

Exploring LGBT+ people's experiences of Pride events in the UK: Contrasting safeties, celebrations, and exclusions

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Exploring LGBT+ People's Experiences of Pride Events in the UK

Contrasting Safeties, Celebrations, and Exclusions

ABSTRACT

This article draws on research on understandings and experiences of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans¹) communities in the UK (Formby 2017). It explores experiences of Pride events in the context of, and often in contrast to, LGBT+ people's everyday lives, focussing on two broad areas: how Pride events link to understandings of LGBT community, and how Pride events can be sites of alienation and exclusion. In the former, I examine two sub-themes concerned with safety and celebration. In the latter, I explore three sub-themes relating to commercialism, identity-based prejudice, and the notion of "excess". Across these, I draw attention to the boundaries of Pride and how these are experiential as well as spatial and temporal. Study participants viewed Pride events as particularly significant, albeit temporary, forms of "LGBT space", thought to facilitate feelings of community belonging, safety, and freedom, which were not always experienced elsewhere. However, Pride events were also subject to varied criticisms, related to a lack of "politics", the presence of alcohol and other commercial interests, and the potential for some LGBT+ people to be excluded within and from Pride events. Often this exclusion was related to their identities, appearance, or access to financial and other resources. Concerns were also evident regarding so-called "flamboyant" displays of pride that unsettled some people who did not want to be (seen to be) "different" or "extreme". Nevertheless, for others, there was a clear sense of celebration at Pride events, which was appealing. In discuss-

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ing these research findings, and the place of Pride events within understandings and experiences of LGBT communities in the UK, I identify some of the tensions and temporalities at play.

Keywords: celebration, community, exclusion, LGBT+, Pride, safety

THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES contrasting views on Pride events from LGBT+² people in the UK within two overarching headings: how Pride events link to understandings of LGBT community, and how Pride events can be sites of alienation and exclusion. These sections explore themes of safety, celebration, commercialism, identity-based prejudice, and the notion of “excess”. The paper thus identifies tensions between Pride events supporting, for some, a sense of safety and celebration – culminating in a sense of belonging and community, whilst for other people (or even the same people at other times in their lives), Pride events can foster feelings of alienation and exclusion. Whilst focussing on these events, the article draws on broader research which explores understandings and experiences of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans) communities in the UK (Formby 2017). Amongst other things, this research found that particular events were important in contributing to people’s sense of belonging and group identity. My use of belonging here draws on May’s (2013, 3) definition of belonging as “the process of creating a sense of identification with, or connection to, cultures, people, places and material objects”, as well as Yuval-Davis’ earlier (2011) suggestion that belonging is an emotional attachment and a feeling of being “at home”, including in a “relational (between people); cultural (the institutional order); and material (space and objects)” sense (May 2013, 5). Guibernau (2013) has also drawn attention to *rituals of belonging* and *rituals of inclusion* generating a sense of closeness and solidarity among participants, which has obvious relevance to Pride events, as I return to below.

Weeks (1996, 76) has suggested that a community (or I would argue, communities) need to be “sustained over time by common practices and symbolic re-enactments”. In other words, “we have to be made to feel ‘we’” (Jenkins 2014, 179). This article therefore examines experiences

of, and views on, Pride events as temporary forms of “LGBT space” (Formby 2017), which can contribute to feelings of community or “witness”. The article is situated in the context of the Global North/West, and thus discusses different issues around Pride events than those relevant to Global South/East contexts (see further discussion below). Nevertheless, in examining these spaces, I extend understanding on how Pride events link to perceptions of LGBT communities, and contribute to knowledge on how Pride events can be sites of alienation and exclusion. In doing so, I draw attention to the boundaries of Pride events and how these are experiential as well as spatial and temporal. This introduction is followed by sections on research methods and context-setting. The article then turns to the themes described above and closes with a conclusion.

Research methods and participants

The research on which this article draws utilised three methods of data collection: a short online survey to which there were 627 responses; an interactive project website to which people could post contributions, comments, and upload documents and photographs; and a series of in-depth interviews and group discussions involving a total of 44 people.³ All interviews and group discussions were facilitated by the author and took place in mutually agreed locations, often appropriate community settings. Group discussions involved visits to existing LGBT groups and places where “one-off” participants were directly recruited to attend the discussion. Group discussions lasted 60–90 minutes, individual or paired interviews 30–120 minutes, with the majority lasting around 75 minutes. The research included representation from all four UK countries: England, Northern Ireland (survey only), Scotland, and Wales. Once the project website was developed, information about the project was disseminated, largely digitally. This dissemination consisted of an open call for assistance through providing references or existing literature, completion of the online survey, or participation in regional discussion groups. The call was sent to approximately 200 recipients – personal contacts, social groups and organisations, and LGBT staff

networks, publications and websites – with an explicit request for the information to be cascaded.

Similar themes were explored in the survey, interviews, and group discussions. Question areas broadly centred on people's views on, and experiences of, LGBT communities currently, in the past, and in the future. Within these question areas, participants discussed access to LGBT spaces and events understood to relate to "community", and it was here conversations about Pride events emerged. I did not explicitly ask participants to reflect on their experiences of Pride events, but they were frequently discussed, pointing to the importance of these annual events within the context of "community", examined further below.

All qualitative data was digitally recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically; open text survey data was also analysed thematically, with this inductive process involving identifying and categorising recurring themes arising throughout the data, using principles of framework analysis (Ritchie & Lewis 2003). Ethical approval for the project was granted by my university's research ethics committee. Standard ethical procedures were followed regarding informed consent, participants' right to withdraw, confidentiality, anonymity, and secure storage of physical and electronic data. I endeavoured to put participants at ease throughout, and was "out" about my own lesbian identity, whilst also striving to not make any assumptions related to this.

The research involved a range of participant ages, genders, and sexualities, though there were limited numbers of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) people/people of colour involved (within this article, four of the 18 participants included are BAME). Amongst survey respondents, the age range was relatively evenly spread between 25 and 54, though there were fewer responses from those aged under 25 and those aged over 54. An open question about gender identity⁴ produced 31 different responses; with caution, I grouped these into larger categories for all those with over five responses. This resulted in 189 female, 167 male, 12 trans, and 11 non-binary respondents. A sexual identity question was also open, resulting in 44 different responses (also amalgamated, with caution, into larger groups for all those over five responses). There were

177 gay, 114 lesbian, 48 bisexual, pansexual or polysexual, 24 queer, and six heterosexual/“straight” respondents. Of the 44 people involved in the in-depth stage, 21 described themselves as female, 19 as male, and four as non-binary. Of these 44 people, 21 also identified as gay, 12 as lesbian, three as bisexual, two as pansexual, one as straight, and five did not disclose their sexual identity. More detail about the research methods and participants is available in Formby (2017). Although the original research involved both quantitative and qualitative methods, this article focusses on the latter, drawing on quotes from participants (all names are pseudonyms) to illustrate themes in the data relating to Pride events (though this is not to suggest that these participants were the only ones who discussed Pride within the research). Where participant demographic information (drawn from verbal information supplied and written demographic information sheets given to participants) seems pertinent to their comments, this is included in the text.

The research was informed by social constructionist and interactionist perspectives, because the self is relational, and culturally and socially embedded (May 2013). I also draw on the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989), acknowledging the “importance of considering overlapping aspects of identity and how these complicate individual identities and interactional encounters” (Sanger & Taylor 2013, 2). I see the concept of space as socially produced (Lefebvre 1991) and “constituted through interactions” (Massey 2005, 9). The notions of boundaries and belonging are also relevant, as Cohen (1987) argued that boundaries between members and non-members are crucial to the construction of communities. A sense of “we-ness” is developed and asserted through establishing “us” and “them” (Jenkins 2014), with ritual and ceremonious events, such as Pride, being one way of signifying membership (Cohen 1982; Guibernau 2013).

Setting the context for the research

Before turning to my research findings, I outline here some existing literature on Pride events, by way of context-setting. As Peterson et al. (2018) have noted, Pride events are tied to the notions of coming out and collectively performing pride, in order to increase LGBT visibility.

Although events vary internationally, “the parade format, the underlying cultural script of coming out, and the iconography of the rainbow flag” (Peterson et al. 2018, 63–64) unite or “anchor” the events. At a conceptual level, Pride events are boundary markers, with a boundary conceived as being around something to be protected, not only a simple divide between spaces (Tilly 1999). The “boundary” of Pride day therefore offers, or signifies, safety to (some) LGBT+ people. Physical barriers often present (at least at Global North/West) Pride events “function as a demarcating instrument which ‘fences off’ the *exoticness* ... of Pride participants from the presumably neutral spectators” (Ammaturo 2016, 25, original emphasis). This separates the “observed” and the “observers” (Ammaturo 2016). In a similar vein, Johnston (2007, 30) has commented that, as tourist “spectacles”, Pride events can “strengthen Western dichotomous categorizations of homosexuality and heterosexuality as distinct, separate and hierarchical subjectivities”, with physical barriers operating to fix and reinforce these categorisations (Johnston 2005). Despite some contextual and geographic differences, a Pride event marks a relatively clearly defined spatial and temporal boundary that people experience differently to other spaces and “normal” times in the same space. Transgressions are thus limited by time and place.

It is clear that Pride events and the contexts within which they take place vary considerably around the globe. Scholars have drawn attention to violent opposition at Eastern European events in Hungary (Renkin 2015), Serbia (Mikuš 2015) and Russia (Stella 2013), with Woodcock (2009, 7) arguing that “violence against gay Pride parades in post-socialist Europe is the spectacle that puts ‘the East’ on the Western gay-dar”. Literature also documents early Pride events in Uganda (Nyanzi 2014), for example, occurring within a context of criminalisation and the threat of lifelong imprisonment.

Elsewhere, the literature on Pride events has focussed on their positive effects for LGBT+ individuals. Kates and Belk (2001, 420) suggest that Pride events facilitate “unapologetic expression[s] of identity, defiance of conservative sexual norms, and claiming of space and power beyond the confines of the gay ghetto”.⁵ Browne and Bakshi (2013) also contend

that they allow LGBT people to represent themselves whilst refusing homonormative agendas, noting that Pride events can bolster and celebrate identity, facilitate visitors' opportunity to express their sexualities more than "daily life", and challenge fear and shame experienced elsewhere. Thus, "dancing on a float, experiencing the wonder of being part of Brighton Pride⁶, or tentatively watching from the street, can be 'life affirming', even life changing" (Browne & Bakshi 2013, 166). Previously, Browne (2007, 66) argued that Pride events enable the enactment of otherwise hidden identities, creating a "temporary LGBTQ public" and "visible presence of sexual otherness", which shines a light outside Pride spaces, pointing to the everyday heterosexualisation of space, and the presence of homophobia and heterosexism more generally. This is not to negate the flaws and imperfections of Pride events, but to suggest that they can be interrogated in relation to both their positive possibilities *and* normalising and commercial impetuses (Browne & Bakshi 2013). In a Spanish context, Domínguez Ruiz (2019, 519) has argued that Pride events have become the loci of debate and conflict: the "relationship between emancipatory and activist origins ... and an evolution toward commodification and mediatization ... have polarized the debate", but both resistance and commodification are present, as "emancipatory and capitalist practices intersect".

Kates and Belk (2001) have argued that Pride events can provide "life affirming moments" for LGBT people; they fulfil an important function of reminding us that (Global North/West) LGBT lives are not only, or always, about suffering and exclusion (Browne & Bakshi 2013). They are thus significant to understandings and experiences of LGBT communities, and Howe (2001) has suggested that Pride events help to consolidate identities and build communities. As McFarland (2012, 179) proposed, "Pride parades engage in conflict by flipping a cultural code on its head ... [they] make visible, support, and celebrate a community that is alternately invisible, misunderstood, and condemned ... they attempt to change culture by actually doing what they want the wider culture to do". Drawing on Lefebvre's (1991) "lived" spaces of representation, and Soja's (1996, 6) notion of the "multiplicity of real-and-imag-

ined places”, I demonstrate that the way places and spaces are imagined becomes important to how they are experienced, in part because of how those places and spaces are subsequently “lived”. As Browne and Bakshi (2013, 48) argue of Brighton, because it was “perceived as being ‘mixed and accepting’, people used spaces in ways that reflected these imaginings and such uses reiterated this sense”. Different spaces therefore offer different possibilities or conditions for “ordinariness”, suggesting that ordinariness is “spatially contingent” (Browne & Bakshi 2013, 191), and informed by our imaginings. Anderson (2006) also influentially drew on the idea of imagination, building on notions of belonging in relation to nations, in his conceptualisation of imagined communities (for further discussion of imagined LGBT communities, see Formby 2017). I return to discuss such (spatially contingent) imaginings, and ways of being, in relation to Pride events below, and extend this thinking to include temporal contingency (in Markwell’s (2002) words, “temporal containment”).

Pride events have the potential to affirm LGBT+ lives, but they also pose difficulties for some, linked to wider issues amongst and between LGBT+ people. Whilst boundaries at Pride often demarcate LGBT+ people from non-LGBT+ people, they can also exclude LGBT+ people, and research with and about LGBT+ people has evidenced much complexity with regard to belonging and a sense of community (Formby 2017). Racism and invisibility of BAME people/people of colour within and amongst LGBT communities has been documented in a range of research in the UK and beyond (Holt 2011; Lehavot et al. 2009; McKee et al. 2010), which has relevance to Pride events. Rogers (2012), for example, identified racism within “gay” spaces, which meant that for some people, the phrase “coming into” – i.e., coming into racism, sexism, and drug use, as one of his participants described – more accurately reflected their experiences than the more widely used “coming out”. To not come into particular identities, communities or spaces is therefore not about being “in the closet”, but an active choice not to engage with certain spaces or communities.

Another form of potential exclusion relates to “not drinking”, which

Browne and Bakshi (2013) noted was an unexpected form of exclusion within their study (as a “non-drinker” myself, this form of othering was not surprising – I have even been told at a Pride event that “non-drinkers can’t be trusted”!). The common privileging of alcohol in this phrasing is clear, with “not drinking” used as shorthand for not drinking alcohol, rather than not drinking liquid in any form. The presence of alcohol (and similar arguments could be made about drugs) in Pride events is therefore complex: on the one hand, alcohol consumption is frequently understood as physically and mentally unhealthy; on the other hand, to not participate in this consumption can render people “out of place” (Browne & Bakshi 2013) and isolated. Valentine and Skelton (2003) have called the scene a paradoxical space because it can offer support and validation at the same time as posing “risks” in terms of drug use, unsafe sex, and exclusion, and the same observation could be made about Pride events.

A common lament (coming from a particularly Global North/West perspective) relates to the depoliticisation of Pride, which scholars in Australia and Italy have also noted: “As laws surrounding discrimination on the grounds of sexuality changed, some marches became fashioned as parades; with a focus more on entertainment than protest” (Johnston & Waitt 2015, 108); “Once the [LGBT] rights have been obtained, a sort of ‘political void’ is created, swiftly occupied by commercial actors” (Ammaturo 2016, 36). This shift also relates to the increasing presence of non-LGBT+ people within Pride events, which Casey (2004) has dubbed the “de-dyking” of space. Pride events can therefore be marketed as tourist attractions (Browne & Bakshi 2013), with an emphasis on “party” rather than politics (Hughes 2006). In Brazil, Lamond (2018, 36) has commented that “Sao Paulo Pride is one of the largest LGBT demonstrations in the world. However, corporate interests ... have commodified dissent in order to commercialise ‘otherness’, and the city has absorbed the demonstration into its cultural offer ... [which] depoliticise[s] the event”.

For some, commodification of Pride (conceived as taking such a hold that events are unrecognisable from their “pre-commodified” form) is thought to threaten the politics and meanings behind the events (de Jong

2017). Whilst de Jong (2017) was writing about Australia, in the same year similar debates played out in the (disputed) Pride in London Independent Community Advisory Board's (2017, 6) annual report, which stated that "[some stakeholders suggest that Pride] has become primarily a corporate fun day and marketing exercise ... far distant from the political protest and/or celebration about LGBT+ people's lived experience". Peterson and colleagues (2018, 183) have also noted that "London Pride was far and away the parade in our study with the greatest participation of company-sponsored contingents ... [and] a more subdued political performance". However, existing scholarship reminds us to be cautious of such criticisms; as Brown (2009, 1506) has observed, it has become fashionable for academics and activists to deride Pride events and associated levels of corporate sponsorship as "the epitome of all that is wrong with contemporary 'homonormative' gay life", but they are, he argues, still culturally and politically important events, which many enjoy.

Browne and Bakshi (2013, 178) have noted that "commercialisation is often used as a homogenous and supposedly unified trope against most large scale Pride events in the Global North", despite a lack of shared understanding about what this actually means, where commercialism might include paying to attend, making money for businesses, and the involvement of business-focused people. Bell and Binnie (2000) also called for a more nuanced discussion that avoids oversimplifying capitalism as liberating, victimising, or pathologising. Kates and Belk (2001, 423) similarly complicate the presence of commercialism by suggesting that consumption can offer a way to resist dominant culture, because Pride events can be commemorated and remembered throughout the year by wearing souvenir clothing, key-rings or badges, in "contrast to the rather simplistic contention of a hegemonic commercial presence taking over the day". Nevertheless, authors of the Pride in London independent community advisory board annual report (2017, 6) argued that "the sheer scale of corporate parade entries can restrict the number and impact of community groups ... especially so when the total number of participants has been capped and restricted by the issue of wristbands". These issues are returned to in my findings below, demonstrating the

importance, but also the complexities, of Pride events for LGBT+ people in the UK.

How Pride events link to LGBT+ people's understandings of "community"

When participants raised Pride events in relation to LGBT "community" or "communities", they were often discussed in relation to giving LGBT+ people the opportunity to celebrate their lives, and notably in contrast to non-LGBT+ people's lives. Pride events are therefore significant because they highlight the differing social contexts in which LGBT+ and non-LGBT+ people live, and for one day this is "flipped" (McFarland 2012). Pride events can thus be fortifying for LGBT+ people, like a "good shot in the arm to help us throughout the rest of the year" (Kates & Belk 2001, 416), because they provide a temporary space, or form of community, that contrasts with many LGBT+ people's everyday lives. Though physically and temporally bounded, they can offer a sense of belonging, safety, and freedom that is not always experienced in wider society.

Pride events offer a sense of safety

As I have discussed elsewhere (Formby 2020), Pride events and other forms of space understood to be "LGBT space" are felt to offer the opportunity to safely express physical affection with same-gender partners. By comparison, self-regulatory practices are employed elsewhere in order to minimise perceived risks (Formby 2017, 2020). My research identified ways in which Pride events were framed in relation to communities, and why they were therefore important to LGBT+ people. One way was as joyous occasions with less fear or apprehension than other days, in relation to levels of safety and public displays of affection. Pride events thus allow some people to feel less "censored" than in other everyday spaces. As Timothy explained, Pride for him was a day to relish feeling able to be affectionate with his partner without any discomfort or fear:

On the Friday night I wouldn't have felt comfortable walking down Regent Street⁷ with my partner, kissing and holding hands, whereas on the Saturday it was more than acceptable and we relished every minute of it. (Timothy)

Pride events (in the Global North/West) facilitate people "flouting" the usual risk that such open behaviours, for instance holding hands, engender (Mason 2001), which could be perceived as a protective boundary (Tilly 1999). As Browne and Bakshi (2013, 167) have commented, "ongoing safety issues means that Pride events, for some, mark a difference 'one day out of the whole year'". Men in my research were aware of the potential risk of violence throughout the year, so Pride represented a day when they did not have to be so mindful of this:

It was much easier to hold hands [at Pride]... Much easier to be intimate and kiss... All the things we've been consciously trying to do here [where we live] but obviously still aware of who's watching, you know, you need to be mindful of being bashed by somebody. (Shourjo)

This comment is particularly telling, as Shourjo contrasts the ease with which he held hands at Pride versus the "conscious" attempts at doing so elsewhere, shedding light on people's everyday lives, and demonstrating how Pride events are notable in their contrast. This in turn helps explain why they are understood as a form of LGBT space and community – a space socially produced (Lefebvre 1991) and interactionally constituted (Massey 2005) in contrast to other, non-Pride forms of space. In Browne's (2007, 76) research, women similarly suggested that they could show affection, express their sexuality, and "be themselves" at Pride events in ways that were not ordinarily possible. This suggests that some people's everyday lives are not always accompanied by a feeling of fully being themselves. This again shows the importance attached to Pride events, demonstrated below in Julie and Jackie's sense of non-LGBT+ people living life like it is Pride "every day", "any other day of the week", whilst LGBT+ people "can't do that":

It's so frustrating when, like, straight individuals turn round and say "well we want a straight Pride day". It's like, you know... yours is every day. Every day. And that's what annoys me. (Julie)

Being... a community that can take over some street and act like every other straight person could on any other day of the week is important to us because we can't do that on a Monday through Sunday usually. (Jackie)

Because Pride events allow LGBT+ people to "take over" a street, they enable them to imagine or "experience that a different world is possible – even if only just for a day" (Peterson et al. 2018, 171). In some cases, participants were not aware of this contrast, and their associated inhibitions, until they attended Pride:

I sometimes wonder to myself, do I have such ingrained habits that are actually really sad, because if I go to a Pride, I suddenly notice a change. That must mean that I have been inhibited although I didn't really... feel suppressed, repressed or whatever, but when there's a moment I can come out completely open, then there's a difference. (Luce)

This sense of being "open" again links to being oneself at Pride in ways that some people feel are not possible elsewhere. Pride events thus offer a physically and temporally limited space that can be experienced as "liberating" (on "certain days of the year"), in contrast to other everyday spaces, and the rest of the year:

It's liberating sometimes to be able to do that [hold hands at Pride events], but it's quite a sad reflection on our society that we still have to think, you know, there's certain days of the year when we can be ourselves and do our thing. (Tony)

This shows that some people perceive that they can only display their identities and relationships at certain times, in certain places, and in

front of certain people, and in this context Pride events are significant, because they offer this opportunity. As I have argued elsewhere (Formby 2020), and illustrate here in relation to Pride events, forms of LGBT community or space can be understood as such because of the ways they support LGBT+ intimacies and relationships.

Pride events enable a celebration of LGBT+ people and relationships

Linked to understandings of LGBT communities, some participants emphasised how Pride events are a celebration of LGBT+ people. Carl and Jodi, for instance, talked about Pride events as celebrating “who we are”, and our “contributions”:

It’s more of a party, and I think it’s more of a celebration of who we are, rather than a fight for who we want to be. (Carl)

It’s about celebration... a party atmosphere, and I think it’s more of a celebration of the contribution of LGBT people. (Jodi)

In this view, Pride events are an opportunity for LGBT+ people to display pride, rather than shame, caution, or apology.

Some people also described Pride events as “substitutions” for other celebratory events that could not be accessed or experienced at the time of data collection (when same-sex marriage was still illegal in the UK). Shourjo, for example, compared Pride with another ritual event – a wedding:

The thing I like the most about Pride, especially London Pride, was that it was a celebration, it was joyous, and it’s on a huge scale... I remember when my brother got married in India, I remember the whole family came together in celebration and joy, and I remember thinking at that time I would never have this, and Pride is sort of a substitute because you can celebrate who you are, and your relationship. (Shourjo)

For Shourjo, Pride was a (“sort of”) replacement for such a joyous day, allowing him to celebrate his relationship.

The above comments illustrate that a space imagined and constituted as celebratory can contribute to a sense of “we-ness” and community.

How Pride events can be sites of alienation and exclusion

The above section documented how Pride events are understood as a form of, or linked to, LGBT community, in part because of the safeties and celebration they offer LGBT+ people. However, Pride events can also exclude or alienate some, demonstrating that a sense of community belonging, safety and freedom is not universally shared among LGBT+ people. Overall, I identify here three aspects of Pride events that contributed to some people’s sense of isolation or exclusion: the presence of commercial interests; intersectional identities that led some to experience prejudice and discrimination; and the prevalence of alcohol and other “excesses”. Whilst Brown (2009) has argued that Pride events offer and present diverse ways to be or “do” LGBT, this is apparently not evenly experienced.

Commercialism at Pride events can be off-putting

Linked to debates about depoliticisation of Pride in existing scholarship, some participants raised concerns about increasing commercialisation at Pride. For some people, increasingly commercial Pride events took away from their enjoyment, and sense of community, and there was a clear sense from some participants that they wanted Pride events to become more “political” (though what participants meant by that varied). Ben suggested that Pride events could and should offer a greater source of political education for LGBT+ people:

I think that it could be, and should be, more politicised. I think that you have the march for 45 minutes to an hour and then after that it’s a good piss-up... I would like to see more political awareness raising and consciousness building. (Ben)

As Ammaturo (2016) and others have discussed, recent years have seen an increasing presence of commercial interests within Pride events, and

participants in my study often linked this to decreasing politics. Similarly, a participant in Waitt and Stapel's (2011) study suggested that there has been a linear development from protest, to celebration, to commercial entity. Matt felt that, to a degree, Pride events need to be "reclaimed":

I think those [commercial] kind of Prides maybe do need to be reclaimed back into something a bit more tangible or meaningful... There is stuff which needs to be campaigned on, and there's a danger of people becoming too apathetic. (Matt)

Although there is existing research on "reclaim Pride" events, no participants in my study mentioned these. However, Helen and Colin understood Pride events as, and wanted them to remain, political:

For me, Pride is definitely a protest... trying to keep the marches political, and ensure that those messages around what's happening in the UK, what's happening abroad, what's happening in our asylum process, are present in the parades. (Helen)

From... a trade union point of view, it absolutely drives me insane when people see Pride events as a big party. (Colin)

However, such calls for political messaging within Pride were not always welcomed by everybody. Whilst Matt wanted Prides to be "meaningful", he was also ambivalent about what he termed "shouty" methods. He thus critiqued a politics that he thought assumed everyone is the same, and therefore has equal "need" to protest:

There's something which happens quite a lot... is the phrase "Pride is a protest", which kind of pisses me off a bit because for some people Pride is a protest, but for lots of people now it's really not... maybe like the tipping point came when there was just less to be angry about. (Matt)

The implication of Matt's comments here is that a vocal politicisation of Pride may be alienating to some (potential) participants who feel less "angry" about the context of their lives. Similarly, Carl also questioned the degree to which politics is a unifying force, suggesting that a party might offer more opportunities to unite LGBT+ people. Pride events do therefore not need to be understood as political, or a protest, to be understood as a form of, or linked to, community. This, for Carl, meant politics could be left out, leaving more room for celebrating young people's ability to be happy in themselves, in what Weeks (2007) has referred to (in the UK) as "the world we have won":

I don't necessarily think the political aspect of it [Pride] would tie too many of the younger generation together like a massive party would... which isn't really a bad thing... At the end of the day, surely... the end result for [political activism] is for people to be able to be happy with who they are... so if the younger generation are... doing that already, then that's great. (Carl)

It was clear that participants differed in their views about where a protest/celebration distinction should, or can, be drawn – linked to views on the extent to which the "world" (or "war") has been "won". From Petra's perspective, Pride events need not be political all the time, but people may need to be "reminded" of what or why they are celebrating:

It's very easy to go to London Pride and think that the war's been won, and it quite clearly hasn't... I had a fantastic day, but it wasn't political at all... I mean it's political in the sense that the motivation is political, and it's political in the sense that... you can walk right across the middle of town and not only were you not beaten up... [but] tourists loved it! ... It's so easy to be dour and political all the time, but I think that people need to be reminded of why it's a celebration... It's easy to forget what underlies this whole thing. (Petra)

Here, Petra links politics (and celebration) to safety, once again pointing to how Pride is imagined and constructed through physical, temporal, and experiential boundaries (i.e., because people act in different ways Pride then becomes “different” to everyday life). Peterson and colleagues (2018, 6–9) have suggested that “politics and party... glide often seamlessly into one another – they are not discrete categories”, arguing that “LGBT movements recognize the importance of strategically combining party with politics for community building” (Peterson et al. 2018, 172). In this view, politics and party work together, rather than in tension, and in doing so contribute to the sense of community and exception (“one day”) that participants in my study felt. As Helen observed, protesting can be enjoyable:

I think a protest doesn't have to be depressing, and I think a lot of people associate it with that, so they assume you can't have fun. (Helen)

As Lundberg (2007, 175) argued in relation to Stockholm Pride, “it is important to stress the consistent features of pride in themselves, joy, and laughter expressed by the marchers in the parades”. Despite such observations, some participants in my study felt that the presence of commercial interests at Pride was directly responsible for a decline in political motivations and actions – with impacts on potential community:

The commercial side of things, and the money-making side of things... have turned it [Pride] into sort of raping the pink pound rather than... a sense of community and a sense of standing together, fighting against issues... That's all... fallen by the wayside. (Colin)

A number of participants suggested that some Pride events are now *only* about making money, with boundaries here linked to charging entry rather than an erstwhile boundary between LGBT+ participants and non-LGBT+ onlookers:

There's nothing more horrendous than locking down [a] street with a metal gate around it and paying 20 quid a day, or whatever it is, to get in. It's not that it's not political, there's just nothing. That's not even a celebration of diversity or culture, it's an exclusive party to make lots of money. (Matt)

However, for some participants, a rise in commercial interests offered the possibility for greater size, which they compared favourably to their own city's Pride, where this could be read as legitimising and strengthening an event. As Gemma reflected:

I've been to Manchester⁸ Pride, which I know some people think that's become a bit corporate... but as an outsider going to that event, it felt, well it was big. To be honest, stuff here often feels a bit cheap. (Gemma)

Gemma's view that her local Pride was "cheap" compared to Manchester's suggests that, to an extent, she equated validation and celebration of her identity with the level of commercial input, i.e., she was "worth" that level of investment, which contributed to her memories of the day.

Intersectional exclusions from and within Pride events

Johnston (2005) has identified that Pride events can induce participants to face public abuse by "mainstream" society (thus contrasting with the idea of a "protective" boundary mentioned above), but in my research there was also discussion of exclusion by and among LGBT+ people. Within conversations about Pride events, the importance of understanding experiences of identity-based prejudice and discrimination became clear, as I have discussed elsewhere in relation to intimate encounters and relationships being shaped by intersectional dynamics, particularly linked to ableism, ageism, biphobia, classism, racism, and transphobia from and among LGBT+ people (Formby 2020). Although my broader research discusses experiences of transphobia within LGBT+ communities (Formby 2017), these were not related specifically to Pride events.

Though many participants saw Pride events as only important and positive, others acknowledged that such events are not universally accessible. Helen, for instance, thought that the cost of some Pride events could exclude some people, for example young people and those experiencing homelessness:

Look, here's all the people that that community is excluding because they can't afford it, because they can't drink, or they don't want to drink, or you know, we do have homeless people in our community. I don't think they're welcome at Pride. (Helen)

Eva also contrasted who she perceived to be financially and emotionally “comfortable” with those who she thought were not so comfortable or able to access to such resources:

The most comfortable people at Pride are white, middle class... and walking around comfortably with their wealth and resources, and each other. I spoke to some young people who were on the periphery, and we had a debate about why they wouldn't enter... they were young unemployed people. (Eva)

Just as “gay” neighbourhoods have been noted to be dominated by wealthy, white gay men (Weston 1995), at least historically, it seems Pride events too have been dominated by the wealthy, which has relevance to the idea of LGBT community, belonging, or “we-ness”. As Waitt and Markwell (2006, 246) have argued, because white middle-class professionals “constitute the most lucrative market segment ... it is their interests that typically dominate”. Events premised on the notions of equality and inclusion can therefore be experienced as anything but, because a shared sexual identity does not overcome “social divisions based on class, ethnicity, and gender” (Waitt & Markwell 2006, 246).

It was not only the young or unemployed who were at least partially excluded or who did not “fit” at Pride. Some participants observed that (particularly when combined with alcohol) levels of racism could hin-

der their enjoyment of (ostensibly) forms of LGBT space. As Gerry (a British Asian gay man) said of Soho⁹ immediately following Pride:

Soho was great... the atmosphere there, people were spilled out onto the streets... I enjoyed it... [but] I think I was just a bit cautious... I was aware that people, as they were getting more drunk, were just getting a bit more careless... and I would be sensitive to that. (Gerry)

For Gerry, awareness of the potential for homophobia *and* racism led to spatially specific risk-management strategies, explicitly connected to perceived safety levels in differing spaces and concerning differing intersections of his identity at any one time. Thus, although Prides can be conceived as bounded by place, time and experience, because these boundaries are interactionally constituted, they are also fundamentally linked to intersectional identities.

Gerry and Shourjo described World Pride (held in London in 2012, not long before data collection) as “brilliant” and “great”, but both recognised the low(er) representation of South Asian people at the event:

You saw a lot of East Asian people and Latin American people but very few Black or people from the subcontinent... It was quite a pleasant surprise to see a bunch of South Indians in a group and we hooked up with them and had a nice chat... It would be nice to see more Asian people and Black people I think. (Shourjo)

Another participant similarly observed:

When I have attended Pride events almost everyone there has been white; this has changed somewhat this year, but not by much. (Survey respondent 158)

These observations matter because if Pride is understood as a form of LGBT community, and is experienced as so heavily white, then what does that mean for the visibility of BAME LGBT+ people/people of

colour in Pride and LGBT community spaces? If they do not imagine or perceive Pride in the same “safe” and celebratory ways that other participants do, then they are unlikely to experience them as such.

Because of this underrepresentation, and possibly because of what he perceived to be underlying racism, Gerry felt that it was important to be “counted” and “seen” at Pride events, which one would hope would improve future experiences:

We need to be counted, we need to be seen, and unless people like us...
are seen at such events, maybe we'll never see anyone. (Gerry)

Pride ‘excesses’

In this section I turn to look at perceived “excesses” of Pride events, notably in relation to alcohol consumption, and levels of overall “flamboyance”. Gerry (above) was not alone in his concerns about alcohol. Other research has suggested that some gay men view all “young drunk men” as threatening or “risky” (Nygren et al. 2015), with “straights” associated with “unreasonable” levels of drunkenness (Moran et al. 2003). However, Gerry’s caution was notable in that it occurred in what might be described as “safe” (scene) space, reinforcing that “LGBT space” is not always imagined or experienced as equally safe for everyone. From another perspective, Carl (who identified as “half Indian”) did not appear cautious about others’ consumption of alcohol (or racism), and instead appreciated the “excuse” that Pride offered him to consume alcohol:

I’ve only gone to Pride because it’s an excuse to drink on the streets for a few days and not get arrested. (Carl)

In this comment, Carl cements his view (above) that Pride events are about celebration, with less concern evident about safety or commercialism within Pride.

Earlier, Ben also drew attention to the presence of alcohol within Pride events, linking this to a lack of politics. As these participants similarly highlighted:

I have attended local Pride events for over ten years and have found that of late they have become less about equality and more about how much alcohol can be consumed. (Survey respondent 487)

It's lost its sense of pride. It's ridiculous, it's called Pride, but it's nothing to do with pride... it is about piss-up. (Julie)

The presence of alcohol at Pride events could be a source of alienation or exclusion for participants who did not drink (much) alcohol themselves. It was also a concern for those who worked with young people, who thought Pride events were potentially positive experiences, but who felt that “excessive” levels of alcohol consumption detracted from this potential.

Whilst Pride events offer some people the potential to feel “liberated” and celebratory, at the same time they can prove unsettling to others, which highlights the extent to which the same spaces can be imagined and experienced so differently. Although Pride events may be understood as being about visually displaying a sense of celebration or resistance (Kates & Belk 2001), such displays were troubling to some participants who did not want to be associated (in their own minds or by others) with such “a carnivalesque celebration of excess” (Kates & Belk 2001, 393). “Sites of carnivalesque transgressions, where normatively heterosexual streets are re-performed” (Browne & Bakshi 2013, 159) were therefore uncomfortable for those who did not want to claim or occupy space in such “extreme” or transgressive ways. Colin, for example, felt that:

The danger is that if it does become too much of a spectacle, it becomes a freak show and then it doesn't become a celebration, it becomes a place for people to come and point and laugh, because it does become too extreme and it does become too extravagant, and then people start and look at it from the wrong angle. (Colin)

In this view, an “extravagant” celebration of, by and for LGBT+ people can become a site of concern, connected to how LGBT+ people are, or

might be, viewed by non-LGBT+ people. Whilst it is the flamboyance of Pride performances that attracts non-LGBT+ tourists (Johnston 2005), it can also be this “spectacle”, or form of visibility, that is off-putting to some LGBT+ people who do not want to be viewed or understood in such “extreme” ways. In Colin and Shourjo’s opinion, this could be “dangerous”:

That’s the danger... I think it’s a two-edged sword. Whilst visibility in public can normalise things, it can also create an impression in certain aspects of the public that this is what it is, and I suppose I’m as guilty as anybody else because I associated LGBT [people] with men in hot pants, and I didn’t want to be associated with that. (Shourjo)

As Waitt and Stapel (2011, 208) argued, sexual excess displayed at Pride “becomes a boundary violation and an example of gay shame”, with this shame linked to the notion of not “flaunting” sexuality. These ideas link to the broader notion of the “good” gay or queer citizen (Bell & Binnie 2000; Puar 2007) – one who is not “militant” in their activism, and who conforms to (homo)normative expressions of identities and relationships. These arguments accord with Colin (above), who lamented both the lack of politics and the presence of exhibitionism. For Colin and others, it seems their version of the “right” kind of Pride visibility corresponds with a certain “good” gay/queer citizen.

For Gerry and Shourjo, such perceived levels of excess (“men in underpants”) were off-putting, towards Pride events, and even to a gay identity:

A visible LGBT community through things like Pride... never spoke to me... If anything it was wanting to do the opposite... wanting to disassociate from them because... what they do show on news reports is something very limited. They normally show the more flamboyant, the more loud... men in underpants. (Gerry)

I happened to look at [the] Pride march in London and there was a certain curiosity, but also certain disgust and, you know, “I’m not really them... I’m not that gay person”. (Shourjo)

Johnston and Waitt (2015) have shown that feelings of pride and shame are intertwined and cannot be disentangled, and this can be seen in Shourjo's and Gerry's comments, as they had both experienced levels of disassociation and disgust at representations of Pride events. Whilst Johnston (2005) discussed a "border anxiety" for straight tourists at Pride events, I suggest that this can also occur for some LGBT+ people (such as Colin, Gerry and Shourjo), who were discomforted by "extreme" representations of pride, and who therefore chose (at least initially) to distance themselves from such people and events.

For Carl, the excesses of Pride were merely an inaccurate (not "dangerous") portrayal of LGBT+ life:

Pride is basically the gay cousin of ... the Notting Hill carnival!¹⁰ ... You don't eat that much food normally, you don't listen to that much steel music normally. It's about celebrating it to the excess and it [Pride] is about seven foot drag queens and fire eaters... It isn't a true reflection of what it is like to be gay, but I think that's what a lot of straight society would think. (Carl)

Overall, this section has shown that for some people Pride events can be sites of alienation and exclusion, connected to how spaces are imagined and experienced, which has implications for LGBT+ people's sense of belonging.

Discussion and conclusions

Pride events are clearly not homogenous, even within the Global North/West (Browne & Bakshi 2013; Peterson et al. 2018), and in my study they meant different things to different people. Nevertheless, I have shown how Pride events can create or support feelings of LGBT community, and facilitate safeties and freedoms not always experienced elsewhere. They also offer the opportunity to celebrate LGBT+ identities and relationships. There are clear spatial and temporal boundaries (or "containments") around Pride, as it normally happens in a given street or area, usually over just one day (though sometimes two or more), but

it is also bounded by how differently it is experienced to other days. Because, for some, Pride events are perceived as safer or more celebratory than everyday life, people act in ways that make those perceptions “true” (Browne & Bakshi 2013), thus reinforcing why those spaces and events are understood as forms of, or linked to, LGBT community. Pride events are constituted through imagination and interaction (Browne & Bakshi 2013; Massey 2005; Soja 1996), and understood and experienced by what they are not, as well as what they are. The boundaries and spaces of Pride events are imagined and experienced differently in part because people want different things from Pride. Drawing on Browne and Bakshi’s (2013) idea of spatial contingency, I demonstrate that the communities, safeties, and celebrations that Pride facilitates are spatially and temporally contingent. By definition, because Pride events are physically and temporally bounded, they provide *limited* times and spaces that are perceived to be safer or more celebratory than everyday life. These can be understood as “moments” of community and belonging, contingent on how Prides are understood and interactionally constituted (Massey 2005).

I also demonstrate that Pride events can be exclusionary, unwelcoming, and undermine a sense of belonging. Belonging is thus spatially and temporally specific (Formby 2017), and a sense of community *at* Pride, or indeed a sense *of* pride, is not experienced equally. Whilst some participants felt (or where physically) excluded, for instance related to finances, racism, or alcohol, others were deterred from participation due to what they saw as flamboyant displays of and at Pride. Feelings of safety for some, could therefore be simultaneously allied, for others, with feelings of exposure at being “different”. Whilst many participants enjoyed the celebratory excesses of Pride, others sought to distance themselves from those Pride participants who they saw as too “extreme”, with carnivalesque transgressions (Browne & Bakshi 2013), perhaps ironically, perceived as unpolitical, unhelpful and off-putting.

For those who feel alienated from Pride events, whether related to commercialism, forms of prejudice and discrimination, or perceived excesses, a sense of (albeit spatially and temporally contingent) com-

munity, safety or celebration is not shared. This has significance beyond that day, as it may mean that they feel alienated or excluded from broader notions of LGBT community, and in turn this may limit feelings of belonging, safety, and celebration of their identity (Formby 2017). Pride events are therefore paradoxical spaces (Valentine & Skelton 2003), and paradoxical safeties and alienations, celebrations and exclusions, are more apparent when thinking intersectionally about people's experiences. Furthermore, when those deemed "other" were excluded by LGBT+ people, the emotional component of not feeling a sense of belonging was most easily observed (Formby 2017).

Overall, I have shown that Prides are important but complex events: they can be (at least in the Global North/West) "politically important expressions of public visibility that seek to challenge dominant social and moral conservatism" (Johnston & Waitt 2015, 115), but they can also be the cause of significant emotion and uncertainty. Nevertheless, this article demonstrates that Pride events play an important part in some people's lives, and in understandings and experiences of LGBT communities, whether experientially or symbolically, because these annual events represent a visual or imagined LGBT community that otherwise might not exist. Given the variety of experiences I have documented, and given that Pride events are so closely linked to feelings of LGBT community, safety, and a celebration of LGBT+ identities and relationships, I argue that research is vital to increase our understanding of these tensions. If LGBT communities are to feel welcoming to all LGBT+ people, we need to ensure that Pride events also work for everyone, with all the complexities this is likely to involve.

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NOTES

1. I use "trans" as a shorthand umbrella term to refer to people whose gender identity differs from how they were assigned at birth. The term includes a diverse range of gender identities and embodied experiences.
2. LGBT+ is my preferred term to refer to people, acknowledging the diversity of sexual and gender identities beyond only LGBT. However, when discussing "LGBT communities" I use the more limited acronym, as that is the term more widely used. When referring to existing literature and participant comments, I replicate the acronyms employed within (e.g., LGB, LGBTQ).
3. There were two paired interviews (involving four people), ten individual interviews, and five group discussions that involved a total of 32 people. Two participants were involved in both an individual interview and a group discussion (they have not been counted twice in the total of 44 participants).
4. These identities refer to current identities (at the time) rather than sex assigned at birth.
5. Although overall I relate Pride events to LGBT+ people, and thus gender as well as sexual identities, I do draw on literature that focuses only on sexual identities, and acknowledge that some of my data relates more to LGB+ people than to trans people.
6. Brighton is a coastal resort in Southern England, often referred to as the unofficial "gay" or LGBT+ capital of the UK because of its large LGBT+ population size. Brighton Pride is "considered one of the main UK Pride events" (Peterson et al. 2018, 29).
7. Regent Street is a major shopping street in London.
8. Manchester is one of England's largest cities and known for its LGBT+ population. Its Pride event is one of the main Pride events in the UK (Peterson et al. 2018).
9. Soho is an area of London known for its number of "gay" or LGBT+ venues.
10. The Notting Hill carnival held in London every year celebrates Caribbean culture and heritage.