



Our Stories:

Belonging and Isolation for 2SLGBTQIA+ Newcomers in Quebec

2023 Social Connectedness Fellowship Program
in Partnership with the Samuel Centre for Social
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**SAMUEL CENTRE
FOR SOCIAL
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The aim of the research was to tell some of the stories and lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ newcomers in Quebec. The research was carried out through remote and in-person interviews with five people, digital observation, and a brief mapping of some of the services and amenities available in the province. Newcomer being a broad term, the research team defined it as refugees and immigrants and asylum seekers mainly, all while not excluding international students or expats who hoped to become immigrants and stay after their studies or their temporary stay, for work or otherwise. The research ended up taking a focus on Montreal, organically.

Among other smaller findings, the research mainly points towards three areas: cultural variation, linguistic discrepancy and financial disproportion. As such, we elaborate in the upcoming sections on how experiences are not universal even within a community that shares a common identifier (being their sexuality and/or gender in this case). Cultures can clash or at least cause some dissonance when they come together. This report also confirms that Quebec is unique in its linguistic situation among the other Canadian provinces, for it requires immigrants to learn French before officially settling and becoming permanent residents or citizens... a barrier a lot of the people interviewed either have struggled with or know an acquaintance who did. Lastly, the difference in cultural norms is only reinforced through financial disproportion.

The recommendations included at the end of this report are in response to these findings and other themes that came up during the interviews. The researcher recommends providing LGBTQIA+ newcomers with the safety and security of existing somewhere, freely and unconditionally in a hub, because the research points towards a lack of spaces like these. The researcher also recommends working with live-interpreters and translators during events to make them more inclusive of those who don't speak English and/or French, because the research points to a lot of Hispanic and Arab (among others) newcomers struggling to integrate due to linguistic limitations. Lastly, the researcher recommends hosting alternative events that don't necessarily involve or focus on socialising and networking, but are rather activities or capacity building sessions that will teach a craft or skill.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report is a retelling of the accounts and lived experiences of a small selection of LGBTQIA+ newcomers in Quebec, Canada, converging the voices of immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and international students.¹ The research was carried out through remote and in-person interviews, digital observation, and a mapping of services and amenities available in the province. I outline the methods used in more detail in the Methodology section of this report. This research looks at the services and amenities available to LGBTQIA+ newcomers in Quebec, Canada, which help them settle in and build a home for themselves where they feel they belong. It argues that belonging looks quite different from one newcomer to another depending on their class, ethnic background, languages spoken and immigration status. More specifically, it asserts that it is not enough to have these services available if other accessibility needs are not met, especially regarding languages spoken and financial status.

This research was conducted for the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness (SCSC) as part of their summer Fellowship program. Every year, SCSC partners with 10 to 15 organizations who are each, within their own fields, working on social issues to bolster belonging and combat isolation. The Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness breaks down the concept of social connectedness and belonging into 4 P's: People, Place, Power and Purpose: **People:** Relationship and community — including face-to-face connection — grounded not only in mutual interest but also in care; **Place:** Rootedness in a place and home. Having a home means having a sanctuary—a place where you can be understood by others, where it's possible to be honest and present; **Power:** Having agency - our capacity to

¹ One international student was interviewed, granted that they chose to stay in Quebec after finishing their studies.

contribute, to help shape our circumstances, to give our gifts to the world; **Purpose:** For a person to have the rich experience of “being in the right place,” it’s naturally important to have a sense of our context — a perspective on why we’re here, where we should be headed, and what’s right and good.”² While all four elements are examined, this research is particularly interested in looking at the Place component; without excluding the other three.

The research points towards three areas of findings: cultural variation, linguistic discrepancy and financial disproportion. These are further developed and elaborated on in section 3, which highlights the findings. Section 4 looks at gamifying identity through tabletop role-playing games, namely Dungeons and Dragons, as well as a general overview of using games and play as an effective tool in social sciences and representation studies, namely visual novels and interactive fiction.

1.1. Positionality

I cannot, as a researcher, ethically conduct this research on representation and identity without talking about who I am and how I identify. I came to Canada in the summer of 2019 as an international student on a study permit (a temporary visa), about to embark on a master’s program in socio-cultural anthropology. Prior to that, I had lived 25 years in Lebanon where I, and both of my parents, were born and raised. This topic relates directly to my identity as both an immigrant away from home and a queer person. This influences the trajectory of my research and perhaps even its outcomes. To give an example, after landing in Canada four years ago, I resided in Montreal, Quebec. Canada, being the second largest country in the world, makes it home to so much land I have yet to discover, and lived experiences I remain foreign to.

² Kim Samuel, *On Belonging: Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation* (New York: NY, September 13, 2022).

While I am part of the queer community and tick the same checkboxes on the census as them, I am afforded certain privileges that play a role in the way this research unfolded. For example, I had sufficient financial support to cover my tuition as an international student. I was also granted the opportunity from a very young age to learn three languages on top of my native one, which means I had spoken French for over 20 years before I came to Quebec. This not only addresses my linguistic and educational access but also my financial status, which allowed me to be present in circles that others may not have been aware existed, or could not enter. As someone coming to Canada to study, I was immediately afforded some type of community – other students. This included in-person gatherings, meetings and discussions that happened on campus often behind metal university fences, with security guards at almost every gate.

Finances and languages came up in almost every single one of the interviews I conducted. I am privileged when it comes to both finances and languages, in addition to being part of the community. That is all to say, I am far from being a neutral informant in this case. However, this is not always necessarily a negative thing; while my positionality has indeed impacted my neutrality, it also has helped me find individuals to talk to and fulfill the research, getting the ball rolling on interviews and having a common shared ground for references to brew in a trusted setting. In other words, I found myself relating, nodding along, and agreeing with a lot of my interviewees' responses, which often hit close to home.

1.2. Literature Review

Sexuality studies are often found at the intersection of gender, race, heritage, and other identity signifiers.³ The broad literature used for this research looks at

³ Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).; Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

sexuality and being queer in contrast to other marginalised identities, while acknowledging that these identities, like ethnicity and social class, may overlap and in fact do, for all 5 people interviewed. LGBTQIA+ immigrants and refugees often deal with more than one type of discrimination: the homophobia they escape back home, and the racism they face in their host countries.⁴ In addition to settling into a new place, they have to deal with the discrimination that comes with it all, while trying to prove themselves worthy of employment or higher education.⁵ As such, your position in society is determined by these social identifiers, like your gender and your class.

For example, in “Studying Your Own: The Complexities of a Shared Culture,” Seteney Shami addresses this overlap by using an example of predetermined seating arrangements in her town gatherings in Jordan.⁶ Shami expresses having doubts relating to her gender, nationality and ethnicity because based on these seats, she could only be one of these three identities at once. Women in Shami’s Circassian community typically sit “at the head of the room,” but Shami that day joined as a researcher and sat in the back: “Until the end of her research, we will treat Seteney as a man.”⁷ This example demonstrates the many hats one could wear by simply being human: our identities are complex and multifaceted, and we should not be limited to one or the other even if they don’t always complement each other. In fact, even if they are assumed to contradict each other.

⁴ “Fattoush” (interview participant), in discussion with the author, Montreal, QC, June 2023.

⁵ Nate Fuks et al., “Acculturation Experiences Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Immigrants in Canada,” *The Counseling Psychologist* 46, no. 3 (May 2018): 296–332, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000018768538>.

⁶ Seteney Shami, “Studying Your Own: The Complexities of a Shared Culture,” chapter, in *Arab Women in the Field: Studying Your Own Society*, ed. Soraya Altorki and Camillia Fawzi El-Solh (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1988), 115.

⁷ Ibid.

Sofian Merabet refers to queer identities as “dissident sexualities,” or ones that oppose the regular order of things in which people’s main identifiers are their religion or ethnicity.⁸ More often than not, this opposition is reinforced by not receiving support from family members back home.⁹ Choosing one identity over the other is often viewed as necessary, as though they couldn’t co-exist within the same person and are at odds in the eyes of society.¹⁰ However, queer identity predates social norms in most contexts, and is universal; present all over the globe prior to various colonial and imperial conquests. For example, the law dictating that homosexual sex is unnatural in the Lebanese constitution was written under the French mandate and didn’t exist before that. France may have left, but the constitution has remained unchanged since Lebanon’s independence.

It certainly doesn’t help that more often than not, queer youth are persecuted or even beaten up in their home countries; a driver often cited as the main reason they choose to immigrate to Canada.¹¹ They also cite the country’s laws on civil and same-sex marriage as an incentive.¹² One way queer immigrants acclimate to the new culture of the place they moved to and reconcile these dissident identities is through media: music, TV shows, and films.¹³ Seeing unfamiliar concepts being normalised in media opens their eyes on the prevalence of these topics, confirming that they are not alone in the way they feel and that their identities can co-exist.

⁸ Sofian Merabet, *Queer Beirut* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2014).

⁹ Nate Fuks et al., “Acculturation Experiences Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Immigrants in Canada,” *The Counseling Psychologist* 46, no. 3 (May 2018): 296–332.

¹⁰ Jesús Gregorio Smith and C. Winter Han, eds., *Home and Community for Queer Men of Color: The Intersection of Race and Sexuality* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019).

¹¹ Lauren Munro et al., “A Bed of Roses?: Exploring the Experiences of LGBT Newcomer Youth Who Migrate to Toronto,” *Ethnicity and Inequalities in Health and Social Care* 6, no. 4 (November 29, 2013): 137–50, <https://doi.org/10.1108/eihsc-09-2013-0018>.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Nate Fuks et al., “Acculturation Experiences Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Immigrants in Canada,” *The Counseling Psychologist* 46, no. 3 (May 2018): 296–332.

Media can also help them learn the language of the new place and community they are now members of.

2. METHODOLOGY

The main data collection method that was used throughout this research was interviews. Over the last couple of months, I conducted 5 interviews with two groups involved in these communities: activists, and individuals within organisations. These organisations were either focused on gender and sexuality, and/or newcomer focused organisations. In all interviews, individuals identified as LGBTQIA+ newcomers in Quebec. Defining “newcomers” to construe the limits of participation was no easy task; the research team debated how long you could be in a country before you stopped being a newcomer. Was it five years? Ten? Did they have to come into the country on a particular status, such as a refugee or an immigrant? There comes a set of privileges and set-backs that automatically get assigned to a newcomer based on their status in the country they are coming to. Typically, this is affected by their financial class and ethnic background, among other modifiers that are explained in more detail in the findings section.

The five people interviewed were given the choice between remaining anonymous on record, choosing a pseudonym for themselves, or using their real first names when being cited in the report. Two people decided to be cited anonymously, using a pseudonym, and 3 preferred to use their first name. The decision to offer them this choice came from wanting to limit any risks or harm that they might incur by participating in this study, seeing as not all of them are out¹⁴ to their families back home, or even in Montreal. Unless stated otherwise, the names used in this report were chosen by the participants themselves. One of the participants chose to be

¹⁴ ‘Out’ refers to the “coming out of the closet” expression, a life event where queer people announce to their community, friends and/or family that they’re queer.

called “Tabouli,” a famous Levantine salad. When I showed the initial report to another participant, they then chose “Fattoush” for their pseudonym, to complement the first one.

Three interviews were conducted in person and two on Zoom. In-person interviews took place in coffee shops around Montreal, where participants would be walked through the effects/experience of discussing this topic in a public space. One person, Qusai, who chose to have their interview take place over the phone, was calling from a community centre they are a member of, as opposed to using their own mobile line. Two sets of questionnaires were developed, prior to the interviewing phase: one for engaged activists and individuals, another for people who work in organisations and centres. The lists of questions can be found in the appendix. I allowed the participants to lead the conversation rather than guiding them in a particular direction. I also reminded the participants that they could skip or come back to a question later if they didn’t feel comfortable answering it.

The interviews lasted between 30 to 60 minutes depending on how much my interlocutors had to say. I had prefaced the interview by telling them that we could stop whenever they wanted to and could take as much time as they were willing to give me. I also reminded them at the beginning, throughout the interview, and at the end, that they can ask me to stop recording whenever they felt like it and that we could delete the recording and stop the interview altogether, withdrawing their participation. None of the participants chose to stop the interview or to withdraw their participation.

Of the five people interviewed, two of them identified as non-binary (one using “they/them” pronouns, while the other preferred “they/he”), two of them identified as women (one using “they/she” pronouns, occasionally using they/he when

role-playing online in writing circles, while the other preferred “she/her,” albeit not a strong preference), and the last one of the five identified as a man, using he/him pronouns. Four out of five people interviewed identify as Arabs or of Arab descent but don’t hold a strong connection to the identifying label. One of the five people interviewed is of Greek descent.

2.1. Limitations

The main caveat that arises when studying human experiences is that experiences aren’t universal:

“I don’t think there is such a thing as the queer community in Quebec. I think it’s just people who have this certain aspect to their identity which does affect your experience in life. But I don’t think that is necessarily a basis for a community. I think ‘community’ needs to go beyond identity because if it’s limited to identity then there’s this sort of exclusion.

When queer people are hurt, so is everyone else. It’s a stepping stone: look at trans rights being taken away, then abortion rights being taken away, and then marriage rights being taken away. That’s literally the pattern that happened in the United States. I don’t think there’s one singular hivemind or specific experience that unites queer people. I think unity happens somewhere else outside of queerness.”¹⁵

When addressing limitations, I believe that we must also talk about our preconceived notions and biases that, despite working hard to unlearn, still show up occasionally and subconsciously, whether externally through our behaviour or only in our head.

One of the people interviewed, Tabouli, mentioned that at their workplace, there is a dire need for Spanish-speaking people to help the large influx of queer Hispanic immigrants who come to them specifically in search of community.¹⁶ In my call for participants, I offered to conduct interviews in the three languages I speak comfortably: English, French and Arabic. I believe it is possible that the fact that I

¹⁵ “Fattoush” (interview participant), in discussion with the author, Montreal, QC, June 2023.

¹⁶ “Tabouli” (interview participant), in discussion with the author, Montreal, QC, June 2023.

don't speak Spanish potentially excluded a large proportion of LGBTQIA+ newcomers that I could have connected with.

And of course, one of the biggest limitations in almost any research project is time: the fellowship ran for four months, from May until August, touching the corners of important research. The first two months were spent conducting research, reviewing the literature and discovering what already exists out there and preparing for interviews. There's so much to uncover, so much to read and cite, so many people to talk to and so many experiences to share.

3. FINDINGS

In this section, I present the findings of the research in three components. Section one of the findings points to the inequality between the 2SLGBTQIA+ newcomers interviewed vis-a-vis their societal background (their race, class, and education). Section two elaborates on cultural differences. These differences may cause the LGBTQIA+ newcomers to reject aspects of their identities or their new home, in favour of other beliefs and linguistic limitations. The third and last section of the findings explores what Quebec has to offer these LGBTQIA+ newcomers interviewed, and queer people of marginalised identities as a whole, in terms of services and amenities.

3.1. Not All Newcomers Are Created Equal

In the positionality sub-section, and briefly in the methodology section's introduction, I talked about what being a newcomer entails. One of the people I interviewed for this project, "Fattoush," arrived in Quebec around the same time I did, in 2019.¹⁷ To this day, Fattoush indicates that even after four years, they do not feel fully integrated in Quebecois society. Fattoush arrived as an international

¹⁷ Pseudonym chosen by the participant.

student, much like myself, and is now preparing to become a Canadian citizen after graduating. However, Quebec isn't the endgame for Fattoush because there isn't a beach. "I don't think I can live somewhere that doesn't have immediate access to a real beach," Fattoush added during our interview, also mentioning that their fondest memories back home, a coastal city in Lebanon, always include the beach.¹⁸

The beach may have been a quintessential component of Fattoush's experience back home, but it is not the only thing keeping them, and quite a few of my other interlocutors, from putting down roots in this Canadian province. Many refugees and immigrants arrive in Quebec not speaking French, the province's official language. In fact, "Fattoush" expressed in the interview that getting a job without speaking French had been nearly impossible.

*"It impacts my day-to-day life in terms of what opportunities I have. I finished my masters program, I'm applying for jobs, and most of them require French. It makes sense since my work is quite social."*¹⁹

Not for lack of trying, they have not yet managed to learn the language due to several reasons, the first being that in order to pay for lessons, they need to have a well-paying job. They also haven't had many opportunities to practise at school where everyone speaks English. This has had a snowball effect on Fattoush in which their day-to-day struggle with French also affects their chances of obtaining permanent residency, and later citizenship: "the process involves taking a French exam that I'm not prepared for, so I can't do that. I think it gives a perpetual feeling of foreignness."²⁰

Finances also play a big role in whether newcomers enjoy their stay in Quebec. Refugees, in this case, often arrive with only the clothes they have on their

¹⁸ "Fattoush" (interview participant), in discussion with the author, Montreal, QC, June 2023.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

backs, while international students, if not on a scholarship, pay almost triple what citizens do in tuition.²¹ From my own experience, international students also don't have access to the same health services, despite paying the same taxes, which was confirmed by Fattoush during the interview who had to pay out of pocket for a mandatory training for their masters program.²²

3.2. Western Ideals, Eastern Clashes

For many of my interlocutors, and also a common pattern in the literature, being queer is associated with Western ideals and concepts, as one of the many foreign imports that have no place in Eastern cultures.²³ Individuals are reminded of that on a daily basis, whether through exclusive language or mainstream media.²⁴ Qusai, like many of his peers, hasn't come out to his family yet, so he leads a double life, changing his behaviour and appearance when he returns home to visit.

*"The word itself would cause an uncomfortable burning sensation in my throat as I shyly said it, in my ears whenever I heard it, and I would freeze on the spot waiting for someone to recalibrate me."*²⁵

*"To be gay, you had to be American, or brainwashed by Americans. Surely then, I wasn't gay" says Qusai, a middle-aged participant.*²⁶

*"I still think deep down on certain days that I have to forget one identity in order to be the other: when I forget that I am Yemeni²⁷, I enjoy my life in Montreal much more easily."*²⁸

I believe that the reason why so many people jump at the opportunity to call Queerness, or LGBTQ+ identities a Western import is due to the lack of a linguistic

²¹ "Fattoush" (interview participant), in discussion with the author, Montreal, QC, June 2023.

²² Ibid.

²³ Sara Mourad, "Queering the Mother Tongue," *International Journal of Communication* 7 (January 2013): 2533–46,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/297440630_Queering_the_Mother_Tongue.; Jesús Gregorio Smith and C. Winter Han, eds., *Home and Community for Queer Men of Color: The Intersection of Race and Sexuality* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019).

²⁴ Mourad, Sara, "Queering the Mother Tongue" *International Journal of Communication* Vol. 7 (2013).

²⁵ "Qusai" (interview participant), in discussion with the author, June 2023.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The interviewee was not Yemeni, their ethnicity has been changed for anonymity.

²⁸ "Qusai" (interview participant), in discussion with the author, June 2023.

equivalent in their respective mother tongues.²⁹ In fact, this is clearly evidenced in the comment section of many of BeirutCityGuide’s posts relating to Pride.³⁰ Rana writes in the comments, “[...] sad to see how you imitate the west so hard.”³¹ In “Queering the Mother Tongue,” Sara Mourad talks about the first time she read about sex in Arabic as a teenager. She goes on to add that this experience, which many people in Lebanon are familiar with, goes back to the fact that the education, particularly that of middle and upper class citizens, is a Western education system that was put in place by missionaries.³² Mourad says that this is beyond our control, drawing on Edward Said’s book “Culture and Imperialism,” in which he talks about being torn between two worlds, explaining that “for objective reasons that I had no control over, I grew up as an Arab with a Western education.”³³ Two of my interviewees, Qusai and “Fattoush,” attributed that to how their media consumption of sex and sexual activity, be it in magazines or on TV, came from Western media, which means that they weren’t exposed to colloquial terms around sex and sexuality in their own languages.

Scholars have also explored the possibility that immigrants or people in the Eastern hemisphere may reject their queer identities because the labels they were exposed to “were first developed for the Euro-American context.”³⁴ If so, “how can we make sure that in studying gender systems in other cultures, we do not resort to

²⁹ Hanine El Mir, “Tracing the Invisible: Experiences & Expressions of Arab Asexuals,” *Concordia University*, 2023.

³⁰ On June 1 2022, BeirutCityGuide shared on Instagram a photograph of someone holding a rainbow flag in front of a well-known café in Beirut, with a text banner that reads “8 Queer-Friendly Spots Around Beirut.”

³¹ Hanine El Mir, “Tracing the Invisible: Experiences & Expressions of Arab Asexuals,” *Concordia University*, 2023.

³² Sara Mourad, “Queering the Mother Tongue,” *International Journal of Communication* 7 (January 2013): 2533–46.

³³ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1994).

³⁴ Sara Mourad, “Queering the Mother Tongue,” *International Journal of Communication* 7 (January 2013): 2533–46.

another form of Eurocentrism [...]?”³⁵ This is something that I personally reflected on, particularly thinking about how to be true to both my religion and my sexual identity. It felt, oftentimes, like I was betraying my religious upbringing and my family for wanting to advance the research on this topic. On Twitter, a comic artist residing in a Middle Eastern country, addressed this by asking her followers, “A question for queer creatives, especially closeted ones who aren't close to their family: Did you develop a fear of success because you don't want your family to see your content or risk being outed?”³⁶ This begs the question of how many of us are living in the shadows, unable to belong in Quebec or elsewhere because it contradicts and clashes with other aspects of our identities and cultures.

Not only is it a linguistic gap, but the majority of people interviewed don't feel the need to have a coming out party or event or even heart-to-heart talk with the people they know in Montreal. Farah, one of the people interviewed, stated that she wouldn't come out to people here because it's not as important to her. She feels like coming out to her mother back home would have more impact, but she would never do it out of fear of repercussions.³⁷ Here, people just know, according to three of the people I talked to.³⁸ Whether it's from the way they look and dress, or the circles they hang out in, none of the people interviewed have come out because they didn't feel the need to come out to their peers here in Montreal. Three of them added that that need isn't as prevalent because their queer identity is sort of given for granted.

³⁵ Ulrike Strasser and Heidi Tinsman, “Engendering World History,” *Radical History Review* 2005, no. 91 (January 1, 2005): 151–64, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2005-91-151>.

³⁶ Twitter user MinimaLynn started her thread with this tweet: <https://twitter.com/MinimaLynn/status/1482014176503599109>

³⁷“Farah” (interview participant), in discussion with the author, Montreal, QC, August 2023.

³⁸“Fattoush” (interview participant), in discussion with the author, Montreal, QC, June 2023; “Farah” (interview participant), in discussion with the author, Montreal, QC, August 2023; “Lisa” (interview participant), in discussion with the author, Montreal, QC, August 2023.

3.3. Services and Amenities

Below is a list of some services and amenities encountered during the research process of this project. These organisations and centres offer events, celebrations, focus groups, and advocacy sessions, to name a few. Some of them offer queer newcomers tours of the city's most known queer pubs, salons, and areas of gathering. Others offer them tips and advice on their immigration papers or where to find French language classes to succeed in Quebec.

Service or Amenity	Language	Cost	More Information
The Refugee Centre	French/English/ Arabic	Free activities, focus groups, safe space for sharing	https://www.therefugeecentre.org/
AGIR: LGBTQIA+ Migrant and Refugee Support in Montreal	French/English/ Arabic/Spanish	Free walking tours, events, support, etc.	https://agirmontreal.org/en/home/
Archives Gaies du Québec	French/English	Free detailed queer history collection, pamphlets.	http://agq.qc.ca/en/home/
Conseil Québécois LGBT - LGBT Québec Council	2 out 3 of their guides are only available in French.	Toolkits, guides (Free), formations and trainings (varied cost)	https://conseil-lgbt.ca/outils/
Helem	English/French	Free or cheap events catered to Arab and Middle Eastern LGBT people	https://www.montrealhelem.org/en/home/

4. RESEARCH CREATION - GAMIFYING IDENTITY

As part of my work on this project, I wanted to include a game and play aspect in the final output. I chose to do that in two ways: first, I wanted to run a Dungeons and Dragons session with participants exploring identity and role-play.

Dungeons and Dragons, like many games of the same genre, fosters creativity by placing players in the roles of storytellers and world-builders. It encourages them to imagine, create, and share narratives that are uniquely their own. Second, I decided to put the results of this research into a video game. Scholars argue that everybody plays, one way or another, whether with toys, cards, pebbles or jumping rope.³⁹ Play is performed voluntarily, intrinsically motivated, across multiple species.⁴⁰

What sets games like the ones mentioned above apart from other forms of play is that they often provide the players with an immersive setting and interactive storylines, through which they can explore the world as they come to it. When we play games, we imagine ourselves in the shoes of the protagonists, transform social identities, and take on new roles.⁴¹ Role-play is “a media, where a person, through immersion into a role and the world of this role, is given the opportunity to participate in and interact with the contents of this world.”⁴² Now more than ever, role-playing games are viewed as tools for representation, empowerment, and community-building within the LGBTQ community.⁴³

When talking about inclusivity in the game design world, more and more developers are looking at character creation, asking themselves questions like “How could I make this character less gendered?” Or “How could I provide my players with as many social identifiers as possible to make sure they have enough options for the character to truly represent them?” Questions like these are the topic of many

³⁹ Sebastian Deterding and José Zagal, *Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Thomas Henriksen, “How can you learn through fiction? Theoretical perspectives on learning through participation in role-playing mediated fiction,” thesis, *Department of Psychology, University of Copenhagen* (2002).

⁴³ Sarah Lynne Bowman, *Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010).

roundtables by local and international organisations such as Women in Games⁴⁴ and Pixelles.⁴⁵

In addition to representing more diverse voices as characters in these games, the game-making industry could also benefit from having Queer and POC⁴⁶ developers work on said games, or sensitivity experts consulted about the narrative and lore.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, I will be reiterating the key issues found while conducting this research and offering suggestions for how we, in Montreal, could start filling the gaps to address these issues and improve the quality of life for members of our community. This is, after all, the main reason why this research was conducted and where our interest comes from originally: to foster belonging and combat isolation to the greatest extent possible. The goal was to find out what is available for LGBTQIA+ newcomers in Montreal, Quebec, whether it is enough, and why members of the community aren't taking advantage of these services.

5.1 Identification of Key Issues and Areas for Improvement

As highlighted in the findings section of this report, the research points towards a lack of services tailored enough to suit newcomers based on their diverse backgrounds and cultural origins. As indicated in section three, the available services and amenities are all mainly in French, with English support available. Luckily, all the services and organisations I encountered and mentioned in that table are free or offered at a low cost. While this does not at all begin to solve financial

⁴⁴ In March 2023, Women in Games France held a roundtable about initiatives to make games more inclusive: https://twitter.com/wig_fr/status/1633516233021612032

⁴⁵ Pixelles is a non-profit organization dedicated to empowering more women to make and change games: <https://pixelles.ca/>

⁴⁶ People of Colour.

inequalities, here or elsewhere, it surely helps not to add to the stress and burden faced by immigrants trying to make a living.

5.2 Recommendations for Future Action

As such, here are the four suggestions and action items I recommend we implement, either internally at the Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness (SCSC), or in hubs and gathering spaces across Montreal: First, I would start by providing LGBTQIA+ newcomers with the safety and security of existing somewhere, freely and unconditionally in a hub or a space for them, by them. It could be a cooperative, where everyone who benefits from its services or spaces also runs it or has to contribute to making it work.

Second, and quite importantly, here, more than any other province in Canada, I recommend working with live interpreters and translators during events to make them more inclusive of those who don't speak English and/or French. Language is a big part of belonging in Quebec, and many immigrants shy away from using the facilities due to the language barrier, which is especially true for Hispanic and Arab newcomers, as mentioned by one of the people interviewed, a social worker in a local centre.⁴⁷

Third, many people are tired. The majority of participants expressed the sentiment that they are too exhausted to attend parties or socialising events to simply network with other people in the Queer community. In fact, when recruiting for interviews, I received a lot of rejections whereby the participants expressed that they are too tired from participating in studies about topics as heavy as this one. In addition to that, the growing number of hate crimes that target members of the community impact the wellbeing of those who keep witnessing it and affects their

⁴⁷ "Tabouli" (interview participant), in discussion with the author, Montreal, QC, June 2023.

capacity to engage in research. It is hard to strike the balance between advancing queer knowledge, amplifying voices of the community, and giving them space to recover from burnout.

Circling back on feeling tired, all while taking into consideration that the community isn't a monolith and that members of the community have different interests, it is important to note that not only are they feeling over-researched and fatigued, many don't have the energy or capacity to regularly attend queer events that stress networking or intense socializing. In more ways than one, they seem to be searching for a space where they can simply exist without having to have a justification, topic or explicit purpose. Several participants reiterated the importance of an open space for them to explore their queerness and cultural identities.

Lastly, I recommend avoiding seeing all queer people and experiences as the same, or lumping them all together. As mentioned previously, no experience is universal and so many factors affect our quality of life, more than just the people we love or gender we express. Three out of five people interviewed expressed that they wouldn't attend events simply because the event targeted queer people, seeing as other interests and identifiers intersect and come together in a person. One person interviewed took it further by saying that they don't believe all queer people belong to the same community.⁴⁸ Another said that members of the queer community don't know the meaning of community, or have each other's backs.⁴⁹ While these may seem to be rather negative views, "Tabouli" had a more positive take on this sentiment: it's true that people are complex and have different interests despite belonging to a queer identity, however they come together despite their differences (or different spoken languages, in this particular case).⁵⁰ To respond to the vastness

⁴⁸ "Fattoush" (interview participant), in discussion with the author, Montreal, QC, June 2023.

⁴⁹ "Lisa" (interview participant), in discussion with the author, Montreal, QC, August 2023.

⁵⁰ "Tabouli" (interview participant), in discussion with the author, Montreal, QC, June 2023.

of the queer experience, especially queer newcomer experiences, I recommend also hosting “alternative” events that target a multitude of interests, and working with trainers, crafters, game and/or dungeon masters⁵¹, etc., who are queer themselves, to put them together. For some queer newcomers, interviews may be complimented with an activity like crochet, knitting, drawing, etc, rather than strictly a formal interview.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this research point to three main areas to address to support a stronger and more cohesive queer community, and improve the experience of LGBTQIA+ people, especially newcomers, in Quebec no matter their cultural or ethnic background. First, there’s a big need for language support, whether through offering the recommended live interpretation service or offering free/affordable French and English classes to newcomers. Second, we have to remember that experiences aren’t the same and can differ from one person to another, even if they belong to the same community. Lastly, research-creation plays a big role in this project, through presenting alternative narratives in video games and elevating the voices of people who are queer and new to Canada who might be feeling lonely, torn between their communities. Putting them forward in fun and playful settings, in media meant to be disseminated, normalises their experiences and reminds not only them, but the people who advocate against their existence, that they are welcome to exist.

⁵¹ In the game Dungeons and Dragons, a Dungeon Master, often shortened to DM, is the person who runs the session much like a narrator.

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