

LGBTQ Youth & Safe Leisure Spaces

by
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VANCOUVER ISLAND
UNIVERSITY

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Julia Froese

Presented as part of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts in Sustainable Leisure
Management within the Department of Recreation and Tourism Management at
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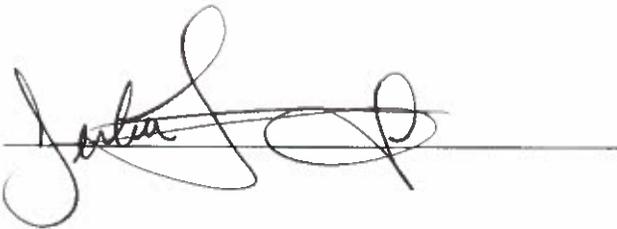
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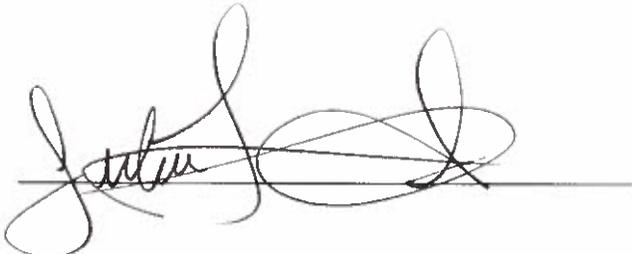
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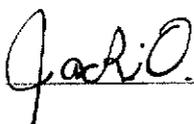
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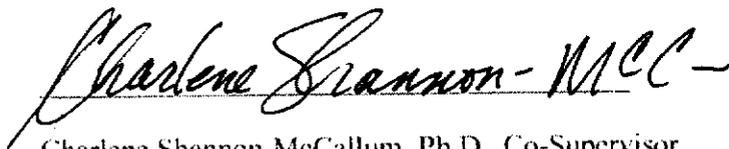
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THESIS EXAMINATION COMMITTEE SIGNATURE PAGE

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Abstract

LGBTQ youth often experience unprecedented amounts of homophobia and transphobia in the forms of verbal, physical, and sexual abuse. This can influence the level of safety that they perceive and experience in public leisure spaces. As leisure plays an important role in the lives of youth, it is important to address the gap in the literature on LGBTQ youth leisure, and to explore LGBTQ youths' experiences and meanings associated with safe public leisure spaces. The purpose of this study was to explore what experiences LGBTQ youth have that distinguishes public leisure spaces as safe. Guided by a phenomenological approach, 13 youth were recruited using purposive sampling and participated in semi-structured interviews. Three significant themes emerged. First, feeling a sense of acceptance by others was important to the youths' perception of safety and occurred through the others speaking and behaving positively towards LGBTQ youth, others being open to learning from and about LGBTQ, and gender-neutral infrastructure and safe-space signage. Second, youth felt a sense of community in public spaces with those who they shared similar experiences and shared hardship with, or felt similar to. Third, a freedom for self-expression was important to the youths' experiences in leisure activity engagement. The findings in this study suggest that safe spaces are connected to the youths' subjective feelings of acceptance, community, and freedom. Further, these three notions were most commonly experienced when the youth accessed LGBTQ-designated leisure spaces, which suggests that safety is epitomized when queer youth join together.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate my thesis to Dr. Jackie Oncescu and Michelle Harnett.

Jackie, thank you so much for all of the hard work you have put into my growth as a student over the many years. I would not be who I am today without you.

Michelle, thank you for your support over the last two years. I have learned so much from your independence, courage, and wisdom.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Within one's community, public leisure spaces are often perceived to be safe and inclusive environments where individuals have the opportunity to experience the benefits of leisure participation. However, youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning (LGBTQ) may disagree. Longstanding heteronormative expectations of dress, speech, manner, and sexuality remain to influence public leisure spaces (Bell, Binnie, Cream & Valentine, 1994; Browne & Bakshi, 2011; Held, 2015). These expectations are emphasized through the gender dichotomies that still embody many leisure and recreational activities of which these spaces facilitate (Block, 2014). Gender is the state of being female or male, independent of one's biological sex. Individuals may experience the sense of being a woman, a man, both, neither, or anywhere along the gender spectrum. Therefore, an individual may or may not identify with a gender that is representative of their biological sex. However, society has typically associated one's biological sex with one's gender. Traditional masculine and feminine views of recreation do not foster or support the development of identity for LGBTQ youth who may not subscribe to the gender binaries and stereotypes that often embody leisure activities (Block, 2014). For the most part, adolescents' "daily interactions support the notion that they are heterosexual and part of the majority" (Block, 2014, p.18). LGBTQ individuals however, experience that they are different and of society's minority, which can lead to "feelings of alienation and confusion" (Block, 2014, p.18). As these emotions take root, many LGBTQ youth experience guilt and shame over their emerging sexuality, and work to suppress their gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation as a means to cope with their identity and to combat social stigmatization and marginalization (Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011). Gender identity refers to the way(s) an individual experiences gender. Gender expression is similar, however it pertains to the ways in which the individual chooses to outwardly express their gender identity. An individual's gender is often expressed through the individual's behaviours, appearance, and preferred name and pronouns. Meaning that an individual can identify as any gender, but may or may not express their gender in visible ways.

Unfortunately, suppressing one's gender identity, expression, and orientation can have detrimental impacts on one's leisure-time satisfaction.

Stigmatization and marginalization against LGBTQ youth is often evident in leisure settings (White, Oswalt, Wyatt & Peterson, 2010). The spaces that facilitate leisure then can become a hard place for youth who fall outside of the "norm" to navigate through, as their sexuality and/or gender expression do not correlate to mainstream heterosexuality. Instead of rewarding and encouraging individuals to be their true selves in these leisure spaces, youth who are open about being LGBTQ often become easy targets to acts of bullying by other youth (Alvarez-Garcia, Garcia, & Nunez, 2015). This makes LGBTQ youth both uncomfortable and unsafe in these spaces, as they often become victims of homophobic and heterosexist acts of discrimination, bullying, and exclusion (Barber & Krane, 2007). Homophobic acts such as using the terms "fag" or "that's so gay" etc., are often heard in public leisure spaces (White et al., 2010). In particular, washrooms, change rooms, and hallways, are spaces where LGBTQ youth feel least safe and fear for their well-being (Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin, & Drechsler, 2012). Unfortunately, gymnasiums and playing fields are also places where LGBTQ experience feelings of fear over their safety, and report that authority figures such as staff members rarely intervene despite the victimization taking place in a visible space (White et al., 2010). In fact, researchers have reported that staff members said they would only get involved if the bullying was physical (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006).

In an attempt to avoid these unsafe leisure spaces, LGBTQ youth often choose to not participate in any leisure activities at all and therefore isolate themselves (Browne, Bakshi, & Lim, 2011; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Robertson, 2003), or only participate when they conform to traditional gender roles (Johnson, 1999; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Krane, 2001) which makes for an inauthentic and unsatisfying leisure experience. Evidently, LGBTQ leisure is largely dictated by the safe or unsafe actions of heterosexuals towards them, as they avoid or adapt to activities to negate bullying from others. Those

who are bullied have their feelings of safety and comfort taken from them in these spaces, along with their ability to freely engage in meaningful leisure that expresses their true identities.

Despite these challenges, leisure still plays an important role within the lives of LGBTQ youth as leisure can positively contribute to a youth's development. According to the Search Institute on Developmental Assets for Adolescents, safety and support are important for a youth's development (Scales & Leffert, 1999). Although these assets are not directly aimed at LGBTQ youth, it stands to reason that they are applicable to all youth, regardless of sexual identity (Theriault & Witt, 2014). As LGBTQ youth experience fears over their safety and may not experience support in leisure settings, these assets are highly relevant to their positive development. Indeed, Theriault and Witt (2014) found in their study on positive developmental settings for LGBTQ youth that safety and support were essential for positive youth development. These assets helped impact youths' feelings of belonging, and were helpful in empowering LGBTQ youth to express themselves freely and authentically in their leisure. This led to improved self-esteem and a strong sense of self-efficacy in the queer youth. Moreover, leisure may help LGBTQ youth in developing important life skills, preparing them for more adult roles, and improving youths' social skills, to name a few. Therefore, the benefits of leisure that youth can acquire through participation may help youth to develop in a positive way.

In addition, leisure has the potential to transform LGBTQ youths' feelings of fear and shame over their gender identity and/or sexual orientation into feelings of pride and empowerment (Iwasaki & Ristock, 2004). Such positive feelings are also recognized as internal assets of positive youth development (Scales & Leffert, 1999). Essentially, leisure spaces that are safe and supportive can contribute to positive LGBTQ youth development which is important as it ultimately leads to an individual's success. Therefore, leisure spaces should not be spaces that youth fear and avoid, rather, they should be places where meaning and satisfaction are derived (Henderson & Frelke, 2000). It is then both unfortunate and sadly ironic that the spaces meant to foster liberating and enjoyable leisure activities are also the environments in which LGBTQ youth feel the least safe to perform these

activities (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Roper & Halloran, 2007; White et al., 2010). Therefore, more research is needed to understand how leisure service providers can create safe public leisure spaces for LGBTQ youth.

The purpose of this study is to explore LGBTQ youths' experiences and meanings associated with safe public leisure spaces. The guiding research question is, "what experiences do LGBTQ youth have that distinguishes public leisure spaces as safe?" Through the described experiences of LGBTQ youth, the objectives of this study are as follows: 1) to identify specific leisure programs and services that meet the needs of LGBTQ youth, which will give insight to the activities which foster the freedom for them to authentically engage in leisure; 2) to identify leisure facility infrastructure, such as safe space signage and gender-neutral bathrooms and change rooms, that contribute to safe public leisure spaces; and, 3) to identify the interpersonal behaviours and interactions of leisure staff that create safety within public leisure spaces.

The knowledge collected through this research has the potential for various impacts. First, this project provides an opportunity for LGBTQ youth to share their lived experiences, and these stories can contribute to the development of inclusive and safe community leisure spaces. Second, this research will address the dearth of literature that exists on leisure spaces and safety of LGBTQ youth. Finally, the knowledge from this study can be mobilized to help leisure practitioners create safe public leisure spaces for LGBTQ youth.

Key Terms

To best understand this study, the following key terms are provided below.

Sexuality. Sexuality refers to an individual's sexual orientation or romantic partner preference.

Heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is defined as "the myriad of ways in which heterosexuality is produced as a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted, ordinary phenomenon" (Kitzinger, 2005, p. 478).

Heterosexism. Heterosexism is defined as "the belief that heterosexuality is the only acceptable

form of sexual orientation and that non-heterosexuals should be universally excluded from society's structures and institutions" (Messina, Hwahng, & Vavasis, 2011, p. 113).

Homophobia. Homophobia is defined as "an irrational fear of lesbians and gay men" (Barber & Krane, 2007, p.6).

Safe spaces. Safe spaces is defined as spaces that are free from "violence, harassment, discomfort, and social exclusion" (p.193), where the space is either inclusive or exclusive to provide safety from hegemonic views, and where marginalized groups are supported (Fetner et al., 2012).

Youth. Youth for the purposes of this study is defined as individuals who are 15 years of age or older and still in high school.

Public leisure spaces. This study will look at public leisure spaces in the context of any space that holds leisure-oriented activities. This may include recreation facilities such as gymnasiums, sport and recreation fields and courts, as well as art, music, sport, and youth clubs, etc. Leisure is defined as both an activity and a state of mind, depending on how the participant spoke about their leisure. Any activity within public leisure spaces that the participant engages in, and those that fostered a sense of freedom for the individual were considered. The participants will have the freedom to discuss the meanings of their experiences in any leisure space and within any leisure activity that is important to them when considering their safety in these spaces. Considering leisure as a state of mind seemed relevant to this study as LGBTQ youths' free choice and internal motivation are often suppressed in leisure activities, as discussed above. Therefore both definitions of leisure were taken into consideration.

LGBTQ youth. LGBTQ youth are those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning (Block, 2014; Seelman, Forge, Walls, & Bridges, 2015). This study will consider youth whose gender/expression/sexuality may or may not already be "out", in partiality or fully, to others.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter highlights relevant literature and summarizes the theoretical framework for the study. Topics summarized below include public leisure spaces, safe spaces, LGBTQ youth and leisure experiences, LGBTQ youth and leisure spaces, and leisure staff. This literature created the foundation of the theoretical framework, which specifically focused on leisure activities, leisure infrastructure, and public leisure staff. It should be noted that the literature chosen for this study pertains primarily to white, middle-class, urban youth because it was representative of the context of the study's participants. At the end of this chapter I highlight how this literature informed the theoretical framework of the study.

Public Leisure Spaces. The Industrial Era was a time where rebellion and delinquency among youth was at a peak (Pryor & Outley, 2014) which motivated social activists to create public leisure spaces to “shape civic involvement, moral development, and general community cohesion” (p.5). This allowed youth to engage in leisure in a safe space, as opposed to engaging in misbehavior while parents worked in the factories (Pryor & Outley, 2014).

Leisure takes place, and is produced and consumed, in spaces (Crouch, 2006). Oldenburg (1999) describes public leisure spaces as a “core setting of informal public life” (p.16), and essential to “regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (p.16). Such spaces are considered familiar and neutral, accessible, accommodating, playful, and a site for social interactions (Mair, 2009). Importantly, these spaces can act as a home away from home at times for members of the community (Glover & Parry, 2008), and often provide positive and enjoyable social experiences (Cheang, 2002). Leisure spaces are influential to a person's identity, as they engage in leisure in these spaces, and make new knowledge about everyday life through which “ideas, feelings and events in the world

may be renegotiated” (Crouch, 2006, p.136). Indeed, leisure spaces contribute to self-realization and identity development as one learns about and constructs personal leisure meanings and values (Crouch, 2006). Therefore, leisure spaces become endowed with significance as the individual engages with the space over time (Maffesoli, 1995).

Public leisure spaces have been well documented in leisure scholarship as a means to creating inclusion and a sense of belonging within community (Lloyd & Auld, 2003; Peters, 2010; Shinew, 2004), and also for developing positive youth identity (Henderson & Frelke, 2000; Pryor & Outley, 2014; Theriault, 2014), to name a few. These spaces allow individuals to tackle social issues in a nurturing environment through leisure (Pryor & Outley, 2014), which is important when considering LGBTQ youth challenges and development.

Safe Spaces. The literature on safe spaces denotes these spaces as “free spaces”, “protected spaces” and “havens” (p.189; 191), which exist primarily for marginalized and vulnerable populations (Fetner et al., 2012). Evans and Boyte (1986) refer to safe spaces as “the environments in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills and values of cooperation and civic virtue” (p.17). Further, these spaces are powerful sites for challenging hegemonic norms, liberating and empowering individuals, and creating social change for marginalized populations (Fetner et al., 2012). In this way, safe spaces act as both a shelter from dominant ideologies and as a preliminary catalyst to social movements (Evans & Boyte, 1986; Morris, 1984).

Safe spaces, however, is broadly stated within the literature and not clearly defined (Boostrom, 1998; Fetner et al., 2012). Fetner et al., (2012) note some important components to safe spaces that are worthwhile. To start, an individual’s affective state plays a part in the determining of what constitutes a safe space (Fetner et al., 2012). Fear is as significant as the

presence of violence itself, as it too will prevent participation (Skeggs, 1999). Therefore, where individuals feel fear, hostility, and insecurity, there is a need for a safe space, and similarly, for a space to be considered safe, the individual must be void of fear. Essentially, the individual must feel a space to be free from harm. Consequentially, in order for the space to be safe, this may require the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others (Fetner et al., 2012; Skeggs, 1999). This segregation is important because safe spaces are social settings, and social settings are complex and vary culturally, and are unpredictable. Therefore, to better predict safety, agreement on membership of some sort is often necessary within a space (Fetner et al., 2012). This selective inclusion fosters a setting where like-minded individuals can communicate with one-another and enable each other to act towards social movement initiatives, which is another component of safe spaces (Fetner et al., 2012).

Although these spaces bring marginalized people out of social isolation and into an environment where they can be supported in their sexuality and gender identity (Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin, & Drechsler, 2012), there are still underlying power and privilege inequalities that may remain apparent within the space. For example, despite the majority of those who access LGBTQ-designated spaces identifying somewhere along the queer spectrum, this similarity alone does not diminish the other social factors at play, such as class, race, ethnicity, religion, age, able-bodiedness, health status, and other markers of difference that distance one from another. These inequalities are what lie at the heart of many social problems (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). Indeed, marginalization within LGBTQ-designated spaces has been identified, resulting in the exclusion of certain LGBTQ individuals in those spaces (Browne & Bakshi, 2011; Fetner et al., 2012; Held, 2015). So, while these spaces may work towards bringing LGBTQ individuals together in a safe space, other factors that divide one from another

may also be apparent. Therefore, these spaces may be safer for some, while simultaneously being less safe for those who are less privileged in society.

Safety is also increased when supervision, programming, and policies, through means of anti-bullying rules and procedures, and anti-discrimination staff training manuals are incorporated (Therriault & Witt, 2014). Using such guidelines and expectations within spaces creates a more welcoming and comfortable environment, which increases the perception, and often, the reality of safety within (Arao & Clemens, 2013). While spaces may have policies and procedures that staff members are abided to follow to ensure safety for LGBTQ individuals, this does not ensure that staff members are in fact sensitive towards LGBTQ individuals' needs or that they uphold the rules for inclusion. Religious beliefs, homo- and trans-phobia, naivety, insularity, and other factors that bring discrimination can affect the ways in which the policies are carried out within a space. The Ontario Human Rights Commission (a.k.a. OHRC; 2014) states that discrimination against LGBTQ individuals can be subtle and hidden, but harmful just the same. At the organizational level, rules may look neutral and as though they encapsulate the rights for all peoples, when in reality some are excluded (OHRC, 2014). Therefore, the classification of a space as "safe" raises some interesting contradictions, as safety cannot be guaranteed because all social settings are complex, diverse, and ultimately unpredictable.

In addition, feelings of safety are increased in a space if the individual perceives a sense of belonging and inclusion and social control (Held, 2015; Myslik, 1996). Despite the positive benefits of safe spaces, many do not receive the attention they deserve as they are overshadowed by more dominant spaces that work to serve the larger majority of society (Fetner et al., 2012). Unfortunately, LGBTQ spaces are one such overlooked safe space.

LGBTQ Youth. During adolescence, youth can experience a range of challenges such as sexuality, parental conflict, and peer pressure (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000). LGBTQ youth also face these problems, however, theirs are magnified by the “emotions, feelings, and attractions that run contrary to the dominant messages and norms of a heterosexual society” (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000, p.4). This makes LGBTQ youths’ problems different from heterosexual youth, because their sexuality, gender, and relationships are not as easily understood or supported by society at large (Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011). This can cause anxiety for many LGBTQ youth who are uncertain and fearful of the reactions that could take place if they were to “*come out*”, or if their gender and/or sexuality preference were to be “*found out*” (D’Augelli, 2003; Kerr, Santurri, & Peters, 2013).

Although youth who are LGBTQ typically are aware of their gender identity and sexual orientation by 12 years of age (Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011), most stay “closeted” until early adulthood, when they are less likely to experience stigma and negative pressures from family and school (D’Augelli, 2003). This is unfortunate because youth develop their identities during adolescence, and one’s gender identity and sexual orientation is a foundational component of one’s identity (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Seelman, Forge, Walls, & Bridges, 2015). The burden of hiding one’s identity trickles into all aspects of LGBTQ youth’s daily lives (Iwasaki & Ristock, 2004). Hetrick and Martin (1987) stated that: “individuals who feel compelled to hide [their LGBTQ status] must constantly monitor their behavior in all circumstances: how one dresses, speaks, walks and talks, become constant sources of possible discovery” (as cited in Kivel & Kleiber, 2000, p.229). This is known as visibility management, where LGBTQ youth constantly monitor their decision to disclose their sexual orientation, and if so, to whom and how they disclose, and how it becomes altered and carefully planned out according to the differing

environments they find themselves in (Lasser & Tharinger, 2003). LGBTQ youth often require a careful plan as to how they will access and partake in leisure spaces, essentially creating strategies for negotiating heterosexual norms when occupying leisure spaces (Skeggs, 1999). For example, some monitor and modify their dress, speech, and body language in public spaces (Lasser & Tharinger, 2003). Some choose to change the pronouns of their partners to conceal the fact that they are of the same sex, or choose to disclose that information altogether (Lasser & Tharinger, 2003). The use of subculture symbols, references to modern pop culture, and humor are also tactics used to blend into a heterosexual society (Lasser & Tharinger, 2003).

The daily challenges facing LGBTQ youth creates a profound amount of stress, which can lead to a range of health issues. In particular, LGBTQ youth are highly subjected to serious mental health issues including anxiety, depression, suicide ideation (Kerr et al., 2013; Muchico, Lepp, & Barkley, 2014; Robinson & Espelage, 2012; Theriault & Witt, 2014), and are at higher risk for dropping out of school, becoming homeless, abusing drugs and alcohol, and being sexually victimized (Fetner et al., 2012; Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009). These outcomes are significantly disproportionate compared to heterosexual youth (Fetner et al., 2012), and can originate, in part, from sexually oppressive conditions and heterosexism and homophobia that they experience from others (Theriault, 2014).

LGBTQ youth and leisure experiences. Heterosexism and homophobia are known to have a detrimental impact on the leisure activities that LGBTQ youth participate in (Barber & Krane, 2007; Baumen & Del Rio, 2006; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Ropper & Halloran, 2007; White et al., 2010). Many LGBTQ youth hold the legitimate fear of becoming victimized physically and/or verbally during leisure experiences, and these lingering threats can cause them to not participate in leisure at all (Johnson, 1999). In fact, Kosciw and Diaz's (2006) study on LGB

youth school climate found that 37.8% were physically harassed and 64.1% were verbally harassed, in addition to hearing homophobic terms like “fag” and “that’s so gay” etc., almost every day (as cited in White et al., 2010). This discrimination does not foster a positive and inclusive environment in leisure spaces, and therefore, it is not surprising that LGBTQ youth do not seek leisure activities, but rather solitude (Browne, Bakshi, & Lim, 2011; Johnson, 1999; Lewis & Johnson, 2011).

Within this free-time solidarity, boredom can start to take place and become a catalyst for acts of “rebellion” or risky leisure behaviour (Caldwell et al., 1998). In fact, LGBTQ youth are at a high risk for sexual risk-taking and substance abuse (White et al., 2010), which may be attributed to boredom and lack of available activities due to homophobia and heterosexism in leisure settings. Although many heterosexual youth also succumb to these issues, the motives behind their engagement are different. Savin-Williams, Ritch and Cohen (1996) found that heterosexual youth take part in substance misuse due to peer pressure or thrill-seeking, while LGBTQ youth are more likely using substances to suppress their growing awareness that they are not heterosexual, to deal with the distressing realization that there will be difficulties ahead, and to take “revenge” against a heterosexist society that rejects them (in Messina, Hwahng, & Vavasis, 2011; Caldwell et al., 1998). However, those who choose not to purposefully isolate themselves, have other issues pertaining to leisure activities. Many LGBTQ youth perceive the only other safe alternative to leisure is to conceal their gender identity, expression, and/or sexuality in those spaces (Johnson, 1999; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Krane, 2001), and to conform to the traditional gender roles and expectations that dominate leisure activities (Block, 2014; Browne & Bakshi, 2011; Robertson, 2003; Roper & Halloran, 2007). Unfortunately, suppressing one’s true identity diminishes the amount of satisfaction that LGBTQ youth can derive from

these leisure experiences, and limits their opportunities for self-expression and belonging (Theriault & Edwards, 2014). It also has a negative influence on the relationships that they form with others. For example, Lasser and Tharinger (2003) identify the dilemma that LGBTQ youth face between coming out and experiencing homophobic violence, versus conforming to heterosexual norms to maintain and build friendships. In addition, many LGBTQ youth experience guilt for portraying a false sense of self with others and creating what they deem to be a more superficial relationship (Johnson, 1999; Robertson, 2003). As a result, some youth choose leisure experiences that isolate themselves from others rather than being on teams, to negate heterosexism and homophobia from others (Roper & Halloran, 2007). This impacts their opportunities to meet people and develop meaningful friendships. Without the social component of leisure, LGBTQ youth are less likely to have experiences that help them gain a sense of relatedness and support from others, increasing their perceptions that they do not belong (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Messina et al., 2011; Robertson, 2003). Not surprisingly, if LGBTQ youth perceive the space to be non-inclusive, unsupportive, and unsafe, they are unlikely to go there (Barber & Krane, 2007).

LGBTQ and leisure spaces. Sexual minority youth may experience public spaces as being not accepting nor accommodating of them, as heterosexism is often assumed and taken for granted in these spaces (Skeggs, 1999). The overarching threat of heterosexist violence and harassment profoundly impacts how LGBTQ youth access and use public spaces (Fileborn, 2013; Held, 2015). Therefore, it is important to consider leisure spaces apart from the activities that are facilitated there, to determine the perception of safety that infrastructure design can provide. Within public spaces, youth often conceal their gender identities and sexual orientations out of fear of homophobic harassment (Fileborn, 2013). Specifically, hallways and the lack of

gender-neutral change-rooms and locker rooms are problematic for LGBTQ youth because these public spaces are where homophobia and heterosexism is most pronounced (Fetner et al., 2012; Gillard, Buzuvis, & Bialeschki, 2014; Morrow & Gill, 2003; O'Brien, Shovelton, & Latner, 2013; White et al., 2010) with Canada's first National Climate Survey on Homophobia stating that three-quarters of LGBTQ students feel unsafe in these spaces (Taylor et al., 2008). This is related to the fact that these spaces do not have the same amount of supervision as the spaces that hold the actual activities. Whyte (1988) agreed that the less people in an area, the less safe that area is likely to be. In addition, gymnasiums and playing fields are also spaces where victimization often occurs (White et al., 2010). Therefore, LGBTQ youth not only have to worry about heterosexist bullying when participating in leisure activities, but also when trying to access the spaces where leisure is facilitated.

To deviate from heterosexism altogether, many LGBTQ youth choose to enter leisure spaces that are designed specifically for LGBTQ-only individuals, also known as "group enclosure" (Johnson, 1999). These spaces increase LGBTQ youth's sense of safety and belonging, while also eliminating the fear and anxiety over homophobic discrimination, and of hiding one's gender preference and/or sexual identity (Fetner et al., 2012; Fileborn, 2013). In Held's (2015) study on safety and comfort for LGBTQ in public spaces, many of the participants emphasized their increased comfort and safety in gay spaces as opposed to straight spaces, claiming that they feel threatened in hetero places. Further, many were protective over these gay-only spaces, indicating that heterosexuals were threats to these spaces and the leisure activities therein (Held, 2015). These spaces give opportunities for LGBTQ youth to engage in gender-neutral activities, and express themselves in other activities more freely and authentically (Fileborn, 2013). In particular, these spaces allow youth to "engage in acts that would be unsafe

in many contexts such as dating, dancing, engaging in advocacy, celebrating LGBTQ culture, and expressing themselves through unconventional modes of dress” (Therriault, 2014, p. 456). Although these spaces eliminate the fear that originates in public leisure activities, there are three problematic factors: first, that not including heterosexuals widens the hetero/homo gap, which ultimately encourages exclusion; second, that there are not many LGBTQ-youth only spaces available; and third, that the activities provided within LGBTQ-only spaces are limited compared to the wide array of public leisure facilities (Johnson, 1999). Therefore, it would appear that many LGBTQ youth face the dilemma of choosing leisure spaces that either engage them in a wide variety of public leisure at their own peril, or, provide them with a sense of inclusion and belonging but cannot meet all of their needs.

LGBTQ and leisure staff. Leisure providers also play a critical role in the perception of safety in community leisure spaces for LGBTQ youth (Therriault & Witt, 2014). Unfortunately, LGBTQ youth who experience heterosexist victimization often do not see staff or authority figures intervene (Barber & Krane, 2007; Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011; Kosciw et al., 2009; Morrow & Gill, 2003). One study on school climate stated that youth witness staff intervention only about 16.5% of the time (White et al., 2010). This is often due to the nature of the bullying, where heterosexist language, such as “that’s gay”, is perceived as harmless or not severe enough to warrant intervention (Kosciw et al., 2009) with some facilitators saying they would only get involved if the victimization was physical (Baumen & Del Rio, 2006). But terminology plays a profound role in making LGBTQ youth feel like they belong; staff who take care in using proper pronouns with LGBTQ youth, and are comfortable with saying “gay” or “lesbian”, make leisure spaces more inclusive (Barber & Krane, 2007). This also positively affects the way heterosexual

youth use language and can be known to increase their awareness on LGBTQ issues and rights (Barber & Krane, 2007).

Unfortunately, there have been accounts of staff actively trying to prevent LGBTQ inclusion policies (Fetner et al., 2012; Robinson & Espelage, 2012) by allowing generic anti-bullying policies but not allowing them to extend over sexual minorities, and furthermore, creating “Don’t Say Gay” bills (Robinson & Espelage, 2012). Some LGBTQ youth have even experienced homophobia and heterosexist remarks from staff members first-hand (Morrow & Gill, 2003; O’Brien et al., 2013). For example, one participant in Fetner et al.’s (2012) study on safe spaces in high schools, shared the experience of witnessing a teacher putting a scantily clad photo of Lindsay Lohan in front of a gay male’s face, and teasingly questioning him that the photo “doesn’t do *anything* for [him]???” (p.198). This type of staff behavior only exacerbates homophobic bullying, which is especially devastating because staff above all should be the ones who set an example of inclusion and support. Evidently, LGBTQ youth lack positive role models that act as allies for sexual minority groups (Bird, Kuhns, & Garofalo, 2012; Flowers & Buston, 2001). Leisure practitioners often do not discuss matters of LGBTQ in leisure settings, and/or do not feel as though they can make a difference on the matter, which does not help in the prevention and termination of heterosexism and homophobia in leisure settings (Barber & Krane, 2007).

Despite the challenges associated with leisure practitioners, they are in a position that can have a positive impact on LGBTQ youth. Leisure practitioners that are openly “out” significantly affect participants’ perceptions of LGBTQ individuals in a positive way (Lewis & Johnson, 2011; Roper & Halloran, 2007). In many cases, LGBTQ staff are able to better discuss sexual minority issues and give heterosexual youth a positive example of LGBTQ individuals. These

interactions reduce one's negative attitudes towards LGBTQ people, which creates a safer leisure space for everybody (Roper & Halloran, 2007). In addition, scholars have found that educating leisure staff about LGBTQ by providing workshops and training manuals have been positively associated with increased awareness of LGBTQ issues, and sequentially increasing their understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ youth (Barber & Krane, 2007; Theriault & Edwards, 2014; White et al., 2010). This improves staff behaviours and relationships among LGBTQ youth and ultimately creates a healthier environment for all. White et al., (2010) found that LGBTQ youth who perceive support from heterosexual adults are more likely to have increased positive feelings of self-worth, self-respect, self-esteem, and integrity. This ultimately creates positive identity development within LGBTQ youth and reduces their likelihood of engaging in the negative risk-behaviors that LGBTQ youth are particularly susceptible to (Fetner & Elafros, 2015; White et al., 2010). Research has suggested that leisure programmers should seek out employees who identify as LGBTQ, as they can help change youth's negative perceptions towards LGBTQ populations (Roper & Halloran, 2007). Further, having staff familiarize themselves with other LGBTQ services within the community, and provide activities that are sensitive to sexual minority youth, may also prove to be useful (Theriault & Witt, 2014).

In summary, heterosexism and homophobia in community leisure settings has compromised the safety of LGBTQ youth. Therefore, they do not have the freedom to authentically engage in leisure activities or develop meaningful friendships while participating. Authentic engagement is where the participant is engaging genuinely in the activity, not as an imitation or copy of what might be expected, but when one feels deeply connected to the essence of themselves through the act of engagement in the activity (Van Leeuwen, 2001). When LGBTQ youth do not feel the freedom to be authentic in public leisure spaces, it negatively affects the ways

in which they experience leisure and interact with others because they are compromising their authenticity. Consequentially, many choose to forgo leisure experiences altogether, which is detrimental to LGBTQ youth's identity formation, especially as one's identity develops largely during adolescence. In the absence of supportive and inclusive leisure activities, spaces, and staff, LGBTQ youth face significant challenges to understanding their sexual identity and how they fit into the broader LGBTQ community as adults (Theriault & Witt, 2014). Leisure studies has covered a great deal of research that explores LGBTQ leisure within an educational context, pertaining to Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA's), teachers and coaches (Fetner & Elafros, 2015; Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011; O'Brien et al., 2013; Roper & Halloran, 2007; White et al., 2010), and homophobic bullying and prejudice within the school system (Fetner et al., 2012; Kosciw et al., 2009; Robinson & Espelage, 2012). As schools exist within the context of a larger community, their overall environment is reflective of, and influenced by, the communities attitudes, beliefs, and values of the larger community (Kosciw et al., 2009).

Although the literature has addressed LGBTQ in the school environment and some leisure experiences in this environment, there is a dearth of literature that explores LGBTQ youth and their experiences of safety within leisure spaces. Therefore, the intention of this research is to address this gap in the literature.

Theoretical Framework

Based on the literature mentioned above, it is evident that LGBTQ youth require safe spaces to engage in leisure. Safe leisure spaces for LGBTQ youth entail the presence of inclusive activities, gender-neutral infrastructure, and supportive staff. The provision of these have all been well documented to create a positive context for identity development in youth (Aitchinson, 2003; Caldwell, Kivel, Smith, & Hayes, 1998; Fileborn, 2013; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Leversen,

Danielsen, Birkeland, & Samdal, 2012; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005; Pryor & Outley, 2014; Theriault & Witt, 2014; White, Oswalt, Wyatt, & Peterson, 2010), and therefore should be considered useful when looking at LGBTQ youth demographics. Because LGBTQ youth experience alarmingly high rates of discrimination, victimization, exclusion, and mental health issues, more sensitivity and mindfulness needs to be considered in regards to leisure activities, infrastructure, and staff, within public leisure spaces to create positive and safe experiences. Below is a description of each component of the theoretical framework.

Although there is no agreement on the exact classification of leisure in the literature (Brajša-Zganec, Merkas, & Sverko, 2011), leisure for the purposes of this study will pertain to spaces that create opportunities for socialization, creative or artistic, intellectual, and sports activities (Scott & Willits, 1998). These are important to an individual's identity, and are often valued as a form of self-expression (Johnson, 1999). However, many leisure activities embody masculine/feminine binaries that LGBTQ youth do not subscribe to. It would appear then, that LGBTQ youth are not given the same opportunity for free and authentic engagement in leisure, which has detrimental outcomes on their experiences. Freedom in leisure is a feeling of being in control of one's decisions and where the individual participates by their own free will without the influence or expectation from external factors (Mundy, 1998, p. 9). Unlike the heterosexual majority of youth whose sexuality and gender identities do not conflict with traditional views of recreation (Leveresen et al., 2012), sexual minority youth are rightfully fearful of having their LGBTQ status exposed in these settings. Therefore, many choose to participate according to the dominant heterosexual expectations (as in biological males engaging in stereotypical masculine activities, or in the same way, biological females engaging in stereotypical feminine activities). However, activities that support LGBTQ identities, such as gender-neutral activities (i.e.,

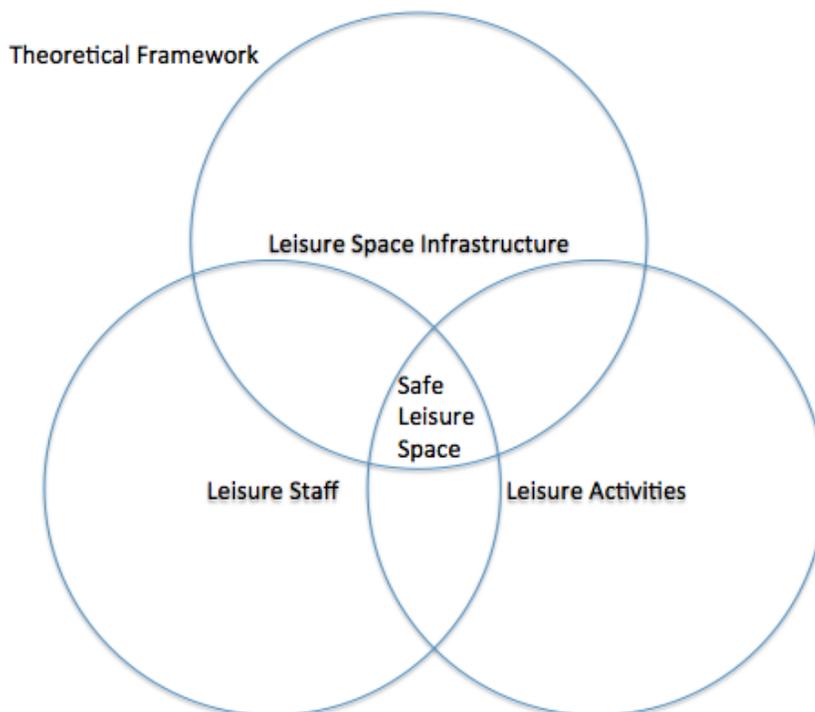
activities that are not segregated by gender, and are thereby meant for both males, females, and anyone along the spectrum), can then positively impact youth development, and negate them from the risky leisure behavior, solidarity, and conformation they are particularly susceptible to, and essentially make leisure participation safer for them.

Leisure spaces embody leisure activities, and raise serious concerns of safety for LGBTQ youth. In particular, the built infrastructure, such as washrooms and change-rooms are places of high victimization prevalence for sexual minority youth (Fetner et al., 2012; Gillard et al., 2014; Morrow & Gill, 2003), but these areas of concern also extend to spaces where leisure activities are engaged in, such as in gymnasiums, sport fields and courts, and other club settings (White et al., 2010). Whether the victimization is perceived or actual, fear alone over these spaces is enough to deter youth from participation (Skeggs, 1999). Therefore, infrastructure such as gender-neutral washrooms and change-rooms, as well as safe-space signage can play a role in diminishing this fear, and creating a more safe expectation of the public leisure space for LGBTQ youth.

Leisure staff are those who play a role in facilitating leisure activities or are present within public leisure spaces. Staff members are critical to LGBTQ youth's experiences of safety (Therriault & Witt, 2014). Those who are aware of LGBTQ issues and sensitive towards their leisure needs, create a positive environment where youths' identities can be affirmed and positively developed (Fetner & Elafros, 2015; White et al., 2010). When leisure employees are seen interjecting on homophobic discrimination and harassment, it speaks volumes that that type of behaviour is not tolerated in that space, and that LGBTQ youth belong there (Barber & Krane, 2007). Further, staff who act as role models and allies give LGBTQ youth a safe person to talk to, which makes these adolescents feel understood, validated, and supported (Gillard et al.,

2014). Therefore, relationships and behaviours from staff are critical to safe experiences for LGBTQ youth.

Overall, safe spaces have been critical for safety within marginalized populations. Safe spaces are regarded as spaces that foster freedom and protection for vulnerable peoples and can be sites where power relations are negotiated and social change can occur. Spaces are considered safe when the vulnerable individual feels emotionally, psychologically, and physically safe (Boostrom, 1998; Fetner et al., 2012). Usually this is through the inclusion of some based on a large similarity, and the exclusion of others who do not have that factor in common (Fetner et al., 2012). Book and Eskilsson (2010) stated that: “As long as homosexuals are not totally accepted in most (or all) parts of the world, the need to gather and feel ‘normal’ and free does exist” (p. 323). Other influences to safety reside in policies and guidelines associated with the public leisure space that leisure staff follow (Fetner et al., 2012; Theriault & Witt, 2014), which also guides the proper supervision of that space to make it safer within.



This theoretical framework guided the methodological approach of this research. Exploring how leisure activities, infrastructure, and staff influence the essences and meanings of safety for LGBTQ youth is critical for understanding what makes leisure experiences safe in public leisure spaces for them.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore LGBTQ youth's experiences and meanings associated with safe public leisure spaces. The purpose of this study and the research questions were explored and understood from a constructivist paradigm, using a phenomenological methodology. These perspectives supported the acquisition of rich data through semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ youth.

Constructivist Paradigm

The constructivist paradigm focuses on the subjective meanings that individuals create through their lived experiences (Cohen & Manion, 1994; Creswell, 2014). These experiences create the individual's worldviews, which are "formed through interactions with others... and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individual's lives" (Creswell, 2014, p.8). As people's interpretations of the world are varied and complex, a fuller understanding of the world is created through obtaining all the diverse perceptions and essences of these experiences from others. Constructivists focus on the complexity of individual's worldviews, rather than segregating them to specific categories or ideas (Creswell, 2014). This paradigm was appropriate for this research because I was exploring the experiences of LGBTQ youth around safety in leisure settings from the youths' perspectives.

Phenomenology

One way to understand the intangible leisure experience is to gain insight about what leisure is from those who are living and experiencing it through phenomenology (Howe, 1991). Phenomenology is a common methodology when working within a qualitative research approach (Block, 2014; Creswell, 2013; Fendt, Wilson, Jenkins, Dimmock, & Weeks, 2014; Howe, 1991; Iwasaki, Mactavish, & Mackay, 2005; Iwasaki & Ristock, 2004; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006;

Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixsmith, 2013), and was used for this study. Phenomenology literally means “to show light” (Schmitz-Scherzer, 1990) on the lived human experience and its intent is to capture the essence and meaning of the experiences that the participant describes (Creswell, 2013; Ivey, 2013; Smith, 2003; Tuohy et al., 2013; Wikström, Jacobsson, & Arvidsson, 2005). This methodology allowed the participants to speak to what they deemed most important within their experiences and allowed me to develop a systematic understanding of the intimate personal experiences (Howe, 1991) that the LGBTQ youth expressed towards safe leisure spaces.

Interpretive phenomenology is one branch of many within phenomenology, and was essential to this study. Within this paradigm, the individuals studied become co-researchers, as they are “experts in their own experience” (Tuohy et al., 2013, p.20) and the researcher and researched mutually construct the lived reality that the participant experiences through cyclical dialogue. This is known as the “hermeneutic circle” (Tuohy et al., 2013) or Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology (Fendt et al., 2014). This contributed to collecting the data in its purest form, giving a full representation of the individual’s experiences by conversational probes (Finlay, 2008). Collecting data in this way was beneficial because it allowed me to stay situated in the research without neglecting my inherent interest in the topic, while also using my worldview to help interpret the data (Fendt et al., 2014). Thus, the meanings of these experiences were a combination of the LGBTQ youths’ experiential meanings and my own interpretations of the meanings from the participants (Fendt et al., 2014), also known in interpretive phenomenology as constitutionality (Gadamer, 1976).

An interpretive phenomenology approach has value when working with populations that are not widely understood, such as LGBTQ youth, as the individuals’ experiences are well

represented (Ivey, 2013). Interpretive phenomenology creates deeper insight into the phenomenon and explores the true meaning and essence of the experience (Tuohy et al., 2013) by allowing the LGBTQ youth to detail their personal experiences open-endedly. This methodology also created a unique opportunity for the youth to feel empowered, as they were given the freedom to take ownership over their experiences and shed light on issues that personally affected them, that they may not have otherwise had the invitation to express, and with no resistance or judgement from the listener.

Interpretive phenomenology has not been largely used or discussed in the leisure literature to date. Therefore, there are not strict guidelines yet as to the best way to conduct it within the context of leisure (Fendt et al., 2014; Schmitz-Scherzer, 1990). Leisure scholarship has used phenomenology to better understand the lived experiences of many differing populations. For example, Fendt et al., (2014), used this methodology to understand the leisure experiences of female surfers. Further, examples that are more specifically related to this research topic are Iwasaki and Ristock (2004) who used phenomenology to study how stress among gays and lesbians impacted development over the lifespan; as well as Kivel and Kleiber (2000), who used the methodology to understand the role that leisure plays in identity formation of lesbian and gay youth.

Sampling

The sampling strategy I utilized was purposive sampling. This strategy ensured that the data obtained related fully to the population that this study was exploring. The youth were primarily recruited from an organization called Youth Spectrum. Youth Spectrum is a program that works towards creating a safe space for LGBTQ youth between the ages of 14-18 years of age. This program is not affiliated with any organization, but is located out of a community

youth centre. At the time of the study, Youth Spectrum ran for three hours once a week in the evening. The amount of youth who attended varied weekly. Typically, 15 youth would attend each week; however, the range of attendance during the study went from five to 30 youth. This fluctuation in attendance likely had to do with what activity was taking place that week. The program offered many different activities for the youth. Activities ranged from watching queer documentaries, to cooking and baking, to clothing swaps, to arts and crafts, and sports. These activities often took place at the Youth Spectrum centre, but depending on the activity, sometimes required the youth to meet at different locations. The youth were never obligated to participate in the weekly activity, and often times it appeared as though the youth had just come to socialize.

Once I received ethics approval, I provided the Youth Spectrum coordinators with a short summary of my research and an invitation letter that they shared with the youth during one of their regularly scheduled activities. I also created a poster that outlined my study and put it up on the wall in the centre. In addition, I created an electronic version of this poster which I posted to the Youth Spectrum Facebook page and to my own Facebook page to increase awareness of the study and provide opportunity for youth to participate. Those youth from Youth Spectrum who showed interest in the study were instructed to contact me through email or Facebook. I followed up with interested participants to answer any questions they had and to coordinate a day, time and location to conduct the interview. Some youth who participated in my study also chose, without my encouragement, to repost the poster to their own Facebook walls. In addition, two participants were recruited through a GSA (Gay Straight Alliance) at a local high school. The managers of the GSA explained the details of my study to the group and the interested participants contacted me to get involved.

Thirteen youth participated in the study. To determine when I had recruited enough participants, I relied on saturation. When the addition of new data did not shed any further insight from the data that has already been collected, I determined saturation had been reached. (Mason, 2010).

Participants. The research participants consisted of 13 youth who were 15 years of age or older and still in high school, who identified as LGBTQ and resided in one region on Vancouver Island. Of the 13 youth, two identified as gay, two identified as bisexual, and nine identified as transsexual or gender non-conforming. The majority of participants were either 16 or 17 years old, and only two participants were 15 years old.

Data Collection

Consistent with an interpretive phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted (Smith, 2003). The semi-structured interviews contained open-ended, non-directive questions (Smith, 2003) and gave participants the freedom to narrate zi/hir (note: zi/hir are gender neutral pronouns) experiences and meanings. Semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to fully express their experiences and share what they deemed to be most important and meaningful in flexible and detailed responses (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013). The advantages of semi-structured interviews also extended to me as a researcher because I was able to gently guide the interview according to the study's research questions and objectives (Mojtahed et al., 2014). I also could then probe or ask the participants to elaborate on information that they had shared, which helped to broaden and deepen the data, and ensured the richest findings (Creswell, 2014; Denovan & Macaskill, 2013). Further, interviews were useful as the participants could not be observed directly to gain a full understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014).

The interviews were conducted in an agreed upon private space where the participants

and I felt comfortable. The privacy and comfort of the participants were of utmost concern, and therefore the space they deemed appropriate was chosen as the interview location. The interviews took place at a number of different spaces during times that were convenient for the participants. Five youth chose to meet me in a reserved private room at the university campus library; three chose to meet me at their high school during school hours when they had a spare; another three youth chose to meet me at a park or a coffee place, and the other two interviews were conducted at Youth Spectrum in a more secluded area of the building for confidentiality purposes.

Before the interview, I briefly went over the consent form and explained that their participation was completely voluntary and that at any point in time they would like to discontinue the interview, or pass on questions, that they were free to do so. I also explained that their identity would be kept anonymous through pseudonyms and that their recorded interviews and transcripts would be stored digitally on a password protected computer. Participants were asked if they felt comfortable with the conversation being digitally recorded and all of them agreed to this.

Participants were asked questions about their experiences of safety in leisure spaces. Interviews typically lasted approximately 45-70 minutes. At the end of the interview I asked the youth for their email or mailing address so that I could send them the transcript to verify. During this time I explained what verifying the transcript meant, and how and when they could provide feedback regarding their transcript. They also had the opportunity to contact me if they thought of any other information that they would like to add.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed the digital recordings verbatim into a

word document. These transcripts were then emailed back to the youth to verify, change, delete or add information on the transcripts. After three weeks, none of the participants modified their transcripts, so I proceeded with the data analysis.

The data was analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Denovan & Macaskill, 2013). IPA is reflective of the research's methodology, as it is an "in-depth exploration of an individual's lived experience of a phenomenon, its meanings for the individual and how the individual understands and makes sense of their personal and social environment" (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013, p.1005). Further, IPA is qualitative in nature, making it an appropriate tool to use. Interpreting the data through IPA helped me gain an extensive understanding of LGBTQ youths' subjective experiences of safety in leisure spaces.

The IPA acknowledges that my perspective invariably affects the analysis (Golsworthy & Coyle, 2001). Therefore, interpreting and analyzing the data accurately necessitated me to be aware of my existing biases and preconceived notions on the subject (Denovan & Macaskill, 2013). However, these existing understandings ultimately helped the interview outcome as I used them to clarify or solidify my knowledge on the literature, and provided a clearer and more and transparent narrative from the respondent of their personal experiences.

The data analysis of this study mirrors Denovan and Macaskill's (2003) study because of the many similarities in their methodological framework. Therefore, I followed similar steps when I analyzed the data: First, I familiarized myself with the transcripts by reading them several times. Second, I noted my broad insights and reflections in the left margin of the transcripts, such as feeling alone, different, conforming, educating, etc. Third, I re-read the transcripts and highlighted more narrow and specific insights and quotes in the right margin. Fourth, I clustered together quotes and insights into themes that shared similar meanings. For example, friendship

and an absence of feeling alone and different helped form the theme ‘a sense of community’. Fifth, I supported the themes and subthemes with quotes from the transcript to denote their legitimacy. For example, Faye’s quote, “they’ve [LGBTQ youth] all probably been through something similar to that [LGBTQ-directed discrimination] so it’s like you know you’re not the only one who’s ever been through that in your in that group” helped to support the subtheme ‘shared experiences of hardship’. Finally, I related the themes to the existing literature on LGBTQ youth and leisure in my discussion section.

To establish the trustworthiness of the data, I utilized Lincoln and Guba’s framework. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that a data’s trustworthiness is determined by four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was obtained through prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, and member-checking. Prolonged engagement is meant to support the trustworthiness of the data because the researcher has spent a sufficient amount of time understanding the topic and population under study. I achieved this through volunteering at Youth Spectrum and developing relationships with the youth who attended there, as well as by reviewing the existing literature on LGBTQ youth, leisure, and safe spaces. Persistent observation is the depth that the researcher attains through prolonged engagement. Indeed, through extensive focus on the data I was able to acquire greater insight into the phenomenon being studied. Peer debriefing is also identified as a way to strengthen the worth of the data. This was achieved in this study through probes I asked during the interview that helped to clear up any misunderstandings or assumptions I may have had. The youth also had the opportunity to look over their transcripts and change, add, or delete any information that they wanted to before the analysis phase was conducted. This is a strategy called member-checking that allows the participant to correct errors and ensure that there are no false

interpretations and that the worth of the data is upheld.

Transferability is another way to ensure the trustworthiness of data. This is attained when the researcher has given a thick description of the phenomenon, and in so doing, the conclusions drawn can be considered transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people.

In addition, throughout the research process I had two co-supervisors reviewing my work, both the transcripts and the themes and subthemes as they were being developed. This increased the dependability of the data because they were able to evaluate my interpretations of the data and also provide feedback so I could better articulate the findings.

Finally, I established confirmability through my audit trail. This consists of the outlined plan in chapters one through three of exactly what steps were taken in the research project. This helps to confirm how and why each phase of the research was conducted. Additionally, during analysis I only used codes that were directly stated from the participants in the data, which verifies the emergence of the themes that were created (Glaser, 1992).

Insider/Outsider Role

As mentioned above, I recruited participants from an organization called Youth Spectrum, which is an organization that I had been volunteering for during the time this study took place. As a result of this volunteer role, I represent a researcher having an insider/outside role. An “insider researcher” is someone who is studying the topic that they are also a part of (Given, 2008). For example, in Fendt et al.’s (2014) study, the purpose was to study female surfers, all-the-while Fendt is a female surfer. This helped Fendt in her research because she already understood the phenomenon of which she was studying. It also made the recruitment process for participants easier, because they could connect on their shared passion for surfing. Like Fendt, the benefits of being an insider researcher also extended to me. For instance, because

I attend Youth Spectrum, I had already begun to understand a sense of the youths' struggles around safety in leisure settings, and this was a good foundation for my interview questions. Further, I had already established a positive relationship with many of the youth who attend Youth Spectrum, which in and of itself granted some acceptance (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). This acceptance made recruiting participants slightly easier, and likely increased their comfort during the interview process, which ultimately enhanced what they shared (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Furthermore, my role as an insider was not completely "inside". Although I volunteered at this program, I myself do not identify as LGBTQ. My status as a non-LGBTQ person may have influenced the participants view of me as a LGBTQ ally, and encouraged them to open and share their experiences and meanings associated with safe leisure spaces.

There are, however, potential downsides to being an insider researcher. I may have unknowingly made assumptions of similarity that can limit the fullness of the experience from the participants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). However, because I do not identify as LGBTQ this likely was avoided. I also asked questions throughout the interview for clarification when an assumption of mine arose, which likely would have dismissed any false perspective that I had. Another concern was that I may have, by association, influenced the responses from the participants. That is something that was out of my control, and a deficit that I had chosen to knowingly surpass, considering the outstanding benefits to this study by being an insider. Finally, I do not fit nicely within the insider or outsider role, but rather, I played a role that falls more in-between the two dichotomies. Because I was familiar with the LGBTQ community under study, but I do not identify as LGBTQ, one may question how accurately I may be able to express the lived experiences of my participants, when I myself have not lived them. Acker (2000) however, supports this middle category and the benefits of falling in-between, and

encourages this approach for other researchers. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) stated that one can be outside of the group of study, and still appreciate and adequately represent the experience of the participants. They go on to say: “the core ingredient is not insider or outsider status but an ability to be open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the experience of one’s research participants, and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience” (p.59). I fully support this position and was insistent on upholding it within my research process. Therefore, I am confident that my role as a researcher, being both an insider and an outsider to an extent, only enhanced the knowledge that originated from this study.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore LGBTQ youths' experiences and meanings associated with safe public leisure spaces. The objectives of the study were to identify what leisure activities, infrastructure, and staff behaviours create safe spaces. Through data analysis, three major findings emerged: experiences that cultivated a sense of acceptance; a sense of community; and freedom for self-expression all contributed to LGBTQ youth sense of safety in public leisure spaces.

Sense of Acceptance

LGBTQ youth in this study shared experiences that emphasized the importance of being and feeling accepted by others outside of LGBTQ-designated settings. This general theme is composed of two subthemes that represent study participants' descriptions of experiences that pertained to the essence of acceptance. Positive messaging and an openness to learning about LGBTQ-related issues made the youth feel accepted.

Positive messaging. Within the youths' experiences, they interpreted positive direct and indirect messages which influenced their sense of acceptance. Direct messages were those that the youth received directly from others or in the form of posters and infrastructure, and indirect messages refers to the messages that the youth interpreted through observing the actions or overhearing statements from others that were not directed towards them specifically, but that still played a part in their interpretation and perception of a space. The importance of positive messaging in feeling accepted was reinforced by negative messages which were interpreted through direct experiences of harassment and avoidance. Therefore, both positive and negative messages are described within this theme to highlight the importance of positive messaging for the youths' perceptions of acceptance. Lastly, observing safe-space signage such as the rainbow

flag and having access to gender-neutral infrastructure were interpreted by the youth as positive messages that fostered the notion of acceptance in those spaces.

Youth paid attention to and interpreted the opinions and behaviours that others expressed towards LGBTQ individuals. These perceptions were informed by indirect messages, which were experienced through the non-verbal actions of others. For example, youth described the physical appearance of others as being an indicator of their level of acceptance. Many youth perceived cisgender and heterosexual males to be intimidating and threatening, describing them as “hyper-masculine”, “alpha-male”, “big”, “burly”, and “aggressively-straight”. These perceptions were derived from the youths’ perceptions that these types of appearances tend to be hyper masculine. This was particularly evident when it came to sports as the youth perceived these characteristics to be indicative of homophobic or heterosexist individuals. Faye, a gender non-conforming youth who uses the pronouns “they/them,” is one participant who spoke to this notion. They wanted to become more active and decided to start going to the gym after school, but also perceived football players to be hyper-masculine and non-accepting. Because of these perceptions, Faye perceived the gym as a non-accepting environment which resulted in an unfortunate outcome:

I stopped going to the gym because of the people who are around there. Like, they were all like, very like, you know the people who are football kids? They were all those guys and I knew they were like, some of them are very transphobic. And homophobic. So it’s like, I don’t want to be around you. So I just stopped going there.

It was apparent from Faye’s interpretation of cisgender and heterosexual males being “intensely heterosexual” that they felt they did not belong at that gym. Although Faye never experienced direct harassment or bullying, they still felt as though it was a non-accepting space based on the

image that Faye perceived the people therein to portray. This, unfortunately, led to their cessation of workouts at the gym.

Other youth, however, were verbally harassed directly by heterosexual males in sporting contexts. Kay, a gender fluid youth who uses the pronoun “he/his”, describes his interaction with one such individual at a time when he identified with a more masculine self:

One of the older senior students that are on the football team had heard that I was using male pronouns and dressing like a guy...[and heard that] I might try joining the football team. And so I guess he found offense to that, because, football’s like a manly sport. And so he started mouthing me off in the hallways saying that I was like messed in the head and everything.

This homophobic incident resulted in Kay not playing football, and furthermore, choosing to forgo gym class as often as he could to avoid verbal harassment.

Youth also described indirect messaging in terms of how other people talked about or behaved around LGBTQ individuals. As Jamie stated, “I can tell by the way they [people] talk about other queer people that they might be homophobes or homophobic”. Similar sentiments are described by Daniel, a transgender male, who talked about his parents’ behaviours when confronted with queer information: “a lot of the times in like commercials or when there are gay couples around them they’ll [adults] just like change the channel or they’ll go away. Like, they don’t want to be near it”. In another instance, he described being with his friend and her parents in a car, where the parents did not know that Daniel identified as a male:

One time they [friend’s parents] were talking in the car and I was with my friend in the backseat goofing around and one of them was reading an article about gender and

sexuality and stuff and they're all like "nooo, this just isn't real, this is just fake. It's just made up".

The scenarios that Daniel described of witnessing avoidance and of hearing blatant disregard for queer individuals were negative messages that led to the belief that his parents and his girlfriend's parents were not accepting of LGBTQ youth. When reflecting on how these instances impacted him, he said: "It's hard, I feel like. It feels like you can't be yourself. Because you can't". These negative messages suggested a lack of acceptance by others.

Despite the negative messages that youth had interpreted, several youth shared other experiences where family members and schoolteachers discussed LGBTQ youth in a positive manner that cultivated a sense of acceptance for them. For example, Jamie, a pansexual youth, had not come out and had been ruminating for years over what her family would say if she were to come out to them. One day, she overheard her mom positively engaging in a conversation with other adults about LGBTQ individuals:

They'd [adults] start saying about their friends and their family who are also LGBT and I thought, "Oh! It's not this big taboo thing, it's not, like I'm some freak like one in 1 Million people are gay. There's a lot of people who I didn't even realize were LGBT". So I think hearing about other people kind of made me realize you know, like, it's not abnormal and it's not...weird

Overhearing this conversation changed Jamie's perception of her mom's opinions of LGBTQ individuals. Rather than fretting over her mom's potential disapproval of her pansexuality, Jamie felt as though the positivity expressed by her mom towards LGBTQ individuals would also be extended to her if she were to come out. In this case, Jamie was not wrong: "So I came out to her

in November last year for National Coming Out Day because I felt like I was ready and she was totally fine with it!”

Overhearing how other people talked about LGBTQ individuals and watching people’s behaviours around LGBTQ individuals were forms of indirect messaging that influenced the youths’ sense of acceptance. However, there were also direct messages in the form of referrals from teachers and support staff that youth interpreted as positive messaging. For example, the youth discussed the experiences of being referred to, or encouraged to join, gay-straight alliances (GSA’s) or other local queer events and clubs were interpreted as positive messaging. Bambi described this experience:

I went [to the teacher, Dr. Borys] and talked to him [about being pansexual] and he was like “oh, there’s this queer group here if you want to go drop in that”. And Dr. Borys is totally cool about that. Like Dr. Borys is sick, he’s awesome!

Bambi’s teacher was able to refer him to a fun and supportive place for LGBTQ youth and this demonstrated his acceptance of Bambi’s pansexuality. Another participant, Emily, was directed through a teacher to a LGBTQ dance performance:

I heard about it umm through my counsellor at school. Because, um, I was at the time not really going to school very often so I would go to my counsellor and my counsellor was like ‘Hey look at this thing!’ And then my teacher for, he was the aboriginal and the SAGA (Straight-And-Gay-Alliance) type teacher, and he went up to me because he knew me from previous classes and he was like “Yeah this would be great for you!! Do this! Go see, there’s an information thing on this day. Go to it!” And I was like, “Oh okay sure”. And it turned out really, really great.

Sarah, a trans-female, also shared how a city youth counsellor directed her to an LGBTQ-space:

I talked to her [city youth advisor] and was like, “oh well you know I’d like to get out and do stuff. Is there something you recommend for me to do?” And she walked me over to the wall and she’s like she was just like tapped the poster [LGBTQ-space poster promotion] and was like “do this”. And I’m like, “Okay! Sure!”

These examples demonstrate how teachers and youth councillors were accepting and showed positive messaging to queer youth by referring them to LGBTQ-youth clubs and activities.

Direct messaging through symbols such as the rainbow flag and other signs, were interpreted positively by the youth. They interpreted them as symbols of acceptance. For example, safe-space advertising on posters around the school were perceived as positive messaging for youth and helped to get them involved in LGBTQ-designated clubs and events. One of the interviews I conducted was on high school grounds with Luke, a gay male-identifying youth. After asking Luke what made him feel accepted as a gay youth, he responded in this way: “Mmmm...just looking at that [pointing to a LGBTQ-club poster]...just having a sign for it”. In this case, Luke had not attended the club that was being advertised on the poster in his school, but interpreted the LGBTQ signage on the bulletin board as a message of acceptance. Other youth were also impacted by the use of LGBTQ posters in their school. Kay described this experience:

Um, I had seen a poster when I was going to [high school] for the first part of the year, and it had a unicorn on it so it really drew in my attention ha ha. And then I saw it and I was like “hey!” That was during my stage when I was kind of going through my gender fluid stage, and I was like “hey let’s go see what this is about! Maybe we can meet other kids, and won’t feel as weird doing what I want to do and stuff”

Another participant named Cay, who is gender non-conforming and uses the pronoun “they”, had a similar experience:

I was interested [in finding an LGBTQ group] like I was walking in the hallway and I saw the sign. So...I was like “okay, I just, that must be kind of cool. I should go”. And then I started coming, so.

In addition to posters advertising queer youth groups and events, other safe-space signage such as the rainbow flag were indicators of LGBTQ-friendly spaces and were perceived by the youth as relaying positive messaging. When discussing how safe space signage impacts a perception of a non-LGBTQ-designated space, Kay explained:

It [safe-space signage] kind of just goes like “hey I support this [LGBTQ individuals], this is an open place. You can be who you are and we have this symbol on our door letting you know, ‘we love you for you’”.

KC said similar feelings: “I know it’d [the space] be like a good fit. And [that I’d be] welcomed”. The importance of the signage and feeling safe was also emphasized by KC when he described what it is like when a non-LGBTQ space does not specify its inclusivity of LGBTQ youth: “if you go somewhere else [not LGBTQ-designated] and it doesn’t, they don’t really say that [it is LGBTQ-friendly], it’s kind of like I don’t know, I’m not so sure about this”. These examples demonstrate how LGBTQ poster advertisements and other safe-space signage were indicators of accepting places for the youth, and those that did not state that it was a safe-space through signage created a sense of uncertainty.

Gender-neutral infrastructure, such as washrooms and change rooms, were also interpreted as positive messages, even when youth identified with their biological gender. Jamie, who is cisgender, relayed how infrastructure was important for her because although she used a

female washroom, the existence of gender-neutral infrastructure lead her to believe that the space was accepting of diverse sexualities. She said: “Yeah I can tell based on gender neutral washrooms that they would be more accepting...knowing that there’s gender neutral washrooms or pride merchandise would make me think, ‘oh okay well it’s at least somewhat accepting here’”. Moreover, having gender-neutral infrastructure was particularly important for gender-fluid and transgender youth in increasing their perception of acceptance in the space. Some of the youth who are transgender described circumstances in which they felt uncomfortable accessing washrooms that were solely male or female with no infrastructure for gender-variance or transgender people. Clove, a gender non-conforming youth, relayed,

I remember like the first time I used like the male washroom, I like I could say I used to present like a lot more masculine then I do now, umm...but, I remember I like went in and I was just super hunched over, like, face down, just trying to avoid any like, kind of like, contact with anyone at all.

Further, transgender youth also received verbal negative messaging from others when accessing washrooms and change rooms in public leisure spaces. Daniel, a transgender male, shared that he often receives verbal harassment for using the male stalls: “I’ve been told a lot that I shouldn’t be in there. ‘I’m not a man’... I’ve been yelled at for going into the men’s bathroom”. Other participants who were not transgender but openly identified as queer had glares and stares directed towards them in change rooms and comments from others like “gay’s shouldn’t be peepin’ in those places [change rooms]” (Bambi). Ace described a more extreme experience: “I was sexually harassed a couple times in the locker room... Not that they’re [his peers] like gay or bi or anything, but just to kind of make me feel uncomfortable”. To this end, Ace suggested this alternative to typical change rooms and washrooms “Um, like maybe adding stalls.

Changing stalls instead of having everyone change in the open that would probably make me feel a bit more comfortable”. Participants affirmed that gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms, or having single-stalls in those areas, would be better.

Openness to learning. In addition to the youth receiving positive messages which supported their feeling accepted, they also interpreted individuals’ openness to learning about LGBTQ youth as a form of acceptance. The openness of others to learning not only made them feel more accepted to be LGBTQ, but also gave them a sense that they were making spaces more accepting. Educating others about LGBTQ issues was important for the youth. Such issues included educating others on various sexualities, gender expressions, and preferred pronouns. Several of the youth had been involved in workshops and presentations in their schools where they could educate their teachers on LGBTQ issues. Because teachers were not required to attend these events, youth perceived those who did attend as being open to learning about queer issues from them which influenced their sense of acceptance. Indeed, all study participants stated that individuals who appeared open to learning about LGBTQ matters was an indicator that those people were accepting or trying to be more accepting of LGBTQ youth. For example, an LGBTQ-designated youth group reached out to a local church to see if the youth could share their experiences with being queer. Bambi, a regular attender of the group, recalled the event:

They [the church] talked about like how back then you were either just gay or you weren’t. And they were like “what the hell is pansexual??” So they’re totally open to learning all this stuff. And you could explain it really deeply without feeling like a horrible monstrosity ha ha.

The meaning of this experience shows the openness that the church had towards learning from LGBTQ youth about being queer. This openness was experience by youth who presented there

as a message of acceptance. This experience was especially interesting considering how negatively Bambi spoke about his strict Christian upbringing earlier in the interview. Growing up, Bambi felt as though his sexuality would not be accepted, and faced a lot of indirect opposition from religious people that prevented him from coming out to family, friends and teachers;

Like it [religion] really hurt me for a long time. And I know it did for a couple of my friends too...Like, having a teacher in grade 4 tell me that he is super catholic and that like, he doesn't accept this stuff and not being able to go home and tell my parents that a teacher is treating me like this and know that they won't defend me.

When retelling this experience, Bambi stated that at the time of the event, he was not out to his school teacher or his family. After this conversation, Bambi remained closeted because he felt his teacher was not accepting of LGBTQ individuals and additionally could not confide in his family that his teacher's remarks had upset him because he knew that they were not accepting of LGBTQ individuals either. However, the openness to learning that Bambi experienced through the LGBTQ group interaction with the church allowed him to perceive religious people as possibly being accepting of LGBTQ individuals: "people like that [church-goers who attended the event], I'd totally be cool talking about it with them. They get it" (Bambi).

Similar to Bambi's experience, when youth saw teachers who attended LGBTQ presentations and workshops, they perceived them to be open to learning from them, which nurtured a sense of acceptance. Staff members who not only attended, but also asked questions and applied the knowledge, were perceived as open to learning and wanting to make spaces more inclusive for and accepting of LGBTQ individuals. "They seemed to care, there were questions at the end like, they were actually putting in the time to ask them, so. That was good" (Vanessa).

Even if the staff continued to make mistakes on individuals' pronouns or preferred names, the attempt to adopt more gender-neutral practices was encouraging. Faye spoke to that notion: "not everybody has to know everything about everything as long as they're like cool, accepting...it's all good." Youth also enjoyed participating in these presentations because they felt that they were making spaces more accepting of LGBTQ youth. Luke, who is openly gay felt compelled to participate in his school's LGBTQ presentations for the teachers:

Just knowing you're making a difference in today's society. And you know that like, 'cuz me and Vanessa (another participant in this study who identifies as bisexual) are both leaving after this year, just knowing that more of the teachers will be more open about new students coming into our school and some of them won't be straight or cis and they'll feel accepted.

In addition, friends who seemed open helped participants feel accepted. Sarah, a transgender female, relayed the importance of having friends who are open to LGBTQ matters: "I wouldn't be out as trans to anyone. And I guess I kind of owe it to a friend who kind of helped me into it." She continues to describe the experience:

We were just walking along the rocks there, I guess it was a river it was the middle of winter, um, and he asked me and he said, cuz we were talking about it [transgender individuals], and said: "would you prefer that I used female pronouns for you?". And I was like "well, this is something I've sort of thought about for quite a while and yeah I think that would be, that would be a thing I could do". Ha ha. So, it was a very precious moment between a friend.

In this case, the friend demonstrated an openness to learning which pronouns to use when talking to Sarah, which influenced Sarah's sense of acceptance and also allowed her to adopt female

pronouns. Essentially, those who show that they are open to learning about and from LGBTQ youth, also show an acceptance of them which was meaningful for the youth.

Sense of Community

Underlying many of the participants' experiences was a sense of community. Youth felt a sense of community in LGBTQ-only settings when they shared common life experiences of being LGBTQ with others, and when they shared similar experiences of hardship. In non-LGBTQ settings, the youth felt a sense of similarity to others.

Shared experiences. Youth described experiences that made them feel a sense of community with those whom they felt had experienced similar life narratives. Primarily, these experiences took place in LGBTQ-designated spaces as queer individuals were the only ones the youth felt could fully relate to their experiences of being LGBTQ. Therefore, queer youth were important for the participants' sense of community, particularly when sharing experiences of feeling alone. For example, participants described a common experience of feeling or being alone when discussing their sexuality and/or gender expression. One of the participants, Vanessa, could fully attest to this. She grew up on a small secluded and conservative island. Of the youth whom live on the island, Vanessa felt as though she was the only queer one. Because of the island's size, she has to commute to high school every day, where she met other kids apart from the ones she lived with on the island. She said:

[I had] a fear of being different. Because there was like, there was no one in my class that I knew was out [in elementary and junior high school]. Like, no one. Like already in my grade 7 class or in my grade 11 and 12 now, *I'm still the only one* [who is gay from the island]. Like I know I was alone. So, I don't know, I had never met a gay person my age or an LGBTQ person my age [on the island]. So I didn't, I don't know, I had no one to

coincide with there. So I didn't want to like, I don't know, I didn't want to be alone if I had come out.

The feelings of fear that Vanessa experienced began when she was six years old, and she endured them until she was 15. At 15, she decided to come out to her family and friends and joined the high school's gay-straight alliance (GSA). Vanessa continued to say:

Yeah I guess, yeah [I feel a sense of community in the GSA]. Cuz like, I think I'm the only queer person in [local community] that are in high school right now, I don't know about elementary school. But definitely [local community] kids in high school I think I'm the only queer one, so.

At the school's GSA, Vanessa did not feel as alone because she was surrounded by other queer youth. Because no one was out where she lived, she was able to connect, in this space, in a unique way with other youth who were. This connection made her feel a sense of community.

Other study participants shared experiences of being or feeling alone that diminished once meeting other queer youth in LGBTQ spaces; "Well, it's kind of like the fact that you know you're not alone [in LGBTQ-designated spaces]" (Faye). LGBTQ youth were able to understand the deep sense of feeling or being alone that others had experienced because they had also felt alone at times. Feeling different than their peers made them feel alone, and so accessing spaces where there were other queer youth made them feel similar to others and less alone. Essentially, these LGBTQ-designated spaces allowed the youth to connect with one another and be a part of a larger community, which was important in their diminishing feelings of being alone, and enhancing their feelings of similarity and community. Emily stated why these spaces are important to her:

The fact that I'm not singled out as the... "the queer one". Right? Everyone here is strange in our own way. And we all are really strange and really weird and we identify as what we identify as and we are different than a lot of people. And because of that, we get, we get backlash, and we get people going "oh so you're different". But, in a situation where we're all different, we kind of work together really well and you feel comfortable because you're not singled out as the different one. You are all different so you are all like each other. Because, LGBT is all encompassing. And so it's quite amazing to be in this space where everyone's different so you're all just queer. It's great! Instead of being the singled out person who's different.

Emily's perception of the LGBTQ-designated space provided her with a sense of community because she knew that in that space she was not going to feel alone and be perceived as different, but rather, feel part of a larger community of LGBTQ youth who are similar to her because of their shared experiences. Another participant, Cay, who is gender non-conforming, expressed throughout the interview how they struggle with meeting people, developing friendships, and having places to hang out after school; "[I feel] like alone in general cuz like I have a hard time making friends, so....I don't really have many friends so. I don't really have many spaces"; and when referring to non-LGBTQ-designated spaces they said: "Obviously I wouldn't really feel like I completely fit in there". In the community that this study took place in, only one LGBTQ-designated space existed for youth after school hours. In discussing what it is like for Cay to go to this LGBTQ-designated space that they attend, they said:

[Youth Spectrum] kind of makes me feel good to meet other people who are kind of who are also like, from the queer community.... just inclusive and fun and like kind of

like...like obviously it's LGBT related, but it's also kind of cool to just hang out and do fun activities...interact with people.

Here, Cay described going to Youth Spectrum and feeling included among the other queer youth and able to interact with people and develop new friendships. The fact that the youth had their queerness in common made them feel a part of the gay community, and also resulted in the opportunity to have fun and form relationships with other LGBTQ-identifying youth. Because of this, many youth were able to cultivate meaningful relationships with other youth in that space, some who described it as seeming familial to them. Kay's sentiments represent this sense of family:

It's just kind of like that we're all together in the same room for the same reason. It's more like a family, when you've been there. Like even if you've only been there once, like you're automatically connected to this big family of like LGBTQ community. And it's like amazing because like, even if you're at home and your parents don't know and you're keeping this all in secretive form, you can come there and you just have this big welcoming family that's just like a second family.

This excerpt conveys how youth in LGBTQ-spaces developed familial-like relationships which makes it clear how, in those spaces, they did not feel alone, but part of a larger community.

Shared experiences of hardship. In addition to sharing and sympathizing with feeling alone, the study participants also felt connected to staff and other queer youth because of their ability to understand each other's experiences of hardship over their sexual orientation or gender expression. Clove, a gender non-conforming youth who uses the pronoun "they", relayed their experience: "all of the staff were LGBTQ kind of thing, so they like've known what you're going through kind of thing. And, they're like educated on that kind of subjects. So, uh, that's

super helpful”. This excerpt supports the notion that staff members were individuals that participants could confide in because participants perceived staff had likely gone through similar experiences.

Similar sentiments were relayed about the youth who attend LGBTQ designated spaces. Daniel stated: “It feels more safer when there is someone else that doesn’t go by their biological pronouns or anything...because you know that they understand more”. Faye spoke further to this notion when referring to LGBTQ-designated spaces and the queer youth who attend:

Like problems you’ve dealt with towards your gender identity and sexual orientation um, you’re not really being, like, they’ve all probably been through something similar to that so it’s like you know you’re not the only one who’s ever been through that in your in that group. Which I really find comforting, because it’s like “whoa I’m not alone in any of this, like, great!

To the same end, Cay shared their experience with coming to Youth Spectrum for the first time:

It was really fun, it was really fun. I was kind of nervous because like obviously meeting new people is kind of nerve racking but, also, felt safe because there are other people who are also feel the same way because they are queer and so must know what it’s like to be different and stuff.

These examples reiterate how LGBTQ youth shared experiences of hardship with one another which contributed to their overall sense of community.

Sense of similarity. The study participants felt a sense of community with people who appeared to be similar to them by way of being marginalized by society. In other words, when people were interpreted as also being marginalized in society, LGBTQ felt connected to them. As a result, the youth felt a sense of community with others who were not part of the queer

community, but who were similar to them because they did not “fit in” as seamlessly with the majority of society. For example, Luke described his perception of a coffee shop he frequented where he felt a sense of similarity to the people who chose to go there:

There’s a lot of different people there. Like, so many different people! Like there’s a lady with tattoos all over her face and body and then there’s people who are like there are hipsters there like hipsters and like, musicians, and just like really cool interesting people there. Which makes, I feel like it’s very welcoming there.

Here, Luke was describing people who are typically viewed as being on the margins of society. Because these people appeared to be more diverse and not so homogeneous or hyper-masculinized, they helped to foster a sense of similarity for Luke. This sentiment was not only perceived by Luke, but several other participants who mentioned the safety they felt when the space was not so obviously heterosexually dominated and when the people were more diverse; “[It’s] just nice to...find a place that is accepting of diverse communities” (Cay). Despite the space not being LGBTQ-only, a sense of similarity was fostered between the queer youth and the other people who went to those spaces because they were all seen as “different” or on the margins of society, and in this way, they were all similar to one another.

Freedom for Self-Expression

Within LGBTQ-designated spaces, youth felt an environment had been created in which they were free to participate and engage authentically in leisure. This sense of freedom was fostered when staff and activities supported them in experimenting with their identities and expressing themselves in ways that they felt were authentic, including expressing themselves through the way they dressed or the pronouns they used. Further, when the youth felt the freedom to express themselves in activities, it helped them to develop strong feelings of

confidence in their sexual and/or gender identities. This was an important outcome from this theme, therefore, confidence will be discussed later in this section as a subtheme.

Youth in this study described their experiences with feeling free to express themselves in activities. Many times, this freedom was fostered through staff members who enabled them to express themselves in non-traditional ways. KC attested to this: “say I want to wear nail polish; they’re [staff] not going to laugh at you, they’re going to be like ‘awesome go do it!’”. Bambi stated similar sentiments: “They don’t care what you are or who you are or how you identify.” Clove, a gender non-conforming participant, elaborated on this notion of freedom for self-expression by describing their experience with staff at an all-LGBTQ youth camp;

[Staff created] a super supportive place to kind of figure out your identity. Like a lot of kids who went, umm, like started experimenting with different identities and different pronouns and different names, all that kind of stuff. And it was just like a super great place! ...It was just like, people who you could talk to without them, like, doubting you.

Without like, making you question yourself kind of thing. So it’s like, if, if you were like umm I wanna try out a new name. They wouldn’t even like blink an eye.

These examples show how the youth felt free to act upon various forms of self-expression because staff “wouldn’t laugh at you”, “wouldn’t doubt you”, or “even blink an eye”, demonstrating that experimenting with one’s identity expression was a normalized and accepted act around them or in that space. There, freedom of self-expression was fostered because of the staff’s support of experimentation with one’s identity.

The importance of feeling free to express one’s identity was emphasized by study participants’ experiences in non-LGBTQ spaces such as their home, school, or other community clubs. For example, when asked how spaces that are not identified as LGBTQ-only make one

feel, Faye replied in this way: “it’s kind of harder to be out when everybody around you is like straight and cis. So it’s like, having those designated spaces is really nice and very helpful”.

In LGBTQ spaces, youth were more likely to feel accepted and part of a community, which thereby helped them to feel free to express themselves authentically. However, in non-LGBTQ designated spaces, these freedoms were not apparent in the same way, and reduced their comfort in self-expression. For example, Sarah spoke about wearing baggy hoodies at home to hide her breasts from family in order to not expose her transition. Luke, who identifies as a gay male, would take off his makeup around family members. Ace, a bisexual male, took up hockey in an effort to portray a more masculine image to his peers. Within these contexts, youth lost their freedom to express themselves because their family and/or peers were perceived to be less accepting of them. In some cases, the lack of freedom for self-expression subsequently contributed to the youths’ decision to cease participation in leisure activities altogether. Luke spoke about his time in air cadets, where all males were required to maintain a traditional male image through the mandatory dress code that he felt did not reflect his sense of self:

Like that’s somewhere where I was never myself because everyone’s dressed the same. Everybody wants you to be the same.... I wanted to be who I am so I left there and was like ‘I’m done. I can’t express myself the way I want to’.

In this scenario, the uniform and overall image that Luke upheld became problematic because he did not want to conform to an image that represented dominant discourses of mainstream masculinity. Rather, he wanted to feel free to express himself in a way that was reflective of his true identity. Luke’s authentic expression of self was limited there because the cadets cultivated a “sameness” among the youth instead of an “authenticity”. Evidently, the freedom for Luke to express himself was pertinent to his participation, and so this example highlights how when that

freedom is not apparent in leisure activities, participation can become limited or in Luke's case, terminated.

Confidence. Confidence was important to include as a subtheme because LGBTQ staff and activities that fostered the freedom of self-expression had a powerful influence on the youths' self-confidence. The youths' sense of confidence was positively influenced when youth felt free to engage in activities that allowed them to authentically express their gender identity and sexuality which occurred primarily within LGBTQ-spaces and activities. Emily, a pansexual youth, passionately recalled her experience with an LGBTQ dance performance that she participated in a couple years back:

It solidified me feeling comfortable with myself... this performance kind of solidified my sexuality. [It] Made me feel more comfortable with it and open about it and my sexuality and my gender and everything, it just made me want to be out and open about it. Instead of being kind of closed off like I used to be and just, if never not really mentioning it ever.

Emily's experience was transformative for her, and through it, she was able to solidify her identity and acquire self-acceptance and confidence. Clove, a gender non-conforming youth, also encountered a formative time in their adolescence while attending an all-LGBTQ summer camp:

I wasn't super confident in my identity. And then after when I came back from it [an LGBTQ camp], I like knew a whole bunch more about my own identity, kind of thing, which was super good, uhh and like right after it uh I kind of like, gained a ton of confidence from that camp.

These youth obtained a larger sense of confidence in their identities. It seems as though when youth felt free to be themselves around staff and in activities, they were able to explore their

identities without inhibition, and thereby develop a deeper understanding of themselves. This led to the youths' increased confidence in their sexuality and/or gender expression. Essentially, when youth felt the freedom to engage in activities that expressed and explored their identities, they became more confident in them; or as Ace said it, through LGBTQ-only activities it helps to spread the message to youth that "it's okay to be gay".

In addition, youth who became more confident in their identities through these LGBTQ activities also showed more confidence when interacting with those who are not or potentially not accepting of their LGBTQ status. Emily continued to remark on the effect of the dance performance:

I went to that performance that I did, and uh, then I formally came out to my family and my friends and it just, as soon as that happened it was just kind of like 'this is who I am if you don't like it screw yourself'... And I didn't used to be like that. I used to be, when I was younger I used to be a lot more shy and anxious all the time... with my identity it's out there. And it's who I am. And I don't care what anybody thinks about it anymore. It's who I am. It's not like, no one can change that. It just is.

Kay expressed a similar attitude when asked what places he feels comfortable going to as an openly-identifying queer youth: "most places now actually! You know I used to kind of keep it to myself and then, after [LGBTQ-designated space] I can go anywhere and be who I want to be without having a problem"; and Luke responded in this way: "I'll have some people turn their heads and look away and I'm like 'that's right, this is me this is who I am'". So, youth who felt more secure and confident in their identities were able to express that confidence in public spaces "without a problem", and maintain it even when people "turn their heads" or "look away".

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and meanings associated with safe public leisure spaces for LGBTQ youth. The guiding research question was “what experiences do LGBTQ youth have that distinguishes public leisure spaces as safe?” The literature informing this study stated that, ‘safe spaces’ are free from “violence, harassment, discomfort, and social exclusion” (Fetner et al., 2012, p.193), where the space is either inclusive or exclusive to provide safety from hegemonic views, and where marginalized groups are supported. In chapter four, youth described the essence of safety through a sense of acceptance, community, and freedom for self-expression. These themes are interrelated with the theoretical framework and further suggest that safe spaces go beyond simply the absence of negative behaviours. Therefore, this section will address the theoretical framework and the literature on LGBTQ youth safe spaces, activities, infrastructure, and staff.. This chapter also discusses the limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and the implications for practice for leisure professionals, community staff members, and the population at large.

Safe Leisure Spaces

The findings of this study helped to illuminate how leisure staff, activities, and infrastructure contribute to LGBTQ youths’ experiences with safe public leisure spaces. This section focuses on the research objectives in relation to my study’s findings and the existing literature.

Leisure staff and other interpersonal relationships. This study initially set out to explore the interpersonal relationships between public leisure staff members and LGBTQ youth and the youths’ sense of safety. However, youth in this study shared experiences where it was not only the interactions between staff members that made a space safe, but rather the

interactions they encountered on a daily basis with peers, friends, family, school teachers, community members, and the larger public all influenced their sense of safety. Fetner et al., (2012) stated that an individual's affective state is important when considering safe spaces. In other words, the individual has to feel safe for the space to be considered 'safe'. In this study, the participants interpreted direct and indirect messages to determine whether or not a space was accepting of LGBTQ individuals. The youth paid close attention to the comments and behaviours of people around them to decipher whether or not the space and the people within the space would be accepting of them or not. Positive messaging played an important role in whether or not they feel accepted by others and choose to engage in leisure.

Feeling accepted was important to the youths' accessing of and engagement in public leisure spaces. Therefore, the experiences in and out of leisure spaces matter because they influence the youths' sense of acceptance. This is critical because when youth do not feel accepted by others, they are likely to stay "closeted" until early adulthood when they are less likely to experience stigma and negative pressures from family and school (D'Augelli, 2003). Unfortunately, because youth develop their identities during adolescence, and one's gender identity and sexual orientation is a foundational component of one's identity (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Seelman, Forge, Walls, & Bridges, 2015), not feeling accepted can hinder participation. This subsequently may negatively influence their positive youth development. It appears that for LGBTQ youth, safe spaces are partially determined by their interpretations of the messages they receive from others, and not just staff members. Therefore, everybody plays a role in creating safe spaces for LGBTQ youth through the messages they send, not just in public leisure spaces, but in all settings and interactions they have with LGBTQ youth.

Staff members outside of public leisure spaces also play an important role in cultivating a sense of safety, particularly through being open to learning about LGBTQ issues. The youth described positive experiences where they educated others on LGBTQ issues through workshops and presentations. Through these experiences, youth felt as though people were learning about LGBTQ issues, and that through this knowledge transfer, spaces would become more accepting of LGBTQ youth. Further, the youth felt accepted by the people who came to listen to their presentations because of their openness to learning from them. In this regard, spaces can be made safe when people are advocating for LGBTQ issues, as well as when people demonstrate an openness to learning about LGBTQ issues. Staff who take care in using proper pronouns with LGBTQ youth, and are comfortable with saying “gay” or “lesbian”, make leisure spaces more inclusive (Barber & Krane, 2007).

Because LGBTQ youth are always interpreting the messages of others in non-LGBTQ designated spaces, LGBTQ-designated spaces acted as a shelter for the youth. Here they did not need to evaluate the acceptance or openness of others to the same degree that they did in non-LGBTQ settings. This also strengthens the notion that LGBTQ-designated spaces are safer for queer youth. Because people who accessed LGBTQ-designated spaces likely also identified as LGBTQ, LGBTQ-designated spaces fostered a sense of community for the youth, which made them feel safe. Indeed, Fetner et al. (2012) stated that when there is an agreed upon membership in a space, safety is better predicted therein. Safe spaces bring people of similar backgrounds together which increases safety (Evan & Boyte, 1986); in this case LGBTQ-designated spaces brought LGBTQ youth together. Through feeling a sense of similarity to and having a sense of shared hardships with one another, youth in LGBTQ-designated spaces likely felt safer as they felt a part of a community there. In addition, spaces where people are perceived to be more

diverse and less heterosexual also contributed to the notion of community for LGBTQ youth. This is important to note as increasing feelings of community and similarity may also work to improve LGBTQ youth's feelings of safety within public leisure spaces (Held, 2015; Myslik, 1996).

Leisure activities. One aim of this study was to understand what specific leisure programs and services met the needs of LGBTQ youth, particularly focusing on what experiences cultivated the freedom for them to authentically express themselves in leisure. Leisure activities are defined as those that create opportunities for socialization, creative or artistic, intellectual, and sports activities (Scott & Willits, 1998). In this study, LGBTQ-designated spaces provided youth with opportunities for these types of leisure in ways that non-LGBTQ-designated spaces could not. As an example, youth described their relationships with other queer youth as superior to other friendships, and this socializing primarily originated in LGBTQ-designated spaces. In addition, a LGBTQ dance performance and LGBTQ-designated camp activities were described as being especially important to the formation of a youth's identity because they felt free to express themselves

In this study, the youth also used their leisure to create workshops on LGBTQ topics. This is particularly important because educating others on issues marginalized youth experience can work to create new programming, policies, and procedures (Therriault & Witt, 2014) that have the potential to increase the sense of safety for queer youth in public leisure spaces. Indeed, educating others can help to change dominant ideologies and act as a preliminary catalyst to social movements for marginalized populations (Evans & Boyte, 1986; Fetner et al., 2012; Morris, 1984). The workshops that the youth delivered could be said to have helped make social change by altering the way others see LGBTQ youth, which subsequently could have increased

their acceptance level towards LGBTQ youth, and thus making spaces safer for them.

Furthermore, safe spaces allow people to gain self-respect (Evan and Boyte, 1986). Therefore, leisure activities such as presenting on LGBTQ issues to community members and teacher can act as a source of enjoyment for the youth while also increasing self-respect and creating social change.

In addition, the literatures on activities for LGBTQ youth discuss how many feel obligated to conform to stereotypical gender norms during participation. The youth in this study did not state many experiences where they conformed to participate, but still reflected this notion by emphasizing the importance for them to be able to freely express themselves during leisure engagement. The youth felt safe to participate in leisure when they had the freedom to engage in activities with self-expression instead of conforming. In addition, LGBTQ-related activities were monumental for the youth's increase in self-confidence in their identities. Therefore, activities that maximize youths' freedom to express themselves can become safer and more sustainable leisure activities for LGBTQ youth.

Infrastructure. The last objective of this study was to understand the youths' perceptions of safe space signage and gender-neutral bathrooms/change rooms and how they influenced their sense of safety in public leisure spaces. In this study, safe-space signage and gender-neutral washrooms/change rooms acted as a positive message that influenced their sense of acceptance. In regard to a space's infrastructure, having gender-neutral change-rooms and washrooms provided an added level of safety for them. This type of infrastructure possibly negated potential discrimination for trans youth who wished to access bathrooms or change-rooms of the gender they identified with. Although infrastructure could not secure safety in the same ways that staff, the larger public, and activities could, it was an effective step in showing

LGBTQ youth that they were accepted..

Although the purpose of this study was not to focus on differences between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ spaces, the data analysis revealed an important distinction between the two spaces in terms of the youths' sense of safety in public leisure spaces. Many of the positive experiences that the youth described in this study were those that occurred in LGBTQ-designated spaces. Because public leisure spaces are regarded as sites for personal development, identities and skills (McGuire & Conover-Williams, 2010), spaces where youth feel safe to participate are important for LGBTQ youth. Unfortunately, most spaces are not LGBTQ-designated and are, for the most part, considered to be heterosexual spaces (Browne & Bakshi, 2011; Johnson, 1999). This is problematic because research has reported that LGBTQ youth are more likely to be bullied than their heterosexual counterparts because of their sexuality and/or gender expression (Alvarez-Garcia et al., 2015; Browne et al., 2011; Messina et al., 2011; Morrow & Gill 2003; Robinson & Espelage, 2012; Theriault & Edwards, 2014). Although the participants in my study did not specifically say that non LGBTQ-designated leisure spaces were unsafe for them, all of the youth had experienced some bullying and discrimination based on their identities to various degrees in non-LGBTQ spaces. In contrast, none of the participants stated any types of discrimination to have occurred in LGBTQ-designated settings. This is in line with Browne and Bakshi's (2011) study where the majority of their respondents stated they felt safe in most spaces, but also recognized the importance of having spaces designated for them. This suggests that despite a general feeling of safety in public leisure spaces, LGBTQ spaces can offer a stronger essence of safety than non-LGBTQ spaces (Browne & Bakshi, 2011; Theriault, 2014). In addition, the youths' emphasis on the importance of LGBTQ-designated spaces leads one to believe that LGBTQ-designated spaces are their preferred spaces (Theriault, 2014). Despite

LGBTQ-designated spaces being the safer space for the youth in this study, segregating spaces based on individuals' sexuality and gender expressions can also be problematic. For example, LGBTQ-designated spaces primarily focus on bringing queer youth together which does not work to bridge the gap between LGBTQ youth and heterosexual and cisgender youth.

Additionally, LGBTQ-designated spaces are few and far between. In this study, Youth Spectrum was the only LGBTQ-designated space for the youth, and it only ran once a week for three hours. If the youth do not feel safe accessing non-LGBTQ designated spaces, this means they may only experience three hours of leisure a week, as opposed to non-LGBTQ youth who have more options through community programming that is targeted for the general public.

Expanding Safe Leisure Spaces

In addition to the theoretical framework, the study's findings lend also highlighted the notion of safe public leisure spaces in the context of how the youth felt a sense of acceptance, sense of community, and freedom for self-expression. Each theme is discussed below.

Sense of Acceptance

A sense of acceptance was important for the youth to experience when accessing public leisure spaces. Positive messaging and an openness to learning were important in creating the sense of acceptance for LGBTQ youth, and thereby safe spaces.

Positive messaging. People within public leisure spaces were of utmost importance in a space was perceived by youth in this study as LGBTQ-friendly or not. The youths' sense of acceptance was influenced by the direct messages they received from people either verbally or through their behaviour toward them. The youth also had experiences with indirect messaging where they overheard others talking or saw people behaving in ways that influenced their perception of acceptance by them. Therefore, what people said and/or how they behaved, both

directly and indirectly, were interpreted by the youth in deciding whether a space and the people therein would be accepting of them or not. This is consistent with Kirby et al. (2008)'s research that found that homophobia can be expressed both directly and indirectly. Similar to the participants in my study, Lasser and Thalinger (2003) found that their participants also interpreted both indirect and direct messages from others to decide whether or not they were homophobic. The distinction between direct and indirect messages is important as it goes to show how even when people are not directly behaving in discriminatory ways towards LGBTQ youth, they may indirectly be sending a message that the youth are interpreting as negative and unaccepting.

As highlighted in my findings, youth in this study interpreted heterosexual men to be aggressive and intimidating. Their appearance and behaviour were indirect messages that the youth interpreted. Johnson (1999) and Kivel and Kleiber (2000) also document how the image of heterosexual men is a message that is often interpreted by LGBTQ people as intimidating. Sporting contexts, in particular, were spaces the youth expected to encounter such people, as the "macho male" is stereotypically believed to possess homophobic and transphobic values and behaviours. The anticipation of this type of behaviour is what makes a space unsafe. Recall that Faye had interpreted the appearance of males who frequented the same gym as them to be transphobic and homophobic. In the context of sports, males were interpreted as upholding a heterosexist image that deterred the youth in this study from participating. In fact, none of the participants in this study were involved in sports at the time they were interviewed. This may not be surprising considering the amount of research that has identified sporting environments to be heterosexist spaces, where LGBTQ youth are particularly susceptible to homo- and trans-phobic behaviours from others (Barber & Krane, 2007; Gill, Morrow, Collins, Lucey & Schultz, 2006;

Kirby, Demers & Parent, 2008; Morrow & Gill, 2003; O'Brien et al., 2013; Robertson, 2003; Roper & Halloran, 2007).

Barber and Krane (2007) and Kivel and Kleiber (2000) claim that when sports and physical activity settings are not perceived as safe, LGBTQ youth will not participate. The consequences of this are that they are less likely to gain the physical, social, and psychological health benefits of exercise (Barber & Krane, 2007). However, these studies suggested that both males and females contributed to the homo- and trans-phobic climate in sport settings; whereas in this study, the youth spoke solely to the “hyper-masculine” and “aggressively-straight” men as being problematic or threatening here.

The youth also shared experiences of other indirect messages that they received that influenced their perception of acceptance from others. For example, many stated that they had overheard others speak both positively and negatively about LGBTQ individuals. Others witnessed behaviours such as changing the channel when something LGBTQ-related came on. These types of messages are important because they might negate LGBTQ youth from engaging in leisure:

Overt discrimination does not have to occur to influence leisure participation. The fear of discrimination experienced by gay and lesbian young adults may be enough to cause them to socially construct significant perceptions and rationales, avoid interpersonal experiences, and make specific life changes or choices to avoid discrimination in leisure. (Johnson, 1999, p. 264)

In this study, indirect messages that were positive helped the youth feel that they were accepted by others and indirect messages that were negative made the youth feel not accepted. Safety in public leisure spaces for LGBTQ youth seemed to not only be affected by the

behaviours and interactions with leisure staff, but also by the interpersonal relationships that they experienced on a daily basis with others. These experiences appeared to carry over into other leisure settings and experiences, and impact how they assess their level of acceptance from others.

Direct messages were also interpreted by the youth to decipher whether spaces were accepting or not. Kirby et al. (2008) noted that direct anti-gay slurs, jokes, and insults diminish LGBTQ youth's sense of safety. While the youth had some experiences with these kinds of messages, they seemed to describe more experiences to the contrary. This may be because people are using more inclusive language, or are more aware that making jokes and using gay slurs is unacceptable. Or, it may show that youth have become immune to these types of negative messages due to repetition that it did not weigh into their experiences as much (Browne et al., 2011). Additionally, this may suggest that safety for the youth is beyond a sense of fear or harassment and bullying, but connected to their sense of acceptance in more subtle ways through indirect and direct messaging.

In this study, teachers, and in two cases a youth counsellor, were able to demonstrate direct positive messaging to the youth by referring them to LGBTQ-designated spaces, programs, and events. Theriault and Witt (2014) stated that these types of referrals send a message to youth that staff accepted LGBTQ individuals, which in turn made the youth feel like staff members were safe people to talk to. Bambi talked about a teacher who referred him to an LGBTQ-designated space: "Dr. Borys is totally cool about that [LGBTQ youth]. Like Dr. Borys is sick, he's awesome!". Gillard et al. (2014) stated, "Staff members who know how to promote discussions of gender, validate gender nonconformity, and effectively suppress others' use of slurs and other derogatory or inaccurate language, with the aim of increasing positive attitudes,

can nurture these positive youth-adult relationships” (p.100). This would suggest that referrals are one way that adults can show LGBTQ youth that they are their allies. This is important because LGBTQ youths’ subjective feelings of safety in school increased when they perceived that staff allies were present (Kosciw et al., 2014; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey & Russell, 2010; Robertson & Espelage, 2012; Seelman et al., 2015; Walls, Kane & Wisneski, 2009). In addition, having staff allies helped LGBTQ youth gain confidence (Therriault & Witt, 2014) and can increase engagement in schools resulting in better academic outcomes (Seelman et al., 2015).

Although much of the leisure scholarship on LGBTQ youth has suggested that spaces can be made more accepting for youth through workshops that discuss sexual diversity, homophobia in sport settings, safe-space signage, and GSAs (Robinson & Espelage, 2012), there are few studies that note the importance of LGBTQ safe space referrals. However, of the participants who mentioned being referred to an LGBTQ-designated space by a staff member in their school or community, all of them chose to attend. Therefore, this study highlights the importance of staff referrals and suggests that this is one more way that staff in non-LGBTQ-designated settings can lend a positive message of acceptance to youth. Furthermore, these referrals also helped the youth to view staff as allies while also becoming engaged in LGBTQ leisure, which is important for positive identity development (Fileborn, 2013).

LGBTQ-safe space signage and infrastructure played a role in the youths’ perceptions of acceptance. All of the participants spoke of the positive message that rainbow flags and gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms gave to a space that was not LGBTQ-designated. For the youth, these messages were interpreted as indicators of an accepting space for LGBTQ individuals. For example, Jamie said: “knowing that there’s gender neutral washrooms or pride merchandise would make me think, oh okay well it’s at least somewhat accepting here”. This is

in line with research that states that LGBTQ individuals' perceived level of comfort improves with the visibility of rainbow flags and gender-neutral change-rooms and washrooms (Browne & Bakshi, 2011; Gillard et al., 2014; Mahoney et al., 2015; Seelman et al., 2015). Further, the youth mentioned how they interpreted posters that advertised LGBTQ-safe spaces as positive messages of acceptance. For some of them, seeing the poster was their first initiation to an LGBTQ-designated space or event, and from seeing the poster they began to attend.

Although rainbow flags and posters were perceived as positive messages for some of the youth in this study, researchers have reported that posters can be interpreted as having very little meaning in terms of safety. In fact, some studies show that such resources were detrimental to LGBTQ-designated club participation (Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011). Some of the male participants in Horowitz and Itzkowitz (2011)'s study recalled that they were anxious about looking at the poster for details of its content because they feared that they would be outted or interpreted by others as gay. So, while the posters are meant to be a positive message for LGBTQ youth, they may also be a catalyst for bullying because observing LGBTQ posters may make youth susceptible to becoming easy targets of homophobic harassment. Posters being ripped down or spit upon brought forth indirect homophobia that was not previously apparent (Fetner et al., 2012). These types of actions can send a message to LGBTQ youth that they are not accepted. So, while there appears to be different outcomes from this type of signage, Barber and Krane (2007) encourage the use of books, rainbow flags, and buttons to propel the notion of acceptance and support towards LGBTQ youth. My findings support these suggested initiatives as none of the participants mentioned the negative effects of having safe-space signage.

Openness to learning. Individuals' openness to learning about LGBTQ youth was important in terms of youth feeling accepted. In this study, Sarah, a transgender youth, described

how it made her feel accepted when her friend was open to learning what pronouns to use. Similar to Sarah's experience, a lesbian participant from Johnson (1999)'s study spoke positively about how a conversation with a work colleague made her feel more accepted when the colleague asked questions and wanted to learn more about homosexuality.

Openness to learning was also evident through the youths' involvement in and enjoyment of LGBTQ-related workshops and educational presentations. These workshops were developed by the youth and presented to teachers, staff, and other community groups through the use of their school's GSA or the LGBTQ-designated space. These types of activities were enjoyable for the youth, and led them to believe that, through their effort to bring awareness, they were making spaces more accepting and inclusive. Likewise, the participants from Fetner et al.'s (2012) study noted how LGBTQ presentations and events created a more open and accepting school. It is significant to note that outside of LGBTQ-designated settings, this was the main activity that the youth expressed an interest in. Therefore, outside of LGBTQ activities, it can be suggested that a main source of leisure enjoyment for the youth is in creating events and presenting to others about LGBTQ issues.

Teachers were not obligated to go to these LGBTQ-informational events. Therefore, when they did attend, the youth felt that this was a reflection of their openness to learning about LGBTQ issues and this cultivated a sense of acceptance. The literature mainly describes staff who attend these types of workshops to be making spaces safer because they become more educated as a result. However, this study showed an added benefit. Through attendance alone, LGBTQ youth perceived those staff members to be more accepting and wanting to make spaces more accepting of LGBTQ individuals. Similarly, Seelman et al. (2015) found that adults who expressed an interest in connecting with LGBTQ youth in their schools, contributed to the notion

that they are accepted, and reinforce for these youth that they are a safe contact for them. They go on to say: “personal relationships *matter* for LGBTQ students—adults who communicate an openness, rather than hostility, about LGBTQ students contribute to the overall high school climate for this population” (Seelman et al., 2015, p. 26; emphasis in original). It can be assumed that adults who demonstrate an openness to learning in settings other than the school, would produce the same results. Therefore, when the church group showed that they were open and willing to learn about queer issues, the LGBTQ youth felt a sense of acceptance. Because acceptance and inclusion are associated with feelings of safety, staff and community members who can demonstrate an openness to learning from and about LGBTQ youth may also help to instill feelings of safety in queer youth (Fetner et al., 2012; Horowitz & Itzkowitz, 2011; Munchicko, Lepp, & Barkley, 2014; Theriault & Edwards 2014).

Sense of Community. A sense of community was fostered for youth who they shared experiences and hardship with, and also for those to whom they felt similar. These contributed to more positive public leisure experiences.

Shared experiences. Part of the reason that LGBTQ-designated spaces were important for the youth in this study was because it connected them to youth who shared in their experience of being queer. Similar to Fetner and Elafros (2015) and Flowers and Buston (2001), participants in this study said that they often felt alone because they did not know other people in their lives who were queer. Feeling alone also made participants in this study feel different from their peers, which further supports Flowers and Buston’s (2001) findings that youth who are LGBTQ feel different from others because they are not heterosexual.

However, once youth in this study were introduced to an LGBTQ-designated space, the feelings of being alone and different diminished substantially. This was because they were able

to develop relationships with other youth who were queer, which made them feel similar to one another. Fetner and Elafros (2015) also found that LGBTQ-designated spaces were conduits to friendships for queer youth; and, Krane, Barber, and McClung (2002) also identified the opportunity for friendships to originate in LGBTQ-designated spaces. Similar to Fileborn's (2013) study, these relationships were important because they fostered a sense of community for the youth.

Because forming friendships was not always easy for the youth in their school and community, LGBTQ spaces were significant in providing an opportunity for developing relationships with others who were similar to them and cultivating a sense of community among the youth. Participants in Krane et al.'s (2002) study also noted the social benefits to participating in the Gay Games, an athletic competition specifically designed for LGBTQ athletes, because of the sense of similarity that was derived through the event between LGBTQ athletes. Indeed, the youth in this study seemed to be positively affected by the development of queer friendships in LGBTQ spaces with many describing such relationships as familial. This finding is not unique to this study, as other research has noted the family-like relationships that can develop between youth in LGBTQ-designated spaces (Iwasaki & Ristock, 2004; Theriault & Witt, 2014). Associating LGBTQ relations with family-like bonds emphasizes the importance of interpersonal queer relationships, and subsequently, renders LGBTQ-designated spaces as an important site for such friendships to flourish and for youth to feel a sense of similarity and community with one another. Furthermore, Theriault and Witt (2014) have regarded the formation of relationships between queer youth to be a "critical aspect of promoting positive youth development" (p. 94). Therefore, because LGBTQ-designated spaces hold such opportunity for friendships between queer youth to develop, they may provide more than just

meaningful relationships, that may not otherwise transpire, but also enhance their overall development through adolescence and onwards.

Shared hardship. In addition to youth sharing similar experiences of being queer, having shared experiences of hardship seemed to strengthen the youths' sense of community. The youth spoke about these friendships in a way that was different from their relationships with heterosexual and cisgender youth. Many of the participants shared that they felt a sense of community with those who could understand what it is like to be of a sexual minority or to be gender-variant, and the associating struggles that one often goes through for identifying along the queer spectrum. Researchers have reported that when individuals can relate to one another, spaces seem safer (Fetner et al., 2012; Fileborn, 2013; Walls, Kane & Wisneski, 2010; Wells, 2006). Indeed, Browne, Bakshi, and Lim's study (2011) found that LGBTQ spaces may engender solidarities because of people's relatedness to "hurt, anger, injury, same, and so on of abuse" (p. 751). Fileborn (2013) also found that a sense of community was created for queer youth in LGBTQ-designated spaces because of the "shared experience and mutual understanding of homophobia" (p. 87). Further, in a study conducted by Russel, Musaco, Subramaniam and Laub (2009), they found that within school GSA's, youth were able to form friendships that consisted of mutual understanding and alleviated isolation. As Cay expressed about people who go to LGBTQ-designated spaces: "...[I] felt safe [there] because there are other people who are also feel the same way because they are queer and so must know what it's like to be different and stuff".

LGBTQ staff members were also able to instil a sense of community among LGBTQ youth because the youth knew that they also understood the hardships that coincide with being queer. These relationships were different than the friendships that the youth developed with the

other queer youth in LGBTQ-designated spaces. Because staff were older than the participants, they were perceived less like friends and more like role models and supportive figures in the youths' lives. This is important because youths' experiences of feeling alone and different are often exacerbated for LGBTQ youth when queer role models are not present (Lewis & Johnson, 2011). The majority of staff members that interact with LGBTQ youth will be heterosexual and will not identify along the queer spectrum (Wiger, 2015). However, because people who access LGBTQ-designated spaces, for the most part, identify under the queer umbrella, LGBTQ-designated spaces offered a unique setting where youth could find queer role models. Staff members who are visibly LGBTQ can act as important people for queer youth to look up to (Theriault & Witt, 2014). Therefore, queer staff members were important for the youth in this study not only because they acted as important role models in their lives, but also because they were able to understand the youths' experiences of hardship better than non-LGBTQ-identifying staff members.

Sense of similarity. Youth described feeling a sense of similarity in non-LGBTQ-designated settings where the other people in that setting appeared to be marginalized by mainstream society. This experience in non-LGBTQ settings fostered a sense of community for the youth because they were also not seen as mainstream because of their sexualities and gender expressions. Theriault and Edwards (2014) stated that spaces that foster diversity, not just diverse sexualities and expressions, are expressive of a more inclusive space. In this study, youth interpreted such diversity as a source of community, which was important for them when accessing non-LGBTQ spaces. There seems to be a dearth of literature highlighting how the appearance of diverse individuals may increase LGBTQ youth's sense of community in public leisure spaces. This notion can also be connected to how the youth interpreted the appearance of

heterosexual “macho” men in sport settings to decipher whether a space was accepting of LGBTQ individuals or not. As youth are always interpreting direct and indirect messages from others to see if a space is accepting, the diversity of a space also can increase or decrease their perception of community for them. Where youth felt similar to others, and as though they were not of minority in a space, they felt a stronger sense of community therein. Therefore, it can be suggested that when people appear to be less heterosexual and more diverse, LGBTQ youth feel similar to them and are more likely to experience feelings of community within those spaces.

Freedom for self-expression Youth in this study enthusiastically expressed their opinion of LGBTQ staff members they encountered. The positive perceptions towards LGBTQ staff members seemed to stem from the freedom that staff fostered towards the youths experimentation with their identities. Luke speaks to this when discussing how he felt staff would be supportive if he decided to wear nail polish. Clove also affirmed this notion when discussing staffs’ nonchalant attitude towards youth experimenting with preferred names (names not given at birth, but chosen by the youth to support their identity) and pronouns. LGBTQ participants in Theriault and Witt’s (2014) study stated similar findings related to feeling free to explore new hairstyles, clothes and names in LGBTQ-designated spaces by the staff, which allowed them to participate with “no filters, none” (p.92). Because these actions often go against societal norms, having the freedom to experiment in LGBTQ spaces with the support of staff members meant that they could delve deeper into activities and explore their identities with little or no inhibition in these settings. Although past research has identified the importance of LGBTQ youth feeling free to express themselves through non-traditional ways, the freedom for experimentation itself has been discussed less. Therefore, this study showed that staff can support LGBTQ youth by not only allowing them to present themselves as they see fit, but also

by fostering the freedom for them to experiment with their identity in order to express themselves authentically.

Activities in non-LGBTQ-designated spaces did not necessarily offer the same freedoms for self-expression in this study. Unfortunately, this may inhibit an authentic leisure engagement and may also result in diminished leisure satisfaction. In some cases, it may cease participation altogether. Theriault (2014) noted that when LGBTQ youth do not perceive support from their teammates, friends, family members, and teachers, they may choose to not participate at all, or the level of enjoyment from the activity may be diminished. This outcome was apparent in Luke's experience with the air cadets. Because Luke wanted to express himself in ways that the program's dress code did not support, he decided to quit. This example highlights the importance of being able to express oneself during leisure as their participation is contingent upon it. This is important because through leisure, youth are able to acquire many benefits. For example, Iwasaki and Ristock (2004) say that leisure developed for LGBTQ youth can provide them with opportunities to cope with life-stressors and allow them to renew themselves physically, emotionally, and/or psychologically. These benefits can help to empower them and contribute to positive development (Iwasaki & Ristock, 2004). Therefore, it is critical that LGBTQ youth participate in leisure to ensure that they acquire the benefits that come from leisure engagement.

Confidence. When youth in this study felt the freedom to express themselves, they gained a deeper sense of confidence in their sexualities and gender identities. Feeling free to participate in leisure activities that allow one to express their gender identity or sexuality has been documented to be transformative for LGBTQ youth. For example, Lewis and Johnson (2011) found that inclusive activities allow for positive gender affirmation and transformation. Similarly, McGuire and Conover-Williams (2010) found that LGBTQ-designated spaces were

“places where youth came to understand who they were, had an opportunity to explore their own gender expressions in a safe environment, and gained insight about what it meant to pursue a gender transition” (p.20). This coincides with the experiences that the participants in this study shared. LGBTQ-related activities were important for the youth because they provided opportunities for them to explore their identities further and express themselves in ways that they had not done prior. Similarly, athletes participating in the Gay Games described a greater sense of pride in themselves and a profound positive learning experience about their identities (Krane et al., 2002). Transgender-inclusive activities can be significant in producing feelings of physical and psychological safety, and in the ways in which trans youth proceed to make sense of their identities in the gendered social world (Rooke, 2010). Confidence in one’s identity can be attained from LGBTQ-activities when the freedom to participate authentically, without inhibitions or fears of being misunderstood, exists.

Having spaces dedicated to LGBTQ youth is important because they are able to engage in activities with other queer youth more freely. Further, LGBTQ-designated spaces expose youth to unique activities that other spaces do not provide for, such as Queer Prom and Pride marches (Therriault & Witt, 2014). These activities may be catalysts to discovering individual identity, which can be of significant importance for queer youth (Therriault & Witt, 2014). Therefore, LGBTQ-related activities may help to solidify queer youth identities, and increase queer youth self-confidence in ways that mainstream non-LGBTQ activities may not be able to provide. For the youth in this study, such as Clove and Emily, these activities allowed them to express themselves fully, which contributed to an enriching and personally meaningful experience where they gained self-confidence in their sexualities and gender identity. The power of these events

significantly worked to shape the youth into confident queer individuals, which is important to recognize.

These themes relate to the framework of this research, particularly how they play a role in creating safe spaces. However, I postulate that sense of acceptance and freedom for self-expression are seemingly more important to safety than the infrastructure component of the theoretical framework. This can be assumed because, naturally, a spaces' infrastructure cannot foster the freedom for self-expression in the same way that activities and staff can, and safe-space signage may not be able to send a positive message of acceptance to the same degree as staff. Through this study it became apparent that people are of utmost importance in LGBTQ youths' decisions in whether a space is accepting of them or not. Individuals in all settings and not just in public leisure spaces play a part in creating safe spaces through positive messaging and being open to learning, which lends a message of acceptance to LGBTQ youth. Youth who are able to connect with other queer individuals also helps them to feel a sense of community with others, particularly in LGBTQ-designated settings. Further, individuals who foster a sense of freedom for LGBTQ youth helped the youth to discover their identities on a deeper level and thereby further helped them to derive a stronger sense of confidence in their gender identity, and/or sexual preferences. It is evident through the experiences that the youth shared that people matter in creating safe spaces in public leisure spaces. Therefore, I believe it is the combination of activities, infrastructure, and staff that leads the youth to experiences that cultivate a sense of acceptance, community, and freedom for self-expression.

Limitations

There were a number of limitations in conducting this study. To start, aside from school GSAs, there is only one LGBTQ-designated space in the community. Of the youth who

participated, 11 of the 13 youth were recruited from this space, and the remaining two participants were recruited from a school GSA program. Therefore, all participants were a part of an LGBTQ-designated program, which may have affected their experiences that they shared with me. Although the frequency of attendance for these youth varied considerably, their connection to an LGBTQ-designated program could have created a bias. This may be why the distinction between LGBTQ-designated spaces and non-LGBTQ-designated spaces was so strong. In fact, none of the participants stated any types of discrimination to have occurred in LGBTQ-designated settings. Although leisure scholarship on LGBTQ youth and safe spaces highlight the importance of having LGBTQ-designated spaces (Fetner & Elafros, 2015; Fetner et al., 2012; Iwasaki and Ristock, 2004; Theriault & Witt, 2014; Theriault, 2014), perhaps only youth who had good experiences in LGBTQ spaces chose to participate in this study which could have affected the results.

Another factor that may have influenced the study is relevant to the interview location. The participants who were able to meet me outside of program hours may have been more conscious of their surroundings which may have deterred them from sharing certain experiences. In addition, my role as an ally in this program may have affected their responses and the individual's choice to participate. Because I was a consistent member of the program, the participants knew that they would see me again there which may have affected what they shared.

The geographical location of the study also has to be considered for this study. Because the participants were recruited from a small city, their experiences with being a gender-variant youth or of a sexual minority may be different than those living in a major city.

In addition, the ages of the youth contributed to a diverse set of answers. For example, the youngest participant was 15 years old, and the oldest was 18. It can be assumed that the

leisure experiences of someone in junior high would be different from those who were graduating high school, which may have also influenced the findings. Age also played a part in terms of the quality of answers that were given. Typically, the older participants were able to more fully express their experiences than the younger participants. This may be because the older participants have gained a deeper understanding into the meanings of their experiences. It can also be an intimidating experience at such a young age to discuss your sexuality and gender identity with someone you are not very close to. This may have impacted the way they spoke or thought about their answers to the interview questions.

Finally, it is important to describe my social location as a researcher. Typical of most researchers, I come from a well-educated middle-class background with western ideologies (Frisby, 2006). I am a cisgender and heterosexual individual. I also am unfamiliar with what it is like to grow up in the area of which the study took place which is much smaller than my own hometown. This also may have impacted my perspectives, as growing up in one area can be quite different from another in terms of people, environment, opportunities, social class, etc. As I cannot separate myself entirely from these factors, undoubtedly they would have influenced the relationships I formed in Youth Spectrum, with my participants, and within my writing.

Within my writing, I can see in hindsight that my social location influenced the literature that informed this study. From my limited knowledge at the time I believe that the literature that resonated most with me were those that spoke to the more obvious signs of discrimination towards LGBTQ youth. However, what this study has highlighted is that it is not only the obvious signs of harassment and discrimination that impacts a persons' sense of safety. More so, safety is brought forth in the more subtle acts of others that demonstrate acceptance, openness, and freedom, which I was unaware of before starting this study.

My social location also influenced my role as a researcher. There is a power inequality as a heterosexual cisgender researcher researching LGBTQ youth. This is problematic, as it is these inequalities in power that oppress people in the first place (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). The youth in this study shared negative experiences with cisgender heterosexual individuals, and as such, I may have also been perceived as a threat or potentially harmful with the information that they shared (Frisby et al., 2005; Yoshihama & Carr, 2002). This may have influenced what they shared or how much they shared. The approach that I tried to live out through this experience with Youth Spectrum and my research however, was to be a mutual learner and allow the youth to be led to speak about what they deemed most important. This type of researcher reflexivity produces questions to which I may never have the answers to.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although LGBTQ youth all fall under the queer umbrella, the importance of certain activities, infrastructures, and staff behaviours seemed to be more relevant at times to trans individuals. For example, infrastructure seemed to particularly be important for trans youth. Because nine of the 13 participants in this study identified as trans or gender-fluid/variant, future researchers may want to gain a more robust understanding of leisure experiences for trans and queer youth.

In addition, the fact that none of the youth in my study played any sports at the time of the interview was significant. More research is needed to truly understand the relationship between LGBTQ youth and sport participation. The natural inclination is that this finding is pertinent to their interpretations towards heterosexual cisgender males in the sport setting. However, Grossman, O'Connell, and D'Augelli (2005) found that, "many transgender and gender nonconforming youth are uninterested in 'traditional girl-boy activities' [as in girls

playing ballet because it is a “feminine” sport and boys playing football because it is a “masculine” sport] because these activities do not meet their needs for self-expression” (p. 22). Because sports are typically segregated by gender, it may not be surprising that trans-individuals appear to be less interested in sports. As the majority of the participants in my study were transgender or gender nonconforming, future research should explore whether the perceived “aggressive” and “heterosexist” men in sport contexts causes trans youth to avoid sports, or whether it is because they feel as though sports do not meet their needs for self-expression. Research that works to understand this would be useful to leisure scholarship and for those that offer physical activity and sport opportunities for youth.

Finally, it appears as though LGBTQ youth in this study were quite comfortable with their identities and suggested a notion that most spaces are safe and are continuing to become safer for a diverse range of sexualities and genders. To this end, a longitudinal study, which to date has not been done regarding LGBTQ youth and safety, may be of value. This could work to identify the specific changes that are occurring and how they affect the safety of LGBTQ youth in public leisure spaces over a longer period of time.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this research have many implications for practice. As discussed throughout, safety is important to youth participation. Spaces can be made safer for LGBTQ youth in a number of ways. Within public leisure spaces, the people in the spaces appear to be the most important factor for queer youth safety. People need to give caution to the language that they use because LGBTQ youth take the messages from others to determine whether spaces will be safe for them or not. What people say, whether directly or indirectly, influences queer youths’ perceptions of a space. These messages are especially important within sporting contexts because

the perceived relationship between sport settings and heterosexism prevails, largely deterring LGBTQ youth from physical activity participation. Therefore, public leisure practitioners should work towards breaking down these barriers and creating an inclusive environment that spreads the positive messages of acceptance for all. This may be done through providing activities that are not segregated by gender, or making it apparent that youth can express themselves freely within that space. This will help to make youth feel more comfortable accessing spaces, which will improve the quality, frequency, and sustainability of their leisure participation.

Staff play an important role in LGBTQ youths' lives. Having staff represent themselves openly as queer helps to role model safe behaviour and positive youth development to LGBTQ youth. Further, queer staff are better positioned to provide support to LGBTQ youth because they have a stronger understanding of what it is like to grow up as a sexual minority or gender variant youth. Because they may have a stronger understanding of the hardships that queer youth go through in becoming confident in their identities, queer staff could work towards helping youth further discover their own identities. This could be done through fostering the freedom for them to express themselves in diverse and personally meaningful ways.

Staff who do not identify as LGBTQ can still influence queer youth in significant ways as well. Showing an openness to learning and attending any type of LGBTQ-related workshop or presentation lends a positive message to queer youth. Staff could also work towards becoming more aware of resources in their community that work to serve LGBTQ youth, as their referrals were well-received by queer youth in this study. The outcomes of these referrals can lead to positive experiences where youth are able to develop confidence in their identities. Further, staff could work to enhance autonomy, comfort, and freedom for the youth to express themselves in

unique ways. This will allow the participant to fully engage in activities and derive a deeper understanding and appreciation of their identity.

In addition, safe-space signage and infrastructure plays a role in creating safe spaces. Signage in the form of rainbow flags, posters, etc., is a seemingly simple way to identify to youth that the space accepts them. Barber and Krane (2007) note that although these seem like small gestures, students often remember them. Infrastructure, however, may be a more difficult task, but the impact of having gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms is significant. Therefore, leisure practitioners could advocate to management to modify the infrastructure to be inclusive. Single stalls can lessen the tension for transgender youth and also relay a message to all queer youth that the space accommodates a diverse range of people. This was apparent even when the youth used bathrooms that matched their sex. Mahoney et al., (2015) suggest that schools may repurpose some locker rooms and bathrooms as gender neutral, or add curtains to create single stalls. This may result in safer spaces for trans individuals and the general public. Because there are more individuals coming out and at increasingly younger ages (Wiger, 2015), changing the infrastructure of a building will, in the long run, be a more sustainable approach to getting LGBTQ youth to access facilities.

Finally, as long as LGBTQ-identifying youth feel marginalized by heterosexual and cisgender people in public leisure spaces, the need to gather as a collective LGBTQ community will exist (Book & Eskilsson, 2010). Unfortunately, despite the importance of LGBTQ-designated spaces for the participants' leisure, these spaces are scarce as most public leisure spaces work to serve the larger majority of society (Fetner et al., 2012). In this particular study, the youth described experiences that gave testament to the positive impact that LGBTQ-designated spaces can have on queer youth in terms of building relationships, engaging in

activities, personal development, and staff interactions. Yet, only one public leisure space in their community allowed for these types of experiences. This leads one to believe that although LGBTQ-designated spaces are important for queer youth, LGBTQ youth are still likely to be underserved because of the minimal opportunities that are available to them. Therefore, leisure service practitioners can work towards creating events and activities that are geared for LGBTQ youth to bring this community together.

Although LGBTQ-designated spaces were accessed most frequently by the youth in this study, the fact that these spaces exist is a reflection of the homo-trans-phobic attitudes that still prevail. Therefore, in addition, leisure practitioners could work towards integrating a diverse range of people, including sexualities, genders, race, etc. to make spaces more inclusive and accepting of all people.

Conclusion

LGBTQ-spaces were immensely important to LGBTQ youth safety in public leisure spaces. These spaces provided them with accepting staff that fostered the freedom for them to express themselves fully. Through these authentic expressions, they were able to fully derive the benefits of the activity and connect to themselves in personally meaningful ways. The outcome of this type of engagement resulted in a greater sense of self-confidence in their identity, which can be said to positively influence their development and perhaps their sense of safety. Outside of LGBTQ-designated spaces, safe-space signage and infrastructure can play a role in the youths' perception of safety and thereby in encouraging them to engage in the space. Further, having knowledgeable and accepting staff members is critical to youth participation and safety. Therefore, staff who attend workshops about LGBTQ issues are likely to be perceived as more accepting than staff who do not, and will likely be able to better refer queer youth to LGBTQ-

designated spaces and events. Finally, all people should work towards creating positive messages for queer youth, which will lessen the need for LGBTQ spaces. This will be a truer reflection of safe spaces; when spaces are considered so accepting that we do not need to make a division between sexualities and genders to create them.

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