Lesbian nightlife in Amsterdam: an explorative study of the shift from 'queer-only' to 'queer-friendly' spaces

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This paper explains the decline of lesbian space in Amsterdam through a better understanding of young lesbians' lived experiences of in/exclusion in urban nightlife. The study is situated in Amsterdam, a city internationally known as a queer capital. In-depth interviews were conducted with young lesbian clubbers, owners of local lesbian bars, and organizers of lesbian-oriented parties. The results show that straight and queer spaces should be understood as fluid since the clientele has become a queer and non-queer blend after a shift towards an 'inclusive' and open-minded vibe. That shift goes hand in hand with the commodification of queer venues, which puts pressure on the few women-only spaces left. As the interviews revealed, a commodified open-minded, 'inclusive' venue or party is not necessarily a safe space for lesbian clubbers. The interviews also foregrounded the diversity among lesbian clubbers, which partially explains the widening range of venues and party concepts with a concomitant decline in visibility. This paper suggests some ways to create safe lesbian nightlife space, in light of the experiences of interviewed clubbers and information gathered from entrepreneurs within the scene.

Keywords: nightlife, queer spaces, lesbians, fluidity, commodification, Amsterdam

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Introduction

The city of Amsterdam is known worldwide as a place of sexual freedom and for tolerance of a broad gay and lesbian community. The first same-sex marriage in 2001 set an example for other countries (Hekma & Duyvendak 2011). While Amsterdam remains one of the world's top destinations, particularly for gay travel and the red-light district (van Aalst & van Liempt 2018), its lesbian nightlife has been under pressure. In 2017, one of the last lesbian venues, Vivelavie, closed its doors after 37 years.

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Meanwhile, the oldest lesbian bar left in Amsterdam, Sarein II, has transformed from a lesbian-only space to a place open for "all queer minded people" (Saarein 2019). What happened?

Feminist and queer liberation movements claimed the right to be out at night in the 1960s and 1970s, and 'pink' nightlife became increasingly popular (Hekma 1992). Starting with the first lesbian café Tabu in 1970 (*ibid*. 1992), the 1980s were 'the golden age' of lesbian visibility in terms of spatial clusters of commercial spaces, like bars, discos and clubs (e.g. Podmore 2006). Schuyf (1992) described the social dynamics of lesbian communities in the 1970s and 1980s in the Netherlands. Lesbian-only cafés were used as spaces for political activities by the second-wave feminist movement. A variety of shifting economic, social, political and geographical factors have contributed to the current invisibility of lesbians and the sharp decline of lesbian space, not only in Amsterdam but in other metropolises in North America and Europe (Podmore 2006; Fobear 2012; Forstie 2018).

Due to anti-discrimination legislation and growing acceptance in mainstream society from the 1990s (Hubbard *et al*. 2015), gay enclaves were transformed into queer districts (Podmore 2006; Brown 2014) and incorporated into the city's tourism and marketing strategies (Goh 2018). Research explains the loss of women-only bars and the marginalization of lesbians due to gentrification processes (Podmore 2006) and to the dominant position of gay men in such enclaves (Pritchard *et al*. 2002; Browne 2006). The increased trendiness of these areas attracted a social mix of visitors and tourists, though some queer communities seemed to be excluded (e.g. Adamson 2017), based on gender and other asymmetries like race and class (Browne 2006). Investigating lesbian venues and institutions, Forstie (2018) suggest that a post-lesbian era has already arrived (see also McNaron 2007). Young girls do not want to be restricted to socializing in lesbian-specific places. This growing detachment from identity politics could be attributed to an intergenerational tension among lesbian women (Fobear 2012). In this paper, lesbians' position in urban spaces is understood to be not only determined by sexuality but also interrelated with other categories, such as age and gender.

There is a wide range of academic literature focused on gay male spaces (Nash & Gorman-Murray 2015) but few studies on young lesbians' clubbing preferences or on in- or exclusion practices in nightlife (Pritchard *et al*. 2002; Browne 2007a; Fobear 2012). In that light, our aim is to explain the lack of lesbian space in Amsterdam's nightlife through a better understanding of young lesbians' lived experiences of in/exclusion in Amsterdam's queer scene on the basis of qualitative research. The data on which this article is based are derived from in-depth interviews with clubbers and key actors in the lesbian nightlife scene in Amsterdam.

An extensive body of literature has asserted that space is produced as heterosexual and constructed as heteronormative (e.g. Valentine 1993, 1995). Human geographers like Binnie (1997) and Valentine (1995) investigated questions about gender and visibility and how gay men and lesbians marked and claimed urban spaces. In 'queer geographies', queer is often seen as an overarching term describing multiple groups of sexual dissidents and referring to the broader LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex) community (Browne 2006; Oswin 2008). Contemporary academic debates challenge conceptualizations of queer space as dissident space or claimed space, instead emphasizing the fluidity of queer spaces (e.g. Browne 2006; Goh 2018). Recent research describes the users of these spaces (queers) not only as sexual identities but "simultaneously as raced, classed, and gendered bodies" (Oswin 2008, 91). Taking this into account and following Maliepaard (2015) we characterize queer spaces as relatively free from the influences of heteronormativity and which thereby provide members of the LGBTI community the opportunity to express their multiple identities (Goh 2018). The term 'lesbian space' refers to nightlife space that is labelled 'for lesbians' (Cattan & Vanolo 2014) while 'gay male space' consists of clubs and bars explicitly meant for homosexual men (Browne & Bakshi 2011).

The theoretical framework is outlined in the following, under the headings of urban nightlife developments and lesbian nightlife spaces. After elaborating the research design and the geographical context of Amsterdam, the results of the study are reported. These results touch upon struggles of lesbian venues, the increasing popularity of lesbian and women-oriented parties, multiple and fluid lesbian identities, and the complex search for safe and inclusive nightlife spaces. The final section presents the conclusion.

Urban nightlife developments: regeneration, gentrification, commodification

Nightlife in large cities operates within an economy-driven framework. The term 'night-time economy' (NTE) encompasses the obvious links between nightlife, job creation, and inter-urban competitiveness (e.g. Shaw 2010; van Liempt *et al*. 2015). Increasingly, the term is used for the assemblage of bars, clubs, cinemas, theatres, cultural festivals and parties which are, in a context of urban entrepreneurialism, supposed to contribute to urban regeneration and local economic growth. The promotion of the NTE has, in many places, sparked social conflicts between partygoers and (gentrifying) residents in and around city centres (Hae 2011), often over noise levels and litter.

Nonetheless, nightlife venues frequently contribute to gentrification. Flourishing clubs make urban areas attractive to wealthy residents with other tastes and rhythms, with the result that nightlife itself becomes gentrified (Garcia 2018). According to the academic literature, this uptake partially explains the invisibility of lesbians in nightlife. Studying the Village in Montreal, Podmore (2006) analyses the shifting character of lesbian territorial practices and the loss of women-only bars due to gentrification. In the 1990s, this area became the local economic engine for gay and queer commerce, serving as a site for local boosterism and the expansion of the tourist market (Podmore 2006). Nash and Gorman-Murray (2015) report a similar transformation in Sydney's and Toronto's former gay villages, where the commodification of gay nightlife and the mainstreaming of LGBTI spaces attracts a larger crowd of straight people, partly international visitors (Pritchard *et al*. 2002; Nash & Gorman-Murray 2015).

According to Brown (2014), the number of exclusively gay and lesbian bars has declined in traditional 'gayborhoods'. Such spaces across the Global North are often the territoriality of gay men (and to a lesser extent the LBTI community) and pre-dominantly white (see Brown 2014 on sexual minorities in gayborhoods). The growing presence of straight clubbers attracted by these cool, exotic and fun places has led to a feeling of displacement among the LGBTI community, and also to the loss of spaces with a strong queer identity (Pritchard *et al*. 2002; Nash & Gorman-Murray 2015). This 'de-gaying process' can feel threatening; lesbians in particular do not feel welcome anymore in 'their own space' and they feel frustration and anger due to their loss of safe space (Pritchard *et al*. 2002; Eves 2004). Skeggs' research in the gay village in Manchester has shown that while "for straight women the gay space offers a space away from the demands of heterosexuality, specifically men and hetero-masculine performances" (Skeggs 1999, cited in Held 2015, 35), the gay space still prescribes certain gender norms which make lesbians feel uncomfortable.

Another development that affects lesbian clubbing is the rise of party concepts and themed club nights (Boogaarts-de Bruin 2011; Roberts & Townshend 2013). Over the past decade, the number of pubs has been declining. Meanwhile, clubs have started a new trend of 'broad programming' to diversify their clientele by renting the venues out. Party organizers and DJ collectives have emerged around specific themes and sell their party concepts to clubs throughout the Netherlands (Boogaarts-de Bruin 2011). The rise of temporary parties is also affecting the queer scene, as Cattan and Vanolo (2014, 1163) describe: "a new type of lesbian party is flourishing, which consists of itinerant nights taking place in different parts of the city." All these trends influence the spatiality and fluidity of lesbian nightlife in Amsterdam.

Lesbian nightlife spaces: paradoxical spaces

The queer scene is a setting where people get the opportunity to dance, experiment, and meet their friends without being in a heteronormative world (Valentine & Skelton 2003). Therefore, it is considered to be a safe space. The absence of heterosexual norms and the 'male gaze' creates a liberated feeling for lesbians (Pritchard *et al*. 2002; Fobear 2012; Held 2015) in a space where they can express themselves without the feeling of being judged (Myslik 1996; Maliepaard 2015). Other clubbers can confirm and justify these identities, which can lead to more self-confidence regarding one's sexual identity (Valentine & Skelton 2003). Queer clubbers have the feeling they are joining an 'imagined community' with a shared identity, which creates a sense of belonging (Pritchard *et al*. 2002). However, the 'community' is fragmented by "many relations of inequality, exclusion and exploitation between them (...)" (Valentine & Skelton 2003, 854). This suggests that the queer scene, which appears to be a

safe and inclusive setting at first sight, is still marked by divisions and tensions within the community itself. The scene can be intimidating because of its expressive and often sexualized character. Queers who join the scene for the first time are at risk of dressing and acting queer in order to conform to the dominant queer culture, while still feeling insecure about their own sexual identity (Valentine & Skelton 2003). Conformity to the dominant queer culture can be experienced as a kind of pressure, especially when there is no space to share insecure feelings and doubts about one's sexual identity.

Furthermore, the queer scene seems to be divided along gendered lines. As many feminist geographers have argued, gender differences must be recognized to understand spatial practices and negotiations in public spaces (e.g. Pain 2001 about perceptions of fear and vulnerability). Pritchard, Morgan and Sedgley (2002) conducted research on the experiences of lesbians within the gay village of Manchester. They argue that men dominate the queer scene there, which causes feelings of displacement among lesbians. Their marginalized position within queer space is experienced as problematic because queer space is perceived to be 'their' (lesbian) space as well. Podmore (2006, 598) argues that "bars have been central to the process of building visibility among lesbians at the urban scale and expanding what lesbians have identified as their territory." All these dynamics point to the paradoxical nature of queer, and more specifically lesbian, space; while some people experience clubs and bars as safe and inclusive spaces in which they can freely express themselves, a significant number experience this space as pressuring and intimidating.

Based on research in Montreal, Podmore (2006) asserts that lesbian nightlife has deterritorialized and become more integrated in former gay-male space. This is partially explained by gentrification but also by a shift in lesbian identification processes. By the early 1990s, queer politics was on the rise, meaning that lesbians and gay men were working together on common projects. As more lesbians identified with queer politics, lesbians and gay men became more integrated in the 'queer space'. This shift in lesbian identities corresponds to the findings of Fobear (2012) in Amsterdam where the lesbian scene seems to be divided by age. Younger lesbians (in their twenties) feel less need to be 'visible' than older women do (those who were active in the feminist/lesbian movements of the 1970s and 1980s). The younger generation perceives lesbian space as excluding, intimidating, hostile to newcomers and even as "a meat market for lesbian hookups" (Fobear 2012, 734). They have a stronger desire to mix within queer and heterosexual clubbing scenes, because these environments were considered less pressuring and "the judging circle phenomenon was diminished" (Fobear 2012, 734). These judgements would presumably be less prominent within queer or heterosexual space and mixing would enhance the sexual development of the younger lesbian generation. The desire to mix within queer and heterosexual clubbing scenes might also be related to the decline of a strong lesbian identity. Hekma and Duyvendak (2006, 443) argue that most queer people in the Netherlands do not have strong sexual identities, noting that "the absence of strong sexual identities parallels the lack of spatially concentrated gay and lesbian communities." This is in line with the findings of Fobear (2012); younger lesbians do not primarily identify themselves as 'being lesbian'. Although their sexual identity does not appear to be the main concern, lesbian nightlife space has not lost its value. According to Fobear (2012), the debates on spaces and visibility should be couched in broader discussions on normativity and lesbian identification processes.

Lesbian identification processes can be linked to "the construction of social norms that include lesbians and gay men on the condition that they conform to individualist and consumerist economic values and lead sexual lives that mirror the norms of heteronormativity (e.g. long-term, monogamous relationships within specific gender norms)" (Browne & Bakshi 2011, 181). The assumption is that members of the LBGTI community want to be part of the dominant culture. This assertion corresponds to the research of Fobear (2012, 736), who finds that young lesbian clubbers do not want to stand out from the rest of society. They feel a strong desire 'to be normal' and to not to deviate from the gender norm although it was not seen as hiding their sexual identity. According to Browne and Bakshi (2011), homonormativity structures the queer community and causes marginalization within the queer scene. Young lesbians associate lesbian identity with being overly masculine, ugly, man-hating, crude, and aggressive. This impression of what a lesbian is supposed to be leads younger 'femme' lesbians to feel uncomfortable about portraying themselves as a lesbian. At the same time, 'butches' feel pressured to 'act normal', meaning more feminine, to avoid reinforcing 'negative' stereotypes

(Fobear 2012, 738). These identification processes suggest pressure within the queer scene to dress, act and behave according to certain gendered and sexualized norms. If you do not fit the norm, it is difficult to feel welcome within the queer or lesbian nightlife space. To understand their feelings of in- and exclusion in urban nightlife, it is thus important to analyse the spatial practices and lived experiences of young lesbians.

Discovering urban nightlife through the eyes of lesbian clubbers and entrepreneurs

This paper draws from an empirical study with a qualitative research design. Conducting in-depth interviews was deemed appropriate to gain a better understanding of young lesbians' lived experiences of in/exclusion in Amsterdam's nightlife (Seidman 2006). This study focuses on young lesbians who go clubbing in Amsterdam. They form a specific group that cannot be reduced to a simple category of being only women, lesbian, nor youngster (Parent *et al*. 2013; Rodo-de-Zarate 2015). Fobear (2012) highlights generational differences between lesbian clubbers in Amsterdam; her findings confirm that nightlife experiences are related to age, but also to gender, sex, and sexuality. Since these categories intersect, overlap and interact, the lens of intersectionality is applied throughout this research process (Valentine 2007; Parent *et al*. 2013).

Respondents were recruited through various personal social networks using a snowball sampling technique which helped to gain easy access and initial trust. All of the respondents are women [18–30 years old], self-identified as lesbian or bisexual, and (recently) active within the nightlife (queer) scene of Amsterdam. They live in the city, are students or have a job, and their educational background is diverse, ranging from vocational to academic. The clubbers' views have been combined with the perspectives of entrepreneurs active in Amsterdam's lesbian scene to gain a more thorough understanding about the decline of lesbian space.

Our findings are based upon interviews conducted during daytime between March and May 2017 with six lesbian clubbers and four key actors in the lesbian nightlife scene: one entrepreneur of a (former) lesbian venue and three organizers of lesbian parties. The entrepreneur was responsible for Vivelavie and one organizer had set up the lesbian event Lesbique. The other organizers (a team of three women, two of whom were interviewed together) were responsible for the parties YARRR, GirlDrop and Klitty. The lesbian venues and party concepts will be explained in the following section. In addition to these interviews, one expert-interview was conducted with a researcher to provide some context on gender, sexuality and emancipation in the Netherlands.

Before each interview, we obtained verbal informed consent to record the conversation. All recordings, which had an average length of 50 minutes, were transcribed verbatim and analysed through several cycles of coding and categorizing. The analysis started with the "open-ended process called Initial Coding" (Saldaña 2015, 4) and was combined with *in vivo* coding. During the process of recoding and recategorizing, we used analytic memos to reflect on the data and enhance our analysis. The data was analysed in Dutch, the original language of the interviews. The quotes were translated by a native-speaking text editor. Pseudonyms are used for all participants, while organizers and entrepreneurs are anonymised. The real location and names of bars and parties are presented to maintain a clear connection with the local context of Amsterdam.

Geographical context: queer spaces in Amsterdam

Amsterdam promotes itself as a queer-friendly capital and uses this image for city marketing purposes (Amsterdam Info 2016; Travel Gay Europe 2017). Whereas some global cities have clearly demarcated queer neighbourhoods (e.g. Cattan & Vanolo 2014; The Castro in San Francisco and The Marais in Paris, see Mattson 2015), queer nightlife spaces in Amsterdam are scattered throughout the city centre. The streets Reguliersdwarsstraat, Amstel and Kerkstraat are characterized by a high density of queer pubs and clubs (Amsterdam Info 2016; Nighttours 2016; Travel Gay Europe 2017); as shown in Figure 1, famous places like Club NYX are located in this area (Club NYX 2019). Another prominent queer bar, De Trut, is a bit hidden and only open on Sunday nights; it is difficult to trace online but well-known among clubbers within the scene. Since the beginning of 2017, heterosexuals are officially

allowed to enter. Almost none of the queer venues have an exclusive character in the sense of being restricted to people with a certain gender or sexual orientation.

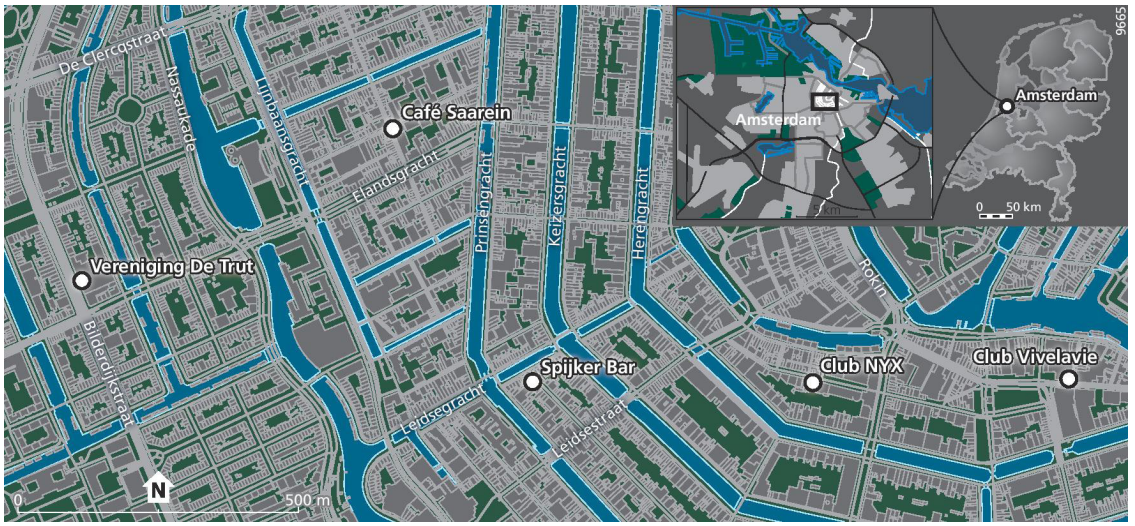

Fig. 1. Amsterdam queer nightlife venues.

At the time of our research, the city had only two historically lesbian-oriented bars: Vivelavie and Saarein. Vivelavie is a pub in the main queer district (Fig. 1), near the touristic 'Rembrandt square'. The respondents describe Vivelavie as a commercialized, more 'mainstream' bar, where you can go for a drink or dance late at night. Saarein, in contrast, is a bit secluded and situated in a residential area (Fig. 1). It is described as a place to talk, hang out and play pool/billiards. Saarein is known to attract an older generation of lesbians. Two respondents refer to its historically political and feminist character. Aside from these two lesbian-oriented venues, there are several lesbian-oriented parties. Our respondents mention a wide range of events which emerge and disappear, though some make a comeback over time. These parties are organized in a flexible way, and the sequence mainly depends on the available time of the organizers. Periods with regular parties held at specific times of the month alternate with periods without these parties. We will focus here on four parties that were important during the time of the fieldwork. Lesbique is a lesbian evening in the queer bar Spijkerbar and is usually held once a month on a Monday. It is a meeting space where lesbians can gather and hang out. Initially, Lesbique was part of the queer party Flikker but in the form of a theme night meant to attract queerer women to Flikker. One of the organizers of Flikker decided to develop the idea of Lesbique further and started up her own event. The idea of Lesbique is to host a "real get-together, where people can have a conversation with each other, to meet like-minded and new people" (organizer Lesbique).

YARRR, GirlDrop and Klitty are different party concepts, each organized by one group of three women but each with its own character. YARRR has the vibe of a club and is a party where young lesbians can meet and dance. It is held in various venues and has grown over the years from 100 visitors to 300. GirlDrop is a smaller, low-key bar hang-out organized in the Cut Throat Barber Shop at the heart of Amsterdam. The shop is temporarily transformed into a small dance floor during these parties. Klitty was on hold during the time of interviewing; it used to operate in the winter and it featured live music and jam sessions.

Struggles of lesbian venues

Just a few weeks after the interview with the owner of Vivelavie, the bar announced it would close its doors after 37 years in business (Telegraaf 2017). The 70-year-old owner had sold it to an external actor; she explained how difficult it is for a lesbian bar to survive in Amsterdam:

> At first, it is all new, and fun, and everyone likes to come. And later on, the question is: can I keep them in? But aside from that, you should also have other guests besides the lesbian women, to keep your business healthy. You can't carry on by focusing on one group only. (entrepreneur Vivelavie)

She stressed the entrepreneurial importance of moving away from a lesbian-only crowd, given the high costs of running a bar in the city centre. During the interview, she highlighted the role that tourists and local neighbours play in keeping the business going. Interestingly, both clubbers and entrepreneurs had specific ideas on lesbians' spending behaviour. Compared to gay men, lesbian clubbers would drink less alcohol, spend less money, and party less frequently, especially if they are in a relationship. The organizer of Lesbique links the lack of lesbian nightlife venues in Amsterdam to "a big generalization or opinion about lesbian women that they do not drink, that they are stingy". This is in line with the vision of the entrepreneur of Vivelavie who said that it is not profitable to focus only on lesbians. Some clubbers explained their view:

> Well it's not so strange that clubs focus on gay men. Because if they [gay men] are in a relationship, they still party as much as they would without being in a relationship. Spend more money, often also have more money, that's just logic you know. No strange desires to have children or so (laughs) (Tiffany, clubber, aged 25)

> And financially it is really, if you just see what a man spends on an evening, a gay man spends and a woman, then it's also related to how much money women and men earn. Yeah and especially gay men, they work so much and have better jobs in general, higher salaries and that's what you notice. (Anne, clubber, aged 27)

Interestingly, Tiffany and Anne relate ideas on how lesbians spend their money to a gendered pay gap. That gap is still present in the Netherlands: women earned 15.2% less than men for similar types of jobs in 2019 (European Commission 2019). Following the clubbers' reasoning, a lower income might mean that women spend less money on clubbing. While it is beyond the scope of this research to examine whether clubbers have different, gendered spending behaviour, Jayne, Valentine and Holloway (2016) discuss how drinking practices are differentially constructed for men and women. Differences in alcohol use often reflect gender roles about appropriate masculinities and femininities and cultural expectations (Jayne *et al*. 2016). We could assume that other factors like cultural background and upbringing also affect drinking and spending behaviours.

The desire to have children was also mentioned by Tiffany as a possible reason why lesbians would go clubbing less. Her idea is underpinned by the assumption that more lesbians would have a child wish compared to gay men and touches upon gendered divisions within the queer scene. These gendered divisions (see also Pritchard *et al*. 2002; Fobear 2012) might explain some of the entrepreneurial difficulties of lesbian venues.

Another struggle faced by lesbian venues is found in the competition among footloose parties. These women-oriented events have gained popularity in Amsterdam, which corresponds with a broader shift in urban nightlife from fixed venues to temporary parties (Boogaarts-de Bruin 2011; Roberts & Townshend 2013). The organizers of Lesbique, YARRR, GirlDrop and Klitty mentioned that they do not face financial problems and therefore feel no need to attract a broader crowd. These organizers do not have monthly fixed costs (e.g. rent, pay checks, electricity bills, salaries) and only need to cover the costs of their party. Since their work is mainly non-profit, they need less money to keep their parties going. This fits in with another broader trend in Amsterdam: the shortage of inner-city space for creative activity and strict regulations lead to a music and clubbing scene characterized by festivals and foot-loose actors (Dorst 2015).

Lesbian and women-oriented parties: a key to success?

YARRR, GirlDrop, Klitty and Lesbique can be understood as four different events sharing a similar approach to organize a party or bar hang-out specially meant for women within the queer scene of Amsterdam's nightlife. The initial idea of YARRR was to start a creative venue where people can dance, enjoy the music, hook up and make friends. After six years of organizing YARRR, the concept was professionalized and evolved towards a club setting. While YARRR developed as a club venue, the organizers initiated GirlDrop as a place to hang out with friends. As the organizers describe it:

> Well, YARRR is more of a club venue, so, it's a higher volume. But it's just that we also have other programmes in there. GirlDrop is more a hangout, no entry fees, a lot of start-up DJs are coming there. We give them the opportunity and sometimes we give them a short lesson to perform, how you need to DJ. YARRR is a bit more professional, on the performing side. (organizers YARRR, GirlDrop & Klitty)

An important aspect of YARRR, GirlDrop and Klitty is the flexibility and fluidity of these party concepts. The parties are characterized by a constant turnover of new ideas, varying in time, location, venue, crowd, music (DJs), themes and name. The organizers explained that they deliberately chose not to hold YARRR at the same place but to continually change the location, giving thought to the production costs and the need for a good sound system. Aside from preventing high monthly costs, changing venues keeps it interesting to themselves and to the clubbers: "And we like to evolve you know. And the reason why we change venues is that we don't want to bore our people and us also" (organizers YARRR, GirlDrop & Klitty).

Another example of flexibility can be found in the diversity of music offered at their parties. With YARRR, every hour a different style of music caters for different groups of women. This fits the trend of 'broad programming' (Boogaarts-de Bruin 2011) and hiring various DJs with different music styles to attract a broad audience. The party organizers mentioned that they explicitly aim to reach a diverse crowd, which fits the strategy of broad programming. It might also fit the need to accommodate different groups within the internally diverse lesbian community.

The fluidity and constant evolution of party concepts seem to be key to the success of lesbian and women-oriented parties (Cattan & Vanolo 2014). These characteristics might also explain some of the popularity of parties and festivals; if a concept does not work well, it is easier for event organizers to change some of its main elements (venue, location, music, targeted crowd) or to even start from scratch with a completely new concept. This is more difficult for entrepreneurs with a fixed venue. Being 'footloose' provides high flexibility and reduces costs. Fixed venues seem to have less flexibility to experiment with new elements (being tied to the same venue and location) and are locked into fixed costs. These dynamics seem to explain their struggle to keep their business healthy.

Fluid and multiple lesbian identities

During the interviews, the lesbian clubbers stressed the variety of lesbian identities. They associate a 'lesbian' identity with short hair, tattoos, piercings, a boyish look, and sometimes with 'being feminists'. These descriptions are paired with different labels. Among others Eves (2004) used a more classical distinction between 'femme' and 'butch', while our respondents mentioned *soft-femme* (Jane, clubber, aged 30), *hard-femme* (Jane, clubber, aged 30), *hard-core dyke* (Rose, clubber, aged 19) and *lipstick lesbians* (entrepreneur Vivelavie; Jane, clubber, aged 30). The idea of a feminist, boyish, short-haired lesbian seemed to be derived from the feminist movement of the 1970s (Fobear 2012). Most of the interviewed clubbers did not recognize themselves in these profiles. As Jane explains: "For example if someone asks 'what, what are you?' then I say like 'just gay'. 'Aren't you a lesbian then?' Well the word lesbian sounds so dirty. Les-bi-an, it sounds so owww, I don't know what it is" (Jane, clubber, aged 30).

The resistance to having a 'lesbian' identity might reflect a strong urge to 'be normal'. This impression is in line with the findings of Fobear (2012), who states that younger lesbians do not like to deviate from the gender norm. Jane (clubber, aged 30) states that she "does not like to be seen as different", and Simone (clubber, aged 26) explains that "If someone says: 'I didn't expect you to be gay'. Then that actually means: 'because you look straight'. And somehow I feel flattered (...) I actually do not want it to be flattering, but it is. And perhaps sometimes I even try a bit harder to look straighter."

This urge to 'be normal' seems to represent a sense of homonormativity (Browne & Bakshi 2011) in which clubbers feel the need to fit in with mainstream society without trying to hide their sexual identity (Fobear 2012). This might explain why some lesbians prefer to be invisible in the sense that they do not want to stand out from society (Fobear 2012).

While there are diverse lesbian identities, our respondents expressed more fluid ideas on gender and sexual identities. Jane (clubber, aged 30) states that "I don't think in masculine and feminine. That is what you [society] are doing. And that's why I also think about it sometimes. But for myself it is not something I think of."

Her comment highlights the important distinction between a self-ascribed identity and an identity ascribed by others. Several clubbers expressed discomfort about being confronted with stereotypes of what a lesbian identity would entail without recognizing themselves in these ideas. These clubbers felt they were being placed in a box, as others decide what it means to be lesbian. As Lisa (expert) states:

> In feminist or lesbian research and cultures there exists this strict distinction between 'femme' and 'butch'. Well, I am not really in favour, because you clearly separate it in feminine and masculine. While if you do not fit the gender norms, you shouldn't search for new boxes, to make this [new box] the new norm.

And as the organizer of Lesbique explains, "It's not like I have one identification box that I fit and I'm also not looking at other people like: 'wow, you are really this, or you are only that.' I think it's more a scale of different components and that nobody is only one thing." This fluid approach to both gender and sexuality is increasingly adopted by scholars (e.g. Browne 2006; Oswin 2008). Browne (2006) urges researchers to move beyond the homo/heterosexual and feminine/masculine dualistic framework towards a more comprehensive understanding that explores the complexity and fluidity of sexes, genders, sexualities and desires.

Three of our interviewed clubbers expanded on how plural and diverse lesbian identities are hypersexualized, especially during their mainstream clubbing experiences in Amsterdam. Personal examples reveal how two women who show affection are often sexualized in mainstream clubs; the presence of the 'male gaze' in these mainstream venues is a reason for some clubbers to prefer the queer scene. Sarah (clubber, aged 19) mentions that she is not taken seriously when she is clubbing with her girlfriend and encounters heterosexual men who try to hit on lesbian women: "Imagine someone would hit on my girlfriend and I said 'this is my girlfriend', they don't take it seriously and keep on going (…) Or if I were kissing with my girlfriend then people would only start sexualizing this: 'Oh really nice lesbian sex and so'."

Tiffany and Rose have similar experiences of heterosexual men making comments: "You have not tried my dick yet" (Tiffany, clubber, aged 25) and "Oh, that was horny, could you do that again?" (Rose, clubber, aged 19). Sarah, Tiffany, and Rose feel irritated by such behaviour, comments and gazes. They feel more aware of their sexuality because of the heteronormative gender roles which cast young lesbians as 'different'.

The plurality and fluidity of lesbian identities, but also the stereotypical features and urge to meet gendered and sexualized norms might explain why some young lesbian clubbers prefer to stay away from specific lesbian- or women-only nightlife spaces. However, the clubbers we interviewed affirmed the need for a safe space where lesbians can freely express their emotions and sexual identities in Amsterdam's nightlife.

Fluid dynamics of safe space

In general, lesbian clubbers describe queer venues as places where they can experiment and express themselves in an open way (in line with Valentine & Skelton 2003; Maliepaard 2015). "It is just really pleasant to merge yourself in a crowd." (Sarah, clubber, aged 19), and Simone (clubber, aged 26) states:

> You just want to celebrate your evening with peers, you just want to party. And ehm, you don't need to, you don't want to think about it! (…) And if everyone is gay, you don't need to think about it [sexuality], since you are just part of a group that does stuff together and when a group of heteros joins, you just immediately feel… so conscious again.

Both quotes illustrate how these clubbers experience queer space as safe and inclusive due to liberation from the 'male gaze' (supporting the findings of Pritchard *et al*. 2002), the ability to merge into a crowd without being aware of your sexual orientation, and the imagined queer community which creates a sense of belonging (see Pritchard *et al*. 2002; Valentine & Skelton 2003).

However, the idea of queer space as safe space is also contested. The idea of having your own space can be underpinned by a feeling of exclusion. Jane (clubber, aged 30) stresses the paradox of having your own space: it could create a safe environment in which you can express yourself "for one hundred per cent", while at the same time the *need* to have your own space implies that you are being excluded from other places. All clubbers mention how sexual comments and the male gaze make them feel uncomfortable in some mainstream clubs. They do not necessarily feel excluded but are highly aware of their own sexuality. The need for a physical space for lesbian clubbers in Amsterdam's nightlife emphasizes that lesbian sexualities are deviant from the dominant heterosexual norm. As Jane (clubber, aged 30) explains:

> We need to have that space, because it is not safe there [mainstream clubs]. That is what I don't like about it. That, apparently, I do have some desire for it [queer space], because I do not feel comfortable in another space from time to time. It's not a nice thought (...) it is very paradoxical.

It is interesting how clubbers navigate this paradox of not always being accepted in mainstream clubs, but also being unwilling to separate themselves from other clubbers based on their sexualities and gender. Rose and the organizer of Lesbique clearly disparage the idea of lesbian-only bars and clubs and say they would feel uncomfortable there. Lesbian-only bars are compared to a "snake pit" (organizer Lesbique), "a meat market" (organizer Lesbique), "where clubbers would come 'to hunt'" (Rose, clubber, aged 19) and "if you enter, all eyes are on you: 'fresh meat, yes!'" (Rose, clubber, aged 19). Among others, Anne (clubber, aged 27) stresses the tensed vibe in lesbian-only venues; therefore she prefers gendered mixed venues "because lesbians can also make drama out of nothing". She illustrates this with an example of a night at Vivelavie:

> All these dominant lesbians that are just fighting and so on, screaming towards each other, that I think: yo, this is not my scene you know. Yeah, I am not really in the mood to be there. (...) But on the other hand I think, if we are just nearby: Hmm, let's go there for a drink. Because then I'm with friends and then it's fine. I think it's important that something like this should continue to exist. Because you see that it's just relaxed, well in general.

Anne's experiences reveal contradictory and sometimes mixed desires. This messiness reveals complex dynamics of lesbian and queer venues (Valentine & Skelton 2003). While clubbers might have specific preferences for a night clubbing, these preferences and desires might not necessarily be connected to fixed places. Anne prefers other places to Vivelavie, but under specific circumstances (being nearby and being with friends) she would still go there. Later in the interview she states:

> Everything has become more liberated and open, so you don't focus any longer on one location. You don't need any longer one venue to meet people. I also notice it with my own circle of people that even if you're only with gay friends you don't necessarily go to a gay party. Because if you like a specific music style, you just go to a festival or to this club or that party. (Anne, clubber, aged 27)

The experiences of places should therefore not be understood as fixed, but rather as fluid and interacting with different factors like the company of clubbers, their music preferences, and their objective of the evening (e.g. to flirt, to dance, or to hang out with friends). These aspects are subject to change and influence how clubbers experience and evaluate the same spaces at different moments in time (Malbon 2002).

This fluidity does not guarantee that queer and lesbian space can be understood as 'safe' space. The queer scene still tends to be male-dominated, leaving less space for lesbians. Sarah (clubber, aged 19) and the organizers of YARRR, GirlDrop and Klitty mention the attitude of gay men and their dominant behaviour. Tiffany (clubber, aged 25) can feel completely ignored by gay men, in her view because she is a woman. She states that: "You are not really included by that kind of person [gay men]. Nasty comments, or meanness you know. It happens."

Tensions within the scene arise not only along gendered lines. Clubbers described other subgroups within the scene, they spoke of *hard-core dykes* (Rose, aged 19), *tinhorn crowd* (Tiffany,

aged 25) and *feminist lesbians wearing pink dungarees* (Sarah, aged 19). As the organizer of Lesbique mentions: "Within such a group [the queer scene] you see different minorities and there is not a high level of tolerance on some points."

These findings show that a queer space is not necessarily inclusive and safe (Pritchard *et al*. 2002; Maliepaard 2015). "Vulnerable social groups are not just marginalized/oppressed, but can also marginalize and oppress each other" (Valentine & Skelton 2003, 163). Although these internal divisions are partially gendered (e.g. Pritchard *et al*. 2002; Fobear 2012), it is of crucial importance to move beyond this gender dichotomy and stress the wide variety of internal differences related to lesbian and queer nightlife (Browne 2006). Internal exclusion was mentioned by the same lesbian clubbers as those who described the inclusive and open character of the queer scene. In- and exclusion can thus occur in the same space, illustrating the fluidity of space (see also Browne 2007b). However, while most of the lesbian clubbers prefer mixed queer parties and bars to lesbian venues, they argue that it is important to have some lesbian places available.

Safe space for lesbians is still important in Amsterdam's nightlife, but this does not necessarily mean that a venue should exclusively focus on a lesbian crowd. Lesbian clubbers themselves stress the importance of an inclusive vibe, where open-mindedness seems to be key. The organizers of YARRR, GirlDrop, Klitty, Lesbique and the entrepreneur of Vivelavie also emphasize the importance of creating and maintaining an inclusive character at queer spaces and parties. Being in an 'open-minded environment' seems important, but this open-mindedness occurs in different shapes and degrees. A lesbian venue might be perceived as 'open-minded' by default, since it moves away from the heterosexual norm and embraces other sexualities. Gendered norms do however still occur, which can produce new tensions. All the organizers involved in this research stated that they do not want to exclude people on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender or age, and aim to create 'open-minded' parties and venues where everyone is welcome.

Creating an inclusive space

One of the difficulties of responding to this need for a safe and inclusive space is that one venue might feel inclusive to some lesbians while other lesbian subgroups can feel excluded at the same time and place. The enormous diversity among lesbians and the existing internal tensions make it even more difficult to create an inclusive space for everyone.

Entrepreneurs within the queer scene do have experience with creating open and inclusive places. For example, the organizers of YARRR always explain what kind of party is going on to people at the door. The door policy is that everyone is welcome – regardless of sexuality or gender, as long as they respect each other and do not harass people or show disrespectful behaviour. Many clubbers who are unfamiliar with these inclusive parties react as follows: "And most of them [group of guys] are like, okay we'll get in, have a drink and then leave. And understand that girls are not interested in them. And some of them are like 'okay, then we'll go somewhere else. Thank you for letting us know." (organizers YARRR, GirlDrop & Klitty).

The entrance fee might raise the threshold for people who are not familiar with the party concept. Besides, the organizers describe how the level of inclusiveness depends on the location of the party:

> It depends on our venue. Because like Club Akhnaton, that is a venue with fewer spontaneous visitors. It is also the geography / location of it. So, a lot of people who attend are attracted by our party and invite their friends. In the past, when we organized our parties in the Winston (Warmoesstraat) we had a lot of street walk-ins [...] that is where it changes. (organizers YARRR, GirlDrop & Klitty)

The location of the venue, the advertising, and what you explain to people at the door are examples of how entrepreneurs try to make their event appeal only to people who are really interested. People who could 'ruin' a party will either not know about it or will not feel like joining in. These strategies of self-exclusion might be the key to organizing inclusive events.

The inclusive vibe that entrepreneurs within the queer scene try to attain is being commodified as former queer spaces are transformed into mainstream places with an increasingly straight crowd. Several lesbian clubbers gave examples of how formerly explicitly queer clubs like Club NYX are

becoming more mainstream, tending to attract a non-queer crowd. While straight clubbers might want to blend in with Amsterdam's queer community, several lesbian clubbers do not feel at ease anymore in these clubs; some say they are even being commented on by straight clubbers for showing affection. This pressure on queer space fits a broader trend of commodification and gentrification of queer venues in cities like Sydney and Toronto (Nash & Gorman-Murray 2015). In the process of gentrification, traditional queer clubs and bars become increasingly more attractive to a non-queer crowd (Doan & Higgins 2011; Mattson 2015) which can lead to feelings of displacement (Pritchard *et al*. 2002; Nash & Gorman-Murray 2015). While blending in of straight clubbers at (formerly) queer venues is often perceived as a sign of emancipation, it might also increase the pressure on the few 'safe spaces' Amsterdam has left.

Conclusion

The wide variety of queer venues in Amsterdam seems to reflect an open and tolerant city in which diversity can be celebrated. However, the international reputation of Amsterdam might explain its declining success. Increased commercialization puts pressure on Amsterdam's nightlife spaces, which specifically affects the more creative and experimental (non-profit) initiatives. The 'night mayor' of Amsterdam even launched a campaign to fight against the 'repression of nightlife culture' in the city (Nachtburgemeester Amsterdam 2019). This pressure on more experimental, creative and diverse nightlife cultures also affects the queer community. Queer venues are seen as hip and trendy, and it becomes 'cool' for straight clubbers to go there (notably to the Reguliersdwarsstraat). At the same time, it might be an economic strategy for some former queer venues to open up to a broader, non-queer crowd.

Opening up to a broader crowd also fits in with the philosophy of being 'inclusive'. Many queer venues aim for inclusion and want to be open to everyone regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. The declining lesbian visibility might be explained by a more fluid understanding of gendered and sexualized space, in which people with different sexual orientations, genders and ages interact as elaborated by Browne (2006) and Oswin (2008). This fluidity among different queer groups and between queer and non-queer clubbers could be a sign of emancipation. However, this fluidity also puts pressure on the existing safe space for lesbian clubbers. 'Blending in' of straight clubbers often reinforces the 'male gaze', which reduces the already limited safe space of lesbian clubbers. Although some lesbian clubbers stress the importance of being willing to mingle, and thereby relinquish the idea that it is necessary to have your 'own' lesbian space, these clubbers assert that their former safe space is under pressure.

Lesbian clubbers, entrepreneurs of lesbian venues, and organizers of lesbian and queer parties stress the need for a safe space, a place where lesbians can dance and act freely without feeling judged. All clubbers mention the need for safe places where they can express themselves fully, which is in line with earlier studies of Valentine and Skelton (2003) and Fobear (2012). Our participant stress that these safe spaces can also be open to other groups but their main focus should be on women who love women. One of the difficulties in creating spaces that are both safe and inclusive is the internal tension among lesbian clubbers caused by the enormous diversity among them. A fluid understanding of gender, space, and sexuality highlights internal heterogeneity which makes it challenging to create 'safe' space for everyone. Several subgroups have stereotypical ideas about the others, which leads to a fragmented 'lesbian' scene.

This internal fragmentation is visible in the underrepresentation of lesbian nightlife venues in Amsterdam. The nightlife scene for lesbians lacks diversity, with only one lesbian-oriented bar left. While several party organizers try to fill the gap, lesbian clubbers say that they do not have many places to go to, aside from more general queer venues and some open-minded 'open to everyone' parties. These more commodified parties cannot always guarantee a safe environment for lesbian clubbers. According to clubbers and entrepreneurs in our research, a dedicated crew with people who are sensitive to possible tensions and able to take action is needed to create inclusive spaces. Also door policies could be crucial to inform clubbers about the kind of party they are entering; an entrance fee might create a threshold for visitors who accidentally run into the party and are not

looking for a lesbian or queer night out. Furthermore, targeted advertising and the marketing of themed parties can lead to self-exclusion. Last but not least, balancing the needs for inclusive yet safe nightlife spaces is of key importance to celebrate diversity.

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