



Selected Papers of #AoIR2022:
The 23rd Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Dublin, Ireland / 2-5 Nov 2022

HYBRID CONSTELLATIONS: EXAMINING SOCIAL MEDIA'S ROLE IN THE MONTREAL LESBIAN SOCIAL SCENE

Stefanie Duguay
Concordia University

Alex Chartrand
Concordia University

AM Trépanier
Concordia University

“On est partout,” Cynthia declared: “We are everywhere.” A lesbian in her late twenties, she spoke about her visibility work for the Quebec Lesbian Network (QLN), where the gatherings she initiates through the organization’s social media aim to bring together a vast lesbian population to “defend everybody’s rights.”

This paper examines the role of social media, alongside other modes of communication, in the definition and organization of lesbian¹ sociocultural landscapes. Building from geographical studies that identify how lesbians’ dispersion across cities counters heteropatriarchal occupations of space, the study is anchored within Montreal/Tiohtià:ke to identify local approaches to visibility and gathering. This angle is combined with digital scholarship that considers how mobile technologies, platforms, and apps give rise to hybrid arrangements that merge physical and digital practices. These lenses are applied to interviews with representatives from organizations and individuals who use digital technologies to connect lesbians online and across physical space. Preliminary findings indicate that social media is a focal tool, among others, to support lesbians’ networked social arrangements but that platforms lack affordances for the fluidity integral to ever-fluctuating lesbian/queer identities, locations, and temporalities.

Theoretical Framework and Background

While gay-specific neighborhoods or “villages” have formed in cities, their venues and living spaces have been most welcoming to those capable of expressing

Suggested Citation (APA): Duguay, S., Chartrand, A., & Trépanier, AM., (2022, November). *Decolonizing Creativity: Hybrid Constellations: Examining Social Media’s Role in the Montreal Lesbian Social Scene*. Paper presented at AoIR 2022: The 23rd Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Dublin, Ireland: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

homonormativity in alignment with gender-conforming, capitalist, and white supremacist values (Browne & Bakshi, 2011). Jen Jack Giesecking (2020) found that, rather than occupying specific urban territories, lesbian, transgender, and gender non-conforming people formed “constellations” of connections across space and time: moments of queerness in fleeting locales. Giesecking sees these constellations as distinct from, but indebted to, projects of decolonization as women and queers “make their own worlds that are both unseen by and work to unravel heteropatriarchal society” (p. 228).

Geographical perspectives are increasingly combined with digital scholarship to consider how technology shapes social and physical relationships to place (Nash & Gorman-Murray, 2016). Mobile apps, geolocation features, and real-time affordances give rise to digital interactions that overlay physical space (Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2015). As LGBTQ+ people have been early adopters of digital technologies, social media play an increasing role in fostering queer intimacy even while posing challenges for privacy and security.

Historically, Montreal’s lesbian scene has been dispersed across the city (Podmore, 2001). As in other urban centers, rotating club nights have increasingly replaced lesbian bars, requiring additional social media labor from queer people and organizations already often rendered financially precarious (Krishnan & Duguay, 2020). This study looks specifically at the use of social media by those organizing lesbian gatherings to identify its relationship to lesbian constellations in changing cityscapes.

Methods

Interviews were chosen as the most effective approach for understanding the motivations, experiences, and challenges involved in using social media for lesbian event coordination. Although delayed by COVID-19, interviews were conducted throughout 2021 with nine women representing six different event series/organizations (with plans for further recruitment). Participants represent publicly-funded formal LGBTQ+ organizations, volunteer groups, and individual event promoters who coordinated gatherings ranging from outdoor activities to game nights and dance parties.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by videoconference or telephone, lasting approximately 90 minutes each, with six in French and three in English. Interview transcripts are being analyzed by a multilingual team through open and axial coding, following feminist, constructionist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). This allows for identifying key themes across participants’ meaning-making while also considering differences across positionality and in relation to the diversity of Montreal’s lesbian population.

Findings and Discussion

Preliminary findings illustrate the increasing need for networked communication as lesbians spread across the city. Maryse, from the volunteer group Les Chouettes, recounted their ousting from a bar in The Village because “we did not really fit with their clientele.” This story supported Cynthia’s view that gay men’s occupation of The Village

stems from a gendered sense of entitlement: "...men are used to taking this space because we raised them like that. We tell them, 'This place, it belongs to you, take it,' while we don't tell women that." Although we also heard how men took up space on their Facebook pages and in direct messages, these organizations turned to social media to establish events in other neighborhoods.

To sustain constellations of lesbian gatherings, organizers combined longstanding approaches, such as newsletters and telephone lists, with social media. Mim, who coordinated lesbian parties since the 1990s, simultaneously maintained an email newsletter and Facebook group to reach different audiences. However, Facebook complicated promotion: "When Facebook happened, more parties happened, because people were able to organize quickly and publish quickly, so there was more competition." Even as lesbian dispersion necessitated a constellation of communication modalities, the proliferation of networked connections made it difficult to galvanize women in any particular direction. Platforms' opacity did not help, as organizers agonized over strategies to game algorithms and increase events' online visibility.

Social media's requirement for organizations to define their mandates, audiences, and events posed a significant hurdle. Audrey, social media coordinator for the Centre de Solidarité Lesbienne, stressed, "It remains problematic...to share on platforms, as well as in our graphic design and the way we write our events, to always be inclusive...and people do not miss reminding us when we make mistakes." Several organizers felt pressure to respond to community expectations of inclusivity across language, race, socioeconomic status, ability, and fluctuating boundaries of gender identity, fearing backlash when publicity or events failed to meet these demands. Lucia, who co-coordinates parties, felt personally implicated in the perceived limitations of their Instagram promotion: "I don't think either of us were also expecting to be like micro-micro- micro-influencers with people, kind of, knowing us and making assumptions about us." Some followers questioned their legitimacy in holding events intended to be inclusive when they framed the account through their particular identities.

Our early analysis points to conclusions regarding space, identity, security, and the growing digital literacy of lesbian organizations. Most prominently, these findings indicate that a constellation of lesbian networks throughout Montreal have required a constellation of communication modalities, including social media. However, platforms call for static definitions of events or identity-based promotion, which contradict the fluid and temporally fluctuating qualities of lesbian constellations.

References

- Blackwell, C., Birnholtz, J., & Abbott, C. (2015). Seeing and being seen: Co-situation and impression formation using Grindr, a location-aware gay dating app. *New Media & Society*, 17(7), 1117–1136.
- Browne, K., & Bakshi, L. (2011). We are here to party? Lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans leisurescapes beyond commercial gay scenes. *Leisure Studies*, 30(2), 179–196.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide*. Sage.

- Gieseeking, J. J. (2020). *A queer New York*. NYU Press.
- Krishnan, P., & Duguay, S. (2020). From “Interested” to showing up: Investigating digital media’s role in Montreal-based LGBTQ social organizing. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 45(4), 525-544.
- Nash, C.J., & Gorman-Murray, A. (2016). Digital technologies and sexualities in urban space. In G. Brown & K. Browne (Eds.), *The Routledge research companion to geographies of sex and sexualities* (pp. 399–406). Routledge.
- Podmore, J. A. (2001). Lesbians in the crowd: Gender, sexuality and visibility along Montréal’s Boul. St-Laurent. *Gender, Place and Culture*, 8(4), 333–355.

¹ Many participants foregrounded the term “lesbian” while redefining it as inclusive of gender non-conforming, nonbinary, and transgender people. As such, we adopt this term while recognizing that umbrella terms for LGBTQ+ identities are often fraught.