Resisting heteronormativity through counter spaces

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Abstract

This thesis explores the ways spaces can enable a contestation of gender norms for a queer counterpublic in Rotterdam. To do so, 14 conversations were held with queer people and seven spaces were visited and observed which were named by the informants as enabling a contestation of gender norms. This article shows that counter spaces are necessary and essential for people to contest gender norms. They provide a place where people can connect and find other people of the queer counterpublic, leading to more confidence in their own identity. This is achieved through creating a space where they can be safe to explore and experiment with gender expression and queerness and inspire each other through their contestation. The spaces contribute to this through their physical materialities, the people and community present, and their policies and organizing practices. By examining how counter spaces challenge normative gender constructions, this research contributes to queer and feminist theories aimed at deconstructing and abolishing restrictive gender norms and binaries.

Keywords: *queer, counterpublic, gender norms, materiality, spaces*

Introduction

"In this city, where 'being different' does not exist, because everyone is different, everyone can be themselves." (Rotterdam Info, 2023). This slogan of the city Rotterdam, especially directed to queer individuals, sounds ideal but is not the reality for many people living in the city. Catcalling is still a thing; queers are being harassed in the street as well as in bars or nightclubs and aesthetic transgressions of traditional gender norms are frequently punished by physical or verbal violence (Radar, 2024). You are only allowed to 'be different' to a certain extent, *too* different will not be accepted, at least not everywhere. The research by Radar (2024) shows that in Rotterdam queer people still change their behavior and expression because they do not feel safe. For me, this highlights the importance of looking into spaces where people feel free to express themselves, free of harassment and violence and feel the room to transgress dominant norms, essentially learning from the dynamic of such spaces.

Being different can only occur when there is a 'normal'. The normal in the Dutch society concerning gender and sexuality is heteronormativity, embedded in rules, standards, assumptions and expectations imagining a binary gender of man and women and sexual norm of heterosexuality which occasionally tolerates homosexuality (Robinson 2012, Duggan, 2002). Heteronormativity describes the standard of a heterosexual culture as the dominant structure in society (Warner, 2005). Which not only is embedded as a sense of rightness in attitudes of individuals in the form of prejudices and phobias but also in every aspect of social life (Berlant & Warner, 1998). This position of heterosexuality as the standard marginalizes and stigmatizes non-heteronormative individuals – people who are gender and/or sexually queer. Warner (2005) points out that this process of marginalizing and stigmatizing leads to a certain invisibility of queerness since it is pushed out of sight. Visible transgressions of gender norms are being policed and punished through looks, comments,

shaming or verbal and physical violence upholding the heteronormative as standard (McCann & Monaghan, 2019; Hoskin, 2019).

People who feel conflicted with heteronormative norms and deviate from them could become a queer counterpublic (Warner, 2005). A counterpublic is organized around a shared discourse of interests or concerns, it includes a relation amongst strangers who are being excluded and marginalized by the mainstream public discourse. A counterpublic is not linked to a certain space, whereas people part of a counterpublic nevertheless often search for places where transgression of the dominant norm *is* possible (Berlant & Warner, 1998). These spaces can function as a safe space for a queer counterpublic, to meet and exist without a heteronormative standard where they experience the freedom of expressing themselves and design spaces for themselves. Sara Ahmed, in Queer Phenomenology (2006), discusses how bodies depending on their orientation shape and impact the world and interact with spaces and their objects. Pointing out that spaces are not a mute background, but their materiality can speak to a queer counterpublic. Additionally highlighting the role of objects in reinforcing social norms. Yet, there is still a lack in understanding of the lived experiences of queer individuals on the intersection of these topics, especially concerning the impact spaces and the materiality of these spaces can have on negotiating dominant gender norms, which is why I want to raise the following question guiding this research: *How can spaces in Rotterdam enable a contestation of gender norms for a queer counterpublic?*

The central aim of this research is to better understand physical spaces where queer counterpublics materialize in Rotterdam and how these enable a contestation of gender norms, while additionally exploring how the materiality of a space can contribute to renegotiating gender norms. To better understand how this is possible in some spaces and not in others and what can be learned from these spaces. Since the goal is to better understand the

perceptions of queer individuals, semi-structured interviews were conducted in combination with observation of spaces named during the interviews.

Academically, this research contributes to queer theory by offering insights into the ways in which marginalized communities contest dominant norms and create alternative spaces of belonging. The exploration of discursive and spatial dynamics within queer counterpublics enhances our understanding of resistance strategies and agency, enriching scholarly discourse on gender, sexuality, and social movements. Societally, this research is aimed to promote and understand spatial safety for queer individuals in Rotterdam and promote an abolishment of dominant gender norms. By examining the lived experiences of queer individuals and their interactions within specific spaces, this study informs efforts to create safer and more affirming environments for people with diverse gender expressions and identities. Understanding the challenges faced by queer counterpublics and their strategies for resistance provides valuable insights for policymakers, community organizers, and advocacy groups seeking to address systemic inequalities.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical roots of this research are drawn from queer theory. The focus of queer theory is on deconstructing and destabilizing the dominant normative culture (McCann & Monaghan, 2019). Theories and concepts are presented as tools to interpret and analyse the conversations and provide a theoretical context and foundation for what and how to conduct the observations.

Publics and Counterpublics

Michael Warner (2005) defines the concept of a public not as an accidental gathering of people but rather as a group of strangers brought to existence through a shared discourse and

the attention and engagement with this discourse, independently from the state or other institutions. The people of the public share a social reality in form of common interests, norms and concerns. People who do not fit into the dominant public and are being marginalized by the dominant discourse can form counterpublics. Any subordinated group as for example women, workers, people of colour, or queers could form a counterpublic, if there is friction towards the dominant public and a shared discourse amongst them on how they see the world. In these counterpublics oppositional interpretations of identities, interests and needs are being imagined, formulated, and lived. Counterpublics still consist of an indefinite group of strangers but here the members are marked by their participation and collaboration in the counter-discourse and creation of an alternative social reality.

Determining one's belonging to a counterpublic involves more than just personal identity, it involves active participation like paying attention to- and participating in the counter discourse and going to counter spaces (Warner, 2005). For this project, the concept counterpublic enables a nuanced analysis of the impact of different discourses on one's identity formation and expression. It will allow to study how respondents experience parts of the dominant discourse like gender norms and how being part of a queer counterpublic impacts their contestation of gender norms.

Normative Gender Expectations

Gender norms can be defined as normative assumptions of what is considered to be 'normal' or 'abnormal' which differs based on one's gender (McCann & Monaghan, 2019). Inside the gender binary, men are expected to act, dress, desire differently than women. The dominant binary conception of gender is based on assumptions concerning sex, gender, and sexuality that can be summed up in the heterosexual matrix described by Butler (1990). The heterosexual matrix entails that individuals assigned female sex at will grow up to be women,

present feminine behavior and appearance and be solely attracted to men. This heteronormative set of assumption is embedded throughout the dominant public. It is reflected and reproduced in institutions, medicine, education, infrastructures like toilets and changing rooms, and much more (Berlant & Warner, 1998).

Visible transgressions of dominant gender norms in general lead to attention (Hoskin, 2019). This attention can come in the form of looks, comments, jokes, shaming, or verbal and physical violence (Yu et al, 2017). This punishment of deviating from the norm, so-called "norm policing", makes gender and gender expression publicly mediated and holds the heteronormative standard in place. Out of what is called respectability politics minorities comply with dominant social norms to advance their group's position and by assimilating achieving social mobility and the respect of the majority culture and avoiding negative attention (Pitcan et al., 2018). This influence of norms and norm policing on queer identities was discussed in the interviews to further explore where and how gender expression is dominated by a public and essentially where people feel free to contest and deviate from these norms.

Non-cis or non-straight is not immediately Queer

During the 1980s there was a shift in the usage of the term queer, from a derogatory slur for homosexuality towards a proud self-identifying umbrella term for sexual and gender non-normativity and resistance (McCann & Monaghan, 2019). For the Dutch context it is essential to emphasize that not-straight is not immediately queer, as the definition includes a form of normative resistance (Duggan, 2002). This will be clarified through a discussion of Lisa Duggan's (2002) concept of 'homonormativity'. Duggan (2002) describes the phenomenon that certain deviations from heteronormativity are conditionally accepted by parts of society. It is a neoliberal reaction of dealing with gay rights where the focus is on

providing some equal rights (such as marriage) for some people (homosexuals) instead of changing the structural issues of discrimination and marginalization. In this sense, Duggan differentiates between 'gay' and 'queer' where gay does neither include transgender, nonbinary or gender fluid people nor actively include lesbians, women, bisexuals in their politics while instead mainly focusing on white gay men. Further, other oppressive dimensions such as class, education or race are also neglected. Freedom and equality become narrow, only being provided to certain gay individuals who do not deviate *too* much from societal norms. Homosexuality is accepted without changing the status quo. Robinson (2012) highlights two dangers of this assimilation in the Dutch discourse where those who assimilate become invisible, as part of the public and those who do not conform to assimilationist discourses, mainly gender queers and people of colour are even more marginalized. Combining Warners (2005) concept of the queer counterpublic with the nuanced understanding of queerness provided by scholars such as Duggan (2002) highlights the importance of taking an intersectional approach. By sampling a diverse group of informants this research aims to not contribute to a perception of queer spaces as white, gay and male-dominated.

Space / Counterspace

Queer counterpublics are dependent on finding each other in urban space. Berlant and Warner (1998) point out the necessity of counterpublics to come together and materialize in places where they can create shared imaginaries, thus countering the dominant public. These spaces don't need to be explicitly designated as queer, they can also be locations that are queered by the presence, expression and actions of queer individuals. Spaces are never naturally 'straight' or 'queer' but rather actively produced and typically heterosexualized (Oswin, 2008). The presence of queer bodies can queer a space by transgressing the heteronormative.

This aligns with Ahmed (2006), who points out how spaces are organized to privilege certain bodies over others. Queer bodies, bodies of color and disabled bodies often find themselves out of place in normative spaces. Ahmed advises understanding spatial dynamics through the concept of orientation. Our physical orientation (how we are positioned) and our social orientation (how we are directed to certain norms and practices) influence our experiences in spaces. Furthermore, queer bodies reorient a space through creating a sense of disorientation for normative structures by disrupting the heterosexual matrix.

Additionally, Ahmed (2006) highlights the role of objects in orienting bodies noting that certain objects help orienting bodies and can reinforce or counter social norms. Everyday items and decorations such as wedding or family photographs signal heteronormative expectations. On the other hand, objects such as a rainbow flag or queer art can reorient a space and make it inclusive and affirming for queer individuals. This highlights the importance of looking into the materiality of a space, by acknowledging and researching the role of objects in these spaces to understand how the presence and arrangement of certain objects can support queer expressions and interactions.

Moreover, Duggan (2002) and Browne (2006) distinguish between homonormative and truly queer spaces. Homonormative spaces may accept homosexuality but continue to police other norm transgressions. Browne (2006) describes queerness as essentially transgressing boundaries such as man/woman and hetero/homo moving beyond normativity into a fluid space. A queer place therefore must provide the freedom for this transgression without any form of policing. Further, it is crucial to not overlook the intersectionality of race, class and gender in queer spaces. Oswin (2008) critiques how research often overlooks these dimensions, implicitly marking queer spaces as white middle-class spaces while also ignoring the ways in which the identities intersect and influence each other. Ahmed's (2006) emphasis on how bodies are differently oriented based on intersecting identities aligns with

this critique. Thus, it is vital to explore how different norms and categories are organized within queer spaces and counterpublics. To take this critique seriously I aimed to sample a diverse group of informants to not contribute to an understanding of spaces as white and middle class. Additionally, during the observations I focused on the visible demographics of people present, the accessibility, the prices and the policies in place.

Operationalization

The two concepts that need to be operationalized for this research are 'queer spaces' and 'contesting gender norms'. The first one, queer space, can be defined as a physical space where queer individuals feel like they can express their gender and sexual identity freely and comfortably (Browne, 2006). The place allows to go beyond normativity into a more fluid space. Norm transgression must be possible and supported without a policing of the norm (Oswin, 2008). Therefore, the interviews explored the perceived safety and comfort of the informants in transgressing aesthetic gender and sexual norms in different spaces. Additionally, the specific norms present in the spaces were discussed (Oswin, 2008; Browne, 2006). Further, the inclusivity and accessibility of the mentioned spaces is evaluated by looking at policies, practices and the physical environments. To grasp the materiality of these spaces, observations were conducted in addition to conversations. These observations focused on signs, symbols, aesthetics, visible characteristics of staff and visitors, infrastructure within the spaces, and the activities and events taking place.

Gender norms are defined as societal expectations, beliefs, and behaviours linked to the associated gender of a person based on the heterosexual matrix (McCann & Monaghan, 2019; Butler, 1990). As already discussed, the heterosexual matrix describes the assumption that a person assigned female at birth (sex) will grow up into being a woman (gender), dressing feminine (gender expression) and be exclusively attracted to men (desire). For this

research, contestation of gender norms, defined as subverting or undermining gender norms, involves actions, behaviours, and expressions that challenge or reject societal expectations based on gender (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). This process includes any movement away from traditional gender norms, described by the informants. This can include dressing in ways traditionally not associated with one's gender or expressing one's nonbinary identity. Further it can include showing affection to a same-sex partner or date or a participation in activities or events focusing on gender and sexual diversity.

Research Design

To answer the research question *How can spaces in Rotterdam enable a contestation of gender norms for a queer counterpublic?* a qualitative research design has been used incorporating triangulation through interviews, participant observation and physical space observation. To better understand personal perceptions and experiences of queer people, semi-structured in-depth interviews have been conducted with fourteen queer informants (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In this research queer has been used as an umbrella term for people identifying as non-cisgendered or not straight. The narrativity of the interview created room for personal conversations where experiences and emotions in different spaces could be shared and discussed in their own words and pace (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This enabled a nuanced understanding of their lived experiences, spatial preferences and the discursive practices within queer counterpublics in Rotterdam (Nash & Browne, 2010). To enhance reliability, a topic list ensured that the same issues were discussed allowing for comparison (Babbie, 2015). The topic list has been created based on the theoretical foundations to strengthen validity (see Appendix A). The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded while following the coding process of three stages: open, selective and axial coding through

Atlas.ti (Boeije, 2009). A codebook safeguarded the reliability and internal validity during the coding process (Babbie, 2015).

Next to the interviews, inductive observations have been done to better understand the materiality and dynamic of the spaces named by the respondents. Inside these spaces I have been attentive to symbols such as stickers, posters, books; visible characteristics such as gender expression, race, age of the staff and the people present; the infrastructure in these spaces such as wheelchair accessibility, prices and toilets and the interactions, policies and activities in these spaces as well as the general aesthetics in the place (Ahmed, 2006; McPhail et al., 2022). Lastly, I was attentive to my own behavior and emotions when visiting the spaces (Browne & Nash, 2010). The notes made during the observations have been analyzed by using the presented theories and formed an addition to the findings of the interviews.

Sampling

The sampling criteria for this research required participants to be over 18 years old, identify as non-straight and/or as non-cis which is in this paper summarized under the umbrella term queer, and have lived in Rotterdam for at least one year. To reach the target group a flyer (see Appendix B) was posted in the private Facebook group Queer Rotterdam, where entrance requires admin approval involving questions about queerness to maintain a protective environment. Six informants were recruited through this group. The remaining eight I reached by spreading the flyer in my network (online and offline) reaching friends, acquaintances and friends of friends. As much as possible a group was gathered diverse in queerness, race, class and age. Concerning the spaces, I explored places named by informants as spaces where they felt free to express and explore their queerness, instead of visiting places commercially labelled as queer. Therefore, the focus is put on spaces which are authentically experienced as queer by the queer counterpublic.

Characteristics Informants

I have talked to 14 people: 12 in one-on-one settings and one double interview. The informants' ages range from 20 to 62 years. Thirteen of the participants have lived in Rotterdam for at least two years, while one has worked in Rotterdam for 6 years but lives in the Hague. The sample is limited in terms of racial diversity contributing to a predominantly white perspective on queer spaces since only two of the 14 informants are people of color. Additionally, most informants held a master's or bachelor's degree from university or Hogeschool indicating a lack of diversity in terms of class and education resulting in a biasedness of views. In terms of nationality, most of the informants were Western European: 8 were Dutch and the rest included Franco-African, German, Polish, Israeli, French, and American. Regarding queerness, the informants identified mostly as queer and when further categorizing[1] ranged from bi- pan- or homosexual to transgender and nonbinary. The interviews were conducted in English, Dutch or German and were held in parks, one of our homes, or online in one case, all depending on the preference of the informant. The duration of the recorded part of the conversations were on average 75 minutes. Overall, it is no representative sample therefore I refrain from making generalizations. However, numerous common themes emerged, laying the groundwork for future research. The table below shows an overview of the informants and in which spaces they felt free to express themselves. Although these spaces were named, the lack of specific spaces in Rotterdam was still a topic in all the conversations.

[1] Aiming to move away from categorization and labelling I still include this to highlight that I have talked to different people from the queer field.

Table 1: Characteristics

Pseudonym	Pronouns	Age	Spaces named
Nora	She/her	28	Poing, Weelde, (queer) techno parties, Worm/Wunderbar
Milan	He/him	27	Poing, (queer) techno parties, need for more in Rotterdam
Adrian	He/him	25	Strano, Ferry, Erasmus Pride, Roodkapje, Tom's Brewery, Vessel 11, Wunderbar/Worm
George	He/him	62	Roodkapje, Lantarenvenster, Everywhere except Rotterdam metro
Noa	They/them	24	Queer Rotterdam, Coffee Company Eendrachtsplein, Boulderhals, Keile Cafe, Rotown, Wunderbar/Worm, Poing, need more queer coded places
Sem	He/him	30	Ballroom, Wunderbar/Worm, Events e.g. Gender Bending Party, Hangout010,
Zane	He/him	20	Poing, Weelde, Worm/Wunderbar, (queer) techno parties, Vegan Junkfood bar
Lea	She/they	25	Ferry, Pride, Bonaparte, Rotown, Culture Hub, University, Occupation/activism
Johan	He/him	62	Baroeg, Rotterdam Pride volunteer, Roodkapje, Wunderbar/Worm, Keilecafe
Clara	She/her	45	Need for spaces
Samuel	He/him	34	COC Rotterdam, Ferry, need for spaces
Jamie	She/they	23	Wunderbar/Worm, Ballroom, Roodkapje, Bar3

Mogo	She/they	26	Ferry, Rotown, Worm/Wunderbar, Rotterdam Pride Volunteer, (queer) techno parties, The Hole (Queer Rotterdam), Queer Bouldernight,
Mia	She/her	23	Bar3, Coffee Company Eendrachtsplein, (queer) techno parties, museums, Rotown, Poing

Spaces observed

For the observations, seven of the locations mentioned during the conversations were visited. These locations were selected aiming at maximum variation to provide an in-depth understanding of different spaces. I visited the locations alone, with informants, or with friends. The locations included Bar3, Worm/Wunderbar, The Hole by Queer Rotterdam, Coffee Company Eendrachtsplein, Rotown, Bonaparte, and Ferry. Table 2 summarizes the spaces and informants' perceptions. Most spaces were visited on a regular day or evening to observe the atmosphere, apart from Worm/Wunderbar where I attended a party during the night (23:00-6:00) organized in collaboration with the Poing collective. Another exception was the Hole, the space of the organization Queer Rotterdam, which is also only open during events or workshops. There, I participated in an intuitive painting workshop with an informant, as part of the one-day festival Flux for 'femmes and thems'.[2]

Table 2: Spaces

Place	**Brief indication**	**What informants said about the space**
Worm/Wunderbar	Restaurant/bar/club	Queer labeled, creative place/people, visibly queer anarchistic, diverse, expressive,

[2] They described it as an event for feminine, non-binary and gender nonconforming people (Queer Rotterdam, 2024, May).

Ferry	Restaurant/bar/dance bar	More gay, white privileged men, groups of guys, good place to dance on not techno
Coffee Company Eendrachtsplein	Café	Queered space due to staff and visitors
Bonaparte	Night bar	More gay, random crowd
Rotown	Restaurant/bar/ nightclub	Not queer labelled but welcomes any kind of expression, alternative music,
The Hole	Main space of Queer Rotterdam	Designed for queer people, safe, queer meeting space, workshops
Bar3	bar	Queer friendly, neutral space, "I don't give a fuck vibe", visibly queer staff

Ethical Considerations

Due to the sensitivity of the topics discussed, ethical considerations were followed. Before the interview, participants were informed about the study's purpose and topics, and they signed an informed consent form agreeing to the interview and its recording. They were also made aware of their anonymity in the project and their rights to withdraw at any time. It was emphasized that participation is entirely voluntary and that they could pause or withdraw at any point, even after the interview. During the interview, emphasis was placed on tending to respondents' emotions and reactions while also trying to create a comfortable environment where they feel comfortable to share but also to pause or stop the interview. Given the distressing nature of discussing topics such as spaces, queerness, and gender expression in relation to spaces and safety, the respondents could choose a space where they felt most comfortable.

Positionality/Lens

In this research, I draw upon Donna Haraway's (1988) idea of 'situated knowledges' as a conceptual framework to acknowledge and embrace the significance of my identity and my perspectives in shaping the research process and the knowledge production. Haraway (1988) challenges the notion of an objective, detached observer and encourages the acknowledgment of the researcher's positionality within the context of the study. As a queer researcher, living in Rotterdam I used this lens for a more nuanced exploration of the complexities within queer communities while positioning myself not as an impartial outsider but as an active participant in this co-creation of knowledge. Since I too am searching for spaces where I feel free to express my identity and look for ways to contest and abolish the norms surrounding my gender and sexuality. I felt that my position as part of a queer counterpublic created trust and allowed for more personal conversations since I was able to make clear that my aim is doing research *with* them instead of *on* them. The observations have been mostly done together with informants which gave me the opportunity to not be an outsider and experience the places as part of the queer counterpublic (Browne & Nash, 2010). By adopting this lens, I aim to contribute to the ongoing dialogue within queer studies, promoting a more holistic and intersectional understanding of the dynamics at play. The usage of situated knowledge aligns with the aim of listening to marginalized voices, challenging traditional power structures, and promoting a more equitable research process.

Results and Analysis

Queerness inherently is a deviation from heteronormativity. Despite the self-presentation of the city of Rotterdam as a place where everyone can be different everywhere, this was not felt by the 14 people I talked to. The extent to which people felt comfortable or unsafe in certain spaces varied depending on their age, gender and gender expression and if they visited to

space during the day, the evening or the night. The results are structured by starting with the experiences in non-queer spaces and the reasons to go to specific spaces, afterwards it will be discussed how spaces can enable a contestation of gender norms through architecture and interior design, people and community, and policies and organizing. The section ends with discussing tensions inside the spaces.

Navigating in non-queer spaces

As expected, based on the presented theories, many informants shared feelings of discomfort in 'straighter' environments in Rotterdam. The more they visibly deviated from the heterosexual matrix discussed by Butler (1990), the more they felt othered. Consistent with McCann and Monaghan (2019), informants felt strict normative assumptions based on their assumed gender. Jamie (she/they, 23) shared "you're a woman so you should be dressed like this, act like that, wear a skirt, put on make-up". Informants felt that gender norms for women included long hair, tighter cloths highlighting body curves, shaved legs and armpits, not taking up too much space, talking about men and having a boyfriend. For men this was short hair, no accessories, no or little colors, dominance, sportive, strongly built, aggressive, assertive, talking about women and having a girlfriend. Heteronormative expectations also extended to hobbies and interests while overall it was perceived that in straighter environments weirder hobbies, passions or interests are more looked down upon.

The overall atmosphere within heteronormative spaces was often described as heavily male dominated where people often gathered in groups. Larger, louder groups were perceived as very intimidating especially when alcohol was involved. Most informants had experienced various forms of hostility from straight[3] men. Female presenting[4] informants experienced a

[3] Informants phrased it this way, focusing more on the concept of a straight man than on whether the men they encountered and experienced hostile behavior from were actually straight.
[4] I refer throughout the paper to female or male presenting people, here I imply not always to conscious form of self-presentation but more so the reality of being read, understood and treated as a female or male person.

lot of unwelcome sexual attention in form of looks, comments, or physical harassment. Same-sex affection was evenly treated with hostile behavior by men but not always with a sexual undertone. For example, Adrian (he/him, 25) shared to often receive aggressive comments by "drunk dudes" when walking hand in hand with his husband or Clara (she/her, 45) experienced unwanted touching and belittling by men when showing affection to her female presenting date.

The feeling of being othered can also develop out of 'positive' attention as Milan (he/him; 27) shared; Once, in a straight club, a woman congratulated him and the male presenting man he was with for making out, highlighting how great this is that they feel so free here. This form of 'positive' attention, he shares, "makes me feel like, oh yes, wait, I am acting differently than the rest and extra attention should be given to this […] That really makes me feel like such an alien [...] because to put it very, kind of very bluntly, she wouldn't do that to a straight couple.". This shows how not straight is still considered to be nonnormative and is not generally accepted, but rather treated with extra attention in line with research by Hoskin (2019) and Yu et al (2017). Most informants shared to, therefore, always carefully weigh up whether it is safe and if they have the energy to handle the attention when deciding to hold hands with a partner. This caution extends to considering with whom and in what circles they share information about who they date, fancy or any other information which might give away their queer identity, necessitating a constant code-switch between different spaces and surroundings.

Apart from sexual orientation, othering was also experienced when dress or behavior deviated from expected norms associated with their assumed gender identity. This similarly results in unwanted attention, including stares, comments, insults, and intrusive questions like 'are you gay?', 'faggot' or 'are you a boy or a girl'. Or concerning pronouns this includes lacking acceptance or ignorance of preferred pronouns and misgendering. These reactions

often push people to conform to gendered expectations in certain environments to avoid the extra attention, causing them to hide or not give space to parts of themselves as also noted by Pitcan et al (2018). Especially among some of the male presenting informants, there was a significant internalized fear of not being seen as masculine (enough). This fear often led to compliance with dominant gender norms, frequently coming from childhood bullying or ways of upbringing. Milan (he/him, 27) described: “I wish I could let it go more that I look at myself and my clothing and think this is manly so this fits with me”. He expressed a desire to experiment more with his appearance but also a fear to do so. Similarly, Samuel (he/him, 34) mentioned that his fear of not conforming to gender norms holds him back from experimenting with his gender expression. These gendered aesthetic norms appeared more restrictive for male presenting than for female presenting informants. All informants indicated that any deviation from traditional gender norms led to assumptions of homosexuality.

Reasons to visit queer or queered spaces

The awareness that queerness is often viewed as abnormal in certain environments, coupled with fears about safety and acceptance based on previous harmful experiences, makes people search for spaces where they do not feel othered, do not feel they must tone down their queerness, and where they find likeminded people. Mia (she/her, 23) explained, “When I'm in slightly queer spaces or more queer-friendly spaces, then it feels like I don't have to switch as much. Then I can just be a bit more of my full personality as opposed to locking certain parts away.”. Spaces in Rotterdam where informants felt less or not othered were Coffee Company Eendrachtsplein, Rotown or Bar3.

A second reason to visit certain spaces was to meet fellow queers, here people went to places labelled as queer or to events from organizations such as Queer Rotterdam, Erasmus

Pride, Rotterdam Pride or the Hangout010. As Warner and Berlant (1998) point out, is it essential to create spaces where a counterpublic can find each other and together counter dominant narratives. Thirdly, people went to specific places to safely date or find dates. This was more in places labelled as gay or queer, including Ferry or Strano which mainly focused on gay men. Lastly, respondents mentioned to seek spaces to safely explore, live out or experiment with their queerness or specifically their gender expression. Here informants named queer, queer minded or open-minded (techno)parties. These were in general more bound to collectives than places (apart from Worm and Roodkapje) since the prominent places such as Poing and Time is the New Space recently closed.

Overall, the conversations showed that a precondition to contest gender norms is safety in a space, to find safe spaces where one can freely explore and be themselves without extra attention or the fear of judgement. While one space can be safer than other places it can never be fully safe. In the following part it will be discussed how spaces materially and non-materially contribute to and enable a contesation of gender norms in the form of queer self expression.

Spatial Queering Tactics

Spaces are organized in a way to favor certain bodies over others (Ahmed, 2006). Bodies of color, disabled bodies and queer bodies have a harder time moving through spaces. The conversations provided insights on how to reorganize and rearrange spaces to facilitate movement for queer bodies.

Infrastructure

The physical infrastructure in spaces can not only contribute to the contestation of gender norms but also in enable meeting of queer counterpublics. Elements such as gender-neutral

toilets or changing rooms challenge the binary concept of gender signaling a different perception on gender in that space. Worm/Wunderbar, Coffee Company Eendrachtsplein, Ferry, Bonaparte and the Hole all had all toilets usable for everyone. Cis bodies are no longer prioritized over queer bodies, creating a space where everyone is treated the same, and the man/woman divide is transgressed, aligning with Browne (2006) and Ahmed's (2006) theory on queer spaces. This reorientation was especially appreciated by genderqueer informants, who indicated to feel more comfortable in spaces that had gender neutral utilities, as it signals that their identity is acknowledged, and they do not need to choose between gendered doors.

Further, infrastructure can create a space for people to connect, which, following Warner and Berlant (1998), is essential for countering the dominant narrative. Queer counterpublics must materialize in urban space to not be outnumbered. Counter spaces can be designed to enable this connection. At the party at Worm this was facilitated by having two rooms where people could relax or socialize, creating opportunities for interaction. Especially a room with beanbags and expressive art functioned almost automatically as a conversation starter. Similarly, during the workshop at The Hole, the intentional design of sitting in small groups around a table invited participants to talk with each other. By creating environments where individuals can comfortably come together (also alone) and interact with others, the space enabled a moment of connection with other people of the queer counterpublic realizing its materialization. This finding highlights the relational nature of the queer counterpublic. It comes into existence through the interactions between people and spaces. Understanding the queer counterpublic as relational emphasizes the importance of designing spaces that enable these connections.

Signifying safety

Some symbols and objects were named by the informants to increase a feeling of safety and comfort within a space. As Ahmed (2006) discusses, objects can reorient a space, making it inclusive and affirming for queer individuals. Among these, the rainbow flag stood out as a prominent symbol for queer spaces, although the opinions varied among the informants. As Jamie (she/they, 23) articulated, the presence of a rainbow flag, such as the one outside Worm, raises questions about its practical significance. “Like what does it mean really? What does it do? […] There is a big pride flag outside but what do you really do when it comes down to it?” This sentiment highlights skepticism about the effectiveness of symbolic gestures in protecting people from harassment and discriminatory behavior. Despite this skepticism, Jamie’s initial reaction to seeing the flag was positive, indicating that the flag still plays a role in signaling inclusivity and acceptance within a place but just a flag is not sufficient to create a safe space. For some the flag was more related to sexually queer than for gender queer people since it is also often seen in gay bars and used by companies in a performative manner.

Other symbols of inclusivity and safety within queer spaces included stickers and posters placed throughout the venue. Messages such as ‘queer-friendly space’ or ‘we accept no form of discrimination’, ‘say no to racism’ serve as visual cues to reinforce the space’s commitment to inclusivity. Moreover, posters in restrooms with a detailed procedure to follow when feeling uncomfortable or experiencing harassment were named as comforting and assuring. This proactive approach demonstrates that the staff is actively concerned about the visitors’ safety and is prepared to take action and address any issues that may arise. This leads to informants feeling more comfortable reporting incidences since they expect to be taken seriously and in turn feeling more at ease to transgress gender related norms.

Additionally, serve political stickers and writing at toilets also as cues to communicate among a queer counterpublic signaling to each other to have been in the space.

Aesthetics encouraging gender norm transgressions

Apart from symbols specifically signaling *you are safe here* more subtle things were named that motivated people to transgress norms or made them feel comfortable in that space to do so. The presence of nonnormative aesthetics was particularly noted for positively impacting individuals' freedom to deviate from norms. As Ahmed (2006) describes, signal certain objects or decorations heteronormative or queer expectations. The conversations provided more nuanced insights into how aesthetics have a supportive impact on queer expressions and interactions.

A key element contributing to the sense of freedom in queer spaces is their alternative and 'imperfect' aesthetic. Mia (she/her; 23) described this as an "I don't give a fuck vibe," where a chaotic, shabby, and overall imperfect interior design increases the feeling of freedom to deviate from societal norms. This atmosphere often includes mismatched tables and chairs, vibrant colors, plants, and wooden elements. Also contributing to this sense of freedom are stickers and posters featuring political messages linked to anarchy, feminism, activism, queerness, and anticapitalism – challenging the status quo without explicitly stating the place is queer-friendly (different that the ones discussed under *signifying safety*). Books or zines on these topics also contribute to this feeling of safety. This visual chaos reinforces the alternative aesthetic and signals a space of critical thinking and resistance.

The events advertised in these spaces further set the tone. Posters and flyers for art exhibitions, non-commercialized gigs, and events centered around critical political topics create an environment that encourages non-conformity. Respondents frequently mentioned a link to creativity and art, noting that artists "think more abstract and have to think further than the status quo" (Zane, he/him, 20), therefore tend to accept and welcome expressive gender

expression. Further, the presence of "weird art" instead of "fancy art" also plays a significant role in creating an environment where people feel safe and free to deviate from norms. Jamie (she/they, 23) highlighted how less normative art forms in a place contribute to this sense of safety and freedom especially if the art comes from or features people of the community.

Overall, the less normative and more chaotic the environment the safer and freer informants felt to express themselves and deviate from societal norms. A blend of unconventional aesthetics and political messaging creates a space where individuals feel unconventional gender expressions are also welcomed and celebrated enabling a contestation of gender norms.

People and Community

Visibly queer staff

Most respondents emphasized that visibly queer staff made them feel freer and safer to deviate from dominant gender norms. They named codes or signals to read someone as queer which included piercings, tattoos, rings, hairstyles such as mullets, wolf-cuts, and buzzcuts, as well as colorful hair and clothing. For female presenting people: baggy clothes, armless shirts, and overall shorter hair, for male presenting people: nail polish, jewelry, skirts or dresses, for all genders 'weird' or 'unusual' clothing combinations or as Mia (she/her, 23) said, more the focus on individual pieces and style than a general group code. Although this in turn functions as a group code for a queer counterpublic. It was also noted that these cues are becoming increasingly trendy, blurring the lines of identifying someone as queer based on their clothing choices.

The reasons queer staff were considered an essential part of a space are twofold: safety and tone setting. Firstly, having queer staff contributes to a sense of safety. People believe they will be taken more seriously in these environments, as the staff, perceived as

queer, are assumed to have had similar experiences with discrimination, hostile comments, and harassment. Most informants shared experiences from more straighter environments where incidents of harassment were dismissed or ignored by the staff. The assumption that queer staff share these experiences means they are more likely to take complaints seriously and respond promptly without questioning the person making the complaint. Adrian (he/him, 25) pointed out: "if someone will have a problem with who I am they will react, and I can feel safe and protected in a way". An example of this was observed at Bar3, where a member of my group received unwanted attention from a middle-aged man. After reporting this to the visibly queer bar staff, they immediately took action and threw the man out, creating a sense of safety and validation that our concerns were taken seriously.

Secondly, queer staff also function as tone setters for the space and as an inspiration for others. Mia (she/her, 23) explained:

> "Because they're the ones who usually set the atmosphere, they set the tone, they create the vibe we say, and then if there are people, if they're queer people who are very comfortable within their space and their energy, and like hi, this is me, this is who I am, then immediately becomes more of a thing of just, well, that's the nature of the space."

The presence of confident and comfortable queer staff helps establish the nature of the space, making it more inviting for others to experiment and feel more confident with themselves.

Visibly queer visitors

Visibly queer visitors have similar effects on informants as visibly queer staff. Both contribute to a feeling of safety, encourage deviation from norms while also increasing confidence in expression. The perception of safety is again based on the assumption that shared experiences make individuals more aware and responsive for discrimination and

harassment. At parties, Zane (he/him, 20) describes that this creates an atmosphere amongst visitors where you are looking out for each other and actively check in with people when "you see that someone feels unwell or uncomfortable". Nora (she/her, 28) perceived such parties as community events where the general threshold to making contact is lower. Milan (he/him, 27) similarly shared that also "the communication already starts somewhere because we are both at this place which is meant for being queer so there is a certain mindfulness present".

When the majority of people in a space are visibly queer, it changes the norms within that space, having an affirming and assuring effect on individuals. Jamie (she/they, 23) noted that it is relieving to not be othered in a place where being nonnormative is the norm. Mia (she/her, 23) similarly explains that seeing others being comfortable and expressive with their visible queerness also increases one's own confidence and self-acceptance in expressing nonnormatively. It also fosters a sense of community where individuals are encouraged to express their queerness openly, signaling safety and learning from each other. Sem (he/him, 30) shares that seeing other queers, especially queers of color, navigate the world is empowering: "I was like, hey, that's really important to see also people in their power and how they're navigating the world because I was like, I don't really come from that background. Like I could use the support.". Spaces can become places of learning where through visibility and representation people feel affirmed and supported in their own identities.

Overall, queer bodies (staff and visitors) are central for the materializing of a queer counterpublic within a space. Visibly queer staff attract queer visitors who feel more comfortable and accepted in spaces where queer identities are prominently represented. Coffee Company Eendrachtsplein is a good example for this. One of the staff members shared that most of the staff there is queer and regularly brings in queer friends which queers

the space even more. The presence of queer bodies can queer a place regardless of a formal queer label. According to Ahmed (2006), norms within a space can be reoriented by the orientation of bodies within it. As Mia (she/her, 23) phrased it where "the idea of non-conforming [becomes] being the conforming thing.". Interestingly, within these spaces, the contestation of norms paradoxically diminishes as the need to challenge dominant gender norms fades away. Instead, now, individuals conform to the norms within the space while collectively challenging heteronormativity – the norm prevalent outside of these spaces.

Policies and Organizing

Policies

Inclusive and protective policies can be helpful for a safe experimentation of gender nonconforming expressions within specific spaces. Especially at parties, places or events dedicated to queers, the informants indicated this as essential to dare exploring parts of their identities. The basic rules include: no tolerance of any form of discrimination or intimidation, no shaming, communicating and respecting boundaries, never assuming someone's pronouns or gender. Both at the event of Queer Rotterdam and the party at Worm these policies were the house rules. At the event of Queer Rotterdam, it was additionally emphasized that you are not allowed to out anyone outside of the space, to provide a safe place for people who are not out (yet) and participating in the event is a requirement for entry to not have people observing. At parties Milan (he/him, 27) pointed out that a no picture policy further encourages gender norm transgressions. He explained to feel freer in experimenting with gender expression since it will not be shared in any way: "I'm more likely to feel free to dress differently or experiment with make-up or something like that. Or to be a little less within that heteronorm [...] at the moment when I just feel free and vulnerable and not necessarily like oh, this could immediately be shared with the whole world". This anonymity and privacy

for a night motivates people to experiment with their gender expression and encourages people who are not (yet) out or not (yet) sure about their gender and/or sexuality to explore their queerness.

The way the policies are communicated also played a big role for most informants. For parties it starts with the event description, although here Zane (he/him, 20) and Nora (she/her, 28) pointed out it is not essential that an event is labelled as queer but rather clearly as queer-minded. For example, when Poing was still open they clarified that all gender expressions are welcome, and no discrimination will be tolerated. This clear statement of protecting non-normative gender expressions makes it queer friendly.

The next important safety measure at a party is a door host. A door host is a person, in general hired by or part of the organizers and will introduce you to the event and briefly explain the house rules. It is essential that the door host is part of the community since regular security staff often have an intimidating effect on people specifically knowing that queerphobia is inherent to policing structures such as police and security. “The more security there is the unsafer I feel” shares George (he/him, 62). A visibly queer door host sets the tone right from the start, creating a more welcoming and inclusive environment. While also directly filtering out the people who do not react well on the house rules as Nora (she/her, 28) explained.

Before entering Worm during the *Worm x Poing* event we were welcomed by a door host who immediately set the tone set the tone for gender expression. The host, presenting with male characteristics but dressed in a traditionally feminine manner explained to us the rules. They began by asking about the size of our group, emphasizing that larger groups can be intimidating, and we should move in groups of three. Further it was explained that every gender expression is welcome inside, that there is a zero-tolerance policy so no harassment of any kind, respect consent and “simple, just don’t be a dick”. Lastly, they pointed out that if

we felt uncomfortable, we should either go to the bar or to the floor angels. The floor angels, also called an awareness team, are central for guarding safety during a party. They were also named by the informants who went partying as essential to feel safe in a space. Their purpose during the night is to walk around and keep an eye out and step in if they see something happening. They are people from the community so the barrier to walk up to them is lower than to the security, since they function as a form of community care, looking out if everyone feels safe, comfortable or needs something. Overall, more important than the policies themselves is whether they are enforced. Many informants shared that a space does only feel safe when inside they are consistent with enforcing their policies.

Inclusive Practices

Inclusive Practices can play a vital role in comforting people and enabling people to contest gender norms while also signaling shared norms, values and interests (Berlant & Warner, 1998). At events like the one at the Hole, the usage of name tags with preferred pronouns and including pronouns in the introduction round creates a respectful and inclusive atmosphere where everyone's gender identity is acknowledged and never assumed. A space is created where all bodies share their pronouns equally which no longer favors conforming over nonconforming bodies (Ahmed, 2006). Especially for bodies who in straighter spaces experience misgendering this practice felt relieving and affirming. Lea (she/they, 25) shared that spaces where this practice is used either actively through including it in an introductory round or on a nametag creates a feeling of comfort and understanding that the organizers and other visitors share the same values and worldviews on gender. It is used as an indicator for "oh these people think as I do, I am safe.".

Another practice in the space of Queer Rotterdam, I observed, was a cabinet stocked with gender affirming cloths such as bras, binders, dresses, skirts, but also more masculine outfits

to try on and experiment with expressing their gender identity. These practices not only promote inclusivity but also empower individuals to explore and affirm their identities in a supportive environment.

Events

Informants highlighted the importance of events for multiple reasons: exploring queer identity, meeting fellow queers and as indicator of organizational and spatial values. Connecting to Warner's (2005) concept of a queer counterpublic events are central to foster the alternative discourses that challenge heteronormativity marking queer spaces as essential learning spaces for a queer counterpublic. Since the events enable participants to engage in conversations and activities that affirm their identities and experiences which may not be validated in mainstream spaces. Here Sem (he/him, 30) as well as Noa (they/them, 24) referred to the importance of queer and black queer book clubs to engage with counter discourses. Other affirming events that were named were self-help groups on different aspects of queerness organized by Queer Rotterdam.

Informants emphasized that events did not have to center around queerness but rather enable community formation. This aligns with Warner's (2005) since a shared collective identity and the feeling of not being othered in a space, form a crucial foundation for gaining strength and confidence to challenge dominant societal norms also outside of these spaces. Noa (they/them, 24) shared that especially as a nonbinary person they actively searched for a surrounding that is queer and accepting without asking questions about their gender or misgendering them. The events of Queer Rotterdam such as boardgame nights or picknicks in the park connected them to fellow likeminded queer people and enabled them to connect to a community. Similar experiences were named by Johan (he/him, 62) who found likeminded people through volunteering at Pride Rotterdam especially when exploring his queerness, this

provided a space to find answers and affirmation from fellow queers with similar experiences.

These events about queerness or centralizing queer connection can reorient a space as Ahmed (2006) describes where the space is reoriented from the conventional uses of spaces into spaces where queer bodies are not only accepted but central. This also occurs when centering queer artists in a space such as DJ residents from the community, through workshops, or through who's art is featured at the walls. Sem (he/him, 30) points out that for him the spaces are not central, but it is "more who's organizing and who's organizing what".

The emphasis on the role of organizers goes paired with the importance of a non-commercial nature of events. These reflect the creation of counterpublics that resist mainstream commercialized gay culture, which often aligns more with heteronormative capitalist values (Duggan, 2002). It also highlights the importance of intentionality in creating spaces that genuinely support queer orientations and experiences.

Lastly, nighttime events such as queer-techno-parties were named as places to safely experiment with one's gender expression and in doing so, exploring one's queerness. Especially for the male identifying people, parties and queer places provided a space to contest dominant gender norms aesthetically by using lipstick or dressing in a more 'feminine' way. The norm at these parties to be nonnormative enables an exploration of parts of yourself you normally hide. Adrian (he/him, 25) shared that, since he started going to queer parties, he became more comfortable in dressing in a more feminine manner in his daily life. For Milan (he/him, 27) queer techno parties helped him to explore his queerness and to question the box 'male' for him. Female and nonbinary informants indicated less to no difference in how they dress between spaces since they are awarded more leeway in their gender expression without being questioned of their gender identity. For them these spaces

provided a place free of the male gaze and male hunting attention which made them feel safer to sometimes dress more provocatively.

Tension within 'queer' spaces

The tensions within queer spaces in Rotterdam reflects a complex interplay of identity and inclusivity within a community. Many informants differentiate between gay, queer, and queered spaces, aligning with Duggan's (2002) and Browne's (2006) theories. While some feel safe in these spaces, others experience them as exclusionary, challenging the notion of a true queer inclusivity. This section delves into these nuances, exploring how various queer spaces either foster a sense of belonging or perpetuate exclusion.

Gay and queer spaces

The differentiation between gay and queer spaces in Rotterdam was made by most informants in line with Duggan (2002) and Browne (2006). Respondents tend to define gay places as more masculine dominated, designed for gay men and less diverse than other places. Some informants perceived Ferry and Bonaparte for example as "more gay" (Nora, she/her, 28). Zane (he/him, 20) points out the lack of diversity: "You see a lot less [diversity] at Ferry. There they are very white, privileged people.". There, Jamie (she/they, 23) experienced hostility for being seen as a woman and concluded: "I would not call that a queer space.". Two of the female presenting informants experienced Ferry as safe implying that people experience the same place differently depending on their orientation which is in line with Ahmed (2006). Others like Adrian (he/him, 25) perceived it to become a place where straight people claim the space to experience a gay bar.

Overall, it was pointed out that gay spaces where more focused on men while some of the female presenting informants experienced even hostile behavior from the gay men inside

the space. The domination of masculine behavior is in line with Duggan's (2002) view on homonormativity where a space enables not a true contestation of gender norms but rather a bending of sexual norms yet reinforcing patriarchal norms. I did not experience harassment at Ferry myself, yet at the same time I did not feel welcome there either as a queer female presenting person. It felt like a space for men which contradicts how also Browne (2006) defines a queer space: a place where essentially the boundaries between man and woman are transgressed into a more fluid space. There were more men than women and the energy was indeed very male dominated. The only people who were also respected there were drag queens.

Belonging inside these spaces

A space can feel queer and safe for some but exclusionary for others, especially boundaries to enter expressive queer spaces can be high which George (he/him, 62) points out: "the queer spaces, the bubbles, they set boundaries so high that the average person does not dare to enter". Especially related to people who are still questioning and exploring their queerness and gender expression can experience these boundaries as unwelcoming. Lea (she/they, 25) shared a similar experience when being part of Erasmus Pride, a queer student association, they felt uncomfortable because they did not yet understand some of the terms and people were exclusive about it. Additionally, continuous jokes about heterosexual people made them leave the group since it felt unwelcoming for a person still exploring their queerness. Sem (he/him, 30) also highlighted that practices can help to make a space inclusive but also exclusive and overwhelming for people: "It's like if someone doesn't know how you're supposed to approach certain things and deal with some of the social rules, [than] I don't think it feels very inviting.". Since knowledge about certain terms and social practices inside the community are used to filter out harmful people it can simultaneously make it harder for

questioning people or people who are less visibly queer creating feelings of not being queer enough. This tension between exclusion as a protective and necessary measure and inclusion, as well as drawing attention to the feeling of not being queer enough for a space should be centered in future research.

Another struggle within queer spaces and the community is pointed out by Sem (he/him, 30):

> "where does masculinity belong within that? Because I think a lot of people in the queer community have had really negative experiences with masculinity, particularly from cisman. […] But I think the way that that trauma shows up it can be very challenging in the space as well because there's a hyper vigilance of, OK, who is toxic, who isn't toxic? How do you sort of make sure that our space maintains safe as well, but I think because of that, sometimes if you show up in a particularly like masculine way or something like that, then it can be challenging in the queer community. Because it also sometimes feels like you're not questioning the status quo enough."

This brings especially trans men into the position of having to perform in a certain way to signal "like being a safe" person to feel welcome in the space and highlights the tension between inclusivity and exclusivity.

Lack of spaces in Rotterdam

> "You also need to have places where the community can come together. And I think they are really missed in Rotterdam. You have to kind of... meet each other by chance. Or get to know each other via via" (Milan, he/him, 27)

Most informants shared this feeling of missing intentional queer spaces in Rotterdam, many spaces I have visited were queered by bodies and their interplay with the aesthetics of a space

which in turn means that you might only stumble upon them by accident and if you do there is still not an easy way to connect with the community.

Additionally, by closing Poing, Weelde and Time is the new Space, party culture in Rotterdam lost important spaces. Apart from this it was mentioned by Flinta[5] informants to miss spaces dedicated to them since queer/gay bars are very much focused around men and masculinity (think of Ferry, Strano, Regenboog). Also was pointed out a lack of intersectionality in terms of racial diversity in spaces since many queer spaces are predominantly white in terms of visitors and staff. Next, two informants also shared their perception of missing queer spaces for people over 30 since queer spaces are often organized for younger people and frequently evening/party oriented. The spaces which were open to 30+ individuals where very male dominated, again, more gay than queer.

Label

As being already pointed out, labels are no certain indication of whether a place is experienced as queer. Spaces labelled as queer have been experienced by informants as restricting while other spaces not labelled at all have been felt to enable a contestation of gender norms and a materialization of a queer counterpublic. I therefore suggest using the term *counter spaces* instead of queer or queered spaces, based on Warner's (2005) concept of a counterpublic and Nicholls and Uitermark's (2017) further exploration of urban counter spaces highlighting the essence of a space as providing a place where the counter counter public can emerge and oppose dominant societal norms. Therefore, spaces such as Coffee Company Eendrachtsplein can be a counter space due to the bodies present, while lacking an official 'queer label'. Whereas, as in the case of the Hole it can also be both – labelled as queer space and a counter space.

[5] An abbreviation originating from German for female, lesbian, intersex, non-binary, trans and agender people.

Conclusion

This research aimed to answer the question: *How can spaces enable a contestation of gender norms for a queer counterpublic in Rotterdam?* Firstly, it is clear that the findings contradict Rotterdam's claim of being a city where "everyone can be themselves" (Rotterdam Info, 2023). Therefore, finding strategies to enable the contestation of gender norms becomes increasingly important for queer people. The 14 queer informants described feeling othered in many spaces throughout the city when deviating from heteronormativity, experiencing homophobia, queerphobia and transphobia. Although physical safety was not always a concern, they often toned down their queerness and hid parts of their identity to avoid unwanted attention, harassment, and discrimination. Being in queer friend groups, surroundings or spaces was described as relieving since you did not have to hold back certain parts or your identity nor answer intrusive questions.

Counter spaces are essential for contesting gender norms in multiple ways. Through providing a safe environment where non-conformity is not only accepted but celebrated individuals described to feel strengthened to resist and deviate from gender norms also outside of these spaces. Counter spaces directly support this resistance through organizing identity affirming events, political talks, and enabling contact between queer people to build solidarities. Indirectly, the spaces inspire and affirm individuals by providing a space where you see other visibly queer people contesting gender norms confidently, learn from each other, can safely explore your own queerness and built together a common narrative. Ultimately these spaces show that one is not alone in the resistance of dominant restrictive gender norms but part of a community – a queer counterpublic which feels empowering (Warner, 2005).

The findings further revealed a disconnect between the label of a space and the actual experiences of queer individuals within it. Not all spaces labeled as queer effectively enabled

a contestation of heteronormativity, suggesting a trend of queerness being commercialized rather than truly opposing normative structures. Thus, highlighting even more, the need to create actual, intersectional counter spaces, based on the diverse needs of the queer counterpublic, as consistently articulated during the conversations. Although this issue may not have been prominently discussed due to the sample's class bias, it is crucial to address the urgent need for spaces that do not require an entrance fee or consumerism for participation. These financial barriers exclude people from being in the space contributing to a classist society.

As suggested by Ahmed (2006) this research showed that spaces are not neutral but active and political. Queer-inclusive symbols, alternative aesthetics, political posters, stickers or written sentences can reorient a space and be contesting to heteronormative aesthetic standards and signal a welcomeness towards queer bodies. Queer individuals use these not only as cues to feel welcomed and accepted in a space but also as a signal that other queers have also been there or use the nonnormative aesthetics as an inspiration for their own 'unconforming' gender expression. The interior architecture such as gender-neutral facilities also reorient the space, signaling an insignificance of binary genders (Ahmed, 2006)

Lastly, I want to emphasize the importance of self-organization for counter spaces. The countering element in these spaces is not due to a label but through the way the people inside (staff, visitors and community) organize itself nonnormatively. Instead of relying on external security the community self keeps it safe through inclusive policies, queer organizers, queer staff and at parties a queer door host and floor angels. Creating a safe and supportive environment for contesting gender norms, learning, and living out queerness. Concluding that as long as queerness cannot be safely expressed everywhere we must focus on creating spaces where we can live out our queerness, learn, support and inspire each other,

are free of dominant gender norms and use these counter spaces to strengthen us to contest and abolish broader societal norms.

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Appendix A: Conversation Questions

1. Check in + their preferred pronouns
2. Introduce myself + pronouns
3. Express appreciation for their participation
4. Explain overall research project + what I want to learn from it
5. Explain how this interview will look like
    a. Duration (around 1-1.5 hours)
    b. Conversation partly structured by the questions I have prepared. I am especially interested in personal perceptions, experiences, emotions, narratives, memories
    c. In my own experience words or questions can sometimes feel harsh or overwhelming, so I just want to say that everything is optional! You don't have to answer anything if you don't want to, we can skip any question + no good/bad answers.
    d. Break + withdrawal at any time (also afterwards)
    e. Finally, some questions might seem obvious to you but I don't want to make any assumptions based on the literature or my own experience.
6. Anonymity
    a. This will be protected as much as possible (no names, but characteristics like gender identity, sexuality, spaces will be named if that is okay)
    b. Ask for name they want to be referred to in the report
7. Ask for audio record
    a. Will not be used in future analysis only for this research this helps me to fully focus on the conversation and don't have to take notes.
8. Ask if they have any questions before we start.

start recording

<u>Questions:</u>

Background questions

1. Age
2. Current occupation/education
3. Where are you from/nationality?
4. Self-identified Ethnicity

Relationship to queerness

1. Since this research focuses on queerness, I would like to start asking how do you connect to the word/concept?
    a. Do you use it as a label for yourself?
    b. Are there other labels you use or don't use?
2. Do you have other queer people in your closer circle?
    a. What connects you with them?
    b. In what way? With whom?
    c. What is different to other friends? / Friend groups
        i. Specific experience?

Norms

3. Is gender expression a topic you think about in your daily life?
    a. How? In what ways?
4. Do you sometimes think about how other people see you? (as male/female/nb/queer etc.)
    a. Does that play a role to you?
    b. Influences this your choices how to dress?
    c. If yes, how are you signaling something?
    d. Are there spaces where you don't want to signal that?
        i. How do you feel there? (feelings/emotions)
        ii. Why not?

(Queer) spaces

5. Do you have favorite places in Rotterdam?
6. Are there places you avoid? Places where you don't feel at ease?
    a. Experiences?
    b. How do you feel in those places?
7. Are there spaces where you feel you are free to express yourself? *(focus Rotterdam)*
    a. Which space? (*outside of your home*)
    b. Is there anything in particular in that space that makes you feel this way?
        i. Objects/signs
        ii. People (differentiate between visitors and staff)

iii. Infrastructure
iv. Policies

c. Why are you going to these spaces?

8. Own expression in that place
    d. Related to expectations surrounding your gender/sexuality?
9. Do you feel expectations concerning how to aesthetically express yourself in these spaces?
    a. Or to act?
    b. Are there other expectations present in the space?
10. Do you feel like in these spaces (focused on queerness) are welcoming in terms of class, race, education, gender *(depending on who I talk to)*

<u>End interview</u>

1. I am through my questions, is there anything you feel you want to share, or do you perceive I have missed in the interview? Or any story/information you want to share?
2. No? Any other questions? No?

****stop the recording****

3. Ask for contact details.
4. Highlight that they can always contact me for questions or notes/stories they in the aftermath felt could be of any importance.
5. Again appreciation
6. Ask for other possible informants

<u>Things to pay attention to during the interview</u>

Respondent

1. Silences/pauses
2. Pace of Speaking
3. Emotions
4. Tension/comfort
5. Body language

Myself

6. When they fall silent probe.
7. Ask about experiences, details!

Appendix B: The Flyer