

Placemaking and Virtual Community-Building among Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Women and Non-Binary People during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond
Gabby Unipan, Class of 2021

This research project explores strategies of place-making and community-building among queer women and non-binary people in Portland, Maine, Philadelphia, PA, and in online communities as a result of the COVID-19 Quarantine. I will continue this research project as an Independent Study throughout the academic year, and it will become my Honors Project in Sociology.

Many scholars believe we have entered a post-gay society due to the widespread political and sociocultural acceptance of LGBT communities, which eliminates a need for sexual minorities to seek out gay neighborhoods for safety and a sense of belonging. Citing disappearing material culture, such as the closing of gay bars and bookstores, as the erosion of gay spaces, scholars overlook the ways in which LGBT residents have developed new and innovative ways of preserving distinct and visible queer cultures and community through placemaking both in physical and online spaces. Drag shows in restaurants and daylong festivals like Pride highlight some ways in which queer people continue to maintain a sense of community within cities. Online pages dedicated to queer communities such as social media groups are examples of virtual queer communities. Much of LGBT scholarship focuses on white gay men, marginalizing the experiences of queer women and non-binary people. Additionally, scholars often think of queer women as not requiring communities within cities in the same way as gay men, saying that queer women ‘lack the same spatial aspirations as men.’ Online communities have begun to rally amongst themselves in response to the COVID-19 quarantine and inability to physically engage in placemaking. In researching this topic, I seek to gain insight into how queer women maintain a sense of community, distinct from the creative community, amidst an ever-growing population of ‘queerness.’

Through the collection of qualitative interviews with members of the online communities I am studying, this project addresses the following questions: what types of virtual queer spaces exist? How have these spaces changed over time? What is the significance of these spaces, both in individuals’ lives as well as sociologically? How do they compare to physical queer spaces? Are there advantages/disadvantages to digital placemaking? How do queer women and non-binary people see themselves in these spaces? What strategies do they then employ to create, facilitate, and maintain community over time? What challenges to community-building have they faced over time?

Additionally, I engage questions specifically about physical spaces that have been affected due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The following questions will be addressed: How have queer organizations that pride themselves as being pillars of queer life worked to maintain a sense of community as a result of physical placemaking no longer being an option? What evidence of resilience, determination, and creativity exists? What methods have they used, and what is the rationale behind them? How are these organizations, businesses, and groups working to support one another? What difficulties have they been experiencing and why? What is the difference between physical and virtual placemaking?

Results of this study will be published with the completion of my Honors Project in Sociology.

Faculty Mentor: Professor Theo Greene, Assistant Professor of Sociology

Funded by the Christenfeld Summer Research Fellowship