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**Queering Japan: Exploring Narratives in the Community of Queer Migrant Event
Organisers in Tokyo**

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Emma Louise Koretz

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Abstract

Tokyo is a large densely populated city that is home to many LGBTQ+ immigrants. While Japan is generally considered to be a tolerant country in which Queer people can live peacefully, there are a lack of legal rights and protections for this population and Queerness is in many ways still socially stigmatised. To foster community and provide places of safety and belonging for other LGBTQ+ people, some Queer migrants create and coordinate events and spaces of inclusion. This study explored the lived experiences of six Queer migrants who have created such Queer spaces in Tokyo, Japan. The research was designed utilising principles of community psychology and participative research with an autoethnographic foundation. Participant experiences were gathered through semi-structured interviews and analysed using narrative analysis. All participants reported being committed to providing safe and joyful spaces for the local LGBTQ+ community in Tokyo while attempting to expand the event types available and implement fair inclusion policies. Key narratives that offer context for the development of these spaces included migration facilitating participant explorations of their Queer identities and coming out somewhere new. Participants also storied the challenges and advantages of navigating Japanese society as an out Queer migrant, positive and negative experiences engaging with existing Queer spaces in Tokyo, and growing concerns around heterosexual rupturing of Queer spaces in Japan. This research contributes to the growing field of Queer migration studies and is a response to the call for more studies to be conducted within this community. Future studies could expand upon key findings identified in this research and allow for growth in the field of the rarely researched population of LGBTQ+ migrants.

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Chapter One: Introduction

For marginalised communities, interacting within particular spaces and associated space making often extends beyond personal enjoyment and can be part of a broader strategic goal to both take up and reimagine particular locales within the public sphere that otherwise displace and render such groups as aberrant (Hernandez, 2024). For the LGBTQ+ community, for example, (re)claiming and interacting with particular spaces ‘Queers’ both the physical space and the wider community landscape by enhancing the visibility of diverse genders and sexualities (McCartan & Nash, 2023). Queer people often come to affiliate with these spaces in which they can create connections with others and establish a sense of belonging and self, especially when they may struggle to find acceptance in mainstream establishments in society (Hodgetts et al., 2020).

There are many LGBTQ+ migrants living in Tokyo, Japan. While legally, there are many difficulties for the Queer community, Japan is generally considered to be a tolerant country regarding LGBTQ+ sexualities (Tamagawa, 2016). Many Queer residents in Tokyo foster community through the creation of events and spaces. In this thesis, I explore the personal experiences of six members of the LGBTQ+ expatriate community in Tokyo and what led them to create Queer spaces and/or events. Of particular interest are the complexities and nuances surrounding the conduct of Queer relationality within a physical locale for this seldom researched migrant population.

The community construction of such Queer spaces in Tokyo by migrants is the core focus of this thesis, and I will engage with existing research in these spaces in the following sections. For now, it is crucial to note that for Queer migrants, there are often multiple layers of displacement and external judgement faced that result in an increased need to seek community and belonging in the construction of safe spaces (Hughes, 2025). Those who

create Queer spaces after migrating to a new city or country, for example, are likely seeking to make a place of safety for other LGBTQ+ members of the community and often advocate for Queer inclusion in the places where they now live (McCartan & Nash, 2023). Previous research has focused on Queer migration to understand how a person's motivations for migrating are not solely informed by financial motivations and career opportunities but are also influenced by a combination of personal, political and cultural factors alongside such everyday practicalities (Suen, 2021). Researchers who study Queer spaces and/or Queer migration therefore often focus on the nuanced relationship between the Queer migrant's sense of belonging in their new home, what constitutes a Queer space and how these spaces in turn effect the wider society in the Queer migrant's country of settlement (Anderson, 2022; Centner & Neto, 2021; Collins, 2009; Gedro et al., 2013; Hernandez, 2024; Hughes, 2025; Kim & Von Glinow, 2017; McCartan & Nash, 2023; Suen, 2021).

People and groups interact and conduct their lives within and across multiple spaces across the human lifespan. Common spaces include public settings that serve specific functions such as schools and workplaces, more private spaces like one's home and leisure spaces such as a clubs (Massey, 2005). Everyday engagements across these locales that can also include both physical and online settings is an inevitable element of social life today, and of long held interest to social psychologists (Hodgetts et al., 2020). Correspondingly, psychologists and other social scientists have dedicated their scholarship to understanding the use, meaning and politics of space (Boyd et al., 2024). Research suggests that spaces are seldom simply static entities or activity settings waiting to be occupied by people. Following Massey (2005), scholars note that spaces are shaped by those who interact within these settings and can be understood as outcomes of both the functions they serve for individuals and groups, as well as the broader socio-political landscapes in which these spaces are located (Bridger, 2022; Hodgetts et al., 2020; Santos & Buzinde, 2007).

Early definitions of the terms space and place acknowledge that the concepts are inevitably interwoven, but space can refer to a geographic location that is transformed into a place once it has become imbued with meaning and familiarity (Altman & Zube, 1989). However, the term space has evolved and become a dynamic concept that recognises certain physical locations are understood as an outcome of interrelations and meaning making practices that occur within them (Massey, 2005). An empty location can be called a space that transforms into a place when used by people whose interactions then contribute to the way that space is understood by those who relate within it (Tyner, 2012). Space is produced but also produces (Hodgetts et al., 2020). Space can therefore be seen as transcendent in that it encompasses the physical but moves beyond inert settings to include figurative understandings of how space is understood and interacted with by people and communities (Chrześcijańska, 2021).

The spatial self refers to how people construct their lives in relation to the physical spaces and locations they interact and affiliate with (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015). Cultural identities are in part constructed by spaces because these places become sites of affirmation and negotiation of one's social identity through the interactions that occur within locations by particular groups (Santos & Buzinde, 2007). Therefore, people and places can merge to inform the social identities of those that frequent certain geographies. Space-based identities are formed when a place goes beyond physical comfort and produces a sense of belonging informed by the interactions that occur there (Morley, 2001).

Correspondingly, a person's experience of and/or affinity for a space can be felt on a personal and intimate level. Despite such personal place attachments, it is also crucial to note that spaces also exist within social, political and economic structures that shape the existence and purposes of spaces. That is people and communities shape spaces and spaces shape people and communities (Hodgetts et al., 2020).

This chapter provides a foundational understanding of the current social and political climate for LGBTQ+ people living in Tokyo and how this informs the need for Queer spaces that are accessible and joyful for the Queer community. First, a brief overview of Queer history and life in Japan will be provided followed by a description of expatriate and immigrant terminology. Next, I consider the creation of space and contextualising space making in the Japanese setting. Then, Queer space making and migration will be examined in more conceptual depth. Finally, there will be a section on psychogeography that explains where this thesis fits the discipline. The chapter is completed with the stated research aim and thesis structure.

Queer and LGBTQ+ History and Life in Japan

It is useful to begin this section by clarifying the term LGBTQ+, which refers to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, Queer (or in some iterations questioning). The plus is an inclusive marker that invites other non-heterosexual sexualities and diverse gender identities to feel a sense of belonging under this umbrella term (Thelwall et al., 2023). The language and terminology used to refer to those who affiliate and identify under the umbrella term is complex, ever-evolving and not always agreed upon by those in the community or scholars who study and write about these communities (Henrickson, 2017). However, the evolution of the term Queer has led to its frequent and popular use as a descriptor and an identity marker for many people who identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community (Giffney, 2009).

The number of people who identify as Queer has grown exponentially since the term was reclaimed in the 1990s after historically being used as a homophobic slur against those who identified or presented as anything other than heterosexual (Levy & Johnson, 2012). The

term Queer allows for fluidity and complexity for non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people who may connect with different gender identities and/or sexualities across their lifetime. It also provides a resistance to rigid binaries and simple categorisations for those who feel there is more nuance to their sexual and gender journeys (Giffney, 2009). The terms Queer and LGBTQ+ are used throughout this research. The participants in this publication used the term Queer comfortably and frequently. Queer is capitalised throughout this thesis as the term represents an identity and a community (Las Positas College, 2026).

As with many countries, Japan has a unique and complicated history regarding the integrations and acceptance of Queer communities. Same-sex relations and dressing in ways that contradict the societally expected presentations of the male/female gender binary have historically not been criminalised in Japan, excepting a short time during the Meiji era between 1872 and 1880 (Kawasaka, 2025). Japan is generally considered to be a country that is tolerant of Queer people but does not offer much in the way of legal protections for LGBTQ+ residents and citizens. Japan is steeped in a culture that tends to stigmatize non-normative expressions of gender and non-heterosexual sexualities (Kawasaka & Würrer, 2024). The absence of same sex marriage and the lack of legal protections have led to many Queer couples having to use loopholes such as legally adopting their partner so that they may bequeath each other an inheritance and/or be allowed to participate in life and health decisions (Lunsing, 2005). Thus, the societal message that is present in modern Japan is that heterosexuality and cisgender people with normative gender presentations are considered normal and anyone who falls outside these categories is the other.

Correspondingly, Queer activism in Japan was largely developed in response to social stigmatization and later incorporated the fight for legal rights and issues (Kawasaka & Würrer, 2024). The historical and ongoing discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in Japan is multilayered and includes medical stigmatization, a lack of legal recognitions and a social

othering that unlike many other parts of the world comes from heteronormative dominant discourses and not from a religious worldview (Kawasaka, 2025). Japan can be seen as somewhat unique in that way as the opposition to same-sex marriage appears to be primarily based on culture and traditions as opposed to religious or Christian beliefs (Tamagawa, 2016). The fight for same-sex marriage in Japan is ongoing as a 2025 ruling by the Tokyo High Court deemed the ban against marriage equality to be constitutional, a decision that disappointed and outraged the plaintiffs and supporters of LGBTQ+ rights (The Associated Press, 2025). Same-sex partnerships are offered by certain districts in Japan, such as Shibuya, however, these partnerships offer little in the way of legal rights and protections and are therefore seen as more of a symbolic gesture (Kawasaka, 2025). Robust protections and anti-discrimination policies are not yet a part of everyday life in modern Japan.

Day to day life for LGBTQ+ people worldwide, while influenced by legal rights and public policies, often presents a different picture for those living it (Meyer et al., 2021). While Japan is lacking in its legal protections for Queer people, it is generally expected that LGBTQ+ people can lead somewhat ordinary and happy lives in the country (Tamagawa, 2016). However, while there is a perception that locals in Japan are generally tolerant of Queer people, there still exists bullying and discrimination in many social environments like schools and workplaces that can contribute to a person's decision to remain closeted (Sato & Sawamiya, 2024). Some studies show that while many Japanese people believe that homosexuality should be societally accepted, their allyship does not extend to support for marriage equality (Tamagawa, 2016). This indicates that while many don't possess ill feelings toward LGBTQ+ people, they still believe that legal rights and statuses are reserved for heterosexual couples. There may be a quiet personal acceptance of difference by many in Japan but a general apathetic attitude that serves to maintain the status quo (Kullberg, 2023).

There is a common perception of Japan from both within the country and worldwide that it is a largely homogenous society which encourages attitudes that differences between people should be imperceptible (Narzary, 2004). There is however, a kind of leniency afforded to migrants who are often immediately identifiable as being different from Japanese (Ohata, 2023). Therefore, the experiences of Queer migrants and Queer Japanese are often vastly different with different privileges and challenges present in both communities (Anderson, 2022). It is therefore difficult to present a generalised account of LGBTQ+ life in Japan.

Immigrant and Expatriate Terminology

This study uses the terms migrant, immigrant and expatriate to refer to the participants and the community involved in this research. Migration can be defined as the act of a person or persons either permanently or semi permanently changing their place of residence and the physical and social transition someone undertakes by relocating over a great distance (Loue, 1998). There are some issues with the term expatriate as it carries some elitist connotations and has historically been used to distinguish between ‘good’ migrants and ‘bad’ migrants (Cranston, 2017). Much like terminology used for LGBTQ+ people, there are varying levels of comfort within the migrant community regarding the use of the term expatriate (or the abbreviated form expat) and many acknowledge that migrant terms and categories carry different social meanings and power dynamics (Kunz, 2020).

The term expatriate often conjures an image of a certain type of person, usually white Western males, that lends an air of privilege and power to that term (McNulty, 2015) whereas the term immigrant may be visualised as non-white, non-Western people who have less access to privilege and are often stereotyped as being low-skilled (Kunz, 2020). Some people

are happy to use migrant terms interchangeably while some register objections to being labelled as an expatriate or an immigrant because of what these terms signify. There is much research and literature that exclusively uses the term expatriate to study migrants (Kunz, 2016). By using the terms expatriate, migrant and immigrant interchangeably I hope to add to the existing literature on migration while neutralising the use of these terms. The original title of this project used the term expatriate, however, following research on migration terminology and discussions with some participants I have opted to use the term migrant instead.

While Queer lifeworlds and the complexities involved with being LGBTQ+ differ from country to country, there also exists an international negotiation that must occur for Queer people who travel to and/or migrate to other cities and countries (Gedro, 2010). Queer migrants oftentimes do not exist within heteronormative societal structures and so often seek to build community and reimagine traditional social structures through engaging with other Queer migrants (Radicioni & Weicht, 2018). Expatriates can often feel pressure to assimilate to the cultural norms of their new country of residence and this pressure is acutely felt by minorities (Kim & Von Glinow, 2017). As such, the creation of Queer safe spaces and the subsequent cultural enclaves formed become an important part of life for those who are either negotiating their new lifestyle or seeking to build stronger connections in the country in which they have resettled (Anderson, 2022; Centner & Neto, 2021; Held, 2023; Hughes, 2025; Kim & Von Glinow, 2017; Novitskaya, 2023).

Migrants may also carry unique opportunities to reimagine their lives because of the freedoms afforded to them through their relocation to a new place (Collins, 2009). Through participation with Queer spaces, LGBTQ+ immigrants can encounter and engage with other Queer people on their own terms. There exists an interesting fusion of habits and identities as transnational people will inevitably bring various social practices and perspectives from

abroad. This whilst also adapting to new cultural sensibilities and establishing connections with their destination community of fellow Queer expatriates (Centner & Neto, 2021).

Further, such minority immigrants often need to negotiate multiple identities and levels of social acceptance and so seek comfort, understanding and joy in the presence of others who are able to understand these unique factors in the life of a Queer migrant (McNulty, 2015).

Engaging with Queer spaces is for many an essential part of meaning making while they navigate their existence as a Queer transnational person.

A useful reminder here, is a key assertion underpinning this thesis that people exist across and interact with several distinct spaces. Many people move across various spaces and places daily and the geographic spaces people inhabit and move through have an effect on them, their mindset and oftentimes their preferred ways of being and behaving (Sack, 1993). Spaces are influenced and moulded by understandings of identity and are informed by social norms whether adhering to them or creating counteractive places that oppose normativity (Radicioni & Weicht, 2018). Therefore, spaces can facilitate feelings of comfort, comprise sites of social performance, invoke anxieties in the people who dwell there, and can contribute to varieties of complex and nuanced experiences.

Massey (1999) states:

“Increasingly the spaces through which we live our lives, and through which the world – and cities – come to be organized are understood as being social products formed out of the relations which exist between people, agencies, institutions and so forth” (p. 159).

Massey conceptualises spaces as sites of relational social interactions. A person’s choice to frequent, dwell in and engage within particular spaces is often informed by the communities with which they wish to connect. Also relevant here, is the insight that spaces extend beyond

their physical settings and become locations of meaning making, community building, lived experiences and emotional attachments (Matsunobu, 2018).

Japanese culture also places importance on a person's connections to spaces. *Ibasho* is an Indigenous sociological concept that combines the terms “I” (present, be) and “*basho*” (place) and refers to a place where one feels a sense of belonging, acceptance and a sense of peace (Bamba & Haight, 2007). *Ibasho* is an important concept for migrants in Japan as they are creating new places of belonging in an unfamiliar country and are often very cognisant of the spaces they are inhabiting and engaging with as the time spent in those spaces, though sometimes temporary, is very deliberate (Vu, 2024). Japanese psychology believes *ibasho* to be an integral part of holistic health and well-being that can be found and/or created in the home, workplace and community (Bamba & Haight, 2007).

The way a person or group associates with a particular place and the sense of belonging that they feel interacting within the space helps to form identities that are space-based (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015). People often have strong connections to places and spaces where they feel a sense of comfort. *Ibasho* shares similarities with Māori conceptualisations of and connections to the physical that are also informed by the spiritual. The concept of *whanaungtanga ki te whenua* which refers to a person's physical connectedness with places and geographical locations of importance such as rivers and mountains encompasses the physical, spiritual and emotional connections to places of belonging that help to form one's identity (Rameka, 2018). *Ibasho* can refer to any space or place where a person finds a sense of comfort and is self-acclaimed, a concept that lends itself to migrants well (Tokunaga, 2018). Indigenous conceptions of place-based identities strengthen the belief that spaces are dynamic and lively sites that are informed by energy and interactions as well as their physical locations (Massey, 2005).

Tokyo is a large city that contains a great variety of spaces to be navigated be they bustling business districts, crowded rush hour trains, quiet local kissaten (traditional Japanese coffee shops) or the large variety of peaceful suburban neighbourhoods (Ogasawara, 2022). For some in Japan, most frequently male Japanese adolescents, the prospect of interacting with multiple spaces becomes too much to bear. They lock themselves away in their rooms for months or even years at a time. This social behavioural syndrome is known as Hikikomori which is becoming known worldwide as part of a growing trend towards social isolation and loneliness (Rosenthal & Zimmerman, 2012). It is possible that those who become reclusive from society are unable to create a sense of *ibasho* anywhere that is not their home. For foreign residents, it is often imperative that they interact with multiple spaces because of work and life administration tasks, such as visiting the immigration office. Immigrants in Japan are often hyper aware of their outsider status and so seek to form bonds with other migrants and form meaning making relationships with spaces, whether they be ephemeral or physical places (Vu, 2024).

Queer Spaces, Space Making and Migration

The constant negotiation of their multiple identities compels many Queer migrants to create their own spaces for community building and meaning making purposes in Tokyo (Hughes, 2025). For example, Hughes (2025) has noted that the feeling of disorientation experienced by many migrants compels them to deepen their exploration of their genders and sexualities. He goes on to describe how feelings of displacement experienced by those who do not neatly fit in to established identity markers under the LGBTQ+ umbrella can lead Queer migrants to create spaces where they can feel more comfortable and extend that comfort to others. Hughes (2025) also acknowledges that the potential temporality of their

residence in Japan allows Queer migrants more ease of self-exploration and a social freedom that may not be available to Japanese locals.

For LGBTQ+ individuals, their sexuality can add complications to oftentimes stressful migratory and resettlement journeys. Early migration studies tended to focus on “traditional” or heterosexual expatriates and nuclear families e.g. Western males in their 40s and 50s, often with a female spouse and children who relocate with them (McNulty, 2015). These foundational studies frequently looked at the expatriate’s adjustments to their new country from a stressor-strain perspective which often presented a deficit model of understanding for readers (Black et al., 1991). Many early studies focused on family and spousal supports and the adjustments heterosexual migrants made after relocating with their families (Takeuchi, 2010). While insights can be gained from early migration studies on the unique factors affecting expatriates and their families when relocating, the lack of inclusion of minorities and those with non-traditional family structures means that there is missing information pertaining to a population of immigrants who do not fit in with traditional heteronormative social structures. Furthermore, early migration studies tended to focus on those who moved countries because of being organisationally assigned whereas nowadays an increasing number of migrants are self-initiated (Kim & Von Glinow, 2017). This warrants a diversification of migration studies and a call to be more inclusive of those involved in research.

There are also a small number of studies that examine the lives of those who have moved from more “Queer-friendly” countries (may provide legal protections and are affirming of individuals within the LGBTQ+ community) to countries that are more discriminatory and/or dangerous (Centner & Neto, 2021; Collins, 2009; Suen, 2021). This raises questions around how LGBTQ+ migrants make meaning and create community within spaces wherein their sexualities are not widely accepted in the broader society (Centner &

Neto, 2021). For example, Collins (2009) found that though the dominant world view is that the West is Queer-friendly and tolerant, participants felt more at ease living openly in the Philippines, in part because of the move away from family and societal pressures in their home countries. Centner & Neto's (2021) study on gay male expatriates in Dubai found that their participants were all active in socialising in Queer spaces despite Queerness being illegal in the country. However, findings indicated that there may also have been a sense of entitlement from participants due to their economic and symbolic privileges and that the camaraderie found in these Queer spaces often came at the exclusion of Queer identities that are not gay and male. Suen's (2021) study highlighted that some migrants underestimated the challenges they would face moving to Hong Kong with its limited legal recognitions for same-sex couples and that these challenges affected both the migrants and the companies they worked for. This research also emphasised that while migrants are influenced by their new country, they in turn also influence and become agents of change due to their being visibly and openly Queer and challenging existing legalities that exclude them.

It is important to note that for many in the Queer community it is imperative that they not only move through existing Queer spaces but actively create these spaces (Hernandez, 2024). In countries that are lacking Queer rights these spaces must often be actively fought for and occupied. Because Queer space makers are often working against policies and systems of erasure regarding LGBTQ+ people in their resettlement country, the building of Queer spaces and communities is an act of reclamation that contributes to making the cities they live in unique (Baro, 2025). Queer migrant event coordinators are engaging in world-making practices and extending the invitation to others within this marginalised community to experience belonging and joy in a space that has been carved out specifically for them (Dasgupta, 2025). Queer leisure spaces have historically been places of relationship building, escape from cis-heteronormative societal pressures and sites of engagement regarding Queer

liberation movements (Wiesböck et al., 2026). Modern Queer space creators actively carry these traditions forward.

Those who make Queer space are creating locations of engagement informed by social responsibilities to the people and communities that frequent them, while Queering policies of specific geographies that may run counter to wider politics of the city in which they are based (Massey, 2005). Visible Queerness is seen to be out of place in countries like Japan, as such, there are those who feel compelled to create spaces of belonging for LGBTQ+ folk who can experience *ibasho* both mentally and physically in dedicated Queer geographies (Ahmed, 2000; Vu, 2024). Therefore, it is of interest to examine the compulsion for Queer migrants to create inclusive space as part of their migration journey and how this space making impacts on the wider community of migrants and locals. The existing literature I was able to access was primarily about social and legal challenges regarding Queer migration (Gedro, 2010; Gedro et al., 2013; Kim & Von Glinow, 2017; McNulty, 2015; Suen, 2021), about the creation of Queer spaces in studies not focused on migration (Hernandez, 2024; McCartan & Nash, 2023; Radicioni & Weicht, 2018), or about engaging with spaces and affirming Queer identities through travel and/or migration (Centner & Neto, 2021; Collins, 2009; Held, 2023; Maclachlan, 2023; Novitskaya, 2023). Studies on Queer people who create spaces after migration (Hughes, 2025) appears to be a growing field that this research can contribute to.

To recap, common themes in existing literature include challenges in relocating and issues with lack of legal protections for same sex spouses. Some studies additionally explore the way in which LGBTQ expatriates socialise with one another, find solace in Queer spaces and seek joy in locations where there is limited access to Queer comfort. Because rights and protections for LGBTQ+ people are geographically constrained (Suen, 2021), there are potential personal and professional ramifications to disclosing one's sexuality and the spouses

of Queer people are often excluded from visa sponsorship and health insurance in host countries (Kim & Von Glinow, 2017). Further, Queer space makers play an active role in shaping geographies of inclusion and community building for marginalised migrants (Baro, 2025; Wiesböck et al., 2026).

It is also worth noting that existing studies are predominantly qualitative and utilise semi-structured interviews to gain insight into the participants lived experiences. This approach provides useful exemplars of both the challenges and triumphs of the LGBTQ+ migrant community. Authors overwhelmingly emphasise the urge for new research to be conducted with this unique population. While there has been an increase in research involving this community, there is still a limited number of empirical studies that explore what it is to be a Queer migrant (Kim & Von Glinow, 2017).

Psychogeography: Where My Thesis Fits the Discipline

Psychogeography is both a psychological discipline that examines and deconstructs spatiality, how spaces are politically and societally shaped and their influence on the minds of those who interact with them and a semi-conscious practice that many people do daily by choosing which spaces and places they interact with based on their experiences with and potential affection for these environments (Bridger, 2022). Though oftentimes unknowingly, physical spaces elicit an emotional response that varies greatly between individuals and has an influence on how we feel and what we do when we are engaging with that structure (Ellard, 2015). Psychologists understand that places and spaces are much more than physical buildings and are dynamic social environments that have both positive and negative impacts on those who interact with them (Hodgetts et al., 2020).

Psychogeography is a part of everyday life and migrants have a unique relationship with the spaces and places that become part of their new realities. For Queer migrants who relocate to countries with more retrograde ideas and laws surrounding LGBTQ+ rights than their country of origin, rather than sacrifice their sexual liberation, they will often seek to find supportive people and places they may interact with in an enjoyable way (Centner & Neto, 2021). There is a pervasive culture in Japan that invisibilises Queer individuals and lifestyles due to societal norms based on heteronormative ideologies of the family unit and outdated stereotypes that can lead to societal homophobic attitudes (Tamagawa, 2018). For Queer migrants living in Tokyo, the involvement of Queer safe spaces in their lives is an essential part of feeling safe and trying to create relationships with others who can understand their unique struggles and triumphs (McCartan & Nash, 2023).

As people invest great personal meaning in different settings, exploring the relationship between people and place across a variety of landscapes and through the eyes of different minorities merits psychological exploration (Hodgetts et al., 2010). This research aims to add to existing Queer studies on migration, space and the nature of living in modern day Tokyo. The spatial is political and while the goals of many LGBTQ+ spaces may be social in nature, they are by their very existence influencing and Queering the culture and society in which they exist (Massey, 2005). Because Queerness is still not fully understood and accepted in modern Japanese society (Lunsing, 2005), LGBTQ+ events and spaces are increasingly important to many immigrants who are building a life in Japan. The information gathered as part of this project should add to psychological understandings of Queer space making and give insight into the psychogeography of LGBTQ+ environments in Japan's capital city.

This study is also a contribution to emerging literatures on the interconnected character of the human self (Gergen, 2011; King et al., 2017; Rua et al., 2021) and how

migrants cultivate new place-based identities (Anderson, 2022; Centner & Neto, 2021; Collins, 2009; Greene, 2022; Kaneshiro Chou, 2025; Novitskaya, 2023), often through the cultivation of shared community spaces or enclaves of care (Hernandez, 2024; Hughes, 2025; McCartan & Nash, 2023; Radicioni & Weicht, 2018). Relationship, whether to self, spaces or other people is a core component of mental well-being for everybody (Gergen, 2011), however, migrants often have the extraordinary task of building or rebuilding multiple relationships after their migration. Queer identities are partially formed through individuals recounting their narratives and experiences of Queerness and these stories then go on to be a part of how culture is shaped and understood (Cover & Prosser, 2024). The interviewees involved in this research all presented their personal Queer narratives based on their sense of being and how they relate to spaces and communities. Their stories are a contribution that gives some insight into how Queer migrants form a sense of self in a new country and in turn shape the culture there.

Research Aims and Thesis Structure

My goal with this research is to contribute to the growing number of Queer migration studies in social science research (Choi, 2022; Collins, 2009; Hughes, 2025; Kam, 2020; Suen, 2021), whilst also providing an opportunity for LGBTQ+ immigrants establishing their lives in Japan to share their stories and experiences with others. Readers of this research may have some insight into life as Queer migrants and some may not have any access to this kind of experience at all. Similarly, there are those who may never have given thought to the realities of life as a Queer person in Tokyo and those who may not have had the chance to speak to people of diverse genders and sexualities. This research will contribute to the growing

number of Queer migration studies both generally and, more specifically, within a Japanese context.

More specific, my research is centred around the following key aims: exploring Queer migrants lived experiences of being LGBTQ+ in modern day Tokyo and what guided them to create Queer spaces and/or events. The intricacies and nuances of this unique population and how they build relationships and communities are of great interest. This project explores migrant life through a Queer lens in Tokyo, a city that has many LGBTQ+ spaces but little in terms of legal rights and protections.

Following this introductory chapter will be a chapter on the methodology used in this research project. The methodology chapter will present the theoretical framework used to design this research, ethical considerations, and my autoethnographic engagements with participants.

Chapter three presents my analysis. Of central focus are participants experiences coming out in Japan, reflections on life as an out Queer expatriate in modern Tokyo and the advantages and disadvantages to being an out Queer migrant alongside how these realities may differ from those of Queer Japanese locals. Key points of the analysis chapter also include exploring participant's interactions with existing Queer spaces in Tokyo, both positive and negative, and what then led to them creating Queer spaces of their own. Heterosexual rupturing of local Queer spaces is an important issue examined that leads to a reflection on allyship. Finally, participants goals for the future of their Queer spaces are presented.

Chapter four returned to the key focus of this thesis and presents a more abstract discussion of my key findings. This chapter will cover thoughts on migration aiding in Queer self-discovery, what it is like to be out of the closet and engaging with Queer spaces in

Tokyo, the need for diversity in event spaces and a reflection on the difficulties surrounding creating meaningful engagement with Queer Japanese people at migrant run events and spaces. The need for heterosexual ally's vs heterosexual infiltration and rupturing of Queer spaces and the solidarity between Queer and other marginalised communities resulting in supportive outreach in many Queer migrant run events is explored. Finally, some recommendations will be given for future directions for study before the chapter and thesis is concluded.

Chapter Two: Method

Disciplinary Underpinnings: A Community Orientation Towards Narrative Inquiry

This research utilises a narrative inquiry design (see final section of this chapter) to provide participants with opportunities to share their migration and Queer space making experiences in Tokyo. I opted for this approach to narrative inquiry because it helps me humanise participants (Freeman, 2015) who have often been dehumanised when categorized as disordered Queer people in the history of our discipline of psychology (Hodgetts et al., 2020). It was not long ago where Queer sexualities were listed as disorders in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (Drescher & Merlino, 2007). Humanistic and narrative approaches to psychological research help the discipline progress toward a more inclusive and reconciliatory practice for Queer people while acknowledging the problematic role that psychology has historically played in their pathologisation (McGuire, 2022).

This is not to suggest that there is a quick fix theoretical approach that will undo historical harm caused by the field of psychology, nor that there is not a continuation of cis-het-normative practices. Modern psychology education and practices sometimes reinforce biases informed by historical othering of marginalised groups such as LGBTQ+ people (Barnett et al., 2019). The field of psychology has also been known to medicalise the lived experiences of Queer people and often overlooks nuances involving the contemporary oppressions and discrimination faced by this marginalised community (Semlyen & Rohleder, 2022). Psychological research with Queer communities has been steadily increasing since the year 2000 and a shift toward empirical psychological studies focused on the social wellbeing of LGBTQ+ folk has been noted (Walch et al., 2020).

Collaborative research with the Queer population facilitated by Queer researchers that centres the voices and lived experiences of those involved is part of the process of moving beyond harmful and pathologizing models and toward diversifying knowledge production (Bhatia et al., 2024; Meyer et al., 2021). Research conducted by those within the community can lead to crucial knowledge and information that is rooted in human connections and personal experiences (Brinkmann, 2023). My approach to this research project places great value on the conversations had with participants about such topics as the creation of Queer spaces. Because the aim of this research is to amplify voices and explore lived experiences in the Queer community of migrants in Tokyo, a narrative inquiry seemed to offer the right fit for this project.

Correspondingly, this research was designed to utilise the principles of community and participative research (Cornish et al., 2023). An important goal of community psychology research is to collaborate with people and groups to gain an understanding of the unique challenges they face in order to support their wellbeing (Moritsugu et al., 2019). Whereas pervasive and hegemonic psychologies rooted in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) societies tend to be more individualistic and often claim distance between the researcher and the participant as necessary to avoid bias (Henrich et al., 2010). On the other hand, community psychologies tend towards a more collectivist orientation. Community psychologies value more participative and collaborative approaches, and researchers can sometimes work autoethnographically with their own communities. The researcher, who may also be a member of that community, engages in open ended dialogues to document and understand the experiences of diverse community members (Chavis & Newbrough, 1986).

There is some existing research on Queer migrants in Japan (see Hughes (2025) and Anderson (2022) above), yet this domain of exploration is in many ways still in its infancy.

Using a narrative approach that is informed by the principles of community psychology is a way to personalise psychological research and make it approachable for readers (Murray, 2000).

Community psychologists acknowledge that people exist across multiple settings, that identity is never static or contained, and that they can establish belonging to multiple communities (Moritsugu et al., 2019). Further, establishing a sense of belonging within these collectives is a crucial aspect of one's wellbeing. Relatedly, Queer migrants in Tokyo exist within and across multiple communities that they must navigate. The LGBTQ+ migrant population in Tokyo is diverse, and there are now many spaces that allow for community formation and growth (Kaneshiro Chou, 2025). The purpose of this approach to psychology is to understand how particular spaces can influence people's sense of self, place, and relationships to others (Moritsugu et al., 2019). Therefore, this approach is well suited to the exploring subject of Queer expatriates in Tokyo who have had to navigate what it means to be Queer in a new environment and to create community in a foreign place.

As such, my research contributes to efforts in community orientated psychologies to document diverse everyday lived experiences and how these are shaped by social interactions with other people and places (Hodgetts et al., 2020). In the process, I am interested in how the social identity of Queer is ingrained through social interactions, shared activities and the collective practices of the Queer community to cultivated shared places of being (Zisakou & Figgou, 2021). This includes a focus on how people give meaning to or story their Queer selves and experiences of being Queer in Tokyo and less LGBTQ+ specific settings in the city (Verkuyten, 2018). To recap, the focus on how people make meaning through social interactions, how they relate to spaces, the process of acculturation and how being a minority shapes how they may interface with the world make community psychology a good fit for migration studies.

Acculturation is a useful concept for understanding how migrant participants adjust to their new home-places in Japan. Acculturation is not deployed in this research in the classic Berry (1997) sense of categorising the extent to which a migrant has successfully become accustomed to their new country using the four strategies of assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization (Berry, 1997). Rather, the complexities of personal experiences and the intricacies of a person's resettlement that are in part affected by politics, societal expectations and marginalised identities are part of a discussion designed to further understandings of migration experiences (Cassim, Stolte, et al., 2020). This approach to understanding acculturation is not designed to give a binary result that indicates the level of a migrant's perceived success in adapting to their new country but instead uses community methods to increase understandings of people's individual acculturation journeys.

Because this is a psychological study of Queer people and communities, it is imperative that Queer theory is present throughout this research project. Queer theory is important as it challenges existing migration studies' heteronormative perspectives and its historical focus on traditional heterosexual migrants (Manalansan, 2006). Heteronormativity and access to power are explored in Queer migration studies through Queer theory and the lived realities of LGBTQ+ migrants in both their countries of origin and those in which they have settled are able to be more accurately shown through this lens (Hughes, 2025). Much like Queer terminologies, there is no one correct way of 'doing' Queerness that can encompass all identities and levels of participation in modern Queer culture. Foundational Queer theorists such as Judith Butler (1997) encourage the scrutiny of modern Queerness and how the activism that contemporary terminology and ideals of being 'out' may inadvertently exclude because of various backgrounds that cannot connect with these ideologies. These considerations are something to be mindful of when doing Queer research. For the purposes and scope of this project, common Queer terminologies and identity markers were happily

used by all involved. It is always important, however, to be mindful of privileged positions and language usage and to understand that even blanket terms such as Queer will not be suitable for the whole community.

Both the participants in this research and myself as the researcher are Queering dominant notions of traditional migration narratives. This involves our being open about the Queer experience and championing the Queer lens through which this research and many aspects of our lives are experienced. Further, the participants in this research are contributing self-consciously to further Queering Japan through their very existence and making Queerness more visible in Tokyo by encouraging community togetherness and celebration in dedicated visible Queer spaces. In short, by designing this research with Queer perspectives in mind, the unique realities faced by Queer migrants are prioritised (Hughes, 2025). As such, I set out to expand on previous migration studies that were often shaped within heteronormative dominant narratives (McNulty, 2015).

Fieldwork and Participants

I recruited six interview participants for this study. The inclusion criteria for participants were that they needed to be expatriates who had emigrated to Japan and currently live or have lived in Tokyo. Additionally, those who have created Queer events or run Queer spaces are the focus of this study. Participants were required to be part of the Queer community and identify under the umbrella of LGBTQ+ in some way. Potential participants were recruited using a two-prong approach. First, I the researcher, contacted two publicly known event coordinators and invited them to participate in the research. The rest of the recruitment was facilitated using snowball sampling where I asked each participant for recommendations who to interview and then contacted them. This is a common approach in

qualitative community-oriented research (Kim & Von Glinow, 2017; McNulty et al., 2018; Suen, 2021) as researchers are often familiar with figureheads in the community and snowballing helps to facilitate a smooth and impartial recruitment process. Table 1 sets out the main identity/demographic features of the six participants. All participants had extensive experience of not only frequenting but also cultivating Queer community spaces in Tokyo.

Table 1: Participant Details

Name (Pseudonym)	Pronouns	Sexuality	Age	Country of Origin
Seraphine	she/her	Pansexual	51	America
Nyx	they/them	Trixic	61	America
Mika	he/she/they	Attracted to males	38	Sweden
Rebecca	she/her	Lesbian, Queer	34	America
Hayley	she/her	Queer	34	England
Tai	Out of drag – he/him. In drag she/her.	Gay	30	Vietnam

My collaborators are all unique in their genders, sexualities and ages. I learned the sexuality term trixic from Nyx which refers to a nonbinary person who is attracted to women and/or feminine people. The recruitment process resulted in finding six participants to

contribute to this study. Once I had conversations with these six people and after discussion with my supervisors, it was decided to pause any further recruitment unless necessary.

All participants attended a one-off interview with me which ranged from 30-60 minutes as anticipated in the participant information sheet. Interviews took place in June and July 2025 via Zoom, in a café or the participant's event space during closed hours. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed both using Microsoft Word and manually. Participants were sent an information sheet explaining the study and a consent form prior to the interview taking place. Consent forms were obtained from all participants.

All six participants were open to further contact and discussion if needed. However, the information gathered from our conversations was sufficient to move on to the analysis stage. Through these discussions, I was able to learn about a range of experiences and hear a variety of opinions that I was able to weave together to describe life in Tokyo and what it means to be part of providing spaces to the Queer community.

Procedural Ethics

With guidance from my supervisors Darrin Hodgetts and Shiloh Groot, I submitted a low-risk notification to the Human Ethics Committee at Massey University. I was informed via email that the low-risk notification was accepted on 11/05/2025 and that the details of this research project had been recorded in the committee's database. Below, I recount three interrelated ethical considerations relating to informed consent, participant confidentiality, and potential risks associated with researching Queer communities.

As with all psychological research, gaining informed consent is an important part of the research process. Gaining consent (see appendices A and B for information sheets and consent forms) from participants to take part in psychological research has evolved from

simply obtaining a signature on a form to having a meaningful process where those contributing to the project are given good information and opportunities to ask questions (Palmer, 2021). Each interviewee was emailed an information sheet that outlined the details and purpose of the study. The information sheet described the interviews as being 30-60 minutes long and semi-structured with some prepared questions and an opportunity for the interviewee to discuss what they felt to be important to this topic (see appendix C for semi-structured interview questions). Participants were informed that their involvement in the interview was voluntary and that they could choose to withdraw from the study without giving reason. Withdrawal was given an initial period of two weeks following the completion of the interview but with an option to withdraw later if necessary.

Participants were asked to agree to the conditions of the study as outlined in the information sheet, to agree to audio recording and/or recording on Zoom and to indicate their understanding that every attempt to keep their information confidential would be made by myself as the researcher. They were also given the option to receive a copy of the interview transcript to view and to receive a summary of the research results once the project is completed. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before commencement of their individual interviews.

Confidentiality is a vital aspect of engaging with communities as part of psychological research (Moritsugu et al., 2019). Participants were ensured that their involvement with the study and any personal information they shared as part of the process would be anonymised. Pseudonyms have been used in this document to prevent identification of those who volunteered their time and stories to help with this project. Participants were informed that only my supervision team and I would be aware of their participation in this research. They were advised however, that they were free to disclose their participation to others if they wished to. While great care is being taken to prevent individual participants

identification in this research, each interviewee was informed that there is always a chance that others may deduce their involvement through guess work. This information was outlined in the participation sheet emailed to interviewees along with the consent form.

Research on Queer migration is a growing field that participants valuably contribute to by sharing their thoughts and experiences (Anderson, 2022; Centner & Neto, 2021; Choi, 2022; Collins, 2009; Gedro et al., 2013; Hughes, 2025; Kam, 2020; Kaneshiro Chou, 2025; Kim & Von Glinow, 2017; McNulty, 2015; McNulty et al., 2018; Novitskaya, 2023; Suen, 2021). As with anything that involves personal disclosure, there is a chance that the interviewee could experience strong emotions which may be distressing. Participants were advised of this possibility and informed that they could stop the interview at any time and we could discuss support options available to them should the need arise.

Another concern I had for this research, which is somewhat small in scope was the possibility of homogeneity within the participant selection. Attempts were made to recruit participants from several different backgrounds and who encompass many different facets of the Queer experience. Those who agreed to be part of this project provided a range of perspectives. The participant selection included people of different genders, sexualities and age ranges (see Table 1 above). Unfortunately, due to the sample size of those being interviewed, not every voice in our unique community can be represented. However, the experiences shared by those who participated in interviews has provided valuable insight into being Queer in Tokyo and fostering community through event organisation. Further, focusing on six participants meant more scope to explore in-depth the lived experience of each participant.

My Autoethnographic Positioning

There is an autoethnographic element to this study and so I must situate myself within it. Autoethnographic approaches are a common foundation for Queer researchers and Queer studies (Meyer et al., 2021). Such self-positioning in psychological research contributes to the decolonising of research practices that have historically caused harm by oftentimes pathologizing minority communities, such as ours (Williams, 2021). Autoethnography disrupts outdated ideas and research methodologies that serve to separate researchers from participants and aligns with Queer theory that attempts to disavow common conceptions of what is considered normal in society (Jones & Adams, 2016). I chose to embrace the autoethnographic impulse in this study in alignment with my orientation towards community psychology and narrative inquiry that offers a more collaborative and relationally ethical engagement with participants (Hodgetts et al., 2022).

I am of Māori (Te Ātiawa) descent. Since learning about Kaupapa Māori research (Cram & Adcock, 2022; Mahuika, 2008; Rua et al., 2023), I have been drawn to this approach to research for many reasons. The commitment to decolonising research methodologies, moving beyond simple knowledge production and trying to foster positive change for Māori are some of the things I admire about this research tradition (Cram & Adcock, 2022). However, although I am a Māori researcher, this research project has not been conducted in Aotearoa or with Māori participants. Therefore, a complimentary and eclectic theoretical approach has been utilised in this thesis which includes community psychology, Queer theory, narrative inquiry and autoethnography. Much like Indigenous psychologies such as Kaupapa Māori research seek to reframe the relationship between those involved in the research process (Mahuika, 2008), likewise, autoethnographies seek to document local experiences from the point of view of the insider and to contribute to local sustainability from within the community. Central to such efforts is to allow community

members to be at the helm of research conversations (Meyer et al., 2021). Kaupapa Māori research serves as the inspiration to seek a strategy for engaging participants in dialogues that champion values of community, sustainability and uplifting other voices from within.

As I am a Queer migrant living in Tokyo, I am conducting research from within the community. My own experience, coming from Aotearoa New Zealand, is that while there are more legal rights and protections for the rainbow population back home, a relatively small population creates difficulties fostering community due to a lack of resources and dedicated Queer spaces. I have found the opposite to be true in Tokyo. There are multiple LGBTQ+ events and spaces throughout the city, which I also frequent more often than I did in Aotearoa. However, legally, there are many issues faced by the Queer community in Japan (Tamagawa, 2016).

Living in Tokyo, I have found that interpersonal connections can be found within the various Queer safe spaces that city has to offer. However, outside of these spaces, living openly as a Queer person can be challenging due to the lack of legal protections and the need to self-regulate within heteronormative society. It is not uncommon for casual homophobic comments to be heard in Japan. I have heard homophobic jokes, slurs and comments from coworkers, casual acquaintances and through the media, in some cases by prominent politicians. The impunity with which discriminatory remarks toward minorities are treated in Japan is something that I find very challenging.

I moved to Tokyo in August 2019 with the intention of staying for one to two years. I had never visited Japan before this move and so it was somewhat of a leap of faith. Originally, my plan was to move here with my girlfriend at the time and at my job interview I was surprised that a large amount of the questions I was being asked were not related to my work experience or my interest in Japan but were about my sexuality. My interviewers asked

me things like – what will you do if somebody at work finds out about your sexuality? Are you aware that there is no gay marriage or partnership in Japan? What if your neighbours find out? And so on. I did not feel that these questions were malicious or judgemental in nature, but I did find it odd that my sexuality seemed to be of more concern to my interviewers than my ability to live and work in a foreign country.

After my relationship ended, I decided to come to Tokyo alone. I didn't know anybody here and knew it was completely up to me to find friends and community. I was starting from scratch. Fortunately, in the age of social media, I was able to find Queer collectives, events and bars before ever setting foot in Japan. Once I arrived and had organised my living situation, I decided to venture to a Queer event I had found on Instagram by myself and hope for the best. I met a group of people that night that I socialised with frequently for many years (as is the nature of migrant life, many of them have now left Tokyo). A few months later I met two wonderful Queer men in the gay district of Tokyo at a lesbian bar. These men became two of my closest friends. Through a regular LGBTQ+ movie event, I have founded close friendships with several other wonderful Queer migrants. Not every night out has been a great success of course. However, I have been able to find community, establish meaningful friendships and create my Tokyo whānau. In this regard, my settlement has been facilitated by Queer events and spaces, and local coordinators who work so hard to foster joyful communications and spaces to belong that are very important for migrants like me who are recreating their lives somewhere new.

Over the course of my postgraduate psychology studies, I became interested in exploring the lives of Queer immigrants living in Tokyo who have created events or spaces. I know firsthand what a positive impact these spaces have had on me. I have experienced the differences living in a city with few events and spaces in Aotearoa to a city in Japan with not

only a large number of Queer event/space options, but a variety in the type that ensures there are options for many ways of socialising.

My having strong connections to the local research community is also part of what makes this project autoethnographic. It is widely considered a strength of autoethnography that researchers have connections with and insights into the communities with whom they work (Braun et al., 2017). Because I am conducting research within my community, I feel a deep sense of responsibility to conduct ethical and safe research that is truthful and gives voice to those who have been generous enough to offer their stories, insights and perspectives. My presence within the community allowed me to have conversations with participants from a place of shared and differing understanding and experiences. This allowed for a kind of shorthand conversing during the interviews that elicited valuable and insider concerns that we were able to share more openly than if I was an outsider to the community.

Narrative Inquiry and the Analysis Process

Central to narrative inquiry is the assertion that humans are storied beings who make sense of the world by constructing narratives (Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007). Also central is the idea that as narrators of their own lives, people do not produce their stories out of thin air. They often do so by combining snippets from the stories of others, community level narratives and broader public narratives, that in this case often stigmatize and joke about Queer people (Murray, 2000). As such, the stories of each participant are simultaneously personal and unique as well as reflective of broader community and intergroup narratives in society.

Freeman (2015) has argued that the use of narrative analysis has grown exponentially over the years due to a paradigm shift toward humanising psychological methods of inquiry.

As noted above, narrative analysis fits well with community and social psychology approaches to research as it places importance on how participant's give meaning to their experiences in the form of storytelling. Likewise, a key goal of the present research was to facilitate interview interactions in which the six collaborating research participants could help shape my understanding of the cultivation of Queer spaces in Tokyo. The idea is to achieve this through narrative analysis that uses direct quotes and organises the range of experiences provided as a kind of story to be read by others.

Narrative inquiry is a useful tool in psychological research with minorities (McLean & Syed, 2015) and for exploring gender and sexualities (Kinitz & Salway, 2022). This is because narrative inquiry allows for shared exploration of the research topic by both the interviewer and interviewee (Slembrouck, 2015). This results in the presented information being relatable and/or understandable to those who may have had little to no previous contact with this community (Stephens & Breheny, 2013). Narrative inquiry and analysis does not shy away from the relationship dynamics between the researcher and participants as being a key factor in guiding and weaving stories in a way that invites the reader into their reality (Freeman, 2015). This method was chosen in part due to the kind of research that I enjoy reading. I find that when narratives are presented, I can connect with the people involved even if I have never met them or am not part of their enclaves. Narratives invite us into another's world and allow us a precious glimpse either into communities we have never interacted with or further into our own.

As the researcher, I take on the role of the bricoleur and it is my responsibility to piece together stories from my participants, my own story as a community member, and previous research and theory to create a cohesive and approachable narrative analysis. The process of bricolage involves constructing and reconstructing, analysing context and utilising reflective cognitive processes to organise a rich tapestry of information based on what has

been gathered through interviews and existing literature (Kincheloe, 2007). Bricolage is an innovative methodological approach to qualitative psychology research that understands that social systems are multifaceted and therefore often require creativity and an eclectic use of theories and skills to present findings that acknowledge complexities and difference (Santiago Sanchez et al., 2025).

A key part of narrative analysis is the transcription process as through transcribing interviews, the researcher begins to interpret and comprehend the information and stories they are accessing (Frost, 2011). Transcription was completed with the help of Microsoft Word dictation and transcription software and edited manually by me, the researcher. The process of transcribing allowed me to listen to each interview multiple times. After this, I read through the interviews and found moments of similarity within them and then specific individual stories and ideas that provided new and personal perspectives. The quotes presented are there to provide insight and a human touch for those accessing this research. I hope that I am able to weave my words and the words and stories of each collaborator or participant in a way that invites the reader into our world, our realities and even if it is from afar, our spaces.

Chapter Three: Participants Storying Themselves Within Queer Spaces in Tokyo

This chapter analyses the experiences and insights gleaned from my conversations with each of the six participants. First, I consider participant experiences of coming out in their home countries compared to coming out in Japan. As such, this section includes insights into how participant migration to Japan constituted a physical move that also facilitated a necessary exploration of their own sexualities and gender identities. Second, I explore what existing as an out Queer immigrant in modern Tokyo looks like, and the challenges and compromises this entails. Third, the outsider status of immigrants is then considered in relation to the freedoms that it may afford Queer citizens who are not Japanese. Then, in the fourth section I examine participant experiences - both positive and negative – of engaging with existing Queer spaces in Tokyo. This then leads to a fifth section focused on stories of how participants moved from engaging with Queer spaces to creating their own spaces. Issues experienced include difficulties engaging with Queer Japanese people in these spaces that are designed to be places of comfort for all but are largely populated by the migrant Queer community. In the sixth section, a growing phenomenon of heterosexual rupturing of Queer spaces is discussed that leads to an investigation into Queer allyship. Finally, I explore participant accounts of their intentions for their spaces and their goals for the future of LGBTQ+ events in Tokyo.

Coming Out at Home and in Japan

For many participants in this research, moving to Japan helped them to recognise, understand and accept their Queerness. The geographical shift in location allowed them to come out and live openly as Queer persons. The term coming out is the shortened version of the phrase “coming out of the closet” which describes the disclosure of one’s sexual

orientation and/or gender identity to others. It is often assumed to signify living authentically, moving from a hidden ("closeted") life to an open one. It may also involve the fear of rejection following disclosure. Coming out is not a one-time event but a multifaceted and ongoing process that is consistently navigated by those in the Queer community (Scott, 2018). Coming out is something that Queer people must often navigate in various familial, employment and civic contexts.

A person is likely to come out many times to multiple people to whom they relate in various ways, all the while considering safety and trying to mitigate potential negative reactions. Those in the Queer community may also change how they identify over time which could result in beginning the coming out process again, this time with a new identity marker (Feinstein & Rentería, 2023). There is much to be learned about the process of coming out in non-Western countries and through the contextual lens of Queer immigrants (Wang, 2017).

Of the six people interviewed as part of this research, only one was out and regularly engaging with Queer and alternative spaces in their country of origin. Mika, a 38-year-old nonbinary drag performer from Sweden and the only interviewee who came out in their country of origin described the way being out and experimenting with fashion and different subcultures sparked their interest in Japan.

I was totally out. I was doing all these crazy looks. I was like a mixture between goth and Visual Kei. So, I was very provocative from, I guess, from high school. I started with goth and then I found Visual Kei which is the reason I came to Japan in the beginning. Visual Kei is a Japanese music genre that is inspired by Western glam rock. So, it's very flamboyant looks and usually hot men dressing up. Sometimes crossdressing too and wearing drag.

As will be shown later in this chapter, Mika's experience differs from the other participants in that they were able to express their Queerness openly and through fashion in their home country of Sweden. Mika describes Visual Kei as a Japanese music subculture that combines punk, goth and anime aesthetics and often involves musicians and fans dressing in gender-non-conforming ways (McLeod, 2013). They then went on to describe their experiences being an out Queer person in Sweden and engaging with the Queer spaces there. When asked what it was like to be out in Sweden they said:

Well, mostly it was appreciated, but it was definitely niche. A lot of people including me got a lot of hate for it as well. So, I would say Swedish people are usually open minded, but they also don't like somebody who's too out there. I went to clubs of course. Like gay clubs, but I never really felt like it was fun or I was enjoying them really. They weren't Queer spaces they were more traditional gay clubs. You know, old school. It was a mixed audience which was nice, but mainly for men, I guess. I usually dressed up when I went there and I don't think that's very popular because I never got any hookups or anything like that. I think people were a little bit intimidated, and it was kind of weird. But then I also went to alternative clubs like goth clubs and places like that, and I felt more at home at those places rather than in the gay and Queer areas back in the day. But I guess also, there was a lot of Queerness in the goth scene that I didn't realise at that time.

Sweden is often presented as a progressive country regarding Queer rights where policies regarding LGBTQ+ rights are commonly seen to be an important issue for local politicians (Liinason, 2017). Mika describes being able to live openly and frequent Queer events and spaces in their home country. They also provide commentary on the types of spaces that they found more inviting which were often subculture spaces rather than conventional gay bars. Queer bars and spaces being catered to and/or dominated by cisgender gay men is a common

critique of existing Queer bars that is touched on by others later in this chapter. Often Queer venues will have inclusive policies designed to welcome a variety of genders and sexualities, however, this doesn't always reflect the realities of the patronage and reputation of certain locations (Hartless, 2018). This can be the impetus for some to create alternative Queer spaces.

Because LGBTQ+ migrants have previously been seen as non-traditional expatriates, there are few studies examining how their diversities shape their experiences of living abroad (McNulty, 2015). Relatedly, migration to countries such as Japan can provide an opportunity for closeted LGBTQ+ people to explore their sexuality in what for them is a neutral space. In the past, many Queer people have used travel and tourism as a way to engage with homosocial spaces in countries where their exploration poses less risk to their personal and professional lives (MacLachlan, 2023). Much existing research on LGBTQ+ migration has been conducted with those who were out as Queer in their home countries and then had to either navigate the process of migrating as an openly Queer person, or grapple with going back into the closet for the purpose of their new life and job opportunity (Gedro et al., 2013).

Less can be found on the way in which migration can provide the space and clarity needed for a person to explore and discover themselves and their sexuality. The change of geographical location may present an opportunity for self-exploration. As migrants must often build community from scratch, they may seek to do so in Queer spaces. An example of migration facilitating personal exploration of one's sexuality is Tai, a 30-year-old gay male drag performer from Vietnam who came to Japan to attend university where he was able to begin exploring his sexuality. Tai states:

I was in my questioning phase in Vietnam because I left after high school and I found out about gay life and Queer culture during university [in Japan], because that was

the first time that I had exposure to international people. So, then I got to know, gay life and all of that. So before coming to Japan then no, I was not out. I was actually confused about what I was.

In this quote, Tai talks to exploring his sexuality at home in Vietnam but not fully embracing it by coming out until moving to university in Japan. There are studies on LGBTQ+ life and activism in Vietnam (Horton, 2014; Rydstrom et al., 2023) that provide an overview of the political, social and legal climate there, both past and present. Vietnam is characterised as a patriarchal society with a gendered and heteronormative hierarchy that has led to a negative societal view of homosexuality and significant negative impacts on many Queer youth (Horton, 2014). There are, however, many activist groups working toward creating a more tolerant society and advancing Queer rights in the country (Rydstrom et al., 2023). Relatedly, Tai felt unable to fully understand himself and his sexuality in the Vietnamese context. It was not until his relocation to Japan that he was able to delve into personal exploration of his Queerness. Moving geographically was instrumental in facilitating Tai's self-exploration and revealed his new and authentic version of a Queer self.

Over the course of the discussions held in the interviews, there were multiple factors mentioned that contributed to participants feelings of not being able to come out in their home countries. Legal rights, the political climate and societal factors can all be contributors to a person's decision to stay closeted and to leave their home country in search of exploration and self-actualisation. For example, Nyx, a 61-year-old nonbinary person who moved to Japan 25 years ago, spoke of their experiences in the USA during their youth:

I didn't come out until I moved to Japan, but I've known about my gender identity since I was young. And for my generation, terms like nonbinary were not in practise. So, you're either a boy or a girl, or a femme or a butch version of a boy or a girl. And

where I grew up, being a little bit feminine resulted in quite a bit of bullying and violence and it got worse actually as I got older and got into high school and college.

In contrast to Tai, Nyx professes more of a sense of who they were in terms of sexual identity in their country of origin. Other participants from America echoed similar sentiments to Nyx regarding being closeted in the USA. Structural homophobia and transphobia present within society and sometimes echoed by peers or family members can become a constant presence that elicits feelings of vulnerability and fear in LGBTQ+ people. Even if they have not experienced direct harm or violence, there is a heteronormative pressure present that can lead Queer people to seek escapism through migration (Novitskaya, 2023). Also evident here is a sense of change over time with reference to ‘my generation’ and the subsequent introduction into the common vernacular of terms such as ‘nonbinary’.

The USA is a large country with much diversity and intersectionality. The participants in this study would often refer to different states in that country as being more tolerant or more discriminatory, indicating a vast difference in cultural acceptance of LGBTQ+ people depending on geographical location. Over the past 50 years Queer civil rights such as marriage equality have been gained in America and there has been an increase in LGBTQ+ visibility. However, an increase in legal protections does not necessarily indicate a change in societal opinion or conduct (Meyer et al., 2021). Discriminatory attitudes and biased practices toward minorities still exist within that and related countries regardless of advances in legal rights. Studies have shown that LGBTQ+ individuals in the USA are more likely to be victims of hate crimes compared to their heterosexual counterparts and that these hate crimes disproportionately occur in public spaces (Flores et al., 2022).

Correspondingly, Seraphine is a 51-year-old transgender woman from the USA who spoke to being closeted in her youth and indicated that societal attitudes are still

discriminatory now. This account, corresponds with that of Nyx because Seraphine came out after moving to Japan:

I wasn't out in the US, so my experiences were very closeted, I mean, I grew up in Texas, so I graduated from high school in Texas in '92 and this was really not the nicest moment. Not that it's such a nice moment in Texas now either.

Evident for the accounts of such participants is the use of subtle phrases in reference to societal conditions that set the terrain for levels of personal safety and the willingness of participants to come out in their countries of origin. 1992 not being a 'nice moment' for LGBTQ+ people in Texas is then repeated in relation to the present moment to suggest that biases against Queer persons can persist despite progressive change towards increased social justice in other states and places (Budge, 2023). Many progressive policies regarding Queer rights and protections are currently under threat in the USA or are being actively taken away from this vulnerable population (Cohen & Galloway, 2025). Transgender people have often been specifically targeted in recent legislative sessions with politicians seeking to restrict access to health care and the ability of this population to participate safely in society (Kelly-Thompson & Lusvardi, 2025). This shows that the stability of Queer legal rights worldwide is precarious regardless of advances that may have been made in recent years.

Based on the conversations with such participants, it appears that while a country's socio-political perspectives toward LGBTQ+ people are a contributing factor to a person remaining closeted, legal protections do not solely influence whether someone feels comfortable enough or is able to explore their sexuality. Though some have moved from countries with more robust LGBTQ+ rights and legal protections and some have migrated from countries with less, the political landscape is only one aspect of the tapestry that constitutes self-exploration. There exists a duality in lived experiences in which migrants

may have newly acquired freedoms after relocating paired with anonymity that lends itself to self-exploration that may be harder to achieve in one's country of origin. For many, migration provides individuals with a sense of privacy and a fresh start away from their original and sometimes unsupportive community that is conducive to exploring and discovering their individuality and sexuality.

Though Japan has a fraught history regarding Queer life, most participants felt a sense of comfort accepting and embracing their sexualities and/or gender identities once they resettled in this unfamiliar country. While Tokyo is the place in which most of the participants explored their sexuality and connected with Queer spaces and community, it could be argued that the location was less important for participants coming out as the act of migration itself. The space and autonomy gained through migration allows for the exploration of one's sexuality and at times increased access to Queer communities (Choi, 2022). For these participants, they happened to resettle in Japan and while the move away from their country of origin allowed them to discover and embrace their genders and sexualities, they then had to navigate what being openly Queer means in their new country.

Out in Japan: Navigating Open Queer Identities in Modern Japanese Society

As of February 2026, Tokyo is the most populated city in the world with 36,953,600 people calling this city home (World Population Review, 2026). Those who live and work in Tokyo are likely to be perceived by multiple people across many public spaces daily. For those who present themselves in ways that counteract the heteronormative structures ever-present in Japanese society (Sato & Sawamiya, 2024), they do so knowing that they will be perceived and possibly judged negatively by multiple onlookers. This can happen whether at the conbini (convenience store), on the train or simply walking down the street. In this

context, and for Queer Japanese people, coming out in Japan can be a complex and/or seemingly impossible process. While some experience positive effects after coming out to one or more people in their lives, there is still significant concern regarding societal and familial bullying that can occur once one reveals their sexuality (Tamagawa, 2018).

Homophobia in Japan exists in two categories. The first is quiet (*otonashii*) homophobia which is a pervasive but often unsaid, ever-present societal dislike and discrimination. The second is familial (*uchi*) homophobia that is present in a Queer person's personal relationships with friends, family and work colleagues (Tamagawa, 2016). Foreign migrants may encounter these forms of homophobia but there will likely be differences in how they experience and interact with discriminatory people and conventions in Japan. This shows that while the political landscape and social acceptance of homophobia differ from country to country, there are similar challenges regarding self-acceptance in one's country of origin.

Migrants in Japan face many challenges but are also privy to some personal benefits regarding their ability to stand out with relative impunity. Foreigners in Japan are often referred to as *gaijin* which is an abbreviated somewhat informal version of *gaikokujin*. *Gaikokujin* translates to *person from a foreign country* whereas *gaijin* translates to *outside person or outsider*. This change in translation means that some consider *gaijin* to be a somewhat offensive term. Nevertheless, it is a term commonly used in Japan (Duppenthaler, 1989). One aspect of privilege that migrant's outsider status affords them is something known as the "gaijin card". The *gaijin card* is a colloquialism that affords foreigners a kind of pass for making mistakes and/or not adhering to Japan's unwritten societal rules (Shircliff, 2024). Because immigrants will never be able to fully integrate into Japan's seemingly homogenous society, they can sometimes exist in their own bubbles which, depending on workplaces and the person's social circle, can have varying Japanese influences present.

For some participants they may be physically located in Japan but working with other Europeans in cultural enclaves. For example, Hayley, a 34-year-old Queer woman from England, speaks to her bifurcated existence in Japan:

I live a very specific Japan experience that is like yeah, I am in Japan, but when people ask me, what's it like being, Queer in Japan? I'm like, I work for a European company. I speak English all day. Everyone that works at my company is European. My friends are either Japanese Queer people or international people. So, I'm kind of like, I don't know that it's much different from anywhere else for me personally. I don't know how different it would be, for example, if I worked at a Japanese company.

In this account we can see a self-protected strategy in the form of the creation of a comfort zone of encounter (Zahnow & Corcoran, 2025). Such zones are often characterized as containing culturally or sub-culturally similar persons that are shaped by shared values and interests (Hodgetts et al., 2020). These zones offer safe havens from which groups can come into contact or engagements with difference whilst being able to retreat into the group's norms and expectations if necessary. Migration isn't a simple exchange of one culture for another, rather, migrants must negotiate their past and current lives and often create a sense of proximity to their cultures by engaging with others with similar social backgrounds or who are from the same part of the world as them (Cassim, Hodgetts, et al., 2020). Hayley emphasises that she engages primarily with other Europeans or Queer Japanese. This quote presents the context of the cultural politics of Japan wherein there is a very clear division between Japanese and the other, in this case foreigners.

The intensive othering within Japanese society can contribute to fear of discrimination within foreign communities, may influence their social actions and could lead to a concealment of their differences where possible, including their sexuality (Ohata, 2023). In

contrast, the knowledge that they are already the other in Japanese society may give a kind of freedom for Queer people to express themselves knowing they are already seen as different. While there are negative aspects to being othered, existing within the margins of Japanese society can also be beneficial for Queer people. The societal pressure to assimilate is often an already impossible task for migrants living in Japan as depending on their country of origin and physical presentation, they may be instantly recognisable as a foreigner. There exists here a potential benefit as migrants can live their lives in ways that are not seen as typical in Japanese society.

Participants generally spoke highly of their experiences of being out in Japan and with the locals. When questioned about experiences of homophobia in Tokyo, most stated that they had very rarely encountered instances of overt discrimination. Tai spoke to instances of quiet (otonashii) homophobia but indicated that he believes this kind of response is present in many countries:

So far, I haven't had any physical attack. So that's a good thing. I've had some annoying situations that they were hinting homophobia. But I mean, it's everywhere. Wherever you go, you're gonna see those people. So, I don't really mind that. But I would say it's pretty mild. It's safe to express yourself. I don't see a problem with walking out on the street and wearing drag. And in broad daylight it's fine.

Wearing drag in public is an overt assertion of one's identity and, arguably, speaks to a level of everyday indifference to foreigners in Japan. For migrant drag artists, the social freedom they have post migration may enhance their courage to wear drag in public as the potential consequences for doing so are different for immigrants when compared to Japanese drag artists (Hughes, 2025). Even with the extra freedoms that come with being non-Japanese in Japan, there is always risk of discrimination when presenting in an overtly Queer way in a

public setting (Suppes et al., 2021). This paired with the fact that Tai may not be immediately discernible as an immigrant to the general public (Narzary, 2004) shows the level of self-confidence he has to be himself (or herself in her drag persona) and to be visibly Queer in a civic setting. Tai is claiming space by existing visibly and unapologetically in a society that has very particular views on what constitutes normality (Suganuma, 2011). His personal confidence and the faith that homophobic attitudes in Japan are generally more passive aggressive than outright violent contribute to his ability to do so.

Spaces of encounter or contact also matter in relation to being out in Japan. The experiences people have within and across different settings appears to influence the level of comfort they feel engaging with a particular space of encounter (Hodgetts et al., 2020). Certain environments create zones of comfort and feelings of belonging and others may induce feelings of unease or compel those present to adhere to a kind of heteronormative or gender performance (Rushbrook, 2002). For example, Mika recalls the differences between how they were able to present themselves at a language school in Tokyo versus how they were expected to dress at their previous place of employment:

I used to be so out in Sweden, and then when I came to language school [in Japan], I was super out at school as well. I was dressing up as a girl for classes, and I felt comfortable doing that. But then when I went to university and I started job hunting you had to wear suits. You had to cut your hair short. You had to....no makeup, no nail polish, no crazy hair colour. I thought, is this what I have to do to get a job here? So, after that I converted to be more passable. I toned down a lot during that time because I had to. And that's also when I started to hide my sexuality and my gender. So, I had to butch up just to fit in. And I hated that so much.

Mika outlines the very binary expectations of dress in the Japanese workplace that are largely informed by patriarchal values and do not allow individuals to express themselves artistically through fashion (Monden, 2014). Mika had to navigate these rigid gender expectations in the workforce in Tokyo before ultimately deciding to seek alternative employment in order to live authentically.

The other participants conveyed similar sentiments regarding their experiences in Japan. They spoke of instances of being stared at by Japanese locals and experiencing judgemental attitudes from some people.

For trans and gender non-conforming people, there are additional challenges. Japan, like many countries, has a history of crossdressing in some spaces being societally acceptable. Women's roles in kabuki theatre were played by men, a tradition that continues to this day, when women were banned from performing in Japan in 1629 (Isaka, 2023). Modern day Tokyo is a city that provides many and various entertainment opportunities. There seems to exist a separation between what is societally accepted as a way of life and what is relegated to a hobby or entertainment. For example, there are many bars and events dedicated to joso (loosely translated to crossdressing and largely referring to male-to-female presentations) in the city that are frequented by many heterosexual people as well as LGBTQ+ (Ho, 2024). The psychological separation between what is a permanent lifestyle and what is considered a fun way to unwind may lead some to participate in gender-non-conforming behaviours in their spare time but not accept or support trans and nonbinary people's realities.

Mika spoke to this while discussing the mainstreaming of drag culture. When asked if drag shows in Tokyo are generally Queer spaces they responded:

Well, they should be, I think. We aim for it. I don't think they necessarily are because some are driven by straight people, like brunches or whatever. It's 2 or 3 drag

performers and everybody in the audience is straight. Well, not everybody but like 80%. So, I wouldn't say those are Queer spaces. It's becoming more common because drag is becoming more mainstream, which is good. But it's also bad in one sense because it also takes away from the diversity that is drag.

Mika's experiences of drag shows that are catered toward heterosexual consumption is that they take some of the Queer essence and diversity away from the art form and spaces.

Support from heterosexual attendees toward gender non-conforming performers is often limited to their leisure time and does not always extend to meaningful advocacy beyond their temporary exploration of these unique spaces that provide them entertainment (Rushbrook, 2002). Crossdressing bars, drag and Queer events popular in red light and entertainment districts in Tokyo are not always held in dedicated Queer spaces. This serves as a kind of comfort to the heterosexual clientele who may wish to participate in gender non-conformity but do not wish to be associated with Queer culture overall (Ho, 2024).

Further, the popularity of drag, ballroom and the boom in heterosexual attendance of Queer spaces can be linked to mainstream media and TV shows such as RuPaul's Drag Race (Pullens & Vollebergh, 2022). The transition from drag and Queer culture being an underground subversive community-based art form to a mainstream consumable product has led to many straight fans feeling entitled to take up Queer spaces because of their identity as a fan (Sidi, 2018).

Despite appearing liberal in terms of the provision of spaces for crossdressing, Japan is a country with largely conservative moral views regarding gender that are overwhelmingly presented in governments and dominant political parties (Namatsu, 2025). This leads to social expectations that people be gender conforming in their everyday lives, with the exception of occasional recreation for the purposes of entertainment. As being Queer and/or gender non-

conforming in Japan is seen as a minority undertaking, the majority of heterosexual, gender conforming people may expect assimilation and acculturation from migrants in terms of their gender presentation (Park et al., 2022).

Seraphine recalled an incident where a staff member at a local train station shouted at her aggressively while she was using the women's toilets. As the train station was closing, staff were checking to make sure people were leaving and a male member of staff called in to see if anyone was left in the restrooms. When Seraphine replied that she would be out in a minute the man then shouted at her very aggressively and told her she should not be in the women's toilets:

... because Japanese people don't know what a trans person is in many cases. They only know whatever they see on TV or in an entertainment context. And so, people didn't know what to do or they couldn't identify me as a woman. Also, I'm tall, especially in a Japanese context, and you know it's these categorizations. They're based on a set of cues and like, a woman cannot be this tall, therefore.... And then I speak, and I also have a deep voice, so I must be not a woman.

Seraphine believes that the incident escalated in part because her voice is low which does not align with traditional gender presentation expectations in Japan. Many women in Japan speak in a high-pitched voice. The sociolinguistic term 'sweet voice' refers to a high-pitched register often associated with female announcers and anime characters in Japan and is designed to make them seem feminine and kawaii, meaning cute (Starr, 2015). Because of this gendered expectation of women having sweet voices and being short, Seraphine did not fit the societal norms of what a woman is assumed to sound and physically present as. Nonbinary and transwomen who do not embody societal norms of womanhood (e.g. domesticity, respectability and heterosexuality) including, presentation, are often at greater

risk of visibility (Glover, 2016; Tannehill, 2018). Seraphine's differences from these societal expectations rendered her vulnerable to judgement and verbal attack in this incident.

Engaging Queer Spaces in Tokyo

For several participants, either during the process or after coming out, they often engaged with existing Queer spaces in Tokyo. The district of Ni-chōme in Shinjuku, Tokyo is the largest Queer neighbourhood in Japan hosting hundreds of gay and Queer bars and event spaces (Suganuma, 2011). See Figures 1 and 2 below for depictions of this area and specific venues. It is common for Ni-chōme to be brought up in conversation when discussing Queerness in Tokyo. For Queer migrants, engaging in nightlife in this area is often an important step to affirm themselves, engage with community and negotiate their belonging in a country that is not their place of origin (Centner & Neto, 2021). For those in Tokyo seeking Queer comfort or who simply wish to partake in nightlife among those with whom they share a commonality, Ni-chōme is often a first choice.

Ni-chōme, now a famous Queer neighbourhood, was once a red-light district that primarily catered toward heterosexual patrons until the 1950s (Suganuma, 2011). This district has many locations that are well-known and loved by both the local Japanese and migrant community. These include 'lesbian alley', an alleyway full of small bars catering to sapphic women, Airoo Café, a shot bar known for its rainbow torii gates (a traditional Japanese gate often located at the entrance to Shinto shrines). There is also the famous among Tokyo residents 7-11 located near the bars where people drink cheap convenience store alcohol and often make new friends with strangers on the street. Clubs like New Sazae, a disco bar established in 1966 pioneered in welcoming diverse sexualities and genders into one joyful nightlife space (Sadachi, 2022). There are also establishments aimed at providing a more

relaxed environment than a nightclub such as Ashiyu cafe & bar Donyoku, a place that offers food, board games and even seats with traditional foot baths (which is the meaning of the word ashiyu). There are Queer owned restaurants, various performance spaces, snack bars (smaller retro style bars) and dance clubs all within approximately 5 city blocks. Ni-chōme has grown in the variety of establishments offered and many people can find a place there that suits their needs.



Figure 1. Outdoor Images Taken in Ni-chōme: 7-Eleven (Top Left), One of the Main Streets (Middle Left), Rainbow Torii Gate (Bottom Left) and Lesbian Alley (Right).



Figure 2. Image of Ashiyu cafe & bar Donyoku (Top) and New Sazae (Bottom Three Images).

Ni-chōme fosters a feeling that contrasts many other parts of Tokyo. This large city “gaybourhood” differs from other sites that uphold mainstream societal expectations of self-expression and sexuality and allows patrons to be their authentic Queer selves while interacting with other Queer people (Kaneshiro Chou, 2025). Ni-chōme is a testament to the organisation and creativity of the Queer community as the evolution of Ni-chōme into a hub for LGBTQ+ life and socialisation evolved outside of any formal or state planning (Sorensen,

2002). For many in the Queer migrant community, Ni-chōme is a special space that offers a retreat from the pressures of everyday life and is a place of valuable socialisation with likeminded others (Massey, 2005).

Some participants had positive things to say about existing Queer spaces in Ni-chōme, and Tokyo more generally. Ni-chōme has many establishments that are welcoming to people of any sexuality or gender identity and aim to provide a safe and enjoyable Queer space for any and all patrons (Sadachi, 2022). Some participants run their Queer events in various establishments across Tokyo, including spaces in Ni-chōme. For many, these existing spaces provide joy, comfort and community. While Hayley does not particularly enjoy spending time at Queer bars and drinking establishments in general, she expressed her appreciation for Ni-chōme:

I love Ni-chōme. I think it's great! I think it's great that it exists in a time where you know, gay areas are routinely getting mowed down.

Fear of change to these existing cultural enclaves, whether due to displacement or gentrification, is prevalent across Queer communities worldwide (Rushbrook, 2002). Hayley acknowledges the importance of districts such as Ni-chōme and understands the threat of closure of this beloved existing space because of patterns seen in other cities around the world. Many participants value the Ni-chōme district, however, issues of exclusionary practices in some establishments have invoked discussions of the diversity of the Queer community in Tokyo.

Ni-chōme, much like existing Queer spaces worldwide, is not without criticism. Ni-chōme is described by many as catering primarily to gay men (Suganuma, 2011) and can oftentimes be seen as exclusionary to those of diverse genders and sexual orientations. Participants gave a range of responses when talking about Ni-chōme. Some had positive

things to say, some were ambivalent, and some were largely negative about the shortcomings of this popular and densely populated gaybourhood.

Many of the establishments in Ni-chōme are bars and so the events held are often centred around nightlife and alcohol consumption. Hayley spoke about the need to have Queer spaces that are not solely focused on traditional nightlife:

I was part of a kind of events collective before. A lot of us don't drink, and a lot of people who are in that kind of group of friends that started it had recently decided to go sober. So, they were like, well, we don't really enjoy being in these spaces where everyone is drinking and partying. So, we just want to do other stuff with people that we know are safe and that we can resonate with. So, we started doing book exchanges and zine meetups and art fairs and picnics and those kind of alternative things that were in the daytime and not centred around drinking.

The culture of alcohol consumption has been a longstanding part of Queer nightlife with many LGBTQ+ people feeling they must drink in order to socialise with others (Meads et al., 2023). Alcohol consumption and the resulting health issues have long been a source of concern for minority groups including the Queer community and while some use alcohol in moderation to relax, others may drink heavily as a subconscious response to being marginalised (Adams et al., 2022). Hayley speaks to a growing idea that there should be diversity in the kinds of Queer spaces available to the community. For those who do not drink, spending time at a bar may not be appealing but they should be able to access community events all the same.

Voicing similar sentiments about the limitations of bar only options for Queer spaces, Rebecca, a 34-year-old lesbian who runs a successful Queer horror movie event in various

establishments all over the city reflected on her experience of Ni-chōme when she was trying to meet friends in her early days in Tokyo:

I just couldn't find Queer community. I knew about Ni-chōme. I'd go there a few times, and that's great. Queer nightlife is so important. But I didn't really get a sense of community there.

Both Hayley and Rebecca acknowledge the importance of the existing Queer spaces, including bars. However, Rebecca noted she had trouble making meaningful connections with others. The purpose of Queer safe spaces is often to foster interaction between community members in an environment that one can be visible in without risk of danger (McCartan & Nash, 2023). When asked what she thought was missing in Ni-chōme and other events she had attended, Rebecca continued with the thread regarding community in such spaces. She disclosed that other people appeared to be experiencing community, but that her shyness meant she was not as comfortable in such social settings:

I'm not really sure because the people there seemed to feel comfortable. They seem to be in community. A lot of it was a little bit nightlife focused, but I also noticed more community-oriented spaces outside of Ni-chōme opening up. I'm kind of shy. I'm not really good at breaking into social circles, you know.

Such quotes reflect how the same space can be experienced differently by different inhabitants. This participant recognises Ni-chōme as a space for community, but just not for her. Seraphine also framed Ni-chōme in a way that correlates with Rebecca's experience by pointing out that the space was primarily welcoming to only certain groups within the Queer community:

When I first came out, you know when one would go to Ni-chōme, that was the option. And Ni-chōme is not a wonderful space for Queer people if you're not a cis gay man, and especially if you're neither a cis gay man nor a cis gay woman.

Seraphine expressed a general distaste for Ni-chōme but also detailed an incident where she was denied entry into an event at a lesbian bar due to her identity as a trans woman. She described going to see her friend DJ at a women's only event but being rejected at the door by staff because they did not consider her a woman:

*...we were there at the party. They don't let me in. The reason I was there in the first place is cause my friend was deejaying. She invited me and I'm like, you know, I heard that trans women don't get in this party, and she's like, no, no, absolutely not. That can't be. That would be crazy. And so, I couldn't get in. And then she came out, she's like, what's going on? And I told her they won't let me in. And then she went back in and she came back out with her record bag. Her set was starting in 2 minutes. And she says I'm not playing this ****.*

As disclosed above, this experience led to her friend leaving the bar without DJing her set. The effects of this experience were many and ongoing. Both the bar and Seraphine herself received backlash from members of the Queer community. Seraphine stated that she did not believe that the intentions of staff were malicious but that they were uninformed and unfortunately discriminatory. This incident became the catalyst for her to create an alternative Queer space in Tokyo.

Rounding out this section, it is important to note that transgender rights in Japan also have a complex history. Transgender healthcare was legalised in Japan in 1997, but this has not been without issue. Since then, for a person to change their legal gender, they were required to be in a permanent state of infertility. This condition was thankfully ruled to be

unconstitutional in the Supreme Court in October 2023. The ruling has led to trans people being able to change their gender in official records without undergoing sterilisation (Yorozuya et al., 2025). There are some who argue that while advancing legal rights is an important step for transgender people in Japan, it is imperative that there are social developments in the understanding, recognition and acceptance of this underrepresented community (Lunsing, 2005). As shown by Seraphine's experiences outlined in this research, more understanding of trans issues needs to come from both within and outside the Queer community.

To recap, Ni-chōme is made up of hundreds of bars and spaces, many of which are extremely gendered and separatist regarding Queer identities (Suganuma, 2011). Different genders and sexualities have different relationships to and affinities for these existing spaces within this Queer cityscape. A common critique of Ni-chōme is the way different establishments exclude, as evidenced by Seraphine's experiences at a lesbian bar. Each bar or space in Ni-chōme has its own atmosphere and its own set of morals and rules of inclusion (Kaneshiro Chou, 2025). This can lead to conflict, feelings of exclusion and judgemental attitudes from those within the community. It also suggests the need for alternative event spaces.

Organising Queer Events and Creating Alternative Spaces

For some, issues experienced within existing Queer spaces inspired them to join and add on to what was already established in Tokyo. For others, the need to create more inclusive spaces or to better curate communities became the main catalyst for their migration from event attendees to event creators. For Mika and Tai who are drag performers, for example, they chose to expand upon the existing scene and create events that incorporated

different interests and subcultures. Through existing events Mika became friendly with other drag queens and began to do shows at an established drag event. They then decided to branch out and create their own Halloween event which they described as a “big failure”. While the event was enjoyable for patrons, Mika felt they overdid it by including too many performance elements and ultimately made a financial loss:

My first event was 2013, because I've always been interested in trying to do something myself. And I had a Halloween special where I invited friends to perform and it was a big failure. So, I lost about ¥70,000. Like, a lot of money. And I was like, what? The house was packed! I had 140 people coming! How did I lose money? Because I had done a budget and I asked for advice from friends who had done events before me. But still it was a huge fiasco. So, after that I took a big break from doing events because I felt so defeated. My organisation skills were not there. And I was also doing too much because I put everything on myself. I put all the financial risk on myself. I had 11 dress changes. That was way too ambitious! And I was also singing. I was playing guitar. I was doing everything. I was involved in all the shows. And I also made a movie for it. So, I was too involved in it. I was doing too much.

Mika tried consulting with friends who had experience doing shows but ultimately had a stressful experience because of the complexity of their involvement in the show and the resulting financial loss they suffered. Queer events are often created with multiple collaborators and support from the community (Radicioni & Weicht, 2018). While Mika sought advice from others, they felt that they took on too much responsibility themselves which led to burnout and a reluctance to organise other events for a while.

The first event Mika organised took place in a district of Tokyo called Roppongi which is known for its nightlife and popularity with Western tourists and immigrants

(Matsumoto, 2013). While some Queer events are held in Roppongi, the area itself is not known as a Queer area. The reputation among those who live in Tokyo is that it's a district largely patroned by white heterosexual men, the stereotypical expat according to early studies involving migrants (McNulty, 2015). It is also known for having expensive venues which Mika also noted during our interview.

It took Mika five years to feel ready to create and run another drag event themselves which they moved to a lesbian owned bar in Ni-chōme. After their second event was a success, they found confidence, created a drag family and began to run more events:

Then I did an event in Ni-chōme and the people there were more friendly. I got in contact with a Korean lesbian girl who was super friendly and she had hosted parties a lot in Ni-chōme. She had a venue there, so I booked it and that time it was a big success. I did it as a birthday bash for me because at that point I had started to build up a following in my drag as well. It was an all-night event and there were still issues, of course, but it went way smoother and I didn't make a loss, which is good. And after that I thought - oh this is really fun - and then I continued to do it. And then I created my drag family, and we started to do events together.

Mika expressed that the help and support they received in Ni-chōme differed from that in Roppongi. Though they had friends who they asked for guidance with their first event, their second event became successful after engaging with a new venue owner and shifting from Roppongi to Ni-chōme. Spaces come alive through the community that gather there and the practices that are produced as part of the space (Massey, 2005). While part of the issue for their first event was that Mika tried to do too much alone, another key factor identified was the unsuitability of the physical location, both from a financial and a community standpoint. In this example, Ni-chōme provided a location from which a Queer event could operate from

that was supportive and could therefore thrive (Suganuma, 2011). Because of the success of Mika's second event, they were able to expand their Queer circle by creating a drag family.

A drag family uses heteronormative familial gender roles and titles yet subverts these by Queering well-known traditional cultural scripts to create an interconnected community of Queer artists who support and uplift one another (Hughes, 2025). The drag mother, in this case Mika, is usually the mentor figure who offers guidance and sometimes helps their drag children with their first time in drag or will connect them with their wider Queer and drag community (Balint et al., 2025). For example, Mika is the drag mother of Tai. Mika helped Tai get booked gigs as a drag queen and supported him to perform and host Queer events. Together with their drag family, Mika runs three popular ongoing drag events in Tokyo. One is centred on performances (often horror-related) from established drag artists. The second is a charity show that aims to give both established and up and coming drag performers the chance to get experience performing in a supportive environment. A third, newer show, places more focus on audience interactions.

Mika's primary intentions for creating and running their own Queer events was to expand upon the already established drag events and to create additional opportunities for Queer art and performance to be seen and enjoyed. They spoke to what they hope to add to the landscape of drag in Tokyo:

One other thing that stands out from other drag events is the horror and I think diversity because we include any type of gender, any type of performer, any type of sexuality. So, we want it to be like as multiversed as possible.

Queer culture has a longstanding affection for the horror genre for reasons including its campness and the affiliation marginalised people and communities can find with the monsters, quirky friends or clever final girls present in these stories (Leger, 2025). Because

drag performances have now found a mainstream and sometimes heterosexual audience, there is often a formulaic expectation of what a drag queen is and how they should perform. This leaves very little room for the complexity of gender performance by a wider range of identities in the LGBTQ+ community (Brennan, 2023). Mika is actively trying to include many kinds of genders, sexualities and performance styles in their events. They are dedicated to encouraging subversion and authenticity in this art form.

The drive for more inclusion in Queer spaces was a reoccurring theme in all my discussions with the research participants. Nyx runs a café and bar in a fixed location in a small but vibrant district in Tokyo. They have many different events weekly that range from parties to clothing swaps, movie events to shamisen (a traditional Japanese instrument) classes. They aim to provide a safe and diverse space that caters to the sometimes-forgotten members of the Queer community such as older and/or neurodivergent people etc. Nyx spoke of their Queer space that they co-own and run with their partner:

There are different communities of Queer people coming here. So that idea of wanting to go to a place where you can just meet Queer people regardless of their age or where they come from or how they identify or who they're interested in actually occurs here on a small scale every week. And it's been amazing because it's what we needed, and it turns out we're far from alone in needing that.

This quote speaks to the desire for inclusive spaces that are accepting of difference in the Queer community, and which can address issues of isolation or disconnection. Space making that is non-judgemental and that caters to many demographics within a group as vast as Queer migrants serves to not only provide a place of comfort but extends beyond the physical location into world making (Hernandez, 2024). Connections formed in physical spaces like Nyx's can turn into meaningful long-lasting friendships. Alternatively, it can be comforting

for some to simply have a place where they can engage with others in a no pressure environment. The environment Nyx provides is designed to appeal to different demographics and is a gentle space that encourages community participation.

Rebecca created her Queer horror movie night as a way to both find and create community in Tokyo. This is a fun space for Queer communing that Rebecca is proud of:

I'm really proud that it has [created community]. I wasn't sure this was going to work, but a lot of people tell me they feel that it's a safe space. They feel that it's a community. Someone went to their first event about two months ago, they said they finally found their people. Their Queer freaky people.

Like Mika, Rebecca provides a unique environment to appeal to Queer people with an affinity for horror. Creating these alternative spaces is about finding one's people or place to be within the LGBTQ+ community. While the attendees at Rebecca's events may differ in their genders, sexualities and identities, they are brought together as a group because of a shared interest which allows them to find and enjoy each other's company in a shared safe space.

Participants stressed the importance of having diverse event options for Queer communities. Some have permanent locations that hold multiple events with different collaborators, and some have a more fixed event style that migrates to different spaces within Tokyo. Curating inclusive spaces involves not only providing a welcoming environment and encouraging diversity in the attendees but also incorporating specific interests and subcultures. Providing enjoyable environments for Queer people to engage in different activities and interests expands the function of Queer space beyond late night parties and pride celebrations. The ephemeral nature of many of these events allows for a variety of interests to be catered to and for attendees to gather and interact with the event theme being

the primary focus and their Queerness being somewhat secondary to the purpose of the evening (Greene, 2022).

It has been argued that people are made up of many dimensions of self, related to particular social categories that can afford them both privilege and challenges in their lives (Carbado et al., 2013). For Queer migrants, their Queerness and their status as foreigners in the country in which they live make up two significant parts of their intersectional identities. When one creates space that allows for the Queer and foreign aspects of a person to simply exist in a safe and affirming environment, this can nurture and encourage simple enjoyment of a specific interest for the duration of the event.

Having spaces for communing that embrace diversity and the arranging of successful events also helps to support and encourage aspiring event co-ordinators who may be in the beginning stages of running a business or Queer spaces themselves. Much like a drag family Queers heteronormative family roles, LGBTQ+ run spaces can similarly uplift community members by incorporating specific Queer informed policies of safety and care into their settings (Radicioni & Weicht, 2018). This can foster a sense of support and belonging that is important for both Queer people and immigrants. A significant feature of Hayley's Queer space is providing the physical space for other Queer people to run events or pop-up shops:

One of the regular events that we have is a vegan pop-up. There's a vegan baker who runs their monthly pop-up here and their aim is to one day own their own cafe or restaurant. So, they're getting the practise of running that business, they're trying out the recipes, they're doing something every month, and they donate to good causes as well. So, we get to help build not just something that's good for the community now, but that makes something for people who are part of the community for their futures

too. There are people who can say “I was in an art exhibition in Tokyo” because of us.

Here we see a sense of a tradition of belonging that these spaces provide to support people in the present and future. Because Hayley’s space is run by Queer migrants, the team is mindful of the unique pressures and limitations that others in their community face and strive to provide opportunities for others through their collective (Gedro et al., 2013). This demonstrates ongoing support for fellow LGBTQ+ immigrants because the venue both provides a leisure space and a physical location for those who wish to test run their own events which may lead to more permanent Queer spaces and/or businesses being run in Tokyo.

Engaging Local Japanese People in Spaces of Encounter and Belonging

When discussing challenges regarding running LGBTQ+ events in Tokyo, some participants expressed regrettable difficulties in engaging with Queer Japanese people. All interviewees expressed the intention to engage with both the migrant and local population in an all-inclusive Queer space. However, some appeared to have more success than others.

Nyx co-runs their event space with their Japanese partner and stated that some events, such as music performances, typically bring in a Japanese audience but that they sometimes struggle to connect with local Queer communities. Nyx states:

You know we've tried social media. We go to events. And of course, we connect with the Japanese Queer people who do come here. And occasionally they bring people as well. But like the nonbinary community or x gender community in Japan, we have had a really hard time connecting with them. We've tried inviting them to things, inviting them to groups and we've had more luck with the Japanese community when we've

done programmes that are around support for Palestine. So, I'm not really sure why this is the way it is, but it's something we want to address.

There are likely to be many reasons why it might be difficult for foreigner-owned and run Queer events to connect with local Queer Japanese. For example, the language barrier is something that may contribute to the fracture between these two Queer communities. As many migrant run LGBTQ+ events are primarily run in English, those with little or no English skills or who are shy about trying to communicate in English may find the idea of engaging with these communities intimidating and/or tiring. Rebecca also spoke to the challenges of trying to address language barriers whilst trying to be an open space for both local and migrant communities:

I'm definitely trying to encourage a multicultural attendance, Japanese and expats. However, the event does have a majority expat community. Whenever possible, I always have Japanese subtitles, but sometimes that's not possible. Like I do a series called Creepy Classics where we show movies that are really old. I think one of them we did was 98 years old. So yeah, there's not often Japanese subtitles available for that.

Situations like a lack of subtitle availability creates an unfortunate but occasional barrier to enjoyment of the event by Japanese attendees. This event was primarily advertised on Instagram and apologetically advised people when Japanese subtitles were unavailable for certain movies.

Another potential divide between the local and immigrant Queer communities in Tokyo could be the tendency towards homogeneity that is present in Japanese culture. The care with which a community tries to protect their homogenous society can lead to rejectionist attitudes toward foreign communities from local communities (Ullah et al., 2023).

This could be a potential avenue for further psychological study but is beyond the scope of the current research.

Many participants in this study referred to the Japanese people that engage with their events as being familiar with diverse cultures and open to communicating with people from abroad. Tai is a prominent figure in the ballroom scene in Japan and runs both drag and ballroom events. Originating in Harlem in the 1960s, the ballroom community is now large, multicultural and transnational (Bailey, 2013). Ballroom culture provides a stage for Queer and drag performers to compete in ‘balls’ in various categories including runway, dance, voguing and posing categories (Pullens & Vollebergh, 2022). Tai speaks to the multicultural nature of the ballroom scene in Japan:

The main thing I can see from the Japan ballroom scene is that the Japanese culture and the ballroom culture, they don't really mix well because a lot of Japanese values are about hiding and blending in, but ballroom is about standing out. So, it's two opposite takes on life. Of course, we have Japanese members in the ballroom scene here, but they are very different from a typical Japanese person. I would say that the ballroom scene in Japan is half international, half Japanese and even these Japanese people, they are very international Japanese. Like, they're willing to communicate with foreigners. They're willing to learn languages. They're willing to break free from the shackles of Japanese expectations of what a Japanese person should be, and how they should behave. So, I feel that the scene in Tokyo is very international. If you look at the Taiwanese scene or the Thai scene or the scene in China or the Korean scene, then it mostly consists of the local people. But then in Tokyo, half the people are international and come from all over the place. So, it's very unique. Ballrooms in Japan are quite different.

Tai emphasises that the ballroom scene in Tokyo is distinctive from other countries in Asia as it includes a mix of both foreign and local participants. As this study only presents a migrant perspective of Japan and Japanese Queer culture, it is by its nature an unbalanced view. More research is required to ascertain the reasons why Japanese Queer people may be reluctant to engage with Queer spaces run by non-Japanese residents.

Heterosexual Ruptures to Queer Spacing

My analysis above speaks to challenges participants experienced in cultivating Queer spaces of encounter and inclusion, which related to engaging with different intersectional segments of the LGBTQ+ community, such as older people, those who are neurodivergent and Queer Japanese. There are also ongoing concerns about the rupturing of Queer spaces by heterosexual audiences. To ensure economic viability and attract tourism, these spaces experience pressure to increasingly cater to heterosexual audiences, thus excluding marginalised and Queer people (Collins, 2004). This phenomenon, termed *heterosexual tourism*, sees Queer spaces transformed into spectacles for heterosexual consumption, leading to the displacement of Queer people and increased vulnerability to violence (Puar, 2002). As mentioned by Mika earlier in the chapter, the popularisation of drag shows has led to an increase in heterosexual audiences which has in some instances altered the style of performances and transformed the space into a consumable Queer product aimed at the heterosexual palate. Social media, modern movies and popular TV shows have made Queer culture more accessible and in limited ways, more acceptable to straight audiences (Pullens & Vollebergh, 2022). The flipside of this move toward a more globalised acceptance is that more and more straight people are occupying Queer spaces, causing many LGBTQ+ people to feel uncomfortable and/or threatened in what is meant to be their safe haven (Doan &

Higgins, 2011). Many come to graze upon the joy and freedoms of these hard-fought for social venues without being actively involved with Queer communities or being aware of their heterosexual privilege and impacts on the sustainability of these settings (Hartless, 2019).

In Ni-chōme, there have been increasing instances of inappropriate and sometimes violent behaviour from heterosexual people accessing Queer spaces. One such incident occurred in early 2025 at a bar in Ni-chōme that is aimed at providing a comfortable space for Queer women. Hayley details this incident:

There was one incident where one of the bars had one of their staff members attacked by someone who was on gay safari basically. There are straight men who come into Ni-chōme, and they'll come into spaces and they'll look for Queer women to hit on. And so, this man was doing that. And the bartender, very kind person, intervened because he could see that the woman was uncomfortable and he [staff member] got attacked and he [staff member] got hit in the face and ended up with, a gash on his head. And they [the bar] posted, "Let's keep Ni-chōme safe. Let's look after each other for community." It's like yes, but you're a venue and your staff member got attacked because they were being a good samaritan, basically. Thankfully that bar has since gotten security, especially at the weekends. But even that, you know, people have mixed feelings about that because it's not nice to have to have security. But then if you don't, these things happen.

Along with the physical violence and harassment of the customers and staff of the bar, the man involved in this incident allegedly shouted homophobic slurs (Japan Gay Guide [@japangayguide] & Queen Tokyo [@queentokyobar], 2025). This is an example of a disturbing global trend where the visibility and accessibility of Queer spaces has led to places

of safety being commodified by heterosexual ‘tourists’ who may have skewed interpretations of a Queer space as being a type of modern playground or attraction (Rushbrook, 2002). As Queer spaces become assimilated into mainstream culture, there is the risk that their accessibility and safety are compromised (Oswin, 2008). These spaces risk becoming subsumed within heteronormative structures, undermining their initial purpose as safe sites for Queer expression (Robinson, 2016). The challenges Queer communities face in preserving the integrity of their spaces underscore a complex struggle to balance Queer expression with safety, especially in urban areas where commercialisation and assimilation increasingly erode the original purpose of these spaces as ‘safe’ and ‘inclusive’ sites for Queer existence (Nicolazzo, 2019). This ongoing tension sets the stage for a closer examination of how Queer expats navigate these dynamics within Tokyo, Japan.

The presence of such a large gay district in Tokyo may give the mistaken impression to others that Japan is a country that is tolerant and accepting of Queerness. However, seeing a community in a celebratory state is not the same as understanding the realities of Queer life in a nation that has little LGBTQ+ legal rights. Heterosexuality and gender conformity are still seen as being normal and Queer people are still considered ‘other’ in Japan and many other countries worldwide (Hartless, 2019). Ni-chōme, once seen as safe haven for Queer people in Japan who must often carefully manage their public and private lives, is now increasingly dealing with ruptures and disruptions in the space by visitors who are not Queer and/or who do not have such worries about discretion (Suganuma, 2011). Heterosexual visitors, or as Hayley puts it, those on ‘gay safari’, have contributed to some feeling that they have lost their safety and the decline of the community feel that this cherished Queer sanctuary once held (Kaneshiro Chou, 2025). Seraphine spoke about the potential issues caused by Queer events becoming increasingly popular with heterosexual patrons:

Queer nightlife collectives in some parts of the world face explicit repression and police hostility. Others have issues like having their parties become too popular. With the result that the Queers couldn't get in anymore. The space starts to have a different kind of makeup inside, you know. Because it became the hot party and so, it stopped being a Queer party in a sense. And we had a bit of this experience with this other party that we were doing where it became the hot ticket. It stopped having the character that we were aiming for. It's defunct at the moment, actually, partly for this set of reasons. And you know, it's important to have spaces where all kinds of people can be together and build bridges and yada yada. But when that comes with losing a core element of the feeling of the space that's sad to me.

This quote exhibits some real consequences of heterosexual rupturing of and entitlement to Queer space. Seraphine's event became so popular that the LGBTQ+ people it was designed for were no longer able to buy tickets to it. This was a partial reason for the event being paused, perhaps indefinitely. A potential effect of the mainstreaming of Queer culture is that it leaves safe spaces vulnerable to appropriation and deradicalisation to the point where they may become majority heterosexual spaces (Kolb & Betsky, 2017). There is a trend of commodification and sanitisation of Queer culture that has made interacting with LGBTQ+ more appealing to straight audiences. Many heterosexual people now associate attendance at Queer spaces as a way of gaining social capital now that there are social advantages to be gained by associating with Queer people (Bettani, 2015). The unfortunate consequence of this is that Queer people are being pushed out of the events and spaces that were created specifically for them.

While the instances of violence, sexual aggression and entitled behaviour from heterosexual patrons has and continues to create issues within Queer spaces, there are those who wish for a more harmonious and inclusive relationship between all sexualities and

gender identities. Nyx spoke enthusiastically about wanting to foster a positive relationship between the Queer community and straight allies and actively wishes to use their space to do so:

Another goal we've had is to try to get Queer people and more allies in the same room with each other. Because most of our music friends are really progressive and they would put themselves on the line for Queer people. They're very about human rights. They're very about inclusion. So, I want them to meet the Queer community because the Queer community's inspiring and they're nice people and they're creative as well.

Nyx speaks to a tension when it comes to spaces around enabling enclaves for marginalised Queer groups in heteronormative societies and opening these as spaces for inclusion that extends to heterosexual allies. For many in the LGBTQ+ community, there remains a form of discomfort when engaging with heterosexual society, especially in a Queer space (Forbes & Ueno, 2020). This may be in part formed by previous encounters and/or disruptions caused by heterosexuals who are not allies but populate Queer spaces for their own entertainment purposes. Nyx uses the term allies to denote that they are specifically referring to those who care for Queer rights and social issues and would 'put themselves on the line' for the LGBTQ+ community.

Working With Allies to Sustain Queer Spaces

The term ally refers to a person who is a member of the privileged majority group, in this case heterosexuals, who is committed to advocacy for marginalised groups and contributes to Queer communities' feelings of safety in both dedicated spaces and the wider cityscape (Goldstein, 2017). Many LGBTQ+ people feel cautious about opening their spaces to heterosexual patronage because of previous incidents of commodification and sometimes

violent rupturing of their safe enclaves (Rushbrook, 2002). However, true allies are not there to take possession of Queer spaces but are contributors to the safety and enjoyment of the space. There is no singular definition of or set of expectations from allies by the Queer community. The term itself is often criticised as encouraging only passive support whereas a shift towards more active, high-risk, and systemic disruption in equity work might be needed (Mills et al., 2024; Squire, 2019). However, common expectations of an ally sometimes include political support, activism and on a more personal level, friendship (Forbes & Ueno, 2020).

Nyx discussed a passion for connecting allies to the Queer community and the sharing of inclusive spaces. This strategy is framed as particularly important in the current period of an upsurge in anti-Queer conservatism within which community rights are being challenged across the world:

I would emphasise it's important that we bond with allies more and I think that comes from both sides. Allies need to feel comfortable to come to Queer things that are open to them and Queer folk need to be more inviting because looking at what's going on in the US, we are on the back foot in that conflict right now. We're losing ground really fast and we're not going to get it back unless we have a lot of very straight, very ordinary citizens standing next to us, fighting for that. In Japan, the statistics here tend to show that the average Japanese person is actually fine with Queerness, they don't have any issue, they're not trying to politicise it, and I think it would be nice if the Queer community can pull those people closer and say we need you. We need your help. Help us make this government understand that marriage equality is important. Help us create more resources for Queer communities and help us fight against, you know, there is a rising right in Japan just like there is everywhere else now and this needs to be fought before it gets stronger.

This quote invokes notions of solidarity between most Japanese people being accepting of Queerness and the need to cultivate overt allyship during a period of increased hostility towards Queer communities globally. Studies have shown that many Japanese have a somewhat apathetic attitude toward Queer people in Japan in that they are not staunch supporters but are generally unconcerned by the presence of the LGBTQ+ community (Kullberg, 2023; Sato & Sawamiya, 2024). There seems to be pluralistic ignorance in Japan toward LGBTQ+ people, meaning that individuals may hold supportive or non-discriminatory attitudes toward the Queer community but they don't actively voice these opinions due to their perceptions that the majority of others in society don't share this opinion (Yokota, 2023).

The Japanese government continually presents an unaccepting position toward its LGBTQ+ citizens. In 2023, then Prime Minister Fumio Kishida stated that he did not think disallowing same-sex couples to marry was discriminatory. One of the Prime Minister's aides, Masayoshi Arai, publicly stated that he would not want to live next door to Queer people. He believed Japanese citizens would flee the country if marriage equality was legally recognised in Japan (The Associated Press, 2023). Japan's first female Prime Minister, Sanae Takaichi, who was elected in 2025 also opposes same-sex marriage and holds staunchly conservative views on this and related issues (James, 2025). Though anecdotally it appears that many Japanese citizens do not hold discriminatory attitudes toward Queer people, the impetus to be vocal LGBTQ+ allies may be affected by government attitudes and assumed opinions of others in society. Nyx expresses the desire to bring Queer folk and allies together to help facilitate social change and compel a dialogue between these groups of people.

This is a complicated notion as with the rise of incidents of violence and predatory behaviour by heterosexuals in Queer spaces in Tokyo, many Queer people are reluctant to invite heteronormative encroachment into their Queer spaces (Doan & Higgins, 2011; Oswin,

2008). Mika noted that the rise in popularity of what were previously underground and subversive Queer art forms has changed the style of the performances and the expectations of performers. This indicates that heterosexual attendance is not solely about supporting Queer art and enjoying Queer performance but is actively shifting the culture toward the 'straight gaze' which can sideline Queer performers and attendees in their own spaces (Kolb & Betsky, 2017; Sidi, 2018). In a country like Japan which offers very little in the way of legal protections for Queer people and often stigmatises difference (Kawasaka, 2025; Kawasaka & Würrer, 2024; Lunsing, 2005; Tamagawa, 2016), Queer people's spaces are one of the few ways in which this population can access comfort (Kaneshiro Chou, 2025; Suganuma, 2011). While active allies are certainly important (Forbes & Ueno, 2020) there is an understandable reluctance from many in the LGBTQ+ community to invite more heterosexual attendance into their spaces both because of previous negative experiences and because for many, a Queer bar or space is the only place they can be around others like them in this city textured by heteronormative values (Hartless, 2019).

Further, the concept of allyship is complicated as there are concerns that some use the term ally as an identity marker in the hopes that they are seen as good people regardless of how active they are in supporting marginalised communities and advocating for change (Squire, 2019). There are calls for the practice of Queer allyship to be more expansive and involve long-term collaboration with minority groups that is strengthened by self-reflection and knowledge of heterosexual privilege (Cumming-Potvin, 2024). The language of activism is also evolving with many calling on those who identify as LGBTQ+ allies to move beyond a passive role into an active accomplice role to help fight for Queer rights and against further stigmatisation (Mills et al., 2024). Nyx speaks to fostering a collaborative relationship between the Queer community and those who identify as allies. Because of a complicated history and ongoing issues of space disruption from heterosexuals in Queer venues there is

understandably no consensus on how to accomplish this (Dooling, 2020; Hartless, 2019). However, for many in the Queer community there lies an expectation that allies will have done their own internal work and will therefore know how to respectfully access Queer spaces and find their place alongside the community without the need for recruitment from within the LGBTQ+ community (Duhigg et al., 2010).

Allyship and Activism Within the Queer Migrant Event Community

A common finding across participant interviews is that each event coordinator is dedicated to serving the community and this extends to communities beyond the LGBTQ+ community. All participants revealed that the events they organise often have a charitable focus. Mika described the purpose of the charity show that they often run:

*We do different themes each time. So, it's usually for trans life matters or pro Palestine or something like that. Some issues that are very current. So, all the tip money that time goes to that. And the performers are allowed to donate their salary to the charity if they want to. There's so much s*** happening in the world, so it's nice to do something to give back to people in need. Because we are blessed. We can do drag shows in Tokyo and be semi open about our sexuality and you know live our lives to the fullest. There are so many people in other countries and other places that cannot do that. So, we want to support them. And drag is political. So, you make a statement whatever you do.*

While Queer immigrants living in Tokyo face many challenges, Mika acknowledges that there are also many privileges to living in Japan. Their wish to leverage those privileges to support other communities experiencing discrimination have led them to use their Queer space for advocacy and fundraising. The Queer expatriate community in Tokyo have

experienced marginalisation as minorities in society. Correspondingly, many event organisers are mindful of using their platforms to support other communities and social justice struggles.

Many in the LGBTQ+ community are aware of a wide range of social issues and are often cognisant of their own privileges and potential for giving (Drezner & Garvey, 2016). Queer communities overwhelmingly seem to support various charitable endeavours and choose charities and attend events to support marginalised communities even if they themselves are not directly affected by the cause (Dale, 2018). For example, Mika made reference to the privileges of living in Tokyo as a Queer person and how that motivates them to help others. Having an identifier affiliated with one or more marginalised communities can motivate Queer people to seek tangible and legitimate ways to serve and contribute to other communities who are oppressed or facing troubles (Meyer et al., 2021).

Hayley's space regularly runs fundraising events for different causes. Examples include, pro-Palestine charity events, fundraisers for natural disasters like the Myanmar earthquake in 2025, and to support other local businesses and Queer ventures. If the events they want to run exceed the capacity of their physical space, Hayley organises larger venues also run by Queer people in the same neighbourhood as her establishment. In this sense, her Queer space for encounter and inclusion is mobile, in terms of physical geography:

If we know we're going to do something big that we can't facilitate within our space, we'll do it there and we'll donate towards their rent and help them stay open too. They really struggle. So, we're not just us, we're trying to hold as many people together as we possibly can.

Hayley's Queer collective has a community-based focus that seeks to help and support other Queer space owners in Tokyo, up and coming local Queer event coordinators and those experiencing distressing events in other countries. The capacity for community engagement

extends beyond the physical location of her space to other physical locations in the city and on a larger scale, to other parts of the world through the fundraising events aimed to raise awareness of the struggles of other communities.

Likewise, Tai speaks about activism inherent in the ballroom scene as being part of the lineage of the art form that the up-and-coming generation have a duty to continue on:

A lot of the young drag artists now forget what the root of drag is about. And that's why for me, a lot of the drag shows that I'm performing in and organising, they are tied to activism. They're charity shows. They're not just money-making shows, you know. And then for the ballroom scene, the whole point of ballroom is trans activism. It is Black Queer activism. So, whatever we do in ballroom, it's directly tied to Queerness, and it's tied to Queer activism. Of course, we also have the mainstream side of ballroom, and then people kind of get a little bit carried away and they kind of forget the roots. But the thing with ballroom culture is that it's more vocal and we actually call out the people that don't want to engage in the activism side because the whole point of ballroom is activism. It was pioneered by Black trans women to fight for their space, to fight for their recognition in society, to fight for their rights. And then we as non-Black people coming into the ballroom space, we are all guests. So, we have the responsibility to learn the culture and respect the roots of ballroom, and we need to continue educating ourselves and other people on the true values of the ballroom scene.

Tai expresses that interacting with the Queer sphere of ballroom culture is a privilege and those involved must never forget the history of how ballroom came to be. The culture and values of protest, political radicalisation, charitable endeavours and redefining what it is to be a family are part of the lineage of Queer and ballroom culture (Pullens & Vollebergh, 2022).

Relatedly, the event co-ordinators and creators participating in this research are acutely aware of their sub-cultural histories and social responsibilities towards others as modern Queer space makers in Tokyo. As such, many events are run and spaces cultivated with either community building or charitable intentions or both pro-social motivations.

Core Intentions Underpinning Participant's Creation of Queer Spaces

Each participant was asked about their future aspirations or goals for their spaces. Responses ranged from trying to create a locale of safety for other Queer folk to raising awareness for social issues affecting both Queer and other marginalised groups. Finding and creating community was also a common response, as was providing educational and/or artistic opportunities. All participants emphasised the need for LGBTQ+ people to have access to spaces of enjoyment. Some provided such spaces through organising parties, some through collective movie watching events, and others through organising performance events. Participating event coordinators organised a wide range of events. All were characterized by the intention to facilitate sites of Queer joy, expression, safety, belonging and inclusion.

Seraphine's impetus for creating her event formed after experiencing overt discrimination from within the LGBTQ+ community. She wanted to establish a non-discriminatory nightlife event where all Queer people can feel safe and that could do some good both for the community and for other oppressed people:

I mean, we'd been talking about these things for a while. Like, oh, there's not a space for us. How does one go about doing that? And then when there was that incident at the bar it just became clearer to us all that having a space with any kind of exclusionary policy couldn't be justified. So, after the incident happened, we went to the convenience store and got some beers and we were standing in a parking lot

*like...OK, let's start our own ***** party. Let's throw a counter. And then we found a venue and we set it up in 10 days. The event is still nightlife. It doesn't make sense for us to go and start trying to do political outreach as a primary thing. But you know, if you look at our Instagram these days, you'll see the stories are like, Palestine and immigration and anti-pinkwashing [corporations that try to advertise/appeal to the LGBTQ+ community, often for capitalistic purposes] and stuff like this. So, our political stance isn't limited to issues around Queerness because we think that's wrong. Raving builds a community, and then the community can do a thing. And that's what we've been pushing for.*

Seraphine's event while originally conceived over beers in a parking lot has gone on to become a popular semi-regular event. The purpose of the event is to provide a safe non-discriminatory party space that is open to all sexualities and genders. Correspondingly, this event displays some robust political beliefs related to human rights for many marginalised communities. Seraphine has also since patched things up with those involved in the inciting incident where she was denied entry into a space because of her trans identity. In this sense, such spaces that are re-textured as Queer, can not only support activism, but direct community action through solidarity.

Nyx aspires to grow the space they have and continue to provide comfort and safety for the local community. They said:

Our vision for this is that it's a safe haven and we want this to keep being what it is today. We don't want to grow this space too much because if it's crowded and noisy all the time, we're going to alienate a lot of the people we're trying to reach. So, we want to keep this accessible, comfortable environment. But at the same time, you know we want to do bigger things that can touch a wider range of people. We've been doing a

series of events called nonbinary talk. Those are really important because it's an opportunity for nonbinary people to hear a lot of other nonbinary people talk about their careers or their goals or how they're experiencing life. But it's also, I think, super important for other Queer people to get to know that we're not Internet enby's [nonbinary people] who are very cute and very fashionable. There are people like that but the average nonbinary person, you wouldn't ever notice. They're just like any other normal human being. So, we really want to have more information events on a bigger scale. We did Films for Palestine last weekend. There's more of that sort of political vein that we want to be involved in. We're not really demonstrators when it comes to our political ideologies. We want to educate and give people access to putting human faces on conflicts rather than, you know, getting involved and shouting. There are people who are better at that than we are. And we want to have more artist events. There's a lot of great Queer artists in this community, so we'd like to do collaborations with galleries too.

Nyx relayed a similar sentiment to Seraphine regarding the scope of their spaces political outreach. They try to help communities by providing a place for activism and information sharing. This, whilst acknowledging that a key strength of their space lies in the local community outreach and community building that occurs there regularly. Both Seraphine and Nyx aim to provide education in their spaces that reflect the political stances and beliefs that are important causes to them as event co-ordinators. Nyx also spoke to not wanting to be part of what may be seen as a typical type of protest.

For immigrants, there are risks associated with being involved in protests and/or political demonstrations as they are vulnerable to negative outcomes including job loss and/or deportation (Constable, 2009). There are many Japanese people who have negative views toward migrants in Japan and oppose increasing migration and granting citizenships to

foreigners (Kobayashi et al., 2014) which could impact immigrant's decision making on how to engage in political outreach. When Seraphine began running her event in response to an established locations transphobic response to her, she encountered backlash from people in the community who specifically referred to her being a migrant in a negative way:

And then there was the blowback that continued and people called me personally, kurofunne [black boats that came from primarily Western countries and ended Japan's period of isolation by bringing foreign people and influences to the country]. Kurofunne the black boat, like the ones that that Perry [Commodore Matthew Perry] came in in the 1800s and forced Japan to enter the world. So, like they're like OK, colonialist, basically that was the conversation there.

This specific insult that Seraphine encountered correlates being a migrant with causing trouble and bringing unwanted change to Japan. There is a common perception that foreign people are unable to understand Japanese values which is another frequently given reason why some Japanese oppose immigration (Davison & Peng, 2021). There are many ways of being political and civically engaged including performance, protest, education and raving (Shepard, 2009). Being an immigrant may impact on how one wishes to engage in and/or lead activism due to the associated risks faced and the possible negative perception they may face from some in the local Japanese community (Constable, 2009; Kobayashi et al., 2014). Queer migrants in Japan can sometimes encounter attitudes from the public aimed at reminding them that their sense of belonging in this country is tenuous (Morley, 2001). This may influence the way in which they decide to engage in political activism and discussion in both their event spaces and others.

Hayley responded to the question regarding the purpose of the space she creates with the following:

*Anarchy. Queerness. Keep doing gay ****. Keep being as equitable as possible. Keep contributing to good causes. Keep spreading awareness about inequality and action in the world that's going on. Keep living actively.*

Hayley aims to cultivate an active Queer space with the purpose of achieving positive change for a variety of people and groups. Many Queer space coordinators have an inclination toward generosity for multiple social causes and they engage in positive world building and meaning making through their advocacy (Oleksiak & Alexander, 2021). Queer activism has a long history of supporting other marginalised communities without the need for an identical or shared experience with them (Handschy, 2021). As we see in this quote, Hayley is committed to serving both her local Queer community and other struggling communities while maintaining anarchist and Queer centric ideologies and practices.

Tai answered the question regarding the goal of the drag and ballroom events he facilitates and attends that he believes their goals are creating safe spaces for Queer people. When asked how he would describe a safe space for Queer people, he responded:

It's where you can confidently and comfortably express whatever you want to say and wear whatever you want to wear, express whatever you want to express without any judgement, without any hesitation. For example, in a drag show, you have the stage and then you do whatever you want. You can have a crazy performance and then you show it in front of people and then people clap and cheer for you. So that is a safe space where you're expressing whatever you like to do. The same thing in ballroom. You get on the floor and then you walk your categories. The categories in ballroom, they mean a lot of things. They mean a lot of historical values tied to your identity. So, when you walk out there, when it's called, then basically you're shining your true

colour and then the whole room just cheers for you and then celebrates you. So that is a safe space.

Tai emphasises the power of being celebrated and celebrating others who are unapologetically being themselves in a joyful Queer setting. His conceptualisation of Queer safe space moves beyond physical safety and extends to the collective championing of one another from within a space formed by community and Queerness (Pascar et al., 2018). At a time where LGBTQ+ rights are in a precarious situation in Japan and worldwide, the need for Queer joy is more urgent than ever. Celebratory Queer events are about much more than enjoying oneself for an evening, they are communal experiences that strengthen connections, enhance collective power and reaffirm the Queer community's belonging in cities, local communities and the world (Wright & Burkholder, 2025).

Chapter Four: Discussion

The findings of this study offer insight into the lived experiences of six Queer migrants who have created and co-ordinated event spaces in Tokyo. Each participant offered unique insights informed by their personal experiences living as Queer immigrants and space creating in Tokyo. This chapter expands upon insights gained from the analysis chapter by taking a closer look at key topics identified. I begin by outlining how migration led to aspects of self-discovery for many participants. Our attention then shifts to what it is to be an out Queer migrant in Tokyo, Japan and engage with LGBTQ+ spaces in the city. Following this, a reflection on the need for diversification of Queer spaces in Tokyo and expanding policies of inclusion is provided. Then there will be a section discussing the difficulties engaging with the Queer Japanese community in migrant run Queer spaces. This is followed by an exploration of heterosexual attendance in Queer spaces that examines the difference between allies and disruptors. Next the LGBTQ+ community's role as advocates and accomplices for social issues both within and beyond the Queer community is outlined. Subsequently, there will be a reflection on the theoretical conceptions of space and Queer space. Some ideas for future directions in this field of study are suggested. Lastly, some final thoughts about how this research contributes to the literature on Queer migration by offering scope for expansion are given before the thesis is concluded.

Migration Leading to Queer Self-Discovery

When listening to the stories of the participants, a common topic was that their migration gave them the experiences and freedom necessary to begin their self-exploration and ultimately come out and live freely as their gender and/or sexuality. This echoes findings in existing studies that show migration can facilitate Queer self-exploration through avoiding

heteronormative pressures in one's home country, accessing new communities and resources after relocation and reimagining oneself in a new place (Choi, 2022; Collins, 2009; Kam, 2020). Five of the six interviewees only came out after they had left their home countries and resettled in Japan. For these participants, their migration was a key contributor to their discovery of and comfort within their Queerness. The stories told often mentioned exposure to new people and places being part of this important journey of self-discovery. Migration offers many the chance to learn new things about themselves and engage in personal growth, the result of which can be intense personal discoveries and revelations (Kutor et al., 2019; van Tonder, 2013).

When one moves abroad, one often gains a kind of anonymity even if temporarily (Lehmann, 2013). In Japan, a country that has a largely conformist society (Narzary, 2004), migrants gain a *gaijin* or outsider status upon arrival (Duppenenthaler, 1989). While navigating changes in their sense of self and grappling with the freedom to be out as Queer as an outsider in this new context, the readjustment participating migrants make appears to have the added advantage of offering greater introspection. In this way, migration facilitates identity shifts wherein personal, social and relational identities all evolve, a process that influences all who migrate (Adams & van de Vijver, 2015; Mao & Shen, 2015). The changes experienced in part as a result of migration mean that migrants often gain multi-hyphenated identities that include their cultures, ethnicities, genders, sexualities and their identity as an immigrant (Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2008). The emergence of these new identities and/or identity shifts necessitates deep self-reflection and a search for belonging among these differing identifiers and their associated communities. Participants in this study who were surrounded by homophobic social orders and public spheres, friends and family in their country of origin became free to begin life again, in many respects, away from previous negative influences and to embrace what was experienced as a liberated self. The consciousness shifts and access

to new experiences gained through the act of migration have the positive effect of allowing these migrants to accept their sexualities and/or gender identities and gives many the confidence to live openly and out of the closet (Maclachlan, 2023). My findings support existing studies that have explored the act of migration as an openly Queer person, often as a process of coming out or experiencing more freedom to be oneself (Centner & Neto, 2021; Gedro et al., 2013; Novitskaya, 2023; Suen, 2021). In many ways, living in Japan has been a liberating experience for the participants, despite the legal restraints faced by Queer people in this society.

Most participants also spoke of the numerous societal shortcomings faced because of a lack of legal protections in Japan. However, this did not affect their ability to do the inner work needed to recognise their unique genders and sexualities and begin living with an increased sense of authenticity. Regardless of the legalities surrounding Queerness in their countries of origin, participants were able to gain a measure of Queer happiness. This was because of their migration to Japan and the freedom it afforded them to explore themselves away from the embedded often homophobic discourses they faced in their countries of origin (Novitskaya, 2023). A commonality discovered in the participants narratives was that their outsider status in Japan meant that they are freer to live openly and make decisions regarding being visibly Queer that may be harder for Japanese locals to make (Shircliff, 2024).

While there are general expectations that people will conform to rules and social expectations, foreigners in Japan can and do make exceptions regarding fashion, drag and/or being vocally Queer. In a society where Queerness is still largely unseen or is actively ignored (Tamagawa, 2016), many participants have made the choice to live openly and proudly as Queer people. This choice may have been strengthened by their identities as immigrants due to the combination of their anonymity by way of moving away from existing

social groups and their immediate recognisability as immigrants which allows for some leeway in how they are expected to behave in Japanese society.

Being Out and Going Out in Tokyo

Tokyo was generally presented by those interviewed as a place where one can live relatively comfortably as a Queer person. Their accounts support existing studies that show that while Japan is not always progressive in its view of diverse genders and sexualities (Kawasaka & Würrer, 2024), it is still seen as a safe place to live and work for LGBTQ+ people and migrants (Tamagawa, 2016). Despite this general sense of comfort, participants also spoke about experiencing homophobic and transphobic attitudes in Tokyo in sporadic incidents that occurred from both within the Queer community and outside of it. These moments comprise disruptions to their sense of belonging. Queer migrants in Japan often must balance their multiple cultural identities while seeking belonging across various spaces in the city (Ohata, 2023). When intruded upon by the intensity of the straight gaze, Queer migrants can feel instant displacement with which they must then grapple (Rushbrook, 2002). What is perhaps even more painful is when the exclusionary actions come from within the community itself as when different Queer identities are made to feel unwelcome in spaces supposedly designed for them, these venues unfortunately become questionably Queer at that point (Hartless, 2018).

Visibly Queer people are still somewhat uncommon in modern Japanese society (Tamagawa, 2018). The slow progression of Queer visibility and rights in this country, combined with the participants' outsider status as foreign residents may serve to embolden strangers to engage in antisocial behaviour or staring at participants. While the participants all expressed never having been the victim of physical violence in Japan, they have still

encountered judgement and homophobic attitudes from local people. While many Japanese residents claim not to have a particular dislike for LGBTQ+ people, many also voice that they find this community strange and tend to look upon visibly Queer people accordingly (Kullberg, 2023). Such instances remind us of the importance of everyday social interactions in particular spaces for the normative policing of inclusion and exclusion (Hodgetts et al., 2020). These instances of homophobic response are associated with ruptures to participants' sense of place. Queer migrants are often seeking to be socially included in Japan, the country that they now call home (Hughes, 2025). However, the LGBTQ+ population are routinely shown that they are not considered 'normal' by Japanese societal standards by virtue of their outsider status as *gaijin* and their being non-normative in gender presentation and/or perceived sexual orientations (Sato & Sawamiya, 2024; Suganuma, 2011).

After coming out in Tokyo, the participants all attended local Queer events and engaged with existing Queer spaces. Ni-chōme is the most famous Queer district in Tokyo and as such was referred to in most of the interviews in a variety of ways. Ni-chōme provides many spaces where one can socialise with other Queer people in spaces that have long been designated for LGBTQ+ folks. Echoing a study on the spatiality of Ni-chōme that indicated around only half of their interviewees felt a sense of belonging there (Kaneshiro Chou, 2025), the participants in this research indicated varying levels of comfort and belonging themselves in Ni-chōme.

These positive participant accounts highlighted that they admired that the spaces exist and are still thriving in Ni-chōme, especially when many Queer establishments and neighbourhoods worldwide have been gentrified and/or permanently closed (Kaneshiro Chou, 2025). Some participants have also been able to hold events in the Ni-chōme district with the help and support of those with already established spaces there. Ni-chōme is an area that centralises Queer life and identities and where patrons can thrive in an entertainment hub that

does not necessarily reflect the accuracies of everyday life in Tokyo (Tamagawa, 2016). For those who enjoy nightlife and who have made friendly connections with patrons and space owners, Ni-chōme is a great place for accessing fellow Queer community or simply unwinding for an evening.

It is commonly known among locals that many of the bars in Ni-chōme are very gendered and separatist in nature (Suganuma, 2011). This has led to some of the participants in this study not knowing which spaces they can or should frequent. Further to this, the pervasive gendered expectations of how somebody presents themselves that are common in Japanese society (Monden, 2014; Namatsu, 2025; Starr, 2015) led to a negative transphobic incident for one of the interviewees, Seraphine. It is possible that the separatist nature of existing Queer spaces in Japan has contributed to friction between members of the Queer community who have different identifiers.

The incident which involved Seraphine, a transgender woman, being turned away from a women's only event in a Queer space became the momentum for her to create her own event that had more inclusive policies. LGBTQ+ education is lacking in Japan which has resulted in straight people's often judgemental attitudes toward the Queer community and an ignorance from within the Queer community about other LGBTQ+ people with different identities (Ikuta et al., 2016; Seko, 2021). Spaces, whether intentionally or not, often reproduce power dynamics that are present in the wider social community in which they sit (Santos & Buzinde, 2007). While Queer and transgender rights are something that continue to be fought for in Japan (Kawasaka & Würrer, 2024), there remains a lack of understanding of trans identities beyond the scope of entertainment and stereotypes (Tamagawa, 2018). Many transgender people feel a sense of exclusion from Queer groups and spaces (Hartless, 2018) and incidents like what happened to Seraphine can further marginalise from within the already marginalised LGBTQ+ community.

Expectations of gender and gendered presentations are somewhat rigid in Japan and transgender people are often expected to adhere to a very binary idea of what is a man and what is a woman (McLelland, 2011). Transgender people, particularly trans women, are visible in Japan through an entertainment lens on television shows, in theatre and at performance clubs and venues (Tamagawa, 2018). These presentations are often heightened and/or played for comedic effect. While studies show that the average Japanese person believes that transgender people's identities are authentic and not a mental illness, these beliefs do not extend to enthusiastic support for trans rights (Seko, 2021). Some people in Japan wish only to engage with transgender people in an entertainment context and do not have knowledge of the stigmatisation and discrimination experienced by this population (McLelland, 2011).

I was able to find some studies on heterosexual attitudes toward transgender people in Japan (Kullberg, 2023; Tamagawa, 2018; Yokota, 2023), but I was unable to find anything regarding discrimination of trans people in Japan from within the local LGBTQ+ community. However, incidents like the one outlined by Seraphine show that the discriminatory attitudes of the public toward transgender people are not limited to the heterosexual community. Consequently, transgender people can at times lose access to or comfort in certain spaces that should be inclusive of them. In a sense, their rights to belonging as themselves still carry some fragility or risk of disruption when heteronormative values in the Japanese social order are reimposed and shift the tone of spaces of inclusion into spaces or moments of exclusion.

Those within the Queer community have likely experienced discrimination and negative behaviours from external sources that can lead to internalised homophobia or transphobia (McLean, 2021). This can also lead to people within the LGBTQ+ community having discriminatory attitudes toward other Queer people with differing identity markers. This is either because of a lack of understanding or a subconscious attempt to distance

themselves from other identities that society deems non-normative (McLean, 2019). Because of some existing spaces in Tokyo being so separatist and at times discriminatory of those within the LGBTQ+ community, some participants decided to create their own spaces due to seeing the need for better inclusion policies.

The Need for Difference and Inclusion in Queer Spaces

Whether the participants enjoyed existing Queer spaces in Tokyo or had negative experiences within these, they all sought to create alternative spaces to cater to different interests within the Queer community. While existing or legacy Queer spaces are important, these are not always appealing to Queer migrants for a variety of factors including the potential for marginalisation within the community, a lack of diversity in the kinds of events offered and a proclivity to be nightlife focused (Held, 2023). The Queer migrant space makers in modern Tokyo participating in the present research think broadly about how to create spaces that are inclusive of intersectional Queer identities and that can also cater to niche interests shared by some LGBTQ+ folks (Vallerand, 2018).

For the space makers who are involved in drag and ballroom, they are adding to existing events while expanding on the variety of shows offered with their own ideas and themes. Drag and ballroom events have historically been places for those who feel like outsiders, even within the Queer community, to find a place that accepts them as they are regardless of race, gender presentation, sexuality or any other part of their identities (Pullens & Vollebergh, 2022). Tai spoke passionately about the diversity present in the Japanese ballroom scene and the importance of acknowledging the origins of ballroom when engaging with the community. The ballroom scene in Japan is welcoming but kindly asks newcomers to be mindful of keeping the space safe and acknowledging their privileges before entering

(Joplin, 2025). The growth of the ballroom scene in Japan may be in part due to the growing popularity of voguing but may also reflect the desire for spaces that not only include diverse identities but actively celebrate them.

Participants spoke of the need for diverse events for multiple reasons including providing space for those who are neurodivergent, people of different ages, those who do not drink alcohol and for people with niche interests, such as horror. From participant accounts we gain insights into how Queer migrant space makers in Tokyo strive to provide sites of social support and leisure spaces that recognise the unique complexities of what it is to be a Queer migrant (Hughes, 2025). They do this whilst actively expanding these parameters to include other facets of what makes up potential attendees of their events. Participants speak of creating events that cater to different needs and different interests. Because Queer affection for the horror genre is so popular, for example, horror specific events are now available in Tokyo through both drag performances and movie watching events (Leger, 2025). These events are open to anyone regardless of gender or sexuality and provide a space for people to engage in a specific interest, in this case horror, while comfortably being in a LGBTQ+ space.

Because of years of activism worldwide, Queer spaces in Tokyo are able to move beyond taboo sites of Queer hiding and into reclaimed and joyful spaces that are becoming more inclusive (Suganuma, 2011). Queer migrants are an active part of this social change and serve to increase visibility of the Queer community in Japan while creating change within it through their inclusion policies and diversification of event types (Suen, 2021). The migrants who are involved in Queer safe space making are creating ephemeral experiences of belonging for a variety of people in the LGBTQ+ community that create a positive impact on their migration experience (Hernandez, 2024). Participants saw the need for a wider range of event types and have responded to that need through event creation and space making.

Engaging With Queer Japanese Locals

Several participants expressed their desire to engage more with the local Queer Japanese community but acknowledged that they struggle to gain attendance from this group at their events. Participant speculation as to why ranged from language barriers to technical issues. Some participants are unsure why they are unable to reach these important people in the local Queer community after making attempts to engage with Japanese local Queer groups. While there are no concrete answers as to why there is a reluctance from many Queer Japanese to engage with Queer migrant run events and spaces, there are some ideas as to what may be causing this hesitance.

As discussed in the analysis chapter, immigrants often get the ‘gaijin pass’ or can play the ‘gaijin card’ which means that their differences or perceived failure to assimilate or follow rules are often overlooked because of their status as foreigners (Shircliff, 2024). This means that there is a schism present that differentiates the societal expectations of Queer migrants and Queer Japanese. Where many Queer migrants have gained freedom from familial expectations because of their migration, Queer Japanese still exist within Japan’s intensely patriarchal society that others Queer people and makes the coming out process extremely difficult (Tamagawa, 2018). These inherent differences may mean that Japanese Queer people are reluctant to engage with migrant run events due to a lack of shared experiences with the other attendees.

Queer media in Japan along with Japanese society often promotes ethnic endogamy and rarely displays Queer interracial relationships or friendship groups (Kaneko, 2025). Queer Japanese who engage in romantic relationships with people of other ethnicities are at risk of further marginalisation which may decrease their willingness to engage with foreigners in a long-term manner. Those who have come out in Japan are still not seen as

being part of mainstream society (Tamagawa, 2018) and so associating with and/or dating foreign people could result in further othering that they are unwilling to take on. The Japanese same-sex dating reality TV show *The Boyfriend* that released its first season in 2024 and its second season in 2026 featured some participants of different ethnicities and some who were of mixed Japanese and migrant ethnicities, though the participants all spoke fluent Japanese. Modern media is diversifying which may mean that those in the Japanese Queer community are more willing to engage with migrants in the future (Kaneko, 2025).

Further to homogenous values, language barriers may be a significant reason why Japanese Queer folk are reluctant to engage with Queer migrant run events. In 2025 it is estimated that 15-28% of the population in Japan are able to speak English (Ploscaru, 2025). The participants of this study ranged in Japanese language ability but indicated that they try to be inclusive of the Japanese language as much as possible. Beyond language barriers, the cultural differences between Queer Japanese and Queer migrants may also contribute to a lack of Japanese attendance at foreign run Queer events. For many Queer Japanese people, there is still a wish for privacy even when engaging with LGBTQ+ spaces. There are social pressures for Japanese Queer people to be subtle regarding their sexualities that migrants may not share which could lead Queer Japanese to feel exposed in Queer spaces (Suganuma, 2011), especially with the modern prevalence of smartphones.

It is difficult to know why Queer Japanese people do not engage with migrant run Queer spaces to the level that most event organisers would wish. The participants share their insights from thinking through these issues and previous studies offer limited clues as to why but without a dedicated study exploring this divide between Queer cultures, there is only so much that we can know. There are studies that explore the Queer Japanese experience (Hill et al., 2025; Kaneko, 2025; Tamagawa, 2018; Yorozya et al., 2025) and those of migrants in Asian countries including Japan (Collins, 2009; Hughes, 2025; Kaneshiro Chou, 2025; Suen,

2021), but based on my search I was unable to find much that brought the interaction between these two sets of people beyond an exploration of interracial dating.

Heterosexuals in Queer Spaces – Disruptors vs. Allies

Two strong and interrelated views regarding the presence of straight people in Queer spaces were presented within this research. The first relates to the rupturing and retexturing of Queer spaces due to heterosexual attendees. The second relates to the desire to foster solidarity between Queer people and allies. The clear difference when talking about heterosexual patrons is differentiating between those who are allies to the Queer community and those who wish to simply consume Queer spaces or worse, disrupt them.

Queer spaces are seen as sanctuaries and places of celebration that are dedicated to making Queerness visible so that those in the LGBTQ+ community may interact with one another in safe spaces where they do not have to prescribe to heteronormative expectations (Forbes & Ueno, 2020). However, the mainstreaming of Queer culture and the popularisation of Queer spaces has led to more heterosexual people feeling emboldened to take up part of these dedicated Queer spaces for themselves (Kolb & Betsky, 2017). Incidents of violence and sexual aggression have become an unfortunate byproduct of straight people feeling entitled to Queer spaces in Tokyo. This ruptures Queer safe space and leaves many with apprehensive feelings toward heterosexual people in general (Kaneshiro Chou, 2025).

There is, however, a difference between heterosexual people who take possession of spaces for their own amusement and those who are genuine friends of and allies to the Queer community. Nyx in particular spoke enthusiastically about the need for the Queer community to meaningfully engage with allies in dedicated Queer spaces. The reluctance of many Queer people to engage with heterosexual patrons of Queer spaces means that those who are true

allies may have trouble trying to support Queer people in a meaningful way due to preconceived ideas regarding the straight community's use of Queer space (Dooling, 2020).

Studies have shown that while many people in Japan are not bothered by Queer people, they are not active in supporting them or advocating for Queer rights (Kullberg, 2023; Sato & Sawamiya, 2024; Yokota, 2023). This stance is often reflected in street interviews on social media. An apathy toward social issues in Japan is not limited to LGBTQ+ issues. The Liberal Democratic Party that has long been in power in the Japanese government actively depoliticises young people by restricting political activities for youth. This leads to a lack of information being received by the younger generation and fosters a general ennui toward voting and becoming informed about societal issues (Steel, 2023). Some voters may feel that it is their duty to uphold the status quo and therefore they obediently vote alongside the majority regardless of their personal feelings toward policies (Tsukada, 2015). Because of a lack of political engagement, some Japanese people may be reluctant to call themselves allies to the Queer community. They may verbalise having no problem with LGBTQ+ people but that is the extent of their support.

For those who are allies to the Queer community, there is a potential hurdle to overcome because of the persistent and growing bad behaviour of other heterosexual people in Queer spaces. There may also be some distrust of the use of the term ally by people who only show up to enjoy Queer spaces but do not appear to actively participate in activism that protects LGBTQ+ communities. The term ally carries an expectation that the person, while being a member of the majority, is vocally and politically committed to achieving equity for minority populations, in this case the Queer community (Goldstein, 2017). To move beyond performative allyship, allies must understand their own privileges and be active in challenging homophobic and transphobic behaviours in heterosexual settings (Dooling, 2020).

I have personally never heard any of the straight people I encounter in Queer settings in Tokyo refer to themselves as an ally. It would perhaps be beneficial for straight allies to identify themselves as such, especially when engaging with Queer spaces. The current conservative political state of many parts of the world may make identifying as an ally to the Queer community unappealing because of the rising moral panic surrounding the LGBTQ+ community and those who associate with them (Osborn, 2025). However, this makes it even more urgent that allies present themselves as such and play an active role in supporting Queer rights worldwide.

What differentiates heterosexual patrons is their behaviour in Queer spaces and their involvement with the LGBTQ+ community beyond their personal enjoyment of celebratory events and spaces. In a time where heterosexual rupturing of Queer space in Tokyo is becoming more violent and predatory, it is important for straight people to be mindful of their privileges and be respectful when engaging with Queer space. There is a strong need for allies, however, this allyship cannot simply be performative and should extend to true advocacy for all Queer people in Japan. This study has presented two strong views on straight people in Queer spaces. One highlights the voyeuristic and disruptive nature of straight people who rupture LGBTQ+ spaces and one encourages the coming together of Queer people and straight allies to create harmony and foster supportive relationships. Different terminology is used as a descriptor for these two groups. Those on 'gay safari' are people who take from Queer populations and spaces for their own amusement whereas allies are supportive and have a genuine interest in Queer rights. Identity markers may indeed be important when differentiating the intentions of straight people in Queer spaces.

LGBTQ+ Advocacy Both for and Beyond the Queer Community

Participants vocalised goals to create inclusive, safe and enjoyable events and spaces for the Queer community in Tokyo. These events are migrant run but open to all who wish to attend. All have expanded the parameters of the kinds of events available in the city. Some create from within existing Queer spaces like Ni-chōme and others have opened spaces in other parts of the city making Queerness more visible in a country that has much progress to make with both legal Queer rights and societal acceptance of LGBTQ+ people (Tamagawa, 2018). The participants all live or have lived in Tokyo as openly Queer migrants and are committed to fostering community-based joy and activism through the spaces they create.

Beyond supporting the LGBTQ+ community, all of those interviewed discussed creating events that have a charitable focus that extends beyond the Queer community. The participant's activism was not limited to LGBTQ+ causes but included support for many different marginalised communities. Queer migrant's experiences of being discriminated against and finding and creating supportive networks outside of their families and countries of origin can lead to their passionate activism and quest for social justice for causes that don't necessarily affect them personally (Handschy, 2021). The act of migration necessitates finding understanding between multiple identities, both of one's own and of others (Ayoub & Bauman, 2019). Enhanced understanding of others combined with the unique experiences of being a Queer migrant has led to all of those interviewed seeking to use their events and spaces to affect broad societal change for both the LGBTQ+ community and beyond. LGBTQ+ folk are often civically engaged and passionate about advocating for others which in turn can strengthen their connections with other marginalised communities (Terriquez, 2015). In a country like Japan where political engagement is low (Steel, 2023) Queer migrants can be an example of what can be achieved both locally and globally through activism (Suen, 2021).

Theoretical Reflections

This research was informed by theoretical insights from previous scholarship on the dynamics of space and space production (Altman & Zube, 1989; Bridger, 2022; Hernandez, 2024; Hodgetts et al., 2010; Massey, 1999) with the intention of deepening understandings of the socio-spatial aspects of Queer events organizing among immigrants in Tokyo, Japan. Psychologists have long been interested in the connections that people make with spaces and how these contribute to their understandings of self and in turn influence the societies in which they live (Bridger, 2022; Hodgetts et al., 2020). Discussing the interactions with and formations of spaces by the participants in this research has allowed for exploration of multiple aspects of the Queer migrant experience. The meaning with which individuals and communities imbue spaces transforms them into important locations of belonging which is a valued aspect of life for many in marginalised groups (Altman & Zube, 1989). The importance of having safe Queer spaces to access is a vital part of wellbeing for Queer migrants (Hernandez, 2024). Because spaces are dynamic locations that are formed by the relations between those who interact within them, they inevitably in turn shape the cities in which they exist (Massey, 1999).

Queer space is conceptualised as space that supports diverse genders and sexualities and resists cis-heteronormative expectations (Rouhani, 2015). Queer spaces that exist in countries with complex legalities and hostility toward LGBTQ+ people are innately spaces of resistance (Centner & Neto, 2021; Suganuma, 2011). LGBTQ+ sites are places of great cultural and social significance, act as symbols of resistance against prejudice and make visible cultures that are often ignored in countries such as Japan (Kaneshiro Chou, 2025; Tamagawa, 2018). The provision of these spaces often begins with members of the community seeking to offer sites of inclusion and safety for other LGBTQ+ people (Hernandez, 2024).

Literature on Queer spaces often emphasises that community formation is both part of the goal for the space and a vital aspect of how spaces are grown (Hernandez, 2024; McCartan & Nash, 2023; Radicioni & Weicht, 2018). The vulnerability of rupture to these important spaces of safety (Hartless, 2019; Kaneshiro Chou, 2025; Pullens & Vollebergh, 2022; Sidi, 2018) unfortunately highlights the necessitation of such spaces of care to be available for the LGBTQ+ community (Baro, 2025; Morley, 2001; Wiesböck et al., 2026). In the context of Queer migrants in Tokyo, place-based attachments are important for multiple reasons. Their outsider status as both foreigners and Queer people makes them part of two minority categories and so many seek places of belonging alongside likeminded folk (Held, 2023; Tamagawa, 2018; Tokunaga, 2018). Queer spaces also provide escapism from the intense cis-heteronormativity and expectations of adherence to strict social rules in Japanese society (Kaneshiro Chou, 2025; Monden, 2014; Suganuma, 2011). This thesis contributes to existing literature about Queer space and adds the perspective of migrants in the context of Tokyo, Japan. Many aspects of both the Queer and migrant experience and how these relate to space and space formation have been explored through narrative inquiry. The production of Queer space that is migrant run provides this unique community with locations of coping and joy (Massey, 2005). The perspectives given as part of this research speak clearly of the need for the Queer migrant population to have spaces of connection and affiliation where people can embrace and celebrate their authentic Queer selves.

My research supports the importance of Queer spaces as sites for attachment because people and communities form attachments to particular locales and space-based identities through their interactions within sites and the sense of belonging achieved through engaging within ephemeral events (Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015). People's connections with spaces go beyond purely physical interactions and encompass emotional responses, affections and feelings associated with time spent in places of comfort or discomfort (Chrześcijańska, 2021).

My research supports the assertion that the spaces that are created for particular communities can become important locations of world building, meaning making and the construction and sustainability of community ties and a sense of belonging (Matsunobu, 2018). Important to the creation of these events, spaces support Queer identities to the point that people experience these spaces as social and emotional comfort zones (Sack, 1993). The relationships that are formed both with and within a space often become invaluable aspects of a person's sense of self, and if experiences are positive, their wellbeing (Gergen, 2011). This can be especially true for marginalised communities who have to negotiate differing levels of societal acceptance depending on where they are located in the world (Kam, 2020).

Migrants are often looking for a place where they fit and feel connections in their country of settlement. Migration facilitates an abrupt change wherein a person is suddenly a great distance from their previously familiar settings and must resettle in a new country and negotiate the addition of being a migrant to their identity (Cassim, Stolte, et al., 2020). Negotiating with new surroundings and dealing with feelings of displacement, migrants often seek a sense of belonging by engaging with spaces where they feel they may fit, whether because of shared identifiers or shared interests (Hodgetts et al., 2020). Interactions with new spaces and places can also help migrants discover aspects of themselves previously unexplored as they gain access to diverse communities and freedom from restrictive social settings and familial expectations (Choi, 2022). Research also suggests that migrants often have to form new bonds with spaces and communities in their country of settlement (Hauge, 2007). My research also supports the view that space attachments and space-based identities are informed by a combination of the physical reality of a location and the experiential associations people who organize and those that frequent these spaces form with particular locales and events. These attachments can influence a person's sense of self and place in the Queer community (Peng et al., 2020).

Future Directions

This research has added to the growing number of studies on Queer migration (Anderson, 2022; Centner & Neto, 2021; Choi, 2022; Collins, 2009; Gedro, 2010; Gedro et al., 2013; Held, 2023; Hughes, 2025; Kam, 2020; Kaneshiro Chou, 2025; Kim & Von Glinow, 2017; McNulty, 2015; McNulty et al., 2018; Novitskaya, 2023; Suen, 2021; Wang, 2017) and responded to the call for further work in this area. By sharing the narratives and lived experiences of the participants in this research, some insight has been gained into the unique joys and challenges faced by this community along with providing areas for further exploration (Willig, 2021). This study highlighted several key areas that would benefit from dedicated future studies.

Participants repeatedly emphasized how migration contributed to their further self-explorations that allowed them to understand better their sexuality and/or gender and come out of the closet. While many people migrated from countries with better LGBTQ+ legal rights and protections, Japan is not a country that legally protects its Queer residents. Despite the heteronormative legal settings that feature in the present social order in Japan, the act of moving away from their countries of origin to Japan still afforded participants the freedom to discover and live as their authentic selves. A larger qualitative study that explores the process of coming out post migration could give some valuable insights into a seldom researched group of people. There are opportunities for this kind of research to be conducted in Japan, but also in many other countries that do not have robust Queer rights and protections. Studies have been conducted that explore Queer migration to countries with complicated legalities regarding Queerness (Centner & Neto, 2021; Collins, 2009; Suen, 2021). I also found one paper that examined the coming out process for migrants after migration to such contexts (Wang, 2017). However, I believe the insights regarding coming out through migration journeys can be deepened through further research.

The perceived reluctance of Japanese Queer locals to engage with Queer migrant run events and spaces would be another aspect of the present study that could benefit from further research. Many studies regarding Queer life in Japan focus on Japanese people or immigrants (Kullberg, 2023; McLelland, 2011; Sato & Sawamiya, 2024; Tamagawa, 2018; Yokota, 2023), but rarely on both or on the relationship between these two communities. A study that included both Queer Japanese and migrant participants has been conducted that presented some interesting insights into LGBTQ+ people's workplace experiences in Japan (Anderson, 2022). This study highlights some differences into the unique pressures faced by both communities but as it was workplace based, Anderson did not explore shared social spaces. Because many of my participants highlighted difficulties engaging with the local Queer Japanese community or stated that the type of Japanese people that attends their events are very familiar with international cultures and open minded, it would be of interest to explore why many Japanese people do not wish to attend foreign led events and spaces. The participants shared ideas as to why this is, but it would be beneficial to conduct some research with the Japanese community to gain their perspective on the matter.

The heterosexual rupturing of Queer space is not a new phenomenon (Hartless, 2019; Kolb & Betsky, 2017). It is a phenomenon that seems to be increasing due to the marketability and popularity of Queer life in pop culture (Bettani, 2015; Forbes & Ueno, 2020; Kolb & Betsky, 2017; Sidi, 2018). Through conversations had as part of this study and my own autoethnographic experiences, the increase in heterosexual attendance in dedicated Queer spaces in Tokyo has led to decreased feelings of safety for Queer locals. However, other participants spoke of not only including allies in our spaces but actively seeking to incorporate their presence in order to strengthen this relationship. There is an opportunity to study allyship in a Tokyo and/or Japan based context to determine what makes an ally, who

feels comfortable identifying as such and what are the barriers to collaboration between the Queer and ally communities.

Future studies on Queer migration and space making in Tokyo could benefit from further conversations with a larger number of participants. This would have the added advantage of increasing diversity within the interviewees and gaining access to a wider range of experiences and stories. Including more genders, ages, ethnicities and sexualities would provide a wider range of lived experiences which could result in deeper understanding of this diverse group for readers both within and outside the community.

Finally, this research constitutes a contribution to the growing field of studies on Queer migration and is a response to a call for more investigations into the lived experience of non-traditional expatriates (Kim & Von Glinow, 2017; McNulty, 2015; Suen, 2021). Further research regarding LGBTQ+ migrants who make space in the country in which they now live and lived experiences of Queer migrants in Japan would further expand this growing area of study.

Final Thoughts

In this research I provide insights into the Queer migrant population in Tokyo who create spaces and run events. As the literature on Queer migration is still expanding, this study adds to the growing discipline and gives the reader personal insight into this group's lived experiences through narratives. My conversation with participants, combined with insights from psychogeography and community psychology provides what I hope is a humanistic picture of the realities of people who are navigating multiple identities and striving to create places of comfort for their fellow Queer community. Several key themes were identified and explored through the conversations with participants. These included the

act of migration facilitating the coming out process, experiences living in Japan as an out Queer person, and the need for alternative Queer spaces beyond what already exists in Tokyo. Also discussed were the difficulties gaining attendance from the local LGBTQ+ Japanese community in migrant run event spaces and the heterosexual rupturing of previously safe Queer spaces. These conversations provided useful insights into a rarely researched population, whilst also giving ideas and directions for further study.

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Appendix A



Participant Information Sheet

Research project title: Queering Japan: exploring narratives in the community of queer expatriate event organisers in Tokyo

Student Researcher: Emma Koretz

Supervisors: Professor Darrin Hodgetts and Dr. Shiloh Groot

Dear participant,

My name is Emma Koretz. I am from Aotearoa/New Zealand and am of European and Māori (Te Ātiawa) descent. I have been living in Tokyo for 6 years and work part time as an English teacher. I am currently a distance student with Massey University NZ and am working toward a Master of Arts (Psychology).

As part of my studies, I am conducting a research project that focuses on the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ expatriates living in Tokyo. As part of the queer community myself, I have often gravitated toward queer events and spaces. I decided to interview queer expatriates (or former expatriates) who have contributed to creating these LGBTQ+ spaces as part of my research. I am interested in hearing about various people's experiences living in Japan as a queer person and what it is like to organise queer spaces.

What is involved for interviewees?

If you would like to participate in this research, this will involve a one-off interview with me. We will discuss things like your move to Japan, your experience with queer spaces in your country of origin, what led you to create a queer space here in Tokyo and what your experiences have been like running these events. We will also discuss your opinion of the current spaces and events in Tokyo and what you hope to see in the future.

The interview will be audio or Zoom recorded and will take approximately 30 – 60 minutes. This will be a semi-structured interview meaning that although I will have some questions and ideas to address with you, I want you to feel free to bring up important ideas that you have regarding these topics.

Participating and withdrawing from the project

Participation in this research project is voluntary. Should you wish to withdraw from the study you may do so without giving reason. You may withdraw from the study up to two

weeks after the interview is completed. Should you wish to withdraw after this time, please feel free to contact me and we will discuss this together.

Confidentiality

Great care will be taken to ensure that your participation in this study and any personal information you provide will be anonymised to prevent your identification in the published research findings. Your confidentiality is of the highest priority to me and my supervision team. Pseudonyms (fake names) will be used in the thesis document. You are welcome to choose your own pseudonym, or I am happy to provide one.

I will not share with anyone besides my supervision team that you are participating in this project, however, you are free to disclose this information to others if you wish. While the utmost care will be taken to ensure your data is anonymised, there is always a risk that others may realise that you have taken part in this study through their own guess work.

Any data collected will be stored on password protected computers. At the conclusion of this research project, all data and consent forms will be kept on my supervisor's password protected computer for a duration of 5 years. Data collected from this study will be used in my master's thesis and will potentially be published as an article in an academic journal and may be used in conference presentations.

Risk/Benefits

While research with queer expatriates is a growing field, there is still a scarcity of studies regarding queer spaces in psychology. This project aims to help respond to the call for more research with our community. As a participant in this study, you will be an invaluable collaborator and will help to provide a human voice to this segment of the population. You will be given the option to receive a summary of the findings of this research on conclusion of the project.

The discussion we have is unlikely to cause you any distress. However, it is important to acknowledge the possibility that you may experience emotions when sharing your stories and lived experiences. You are welcome to ask that the interview be paused or stopped at any time and there is no pressure on you to continue if you feel unable to do so. If you wish to, we can talk through how you are feeling at that time, or we can discuss different support options available to you. My priority is that you feel comfortable throughout the interview process and that you have an opportunity to tell your story in a way that feels positive for you.

Questions or concerns

Should you have any questions or concerns regarding this project and/or your participation in it, please feel free to contact my main supervisor Professor Darrin Hodgetts at Massey University (New Zealand) on +6492136758 or via email at D.J.Hodgetts@massey.ac.nz. You can contact my co-supervisor Dr. Shiloh Groot at the University of Auckland (New Zealand) on +64 9 923 8555 Ext.8555 or via email at s.groot@auckland.ac.nz. You may also feel free to contact me on [REDACTED] or via email at [REDACTED].

Appendix B



Participant Consent Form

Queering Japan: exploring narratives in the community of queer expatriate event organisers in Tokyo

I have read and understand the Information Sheet provided. I have had the details of the study explained to me, any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study up to two weeks following the conclusion of the interviews. If I wish to withdraw after this time, I will discuss this with the researcher.

Please tick:

	Yes	No
1. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet	☐	☐
2. I agree to the interview being audio recorded/recorded on Zoom	☐	☐
3. I wish to have a copy of the transcript to review	☐	☐
4. I understand that participation in this study is confidential and that although direct quotes may be used, names will be replaced by pseudonyms and there will be no material that could identify me in any reports	☐	☐
5. I wish to receive a summary of the results from the study	☐	☐

Declaration by Participant:

I _____ [print full name] hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: _____ Date (D/M/Y): _____

If you ticked yes on items 3 and/or 5 please provide your contact information below:

Address: _____

Email: _____

Telephone: _____

Appendix C

Queer expats in Tokyo interview guide

1. *Researcher (Emma) introduces herself, her own identity, pronouns, and relationship to this project. Ask the following demographic questions for the research records and to better understand participant's own unique experiences in reference to this topic.*

Participant Details	
First Name:	Last Name:
Pseudonym (<i>participant can choose or be assigned one</i>):	
Pronouns:	
Age:	
Ethnicity/Country of Origin:	
Gender (optional):	
Sexuality (optional):	
Contact email:	
Contact phone:	

2. *Researcher gives an overview of the project; go over the Information Sheet and Consent Form – give the participant time to ask questions*
3. *Confirm the participant's consent for audio-recording, remind participant that they cannot ask for the recorder to be turned off, but that they can choose to not answer any question or they can request to stop the interview.*
4. *Let the participant know that this is just a conversation, there are no right or wrong answers, and they don't have to talk about anything they do not want to.*
5. *Remind participants that anything information they give that may identify them will be altered to protect their identity.*

Semi-structured interview questions:

1. Begin a conversation about participants' experiences of LGBTQ+ spaces in country of origin....
2. When did you move to Japan?
3. What have your experiences of being LGBTQ+ in Tokyo/Japan been like?
 - a. [Possible prompts] What LGBTQ+ spaces do you interact with? How does that impact your sense of community? What do you wish people knew about your community experiences within these spaces?
4. What led you to create your event/open your establishment?
5. What does a LGBTQ+ space look like?
6. What spaces do you feel are safe and accessible to individuals?
7. Memorable events or moments?

Events

8. Can you walk me through an event you organised?
 - a. Examples of events. First. Best. Worst.
9. What makes an event?
10. What is your goal for your space?

Insert prompts from key ideas from the literature on queer spaces and events.

11. Do you think that there are enough spaces in Tokyo/Japan that are inclusive of/exclusive to those who identify as femme, lesbian, intersex, nonbinary, transgender and agender?
12. How do you understand yourself and your identity within the context of Tokyo/Japan? How does that connect to your experiences back home?