



Paradox of the Safe Space

Governmentality,
Homonationalism, and
Gay Identity Formation in
Sexual Health Outreach
Interventions

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aidsfonds  SOAIDS

يرجى أخذ حمام (دش) قبل الدخول للمسبح
PLEASE TAKE SHOWER BEFORE
ENTERING THE SWIMMING POOL





Preface

A song by Nancy Ajram, a poster of Madonna, and a depiction of the “other” Madonna: the virgin Mary. This thesis is collaged in memories that belong to visitors of the Sexy Side, as if you put the entire party into a bag and scattered them all over the table. The party itself is represented by the white square in the centre of the cover: it is empty of these memories and images. On the one hand it symbolizes a “safe space” free from external judgment, but on the other... a space that in practice asks visitors to leave heavy but significant baggage at the door.

I want to thank my own queer family, and specifically Noura and Sjadela, who have taught me what friendship means, my supervisor Jelle for his sharp-as-a-knife feedback and thoughts, and my thesis buddy Chantal for her infinite happiness and positivity during this process. Furthermore, I thank my family and the department of Sociology at UU for all that I have learned. I want to also strongly thank all the people that I had the honour of interviewing. Your stories were heartfelt, and your perseverance admirable. Last, I thank the people at SoaAids Nederland for giving me the opportunity and inspiration for this research. Marvin and Wim, you have truly helped me find a professional environment, where I can still bring my entire self.

With gratitude,
Devin



Abstract

In this research, I have tried to highlight the understudied populations of refugee MSM on their interpretation of sexual health outreach activities. I do this by SoaAids Nederland's *Sexy Side of the Netherlands* event, hosted in a fetish club as a real-life case example of Foucault's governmentality. Interviews with this population, and a focus group with the event's organizers, as well as observations have revealed the complex interrelation between national identity, religion, refugee status, and sexuality and the relationship between those that send information and knowledge, and those that receive it. On the one hand, the party becomes a safe space through participation of its visitors, and their strong ties to their personal refugee MSM network, as well as volunteering positions and other sexual health outreach events. This creates a self-sustaining network of safety. On the other hand, though, the party becomes an arena of normative identity formation. The presence of religion inside the fetish club creates an invisible religiosity that normalizes an image of a gay man that is secular, sexually liberal, and pertains to specific ways of being gay, which perpetuates ideas that are familiar from the literature on homonationalism.

The power imbalance between the organizers and visitors of the party reinforces a governmentality process, where normative information on "the correct way" of being gay is distributed by organizers through their outings and symbols, but also by visitors of the party themselves, through social control within their rich networks. It furthermore shows how the governmentality process can also consist of unintended consequences and meanings that do not always directly align with the goals of policy. Last, this study highlights the importance of not only studying those that receive sexual health outreach interventions, but to also critically assess the assumptions of those creating it, as this is essential in understanding the power relation inherent to such interventions.

Conclusively, I propose that there is a Paradox of the Safe Space: the space creates a place for refugee MSM to feel safe with one's identity, while simultaneously scrutinizing this very identity by creating a normative framework through which they reflect on their identity: a framework that is created by those in power – the intervention's organizers. The party, thus, is more than one night of bliss, but moves participants to reevaluate what it means to them to experience religion, to have a place in Dutch society, and how they see themselves as both gay and refugee.





Index

Introduction	6
Power and Identity in Disco Lights	9
Information and Power	9
Governmentality and the Dutch Identity	10
Exclusion and the Safe Space	11
Methodology	14
An Evening at the Sexy Side	15
Creation of the Safe Space	16
Giving Help	17
Like a Prayer	19
“This is the Netherlands”	21
The Homosexual Demeanor	23
The Paradox of the Safe Space	26
A Structure of Safety	26
Invisible Religion: An Imbalance of Power	26
The Paradox of the Safe Space	27
Conclusion	30
Sources	31
Appendix	33
1. Policy Recommendations	33
2. Informed Consent Form	35



Introduction

Coming in from the streets of Amsterdam and walking through the wardrobe area, I am met by a dimly lit room with a dancefloor doused in colourful disco lights. Two large kitsch chandeliers float in the middle of the room. The bar is framed by gothic inspired arches that resemble the ship of a church. Behind these arches are stylized pictures of shirtless men, accompanied by a statue of the Virgin Mary. The wall behind the bar shows a large collection of cocktail mixers, strong spirits and other beverages. On the right side of the bar, there is a heightened platform with a pole that may be used for performances. Close to this pole, there is an image of Jesus being held by an apostle in faux stained glass. The stage and the perimeters of the room are richly and colourfully decorated in feathers, flags and paper garlands to accentuate the “carnival” theme of the night. A double staircase leads up to a rubber round couch and a sex swing surrounded by black walls. The downstairs area has the bathroom and spaces that are usually darkrooms. On a typical night at *Club Church*, these rooms play host to endless and varied sexual encounters. Tonight though, the visitors are not out for an erotic night, but a night where they can get tested for STI’s, vaccinated for Hepatitis B and meet others that, just like them, are LGBT+ refugees.

This party, fittingly titled *The Sexy Side of The Netherlands* was created by *SoaAids Nederland* (SANL) providing LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum seekers with a space to meet each other, be with other LGBTQ+-people, and get educated on sexual health practices. Furthermore, visitors of these parties can get tested for HIV and other STI’s, and vaccinated for Hepatitis B. Moreover, local CHS [GGD] (Dutch public health services) uses these parties to introduce attendees to their services. Within the population, SANL focusses on Men who have Sex with Men (MSM) and transwomen, as these groups are at higher risk of contracting HIV and other STI’s (SoaAids, 2019; de Vos & Siedenburger, 2019, Tohme, Egan, Stall, Wagner and Mokhbat, 2016).

When looking at other, similar interventions, research has focused on social support and the exchange of knowledge among peers (Logie, 2016), and the transferal of educational information from organizer to “user” of the service by studying the discourse that is used in this information exchange (Burchardt, 2013). Burchardt (2013) highlights the power dynamics that are inherent to this exchange by studying not only the visitors of services, but also the organizers and other employees that create such interventions. This paper considers the

transferal of knowledge as a tool of power in the context of the Sexy Side by using Foucault's (2010) concept of governmentality. Furthermore, literature on homonationalism helps in interpreting the governmentality process (Mepschen, Duyvendak & Tonkens, 2010). In this sense, the Sexy Side is a tangible case of governmentality and homonationalism through the institutionalization of norms, which as we shall find, are unintended by SANL, but carry strong meanings for the party's visitors.

Early successes of this project is apparent, as 858 MSM and trans refugees and asylum seekers have attended eight parties from 2017 to 2018. A total of 223 STI tests were performed and 226 Hepatitis B vaccinations have been administered (Zuilhof & Bos, 2019). In personal conversations, the organizers stated that visitors of the party anecdotally expressed a strong appreciation of the activity, but what actually happens inside the heads of visitors during and after these parties remains unclear. This disconnect brings up many questions: Do these parties have implications that go deeper than just one night of bliss? How do people interpret the space, and what sticks out to them? How do they have contact with other refugee MSM who go to the party, and what is their place in this network? What role does religion play in a place that is called *Club Church*, and what does this tell visitors about Dutch society? Most importantly, how does the exchange of knowledge from provider to receiver reveal a power relationship, that can later shape the self-assessment of MSM refugees when they look at their interpretation of Dutch society and their own cultural background, being gay and being a refugee?

To address these questions and fill in current gaps in knowledge, I will have to 1) establish motivations behind the Sexy Side parties from the perspective of organisers, 2) uncover the motivations of visitors to attend these parties, 3) map the ways in which visitors view their experiences at the party, 4) analyze ways in which these visitors make inferences about their own, and other cultural identities based on these experiences, and 5) elucidate the contrast between intentions and perceptions of the organizers of the party and its respective interpretation by its visitors.

Data will be collected on the Sexy Side case using a few different manners. I will study the current scientific literature, perform observations at the Sexy Side party, semi-structured interviews with its visitors, as well as a focus group with the party's organizers. The combination of these different methods is important, as current research on sexual health outreach interventions often focusses on the target audience of the intervention (Logie, 2016;

Kaplan & El Khoury, 2017) which in this case is refugee MSM. This has left organizations that create such interventions out of the spotlight. This may be a problem, when a power relation or imbalance is in place: just studying the target audience in commission of the organization implicitly takes the perspective of those in power. Thus, it is essential to study the perception and driving forces that organizers hold when creating outreach events.

Sexual or gender identities, for example, may intersect with their ethnic or cultural backgrounds in ways that may limit the personal expressions of one's identity. These groups of people may face discrimination for being LGBT+ within their own cultural communities, friends and family (Messih, 2016), while they may face racism within LGBT+ circles (Logie, 2016; Mepschen, Duyvendak & Tonkens, 2010). The combination of both gay and refugee identities within sexual health outreach activities has been understudied in recent literature (Kaplan & El Khoury, 2017). Moreover, this intersection is situated within a Dutch context, where values of refugees and natively Dutch citizens may or may not collide (Mepschen, Duyvendak & Tonkens, 2010). One such arena in which values may differ is that of religion and cultural identity.

In this research, I aim to fill these research gaps, but I will also be more pragmatic; understanding the complex mechanisms behind the formation of identity may be essential in designing or improving new and existing interventions to reduce infections with STI's and increasing a feeling of personal ownership. In this way, this research will be scientifically motivated, but it is also strongly motivated by the practical wish to improve the health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ refugees and asylum seekers. It will thus conclude with practical advice (see Appendix 1) to improve policy on the Sexy Side project, as well as other similar interventions.

Power and Identity in Disco lights

This chapter will present the theoretical framework that I draw upon to study Sexy Side party case. I will first discuss how power imbalances become visible within sexual health intervention programs. I will do this by presenting a case study by Burchardt (2013) who uses Foucault's (2010) framework of governmentality to analyze this power imbalance. Second, I will present how the process of homonationalism may play a specific role in this process, when applied to the Sexy Side case and its Dutch context. Last, I discuss how such health intervention outreach programs are of specific importance to refugee MSM, and how stigma and exclusion play a role in this process. I end with assumptions that I make based on this literature.

Information and Power

Sexual health outreach interventions can be used for providing information to those who need it. This information, however, is not merely an objective flow of knowledge: The relationship between the "giver" and the "receiver" of information during these interventions is contested.

Burchardt (2013) looks at the way sexual health interventions may create a power imbalance between organizer and user, by looking at how this relationship is an arena for power imbalances through studying a case of a South-African, church-based sexual health intervention programme, through Foucault's lens of *governmentality*. In his lectures, Foucault (2010) poses that power does not only flow from the state onto its citizens; it transcends a single educator-student relationship, as knowledge permeates whole networks. Knowledge, in this way, can be institutionalized through schools, volunteering organizations and other institutionalized groups. In other words, knowledge may be created by people in powerful positions, and it may be recreated by its members as a form of social control. A certain openness about sexuality of participants is required, as these conversations about sex create an opportunity for surveillance of their sexuality. This, in turn, makes them more prone to social control. Information on certain kinds of (sexual) behaviour becomes institutionalized as members of such groups check other members, as well as themselves, in a way that they can essentially govern themselves (Foucault, 2010; Burchardt, 2013).

Burchardt's (2013) case study shows how the use of knowledge can make people reconsider their own sexual behaviour. In this case, Burchardt (2013) elucidates how sexuality was discussed in terms such as "responsible choices and relationships" during counselling sessions. Burchardt uses an example of one of the organizations' employees having conversations with its visitors about sex. Here, the employee talks about the goals behind sexual education; insinuating it is not to stop infection, but to highlight the gift of sexuality. A disconnect manifests, however as the employee simultaneously explains "this gift" conditional on being enjoyed in marriage. Thus, language was used from both sexual health and sex positive discourses, as well as more traditionally Christian discourses, i.e. sex after marriage. Through this way, the program reinforced religious ideas of what it means to have sex in a "good" or "responsible" way. Language and knowledge can thus be used to influence a participant's internalized ideas of a correct type of sexuality (Burchardt, 2013).

Internalization of meanings may also be embedded in non-language-based methods. Pryce (2001) explores the definition of *iconography* referring to the process applying meaning to objects. Like icons in a church, Pryce's icons not only hold an "essential" meaning that may be attributed to it by the viewer; it also has an educational character, where these icons teach the viewer about what is right and what is wrong (Pryce, 2001). I will not use the terms icon and iconography, as not to confuse this process of educational meaning with actual religious artifacts that are present in this research. It does, however, show the interesting overlap between religious and medical discourses that are used to decipher physical objects. It furthermore enables me to analyse the power relations that may hide underneath very tangible objects and situations (Pryce, 2001).

Governmentality and the Dutch Identity

Governmentality does not only pertain to sexual behaviour. Theoretically, I will focus on religion, culture and national identity, with the data showing that this aspect of identity was important to respondents. The relation between national identity and (homo)sexuality is of particular interest, as they can be framed as conflicting. In this case, the western identity is one that values gender equality and sexual freedom. This is in contrast with non-western cultures, specifically that of majority Muslim countries, which are seen by the west as places of gender oppression and sexual repression (Bilge, 2012).

This phenomenon, called *Homonationalism*, can also present itself in different cultural settings. Stella & Nartova (2015), for example, study the way that the Russian anti-gay propaganda law was focussed on family values, and framed gay sexuality as contrasting to the traditional Russian idea of relationships and family. It created a normative framework of “good” sexuality and family life, that may be internalized by Russian citizens through the institutionalization of the propaganda law.

In the case of the Netherlands, Mepschen, Duyvendak & Tonkens (2010) describe three elements of Dutch culture that are important to understand homonationalist motives. 1) *Rampant Secularization*: after de-pillarization, the Netherlands became one of the most secularized nations; religion was seen as authoritarian, paternalistic and was no longer intrinsically a part of Dutch identity. 2) *Sexual Freedom*: This de-pillarization created space for previously was considered “deviant” behaviour through “openness” and a certain pragmatism. Non-hetero sexualities, abortion, drugs and euthanasia became more normalized. 3) *Normalization of Gay Sexuality*: gayness became more resembling of heterosexual sexualities, in the sense that it became non-threatening through a consumerist tendency, as well as more similar to the nuclear family and the lifestyle that was attached to it (Mepschen, Duyvendak & Tonkens, 2010). In this way “Dutch gay identity does not threaten heteronormativity, but in fact helps shape and reinforce the contours of ‘tolerant’ and ‘liberal’ Dutch national culture.” (Mepschen, Duyvendak & Tonkens, 2010, p. 971).

Exclusion and the Safe Space

Following on the two previous points: that there is a power imbalance to be found in sexual health outreach interventions, and that this power imbalance may be coloured by homonationalist tendencies, it poses the question: why do these two processes specifically target refugee MSM in the case of the Sexy Side and how does this group become disproportionately prone to be confronted with these processes?

To explain, Goffman’s (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, that has been crucial for current understandings of stigma. In this book, he discusses stigmatization based on race and on disability and moral infraction. Bos, Pryor, Reeder & Stutterheim (2013) add on his book by going into how stigma is dependent on social interactions; in practice one can be avoided, rejected, dehumanized, or it may be more subtle, like discomfort during interactions or a lack of eye contact. Stigma can be “used” by people

in power to keep power imbalances in place, it may motivate stigmatized people to abide by certain social norms of the ingroup, or it may exclude people from society that would put others in danger, for example to prevent infections with certain diseases (Bos, Pryor, Reeder & Stutterheim, 2013).

Historically, LGBT+ people, and specifically gay men have been stigmatized not only because of their sexualities, but also because of their link with HIV/AIDS. Ostracization of gay men was often justified with the idea that it kept out disease, and that it held up a certain morality (Herek, 1999). Furthermore, the idea of individual agency or fault in attracting HIV through unprotected sex increases this stigma. Gay men were thus constructed as being 1) spreaders of disease, 2) actively responsible in this spread and 3) morally wrong for both spreading this disease, and being gay as a whole. Their perception of being dangerous, outside of conventional norms, and responsible for their fate, impacted their perception by outsiders, which resulted in a stigmatized view on the gay male body that justified their exclusion from conventional society (Bos, Pryor, Reeder & Stutterheim, 2013; Herek, 1999; Ashford, 2010). This form of stigma involves the social perception of the stigmatized, and looks at ways in which people react, or don't react to their being, and is known as 'public stigma' (Bos, Pryor, Reeder & Stutterheim, 2013).

Another form of stigma, "self-stigma," looks at the way this outside perspective is internalized, and at ways in which a person may be impacted by stigma (Bos, Pryor, Reeder & Stutterheim, 2013). This may lead to very real and tangible outcomes; someone may not get tested, as they are afraid of knowing they have STD's, and to become known as a "bad" gay (Kaplan & El Khoury, 2017; Ashford, 2010). This, in turn, may increase the risk of transmitting STD's to sexual partners. Another way of coping may be migration from a country where their identity is not widely supported. Potentially highly relevant in this research, as people move away to find safety, like-minded people, or to circumvent more concrete instances of prosecution (Logie, 2016). Other ways of coping include, distraction and regulation of negative emotions, and altering relations with their stigma and the environment (Bos, Pryor, Reeder & Stutterheim, 2013).

From these two forms of stigma, I distill that gay men can be impacted by stigma in two ways: their identities are used to exclude them from conventional society, and— this external exclusion may be internalized by gay men. I pose that this process is even more complex for gay men that are also refugees, as they may also be excluded for their refugee status (Logie,

2016), especially if their norms fall outside of the previously discussed Dutch norms that are described by Mepschen, Duyvendak and Tonkens (2010). This complex net of exclusion may make respondents more likely to seek ways of coping that might alleviate processes of exclusion and internalized stigma in safe spaces; places such as the Sexy Side, and other interventions that are tailored to experiences of refugee MSM.

As discussed earlier, programs like the Sexy Side and Burchardt's (2013) study may be of specific importance, as its visitors have less spaces where they can both feel comfortable with both their queer, as well as refugee identities (Logie, 2016). As visitors of the Sexy Side could have a higher necessity for these interventions, they may be more likely to come into contact with the process of governmentality through institutionalized ways.

Furthermore, Logie (2016) found that refugees in intervention programmes feel a need to not only receive, but also to give help through their own network. This interconnectedness of people may enforce the workings of governmentality, as members are close knit, which may increase social control. This is of specific interest, as refugees are often framed as lacking autonomy and needing help (Spijkerboer, 2015).

Conclusively, for this research, I make the assumptions that: 1) social support and information on sexual health is of importance to visitors of the Sexy Side, due to the intersection of their gay, refugee, religious and national identities. 2) Because of this need, visitors of the Sexy Side may be more dependent on this event for security. This, in turn, makes them more vulnerable to the governmentality process, where their sexuality may be scrutinized by the party organizers, peers and themselves through internalized processes. 3) this process may shape the ways that visitors of the party reflect on their own gayness, refugee status, religion and national identity, by comparing their own identity to what they see as a "correct" form of this identity, that is shaped by the *governmentality* process.

Methodology

I have collected data in different ways, and from different stakeholders, as to respect the assumed presence of the aforementioned power relations: First, I performed a focus group with the organizers of the party from SANL. I spoke to four men and one woman that were either homosexual, or familiar with the community. The conversation I had with them was based on Eldredge, Markham, Ruiters, Fernandez, Kok & Parcel's (2016) model of Intervention mapping. This enables a systematic conversation, in which assumptions that organizers have in each step of the policy process can be discovered.

Second, to explore experiences and thoughts of visitors at and about the Sexy Side party, I conducted 17 semi-structured interviews. Respondents were contacted through personal invitation at the Sexy Side party, through email via a mailing list of Sexy Side visitors and my professional network at SANL. Due to the Corona virus isolation, almost all interviews were done via phone. Respondents were all men who have sex with men, most of which identified as gay. All of them were under 40 years of age, and mostly within the 20-30 age range. Respondents originated from geographically diverse locations; their home countries were Russia, Kazakhstan, Sierra Leone, Venezuela, Zimbabwe, Egypt and other countries across Africa, Latin America, the Middle East and the west of Asia. The interviews and focus group were transcribed verbatim and coded in Nvivo to provide systematic analysis of the data. Their names were pseudonymized by picking popular names from the respondents' respective countries of birth.

Last, I attended the Sexy Side party as a volunteer and managed first screening of visitors before the STD tests and Hepatitis B vaccinations. During, I was able to observe the room and have short contacts with visitors. I made fieldnotes of my observations, thoughts and experiences after the event.

It is essential to chart a complete image of how my interpretations differed from both the organizers and the attendees of the party. Herein, I do not claim to be a neutral researcher: I will note how my personal bias may have influenced the research where it is of importance. A good example is that I was confronted with my own interpretations of religion, and particularly how I thought this issue was not important at all, which, as we shall see later, proved to be an incorrect assumption.

An Evening at the Sexy Side

I walk into the Sexy Side party, and I am greeted by my supervisor. My task for tonight is a first registration of guests that want to be tested or vaccinated. I ask for their personal info, so we can contact them with the results of the test. I also ask some questions on their sexual behaviour and experiences. The evening starts at 17.00 hours; the first guests appear at registration early and seem to know what to do and where to go. Over the span of the night, I register several men, mostly alone but sometimes in couples; their demeanor ranges from a chore like stoicism to visible discomfort and tension. After the end of the evening – around 22.00 – the last people leave. They appear happy and relaxed and thank the organizers for the night. The excerpts used in this chapter are from interviews with respondents and organizers of the party, and, while starting from the case of the Sexy Side party, the respondents shared stories that surpassed just the context of this party; the safe space of the party was not only an arena of information, connection, medical help and relief. It was also an interpretive tool that respondents used to place themselves in both LGBTQ+ and Dutch communities.

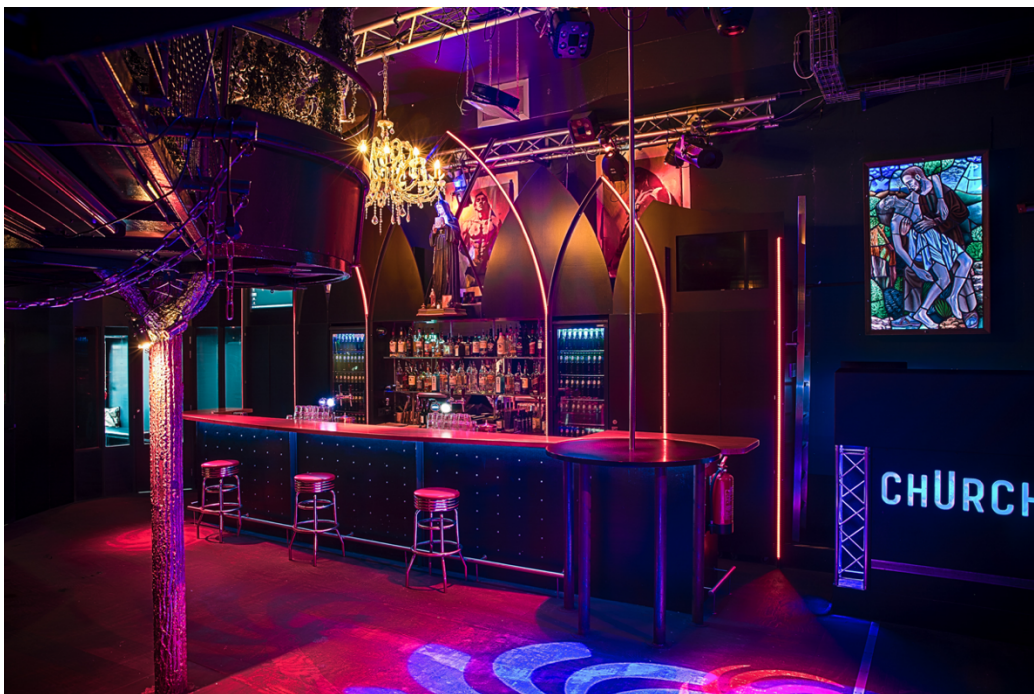


Image 1 and 2. Images of the inside of club church. On the left picture (picture 1), we see a bar, a dancing pole and a stained glass-style image on the wall. On the right picture (picture 2), we see a close up of a religious statue with an illustration of a shirtless man behind it.

In this chapter I will explore this process through analyzing the stories and quotes from respondents. I do so by first studying the creation of the safe space. Second, I look at the way visitors of the Sexy Side parties discuss their own position within a network of interventions and LGBTQ+ organizations. Third, religion within the safe space is discussed. Fourth, I will explain the link between the presence of religion to cultural and personal identities.

Creation of the Safe Space

Before delving into the interpretative function of the party, it is important to understand the way visitors value not only the space that they are in, but also the connections with other people they make there. Respondents state how the party offers a break from personal trauma, or discrimination they may still face by family or people in the AZC (asylum centre). Arsen recalls his first entry into the Sexy Side party.

*Arsen: All volunteers... they're always smiling, they're always asking questions you know and they really caring about you, you can feel it. I think for gay refugees who are coming from outside who have personal drama you know, its kind of... how to say... hmm... welcoming. Its very important.
Yeah.*

It becomes apparent that Arsen's presence in the space feels like a positive one. He furthermore accentuates the intersection of gay and refugee identity, which is consistently reported by other interviewees as well. This intersection may bring about a specific set of obstacles and situations that apply to refugees. Another respondent, Abbad, talks about the hardships of staying in the AZC. To overcome this discomfort, he had to stay at the place of someone he hooked up with. Not because he liked the hookup, but because he needed a place to stay and to feel private—reporting that this was a dark time in his life at the AZC.

Such stories accentuate visitors' warm feeling towards the Sexy Side party, where such forms of discrimination could be dealt with in a positive way, by being with people who support them. Arsen further emphasized a sense of care from the organizers that a lot of interviewees name.

Giving Help

Apart from receiving help from the Sexy Side and other organizations, many participants were active in giving help as well. Many of the people I talked to were active in one or more volunteer organizations. These organizations often had goals similar to that of the Sexy Side; they handled logistics for parties at the COC (Dutch LGBTQ+ Association), gave seminars and talks on LGBTQ+ and refugee topics, led projects, and mobilized people from their personal network for various issues.

Reasons for doing volunteer work were diverse. A few of the respondents that I spoke to are activists in their home country, mostly focusing on LGBTQ+ topics. Participating in volunteering or activism in the Netherlands is simply a continuation of their work. These people also wanted to help people they felt familiar with. This sense of familiarity was also visible in people that were not active in volunteering in their home country. Respondents consistently talked about the importance of helping people that were in similar situations as them. Additionally, contact with other LGBTQ people, and especially those who are both LGBTQ and migrants, was something that made respondents feel comfortable, as can be seen in the following excerpt.

Author: Im just wondering... eehm... when you kind of got into contact with these organizations you got them... eh you asked for them like oh do you have something I could do. Were you looking for things that were specifically related to like LGBTQ people or was it something wider that you were looking for? How did that go?

Nassor: No, I go for LGBTQ much better because at least I will feel comfortable and if im telling people like we are in the same family, maybe they will understand me quickly, because sometimes I'm a bit afraid from interacting directly with hetero people at the beginning. But if they are at ease with LGBTQ, I'm okay. It's like eehm... situation is not easy for me at the start. So, I go for volunteer jobs with the LGBTQ.

For Nassor, the similarity to LGBTQ people of “the same family”, means it is easier to communicate with them, as there is mutual understanding. Volunteering is thus not only done to help people like themselves, but functions as a gateway into a network where they can be

understood. This is also supported by the fact that most of the people I spoke to, had social networks that consisted mainly of other LGBTQ+ people.

In addition to a welcoming network, visitors of the Sexy Side were also moved to visit as it gave them the opportunity to develop themselves. In the following excerpt Kemuel explains his motivations to visit the Sexy Side and do volunteering in what he calls “his community”.

Kemuel: And I found within these organizations it helped provide, as I said a safe space and a platform for everyone that I thought... It would be a good opportunity to be able to be active and to help my community. And also empower me from my personal self. So that's the main reason. It also gives me the opportunity to travel the country and meet new people and be in different spaces that I wouldn't see personally in my life here.

Kemuel discusses how his involvement not only helps the community; it also allows him to empower himself and gives him the chance to see new people and places. To that extent, his volunteering and community involvement allows a certain self-development that would not be provided to him otherwise.

Apart from network and self-development motivations, it stuck out that a lot of interviewees stated that they went to the Sexy Side party, simply because they were bored, and because there was nothing much to do in or around the AZC. Many interviewees were not able to work because of legislation around working during their asylum procedures, and for some, it was difficult to travel due to financial reasons. Free travel and the opportunity of an activity outside of their normal living spheres was a way for them to break this “boredom” and get out. Interestingly though, while interviewees could choose to go to other activities for refugees, they did specifically choose activities and volunteering opportunities that involved gay refugee communities. It would not be accurate to say that attendees go exclusively out of boredom, but likely as a result of a combination of the above motivators.

Attendees’ LGBTQ+ social networks, their presence within LGBTQ+ organizations, and multiple LGBTQ+ parties create a big web of interventions, activities and social gathering wherein safe spaces become interconnected; one’s network informs a person of a gathering, the gathering stimulates more friendships within LGBTQ communities, these friends refer to new activities, and so on and so on. Thus, the safe space is not limited to just one room or

party, but rather, it has a networked, self-sustaining and self-supporting structure that transcends single interactions. Involvement in this network is motivated in different ways by interviewees, but together they create a strong push for visitors to get involved with their communities.

Like A Prayer

Now that the presence of a so-called safe space is established, the question arises how this space is further interpreted by visitors. In other words; does the safe space have implications for the visitors that transcend just a temporary feeling of safety and comfort?

In interviewing the visitors, I found that the physical make-up of the space was very important in creating a safe environment. The presence of religion in this space was specifically interesting to many visitors, as seen in the following excerpt.

Sahr: So, when I go inside the party and I saw the pictures of Mary and Christ on the cross... I was so shocked. I was like Ha. And I met some people and I asked how? And now I know here at Church house [the club hosting the Sexy Side party] it's a part of it. [...] I go inside the party and the first thing that I will look at is the cross and Mary.

Author: Right, so you first go there, you go to the cross. Do you say a prayer?

Sahr: I just go, and I look at it and I say the prayer. Not actual, but I say it inside my mind.

Author: Right. And why do you do that?

Sahr: I just know... I just feel like doing it.

In this excerpt, a couple of things become clear. First of all, the presence of Christian imagery is something that clearly jumps out when Sahr first enters the room. He reports a feeling of shock and disbelief. Many other respondents reported the same initial reaction to statues of Mary, Jesus and other religious icons. Second, Sahr responds to the symbols by saying a prayer. This shows that, even though this icon is present outside of a religious space, it still has a religious essence that activates Sahr to invoke a religious ritual – the prayer – in

this alternative non-religious space. The religious essence of these statues was reported by other respondents as well and influenced the way they saw the space. This becomes tangible when another interviewee, Andrés, talks about his night out at the Sexy Side, and he sees the statue of Mary while dancing.

Andrés: Yeah, sometimes it's not comfortable dancing with Maria there. We know it's only like a toy. It's not Maria. Maria is in the sky. But it's not comfortable... it's like your mother is saying you every time "you can't dance", of course.

Author: Interesting, so it's like Maria is watching.

Andrés: [Laughs] ya ya. Exactly.

Like Sahr, the presence of these icons in the room is very apparent to Andrés. He knows it's "like a toy", but this "toy" still invokes a religious idea. In this case, it reminds Andrés of an omnipresent viewer that judges his behaviour, who tells him "not to dance". This voice seems to be an internalized idea of what Andrés is and is not allowed to do according to what he thinks his religion prescribes.

Not all visitors responded negatively to the presence of religious iconography; some just found it surprising, interesting, or funny. In his interview, Sahr also talks about his initial surprise when he saw the statues at the Sexy Side. He labels the presence of religion in a gay club as Haram (against Islamic doctrine or forbidden). His view on them, however, changed when he talks to another visitor, who comforts him.

Sahr: [Talking about religious imagery at the Sexy Side] ...And I asked another man from Africa, and at that time I was so primitive. And in Africa he said... for me it's like in islam. It's haram. So it's haram. And the guy was like oh relax. If it was haram, god will not allow you to be gay. That you are gay is not because of your choice.

His initial surprise was met by another visitor who stated that God would not allow Sahr to be gay if it was Haram. The presence of these image is something that God would clearly

allow, otherwise, the images would not have been there. Thus, the religious imagery is reframed in a way that embraces both the gay and religious identities.

“This is the Netherlands”

Both religious and non-religious people talked about these statues in relation to their presence in the Netherlands. In the following excerpt, Andrés rationalizes his discomfort with the presence of religious statues at Club Church.

Author: Right, but did you get uncomfortable because of the Maria statues?

Andrés: Yes, of course. It is not respectable, but we are in Holland. It's another... we understand that we are not in our country. Its different.

Author: But if it were up to you, there would be no statues.

Andrés: Yeah, surely not. Not for us. For respect the mind of everybody.

In this excerpt, Andrés states his discomfort with Maria Statues in Club Church. What stands out, though, is that in this excerpt the interviewee tells himself that this is the situation in Holland. It seems that he tells himself to “just get over it”. Multiple interviewees talked about the situation in this way, where they talked about discomfort, but diminished their feelings because “this is how it is done in the Netherlands”. Sometimes during interviews, party visitors would tell me they don’t have a problem with it after they brought it up, but in contrast, they do bring it up multiple times even after saying they don’t mind it. This combination of covert and more explicit ways of diminishing their initial reaction sticks out, especially when you see that interviewees identify a certain Dutch identity through these reactions.

In the following excerpt, this relationship becomes clearer when another respondent, Arsen, talks about his interest in the statues at the Sexy Side. He laughs when I first ask him about it, but later elaborates on his thoughts, where he explains seeing other instances where religious images were seen in LGBTQ+ contexts.

Arsen: ...We went to first Gay Pride here in 2018. And I saw a church building, above the building LGBT flag... hahaha. I thought okay... this is

Netherlands... this is liberty this is really... anything gay... right... in case of gay rights you know. LGBT rights. [...] For me not funny, for me interesting because you know. People [are] in [a] historical building, church, and there is a gay club. Church with dark rooms and its somehow exotic... ehm... and you know. And I think its modern thinking, how can I say. It's a liberal idea in society because in my country in Kazakhstan, they make differently gay clubs.

In this excerpt Arsen names examples of seeing LGBTQ+-symbols in religious contexts; on churches, at certain clubs like *Club Church*, and in repurposed religious buildings. Arsen talks about how the usage of both LGBTQ+ and Christian/religious imagery seems to be “somehow exotic” and he ties this to modern, liberal, and Dutch (“this is the Netherlands”) ways of thinking. Thus, the combination of religious and LGBTQ+ related imagery in a single space has a meaning that says something about the wider Dutch culture; a culture that not only this, but also other respondents continuously described as being “open”, “tolerant” and “liberal”.

This view on Dutch liberalism in regard to religion and LGBTQ+ topics is not uncontested, however. Just as the presence of religion in the Sexy Side parties was viewed by different people in both positive and negative lights, the same can be said about what this presence says about Dutch values. In the following excerpt, Anatoli and his partner, Vadim, talk about their interpretation of religious imagery in relation to Dutch societal values.

Anatoli: [talking about religious images in LGBTQ+ spaces] and I see this at one place too in Winterswijk and I don't go to this place I don't like it. Its stress for me. And I don't understand why in Nederland... [speaks Russian to his partner]. Vadim: Why in nederland ehm have dutch... how do you say relation with religion. On the one hand it is open but on the other hand... it would be for decoration and this thematic.

Anatoli and Vadim talk about how they don't understand that an “open” society like the Dutch one can simply use religious imagery for decoration. Furthermore, they say that it is a stressor to them, and especially for Anatoli. Where Arsen found the combination of religious and LGBTQ+ images to be signifying of the openness of Dutch society, Anatoli and Vadim state that the opposite is the case; it contests Dutch openness and causes discomfort and stress.

The Homosexual Demeanor

In contrast with the rich and diverse experiences of visitors, employees of SANL had a more limited scope of the idea of its visitors. During a focus group with employees that were involved in the policy process of the Sexy Side, I was mostly told about the medical side of the event. While they were conscious of its possible social component, employees focused on the intervention as being “evidence-based” and as “improving sexual health”. Religion was not mentioned in the interview by employees, except for when they talked about a former intern who they worked with who was Muslim. Furthermore, the visitors were talked about as mostly lacking in information on sexual health.

When reflecting on the interpretation of the party by its visitors, SANL employees state that the party was initially made to make testing for STD’s and vaccinations for Hepatitis B more accessible at a location that gay refugees were already visiting. In this case this means *Club Church*, a well-known fetish club in Amsterdam. Visitors were perceived by employees as slowly transforming over the span of multiple Sexy Side visits. In the following excerpt, Frits, one of the employees, talks about the change visitors go through over time within the gay scene.

Frits: The signal that we receive from Club Church is... well... they walk around here and they have no clue what's going on [ze weten van de hoed, noch de rand] [...] What stood out to us, was that men, in a matter of a few months would look very [inaudible]. They just fit perfectly in the gay scene in regards to sexual appearance, dress code, behavior.

Author: What do you mean with that?

Frits: Well that they just... you saw... they were men that appeared like: I know all about it [ze weten van de hoed en de rand]. [...] They have a certain homosexual demeanor. [...] So, on a surface level you have the impression that you are dealing with someone who is socially adjusted [een routinier]. [...] Someone who knows what he's doing.

What becomes clear, is that visitors come in at their first party in a way that appears like they don’t know about social rules and norms within Dutch gay society. After a couple of visits though, they learn how to navigate the gay world: this becomes visible in the way they dress, behave and “a certain gay demeanor”. Frits does not state this as a problematic, nor a

positive behavioural change, but he does notice it nonetheless, and it stuck out in this interview.

The idea of the “well-adjusted homosexual” appears, not only in conversation, but also on the invitation SANL has created for Sexy Side visitors. This image accompanies the invitation that informs gay refugees about the next party, its date and time, and how to register for it. It is interesting to note how the gay refugee body is depicted here: we see a man with dark skin, which we can safely assume signifies a gay refugee. He is laying in a field of grass, laying comfortably and smiling. His body appears chiseled with visible abs and biceps. He wears a speedo with a tulip print: the Dutch national flower. In the foreground, we see a wheel of cheese and a condom. A traditional Dutch windmill graces the background, surrounded by clouds that remind me of the Dutch skies that I know from 17th century paintings by artists like Jacob van Ruisdael.



Image 3. Image that appears on the Sexy Side invitation.

Through this deliberate and specific depiction of the gay refugee, SANL creates an image that calls back to Dutch tropes through classic symbols like cheese, tulips and windmills. Other than perhaps his skin colour, he carries no other references to his refugee status or cultural

identity. Creating the image of the gay refugee as devoid of his cultural heritage, while happily embracing Dutch symbols and culture.

Moreover, I want to draw specific attention to the condom on the foreground: in combination with the subjects revealing outfit, it suggests a certain sexual aura. The condom may represent protection, or the sexual act itself, but in any sense, it refers to a certain sexual openness: the condom is visible and may thus be talked about. Placing this condom in the Dutch landscape further reinforces what I heard in the interviews with visitors of the party: the construction of the Netherlands as a country that is sexually open and liberal.

The Paradox of the Safe Space

A Structure of Safety

We have seen how health care outreach events such as the Sexy Side of the Netherlands can create a safe space for respondents. This safe space creates alleviation for daily stressors and stigma from people outside this safe space. Exclusion by such “outsiders” may be based on two identity markers: cultural identity and MSM identity. First, visitors of the parties may be targeted on their cultural identity, which may be their cultural background, religion or refugee status. This form of exclusion exists both inside and outside of queer circles. Second, interviewees are excluded on the base of their MSM identity, due to their visibility of being gay to others. This mostly happens inside the AZC and refugee communities. This creates a complex image of exclusion: they may be excluded in queer communities for their refugee status, and they may be excluded in refugee communities for their queer status, which shows the complex interconnection between these two identity markers.

I propose that MSM refugees use events such as the Sexy Side to find not just one, but a number of safe environments, where they can feel comfortable with these identities with less judgement from “outsiders”— be it non-refugee or non-queer people. Furthermore, visitors created tight-knit gay social networks that interrelate with other sexual health outreach activities, as well as LGBTQ+ focused volunteering opportunities. In this way, interviewees create a network of safety, that is discussed as highly valuable by its visitors.

Furthermore, I propose that it is not only valuable, but necessary, as respondents not only face exclusion, but also have little things to do inside the AZC: they cannot work, and some AZC’s are essentially “in the middle of nowhere”. Additionally, visitors used the network of LGBTQ+-volunteering as a way to give back to their own communities, and as a tool for self-development. The combinations of accessible STD testing and vaccination facilities, a networked safe space, an alleviation from boredom, and the possibility for self-development and “giving back”, creates a strong push for respondents to move to such parties.

Invisible Religion: An Imbalance of Power

I argue that it is this push that signifies the power relation that is present between visitors and organizers of the party: refugee MSM that I talked to have less mobility in choosing to go to the party, particularly because of its necessity to them. This does not mean that they don’t

have autonomy, or that they went to a party that they would rather not attend, rather, I argue that their situation and needs move them to visit sexual health outreach events more frequently and continuously. This is an important difference, as it is this specific context that moves them to events and exposes them to an image of homosexuality that is sexually liberal, free, “open” and secular, and normalizes a specific kind of gay identity.

This fits in with the three dimensions of Mepschen, Duyvendak & Tonkens’ (2010) description of homonationalism. 1) the space is secularized, not in the sense that it is devoid of religion, but actually full of it. In this sense, religion is present, but invisible. From the perspective of the organizers of the party religion is invisible: religious imagery in the space was barely noticed, let alone problematized by them. In hindsight it is perplexing that religion, while so visible, was not detected or thought about by both the organizers of the party, as well as myself. This shows how deeply ingrained secular ideas and usage of religious imagery are into our minds. From the perspective of the visitors’ religion is also invisible: it is omnipresent, but not discussed. In this way it normalizes an atheist view of the statues inside the safe space, that sees them merely as decoration.

2) The safe space is sexually free, in the sense that it hosts a party inside of a fetish club, and thus normalizes its function in gay communities and gay culture. This was not extensively problematized by respondents. It does however show how the space can construct an idea of what it means to be gay in the Netherlands.

This leads into 3) the normalization of gay sexuality: being gay is normal in Dutch cultures, but in specific ways. Whereas Mepschen, Duyvendak & Tonkens (2010) describe how gay identity mimics the nuclear family and consumerist lifestyle from heteronormative society, I propose that the Sexy Side organizers do not create a heteronormative environment, but an environment that reinforces the earlier discussed gay identity of sexual openness and a “gay demeanor”. They see how visitors of the party come in, and after a couple of visits seem to know “how to be the gay”: they look the part and know their way around their scene.

The Paradox of the Safe Space

In this way, it is similar to Burchardt’s (2013) findings: the governmentality process is similar in the sense that the intervention promotes a specific image of sexuality through the internalization of values by both organizers and participants of the party. The distribution of

knowledge and values is governed by the organizers of the party, while the visitors have a high necessity of its services, and thus, a power relation is constructed. Through this process, visitors learn about what it means to have a place in Dutch society, to be a refugee, and to be gay.

I end with what I would like to call the Paradox of the safe space: on the one hand the safe space creates a place for refugee MSM to feel comfortable with their identity without judgement, and to connect themselves to a safe LGBTQ+ network. On the other hand, it creates new rules and impulses that create an identity of sexual openness, liberalism and secularism that is normalized through the sexual health outreach activity that is created by people at the top of the power relation. Herein lies its paradox: the safe space is a place to both “be yourself,” but is simultaneously a space that creates norms on “how to be yourself”.

The normalization of the secular, sexually free gay that knows his was around his scene is emphasized by the usage of (religious) symbols in the room, as well as through invitations, and is mediated by the openness and personal LGBTQ+-networks of the visitors that are present in the party’s safe space. Three conclusions can be drawn from this.

First, it shows that policy goals of what to “teach” people in sexual health outreach programs do not always fully overlap with what is actually learned by visitors. The Sexy Side wants to “teach” its visitors about sexual health, and testing and vaccination possibilities, but this “main course” is served with a side dish: visitors also learn about the right ways of (homo)sexuality. This is an unintended consequence that the policy designers were not aware of. Thus, I argue that the governmentality process does not only apply to knowledge that is consciously presented: it also highlights the way that unintended knowledge is internalized by visitors.

Second, the paradox shows that education and knowledge in this sense do not only have to be verbal or in text: the space and its symbols itself contain important information on the right types of sexuality, that is to be consumed, internalized and shared by its beholders. What is and is not seen as information or knowledge is dependent on the context and the viewer’s personal background and interpretation of it.

Third, the paradox highlights the importance of looking at sexual health outreach interventions not only from the perspective of organizers, but to critically assess the organizers assumptions and ideas just as well. To just look at those receiving the intervention, is to choose to ignore the organizers’ assumptions. Looking at both parties respects the study

of the power relations that are inherent to sexual health outreach interventions, and many educational programs alike.

By saying this, I do not aim to inherently demonize or problematize this process, nor the power relationship that creates it. Rather, I want to bring it to the surface, as to make members of the relationship aware of what happens when they step into the club to enjoy a night of what at first seems to be a night of relief and joy, but what ends up being so much more than that.

I hereby find it important to note that SANL has many MSM employees, and the team that worked on the sexy side almost exclusively existed of MSM employees. This is important, as it signifies that the normalized gay image that I described is not put into place by non-gay policy makers. Rather, this image is normalized by policy makers that they themselves may have internalized from their experiences in the gay community. In essence, this flips the power relation that I have sketched: instead of those in power, employees of SANL are also subordinates of other power structures, be it within gay or non-gay communities. More research should be done to uncover the complexity of the dynamics that may place policy makers themselves in both ends of the power relation, and how this influences the policy process.

Conclusion

In this research, I have tried to highlight the understudied populations of refugee MSM on their interpretation of sexual health outreach activities. I do this by using the case of SoaAids Nederland's *Sexy Side of the Netherlands* event that is hosted in a fetish club as a real-life example of Foucault's governmentality. Interviews with this population, and a focus group with the event's organizers, as well as observations have revealed the complex interrelation between national identity, religion, refugee status, and sexuality and the relationship between those that send information and knowledge, and those that receive it. On the one hand, the party becomes a safe space through participation of its visitors, and their strong ties to their personal refugee MSM network, as well as volunteering positions and other sexual health outreach events. This creates a self-sustaining network of safety. On the other hand, though, the party becomes an arena of normative identity formation. The presence of religion inside the fetish club creates an invisible religiosity that normalizes an image of the gay man that is secular, sexually liberal, and pertains to specific ways of being gay, as written in homonationalism literature by Mepschen, Duyvendak & Tonkens (2010).

The power imbalance between the organizers and visitors of the party reinforces a governmentality process (Burchardt, 2013; Foucault, 2010) where normative information on this right way of being gay is distributed by organizers through their outings and symbols, but also by visitors of the party themselves, through social control within their rich networks. It furthermore shows how the governmentality process can also consist of unintended consequences and meanings that do not always directly align with the goals of policy. Last, this study highlights the importance of not only studying those that receive sexual health outreach interventions, but to also critically assess the assumptions of those creating it, as this is essential in understanding the power relation inherent to such interventions.

Conclusively, I propose that there is a Paradox of the Safe Space: on the one hand the safe space creates a place for refugee MSM to feel safe with one's identity, while simultaneously scrutinizing this very identity by creating a normative framework through which they reflect on their identity: a framework that is created by those in power—the intervention's organizers. The party, thus, is more than one night of bliss, but moves participants to reevaluate what it means to them to experience religion, to have a place in Dutch society, and how they see themselves as both gay and refugee.

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Appendix

1. Policy Recommendations

In discussion with my supervisor Jelle, I wanted to treat this thesis as if it were a journal article. The following policy recommendations did not fit in with the tone of the rest of my thesis, but I do think they are essential in translating this research into tangible changes in existing policy, and guiding knowledge for new policy for both *SoaAids Nederland*, as well as others. Following on the findings of this research, I recommend organizers of sexual health outreach events to have the following discussion within their own teams, as well as among their visitors:

First, the network of the Sexy Side's visitors is strong and tight-knit, and there is a strong wish to make use of this from the perspective of my interviewees. To put it in stronger wording: they are already making use of this network and are building it from the ground up by themselves. To "empower" them, does not do their efforts justice. This does not mean that sexual health outreach events have no role in facilitating this network; what I am posing, however, is that the visitors of the party can have a stronger role in creating the event as a way to bridge the aforementioned power imbalance. This would also respect their strong urge to give back to the community. Logie (2016) describes this in their research as a certain reciprocity: "There may be a cyclical relationship between acquiring support that helps oneself adapt to challenges and wanting to provide support to others experiencing similar adversities" (Logie, 2016, p.9).

This involvement of visitors brings me to my second recommendation: including visitors into the organization makes it easier to detect possible tensions in an early stage of the policy process, whether this is found in a power imbalance or cultural differences. The interpretation of religion that was found in this thesis, for example, may have been detected earlier on, had the target audience been included in choosing a location for the party. Additionally, I recommend to find people that do not necessarily conform to the image of the sexually free, liberal and secular gay man: try to find people outside of the organizers' personal network, find someone who is religious, someone who is more introverted and so on, and so on. The target audience may not talk about things that they notice in a survey, as they find it not important, but by including them, these topics can come to surface more easily. In this way, I encourage those that create sexual health outreach events to actively look for critique.

Third and finally, I want to note that I do not want to inherently problematize the phenomena that I have found. What I do want to say is that there are power imbalances and cultural differences that participants, but mostly organizers are not aware of. Problematizing these aspects of the party would not respect the tremendous time, love and effort that organizers and participants put into this party: all respondents showed their deep appreciation of the party, and its importance for the target audience– aside from the previously mentioned remarks– must not be underestimated. A deep understanding of the workings of the party on its visitors and the inclusion of their ideas into its organization will only increase this appreciation.

2. Informed Consent Form

SexySide Project

Devin Klein Tiessink, 4232941

I am a master student in sociology at the University of Utrecht. As part of my master thesis I would like to interview you on your personal vision on intimacy, dating and sexual health, and on your experiences at the Sexy Side of the Netherlands event(s). This form contains important information on your reasons of participation, contents and processing of this interview.

Goals of the research

The goal of this research is to uncover how participants view their sexual identities and behaviour in light of the SexySide events. Your personal experiences, feelings and actions are central to this research.

What is your part in this as a respondent?

In this interview I want to give you an open space to talk. This means that I will ask you to talk freely on topics that interest you; I will ask questions to delve deeper into how certain things made you feel, act or think. In this interview, I see you as an expert on your experiences. The interview will take around one and a half hours.

Possible risks and uncomfortableness

With this interview, I hope to cause you no more harm than you would experience in your daily life. It might be possible, though, that you may feel uncomfortable with recalling negative memories. I hope to give you the space to share these feelings, but if you feel uncomfortable, you can tell me, and we will move to another topic, or you can stop or pause the interview at any moment. Stopping the participation has no consequences for you; in that case, your data will not be used.

What benefits will you experience by participating in this interview?

You will possibly not receive any *direct* benefits from this research. This research aims to improve the Sexy Side events to reach its goals of being a safe space, and to supply its visitors with information on sexual health and STI tests. Your results will help in improving these events in the long term.

How is your data protected?

I would like to record the interview with your permission. Through this recording, I can analyze and process the interview in the most effective way. A data breach can never fully be circumvented, but I will take adequate measures to prevent this. This recording will only be listened to by me, will not be shared with others, and will be destroyed after the research is done. If you do not feel comfortable with me recording or making notes, you can tell me, and I will not make them. I may use quotes from the interview in my thesis; I will anonymize your name and personal information in a way that people will not recognize you from reading your quotes.

Consent

By signing this document, you have read and understood its contents. You are free to ask any questions before signing the document, and can reach out to me if you have questions after your participation. You consent to participation in this interview, and its inclusion in this research.

Name of the Participant

Signature

Date

يرجى أخذ حمام (دش) قبل الدخول للمسبح
PLEASE TAKE SHOWER BEFORE
ENTERING THE SWIMMING POOL

