community. The survey’s key findings were that participants attended gay bars to find community, expressed a need for more sober queer spaces, and drank the same amounts regardless of the setting (queer vs not-queer bars). This suggests that the reasons for going to LGBTQIA2S+ spaces were not based on drinking, rather participants went to enjoy time in their community. Gay bars have historically always been a safe space for queer people, and continue to be a safe space today (Warren, 2013). This sentiment was expressed by a number of participants. Participants also noted the need for sober LGBTQIA2S+ spaces. A number of participants shared that they are unaware of any sober LGBTQIA2S+ spaces in their communities and would like to see more sober spaces. The vast majority of participants would still go to LGBTQIA2S+ spaces if they did not have alcohol present. While drinking habits do not seem to change between LGBTQIA2S+ and non-LGBTQIA2S+ spaces, the lack of sober LGBTQIA2S+ spaces may encourage drinking in the LGBTQIA2S+

community. While the type of bar participants are drinking at may not affect their drinking habits, having the option of connecting with their community outside of an environment with alcohol might. Perhaps if more sober LGBTQIA2S+ spaces existed there would be an opportunity to find community without entering a space with alcohol present.

Limitations

The results of this study were limited by the diversity and geographic location of the participants as well as the format of the research. Most participants identified as White, and the experiences of LGBTQIA2S+ people of color need to be studied. All participants also were based out of Minnesota and results may vary depending on the culture and physical location of the participants. The research was also limited by the format. Participants self-reported on their drinking habits, and people tend to underreport the amounts they drink (Livingston & Callinan, 2015). Therefore the statistics on the amount individuals are drinking could be inaccurate. Yet ideally the participants reported with the same level inaccuracy in their responses about LGBTQIA2S+ spaces and non-LGBTQ2+ spaces maintaining an accurate comparison.

Conclusion

While gay bar culture may not directly impact the amount of drinks consumed by participants, the culture of drinking in LGBTQIA2S+ may impact the lack of sober LGBTQIA2S+ spaces. Further research should be conducted on the need for sober LGBTQIA2S+ spaces. The prevalence of sober LGBTQIA2S+ spaces and the sorts of spaces that can or should exist should be studied.

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