

Carson N. Fish. Hidden Places, Hidden Faces: Information-Seeking and Identity-Building Behaviors of LGBTQ-identifying Americans in Russia. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S degree. April, 2018. 37 pages. Advisor: Amelia Gibson

In the literature about Russian LGBTQ communities, an examination of how LGBTQ-identifying foreigners — particularly Americans — navigate the unique relationship between Russia and the LGBTQ community is missing. The goal of this qualitative study was to better understand how this population made plans for their time in Russia, found LGBTQ-friendly spaces, and made decisions about “coming out.” The participants in this study used their general knowledge in Slavic studies — rather than directed, active information-seeking to form assumptions and plans about how they would present and “come out” in Russia. Many times, this meant they planned to remain “in the closet”; however, sometimes — through cultural clues — they could make an educated guess about whether or not coming out to a particular person would be a threat to their physical safety. Finally, participants who made interpersonal connections reported a higher success rate with finding LGBT-friendly spaces, such as gay bars.

Headings:

Information-seeking behaviors

LGBT identity

Russia

Information resources

Everyday life

HIDDEN PLACES, HIDDEN FACES: INFORMATION-SEEKING AND IDENTITY-
BUILDING BEHAVIORS OF LGBTQ-IDENTIFYING AMERICANS IN RUSSIA

by
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	1
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	2
INTRODUCTION	3
LITERATURE REVIEW	6
LGBTQ+ Affairs in Russia and Abroad	6
METHODOLOGY	10
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION.....	12
1.1.1 Researching and planning for being LGBTQ in Russia.....	13
1.1.2 Finding Communities, Making Connections	18
LIMITATIONS.....	26
CONCLUSION.....	27
BIBLIOGRAPHY	28
Appendix A: Recruitment Template.....	30
Appendix B: Interview Outline.....	31
Appendix C: Verbal Consent Template.....	34
Appendix D: Codebook and Examples.....	35

INTRODUCTION

In 2013, the Russian state Duma added an amendment to the Federal Law of Russian Federation no. 436-FZ of 2010-12-23 "On Protection of Children from Information Harmful to Their Health and Development."¹ This amendment, which has come to be known as the "gay propaganda law, (Sputnik International, 2013)" prohibits the distribution of homosexual propaganda to minors, while the terms "distribute" and "propaganda" have been left vague and open to interpretation. The Russian government has used this law to attempt to eliminate sexual practices deemed non-normative and punish those who engage in them. While 2013 was certainly not the beginning of anti-homosexual sentiment in the country, recent years stand in contrast to the more tentatively hopeful years of the early 1990s. After the fall of the Soviet Union, LGBTQ rights' groups started to form in Russia, and many thought that Moscow or St. Petersburg would see their own versions of the sexual revolutions that happened in the United States (Essig, 1996). Unfortunately, this sort of post-Stonewall vision of LGBTQ rights in Russia never materialized, and homophobia — fueled by nationalism and the Orthodox Church — swiftly snuffed out the cautious optimism of the early 1990s. However, in the face of discrimination, taboo, and threat to physical safety, queer communities and spaces survive, for those who know where to look or whom to ask.

¹ Федеральный закон Российской Федерации от 30 июня 2013 г. № 135-ФЗ «О внесении изменений в статью 5 Федерального закона „О защите детей от информации, причиняющей вред их здоровью и развитию“ и отдельные законодательные акты Российской Федерации в целях защиты детей от информации, пропагандирующей отрицание традиционных семейных ценностей»

There exists an abundance of robust and interesting existing research about LGBTQ-identifying Russians in Russia. What is explicitly missing is an examination about how LGBTQ-identifying foreigners — particularly Americans — might navigate the unique relationship between Russia and the LGBTQ community, all in an unfamiliar language and culture. This study hopes to provide some insight into what factors facilitate community-building and personal information-sharing for LGBTQ-identifying Americans in Russia, and how they simultaneously navigate new cultural contexts and decide how to construct or share their identities there. Just as *Queer Migrations* (Luibheid, Eithne, and Cantu; 2005) laid out essays and scholarly works about how LGBTQ-identifying foreigners live in and navigate the United States, research about the experiences of American LGBTQ-identifying people in foreign countries would further contribute to the scholarship about the global LGBTQ experience.

Why does it matter how LGBTQ-identifying Americans research, find, and navigate queer spaces abroad? While this question might not seem urgent when considering many Western European countries, its urgency becomes more apparent when comparing views about sexuality and queerness in non-Western countries — including Russia. Homosexuality in Russia has come to be seen as a Western influence, imported by Americans and Europeans after the fall of the Soviet Union and born out of rampant individuality and sin (Baer, 2011). With this prevailing sentiment in mind, one must wonder: how do LGBTQ-identifying Americans looking to spend time in Russia approach their own identities and to what extent are those identities reconstructed or obscured for a Russian audience? In a time of fairly widespread homophobic vigilantism

in Russia, how do Americans understand their queerness while abroad compared to in the United States?

In order to attempt to begin to fill the gaps, this qualitative study will be guided by the following research questions:

- What types of information sources do LGBTQ-identifying individuals use to plan for and navigate their life in Russia and how do they determine a level of trust for those sources?
- How do culture and language barriers affect LGBTQ-identifying American's information-sharing and identity-building behaviors while living in Russia?
- How do different communities and experiences shape one's willingness to share aspects of identity and sexuality with people in a country that is well-known for not being accepting of the LGBTQ community?
- What creates perceptions of fear or comfort around this information sharing, especially when in an unfamiliar or new cultural context?

The purpose of this study, then, is not to interrogate and examine the sexual behaviors of Americans in Russia. It is also not meant to — and will not — serve as a road map of “how to be queer in Russia.” Instead, the goal is to better understand how LGBTQ-identifying Americans: (a) research and plan for their time in Russia, (b) find and navigate LGBTQ or LGBTQ-friendly spaces in Russia, and (c) make decisions about “coming out.” Hopefully some insight will be gained into the more general ways people manage to find a community, how they are able to read “safety” on others, and how one can — or can't — figure out ways to do this while operating in a foreign language and culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

LGBTQ+ Affairs in Russia and Abroad

While the Russian Government has used their “anti-homosexual” legislation to attempt to punish “sexual minorities”² and eliminate non-normative sexual practices from the country, this law was certainly not the beginning of anti-homosexual sentiment in the country. Much has been written about the state of LGBTQ+ affairs in both the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. There are even a few documentaries and television specials that have examined the difficulties many LGBTQ Russians face on a daily basis³. Many of these works focus on LGBTQ-identifying Russians in Russia. For example, in her book *Queer in Russia*, Laura Essig provides a thorough historical examination of how the country and its former forms of government have approached its LGBTQ population (Essig, 1999). She discusses the history and treatment of homosexual men and women during both Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, delineating the clear differences in how Russia dealt with and punished homosexual activities in men versus women. For example, homosexuality in men was – and still is – viewed as both a moral

² “Sexual minorities” is commonly thought to be coined by Lars Ullerstam in the late-1960s to describe those whose sexual identities, orientation, or practices differ from the majority of others in their society (1966). The phrase has been used since the Soviet Era in Russia to describe LGBTQ+ individuals; however, it also groups them together with other non-normative sexual behaviors, such as paedophilia, polyamory, BDSM.

³ See: *The Iron Closet* (2013) and *Cold Fear: Gay Life in Russia* (2014).

failing and criminal threat to the rest of society. The "solutions"⁴, therefore, were built into the law, and consensual male homosexual sex was illegal in Russia until 1993. The Russian conceptualization of homosexual women was fairly different, though, in the sense that they weren't punished or criminalized in the penal system. Homosexuality in women was viewed instead as a psychological problem, and women were sent to be "cured" in

sanatoriums and psychiatric hospitals. When women were particularly resistant to the treatments trust upon them, doctors often performed sex-reassignment surgery, turning women who loved women into men who loved women.

David Tuller, provides another examination of the sexual lives of gay and lesbian Russians (1997). Part travelogue, part social history, *Cracks in the Iron Closet*, provides a similar picture of the state of affairs for LGBTQ people as painted by Essig. However, Tuller offers his own personal experience as example, too. While Essig seemed to want to maintain an objective, journalistic eye, Tuller provides the reader with memoir-like anecdotes about how his travels in post-Communist Russia altered his own sexuality and self-definitions. As a gay man, Tuller came of age in the prime of the gay and lesbian sexual revolution in the U.S., eventually calling San Francisco his home. However, over the course of his travels in Russia and investigations in the gay and lesbian scenes there, he found himself falling in love with a Russian lesbian woman. Essig discussed the Russian view of sexuality as less-defined and perhaps more fluid than the American view, and Tuller himself offers his personal insight as to how that contrast affected his

⁴ I use solutions here in quotation marks because these so-called solutions were not really solutions at all, and rather a means of control over a population. Laws against homosexual behavior, after all, were not meant to "cure" homosexual men, but to discourage their practices and punish them if need be.

own views about his identity. This idea that the Russian understanding of sexuality and identity is less fixed – less obsessed with definition – than the Western or American understanding also provides an interesting context in which to examine how LGBTQ-identifying Americans in general relate to Russia and re-create identities there.

Many other articles and books have provided additional perspectives on the lives of LGBTQ-identifying Russians and how they navigate a country that regularly and openly discriminates against their community (Downing & Gillet, 2011; Stulhofer & Sandfort, 2005). However, most of these essays and studies emerged out of the immediate post-Soviet space, from the early 1990s to early 2000s, and are thus dated in their approach and optimism about the future for LGBTQ-identifying people in Russia. Essig perhaps offers the most tempered approach of these early post-Soviet writings. Instead of celebrating the emergence of gay and lesbian rights groups in the early 1990s, she points to and examines the reasons so many were short-lived. Despite an exciting explosion of gay and lesbian publications, magazines, political groups, and spaces in the late-1980s to early-1990s, many of these organizations had disappeared by the early 2000s, perhaps reflecting a growing distrust of the West and its perceived homosexual influences. Many publications and magazines ended their runs in the late-1990s and early-2000s, likely due to the growing anti-pornography-related legislative push that began in Moscow around the same time (Healy, 2004).

While the seriousness of the situation in Russia with LGBTQ-identifying populations cannot be understated, there are communities that exist. Moscow and St. Petersburg are still understood to have vibrant and active queer communities and spaces. The Moscow club, Propaganda, opened in 1997 and is still a well-known queer-friendly space. Central

Station is certainly one of the most well-known gay clubs in Moscow, with five-stories of bars and dance floors, as well as drag shows. St. Petersburg has Bunker, which makes its status as a gay club explicitly clear on their website, complete with homoerotic images and the 18+ warning in the upper left-hand corner. Stella wrote about lesbian spaces in Ulyanovsk, describing the more common trend of how LGBTQ-identifying Russians gather (Stella, 2012). While expats and tourists will often visit the well-known gays bars in Russia, LGBTQ-identifying groups gather in many other establishments, creating unofficial queer spaces and more easily escaping the notice of potential threats. Any café or bar where a group of queer friends regularly gather can thus become a "queer space" while still staying under the radar of the authorities.

While the scholarship on LGBTQ affairs and communities in Russia is fairly abundant, the scholarship about LGBTQ-identifying foreigners and how they navigate unfamiliar cultural and linguistic contexts is minimal. Some have written about global contexts for homophobia (Weiss & Bosia, 2013) and the ways visibility politics have worked or not worked in the post-socialist spaces (Fejes & Balogh, 2013). Others have examined tourism and travel trends and behaviors for the LGBTQ-identifying community (Puar, 2002). Other than Tuller's and Essig's personal narratives in their books, a close examination of the non-Russian LGBTQ communities in Russia has not been produced.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this qualitative study was collected through retrospective interviews with 10 different participants. In order to be eligible for this study, each participant needed to be LGBTQ-identifying and have spent at least one month studying and living in the Russian Federation. This researcher was most interested in talking to people who'd spent time in Russia since the passing of the "Gay Propaganda Law" in 2013. All but one participant had spent time in the country since then, and even that one participant lived in Russia in the months leading up the passing of the federal law — while several major cities were passing similar legislation. This researcher also did not require any participants to have studied the Russian language extensively, though many of them ended up having high levels of proficiency, and every participant would be — at least during their times abroad — able to operate at an intermediate-level proficiency. The last element for eligibility was that no participant could be currently living within the borders of the Russian Federation. This stipulation was put into place for the safety of all participants, since they would be at higher risk if their confidentiality were compromised than participants living in the United States at the time of data collection.

The purposive sampling of participants was identified through various study abroad and scholarship programs, including Critical Language Scholarship, Fulbright, American Councils, and UNC Global. Emails calling for study participants were sent out

over email listservs for the above programs or scholarships. All interviews were conducted via Skype or Google Hangouts, and the interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours.

Each interview focused on the participant's first-time or longest study-abroad experience in Russia — whichever the participant defines as the more significant — with the understanding that some participants may have had multiple trips to Russia. In addition, several participants reported that they did not identify as part of the LGBTQ community during one or more of their trips, and in those cases, the questions were focused around trips where they did identify as LGBTQ. Any anecdotes about feelings of fear or safety, particularly as they apply to "coming out", and the participants will be given time and space to expand on these experiences as often as possible. All interviews were transcribed and coded, with analysis focusing on information-seeking around LGBTQ-related current affairs in Russia, finding LGBTQ-friendly spaces and communities, as well as any emotions or impressions that accompanied those behaviors. Special care has been taken to ensure that this research and writing does not serve simply as a guidebook to LGBTQ-related activities in Russia, since such a publication could understandably put all LGBTQ-identifying people in Russia in danger. Rather, the focus here is on personal research done by Americans about being LGBTQ-identifying in Russia in anticipation of and preparation for their own travels, as well as their decision-making processes about "coming out" — both to other Americans in their cohort or to Russians they met and interacted with while there.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A total of 10 interviews were conducted. During recruitment, the participants self-identified with the following list of sexual orientations and gender identities⁵:

- gay men
- gay women
- bisexual women
- transmen
- genderqueer or gender-nonconforming
- asexual

A number of trends emerged from the interviews. First, participants took a generally relaxed and unstructured approach to research for learning about the current LGBTQ affairs in Russia. In preparing for their travels, there was not a single participant who described what they did as “research,” even with an explanation to consider research in its loosest definition. Instead most participants described their knowledge or lack of knowledge about current LGBTQ affairs in Russia as something they had simply learned about over time, through general cultural exposure to the country, whether in studies or previous travels. Second, all participants expressed an interest in meeting other members

⁵ Self-identification is key here. No measures were undertaken to “prove” that any participant was a member of the LGBTQ community. This would have required invasive and unnecessary questioning that could have alienated participants.

of the LGBTQ community – some for dating and other for networking or friendship, although the levels success in this endeavor were varied. This was most starkly illustrated by how participants utilized the Internet or dating apps versus how they connected to the community through interpersonal relationships. Lastly, all participants went through a similar decision-making process when trying to assess which people — or groups of people — would potentially be safe to come out to, and how the participants navigated that process when they were faced with it.

1.1.1 Researching and planning for being LGBTQ in Russia

One of the questions that was asked of participants was whether they did any sort of research about that current state of LGBTQ affairs in Russia. Because this question was intended to explore everyday life information practices — and not just academic information seeking — it included a short explanation of research as very broadly defined. Part of the complexity of studying everyday life information practices is centered in how little most people think about their own information practices in these more nebulous non-work contexts (Savolainen, 1995). The main interests at hand were not necessarily formal scholarly research, but more generalized searching or seeking, that might fall into more nebulous categories. Here, each participant stated they had not done any research prior to traveling to Russia. Instead they discussed a sense of “just knowing” what was going on. The following quotes from the interviews show case this type of answer:

“I didn't do any specific research, I feel like it was something I kind of knew...from being there before. Like, I knew other queer people who I'd studied with before and I'd been aware, I mean, some of them were out. Completely, or like, mostly it was known. Maybe they didn't talk about it but everyone knew and

you could tell that the Russians knew. So, I'd seen that function. And also, I was clued in very much to like the state of what it meant to be...queer in Russia? I feel like that's a very...being there so much that's just something that's really obvious? Especially if you have queer friends back at home and you see — I don't know, it just felt very... It isn't something I did special research on, but it's something I felt like I was informed about through my studies and my experiences. And it's something that I felt...like, I had never really talked to my Russian friends that much about.”

“... I'm trying to remember if I did anything -- I think I probably did some searches to see if there were like places in Nizhny Novgorod that people went to. Um, but, I — I went into it sort of expecting to like, repress my sexuality, or at least not be open about it.”

“I don't know. I guess the research I did was like, my experience, and just knowing that Russia is not a tolerant place. And, you know, not safe necessarily, or usually to be out.”

Thus, the participants drew on their previous studies and experiences to formulate ideas about the current state of affairs for LGBTQ-identifying people in Russia, and also used those assumptions to plan for their own experiences. This sort of organic knowledge gain is more difficult to describe, since the participants themselves are unable to fully describe the process. However, it is an acquisition of knowledge over time, both through Internet searches, reading new articles, taking courses on Russia and Russian, as well as previous personal experience within the cultural context of Russia. The consistent build-up of these things over time means that all participants had an awareness of the attitudes in Russia toward the LGBTQ population. And while formal scholarly research was not the main interest in this study, the research many participants had done in their studies was directly related to how they understood the cultural context of Russia and prepared for their times abroad. In fact, all but one participant planned to not share their sexual orientation or gender identity with most people. Participants cited two major reasons for this reluctance to be as open as they typically are in the United States. First, they were

concerned about general safety. All participants had an awareness of the rise of vigilante groups targeting gay people in Russia. Therefore, to protect themselves from potential physical or psychological harm, they opted to remain “in the closet” in many aspects of their professional and social lives while living in Russia. While none of this study’s participants told stories of physical violence enacted on themselves as a result of being LGBTQ-identifying, many shared stories from other LGBTQ-identifying Russians they met. The following anecdote exemplifies the types of stories that were told:

“So, there was one guy, he was the one that I remember most about being like, uh, he was — I think he came out first to most of us about being gay... So, he told us a story about how like, he had just been holding hands with his boyfriend, and got beat up. And I think he brought it up because I think he still had a little bit of a scar, or — there was a bruise or a scar, or there was something sort of, like, left over from it. And we were like, oh are you are. And he was like, yeah, it's fine, but now, but like, this was when I was with my boyfriend, and we were just holding hands and someone beat him up.”

While a fear for general physical safety was a factor in remaining “in the closet,” participants also expressed an understanding of the different types of work-life balance that exists in Russian culture. One participant described in this way:

“People are just completely different at work and with their friends. And so for a lot of Russian people, there's nothing weird or hypocritical or like hiding or subversive about being in the closet at work, because they are kind like in the closet about everything at work anyways. Like, they might not talk about if they have a wife, for example. Maybe they do, it depends, maybe they don't.”

Even though all participants were American, either their experiences living in Russia or their Russian studies in the United States enlightened them to this phenomenon of stark separation between work and personal life. All participants were at least partially out in

the U.S.⁶ So, each participant balanced not only a fear of potential physical or psychological harm, but also an understanding — whether immediate or gradual — that the expectations for sharing about one’s personal life in Russia might be slightly different than in the United States. It should also be noted that an interesting split in the participant responses occurred here. Of all the participants, those who were male-identifying more explicitly touched on the fear of physical violence, while those who were female-identifying were often more concerned with gender-based violence. Two participants discussed their experiences on train rides in Russia as particularly harrowing — not because they were LGBTQ-identifying, but because they were women. Another participant explicitly stated that she consistently felt more anxiety around being a woman in Russia than around being queer. This trend was also connected to gender expression. The participants who presented as more “traditionally” masculine or feminine reported less problems around LGBTQ-based fears, while those who did not present in those “traditional” ways reported feeling more anxiety and fear around their expression. Two such participants described their experiences around this as well as their planning for how they might alter or not alter behaviors and dress to avoid sticking out. One participant — a transman — discussed the disconnect between a name on a passport and an outward presentation, giving the following anecdote:

I actually pass really well as a Russian man apparently, because every stranger I met assumed that immediately [...] short hair, men's clothes....they go with it? So, I ended up not meeting that many people because making friends involves telling them your name and if they assume that you're a guy already, it's really easy to just let them keep assuming that and just not tell them. But you can't really make friends without that part, can you? I'd be afraid to talk. For quite a while, when I

⁶ I say “partially out” because outness – or any attempts to measure what that means – was not the focus of this study. Some participants still suggested that they exercise some caution when coming out in the U.S., but not to the same extent that they did while living in Russia. In at least one role (and often more) that they occupied in their lives, each participant was out.

met people. Because if they assume I'm a guy – and I know my voice isn't very guy-ish. That would usually be how they'd figure it out [...] And, so I was walking down the street, and this woman stopped me. I had my headphones in [...] And I took them out, and go what? I understood that she like wanted money for something? But I took my headphones out and went, chto? And she went, 'Oh my god! You're a woman!' Which, freaked her out. Her hand was on me, like on my hair, under my hat, right? And I'm like, what's going on? And she freaked out and started like yelling everything deceptively masculine about me. And it's like 2 pm, so there are lots people around and stuff and I was like, well, this sticks bad. I think, I gave her like, 50 rubles and ran away.

This fear around being discovered or being outed was echoed in many of the interviews, so clearly the information the participants had found — over the course of their studies and experiences before their travels — was being processed and used in their awareness of current events, expectations, and perceptions of being LGBTQ-identifying in Russia. Two participants — a transman and a gay woman — also described their choices around clothing. Both had been wearing men's clothing for many years and discussed the conflicts in trying to prepare for nearly a full year abroad. They shared an awareness that their presentations might conflict with what Russians expected to see, based on their gradually-built understanding of the current LGBTQ affairs in the country. In the end, both made small alterations, but acknowledged the cost-prohibitive nature of replacing their entire wardrobes. In addition to cost, they also described weighing the benefits of their own comfort and ease with themselves and the risk of potential harm. Only one made significant alterations, buying several pink shirts from the men's section, as an attempt to present as more feminine.

Despite all the fears and planning, there was not a single participant who stayed completely in the closet during their stay in Russia. All participants discussed their

decisions to come out to some or all of the other Americans in their cohorts⁷. This trend will be discussed further in the remaining sections.

1.1.2 Finding Communities, Making Connections

Geography and Locality

Participants not only did research in preparation for their travels and studies in Russia, they also continued to search for information while they lived in the country. Most of this information need was centered in a desire to connected with LGBTQ communities within Russia. The participants themselves were scattered fairly widely throughout Russia – with some who even talked extensively about other travels in other Russian-speaking countries, such as Belarus. The wide variety of locations and geographical place placement meant that the experiences of each participants on a day-to-day basis could be vastly different. For example, those participants who had spent the majority of their times in Moscow or St. Petersburg reported more successful attempts to connect with the LGBTQ communities in their cities. Most other participants were located still in fairly large cities; however, the difference between the metropolitan cities, such as Moscow, and more “provincial” cities, such as Izhevsk or Irkutsk can be glaring. For example, the LGBTQ communities in Moscow and St. Petersburg – while still somewhat underground – have spaces, such as bars, that can be more easily discovered using English-language searching. According to participants who spent time in Moscow, a Google search yields public information about gay and LGBTQ-friendly bars. The fact that these places are well-established enough to have English-language results makes it

⁷ This wasn’t addressed explicitly above, but while all participants had widespread experiences on a variety of programs, all — at least on one trip to Russia — were part of some type of organized study abroad program or grant. Therefore, while all may not have been in the same city with all the Americans in their cohort, they knew and interacted with other Americans on their respective programs.

easier for those participants who reported lower levels of Russian-language proficiency to find them. There are a few possible reasons why these cities – Moscow and St. Petersburg – have more easily accessible LGBTQ spaces for English speakers. First, the cities themselves are larger and more accustomed to foreign tourists and travelers. This means that the many restaurants have menus in English, metro stations have English signage, and museums will offer audio tours in English. A second potential theory is centered around the metropolitan nature of these cities. Moscow and St. Petersburg, as the two largest cities, could follow the general trend of urban areas being more liberal or – if not liberal, at least the sheer size allows for more guarantees of anonymity, which itself can allow for more freedom of expression (Essig, 1999). Lastly the influence and legacy of the early-1990s LGBTQ culture in Russia might have had a larger and more lasting impact in these cities, similar to the history and cultures of New York and San Francisco in the United States (Tuller, 1997). Just as described by many writers and travelers (Essig, 1999; Tuller, 1997; Healey, 2017), these cities had the best known — if not the largest and most vibrant queer communities in early-post-Soviet Russia. To some extent it can be said that this is still true, though recent trends in political and social sentiments and policies have forced some of this back underground. For an example of the communities and spaces that can still be found, consider the following from one participant who lived in Moscow multiple times:

There were big differences between queer spaces in Belarus and Moscow, because in Belarus it's much smaller, much more closeted [...] in Moscow, it's much more...much more, I would say, segregated based on really specific, like ways of being. Like...like, the гопник⁸ gays hang out with the other гопник gays,

⁸ Гопник (transliterated as gopnik) is a derogatory slang term used in Russian to describe groups of people – typically men – who tend to wear athletic tracksuits and have conservative, nationalistic views. They are typically working class, though that is not always the case. The word itself is sometimes loosely translated as “thug” or “redneck”.

and like...like the people who go to this club are this way and the people who go to this club are this way. And the lesbians go to their own lesbian club, and like, like...it's much more...there's more of a sense of you...you know what kind of person is going to a certain club in Moscow based on like, how they look, their age, like their...their gender. Presentation, stuff like that.

Because of the large metropolitan nature of Moscow and St. Petersburg, the LGBTQ communities and spaces have had a chance to diversify and at the same time narrow the scope of the types of people who occupy each space. While in other cities, where the population isn't as massive – and also perhaps where the influence and influx of foreigners isn't as great – the same community is smaller and thus has not separated itself out into distinct groups with their own spaces.

The role of the internet

However, no matter where the participants were primarily located during their stays in Russia, they all had a tendency to start in the same place when searching for LGBTQ-friendly spaces: the internet. One participant in Izhevsk described his process this way:

In Izhevsk, there allegedly was [a gay bar]. And I was...I really do wish I'd investigated. There was a, from what I'd read online, there was some kind of drag bar in Izhevsk. And then I'd read online that it had closed? And it was in like, kind of a weird...in kind of an out-of-the-way part of the city, and I thought about investigating it, and I didn't. I was just like, eh. If I went I wanted to go with somebody. [...] But then I thought, too, could it be dangerous? Because that was ...I mean I was reading a lot about those, you know, sting, you know, those...like those vigilante groups? Yeah, and I just...really now I regret it, because I wish I had at least ventured to scope out at least where it was.

Several of the sentiments expressed above were reflected in the interviews of people who also lived in cities other than Moscow or St. Petersburg. When beginning their searches, the participants began online, either on simple Google searches or forums and websites

focused toward LGBTQ travelers⁹. In many cases, the participants would find some information about a potential gay bar, but rarely did they visit alone. A major factor in whether or not each participant would seek out these spaces once they found evidence of their existence was (a) the adverse reaction to going alone and (b) the fear that it would be dangerous or there would be unwanted consequences. This fear is not unfounded. The above participant cited vigilante groups and sting operations against LGBTQ-identifying people, and these groups have been known to gather outside known gay bars and wait for people to leave before attacking them or otherwise enacting physical violence. Those participants who did visit gay bars while living in Russia were often accompanied by friends, either Russian or American.

Individual connections and secret networks

While Internet searching could serve as useful starting points for finding information about the existence of gay bars or LGBTQ-friendly spaces, it was only the first step. Over the course of the interviews, it was discovered that there were two main ways the participants learned about these spaces: either an Internet search or they were taken there by other LGBTQ-identifying people. Of all the participants who reported visiting gay bars or LGBTQ-friendly spaces, all actually went to those spaces with other people, and most did not even know the spaces existed until someone – typically an LGBTQ-identifying Russian – took them there. This means that while the participants – all of whom had lived in Russia in the Internet Age – tended to gravitate to Google to help them find out information about these spaces, that searching technique was not the most successful. Instead interpersonal connections were more successful, meaning that

⁹ For an example of such a site, see: <https://www.travelgayeurope.com/>

in this context, other people – particularly Russian members of the LGBTQ community – were better and more reliable sources of information than the Internet. When considering the current Russian cultural context and the state of LGBTQ affairs in Russia, this is not necessarily surprising. If promoting homosexual propaganda to minors is illegal, this could compromise the ability of gay bars and LGBTQ-friendly spaces from advertising themselves in obvious ways. The promotion of this propaganda is so loosely defined in the law and therefore would likely cause most places and people to ere on the side of caution. Another complicating factor is the language barrier. As English speakers and Russian learners, the participants were more likely to rely on English-language sources and less familiar with Russian website and their trustworthiness. It could be that these places are discussed online; however, the location of those sources could be difficult for Americans to find¹⁰. Third, the Russian LGBTQ community is still very much underground, and many of the bars and spaces that participants visited – outside of Moscow and St. Petersburg – were in general difficult to find, not only online. They existed behind unmarked doors or nondescript buildings, sometimes right in the center of the city and sometimes far on the outskirts. Some would even shift locations. This makes it very difficult for someone outside the community to know where to look or how to find them. It's an understandable protective measure; however, it also unfortunately makes it harder for traveling and visit members of the LGBTQ community to discover where to go. The only way many participants were able to find the spaces were through their own interpersonal connections.

¹⁰ While this is outside of the scope of the research at hand, it's interesting to consider the effects that Google algorithms and personalization of results would have on this problem.

Risk and disclosure: Coming Out

If finding LGBTQ-friendly spaces requires having personal connections, then finding personal connections is a step that must antecede it. There were a variety of ways the participants in this study made connections within the Russian LGBTQ community. In general, this was a precarious undertaking, especially since all participants were wary about being completely open and out and needed to make some assessments and decisions about how and when they could safely come out. In order for an LGBTQ-identifying Russian to know that a participant wanted to visit a gay bar or something similar, both parties would need to come out to each other first.

The study participants often followed a similar set of steps in their “coming out” process while abroad. First, they would come out to other LGBTQ-identifying Americans in their group or cohort. In certain examples, participants discussed their research interests in LGBTQ-related topics, and other members of the group would also express interest in the same or similar topics, which led to a mutual coming out. Other times, a participant exhibited behaviors that are typically read as “queer” in the United States. For example, the following participant describes his “coming out” when asked if he came out to other Americans:

“No, I mean they were all cool. It was just like, you know, being myself and they understood.”

This sort of mutual understanding was reflected in several other interviews, meaning that the participants were less likely to feel fear or trepidation about coming out to other Americans.

However, coming out to Russians caused more anxiety among participants, with most opting not to come out to people they read as safe. This phenomenon of reading

other people like texts, searching them for information, and assessing risk related to disclosure of personal information and information seeking has been discussed in other areas of LIS literature and research, particularly when the populations face discrimination or stigma (Savolainen, 1995; Chatman, 1996). Participants here discussed the ways they interpreted and read the behaviors of Russians they encounter to gauge how safe it might be to come out. The following quotes illuminate this pattern:

“So, a lot of it depends...I mean if they obviously outright say it, like if we're talking about LGBT issues...cause even then it was a thing that was on everyone's radar and people were talking about. But if we were having a discussion about it, and they obviously came down on the correct side of it, like that was a good signal. Other things, too. Like, if they were sort of weirdly nationalist, that was a no-go. And not even in like a super, super crazy way, but in a like, Stalin apologist type way or like a Putin apologist type way.”

I remember this one guy. He was our age. And I think the British students who were studying there like met him somehow. And so, he would hang out with us every once in a while. And I thought he was cool and everything because he was a coordinator person for international students, you know? He seemed cool at first...and understanding and everything. But then he was not. He would say horrible things like...well, nothing directly rude or antagonist towards me. But just generally he would talk about gay people had mental illnesses and all that stuff. And how it's bad, dangerous.

These quotes show the implicit and explicit behaviors and opinions of Russians that the American students would read and interpret to conceptualize how a person might react to their coming out. First, the implicit behaviors related to political opinions, such as agreement with Putin, sympathy for Stalin, and other generally nationalist views. While these opinions do not explicitly align with anti-LGBTQ sentiments, the participants understood that they often appeared together. Second – and much easier to read – were Russians who explicitly discussed their anti-LGBTQ views. The majority of participants used this tactic to estimate a person's reaction to their own coming out. When asked

about American politics, they discussed gay marriage; when LGBTQ-related topics appeared in the news, they asked questions about it. If they were talking to a Russian who reacted “negatively” or in a way that revealed anti-LGBTQ views, then the participants knew that person would not be safe to come out to; however, if the Russian responded “positively” or sympathetically to LGBTQ-related news or struggles, then the participants would consider coming out to that person.

Not all participants came out to all the Russians they deemed “safe,” though. A variety of factors affected this decision including: time left in Russia, nature of relationship with the person in question, level of linguistic comfort, and level of social comfort.

LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this study lie in its small sample size. Only ten participants were interviewed, all of whom had studied or worked in Russia since 2010. In order to create a more robust understanding of the information behaviors of LGBTQ-identifying Americans, this researcher recommends further studies that analyze larger sample sizes. For a more comparative approach, future researchers might also examine only working expats in Russia – including English teachers and other professionals – or include more experiences from other Russian-speaking countries and regions – such as Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, etc.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this study presented a new angle to the scholarship about LGBT-identifying populations and their relationship with information and each other. The participants in this study gained knowledge about current LGBTQ affairs in Russia overtime, through general Slavic studies and personal experiences, rather than as directed, active information-seeking. They also used the knowledge gained about LGBTQ affairs to form assumptions and plans about how they would present and come out in Russia — most of the time opting to remain in the closet as a default during their stays in Russia. However, some participants were able to read behaviors and attitudes on other American, as well as Russians, to determine if someone was safe to come out to. In other words, through cultural clues, they could make an educated guess about whether or not coming out to a particular person would be a threat to their physical safety. Finally, participants who made interpersonal connections reported a higher success rate with finding LGBT-friendly spaces, such as gay bars. This stands in contrast to those participants who relied solely on Internet searches to find these types of spaces. Without the interpersonal connection, participants were less likely to find and explore LGBTQ-friendly spaces, even if a Google search indicated such a space existed in their city.

It is this researcher's hope that future studies will further examine this connection between interpersonal relationships and community-building within the LGBTQ community in Russia.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Template

Dear [Listserv Coordinator],

My name is Carson Fish. I'm writing because I'm currently a graduate student at the School of Information and Library Science at UNC-Chapel Hill, and I'm working on research for my master's paper. For my current research, I'm interviewing people who have spent time in Russia and would be very appreciative if you would send out the below message to your alumni email lists or any other appropriate listservs. Thank you so much for your time and help!

Carson Fish

Hello!

My name is Carson Fish, and I'm a graduate student in the School of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina. As part of my research for my degree and master's paper, I'm working under the guidance of Dr. Amelia Gibson to examine the ways culture and language barriers affect how people share information about themselves, their identity, and their sexuality. In particular, my research will focus on the experiences of LGBTQ-identifying Americans who have spent time studying and living in the Russian Federation.

If you are LGBTQ-identifying and have spent more than a month living in the Russian Federation, I would be interested in learning more about your experience while abroad. Participation is completely voluntary, and the identities of anyone who contacts me will be protected and kept confidential. If you would like to know more about this research or are interested in participating, please send an email to cnfish@live.unc.edu.

This study (#17-1472) has been reviewed by the Office of Human Research Ethics and was determined to be exempt from further review according to the regulatory category cited above under 45 CFR 46.101(b). If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the IRB office at (919) 966-3113.

Thank you so much for your time,

Carson Fish

Appendix B: Interview Outline

The interviews were semi-structured, following a set of guiding questions, while also allowing each participant to elaborate or tell anecdotes as they saw fit. The semi-structured outline also allowed me the chance to follow-up with points as was relevant to the research questions at hand. During each semi-structured interview, the participants were asked to answer questions about their unique experience as an LGBTQ-identifying person in the Russian Federation. The questions focused on their expectations and impressions of Russia, their language studies and abilities, and their experiences as an LGBTQ-identifying person. To this end, the following points and questions served to focus the interviews:

- Where did you live in Russia and for how long?
- What was the focus of the program? (Language & culture, political science, international relations, history, etc.?)
- What was the size and make-up of your cohort, i.e. where you studying with other Americans?
- What was your living situation while in Russia? (Host family, dormitory, apartment with/without roommates, etc.)
- What knowledge of Russia and Russian language did you have before the program? Describe any independent research that was done on Russia before departing, especially as regards LGBTQ affairs there.

- What were your first impressions of Russia? Discuss any culture shock you remember experiencing.
- Did you have an explicit plan or assumptions about whether or not you would be "out" in Russia? If so, how did you come to this conclusion. If not, how did you think about being LGBTQ-identifying in Russia?
- Did you meet any other LGBTQ-identifying people while there? Where they Russian or foreigners?
- Did you visit any queer spaces in while in Russia? Broadly discuss the type of place it was, i.e. a cafe, public park, a private residence.
- Did you ever have an experience when you felt fear about being LGBTQ-identifying? Can you discuss this experience, and did it change your outlook on living in Russia?
- Where you ever scared to "come out" to someone? If you decided to talk about your sexuality with them, why did you reach that decision and what happened? If you decided against talking to them, what factors lead you to that decision?
- What kind of community did you find/make while in Russia? How do you think it shaped your experience there?
- What kinds of impressions did you have of Russia when you departed/your program ended?
- What kind of impressions do you have of Russia now? Have you been back, or do you ever plan to go back? How do you think your first experience

shaped your expectations of what you would expect from travelling to
Russia now?

Appendix C: Verbal Consent Template

Thank you so much for your interest in participating and willingness to sit down with me to answer some questions. Before we begin, I'd like to go over a few things. First, let me go into some more detail about what this study is about: I'm looking at the ways culture and language barriers might affect how people share information about themselves and their identities. Of particular interest to the research at hand is the ways LGBTQ-identifying Americans navigate and experience their first experiences in Russia. I'll be asking you some general questions about your time in Russia, and well as questions about impressions and emotions about being there. Since these are retrospective interviews, it's possible that it's been several years since that first visit to Russia. Just tell me what you remember and if you don't recall your exact impressions, that's completely fine. Just answer honestly. I'm here to move at your pace, as well. So if you need break, just let me know, and we can pause. Also, if there is ever a question you don't want to answer, please tell me, and I will move on the next question.

Also, I want to reiterate that your participation is completely voluntary. If you ever feel like you would like to stop and not continue for any reason at all, please let me know and we will stop immediately.

Thank you again for your willingness to participate and for taking the time out of your schedule to talk with me.

Appendix D: Codebook and Examples

The following are a selection of codes and how they were used to analyze the interview data for this research.

- “Online Activities”:
 - “searching for places”: used when a participant described using a search engine or other websites to try to find LGBTQ-friendly spaces near them (typically gay bars).
 - “research about LGBTQ affairs in Russia”: used when a participant described using the internet to read news articles, etc. about current LGBTQ affairs in Russia or other Eastern European countries.
- “Coming out stories”: used when a participant discussed coming out to someone in Russia. It was also used when participants described Russians or other Americans coming out to them.
- “Emotions/Anxiety”: used whenever a participant described being nervous, worried, or anxious in particular situations or around certain people.
- “Language barriers”: used when a participant described having trouble communicating.
- “Fear of physical violence”: used when a participant described being afraid for their safety or telling stories where other people were afraid for their safety.
- “Mutual introductions/making friends”: used when a participant described meeting someone they guessed was LGBTQ-identifying, or would be LGBTQ-friendly and accepting.
- “Queer spaces”: used when a participant described going to a gay bar or other LGBTQ-friendly space.