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'It's good to be exclusive'—the political landscape of queer nightlife in vienna

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores current dynamics and challenges of queer parties, festive events and leisure spaces as crucial sites of identity exploration, peer support and community-building, making them integral to understanding contemporary queer realities. Queer nightlife in the city of Vienna is increasingly constrained by restrictive regulations and frequent closures of venues, developments that have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, the Europe-wide rise in hostility towards LGBTQIA+ people underscores the need to analyse sites of communalization and resilience amid adversity. Accordingly, this paper focuses on how LGBTQIA+ individuals perceive and experience nightlife in today's context. We conducted three group discussions with a total of 17 persons who live in Vienna and identify as queer. Our findings highlight that, while (exclusively) queer nightlife spaces are valued for their potential to foster personal, social, and economic wellbeing, participants also noted increasing commercialization and gentrification. Moreover, Viennese queer nightlife is marked by fragmentation among subgroups within the queer community, with some divisions welcomed and others problematized. Overall, our results emphasize the importance of spaces tailored to subgroups within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum, alongside governmental support for queer leisure infrastructure.

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Introduction

Urban space holds great potential to provide the spatial conditions for queer people to realise their identities and form strong communities and movements (Doderer 2011, Oswin 2015). However, scholars caution against a premature celebration of cities, highlighting the prevalence of discrimination, marginalization, and violence even within queer-labelled urban spaces (Doan 2007; Klapeer and Schönpflug 2020). While traditionally, studies pertaining to queerness and space primarily foregrounded sexual minority experiences, research in queer geography emphasizes queerness as a radical deconstruction of cis-heteronorms and approaches queer spatiality as fluid,

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ambiguous, embodied and intersecting with various affects, histories, economies and infrastructures (Browne 2006; Knopp 2007; Nash 2010; Nash and Gorman-Murray 2017; Oswin 2008). This lens highlights that even if an urban area is designated as 'queer', it is occupied by different, competing queer identities (Nash 2006).

One key site for examining queer spatial configurations within urban environments is nightlife and leisure spaces, which are crucial to queer lived experiences. Specifically, our inquiry focuses on nightlife and leisure spaces where queer individuals casually and joyfully gather to celebrate, connect, and socialize—i.e. counterspaces to escape the everyday realities (Kramer and Wittmann 2023) of a cis-heteronormative society. This includes venues like bars, dance clubs, concerts, shows, festivals, parades, and other festivities. In these spaces, activists, artists, and participants come together to create new forms of sociability and practice their ideals through anti-binary and inclusive expressions of gender and sexuality (Eleftheriadis 2018). As such, queer nightlife venues pose a significant part of queer infrastructure, centring peer support and community-building (Trott 2020).

This is an especially noteworthy consideration in the context of Vienna, a city home to approximately 180,000 people whose gender identity or sexual orientation diverges from heteronormative ideas (City of Vienna 2024). The Austrian capital is characterised by restrictive nightlife regulation and governance (Niederwieser and Vihaus 2019) which was further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite supportive measures, the number of clubs in Austria has fallen by ten percent (Der Standard 2023). For the remaining nightlife venues, additional costs for implementing safety measures, high inflation, and energy costs compounded by rising costs of real-estate, strict noise control regulations, staff shortage and planning uncertainty pose great challenges (Kirner 2024). Moreover, the majority of Viennese clubs are not able to generate enough financial surplus to handle such challenges (Kirner 2024). Given these developments in Vienna's nightlife scene, the potential effects on the sustainability and sociopolitical relevance of queer festive spaces remain an important yet underexamined area of research. This is particularly relevant in light of Austria's prevailing conservative gender and kinship norms, where public displays of hostility against queer individuals perpetuate systemic inequalities, highlighting the ongoing struggle for acceptance and equality faced by LGBTQIA+ people (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, inter*, asexual/aromantic/agender individuals and those belonging to other orientations, genders, and identities) in Vienna (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2024). For instance, the rising hate and violence targeting drag shows observed internationally (Squirrell and Davey 2023), could also be witnessed in spring 2023 in Vienna when Austrian far-right extremists marched in front of the queer community centre 'Türkis Rosa Lila Villa' protesting a drag-story-time event for children (Puschautz 2023).

Considering the lack of scholarly attention Vienna has received in research on queer nightlife, this paper seeks to contribute to an understanding of the contemporary significance of—and challenges faced within—queer festive spaces through three group discussion (Bohnsack 2004) conducted with a total of 17 persons who live in Vienna and identify as queer. At the core of analysis lies the question: How do LGBTQIA+ individuals perceive and experience queer nightlife and leisure spaces in Vienna? The article is structured as follows: First, we explore the relevance of queer geographies of the urban night. In a next step, the details of the methods and data

used are presented. Subsequently, the outcomes of the study are illustrated with a focus on the importance of exclusively queer (party) spaces and fragmentation and alienation within queer nightlife. Finally, we end with a discussion and conclusion.

Beyond festivity: social and cultural dimensions of queer parties

Turning to queer history during mid-twentieth century North America, foregrounds various examples of how queer people, facing daily discrimination and violence, were carving out clandestine spaces within the urban landscape to call their own (Stryker 2008). Venues like bars, cabarets, discos or 24h diners served as important queer institutions that fostered the establishment and flourishing of kinships and cultures. Defying post-World War II US-American societal mainstream, gay leather bars, predecessors of gay dance clubs, furthered the formation of a distinct community with its own lifestyle, identity, codes, and aesthetics (Hilderbrand 2024). Urban public spaces in general continue to facilitate accessible gay sexual encounters while bringing forth site-specific sexual identities and practices (Brown 2008). Likewise, throughout the coalescence of lesbian bars in Montreal between 1955 and 1975, declaring lesbian-only spaces, denying entrance to straight men, but also upholding Butch/Femme roles, all functioned as spatial appropriation strategies for lesbians to become visible and claim their own space (Chamberland 1993). Consequently, queer nightlife spaces have been strongly entangled with queer liberation movements. Exposed to constant state-controlled repression, whether through legislative regulations (Brown and Knopp 2016) or police harassment and violence, such venues were politically charged spaces, that regularly escalated in riots (Stryker 2008). The most famous example are the Stonewall riots which sparked the formation of various activist actions, queer rights movements and organizations, and care services and networks (Shepard 2013). Similarly, ballroom culture not only offered a space to celebrate and uplift queer life but came with support and kinship networks alternative to the family of origin, especially for queer Black people and People of Colour (BPOC) (Bailey 2013; Rio 2020).

This political significance continues to the present day. Permitting escape from pervasive cis-hetero norms, queer parties provide safer spaces for LGBTQIA+ individuals to express themselves freely with less fear of judgment or discrimination, which is not only crucial for their well-being, but also bears political capacity. Putting queer joy, pleasure, and hedonism at the centre, queer parties are a direct antithesis to cis-hetero norms and the marginalization of queer persons (Bhardwaj 2022, 2023). Turesky and Jae-An Crisman (2023), for instance, argue that the spatialised queer joy enacted over 50 years of Los Angeles pride events functions as a ritual of remembrance and a radical, political organizing device that disrupts the heteronormative culture's comfort. The hedonistic celebration of excess constituting queer parties blurs the boundaries between collective political action and communal partying and acts as a form of reclamation of urban space informing social meaning beyond the actual events (Kates and Belk 2001). They are parties with politics (Browne 2007).

As Bhardwaj's (2022, 2023) research on queer BPOC nightlife spaces highlights, these events not only invite to dreaming and dancing, but also function as collective, embodied forms of transnational, utopian world-making. In line with this,

Garcia-Mispireta (2023, 6) points out that 'stranger-intimacy is a utopian practice' through which 'partygoers can enact and experience the world they want to live in'. Similarly, Verkuylen (2020) argues that queer BDSM play parties are structured around core values that foster inclusivity and radical participation, making them subaltern counter-publics to dominant neoliberal hetero-patriarchal structures with potential to inspire social structure alternatives. Such politics are enacted even on a visceral level by party attendees, be it through distinctions in gender performativities between gay men and trans women around sweat and other body fluids (Misgav and Johnston 2014), or through the rhythm of dance as a method of claiming space embodied by queer Black women (Adeyemi 2022).

Altogether queer parties are not only joyful festivities and recreational events but also and especially a crucial part of queer infrastructure generative of a politics of contact, kin-making and mutual care (Trott 2020). The recent pandemic demonstrated this once again. The intensive loss of informal support groups, LGBTQIA+ community spaces and social connections (Souleymanov et al. 2023), and the overall limited access to supportive environments which are specific to queer identities, was related to a rise in mental health issues in queer population (Bishop 2020; Salerno et al. 2020). In addition to the shutting down of queer community spaces, processes of de-collectivization, and the loss of queer socialities, members of the LGBTQIA+ community were at higher risk of discrimination and violence from government representatives, policymakers and healthcare providers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Adamson et al. 2022). Further to the historically prevailing systematic discrimination, people who are read as LGBTQIA+ are increasingly at risk of being stigmatised, attacked, or harassed in public or private settings, leading to an avoidance of certain locations and contexts (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2024). This also affects queer festivities that, since the 1970s persist to be targeted by deadly attacks (Hanhardt 2016), most notably evidenced by the mass-shooting at Club Q in Colorado Springs, US (Donegan 2022). Such curtailment of LGBTQIA+-rights and queer-phobic attitudes in the population renders joyfully oriented queer spaces even more important. Despite these challenges to queer nightlife, queer people continue to develop creative ways of resisting the disruption of their festive spaces (Ghaziani 2024).

Taken together, these strands of literature highlight the significance and functions of queer festivities. However, with notable exceptions (Andersson 2023; Bhardwaj 2022, 2023; Khubchandani 2020; Misgav and Johnston 2014; Trott, 2020), this discourse remains predominantly Anglo- and North American-centric, often focusing on specific queer nightlife niches and venues. Research specifically addressing Vienna is notably absent, leaving the local socio-political contingencies of queer nightlife insufficiently explored. Therefore, addressing this gap is vital for creating knowledge that advances academic research, informs sociopolitical discussions, and addresses tangible community needs.

Material and methods

We conducted three group discussions (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Sahr 2021) and analysed them using inductive qualitative content analysis (Elo and Kyngäs 2008; Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Mayring 2000, 2014). The group setting enables participants to

articulate themselves as part of collective contexts as well as to enact practices, experiences, and orientations guided by their own relevance frameworks. Both aspects are central to group discussions (Bohnsack 2004) and contrast with focus groups, where participants are selected primarily based on topic relevance rather than existing social ties, and discussions are actively guided by structured questions to cover specific themes rather than relying on an open stimulus, which ensures the prioritization of topics deemed relevant by the participants. Each case comprised four to seven persons who know each other personally and constitute a social circle in real life. While working with pre-existing groups is grounded in the methodological requirements of the group discussion approach, it is also important in research involving LGBTQIA+ individuals, as familiarity among participants helps establish a safe and trusting environment. The group discussions took place in person at the Institute for Advanced Studies Vienna. All participants live in Vienna and received an incentive (Kelly et al. 2017) of €20 in cash. The case selection was based on the principle of purposeful sampling (Patton 2014). Using this technique, we identified three cases in which both the availability and willingness to participate as well as a high density of information were given (ibid.). As similar experiences and backgrounds of the group members are central to a rich discussion, different focal points were set in the groups-compositions, e.g. regarding age and gender identity.

The first group comprised six LGBTQIA+ persons without Austrian citizenship. Participants were aged between 30 and 47 and had known each other for several years through friendship or work. The second group consisted of four FLINTA* (Female, Lesbian, Inter, Non-binary, Trans and/or Agender) persons, aged between 21 and 28, who organise queer events together and describe themselves as part of the same friends-group. The third group was made up of seven gay men aged between 20 and 33 years. Participants knew each other from the local gay/queer community, ranging from one year to several years. The three discussions were conducted in May, June, and November 2023, and lasted between 2h27 and 1h31. The discussions were audio recorded, selectively transcribed according to the research interest, and analysed according to the inductive qualitative content analysis, by deriving the criterion categories directly from the data, thereby reducing the influence of researchers' preconceived perspectives (Schamber 2000). Using the MAXQDA software, thematic codes were developed to compare relevant themes across group discussions and relate them to each other. In order to validate the results and ensure the creation of a shared understanding of the findings, the codes were built and discussed collectively among all research team members.

As an opening stimulus, we asked all three groups how their members had come to know each other and whether they could describe the relationships between the group members. While various topics unfolded in the ensuing discussions, queer nightlife spaces crystallised as the central theme in all groups. Identifying queer nightlife and parties as the major frame of relevance, we thus proceeded to examine important themes within the body of content pertaining to this topic and therewith provide a structured description of the social realities experienced in these settings. Other topics discussed by our participants (some of which intersected with the central theme) were queer activism, queer communities, generational differences and queerphobia.

It is important to note that the sample for this study exhibits a selection bias, specifically the predominant representation of individuals who possess academic education or orientation. Beyond this, fourteen of the study participants had an EU-citizenship (Austrian, French, German, Italian, or Swedish) and three participants had citizenships from non-EU countries (Ethiopian, Iranian, Serbian). Consequently, the findings and conclusions drawn from this study may be skewed towards perspectives and insights that align with viewpoints of academically inclined, predominantly white-European individuals, potentially overlooking the perspectives of other demographic groups, such as BPOC, Muslim, Eastern-European, and working-class queer perspectives. Furthermore, it is crucial to highlight that engaging in research with marginalized communities requires researchers to critically reflect on their own power and subjectivity concerning their research subjects, while also acknowledging the multiple and fluid contours of their sexual and gender identities (Gorman-Murray et al. 2016). As queer individuals are consistently excluded from conventional and socially accepted identity categories, we orient towards a queer qualitative methodology that remains sensitive to queerness in all instances instead of attempting to categorise and contain it (Ferguson 2013). This sensitivity is also reflected in our positionality as researchers, given that we ourselves are situated within queer (community) contexts.

Results

The importance of exclusively queer (festive) spaces

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant societal shifts and disruptions, profoundly altering the fabric of urban life in cities worldwide. In correspondence with international findings (Borowski and Stathopoulos 2023; Trott 2020), the pandemic-induced restrictions on social gatherings and nightlife activities emphasised the political significance of queer party- and leisure-spaces in Vienna:

It's nice to be there at parties, but with the Corona Virus and then just finding out that I have a lot of friends that I only meet at those events [...] And then I realised how really important it is to have just spaces, casual spaces where we can be ourselves or more ourselves and have fun. And watching a movie and laughing together is just, it is nothing more than that, and also it's so much more than that, just to feel good. (GD1, 258–263)

As participants described, these 'casual spaces' facilitate communal joy free from restraints posed by cis-heteronorms, thus carrying the potential to foster community. Noting that 'activism is escapism' (GD1, 270), participants characterised such forms of unrestrained joy as political and highlighted the importance of parties not only as sites of personal freedom and cultural expression but also as arenas for political advocacy and activism. However, as observed by discussants in recent years, a mainstreaming of queer culture and corresponding spaces is gradually curbing these political capacities:

Young people they're doing drag because of RuPauls Drag Race. They're not doing it because of a queer community. You'll see it I mean, it is a lot of new drag queens, [at this

event] there will be twenty-three performances, on one evening? Which is amazing, but everybody wants to be young and a superstar, and everybody does the deathdrop and the audience loves it, when the deathdrop comes it is all very much growing up with RuPauls Drag Race. (GD1, 99–103)

I just create spaces for queer joy, for partying, for drinking, for forgetting the outside maybe, just for a place to just be something else. Or being yourself, which is sometimes for queer people the same, if you don't have to project something, to the outside. And that is for the bubble. I have no interest in doing drag for heterosexuals. (GD1, 240–243)

Juxtaposing the popular status of drag within mainstream culture with personal experiences in the past, when 'it was definitely not drag for the straight society' but 'drag for the queer community' and 'totally uncool' (GD1, 252–255), participants exemplified the depoliticization of queer culture. They perceive contemporary drag as stripped from its political meaning of finding community or playing with gender or class archetypes, and instead motivated by a desire to be cool and famous. This proliferates queer (party) culture among 'heteronormative people,' who are described as 'imitating' corresponding aesthetics and codes and 'us[ing] [them] as fashion' (GD1, 213) without necessarily sharing corresponding political values and concerns. This goes hand in hand with an overall observed commercialization and gentrification of queer nightlife spaces in Vienna. Whilst this development suggests a wider acceptance of queer identities in society, participants also perceived it as an appropriation of queer space:

I do think that this currently is a problem [...] that queer spaces are actually taken away by heterosexual persons [...] if I go to a party that is defined as queer, then I think that's a problem, and especially if [...] maybe even several people from some rural areas travel there, and then they don't dare to approach anyone because they only see heterosexual couples making out everywhere, that's a problematic tendency (GD3, 16–21)

According to this perception, a formerly clear distinction between gay and straight spaces is no longer possible, signifying a "post-gay" era' (Nash 2013, 245). This can be attributed to the neoliberal commodification of LGBTQIA+ culture, which has not only increased the appeal of queer events and spaces for cis-hetero audiences but also fostered growing ambivalences regarding the actual queerness of these spaces:

So, I find it really unpleasant when I have these pumped-up hetero dudes standing there somewhere, who then, I don't know, stand there at the front and somehow, I don't know, don't even dance, I think to myself 'ey what do you actually want here?' (GD3, 25–27)

Hartless (2019a, 1036, 2019b) addresses this circumstance by introducing the concept of 'questionable queerness', referring to the fact that the LGBTQIA+-orientation of a space and its potential to encourage queer community-building become uncertain. For instance, queer codes and aesthetics signal political values and identities that help facilitate a more carefree and affirming navigation of space. However, the group discussions revealed that the appropriation of queer aesthetics can strip them of this function, weakening their role in guiding spaces and interpersonal interactions:

The thing of appropriating gay fashion, queer fashion, non-binary fashion becomes something, everybody follows [...] I don't even know if I flirt with this guy, if he will kiss me or if he will hit me in the face, because they all look the same. (GD1, 232–234)

I have my own experience with people that I know, like personally, that I know are abusers and yet they wear little crop tops. You know? And I'm like fuck you, less bleached eyebrows, and more therapy. (GD1, 226–227).

Queer parties offer possibilities for playful, flirty and/or sexual interactions with others. Thus, queer individuals can engage in experiments with identity/orientation, for which they are often sanctioned in predominantly heteronormative spaces. However, if it is no longer conceivable who can be approached without the risk of facing ostracization or violence, the entire space is rendered potentially dangerous. Along with the style, a more carefree and safer existence in a space is confiscated.

This goes in line with international studies in this field. As Ekenhorst and Van Aalst (2019, 202) point out, LGBTQIA+ nightlife spaces are perceived as 'cool, exotic and fun' by straight persons, who by entering these spaces subvert their exclusively queer and safe space characteristics. This development can be seen as part of a broader transformation in which cities' queer districts experience 'forms of "degaying"', by being commodified as shopping and entertainment spaces, mainly addressed at tourists (Nash and Gorman-Murray 2015, 87). While privileged consumers of all sexualities now enjoy access to most urban spaces, this often comes at the cost of displacing marginalized groups, such as low-income individuals, racialized communities or sexual dissidents (Mattson 2015). This shift towards a post-gay reality has also been associated with homonormativity, i.e. the privileging and acceptance of queer identities corresponding with heterosexual ideals like marriage (Bernini 2020; Duggan 2002).

Especially participants in later adulthood addressed this issue by criticizing that nowadays many queer people gather at queer events merely for entertainment, without identifying with the space. Likewise, they distanced themselves from those conforming to a homonormative lifestyle:

We're both lesbians, but I have nothing in common with this woman [...] she's for me a straight lesbian, there's nothing queer with her. She's married and all these like stuffs, you know? (GD1, 202–204)

Conversely, 'queerness means that you question normativity [...] constantly' (GD1, 195), which links the queer community and queer spaces to a political identity. However, with an increasing integration of queer culture into the consumerist mainstream, the premise of challenging cis-heteronorms can no longer be upheld. Additionally, the process of commercialization corresponds with a gradual decrease of exclusively queer spaces in favour of attracting a broader clientele:

Especially at [club], [event series] and the like, the organisers have also taken the step that we are no longer a queer party, but a sex-positive party [...] it's a trend towards permissiveness that runs through all sexualities and the organisers jump on, because, you can decide, either you take just ten percent of society to cash in, or you take hundred percent [...] it's a shame and partially a reason why actually queer, or gay parties in our case, are completely dying out and disappearing. (GD3, 32–43)

According to participants, party venue owners and event organisers prioritise economic gains when reframing of their spaces towards potentially more guests. This

trend is exacerbated by the overall 'Clubsterben' (the extinction of clubs) in Vienna. Initially associated with the closure of popular Berlin clubs in the early 2000s (Garcia 2018), the term was later used to raise concerns about the future of Viennese club culture during the COVID-19 pandemic (Derntl 2020). As reflected in the group discussions, the ensuing 'Clubsterben' has tangible repercussions for queer nightlife.

All the while, many queer clubs and bars have disappeared over the recent year, among them crucial spaces for sub-communities, such as a bar primarily visited by 'middle-aged gays' (GD3, 53), or 'the only official space for male sex-workers' (GD3, 51). Various authors have assessed this phenomenon for different cities. In the North American context, lesbian and women-only venues have experienced a decline since the 1990s due to gentrification and their gradual integration into queer commercial space (Podmore 2006). During this period, the city's gay Village was transformed and consolidated as queer, a process during which so called 'mixed' sites were established, i.e. shared gay and lesbian spaces, and former gay venues were turned into queer spaces. This process entailed a decrease both in lesbian spaces and small bars and clubs (Podmore 2006).

Such developments jointly contribute to a gradual loss of queer spaces, aggravating the already precarious situation, given that Vienna offers very few non-commercial social places for queer persons. For instance, participants indicated how 'if you're an adult looking for a gay community, there's nothing that's not commercial apart from the [non-consumer meeting place]' (GD3, 91–92). The limited availability of spaces that are not consumption-driven is seen as a major hurdle for queer community building, a need that participants described as a basic human right:

It is a fundamental thing to be able to connect with one's own kind, it is a basic human need, but it is not adequately supported by the welfare state, nor is it sufficiently carried by public funds. (GD3, 42–47)

This goes in line with participants' critique, that the funding of queer community spaces provided by the City of Vienna is fairly low and has not been inflation-adjusted, leaving the work to maintain such spaces to the unpaid labour of queer persons themselves.

Potentialities of queer nightlife spaces

The heightened level of security at exclusively queer party spaces offers opportunities for the formation of identity and community that are often lacking for queer persons in spaces dominated by cis-heteronormativity. For example, queer individuals who navigate mainstream cultural value systems alongside queer-specific cultural norms, are particularly affected by body-image issues (Joseph et al. 2023). Conversely, when placed in an empathetic communal setting, this can lead individuals to positively confront their body image and self-expression, fostering greater confidence and willingness to take creative risks in interactions with others (Joseph et al. 2023). In a social environment characterised by queerness, peers influence each other's self-view and decision-making processes. The FLINTA* participants in our sample experienced how the socio-spatial context of lesbian-centred parties facilitated a *transgression of hegemonic social norms*:

It was extremely fun for me to celebrate that with you, partly seriously, partly for fun, to exhaust it a bit, to kind of wallow in it and not have the feeling that it's too much or inappropriate, but to be just too much and to celebrate it together [...] That was really an experience that I fully appreciated in this whole [event series] and which was also a really exciting experience for me and I have the feeling since then that we can't quite get out of it anymore so [...] it goes on and on. (GD2, 42–48)

This quote refers to a specific moment of shared queer joy when participants were playing with stereotypically masculine gender performativities, including taking photos of themselves posing and flexing their biceps, laughing, and joking together. As described, participants were mocking these exaggerated forms of self-presentation, while simultaneously celebrating, enjoying, and appropriating them. This moment, thus, strongly resonates with the practice of 'queering,' a dynamic movement between 'clowning as much as serious critique' (Light 2011, 432). The lesbian party context offered participants an affective and open space to 'try out and see [...] what spectrum [they] roughly want to move on' (GD2, 61). As implied in the quote, these experimentations continued to be part of the participants' identities beyond the event context. Participants described having drifted in a more 'butchy' (GD2, 59) and 'masc' (GD2, 50) direction in their self-presentation, as their closer social environment re-formed as well:

I think being in the lesbian queer trans community somehow did a lot to my self-perception, and like I no longer want to be thin, I want to be strong and somehow especially the [event series] was so intense that I found more pleasure in it, also because I no longer have men in my environment and therefore the male gaze is slowly crumbling. (GD2, 52–56)

Engaging in such specific party events was described as a formative experience overall. Participants found a queer circle of friends, while, conversely, starting to have fewer cis men in their social network. As argued by queer geography scholars, rather than presupposing a distinct binary between 'heterosexual' and 'queer' spaces, gender and sexuality need to be understood as fluid and researched with attention to all their intricacies and contingencies (Browne 2006; Nash 2010; Puar 2002). In this case, the FLINTA* participants' queer identities solidified through the experiences made in the queer party contexts, travel and are further entangled with other aspects of their lives. Notably, this shift in self-perception took place 'super intuitively' (GD2, 62), influenced by the atmosphere of the lesbian parties. As elaborated in the group discussion, the beauty norms within such spaces do not merely transgress patriarchal beauty norms, they are inherently different and specific to the lesbian space.

Communities formed around queer party events also provide care on an *economic* level. As put during the group discussion, 'we keep each other employed and happy' (GD1, 320). Recognizing the professional and economic dimension of queer parties in heteronormative societies is important, as they create opportunities for networking and collaboration within the LGBTQIA+ community. Connections made at queer parties can lead to partnerships and cooperations that contribute to the development of infrastructure, whether it's in the form of businesses, organizations, or support services (Trott 2020). According to the discussants, this is particularly the case in artistic terms, e.g. by supporting and promoting queer performers, musicians, and visual artists, which in turn contributes to the overall cultural development of the community:

We were able to involve so many of our friends from the queer community, so that it wasn't just us who somehow had a community feeling for ourselves, but we were also able to involve other people, so that [...] we organise it together, and then you DJ, and then somehow a work colleague of mine also performed [...] and then another friend of mine with whom I had contact because of the drag performances, so it all went round and round within the queer community and our bubble and I found that really beautiful. (GD2, 79–85)

This quote illustrates another aspect of parties as queer infrastructure described by Trott (2020). Economic support for artists, performers, and organisers not only stems from an entrepreneurial motivation but is driven by mutual care. Participants describe it as 'a network where people are extremely supportive amongst themselves and are fully there for each other' (GD2, 95–96). This not only includes giving each other jobs, but also being 'always much better paid when [doing] projects in the bubble than outside' (GD1, 294). Further, and similarly to what Trott (2020) argues for Berlin, participants described how queer parties and nightlife events in Vienna are connected to broader community services, such as peer counselling, consumption-free networking evenings, or support for queer youth.

Fragmentation within queer nightlife

The issue of alienation and exclusion

While party venues that are explicitly queer are important for the participants, they alone are insufficient to promote the development of an inclusive social framework. Several lines of exclusions and fragmentation persist within queer nightlife, as all spaces are 'racialised, gendered, and classed' (Puar 2002, 936) and simply queering a space alone does not automatically negate structural influences. For example, commercial LGBTQIA+ nighttime leisure venues are predominantly white and exclude BPOC and other marginalised individuals. This exclusion is often perpetuated through practices such as othering, stereotypical attributions and racist door policies (Held 2015; Vo 2021), thereby compromising the safety and well-being of those affected. Moreover, transphobia, classism, and generational divisions render queer nightlife spaces exclusionary (Clarke 2024; Siverskog and Bromseth 2019). Such 'internal differentiation[s] in the community' (GD3, 132) were in fact a key theme in the group discussions. Specifically, the exclusion of trans people from lesbian spaces, the exclusion of people without financial resources and the academization of the queer scene, as well as intergenerational fragmentation were discussed as problems pertaining to LGBTQIA+ nightlife in Vienna.

Fragmentation within queer spaces can have different causes and ranges from gatekeeping to the exclusion of minoritized groups. In addition to structural marginalization, exclusions can also result from efforts to make queer spaces safer, as highlighted in this dialogue from our group discussions:

P1: And you had to be invited by either a person that was already on the chat, [...] by the administrators [...] so it was very safe.

P2: Yeah, it's safe but also becomes exclusive this way [...]

P3: Ah, it's good to be exclusive. (GD1, 122–125)

Whilst there is an essential need to keep queer spaces safe, as expressed by the study participants, a putative need for security can also function as a justification for the exclusion of certain groups. This can be observed in the case of *trans exclusionary* radical feminists (TERFs), a term referring to “gender critical” lesbian feminist groups’ and their mobilization against trans rights that have been re-emerging since the mid-2010s (Klapeer and Nüthen 2023, 25). Based on binary biological essentialism, they construct the presence of trans persons (especially trans women) in female/lesbian spaces as an ‘invasion’, while conceptualizing trans bodies as ‘contamination’ of cis women’s bodies causing an impending ‘extinction’ of cis lesbian bodies (ibid., 33). This rhetoric complements and supports conservative/right-wing ‘anti-gender’-movements. Referring to such anti-trans rhetoric, the FLINTA* group in our study discussed concerns about the inclusivity of lesbian party spaces:

Because it’s also a problem at many lesbian events and many trans people, whether they’re trans masculine people or trans feminine people, that there’s sometimes a concern that they’ll be asked strange questions. (GD2, 196–198)

The participants identified trans-exclusionary attitudes and practices as a central issue in lesbian nightlife spaces and emphasised the importance of overcoming binary understandings of gender and sexuality by advocating for a broad understanding of the term lesbian:

So, for me personally, it’s also really important to understand lesbianism as a spectrum that has a lot in it. And not just women who are into women and then look like stereotypical women, but to really communicate it as a very open spectrum. (GD2, 204–206)

A further line of exclusion observable in lesbian spaces—but is not limited to these—lies in the increasing *commercialization* of LGBTQIA+ venues. Taylor (2008) gives the example of lesbian working-class bars and clubs, where there is a high risk of gentrification. The resulting closure or rebranding of former working-class nightlife spaces contributes to fragmentation, as working-class lesbians feel out of place in commercial venues that middle-class lesbians can more easily occupy by ‘buying into’ them (Taylor 2008, 524). However, as discussed above, the problem of consumerization raised in our study appears to affect a range of queer spaces that lack non-commercial alternatives. Along with this, the *academization* of queer (nightlife) scene was experienced as an exclusionary mechanism, rendering certain spaces less accessible for non-academics or non-academically oriented queer individuals. This was perceived as hindering open, unbiased interaction and signalling disinterest or inhospitality toward non-academic individuals:

I’ve experienced that twice [...] when I was at parties and then got into a conversation there and said I was doing an apprenticeship one person turned around and left and another, well the conversation was only very short [...] since I’ve been studying and I tell people that, I’m studying [field of study], everyone is immediately interested in it and how cool it is and so on, [...] and whilst I was doing the apprenticeship, nobody even asked what kind of apprenticeship I was doing. (GD3, 74–79)

Describing his experiences as a disabled genderqueer activist, Eli Clare (2015) recounts similar struggles with classism within the urban queer scene. While moving to the city connected him to community and provided safety from the violence and ostracization he experienced in his hometown in rural Oregon, the exclusivity of the

urban queer community rendered by their middle-class assumptions and lack of understanding for rural working-class-struggles left Clare with a persistent feeling of displacement.

A further line of fragmentation within queer nightlife is that between *generations*. Amongst others, this results from missing contact between LGBTQIA+ people of different ages. As study participants in later adulthood pointed out, 'there [are] very few spaces where we actually meet or share spaces [with younger queers]' (GD1, 81–82). However, intergenerational encounters are crucial, as they allow LGBTQIA+ individuals with longer life experience to stay connected to the community and share their experiences with younger queer persons who depend on this transfer of knowledge (McLean et al. 2025).

In our study, the lack of such contact lead to a sense of disconnection among the participants in advanced adulthood, who questioned the authenticity of the younger generation's engagement in queer party culture. By 'othering' (Dervin 2016, 46) younger LGBTQIA+ persons, participants with longer life experience valorised themselves and their ideal of queer nightlife spaces and constructed their experiences and actions as fundamentally different. Claiming that in contemporary society 'support is everywhere' (GD 1, 61), younger queer individuals' community-orientation and need for queer spaces as political entities was perceived to be less urgent than in the past, due to the broader acceptance of queerness in society and new digital ways of connecting: 'they don't need this kind of support that we needed' (GD1, 61). Described as primarily serving apolitical entertainment interests and being 'more of a coolness [thing]' (GD1, 104), rather than 'actually connected to identity' (GD1, 104), current LGBTQIA+ nightlife was associated with a consumption logic increasingly pervading queer culture. As pointed out above, study participants in advanced adulthood objected this commodification of queerness, which they particularly ascribed to younger individuals:

I go to school with twenty-year-olds and they really don't have a sense of community [...] for them it's like going to some [queer event] is like going to some concert or something. (GD1, 45–47)

Siverskog and Bromseth (2019) point out that older people can feel out of place and thus disconnected in queer subcultural spaces that are mainly frequented by younger people. In cases where LGBTQIA+ persons of different generations meet each other, participants with longer life experience characterised both the lack of presence of people the same age, and the choice of music as mainly centred around young people:

P1: But it's still that when we go to [Queer Event] is this just in my head? Aren't there people my age? Am I like ten years older than everyone?

P2: No, at the last at [Queer Event] there were five of us [...] remember? And you were always complaining like 'Ehhh, they should play better music at least so that old people can also dance.' (GD1, 177–183)

Despite a general lack of contact and alienation between different generations of LGBTQIA+ persons reported by the participants in later adulthood, there are occasional encounters between different age groups. As Weststrate et al. (2024) point out, both younger and older queer individuals seek more intergenerational contact. This was

echoed by our study participants, who similarly regarded such contact as desirable: 'We don't cross path in the same way, I don't know, it's a bit sad' (GD1, 90–91).

Similarly, both the FLINTA* group and the young gay men in our study expressed a need for connection, while also criticising exclusions in queer nightlife based on gender and class. However, despite a strong desire for inclusive community-building, participants also emphasized the importance of separation and exclusive spaces for specific subgroups within the LGBTQIA+ community. This was not perceived as divisive, but rather as 'typically democratic' (GD3, 221).

Separation as a choice

While the exclusion from and the gatekeeping within queer spaces are a result of fragmentation in the queer scene—critiqued by both scholars (e.g. Wallenberg and Thanem 2017) and the participants in our study –, the maintenance of separate spaces within the LGBTQIA+ community is nonetheless seen as desirable in certain contexts. This desire stems from a fundamental need for a space of one's one:

I would also miss it if there weren't such labelled places. Where say the vast majority are queer, that's our queer bubble [...] because there's indeed a feeling of safety somehow and I know I have one less risk, very likely. The person is very likely to be queer if it's in this club. (GD 3, 8–12)

This inclination toward exclusivity was differentiated by the participants into a need for spaces for subgroups of the queer community. In this respect, separation was welcomed, as 'in terms of community, it's not a bad thing that there are different organizations' (GD3, 221) which can meet the various needs of its members, by 'representing different aspects' (GD3, 221) and interests. Simultaneously, participants challenged the assumption of the queer community as a uniform group, instead highlighting its internal diversity:

Because we're not just homogeneous [...] that's why at the pride parade there are the fetishists, then somewhere there's the rainbow family [...] and in between there are the employee-networks and that's completely fine. (GD3, 222–228)

Perceiving the LGBTQIA+ community as a homogeneous entity masks the plurality of needs and lived realities of persons who are 'homogeneous only to the extent that they depart from the heteronormative binary' (Lewis and Reynolds 2021, 545). However, beyond acknowledging the plurality of LGBTQIA+ identities, participants also expressed the need for niches within queer nightlife spaces that incorporate unique aesthetics, labels, and codes. As described above, these spaces are essential for sub-communities, as they enable the cultivation of different identities and cultures and are crucial both within the queer nightlife scene and beyond. This was also highlighted by the young FLINTA* group, who specifically pointed to a lack of lesbian spaces, which exhibit unique characteristics in terms of aesthetics and atmosphere, distinguishing them from other queer spaces:

I've never experienced a space like that before because it was somehow so lesbian. So, I don't know, there are a lot of queer spaces like that anyway, and I feel really comfortable in them anyway, but it's still somehow something completely different? (GD2, 73–75)

This goes in line with Browne (2021), who argues that lesbian geographies cannot be subsumed under LGBTQIA+ geographies, due to the intersection of gender and sexuality that is specific to lesbianism. However, the closure and loss of lesbian spaces in favour of mixed LGBTQIA+ spaces can be observed (Mattson 2023)—a development that is also reflected in the lived experiences of the study participants:

Because these explicitly lesbian spaces are simply missing and [...] there is not as much space as there is for the cis-gay community, for example, or the queer community in a broader sense. I don't want to deny the other groups any space at all [...]. It would simply be nice if there were more spaces, also for other subgroups of the queer community and so, because there is simply a need for them. (GD2, 172–174)

By challenging both heterosexual and patriarchal norms, the distinctive feature of lesbian spaces lies in the absence of the male gaze and male-dominated standards, as the discussants elaborated. This makes such environments particularly relevant as safer space, not only for the lesbian community but also for straight cis women:

Spaces like this aren't just needed for the lesbian sapphic community, but also for cis-straight women who simply don't want to be constantly grabbed, chatted up, harassed in any way, stared at. (GD 2, 186–188)

Altogether, participants view labels like 'lesbian' or 'sapphic' as multifaceted and fluid rather than defined by binary conceptions of gender and sexuality. Just as queer identities are fragmented and complex, so too is queer—or in this case, lesbian—space. Describing the label 'lesbian' as a spectrum and acknowledging that straight cis women find safety in these spaces goes in line with queer geography literature where 'queer' points to approaches interrogating sexual and gendered normoactivities, ultimately complicating the meaning of queer space (Oswin 2008).

Discussion

Our inquiry into LGBTQIA+ individuals' perceptions and experiences of queer nightlife and leisure spaces in Vienna highlights how such spaces are crucial to their personal, social, and economic thriving, and hence, are constituent to queer urban infrastructure (Trott 2020). While commonly, exclusivity is scrutinised from a progressive positioning, in the context of nightlife and leisure spaces, exclusivity is partially rendered desirable by the additional safety it bears for queer persons. Referring to the socio-political potentialities of more care-free, joyful gatherings among queer persons, the study participants voiced a need for more such spaces. Currently, factors like the increasing commercialization, an appropriation of queer aesthetics by heteronormative society and closures of queer bars and clubs work against this need for space being met in Vienna. Combined with the rising hostility against LGBTQIA+ individuals, these developments risk giving rise to what Bell and Binnie (2004) term a 'new homonormativity', i.e. the commodification of queerness within urban entrepreneurialism and city branding stripped of its radical or subversive elements.

As our results stress, the 'queer community' as a uniform, homogenous group does not exist. It is assembled of several different sub-groups, identities, cultures, and aesthetics that hold multiple fragmentations, ambivalences, and tensions—differentiations that are

reflected in the nightlife landscape. Participants both expressed a wish for more inclusion and contact among different queer groups, while simultaneously underlining the importance of more spaces specific to sub-groups within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. To foster a pluralist ecology where niches can fully thrive beyond exclusion and alienation, it takes material and spatial resources. In accordance with the principles of a caring democracy, policies should aim to meet the varied needs of the population, rather than centering on neoliberal imperatives of consumption, individualism, and profit (Tronto 2013). Concretely, participants of the study point towards requirements on different levels that could help address the shortage of queer spaces in Vienna. These primarily include the creation of exclusive, and therefore safer spaces, as well as non-commercial leisure zones supported by governmental financial structures and low-threshold offers.

Expanding on these findings, future studies could explore sub-groups in Vienna's queer nightlife scene that were not the primary focus of our sample, such as transgender individuals or individuals with parenthood responsibilities, to highlight a wider range of lived realities and needs in such spaces. Similarly, further methodological approaches could be applied to the field, such as ethnographic studies. Moreover, the inaccessibility of many nightlife spaces and cultures denies the discussed potentialities to many queer disabled persons (e.g. Perry 2024), raising the need for more research on disabled festive practices (Gotkin 2019). Accordingly, queer leisure spaces beyond the party and nightlife context could be a potentially fruitful alleyway into studying queer spatiality in Vienna.

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