LEISURE SPACES AND LEISURE CONSTRAINTS FOR LESBIAN WOMEN

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Carla Alexandra Barbosa, candidate for the degree of Master of Science in Kinesiology & Health Studies, has presented a thesis titled, *Leisure Spaces and leisure Constraints for Lesbian Women*, in an oral examination held on June 8, 2015. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

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ABSTRACT

Researchers have argued that leisure and leisure spaces are gendered, differentiating men and women in their opportunities for and outcomes of leisure (e.g., Aitchison, 1999; Henderson & Shaw, 2006). Gender expectations generate leisure constraints especially for women (Shaw et al., 1991). Furthermore, within the female group, lesbians face additional constraints because of the intersection of sexism with homophobia (Pritchard et al., 2002; Taylor, 2007). In 2011, I conducted an online pilot study with a sample of 813 lesbians which suggested that for most participants, self-consciousness and fear of harassment prevented them from fully enjoying their leisure in public spaces.

This is of particular concern because studies have suggested that the provision of leisure in gay-friendly environments can be an important tool to help lesbians cope with marginalization and stress (Skeggs, 1999; Iwasaki & Ristoki, 2004). Research into the meaning of leisure for lesbians; however, is scarce and little is known about leisure spaces that are specifically designed for (rather than simply tolerant of) people in the LGBTQ community. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of lesbians who attend a straight-friendly church in order to investigate the characteristics of the leisure setting and the meanings attributed to their leisure experiences. Participants were 7 women recruited from the church who completed semi-structured interviews. The data was digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically.

Participants described the church as a leisure space that played an important role in their lives. Themes emerged related to the church as a leisure space including:
emotional healing and spiritual expression; community building in diversity; network for leisure activities; and institutionalized and internalized homophobia. Participants also reported that religious beliefs disseminated both in churches and in society were constraints that strongly impacted their wellbeing and their experiences in leisure. Themes related to leisure constraints included: churches and religion as leisure constraints; partners as leisure constraints; and homophobia and self-consciousness. These results support the literature that discusses the relevance of LGBTQ oriented leisure spaces to help lesbians create coping mechanisms against homophobia.

The findings indicated that there is a great need for further exploration of leisure for lesbian women, particularly leisure that promotes emotional healing and community building. Findings also indicate that spaces with spiritual characteristics might be more empowering for lesbian women than bars and gay neighborhoods. The study concludes with suggestions for stakeholders, limitations of the study and directions for future research.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 – Introduction

Since the 1980’s, scholars in leisure studies have increasingly discussed the relevance of gender and sexuality in experiences of leisure. These researchers have argued that leisure and leisure spaces are gendered, contributing to different opportunities and outcomes for women and men (e.g., Aitchison, 1999; Henderson & Shaw, 2006; Pilcher, 2011). They also argue that gender roles and expectations create constraints especially for women (Arab-Moghaddam, Henderson & Sheikholeslami, 2007; Chick & Dong, 2005; Lewis & Johnson, 2011; Shaw, Bonen & McCabe, 1991). In the field of leisure studies, the differences among women and men have been analyzed through various lenses, such as gender identity formation (Espiner et al., 2011; Foley, Holzman, & Wearing, 2007; Henderson & Shaw, 2006), geography of leisure (Aitchison, 1999; Scraton & Watson, 1998), leisure constraints (Crawford & Jackson, 2005; Henderson & Shaw, 2006; Shaw et al., 1991), and sexuality (Pritchard et al., 2002; Skeggs, 1999; Taylor, 2007). All these studies have in common the premise that leisure has the potential to act as a tool against gender inequities.

Although there is a growing body of literature discussing the constraints women face in their leisure experiences, studies have also pointed out the need to account for differences between female groups. Building on feminist studies that explored intersectionalities between gender and other social markers, such as sexuality, race, class, age, geographical location, and (dis)ability, some leisure scholars have also reinforced the multiplicity of leisure experiences women are entitled to or denied based on these social
markers. Lesbians, for example, face additional constraints because of the intersection between gender and sexuality, exposing them to sexism and homophobia at the same time (Pritchard et al., 2002; Taylor, 2007). This intersection of oppression impacts their lived experiences and general well-being. On average, lesbians are less physically active (Bowen, Balsam, Diergaarde, Russo & Escamilla, 2006; Brittain, Baillargeon, McElroy, Aaron, & Gyurcsik, 2006) and more likely to be overweight and obese than heterosexual women (Boehmer, Bowen, & Bauer, 2007). Lesbians are also more likely to be addicted to alcohol and tobacco (Diamant, Wold, Spritzer, & Gelberg, 2000), which can lead to higher rates of heart disease and stroke. They perceive less social support from their families (Elizur & Mintzer, 2003; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007) and, as a consequence, are more likely to feel isolated and suffer from mental health problems than heterosexual people (Koh & Ross, 2006). Therefore, although sexuality is only one aspect of an individual’s life, studies have suggested that for those who do not have a mainstream sexual orientation, life tends to be more constrained in many areas. Experiences with homophobia have direct implications on general health and on interactions with people and places, which greatly affect leisure experiences.

Studies have suggested that the provision of leisure in LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) oriented and gay-friendly environments can be an important tool to help lesbians and gay men to cope with marginalization and stress (Skeggs, 1999; Iwasaki & Ristoki, 2004; Mock & Hummel, 2012). In 2011, I conducted a quantitative, online, pilot study with a sample of 813 lesbians which suggested that these lesbians were twice as likely to come out to friends as to their families, indicating that social interaction outside the home is an important factor in the development of their
identity as lesbians. I also found that, for most participants, self-consciousness and fear of harassment prevented them from fully enjoying their leisure in public spaces. Lesbian bars were reported as an important refuge in which they could express their sexual orientation without fear of homophobic backlash. Along with existing research, my pilot study has pointed to the need to better explore the leisure experiences of lesbian women and the characteristics that make leisure spaces inviting for them. However, there are not many studies looking into these issues in the literature today. Furthermore, almost no research has explored religious places as a source of leisure for the LGBTQ community. Considering the fact that lesbians tend to be more susceptible to alcohol and tobacco consumption (Diamant, Wold, Spritzer, & Gelberg, 2000), studies on spaces other than bars can shed some light on how to provide healthy leisure experiences for these women.

1.2 – Purpose of Research

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of a group of lesbian women who attend a straight-friendly (LGBTQ oriented) church as a source of leisure, and the meanings they associate with their experiences.

1.3 – Research Objectives

This study sought to address three specific research questions:

1. What are the leisure constraints experienced by lesbian women?

2. Why do lesbian women engage in leisure in this environment and what characteristics do they see in the church that they would like to see in other places?
3. How does the construction of meanings associated with this specific leisure space affect their lived experiences in leisure?

1.4 – Focus

Although this study focused on the experiences of a group of women who attend a Christian church, I made a conscious choice to not focus on religion when investigating the phenomenon. I made this choice for two reasons: 1) because the purpose of the study was to understand lesbians’ leisure and 2) because it was necessary to narrow the scope of the thesis. As an attendee of the church, I had previous knowledge that many people attend this church even though they are from other religions or do not have any particular religious affiliation. Rather many people view the church as an opportunity for social leisure. Therefore, I decided to focus on the church as a broader leisure space rather than a specifically religious place. As anticipated, spirituality and religiosity was a part of the findings, but they will not be discussed using religion as a conceptual framework in order to focus on the leisure experiences.

1.5 – Significance of the Study

The majority of literature about leisure for LGBTQ individuals has focused on three settings. They include: (a) gay neighborhoods (Skeggs, 1999; Taylor, 2007), (b) gay oriented tourism (Pritchard et al., 2000), and (c) gay and lesbian bars (Casey, M., 2004; Gruskin, Greenwood, Matevia, Pollack & Bye, 2007). Although these studies are extremely valuable, some aspects of leisure spaces have been overlooked, specifically for lesbians. Studies have shown that gay neighborhoods are not necessarily welcoming for
lesbian women (Pritchard et al., 2002); LGBTQ oriented tourism usually does not contribute to the creation of a solid and long-lasting social support system; and gay and lesbian bars tend to contribute to the consumption of alcohol and tobacco, which is detrimental to these women’s health (Diamant et al., 2000). Consequently, research in other types of environments is necessary in order to fill the gaps in the literature. Therefore, this study is significant because it addresses some of these gaps and provides insight into ways that LGBTQ-oriented leisure settings can to the well-being of lesbian women.

1.6 – Positioning the Researcher

"Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom."
(Aristotle)

This research was primarily related to leisure studies and focused particularly on leisure spaces and leisure constraints. However, there were other topics entwined in this study, including gender, sexuality, and geography. As part of the reflexive process involved in doing research, it was necessary to clarify my epistemological location in regard to each of these topics.

One of the main reasons why I decided to work on this research was my personal experience with this particular church. When I first got there, I was looking for a place where I could reconcile my Christianity with my sexual orientation. As my participants, I also had been hurt by churches in the past and these experiences had great negative impact in my life. I also experienced emotional and spiritual healing in this place, which made me want to further explore the nuances of lived experiences in religious leisure spaces.
Although I could have used other research frameworks, leisure studies seemed the most appropriate because of my own understandings of leisure. I believe that, in leisure, individuals have a better chance to be authentic, to develop relationships with likeminded persons, to have more freedom to choose participation, and to connect with their true self without limitations imposed by work or family for example. Therefore, leisure seemed to be (and indeed ended up being) a good fit to investigate leisure spaces and leisure constraints for lesbian women.

Feminists have been discussing for a long time the influence of the researcher and writers during the research process (Fine & Weis, 1996; Wolf, 1996). Alcoff (2008) highlights the challenges of speaking for and about others, and emphasizes the consequences of doing so. According to Alcoff, “a speaker’s location (…) has an epistemically significant impact on that speaker’s claims and can serve either to authorize or disauthorize one’s speech” (p.458). She emphasizes that advocacy for an oppressed population should be done primarily by these people themselves because their discourse expresses a specific and authentic epistemological location. Researchers should make a conscientious choice of speaking for and about groups in which they have membership in order to validate and strengthen their discourse. However, Alcoff also argues that the very delimitation of groups is complex because all individuals have membership in various groups simultaneously. Can a poor White woman speak for all women, for all poor, and for all White people? Not likely, because her social location, identity, and status might be considered oppressed or oppressive, privileged or unprivileged depending on what issue is being discussed. Power relations can change significantly depending on the context in which this woman is inserted.
However, it is generally agreed in the literature that there is a great need to give more voice to lesbians because they are a group of women who suffer intersections of oppression based on their gender and their sexuality. Because I am a lesbian myself, I have membership in this group and I feel comfortable to advocate for homosexual women, which is consistent with my feminist understandings. Yet, I am aware that I do indeed have membership in other groups and that my voice does not represent all possible epistemological locations within the lesbian group. Despite being aware of my limitations as a researcher speaking for and about other homosexual women, I did want to contribute to understanding about leisure experiences for lesbians.

I was very pleased to act as a voice for these women, but I was equally glad to find a place for my voice to be heard, as a woman, as a lesbian, and as a researcher. I could not ignore or hide that my social and cultural location and identity was present in every stage of this research. My scientific agenda was to study leisure constraints and leisure spaces for lesbian women and to contribute to a more accurate representation of lesbians in the leisure literature. However, I also had a social and personal interest that included the endless search for ways out of oppression, segregation and homophobia. In constructing the findings of my study I tried to represent the voices of the participants as accurately as possible. However, I also kept in mind the influence my social location could pose in the construction of these findings.

I also tried to be aware of possible power relations that could arise because I am a Brazilian immigrant in Canada and, therefore, I speak English as my second language and I have an overall inferior status in Canadian society. As will be discussed in Chapter 5, these social markers did not impact my interaction with participants as I had
hypothesized. Nevertheless, it was meaningful to me to keep this reflection in mind while conducting the study. The fact that I am a lesbian and have been a member of the church since 2011 seemed to have equalized my power relation with these participants.

I also had to locate my professional background as an Architect and Urban Planner. Having worked for 10 years planning various types of environments, I have developed a deep interest in how power finds its place between stones, concrete and steel. The materiality of cities, their buildings and neighborhoods, conceals and allows the mistaken idea that stones have no intention. However, as it is extensively discussed in Cultural Geography studies, the construction of cities creates division on all levels. Our cities are the tangible proof of our segregation and, yet, we usually fail to recognize how spaces are constructed based on power relations. Buildings and urban spaces are the materialization of our notion of who is allowed to come inside and who we designate as outsiders, who belongs and who are the others. It is in this context of systematic maintenance of tangible oppression that people have to find their physical and metaphorical place in the world, their epistemological location, their identity. It is in this context that each of us has to fight to maintain our self-esteem, our physical and mental health; to recognize, to accept and to develop our desires, our love, and our experiences with productivity, freedom and leisure. These expressions of power in spaces are a curiosity very close to my heart and, as I anticipated, caught my attention at various moments of this study, such as when some participants emphasized feeling inadequate in bars because they felt too old for that environment, or when two participants discussed antagonistic perceptions of a lesbian dance night being held in a church building. These
two physical buildings, the bar and the church, have discourses associated with their existence, and these discourses grant different levels of access to these spaces.

It was in this context of power and materiality that I locate myself and that this research took place. Circumscribed by my own limitations to see, to understand and to act in the world around me, my intention was to contribute to the representation of one kind of space that allows people who are usually marginalized to come inside and have a voice. And it was while trying to be conscientious about my physical and metaphorical place in this world that I tried to reproduce these women’s voices. Using leisure studies as a mediator to reach participants’ world view, I investigated their ideas about spaces and constraints. If knowledge and awareness are the key to changing the reality around us, hopefully, I contributed to the field of leisure studies and to the construction of a world with less oppression.

1.7 – Key Terms and Definitions in This Research

A series of common terms used in leisure studies, geography, and feminist theories were described or utilized in this research. Some operational definitions were, therefore, necessary.

**Androcentrism** – The understanding that the male perspective corresponds to the norm for all individuals, assuming the inexistence of social differences between the lived experiences of women and men (Lindsey, 2005).

**Gay man** – A man who feels sexual attraction toward other men, and/or has sex with other men, and/or has the desire to establish romantic relationships with same-sex partners.
**Gender** – A socio-culturally constructed definition of behaviours associated with and expected from females or males, as if biological sex was responsible for characteristics associated with femininity or masculinity (Butler, 1990).

**Gender identity** – Refers to the identification and self-expression individuals demonstrate in consonance with the socially constructed concepts of femininity or masculinity. Females are expected to identify with femininity and males with masculinity (Butler, 1990).

**Gender role** – Set of socially constructed rules that defines which behaviors are considered appropriate for members of each sex (Butler, 1990).

**Heteronormativity** – Refers to the numerous ways (political, social, cultural, organizational, interpersonal) in which heterosexuality is produced and affirmed as a natural, unproblematic, normal, taken-for-granted, ordinary phenomenon. Heteronormativity grants the definition of “variance”, “alternative to”, or a “deviant manifestation” of sexuality to any other form of sexual orientation (Phelan, 2001; Kitzinger, 2005).

**Hegemonic masculinity** – It is the attribution of power to men, where the most powerful individuals are Caucasian, heterosexual, middle-class, and educated men. This power is achieved in the reproduction of an ideal male behaviour, and sustained based on the oppression of females and inferior males (Bird, 1996; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

**Homophobia** – Personal discomfort, anxiety or fear of being physically close, or being associated with gay men or lesbian women. It can range from mild awkwardness to strong feelings of horror, disgust and hatred toward homosexuals or people whose
physical or behavioural characteristics are perceived as homosexual (Weinberg, 1973; Herek, 1984).

**Homosexuality** – A social construction that categorizes individuals who feel sexual desire exclusively for same-sex partners. In this study, it was used interchangeably as the category of individuals who establish (or have the desire to establish) romantic relationships with someone of the same-sex.

**Lesbian** – Literature has defined lesbians as women who feel sexual desire toward other women, and/or women who have sex with other women, and/or women who have the desire to establish romantic relationships with other women. These definitions can be overlapped or individually considered in the formation of one’s identity as a lesbian (Bauer & Jairam, 2008; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael & Michaels, 1994). For the purpose of this research, the concept of and the identification as a ‘lesbian’ was defined by the participants.

**LGBTQ** – Acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer.

**Resistance** - For the purpose of this study, resistance was defined as a set of symbolic acts against homophobic forms of oppression (e.g. - going to a LGBTQ oriented church in a homophobic society). Although resistance might not be displayed as open opposition (explicit), they are still psychologically empowering for those who commit such acts. (Scott, 1990)

**Sex** – Set of biological characteristics used to differentiate female and male bodies.

**Sexual orientation** – It refers to one’s sexual desires, sexual behaviour, romantic feelings and/or self-identification. Sexual orientation can be towards people of the same-sex (homosexual), different sex (heterosexual), both (bisexual), or none (asexual).
**Straight-friendly environment** – Environment that focuses on answering the needs of LGBTQ individuals, but is open and welcoming to the presence of heterosexual individuals.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 – Introduction

In this chapter, two main topics will be discussed: (a) leisure spaces and (b) leisure constraints. There is a significant body of literature discussing these two areas as well as an increasing number of studies exploring the influences that gender exerts in the utilization of leisure spaces and in the experience of leisure constraints. However, there is still much work to be done in order to better understand how gender and sexuality, together, shape leisure experiences. The impact of heterosexism has been discussed for a few decades in other disciplines (such as psychology & sociology) (e.g., Share & Mintz, 2002; Szymanski & Owens, 2008). However, there are few studies in the leisure literature exploring how experiences of discrimination based on sexual orientation impact the utilization of leisure spaces and to what extent these experiences with discrimination constitute leisure constraints.

Concepts such as place attachment, place identity, and place claim, among other relevant topics in leisure studies have been discussed in geography of leisure (e.g., Henderson & Frelke, 2000; Myrdahl, 2011a, 2011b; Williams, 2002). However, many studies of leisure and geography still tend to disregard the differences of experiences among women and men (e.g., Bricker & Kerstetter, 2000; Higham & Hinch, 2006). Since the main purpose of this study was to explore the leisure experiences of a group of women, it was crucial to discuss how gender frames opportunities in regard to the use of spaces. It was essential to point out that geography is not neutral, exempted from power relations or cultural values of gender roles. In order to understand our relationship with
spaces, it was important to acknowledge that our experiences in the physical world are mediated by our physical bodies, and that our physical bodies are deeply marked with cultural meanings. Consequently, in order to interact with the physical world, with these geographical spaces around us, we all have to learn what our culture prescribes for our sexed bodies. We have to find our metaphorical place in a range between assimilation of cultural values prescribed for our bodies and resistance against the system.

The impact of gender on our leisure opportunities has also been discussed in leisure studies using leisure constraints as a framework (e.g., Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007; Jackson & Henderson, 1995; Ofstedal, Kang, & Schneider, 2015). However, as in research about geography of leisure, many studies still disregard the differences between constraints for women and men, as well as differences between heterosexual and non-heterosexual individuals. This study, therefore, addressed the uniqueness of constraints faced by women in the pursuit of meaningful leisure experiences, paying particular attention to how heterosexism constrains the leisure of sexual minorities. It also considered how homosexuality creates another unique level of constraint in the lives of women who are lesbians.

This literature review aimed, therefore, to set the stage for a broader comprehension of the reality faced by lesbian women in Anglo-Saxon cultures, focusing particularly on North America. Reviewing what has been described in the literature about leisure spaces and leisure constraints for lesbian women was an important first step toward a more refined understanding of the reality faced by the participants of this research. It also allowed me, as a researcher, to be sensitized to possible themes that I could come across during the data collection and analyses. The main goal of this
literature review was, therefore, to establish a more open attitude to listen, understand, and truly give voice to these women’s stories, realities and viewpoints, respecting the uniqueness of their individual experiences in life and in leisure, but aware of the social structures that shape our collective existence.

2.2 - Spaces, Gender and Sexuality

The impact of gender on our access to spaces is not a new discussion in the field of geography. Since the 1970’s and 80’s (Etorre, 1978; Harris, 1989) and more consistently in the 90’s (Duncan, 1996; Valentine, 1992, 1993b, 1996), some feminist geographers have studied how gender shapes our relationship with physical spaces. Valentine (1992) and Duncan (1996), for example, argued that, historically, women have been associated with the private sphere of life and men with the public one. This differentiation between women and men has various roots and implications for access to urban spaces (Duncan, 1996). Western societies developed the understanding that public spaces are linked with the market place, the waged labor, the critical public discourse, and rationality. In opposition, private spaces are linked with the domestic, the family, the unwaged labor, the personal life, and the experiences of intimacy, care, and sexuality. The private world is rooted in the idea of privacy and patriarchal familial sovereignty, where the men were the head of the household, and women were the dependent apolitical individuals responsible to give care for children and for older adults (Duncan, 1996). This strong division between what belonged to the public and private world was based on a clear distinction of female and male’s roles in White middle-class families, social expectations associated with feminine and masculine behaviour, as well as a solid
valorization of heterosexual relationships as the mediator for this private/public dichotomy (Valentine, 1992). Nowadays, even though society has changed and women have achieved a more independent and active political place in society, men can still move between the public and private worlds with more autonomy and legitimacy than women (Duncan, 1996; Foster & Giles-Corti, 2008; Koskela, 1999).

Other factors, such as discourses of respectability, appropriateness of female behaviour, and fear of male violence or harassment, also regulate women’s use of public spaces (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007; Green & Singleton, 2006; Valentine, 1989, 1992). In the 1990’s, Valentine (1992) found that, statistically, young men were much more likely to suffer violence in public spaces than women. However, women reported feeling much more fear of using public spaces than men, especially at night. Even though statistics also suggested that women were more likely to suffer domestic violence caused by men they know rather than violence in public spaces caused by unknown perpetrators, women tended to think that private spaces were safer. Contemporary statistic reports (Canadian Women’s Foundation, 2012) show that this reality continues and a more recent body of literature affirms that women still have more fear of occupying public spaces than men (Foster & Giles-Corti, 2008; Koskela, 1999; Wilson & Little, 2008). Because of fear, women tend to regulate their spatial mobility, which makes their experiences with and access to spaces very different from men’s experiences. Public spaces constitute, therefore, a physical (real, material) demonstration of the power of hegemonic masculinity over women’s lives. In an era of female emancipation, female bodies are still a social marker constraining physically and metaphorically how far women can go.
In leisure studies, spaces have also been studied through the gender lens (e.g. Carr, 2000; Espiner, Gidlow, & Cushman, 2011; James, 2001; Lloyd, Burden, & Kiewa, 2008; Scraton & Watson, 1998). Wearing (1998), for example, discussed the influence of paid work (or men’s work) in the private/public dichotomy. As the breadwinner, men were expected to be the ones going to work, establishing a clear cut division between work and leisure, and city (or place for work) and suburb (or place for leisure and family relations). Because of this patriarchal configuration of family and society, cities in the post-war era were planned to fulfill the assumption that men would travel to work and women would stay in the suburbs. As well as other urban spaces, leisure spaces were not developed focusing on the needs of women and children. Even though society has changed since the post-war era, Wearing and others (e.g., Beck & Arnold, 2009; Green & Singleton, 2006; Harrington, 2006; Henderson, Hodges, & Kivel, 2002), argue that still today factors such as the wage gap, time availability, distance, lack of transportation, and lack of family-friendly facilities make involvement in leisure activities in urban spaces difficult for many women. This spatial constraint narrows their leisure opportunities (Aitchison, 1999), and also their ability to develop their sense of self and identity (Atencio & Wright, 2009; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000), because they are not exposed to lived social experiences that could widen their options as individuals. As a consequence, gender ideologies and the public/private dichotomy are perpetuated, maintaining urban spaces as still strongly male dominated and constraining women’s leisure.

Similar to gender, sexuality also plays an important role in our interactions with spaces and our experiences with leisure. Like gender, sexuality is also regulated by the public/private space dichotomy. There is a socially accepted discourse that sexuality
should be restricted to private spaces (Duncan, 1996) and a social belief that urban spaces are asexual (Valentine, 1992). However, the same way that society tends to have a distorted view of what constitutes danger for women in public spaces, society also tends to misconstrue the way sexuality is actually promoted in these spaces. Authors such as Valentine (1992, 1993b), Duncan (1996), and Chouinard and Grant (1996) have extensively discussed how heterosexuality is constantly reinforced in public spaces. Dolance (2005) and Myrdahl (2011a) affirm the same in regard to leisure spaces and leisure activities. These authors argue that the extent to which this reinforcement happens is so great that heterosexual interactions in public spaces become invisible. Women and men walk holding hands, they kiss in public, they wear wedding bands, they take their children to parks emphasizing the heterosexual relationship and the heterosexual family. These constant expressions of heterosexual life are so frequent that they become naturalized and invisible. Using the words of Duncan (1996), “[l]ike trying to convince WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) that they have an ethnicity, it is difficult to make heterosexuals aware that their spaces invoke a sexuality” (p. 138). Although heterosexuality is everywhere and constantly reinforced and celebrated (e.g. the ‘kiss cam’ during football games, when couples are stimulated to kiss while thousands of people watch), there is, nevertheless, a socially accepted discourse that sexuality belongs to the private realm.

The same way that public/private plays a great part in the opportunities that women and men have in public spaces, this dichotomy also differentiates people based on their sexual orientation. The belief that sexuality should be kept in private is constantly used to justify homophobia (Valentine, 2012), including the reasoning for physical
violence against gays and lesbians (Gough, 2002). This social control over homosexuality causes many restrictions to the use of public spaces by sexual minorities. Different from heterosexuals, homosexuals are more likely to create ghettos, they are more likely to socialize in friends’ houses rather than in public spaces, and they constantly monitor their behaviour when interacting in public spaces (Levine, 1979; Myrdahl, 2011a). The need for safer spaces where sexual minorities can freely express their sexual orientation significantly impacts the way these people create bonds with places (Mock & Hummel, 2012; Pritchard et al., 2002; Taylor, 2007). It also shapes their choices in leisure. Rather than choosing leisure spaces and leisure activities based on their personal interests, sexual minorities strongly value the existence of a gay-friendly social support where they can avoid experiences of heterosexism.

Due to the unique experiences of and attitudes toward the use of space that many sexual minorities hold, many aspects of their lives tend to be different from heterosexuals. The spatial constraints affect how they develop their identity (Atencio & Wright, 2009; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000), how they meet friends, lovers and partners (Valentine, 1993a), how they build community and a social support system (Taylor, 2007), how they develop their self-esteem, how they develop their faith (Valentine, 2012), among many other aspects that make each one of us what we are. Many of the benefits of leisure that scholars have been discussing for years are affected by our sexual orientation, and many of the positive outcomes that leisure experiences and interactions in leisure spaces produce are limited for those who are not heterosexual. Therefore, the scarcity of research about the experiences of this group represents a notable gap in the leisure studies literature. If we are to argue that leisure can be used to achieve a
healthier, happier and less oppressive society, all voices must be heard, including lesbian women.

2.2.1 – Leisure Spaces for Lesbians

Studies have shown that leisure experiences are important in the construction of our gender identities (Atencio & Wright, 2009; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000). Green (1998), analysing women’s experiences of leisure, discussed the importance of leisure as a site for feminine identity construction and argued that gender rules and roles are learned and passed along when women experience leisure together. In this process, definitions of what is ‘normal’ or ‘deviant’ behaviour is spread and internalized, which can be very empowering and comforting for some women. Green emphasizes that leisure can also be a site to promote resistance against gender stereotypes by those who do not correspond to the norm. Leisure spaces play a significant role in this process because they foster social interactions that allow us to exercise our gender identity (Aitchison, 1999; Green, 1998).

However, because spaces encompass power relations (Lefebvre, 1991; Stokowski, 2002; van Ingen, 2003), different groups have different opportunities to develop their identity, to create bonds with peers, and to develop other social skills (Scraton & Watson, 1998). Therefore, there is a direct relationship between our access to spaces and the development of our identity.

Valentine (1993a), discussing friendship among lesbians and the use of spaces for non-heterosexual women, argues that lesbians usually have a limited number of places in which they can freely meet and socialize with other lesbians. This factor constitutes a significant difference compared to how heterosexual women (and men) establish
friendships. Lesbians tend to be more open and adaptable to heterogeneous groups (e.g. class, age, ethnicity, level of education) because they want to maintain their network, and because it is harder for them to meet new friends. While heterosexuals tend to adapt their friendships to major changes in their lives (e.g. getting married, having children), lesbians tend to adapt their lives, their interests and their boundaries in order to maintain their friendships (Valentine, 1993a). Therefore, the absence or scarcity of leisure spaces where lesbians can openly express their sexual orientation can have a significant impact in the construction of their identity as women and as lesbians (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000).

Although feminine identity formation and friendship among women have been discussed in leisure studies (Green, 1998; Aitchison, 1999), there is almost no literature exploring the unique experiences of lesbian women. Feminine identity formation and friendship among lesbians might constitute a very different scenario since friendship and sexual attraction, in this case, can be connected.

Beyond the aspects related to identity formation, researchers have been examining how lesbians develop and construct place attachment with leisure spaces. Studies have shown that lesbians face greater disadvantages in the use of public leisure spaces than heterosexual women (Jacobson & Samdahl, 1998; Pritchard et al., 2002; Taylor, 2007). Discourse associated with hegemonic masculinity creates greater disadvantages for all women in their leisure opportunities and in their access to leisure spaces when compared to men from the same social-cultural standard (e.g. age, race, class) (Aitchison, 1999; Scraton & Watson, 1998). However, lesbian women face even greater disadvantages because of discourse associated with heteronormativity. As a consequence, they face a peculiar scenario in the development of place attachment. One of the aspects pointed out
in the literature is the previously discussed public/private dichotomy. Studies emphasize that most women, independent of social background or sexual orientation, share gendered experiences related to perceived risk of violence, social control of women’s behaviour, and restricted access to urban spaces, which push women into the private sphere of life (Koskela, 1999; Lloyd & Auld, 2003; Scraton & Watson, 1998). However, public spaces such as lesbian bars or other LGBTQ public spaces might be more appealing for lesbians than private spaces in which they have to conceal their sexual orientation. Therefore, this dichotomy might present important differences from heterosexual women because of aspects related to homophobia and heterosexism, including within their family realm. On the other hand, lesbians tend to structure their lives without depending on men and without the concern of how they are perceived by men (Raja & Stokes, 1998; Toledo, 2007). Their independence and disregard toward male gaze might be a source of empowerment for lesbians, leading them to feel less fear of harassment and male violence, granting lesbians more perceived spatial freedom than heterosexual women. These particularities of lesbian existence might, therefore, impact their attachment to places as well.

Some authors also have discussed the utilization of gay environments by lesbian women. Skeggs (1999), Pritchard et al. (2002), and Taylor (2007) argued that lesbians are not particularly welcome in gay neighbourhoods because they do not share the consumerist identity of gay men and because these neighbourhoods receive a great number of heterosexual women who end up intimidating lesbians. Skeggs (1999) found that lesbians do not feel physically threatened by straight women, however, the presence of heterosexual women in a gay dominated environment reinforces concerns with
appearance and consumerism that usually bond gay men and straight women. In this context, lesbians lose recognition as women and visibility as homosexuals. Pritchard et al. (2002), therefore, suggested that further explorations of the power relationship between gay men and lesbian women should be addressed. According to them, this relationship tends to reinforce androcentric ideology and lead to the generalization of ‘homosexuals’ as a homogenous group. According to Johnson and Samdahl (2005), this generalization is easily made, but fundamentally wrong. In their study about the utilization of a gay bar by lesbian women, they found that gay men tend to see lesbians primarily as women rather than fellow homosexuals. They argue that, even though the life of gay men is deeply affected by heterosexism similar to lesbians, hegemonic masculinity overpowers their similarities of oppression, and even though gay men may not practice their masculine power in a traditional way, they still benefit from this power. Even gay men perform masculinity in ways that maintain male privilege (Johnson & Samdahl, 2005).

Generalizations should be avoided also within the group of lesbian women. Aspects such as age, race, ethnicity, social status, geographic location, maternity, (dis)ability, and sexual orientation concealment might significantly change the views, opportunities and constraints a lesbian might face in society, including denial of or entitlement to urban spaces. Taylor (2007), for example, investigated working-class English lesbians and concluded that these women felt discriminated against in the ‘gay scene’ because they do not have enough money to present themselves in the ‘correct’ way to fit in. They felt that gays and upper middle class lesbians were constantly judging them and analyzing if they ‘deserved’ to be in that scene. In this context, identity and
consumerism became interconnected and working-class women had reduced opportunities to work on their own identity as lesbians because they were not wealthy enough. The ‘right’ way to present themselves as lesbians was unaffordable for most of these women, and financial oppression overpowered the similar sexual behaviour they share with upper-middle class lesbians. Therefore, Taylor argued that there is a need to study working-class lesbians to better understand how they manage their identity formation, their sense of belonging in queer communities, their leisure experiences in these places, and their sense of entitlement to urban spaces.

Although gender and sexuality establish an intersection of oppression in the lives of lesbian women, some authors have discussed how they manage to transform this oppression into resistance. Valentine (1996) described a series of actions (or absence of actions) which allow lesbian women to identify themselves and create bonds that resist heteronormativity. She mentioned subtle signifiers of lesbian identity such as rainbow ribbons, dress code, body language, as well as linguistic expressions and use of lesbian jargon referring to lesbian cultural icons. She also highlighted the maintenance of silence in situations in which heterosexual women would use patterns of verbal behaviour in order to interact with or attract men. These subtle interactions, invisible to the heterosexual gaze, establish, approximate, and strengthen the relationship among these women and allow the construction of a ‘lesbian community’ and a symbolic space shared by these women. This invisible place transforms geographical sites into significant environments that allow these women to challenge the heterosexist city and empower their community (Valentine, 1996). Some authors have looked into this community construction associated with leisure spaces and activities, and gay bars (Gilmartin, 1996;
Kennedy & Davis, 1993), music festivals (Eder, Staggenborg & Sudderth, 1995, Lockard, 1986), sports sites (Dolance, 2005; Myrdahl, 2011a), gay neighbourhoods (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004; Quilley, 1995; Pritchard et al., 2002; Skeggs, 1999; Taylor, 2007), and LGBTQ oriented seasonal homes (Krahulik, 2006; Mock & Hummel, 2012) are the most frequent sites discussed in the literature. There is, nevertheless, a need for further research in the leisure studies field focusing on how the intersectionality among social markers (e.g. race, religion, marital status, level of education, parental status, class, profession, age, geographic location, physical (dis)ability, and sexual orientation concealment) might significantly change the views, the possibilities and the constraints lesbians face in society. There is still much work to be done in order to change realities of oppression and create better conditions for more inclusive and meaningful leisure experiences for all.

2.3 - Leisure Constraints

“... Freedom, a word the human dream feeds on, that no one can explain or fail to understand ...”
(Cecilia Meireles, 2005, p.71 - Brazilian poetess)

Leisure constraints can be understood as something that inhibits or prohibits someone from participating in a leisure activity even though this person has interest in pursuing participation (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). They can also be understood as factors that lead individuals to participate less often that they wish, or not fully enjoy their leisure activities (Jackson, 2005; Shaw et al., 1991). Leisure constraints have become one of the major focuses of leisure studies in the past two decades (Russell, 2009).
The most common model of leisure constraints used in contemporary research was developed by Crawford and Godbey in 1987. They argued that previous researchers had focused their studies on only one type of barriers, “structural constraints”, and it was assumed that all constraints lead to non-participation. Crawford and Godbey’s new model, therefore, suggested an expansion of the original concept, dividing leisure constraints into three groups: (a) intrapersonal constraints; (b) interpersonal constraints; and (c) structural constraints.

Intrapersonal barriers are related to someone’s psychological characteristics. These individual characteristics shape and act upon leisure preferences, rather than simply preventing participation. Examples of intrapersonal constraints include stress, fear, depression, religiosity, and personal evaluation of the appropriateness of a specific leisure activity (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). Some of these barriers are highly influenced by social and cultural norms. However, the interactions and outcomes related to these constraints are experienced differently by people within a society and culture. Therefore, intrapersonal constraints are experienced on an individual psychological level.

Interpersonal leisure constraints are the result of interactions between individuals, and, as in intrapersonal constraints, shape preferences and impact participation. Crawford and Godbey (1987) use the relationship between couples and between parents and their children as examples of interpersonal constraints. The interaction between partners can enhance or diminish leisure participation depending on similarities or differences in each individual’s leisure interests. Leisure expressions among partners are often affected by other aspects of the relationship as well, which might also impact preferences and participation. As for parents and children, usually the child faces constraints because of her or his parents and the opposite is also true. Parents often have constraints that childless people do not have. Although Crawford and Godbey use
these two groups as examples, they specify that interpersonal constraints may happen in any level of relationship (e.g. absence of partner to play tennis).

Structural barriers are the most common understanding of leisure constraints. They are defined by Crawford and Godbey (1987) as “intervening factors between leisure preferences and participation” (p. 124). Examples of structural constraints are financial resources, time availability, and geographical location.

Following the publication of this study, Crawford and colleagues (1991) proposed an expansion of Crawford and Godbey’s model. Other studies also gave support to this expansion (e.g. Kay & Jackson, 1991; Shaw et al., 1991) and, nowadays, Leisure Constraints Theory suggests that constraints lead to outcomes beyond just non-participation. Constraints might be overcome through negotiation, and highly motivated individuals might feel even more stimulated to participate exactly because they have constraints to overcome (Jackson, Crawford, & Godbey, 1993; Shaw et al., 1991). Some authors even argue that constraints can be beneficial for leisure in certain cases because they help to narrow the list of possible choices to a more manageable number and help people appreciate better the leisure they can participate in (Kleiber, McGuire, Aybar-Damali, & Norman, 2008). More recent researchers also discuss that although participation itself may not be constrained, some individuals might not fully enjoy an activity even though they engage in it (Jackson, 2005; Shaw et al., 1991). Other individuals might have their preferences defined by some constraint and even though they participate, they would rather engage in another activity (Liechty, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2006).

Another relevant factor that leisure constraints researchers have pointed out is that psychological mediators (Alexandris et al., 2002; Mannell, Kleiber, & Staempfli, 2006), and socio-cultural contexts (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007) might significantly change the existence
and the perception of constraints. Costa, Heilborn, Werneck, Faerstein, and Lopes (2003), for example, conducted a study with 3,740 employees of a Brazilian university in which the participants were asked about their leisure preferences, focusing mostly on physical activities. The authors found that gender, schooling, and income had a great impact on leisure constraints. Women who graduated at the university level, for example, were more likely to have a higher income than less educated women. Consequently, women with higher levels of education faced fewer financial constraints to leisure. In addition, wealthier women had more possibilities to pay for help with housework and childcare, which had a great impact on their “free time”. Therefore, this study suggests that socio-economic status has direct implications for leisure constraints.

Costa and colleagues (2003) also found that being a father had little impact on men’s participation in leisure activities, but the same did not happen for mothers, who had their participation drastically reduced after having children. This difference among women and men was the same for all classes interviewed which suggests that financial resources differentiate women from women and men from men, but gender ideologies have a stronger impact on women’s leisure, independent of their income.

In another study, Taylor (2001) also pointed out some socio-cultural causes of leisure constraints. This author studied factors that shape immigrants’ leisure preferences in Australia, focusing specifically on women’s experiences. Taylor focused on female immigrants from different backgrounds and learned that aspects related to ethnicity, such as language, religion, attitude, values, and expectations were reported as relevant in leisure decision-making and were a source of meaningful leisure for this population. However, these same ethnic characteristics often become leisure constraints because these women have to balance cultural expectations of family members and the larger community. Many immigrants reported that their leisure choices
were constrained because they had few available opportunities to engage in leisure and they faced exclusion issues based on ethnic differences. In addition, Taylor argued that many leisure providers still use an assimilationist perspective, in which the immigrant is expected to incorporate the values and traditions of the new culture. This process of assimilation can minimize opportunities and maximize constraints for immigrants’ participation in leisure activities outside their ethnic group.

Each group of people faces particular circumstances that define and determine a great deal in regard to their leisure experiences and constraints. Therefore, the same way that there is no unified definition of leisure, it is important to consider that any definition for leisure constraints will, somehow, leave some group behind.

2.3.1 – Leisure Constraints for Women

Researchers have argued that leisure is gendered (Henderson, 1997; Henderson & Gibson, 2013; Henderson & Shaw, 2006) and that gender establishes different leisure opportunities, values, benefits, outcomes and constraints for women and men (Jackson & Henderson, 1995; Ofstedal, Kang, & Schneider, 2015). Based on several studies, Henderson and colleagues (2002) suggest that, when compared to men, the time that women have available to engage in leisure activities is reduced and more fragmented. Also, women have a preponderance of unstructured home based leisure and fewer opportunities outside the home.

In virtually all societies, women are associated with the domestic sphere of life, household work and childcare (Brettell & Sargent, 1997). Henderson and colleagues (2002) argue that, in heterosexual families, even though many couples believe that household and parenting should be shared duties, women are still disproportionately responsible for most of these
activities. As a result, most women, especially mothers, are more likely to establish their leisure around family and home responsibilities while men face fewer constraints related to kinship (Harrington, 2006; Henderson et al., 2002). Gender role expectations greatly impact women’s leisure, creating both interpersonal and intrapersonal constraints in their domestic life. In addition, women face leisure constraints associated with gender expectations to their outside-home life as well. As previously discussed, discourses about respectability and appropriateness of female behaviour (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007; Green & Singleton, 2006), and fear of violence (Koskela, 1999; Lloyd & Auld, 2003; Scraton & Watson, 1998; Valentine, 1989, 1992), for example, have a great impact on women’s leisure experiences and the utilization of leisure spaces.

Furthermore, it is also important to account for differences within the same sex (Henderson et al., 2002). Feminists have been challenging the concept of a unified “women’s experience”, and have been fighting to put into perspective that factors such as race, ethnicity, culture, geographical location, social status, gender, sexuality, among others, have profound impact on women’s experiences (Foss et al., 1999). These factors create different groups of women who share different experiences in society, even though they are all the same sex. Being a white, black, Asian, or a Latino woman, being a partner, a mother, a lesbian, a transgender, being Muslin, Christian or Buddhist, being a lawyer, a maid or a stripper, being an athlete or having a physical disability, all these distinct characteristics, individually or in conjunction, create social expectations that might be both a source of constraint or of empowerment.
2.3.2 – Leisure Constraints for Lesbians

Some characteristics that constitute our identity can be seen differently depending on our environment (e.g. Muslims suffer different levels of discrimination if they are in Saudi Arabia or in the United States). Homosexuality is one of these characteristics. Until today, homosexuality was considered a crime in 79 countries and subject to the death penalty in 10 and only in 1991 was homosexuality removed from the World Health Organization classification list of diseases (Seager, 2009). Therefore, lesbians and gay men must learn how to negotiate heteronormativity in many areas of their lives, including their experiences in leisure (Oakleaf, 2009; Theriault, 2014). Although lesbians and gay men face different nuances of social discrimination, lesbianism many times is studied as correspondent to male homosexuality. The association of women and men, in this case, emphasizes androcentric ideologies, reinforcing the invisibility of lesbian’s sexuality. This generalization of the concept of homosexuality tends to obfuscate constraints that are specific for lesbians (Pritchard, Morgan, & Sedgley, 2002; Skeggs, 1999).

Lesbianism has been broadly studied by feminists for more than four decades now (Anzaldúa, 1987; Bunch, 1975; Rich, 1994). They argue that lesbians suffer a double dose of discrimination because they are women and because they are lesbians (Anzaldúa, 1987). They experience many of the same constraints as other women, but, in addition, there are some barriers that are specifically related to their sexuality, and to stereotypes associated with homosexuality in general and with lesbianism in particular. Chouinard and Grant (1996) argue that “[c]ompulsory heterosexuality ensures that each member of the oppressed group – women – is individually coupled with a member of the dominant group – men. This assures male rights of access to women on an economic, emotional and physical level. Lesbian existence attacks this right. It challenges heterosexual hegemony” (p.174). Toledo (2007) goes further, arguing that
female homosexuality faces circumstances very different from male homosexuality because lesbians break two heterosexist and androcentric socio-cultural constructions associated with women. These constructions are that (a) women cannot have sexual pleasure without the presence of a man (more specifically, the presence of a penis), and (b) women cannot have sex just for pleasure (it must be for procreation purposes or to give pleasure to a man). Raja and Stokes (1998) argued that, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, female homosexuality was not socially discriminated in the United States because these women still conformed to social norms, such as being married and having children. The sexual nature of these relationships used to be de-emphasized and their emotional bonds were accepted by most heterosexuals. This scenario changed in the twentieth century when lesbians started being perceived as women who actively reject male partners and do not depend on men (Raja & Stokes, 1998). It was not until lesbians started being perceived as challenging hegemonic masculinity that they started to suffer systematic oppression and their sexual orientation became a source of constraints.

According to Perlesz and McNair (2004), during the 80s, because of scientific progress in medicine associated with fertilization, industrialized countries experienced a lesbian baby boom. As a consequence, the number of lesbian families increased and studies related to particularities of their lives became more frequent. However, the number of studies in this area is still fairly small compared to other topics related to women and to sexuality. In the field of leisure studies that is also true and, with the notable exception of Bialeschki and Pearce (1997), it is still hard to find researchers discussing lesbian families.

In comparison to heterosexual relationships, homosexual ones are more likely to provide liberation in terms of power balance since both partners are the same gender and were raised with the same gender roles. Since there is no rigid and defined social expectation among lesbian
and gay families, they face more freedom in choosing and establishing their parameters for the relationship (Bialeschki & Pearce, 1997). These unique circumstances make their home based constraints easier to negotiate compared with those faced by heterosexual women. Bialeschki and Pearce suggest that, because of this freedom, lesbian women in a partnered relationship are able to negotiate leisure constraints at home based on four criteria, none of which is dictated by predetermined gender ideologies. The first criterion is personal interests, which means that each partner can usually choose the activity she likes the most as her responsibility at home. The second criterion is time availability, which means that the partner with more available time will be responsible for more tasks at home or for those activities which need more time to be completed. The third criterion is financial possibility to hire help, which means that the couple may choose, depending on their financial circumstances, to pay outside help for housework or childcare, liberating them to participate in leisure activities. Lastly, the fourth criterion is the agreement for task completion, which means that those activities which none of the partners like to do will be done following the understanding that such a task must be completed. According to these authors, lesbian families are, therefore, more likely to achieve pleasurable leisure for all individuals because the absence of gender role expectations opens space for a better negotiation of constraints at home.

Although homosexual families might have some advantages compared to heterosexual families, the reality outside the home tends to be much harder for lesbians and gays. The level of homophobia varies from one culture to another and some places in the world are more accepting of non-heterosexual people than others, which increases or reduces the level of leisure constraints a person might face based on sexual orientation. Toledo (2007), for example, conducted a study with Brazilian lesbians and argued that the inexistence of laws against
homophobia allows moral, psychological and physical violence against homosexuals. According to Toledo, the state overlooks the reality of homosexuals, reinforcing and validating their social invisibility. This social invisibility and absence of power allows for the development of negative stereotypes associated with lesbians and lesbian families and the growth of homophobia. Stereotypes associated with femininity and masculinity in lesbians indulges another type of violence against women, the violence based on perceived homosexuality. ‘Masculinized’ women, homosexual or not, are susceptible to homophobic harassment and physical violence (Toledo, 2007). This exposure to violence shapes many aspects of lesbian lives, including leisure opportunities and preferences. It is important to emphasize that almost no research investigating the constraints faced by lesbian women has been conducted in Canada. Since socio-cultural aspects have a great impact on leisure constraints, research focusing on a country where same-sex marriage is legal and anti-harassment laws are in place might highlight directions for a more inclusive and satisfying leisure experience for these women.

Some authors have also discussed how the intersection of factors such as race, ethnicity, religion, marital status, level of education, weight, general health, parenting, class, profession, age, geographical location, physical (dis)ability, sexual orientation concealment, among others have to be taken into consideration in order to understand levels of constraints someone might face. Jacobson and Samdahl (1998), for example, focused on the leisure experiences of lesbians over the age of 60. The authors found that stigma and discrimination had a great impact on participants’ leisure choices and experiences, and that the intersectionality of gender, sexual orientation and age brought disempowering messages about the self. Some women described feeling even more discrimination from younger lesbians than from society in general, which points out the need to better understand the process of aging in lesbian communities and coping
strategies that some of these women might develop. Many researchers have focused on the aging process for women’s leisure. However, little attention has been given to older lesbians. Although many aspects of aging might put lesbians and straight women in very similar situations (such as menopause, memory loss, loss of family members and friends), the social support these women have access to is different. To deal with arthritis might bring similar difficulties for lesbians and straight women. However, losing a husband might receive more social sympathy and support than losing a same-sex partner, especially for those women who conceal their homosexuality. Therefore, differences in the aging process of lesbians and straight women should be explored further, as well as how meaningful leisure experiences might act as a coping mechanism for them and how leisure can help in their healing process.

As discussed in the previous section of this study, urban spaces in general and leisure spaces in particular also can constitute a leisure constraint for lesbian women. Without a more welcoming environment (social and physical), these women face constraints in the development of meanings and relationships with places, which is an important part in the process of self-location (psychologically and geographically). The absence of leisure spaces where lesbians can find physical and emotional safety for themselves and for their families strongly impacts experiences of constraint and usually results in poorer and fewer leisure experiences for this group. This study, therefore, is trying to address these gaps in the literature.

Foucault (1980) argued that sexuality is a site where social control is accomplished through power relations, through the use of discourses that constantly shape our reality and who we are. According to him, “if you are not like everybody else, then you are abnormal, if you are abnormal, then you are sick. These three categories, not being like everybody else, not being normal and being sick are in fact very different but have been reduced to the same thing” (as
cited in O'Farrell, 2004, p.95). Our inability to deal with these differences generates all kinds of constraints. Constraints are related to power, the power that social discourse has over us and our power to reject this discourse; power to go where we want and with whom we want; power to negotiate circumstances, to adapt ourselves to adversities and pursue positive outcomes; power over our own bodies, our own will; power that is given to us attached to our bodies; power to exert power over other people; power to choose not to exert power over other people; power to generate children, to be the ones who give care; power to be the ones who do not care; power of self-efficacy, of self-determination; power to be free; power to free other people; power to be a unique individual; power to build a community; power to change who we are, what we are allowed to be, and what we want to become; the comforting and yet onerous power of knowledge. I started this section (Leisure Constraints) with a quote about freedom, and I would like to conclude this literature review with another one: “Where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault, 1980, p.92).
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

3.1 – Introduction

“Learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow.
The important thing is to not stop questioning.”
(Albert Einstein apud Benton, 1993, p.13)

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of a group of lesbian women who attended a straight-friendly (LGBTQ oriented) church as a source of leisure, and the meanings they associated with their experiences. Specifically, this study addressed three research questions:

1. What are the leisure constraints experienced by lesbian women?
2. Why do lesbian women engage in leisure in this environment and what characteristics do they see in the church that they would like to see in other places?
3. How does the construction of meanings associated with this specific leisure space affect their lived experiences in leisure?

Rather than investigating cause and effect, predicting, or describing the distribution of leisure activities, patterns, constraints, etc., among a general population, the aim of this study was to explore the meaning of a specific phenomenon experienced by a specific sample. The main goal of this study was to learn how these women understood their experiences, how they constructed their worldviews, and what meaning they attributed to their leisure experiences in a space where they can freely express their sexual orientation and identity. Therefore, this research was conducted using a qualitative approach, which, according to some leisure researchers, is the most appropriate method to fully capture the nuances of social meanings of leisure (Henderson, 2006; Tirone & Shaw, 1997).
Although there is a great deal of discussion about what constitutes qualitative method and the possible divisions in theoretical paradigms, perspectives, or epistemologies (Merriam, 2009), for the purpose of this research I used what Merriam (2009) refers to as an “interpretative approach” (p.8). According to Merriam, a qualitative interpretative approach “assumes that reality is socially constructed, that is, there is no single, observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event. Researchers do not “find” knowledge, they construct it” (p.8). Furthermore, qualitative methods allow the participants and researchers to co-construct knowledge.

Among the possible ways to conduct qualitative research, the phenomenological approach was the most appropriate in this case because it focuses on depicting participants’ lived experience (Merriam, 2009). Phenomenology allows the participants to have their voices expressed in their own terms, from their particular point of view (van Manen, 1990). “Phenomenologists focus on how we put together the phenomena we experience in such a way as to make sense of the world and, in so doing, develop a worldview. There is no separate (or objective) reality for people. There is only what they know their experience is and means” (Patton, 1990, p.69). Phenomenology also allows the researcher to “borrow” other stories and reflections in order to formulate a deeper understanding of the phenomenon she or he is studying. “We gather other people’s experiences because they allow us to become more experienced ourselves” (van Manen, 1990, p.62).

The relationship between researcher and participant as well as the researcher and the data analysis is understood slightly differently from one theorist to another in the field of phenomenology. Giorgi (2009), for example, has a more positivist (traditional science) approach and believes that it is possible to ‘bracket’ ourselves – the human side of the researcher – out of
the research, truly allowing the participant have a voice. van Manen (1990), on the other hand, argues that every research is an act of interpretation of someone’s life, and the researcher has to try to be as objective as possible, but aware that all objectivity is limited by the researcher’s own worldview. van Manen does not believe we can ‘bracket’ ourselves out and, therefore, we have to include ourselves in the research, making clear our worldview and our bias. As a researcher, I identify myself closer to van Manen’s arguments.

3.2- Feminism as a Framework

Cope (2002), in her examination of the impacts of gender on the process of doing research, argues that gender influences the ways we experience the world, how we interact with others, and what opportunities or privileges are open to us. Gender has a great impact on all of us including researchers and participants. It impacts what sparks our curiosity, which questions we are able to formulate, how these questions are framed and what we consider as valid knowledge before, during and after the process of research.

Many feminist authors (e.g. Caplan & Caplan, 1994; Foss, 1999; Haraway, 1988) have argued that women’s participation in what “counts” as knowledge has been historically overlooked and undermined. Lewontin (1991), for example, examines how “scientific” discourses that are reproduced as gender-neutral or value-free are, in fact, a systematic reinforcement of gender ideologies. Because humans are socialized in a context in which women and men are valorized differently and experience the world under different gender rules, it is important to consider that researching lived experiences will never be gender neutral. Therefore, establishing feminism as a framework in this study is, among other things, to account for these differences and to be aware that gender will play a role in every part of the process. Feminism
(and particularly the concept of intersectionality) also helps to recognize that identity is an intricate interaction of cultural, social, political and economic dynamics (Stasiulis, 1999). Therefore, the interactions between gender and other aspects such as race, social status, age, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, impact the lives of each one of us, creating particular epistemological locations that should not be ignored.

In leisure studies, feminism has been used as a framework to analyze topics such as the differences in the use of leisure spaces by women and men (Lloyd, Burden, & Kiewa, 2008), leisure motivations, leisure constraints (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007; Liechty et al., 2006), gender identity formation (Lewis & Johnson, 2011), leisure as a coping mechanism (Taylor, 2001), among many other topics in which differences of power might occur. Feminism also has been used in order to develop research methods more appropriate to the field of leisure. As a mature and consistent methodological framework, feminism has proven useful in the development of meaningful work in these areas. In this study I analyzed the lived experiences of lesbian women through their point of view, valorizing the participants’ knowledge, investigating the essence of the intersectionality in their constraints and being aware of the power relations that exist. Feminism played a role in the development of the research questions, in the collection of data, and in the interpretation and use of the results.

3.3 - Sample

The sample for this research was a convenience sample of 7 women who attended a specific straight-friendly church in Eastern Canada. To be included in the study participants had to be older than 18 years, fluent in English, and self-identify as lesbians or bisexual in a lesbian relationship. I used purposive sampling to recruit participants who represented a range of
characteristics relevant to this topic, including age, socio-economic status, level of involvement in the church and relationship status. Initial contact was pre-established with 3 women with these characteristics in order to initiate a snowball effect. An email explaining the purpose of the research and inviting participation was sent to these three women and they were asked to pass it along to other potential participants (see Appendix A). Two of the participants belonged to the church choir, and a third one was on the committee who proposes activities for women, such as retreats, camping, and dancing nights. Their age range was between 31 and 65, one was still married to a man (but self-identified as a lesbian), two were divorced (one from a man and one from a woman) and each of the others were in a committed relationship with another woman. Two of the participants had children and the others had none. For more information about the participants see Appendix B.

3.4 - Data Collection

A qualitative design was used in order to learn about the lived experiences of lesbian women who attended a straight-friendly church as a source of leisure, and the meanings they associate with their experiences. The data was collected using in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews. An interview guideline (Appendix C) facilitated discussion regarding their experiences in the church. To facilitate a conversational tone, the interview schedule was flexible regarding the order of questions and probes so they could be addressed when the topics emerged naturally. Interviews varied between 45 to 90 minutes in length. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and returned to the participants allowing them to add or remove any information (Merriam, 2009; Somekh & Lewin, 2011). No participant, however, asked to change or remove any part of the transcription. Participants were recruited until saturation was
reached. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants as well as to the church.

I used several strategies to improve the trustworthiness of the data including note-taking, debriefing, member checks and reflexive journaling. Many authors have discussed the importance of journaling and making field notes during the process of research (Dupuis, 1999; Groenewald, 2004; Merriam, 2009; O’Leary, 2010; Somekh & Lewin, 2011). This process increases the trustworthiness of the results because it allows the researcher to have a better account of her or his own position. I engaged in note-taking during the data collection process, and reflexive journaling throughout the study. I also had regular debriefing meetings with my advisor, Dr. Toni Liechty, to discuss the study’s progression. As a member of the church I was able to informally follow up with some participants to clarify certain elements of their interviews. Also as a formal member check, a summary of the findings was sent to the participants and they were asked to make comments. Participants were glad to learn the results and surprised with some of the aspects I discussed. For example, all participants described experiences with internalized homophobia and some had not expected this to be true.

Considering the many strategies for keeping journals (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011), I structured mine in a way that coincided with my previous experiences. I used a notebook and each of its pages was divided into two columns. In the first one, I wrote down notes about the participant (information gathered from the participant, any direct observation that caught my attention, or any other information that was considered relevant at the moment); and in the second column, I wrote down notes about myself (like discomfort, empathy, awkwardness, observations about power relation, etc.), as well as topics I should research further to better understand each participant’s epistemological background.
3.4.1 – Ethics

Because this research involved human participants, in order to minimize possible hazard to the participants, this study was approved by the Research Ethics Board (REB) at the University of Regina. Furthermore, before the beginning of the interview, each participant was informed:

(a) of their rights to refuse to participate or withdraw from participation at any time, including instructions on how to contact the researcher in case they had any doubts or concerns in regard to their participation in the study or about the study itself.

(b) that the research was a voluntary experience and no form of monetary reward would be attributed to their participation.

(c) of the research purpose and the steps involved in the data collection, analysis, and dissemination of results.

(d) that the interviews would be audio-recorded and that the audio produced during the interview would be transcribed, returned to them to add or remove any information they wanted, and then it would be analyzed.

(e) of their right to confidentiality. They were informed that the audio, the transcription, or any other material presentation of their interview would be kept in a confidential place where nobody other than myself would have access. The participants would receive a pseudonym in order to protect their privacy.

(f) that the researcher had contact information for a psychotherapist they could contact in case the participant felt any distress as a result of the interview.
(g) that I was obligated to report to the responsible authorities if, during the research process, I would come to know about a crime of any nature such as child abuse, crime against others, or participant’s intention to terminate her own life.

After being verbally informed of all these topics, participants were asked to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix D) which is kept in a locked file cabinet.

3.5 - Data Analysis

Although theorists disagree as to whether phenomenologists should have a ‘prescription’ of how to conduct a study, some points are presented as guidelines. The listing (the researcher makes a list of relevant statements made by the participant), reduction (the researcher groups similar statements together), elimination (the researcher eliminates repetitions of similar statements) and hypothetical identification (the researcher identifies themes that emerged constantly) are presented as general steps to be followed (Szklarski, 2007). In order to improve trustworthiness, the researcher should always be aware that the participant is the expert on the phenomenon being studied in her or his life. The researcher should also maintain a personal diary recording thoughts, ideas and reactions to the interviews. Also, researchers should always consider discussing their findings with peers (Broussard, 2005).

Making use of audio recordings, I read each interview multiple times in order to familiarize myself with the material and to get a sense of the lived experience as a whole. Using the transcription of the interviews, I followed van Manen’s (1990) suggestions for data analyses. Each sentence was read and analyzed in order to understand what was being described about the phenomenon. Key statements were underlined (listing – Szklarski, 2007). During the reading, emerging themes were noted in the margins of the transcripts making use of labels that
summarize the passages’ major message, trying to make use of the participant’s language as much as possible. After that, the emerging themes were compared among all the interviews and field notes in order to find commonalities, repetitions, and differences. Similar statements were grouped together (reduction – Szklarski, 2007). Repetitions of similar statements were eliminated (elimination – Szklarski, 2007). And, finally, overall themes that emerged constantly and best described the lived experience were identified (hypothetical identification – Szklarski, 2007). The description of the themes and the relationship among them continued until the lived experiences was accurately captured.

After this process was concluded, a final copy of the transcript was printed and the final version of the codes presented in each specific interview was marked in the document to be further analyzed and kept as a record of the research. Each printed transcribed interview is kept in a folder, along with the expanded field notes and comments specifics of that interview/interviewee. Each folder has a cover sheet with identifying information, such as: date of the interview, interviewee’s pseudonym, and the codes that appeared in that specific interview, how many times each code appeared, and in which page of the text I could find each code. These documents were used for review by an external auditor and for further review and refinement of the themes (Creswell, 2009). These files are kept in a locked file cabinet to protect participants’ confidentiality.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The findings of this research are presented as two papers. The first one, entitled Leisure Spaces for Lesbian Women, discusses leisure through the lens of geography, gender, and sexuality. The second one, entitled Leisure Constraints for Lesbian Women, discusses leisure constraints related to cultural understandings of gender and sexual orientation. These two manuscripts will be submitted for publication.

4.1 – Leisure Spaces for Lesbian Women

4.1.1 – Introduction

Since the 1980s, scholars in leisure studies have increasingly discussed the relevance of gender and sexuality in experiences of leisure. These researchers have argued that leisure and leisure spaces are gendered, contributing to different opportunities and outcomes for women and men (e.g., Aitchison, 1999; Henderson & Shaw, 2006; Pilcher, 2011). They also argue that gender roles and expectations create constraints, especially for women (Arab-Moghaddam, Henderson & Sheikholeslami, 2007; Chick & Dong, 2005; Lewis & Johnson, 2011). Furthermore, studies have pointed out the need to account for within group differences among women, because some social markers (e.g. race, age, sexual orientation) can lead to very different lived experiences. Lesbians, for example, face constraints due to the intersection of gender and sexual orientation, exposing them to sexism and homophobia at the same time (Pritchard et al., 2002; Taylor, 2007). Studies in various areas have shown that experiences with homophobia directly influence lesbians and gay men’s general health, their interaction with other people and their relationships
with places, which all greatly impact their leisure experiences (Boehmer, Bowen, & Bauer, 2007; Bowen, Balsam, Diergaarde, Russo, & Escamilla, 2006; Brittain, Baillargeon, McElroy, Aaron, & Gyrucsik, 2006; Diamant, Wold, Spritzer, & Gelberg, 2000; Elizur & Mintzer, 2003; Koh & Ross, 2006; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). For example, leisure is an important means of developing spirituality (Heintzman, 2009; McDonald & Schreyer, 1991), however, due to homophobia LGBTQ individuals may feel alienated from spiritual places, and more particularly from religious spaces. Studies have suggested that the provision of leisure in LGBTQ oriented and gay-friendly environments can be an important tool to help lesbians and gay men experience meaningful leisure and cope with marginalization and stress (Iwasaki & Ristoki, 2004; Mock & Hummel, 2012; Skeggs, 1999).

Although some research has highlighted the unique leisure experiences of LGBTQ individuals (e.g., Oakleaf, 2009; Theriault, 2014), there are relatively few studies looking into these issues in the leisure literature. Also, studies often combine lesbians and gay men into the same sample, disregarding that women and men have different life experiences, even if they share similarities in their sexual orientation. Furthermore, no research has explored religious spaces as a leisure space for lesbians. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of a group of lesbian women who attend a straight-friendly (LGBTQ oriented) church and investigate the meanings they associate with this place.

4.1.2 – Literature Review

4.1.2.1 – Spaces, Gender and Sexuality

In recent decades, feminist geographers have studied how gender shapes our relationship with physical spaces (Etorre, 1978; Harris, 1989; Valentine, 1993b; 1996). Valentine (1992) and
Duncan (1996), for example, argued that, historically, women have been associated with the private sphere of life and men with the public one. This strong division between what belonged to the public and private world was based on a clear distinction of female and male roles in White middle-class families, as well as social expectations associated with feminine and masculine behaviour, and a valorization of heterosexual relationships as the mediator for this private/public dichotomy (Valentine, 1992). This differentiation between women and men leads to variation in their access to urban spaces (Duncan, 1996). Today, even though women have achieved a more independent and active place in society, men can still move between the public and private worlds with more autonomy and legitimacy than women (Foster & Giles-Corti, 2008; Koskela, 1999).

Discourses of respectability, appropriateness of female behaviour, and fear of male violence or harassment are some factors that also regulate women’s use of public spaces (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007; Green & Singleton, 2006; Valentine, 1992). Valentine (1992) discussed that, statistically, young men are much more likely to suffer violence in public spaces than women, yet women tend to regulate their spatial mobility and reported feeling much more fear of using public spaces than men, especially at night (Foster & Giles-Corti, 2008; Koskela, 1999; Wilson & Little, 2008). Female bodies, therefore, are still a social marker constraining physically and metaphorically how far women can go.

In leisure studies, spaces have also been studied through the gender lens (e.g. Espiner, et al., 2011; James, 2001; Lloyd, Burden, & Kiewa, 2008; Scraton, & Watson, 1998). Wearing (1998) and other authors (e.g., Beck & Arnold, 2009; Green & Singleton, 2006; Harrington, 2006; Henderson, Hodges & Kivel, 2002), have argued that factors such as the wage gap, time
availability, distance, lack of transportation, and lack of family-friendly facilities still make leisure engagement in urban spaces difficult for many women.

Similar to gender, sexuality also plays an important role in our interactions with spaces and our experiences with leisure (Robinett, 2014). Like gender, sexuality is regulated by the public/private space dichotomy. There is a socially accepted discourse that sexuality should be restricted to private spaces (Duncan, 1996) and a social belief that urban spaces are asexual (Valentine, 1992). Some scholars (e.g., Chouinard & Grant, 1996; Duncan, 1996; Valentine 1992; 1993b), however, have argued that heterosexuality is constantly reinforced in public spaces. Dolance (2005) and Myrdahl (2011a) also discussed this perspective in regard to leisure spaces and activities. These authors argue that this reinforcement is so great that heterosexual interactions in public spaces become invisible. Expressions of heterosexual life (e.g., straight couples holding hands, hugging and kissing, wearing wedding bands) are so frequent that they become naturalized. There is, nevertheless, a socially accepted discourse that sexuality belongs to the private realm and this discourse is constantly used to justify homophobia (Valentine, 2012) and violence against gays and lesbians (Gough, 2002).

This social control over homosexuality restricts the use of public spaces by sexual minorities. Different from heterosexuals, homosexuals are more likely to create ghettos, to socialize in friends’ houses rather than in public spaces, and to constantly monitor their behaviour when interacting in public spaces (Levine, 1979; Myrdahl, 2011a). Research has shown that the need for safer spaces where sexual minorities can freely express their sexual orientation impacts the way these people create bonds with places as well as their choices in leisure (Mock & Hummel, 2012; Pritchard et al., 2002; Taylor, 2007). Rather than choosing leisure spaces and leisure activities based on personal interests, sexual minorities tend to focus
on the possibility of socializing in gay-friendly spaces where they can avoid experiences with homophobia.

Several aspects of sexual minorities’ lives tend to be different from heterosexuals due to their unique experiences of and attitudes toward the use of space. Spatial constraints affect how they develop identity (Atencio & Wright, 2009; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000), how they meet friends, lovers and partners (Valentine, 1993a), how they build community and a social support system (Taylor, 2007), how they develop self-esteem, and how they develop their faith (Valentine, 2012). Similarly, many of the benefits of leisure that scholars have discussed for years are affected by sexual orientation. And many of the positive outcomes that leisure experiences and interactions in leisure spaces produce are limited for those who are not heterosexual.

4.1.2.2 – Leisure Spaces for Lesbians

The scarcity of leisure spaces where lesbians can openly express their sexual orientation can have a significant impact on the construction of their identity as women and as lesbians (Kivel & Kleiber, 2000). Valentine (1993a) argues that lesbians usually have a limited number of places in which they can freely meet and socialize with other lesbians. This factor constitutes an important difference compared to how heterosexual women (and men) establish friendships. Lesbians tend to be more open and adaptable to heterogeneous groups (e.g. class, age, ethnicity, level of education) because it is harder for them to meet new friends, and because they want to maintain their network. While heterosexuals tend to adapt their friendships to major changes in their lives (e.g., getting married, having children), lesbians tend to adapt their lives, interests, and boundaries in order to maintain their friendships (Valentine, 1993a).
Some authors have discussed the utilization of gay (male) environments by lesbian women. Skeggs (1999), Pritchard et al. (2002), and Taylor (2007) argued that lesbians are not particularly welcome in gay neighborhoods because they do not share aspects of gay men’s identity, such as consumerism. Also, these neighborhoods receive a great number of heterosexual women who usually intimidate lesbians as the presence of heterosexual women in a gay dominated environment reinforces concerns with appearance and consumerism that usually bond gay men and straight women (Skeggs, 1999). In this context, lesbians lose recognition as women and visibility as homosexuals. Pritchard et al. (2002), therefore, suggest that ‘homosexuals’ should not be understood as a homogenous group. According to Johnson and Samdahl (2005), this generalization is easily made, but fundamentally wrong. In their study about the utilization of a gay bar by lesbian women, they found that gay men tend to see lesbians primarily as women rather than fellow homosexuals. They argue that, even though the lives of gay men are as deeply affected by heterosexism as lesbians’ lives, hegemonic masculinity overpowers their similarities of oppression, and even though gay men may not practice masculinity in a traditional way, they still benefit from hegemonic masculinity.

Generalizations should be avoided also within the group of lesbian women. Social markers can significantly change the views, opportunities and constraints a lesbian might face in society, including the denial of or entitlement to urban spaces. Taylor (2007), for example, found that working-class English lesbians often felt discriminated against in the ‘gay scene’ because they did not have enough money to present themselves in the ‘correct’ way to fit in. Financial oppression overpowered the sexual orientation they shared with upper-middle class lesbians. In another study, Jacobson and Samdahl (1998) focused on the leisure experiences of lesbians over the age of 60 and affirmed that the intersectionality of gender, sexual orientation and age brought
disempowering messages about the self. Stigma and discrimination had a great impact on participants’ leisure choices and experiences.

Although gender and sexuality establish an intersection of oppression in the lives of lesbian women, some authors have discussed how lesbians resist this oppression. This resistance can take the form of rallies, marches and protests, but it can also be subtle, invisible to the heterosexual gaze. Valentine (1996) described a series of actions that allow lesbians to identify themselves and create bonds that resist heteronormativity. She mentions subtle signifiers of lesbian identity such as dress code, body language, and linguistic expressions (e.g., referring to lesbian cultural icons) as well as silence in situations in which heterosexual women would use patterns of verbal behaviour in order to attract men. These interactions establish, approximate, and strengthen the relationship among these women and allow the construction of a symbolic space shared by lesbians. This invisible place transforms geographical sites into meaningful environments (Valentine, 1996).

Some authors have also looked into community construction associated with leisure spaces and LGBTQ-oriented activities, and the most frequent sites discussed in the literature are gay bars (Gilmartin, 1996; Kennedy & Davis, 1993), music festivals (Eder, Staggenborg & Sudderth, 1995, Lockard, 1986), sports sites (Dolance, 2005; Myrdahl, 2011a), gay neighborhoods (Binnie & Skeggs, 2004; Pritchard et al., 2002; Quilley, 1995; Skeggs, 1999; Taylor, 2007), and LGBTQ oriented tourism (Krahulik, 2006; Mock & Hummel, 2012). There is, nevertheless, a need for further research focusing on other kinds of environments as well as the uniqueness faced by lesbians in search of meaningful experiences through leisure. There is a need to better explore intersectionality among female homosexuality and other social markers, and how these intersections might change leisure experiences in public spaces. There is also a need to explore
how lesbians create bonds and build community because for lesbians, friendship and romantic attraction may be connected. There is a great need to investigate how other aspects broadly discussed in leisure studies (e.g. identity formation, place attachment, spirituality) affect and are affected by lesbianism. Therefore, this study explored the experiences of a group of lesbian women who attended a straight-friendly church and the meanings they attributed to this specific leisure space.

4.1.3 – Methods

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach because it is a topic about which little is known (Henderson, 2006). Specifically, the phenomenological approach was the most appropriate because it focuses on participants’ lived experience (Creswell, 2009). Also, phenomenology allows the participants to have their voices expressed in their own terms, from their particular point of view (van Manen, 1990). This diversity of worldviews provided us with a better understanding of the array of lived leisure experiences of lesbians and the meaning they attributed to a particular leisure space.

4.1.3.1 – Participants

Purposive snowball sampling was used to recruit participants who represented a range of characteristics relevant to the topic, including age, socio-economic status, level of involvement in the church and relationship status. Initial contact was pre-established with lesbians who attended a straight-friendly church in Eastern Canada. The church was assigned the pseudonym Christian Hope Revival (CHR). This particular congregation is part of a non-denominational Christian church that focuses on the needs of LGBTQ individuals. Although Christian, they are
open to attendees from all faiths. The church is run mainly by non-heterosexual clergy and staff, and the great majority of parishioners are also LGBTQ. However, they are considered straight-friendly due to their openness to people from all sexual orientations. The first three women were selected because of their strong connections within the church; two who belonged to the church choir, and the third one was on the committee which organizes activities for women, such as retreats, camping, and dancing nights. They were sent an email explaining the purpose of the research and inviting participation. Each of these three women participated and passed it along to other potential participants.

Ultimately, the participants were a convenience sample of seven women. To be included in the study participants had to be older than 18 years old and self-identify as lesbians, or bisexual in a lesbian relationship. Participants’ ages ranged from 31 to 65 with a mean of 45.7. All seven women identified as Caucasian. Six participants identified as lesbians and one as bisexual. One participant was married to a man but self-identified as lesbian. The other six were in a relationship with a woman. Two were divorced (one from a man and one from a woman). Two women identified as “Christian”, one as “Anglican”, one as “Christian from the United [Church]”, one as “Evangelic Christian”, and two as agnostic. One had two children, one had five children, and the others did not have children. Two participants sang in the choir and three others volunteered some other way (e.g., making coffee for social events, organizing the women’s retreat). Three women attended church on regular basis (at least three times a month), and the other four attended less frequently.
4.1.3.2 – Data Collection

The data were collected using in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The interviews lasted from forty-five to ninety minutes and were conducted in a location chosen by the participant (e.g., restaurant, participant’s home, or researcher’s home). An interview guide facilitated the discussion regarding their experiences in the church. To initiate discussion, participants were asked to describe themselves any way they thought was meaningful. This topic lead to considerations about their experience with work (engagement or dissociation), with family (being a mother), and with sexuality. They were asked about their experience with being a lesbian in order to better understand their concepts of lesbianism (e.g., women who have sex with other women, women who feel in love with other women). In relation to this topic participants often discussed internalized homophobia and their experience with leisure at this church as a source of coping. Finally, participants were specifically asked to discuss their perceptions and experiences of the church itself (e.g., strengths and weaknesses of the church and why they choose to attend).

Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and returned to the participants allowing them to add or remove any information (Merriam, 2009; Somekh & Lewin, 2011). No participant, however, asked to change or remove any part of the transcription. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to all participants. The study protocol was approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Regina.
4.1.3.3 – Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the suggestions of van Manen (1990) and Szklarski’s (2007) general steps, which include: listing (the researcher makes a list of relevant statements made by the participant), reduction (the researcher groups similar statements together), elimination (the researcher eliminates repetitions of similar statements) and hypothetical identification (identify themes that emerged constantly). First, I read and re-read the interviews to get a sense of the lived experience as a whole (van Manen, 1990). I then read each sentence to understand what was being described about the phenomenon underlining key statements (listing; Szklarski, 2007). During the reading, I noted emerging themes in the margins of the transcripts making use of labels that summarized the passages’ major message. Next, I compared the emerging themes across interviews to find commonalities, repetitions, and differences. During this process I grouped similar statements together (reduction; Szklarski, 2007) and eliminated repetitions of similar statements (elimination; Szklarski, 2007). Finally, I identified overall themes that emerged constantly and best described the lived experience (hypothetical identification; Szklarski, 2007).

To improve trustworthiness, I used debriefing, note-taking and kept a reflexive journal (Creswell, 2009; Dupuis, 1999). Also, the findings were discussed with peers throughout the study (Broussard, 2005). The questions asked during the interviews stimulated narratives, which provided rich data and a better reproduction of participant’s voices. Furthermore, I conducted member checks in which a summary of the data analysis was sent to each participant via email and they were asked to comment on it. Participants responded with positive feedback and emphasized their joy for the opportunity to share their experiences.
4.1.3.4 – Focus

Although this study focused on the experiences of a group of women who attend a Christian church, I made a conscious choice of not focusing on religion when investigating the phenomenon. As an attendee of the church, I had previous knowledge that many people who attend this church even though they do not have any particular religious affiliation. Therefore, I decided to focus on the church as a broader leisure space rather than a specifically religious place. As anticipated, spirituality and religiosity was a part of the findings, but they will not be discussed using religion as a conceptual framework in order to focus on the leisure experiences.

4.1.4 – Findings

Although at differing levels, all participants viewed the church as playing a meaningful role in their lives. Four overarching themes emerged from the data which included: the church as a space for emotional healing and spiritual expression, the importance of community building in diversity, an increased network for leisure activities, and the church as a means to address institutionalized and internalized homophobia.

4.1.4.1 – Emotional healing and spiritual expression

When asked about motivations for attending the church, the opportunity for emotional healing and spiritual expression was consistently mentioned. Participants referred to the church as a place where they allowed themselves to be vulnerable, and that led to emotional healing. This concept can be exemplified by Corinne (53) who explained,

[The main reason to attend this church would be] the opportunity to cry. It sounds kind of ridiculous to put it that way, but it’s what it represents. It’s that time for self-reflection
and I also find a lot of the sermons very meaningful unlike some places I’ve been to. (…) it’s thought-provoking and I often learn things I didn’t know, which I really like. (…) It’s a chance for reflection in that way.

Similarly, Lauren (65) who described herself as “very private person” who would “never cry in public” described the value of attending this church. In the quote below, she describes her reaction during her first time at the church:

As soon as the music started, I start to cry. I cried for the full hour of the service. (…) To be crying in front of people that I do not know, was horrifying to me. When it was over (…) I was able to pull myself together before I got home, and went back the next Sunday.

For Lauren, as well as for other women in this study, ‘being able to cry’ represented the freedom to publicly acknowledge that she was in pain without having to conceal, dissimulate, or hold her feelings back. It also represented the joy and relief of finally having a safe, loving, and supportive environment to shelter these tears.

Another highly reported motivation for attending the church was the fact that, although CHR is a Christian church, it welcomes people from different faiths and spiritual backgrounds. Participants emphasized that they greatly appreciated this inclusiveness and openness. For example, Pamela (37) explained that there were members who were “Muslim or Jewish or no religion” who came for both the spiritual and social experience. For participants, this freedom and acceptance of religious diversity was a unique and important element in creating a welcoming atmosphere and they took pride in the fact that the church allowed people from many paths of life to come together as a community. This pride can be observed in Emma’s (37)
remark: “Our church believes that there are many paths to God, which is not something that most churches believe.”

Although all participants saw the multi-faith aspect of the church as highly valuable, some participants felt somewhat frustrated because, in order to accommodate all faiths, the church “tunes down” the Christian references. Most participants, however, valued the church mainly for the social aspects rather than prioritizing religion or spirituality. For instance, Emma (37) commented, “I have to admit that I do go for the social element. I wouldn’t go for the spiritual element alone.”

Aligned with the freedom of religious denomination, participants also appreciated the freedom they had in regard to the worship itself. They described enjoying the fact that attendees could choose their level of involvement during the service, and this freedom made them feel safe.

I like that it’s optional and everything…it’s up to you to go take the communion if you want it or take the healing if you want it, which I remember the first, maybe ten times we went there, like, scared, I would not get out of my seat! And then slowly realizing (…) that the wrath of God isn’t going to fall on your shoulders or something. (Ashley, 31)

Freedom of religion and participation was particularly important as some participants described having to reconcile with religion in order to fully enjoy their experience at this church. For example, Tatyana (45) explained,

I wasn’t too into the Christian aspect of it and that was a thing I had to reconcile. I checked the CHR out and (…) realized that they’re actually in line with my beliefs, being
progressive and inclusive. I was really happy to find it, and it’s an awesome place and I love the people and it’s a joyous experience.

As part of the reconciliation, participants described having some initial anxiety regarding what to expect from the church and from the worship. After a few times at the church, this anxiety became rather a feeling of relaxation.

I like the predictability of the service. It’s very regiment, you know what to expect, you kind of can slot the time, so it’s very safe that way. (...) [B]eforehand, I was thinking oh they’re going to, like, pick on you or something or be like ‘You! Stand up and tell us why you believe in God!’ or something like that. (Ashley, 31)

Participants described the importance of characteristics of this church that differed from other religious environments. It was Christian, but inclusive for members of all faiths. It had rituals, but attendees were welcome to participate or not. It had communion, but attendees did not have to be baptized in order to take communion. It was a spiritual place, but many attendees joined for social reasons. It used the bible as inspiration for the sermons, but it also used other books or peoples’ life experiences. All these aspects were meaningful to the participants and contributed to the attachment they created with this place.

4.1.4.2 – Community building in diversity

One of the most recurrent aspects described by the participants as responsible for their attachment to this church was the opportunity to build community in a diverse and inclusive environment. Emma (37) commented:
The church also makes a considerable effort to be accessible to people with disabilities. It is economically accessible. The church provides sign language interpretation. There are few environments that take physical accessibility and also accessibility to people with disabilities so seriously and I think it also makes the church unique.

The participants also emphasized diversity in regards to other aspects such as the wide range of sexual orientation (heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and celibatarian), gender identity (female, male, cisgender, transgender, butch, femme), age, race, ethnic background, marital and parental status, and level of education. Participants valued belonging to such a diverse community in which every member could feel accepted.

The participants defined community according to a range of aspects. Most women described community as a group of people with whom they are connected somehow, as explained by Emma (37):

I really do feel it is a community because there are a lot of people within it that I don’t necessarily know well, but I recognize and I say hello to, especially at the social hall after the church. And there are a lot of children that, I don’t necessarily know them very well, but I know who they are and I see them grow up.

Participants described community as a place with likeminded people where friendships start and are developed based on commonalities in sexual orientation, gender identity and spiritual beliefs, as described by Bree (53): “If you go to our church, you hopefully know that that person is queer and that they have a spiritual element with their life. So right there, you have a good place to start.”
Some participants also described community as a strong support system in which they could find help for various difficulties they might be facing. Ashley (31), for example, mentioned the Depression Group. “I know a lot of people who we’ve brought to church, they’re like ‘oh my god, you guys have a depression group?’ If they’re coming from another church, other churches aren’t so open about saying the word depression.” Ashley argued that open discussion about mental health issues allowed people to better connect and find support within the community.

Tatyana (45) also described the church as special because it offered a more positive environment for LGBTQ people, where they could build a community not based on unhealthy habits. She emphasized that the church offered a better outlook for parishioners’ future, which she greatly appreciated.

I live [in a gay neighborhood]. When I walk down the street I see the same people every day and they’re like, standing in front of the bar and smoking cigarettes and drinking all day (…) and I worry about them. They [CHR] are so far removed from that, (…) That doesn’t have to be our fate anymore, there’s something else, there’s another place to be and a place to be gay other than a bar. So I really appreciate that.

Other participants shared Tatyana’s opinion and they greatly appreciated that the church offered an alternative to bars. They highlighted that they did not like to drink alcohol or listen to loud music, and they disliked the constant push for flirtation and eroticism (described as “meat market”) that often took place in bars. One participant remarked that she liked “the fact that it is on Sunday mornings” as opposed to late at night.
Although participants described different nuances of community, they all affirmed that they understood this church as a community they belong to, and this sense of belonging was meaningful to all of them. Corinne (53) described the differences between the church community and a Monday Night Group, which is a social group she also belonged to.

[W]hen people come to the Monday Night Group, (…) they have a lot of trepidation and fear and anxiety and hesitation whereas I think when people go to church, even if they bring that with them, it gets dispelled more easily because there’s an expectation that we’re a place to deal with that fear. [At the Monday Night Group], we can’t really say to a woman that says, “I’m afraid to tell my husband I’m sleeping with the neighbor next door,” (…) “Oh sure, it will be fine.” What we can say is like, “I had that situation and here’s how it worked for me.” People get courage from other people’s stories. But at the church, it’s a little more, there’s more of a sense of expectation, like the David and Goliath stories. There’s more of a history and then an expectancy of overcoming those things.

Corinne’s explanation, as well as other participant’s narratives, indicated the existence of a socially constructed idea about church as a place where individuals can find support and build up strengths through community and spirituality. They emphasized, however, that they did not find such support in “regular” churches or even in “gay-friendly” churches. According to them, it was highly empowering to belong to a church that not only embraced LGBTQ individuals, but rather focused on the unique elements of their lives, acknowledging their pain, their struggles, and their desire to fully belong. Participants’ sense of community was linked to feelings of support and connection and, because of their individual experiences with oppression, discrimination, and ostracism, they greatly valued the fact that anyone could feel included and welcome in this place.
4.1.4.3 – A network for leisure activities

During the interviews, participants were asked to elaborate on their concepts of leisure and leisure spaces. Also, they were asked how the church fit within these concepts. Participants discussed whether the social hour after the Sunday worship and the worship itself constituted a leisure activity. Most participants described these two activities as “free”, “beautiful”, “relaxing”, “fun”, and “spiritual” leisure activities. One participant, however, had a different perspective. Corinne (53) was one of the volunteers who helped organize the social hour, a time when refreshments and snacks were served after the services on Sunday mornings allowing parishioners to socialize. She felt uncomfortable making the connection between church and leisure. In her opinion, church was a “place for service”, a place and a moment in which she had the opportunity to serve the community. She explained,

I tend to think of leisure activities as being more mindless like watching TV and more, for lack of a better term, deadening, less challenging. I see going to church service on Sunday as somewhat of a spiritual challenge I might say, as opposed to, like, I’m just going to sleep in. (…) It doesn’t feel like work, [but] it does not feel like leisure [either]. (…) It feels like contributing to the community. (…) So I go [to church] to bring my opportunity to give service and help other people, even if it’s just so they have a cup of coffee.

Participants had different ideas about the definition of leisure and how the church fit into their understandings of leisure spaces and leisure activities. However, they agreed that the church was an important place for them to find out about and have access to leisure with friends and acquaintances they met at the church. They mentioned activities such as the Annual Women’s Retreat, community meals on Christian holidays, women’s dance nights, and card games. Ashley
even emphasized that knowing that the church had activities being planned gave her a sense of connection with the community and a future to look forward to:

You look at the church program, there’s always something going on in the future. So it also allows for kind of looking forward to, even though it is months down the line, you can think ‘oh, well that might be something I would do’. Whether or not you’re really going to commit… So it’s just having all these things out there as possibilities even if you don’t do them, it kind of makes you feel happy inside and it’s something I can just kind of daydream about, ‘oh yeah imagine what it would be like’, you know, doing gardening with the church or something, which I wouldn’t commit to because I don’t have that much free time, but knowing it’s all out there is so peaceful. (Ashley)

The leisure activities discussed by the participants included ones that happened inside the church’s building and ones that happened in other places. This distinction was particularly noteworthy because some participants felt conflicted in regard to what is appropriate inside the church perimeter. For example, Lauren (65), who struggled with high levels of internalized homophobia and guilt related to her family, mentioned that she felt somehow protected when going to leisure activities at the church. She explained:

It is because it is a church and church, to me, is some place that is pure and good and loving and that is what I feel when I am there, but I don’t necessarily feel that even if I am with the same people in another space. It has to do with being in church. When I went to that first woman’s dance, the only reason why I could feel even remotely comfortable, (...) was that I kept thinking: ‘okay, you are in a church, you are in a church’. That was going through my mind: ‘this isn’t bad, you are in a church’.
Because Lauren felt guilty when socializing with other LGBTQ individuals in spaces other than the church, this space was extremely meaningful to her. It was a place where she could allow herself to “let go of the guilt” and just enjoy herself, exploring nuances of her identity as a lesbian woman. Her sense of entitlement to that space was linked to religious and/or cultural beliefs about the church as a place or institution. She expressed this sense of entitlement to that space when she continued to describe the women’s dance:

That was my first lesbian dance and I was sitting there, listening to the music and then the women get up and dance. There were these two women, (…) they were dancing like I have never seen any women dance before. I wanted to say to them: ‘shouldn’t you get a room, maybe?’ [laughter] Then, they would literally turn around to a friend and do the same thing to a friend. [I thought to myself:] ‘Women do that’? It was unbelievable. It was amazing to watch. I just loved watching it. (Lauren, 65)

Corinne (53), however, described feeling uncomfortable using the church for activities that, somehow, promote romantic and/or erotic interaction between participants.

I once went to a women’s dance at the church and that was sort of a leisure thing. I was uncomfortable in the social hall, in the dance … It just didn’t feel right to me. You see women kind of trying to pick each other up and then you look over there and you see a crucifix on the wall. It just seemed a little disconcerting to me. (…) It just seemed a little out of perspective. It just didn’t quite seem right. So I wasn’t particularly comfortable with the church with that particular leisure activity.

It is worth noting that these two women had very different levels of sexual identity concealment. Lauren, even though she had come out to some family members and friends, was still very much
closed. Corinne, on the other hand, described herself as “completely out” and had strong ties with the LGBTQ community outside of the church. Because they had different access and sense of entitlement to lesbian spaces, their attachment to the church as a place had very different nuances. It seemed that, because Corinne had more access to other lesbian places, she could compartmentalize her connection with these leisure spaces. For Lauren, however, the church became a place that allowed her to work on many areas of her identity at the same time (e.g. spirituality, eroticism, entitlement to friendship with other lesbians).

Participants also discussed the existence of the Choir as a meaningful aspect of their leisure experience at the church. The choir was a group of approximately 40 women and men that sang during the worship every Sunday and performed in other events such a gay pride parade, an annual Christmas concert, or in civic and sporting events. Participants described the music at the church as “amazing”, “cool”, “fun”, and “it rocks!”. They also appreciated the fact that the church “is free to attend”, so they “don’t have to commit financially” in order to enjoy the music. They emphasized that the music is a “great boost in the beginning of the week”. There were two participants who sang in the choir and both described their experience as highly valued. Lauren (65) expressed how the choir allowed her to increase her sense of self-worth, address her internalized homophobia, and enjoy experiences that she would not have if she did not belong to this group.

I have met so many cool people since I started going to CHR and singing with the choir. I mean, when I think about the people, I admit that I never would have met had I not gone to this church, singing with this choir. Now, we have had [a well-known politician] coming to church. We have had the chief of police in our church and all these soloists that come to
sing with us and work on our CD or in our concerts. It just blows my mind. It really does when I think about it. None of this would have ever happened had I not come out.

Besides the activities that happened in the church, the Annual Women’s Retreat was described as the main activity that happens outside the church perimeter. The Women’s Retreat was a weekend long activity that took place every winter in a rural area. The retreat was mentioned by most participants and, although they did not emphasize their relationship with the place in itself, they were attached to the activity. They mentioned that these retreats were an effective way to strengthen their relationships with other lesbians and make new friends and acquaintances. They emphasized that it was hard to get to know people and create bonds when socializing just on Sunday mornings. The retreats were, therefore, an opportunity to chat, to play, to build connections, and enjoy themselves in the presence of other lesbians. This activity was described as meaningful because it allowed these women to increase their network while having a good time in a safe and pleasant environment. Indeed, most of their narratives about friends and the role the church had in their lives started with “after I went to the retreat, I made new friends and” everything grew from there.

Other than activities that were linked to the church, participants also emphasized that, because they developed friendships within the church community, they often organized leisure activities with these friends (e.g. meals, movie nights, birthday parties, trips, walks). This highlighted the relevance of the church as a significant source of friendship and, consequently, of leisure activities among other LGBTQ individuals. These friendships and leisure activities became independent, but the church was a crucial starting point.
4.1.4.4 – (Institutionalized and internalized) Homophobia

One of the characteristics most mentioned by the participants was the positive experience of being in a space where they did not have to deal with homophobia. Most participants explained that homophobic messages were present in their everyday lives. According to them, homophobia was rarely a direct hostility or confrontation against them personally. However, they reported not being completely upfront about their sexual orientation to shield against potential negative reactions. These participants reported high levels of self-consciousness and constant analysis of the openness of their environment in order to avoid possible challenging situations. Underlying messages about homosexuality made them believe that they would face homophobia in many places if they were to disclosure their identity as lesbians. This was reported as particularly true when interacting with religious individuals who frequently associate homosexuality with sin. Bree (53) illustrated this idea:

I’ve never had anybody saying anything negative to me [about being a lesbian]. But I do work with some older Christian people that I know who are from the Anglican Church. I wouldn’t go out of my way to tell them that I’m with a woman (…) because I know you’re going to hit some who think that that’s just of the devil or something. (…) So I haven’t faced that discrimination but I know it would be there.

Some participants also mentioned that homophobic discourses are linked to the development of internalized homophobia. Ashley (31), for example, mentioned that before she started attending this church, she “didn’t realize the layers of internalization of different homophobic messages” being promoted in society. She described the United Church she attended in her youth as “accepting, inclusive, and progressive”. However, going to a church that
“mentions and acknowledges it being a safe space for queer LGBT people” made her realize that the United Church was, in fact, silent about possible struggles their LGBTQ members could be facing. The church’s silence delivered the message that she also should avoid talking about her homosexuality, thus developing her internalized homophobia. Ashley concluded by saying that “it’s interesting the fact that most of the anti-gay movement is coming from the churches, where this church is the opposite. That’s really cool.” Other participants reported similar struggles and internalization of homophobic messages from other churches they attended in the past.

As a result of frequent contact with homophobic discourses, the CHR church was reported as a very important place where participants could work on their internalized homophobia. Also the church was seen as a community that helped them to cope with the stress caused by negative discourses. In their words, the church was “relaxing”, “peaceful”, and “liberating”. One of the ways that the church helped them deemphasize homophobic discourses was through the positive messages about homosexuals and homosexuality that are spread during the sermons. Participants highlighted that having positive reinforcement about their sexual orientation as something ‘normal’ was very meaningful to them, as can be observed in Lauren’s (65) words:

I am being told on Sunday mornings that there is nothing wrong with me. That I am a good person and being gay is not a bad thing. Being gay is not wrong and I need to hear those things because I tell myself the opposite quite often.

The experience of non-heterosexuality as being “normal” was experienced in multiple ways. The first one, which was discussed by most of the participants, was the fact that there are always more LGBTQ individuals at the church than heterosexuals. This reality of being part of the majority was described as very positive and empowering. The second aspect, also frequently
described, was the idea of “normal” meaning not abnormal or freakish, someone ordinary. These two ideas can be observed in Bree’s (53) comment:

So it’s a very free feeling to be in a church where you can assume that most people are probably gay. So I just feel totally comfortable there. Of course I could express anything – I feel like I’m amongst family and definitely feel like I’m in my community.

Similarly, Lauren (65) emphasized how this reality of being part of the majority and being someone ordinary was meaningful to her. She commented on the differences between her experience in the church community and in other environments and described the church as a place where she could fully express her identity without concealment or self-consciousness.

[T]hey were all gays, lesbians, like me. (...) For the first time, it felt like somewhere where I actually belong, even if it was just Sunday morning. I don't have to pretend to be someone that I am not. I can be me in that space, whatever that means for me. (...) [B]ut I also felt like I was going between two worlds every week. (...) I would go to church, I would be me, gay me, lesbian me at church and then, I would go home and I had to be straight me. It was hard going back and forth.

Lauren expressed that her sexual concealment directly affected her mental health and that this church served as a safe space where she could, at least momentarily, escape from her reality of oppression.

The third aspect of “normal” reported by the participants was linked to the idea of passing as a heterosexual person, which helped them to cope with homophobia in unfriendly places. Ashley, describing her relationship with her coworkers, emphasized this aspect:
In my former job, people would be like ‘oh, what are you doing this weekend?’ ‘Oh I might go to church’, ‘oh, well, pray for us’ as a kind of joke. But it made me feel normal because I didn’t have a lot of things to say because I wasn't going to be like ‘oh, me and my partner are going to Niagara Falls’. I didn't want to say anything that would be coming out of the closet, so church is kind of a support, making me feel normal. God bless this church for making me feel more included at my work place. Just to be able to say ‘I go to church,’ that for me was big. (Ashley, 31)

Ashley was the only participant who specifically discussed “passing” as heterosexual as a coping mechanism against homophobia. However, other participants intentionally avoided talking about their personal lives to exempt themselves from having to talk about lesbian relationships or their sexual orientation. Another positive experience in this church was having their relationships respected and validated within a community and with no concerns about homophobic backlash. These ideas can be seen in Pamela’s (37) description of her first days at the church:

it was an amazing thing to be able to hold hands in the church or put an arm around each other. Or when they do the anointing for healing, the cross on our heads with the oil and to get communion with your partner. To have communion in a community with your partner and with your friends is quite something.

In summary, one way or another, superficially or more emphatically, experiences with homophobia were described by all the participants regardless of age, religion, social status or sexual orientation concealment. Many cited this as the reason they attributed meaning to the church. Either as a space, a community, or an activity, this place was meaningful because it made participants feel safe, respected, valued, vulnerable, supported, engaged, and loved. This place
allowed participants to work on their identity as lesbians, on their faith (independent of what faith meant to them), on their connection to others and on their acceptance of themselves; it allowed them to find strength to cope with homophobia and finally have peace of mind to just be themselves.

4.1.5 – Discussion

This study investigated the experiences of a group of lesbian women who attend a straight-friendly church in Eastern Canada. The participants described various meanings they associated with this particular space. First, emotional healing and spiritual expressions occurred through: sharing spiritual experiences with other LGBTQ individuals, regardless of religious affiliation; the freedom to participate in worship with their chosen level of involvement; and the possibility to reconcile sexual identity with religiosity. A second meaning associated with this place was community building which was meaningful based on four mains opportunities: to develop a sense of belonging; to interact with a highly diverse crowd; to build a support system; and to increase their social network including friends and possible romantic partners. Third, because they had the chance to increase their network, participants reported highly valued leisure experiences, such as the opportunity to serve the LGBTQ community, the possibility to educate themselves about leisure activities, and the opportunity to experience leisure with other lesbians. They also reported that the church was a meaningful source of free leisure experiences such as good music, thought provoking sermons, and the possibility to meet public personalities/celebrities. Lastly, the participants viewed the church as a meaningful place because it allowed them to work on their internalized homophobia and resist heterosexism.
through access to positive messages about homosexuality. They valued the opportunity the church offered them to feel "normal", safe, and empowered.

**4.1.5.1 –Community through leisure**

These findings contribute to a broader understanding of characteristics that make leisure spaces attractive for lesbian women. Previous research has shown that LGBTQ spaces are not necessarily welcoming for lesbians (Pritchard et al., 2002; Skeggs, 1999; Taylor, 2007). The findings indicate that it is possible to create spaces in which LGBTQ and straight people can socialize without negatively impacting lesbians’ well-being and that lesbians do value a diverse environment. However, it seemed to be a key factor that LGBTQ should outnumber straight people in order to maintain lesbians’ sense of entitlement to that space. At CHR, the presence of straight people diluted the idea of a ghetto and, instead, promoted a sense of normality and acceptance of diversity. For these women, however, being in the majority was connected to other factors such as the possibility of building community, a focus on some sort of social engagement and activism, and access to positive discourses about non-mainstream sexual orientation.

Skeggs (1999) argued that lesbians feel intimidated by the presence of straight women in gay neighbourhoods because of the bonds they create with gay men, making lesbians lose recognition as women and visibility as homosexuals. At this church, however, lesbians did not report feeling this intimidation, and, in fact, they celebrated the presence of heterosexuals, both women and men. This may be connected to discourses of equality that are promoted by the church, which both empowers lesbians (and LGBTQ in general) and deemphasizes the consumerism and concerns with appearance reported in Skeggs' study. Furthermore, previous research has investigated power relations within the lesbian community indicating that social
markers can lead to unbalanced relationships (Jacobson & Samdahl, 1998; Taylor, 2007). The findings of the current study, however, indicate that in a context in which the focus is shifted to discourses of equality and solidarity, factors such as age, socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, level of education, and (dis)ability were less influential. In fact, findings suggest that participants greatly valued this diversity in their community. These findings corroborate Valentine’s (1993a) study which argued that lesbians tend to be open and adaptable to heterogeneous groups because, compared to heterosexual women, it is harder for them to meet friends and develop a network. It is worth noting that this research only focused on the participants’ perception of the community as a whole, not investigating subgroups of friends. Therefore, it is not possible to conclude if this diversity of social markers is embraced or if, instead, participants prefer to join subgroups that are more homogeneous.

4.1.5.2 –Coping and resisting through leisure

Participants reported that this church is a safe space in which they can recognize and address their internalized homophobia. Szymanski & Chung (2001) discussed that internalized homophobia can be manifested as isolation, fear of discovery, self-hatred and shame, or moral and religious condemnation of homosexuality, and that such feelings can be conscious or unconscious. The findings of the present study indicate that a safe leisure environment in which participants can experience community, where being LGBTQ is the norm, and where homosexuality is viewed as positive can help to mitigate internalized homophobia. This community also allows participants to cope with heterosexism.

The narratives of some participants indicated that the moral and religious condemnation of homosexuality might be the most challenging aspect of internalized homophobia to overcome.
Corinne, for example, who was openly lesbian, greatly involved in the larger lesbian community, and who identified as agnostic verbalized that she saw significant differences between other environments and this church. Although she did not “subscribe to any dogma of religion”, she still reported great levels of spiritual and emotional healing that she did not encounter in other environments. Her narrative indicated that, even though she was not a religious person herself, religious influences from the society around her impacted her emotional well-being. This data suggests that spiritual and religious components in leisure activities for lesbians can be highly beneficial to increase self-esteem and decrease internalized homophobia.

Studies have argued that leisure has many therapeutic benefits. Caldwell (2005), for example, argued that social engagement through leisure helps people cope with negative life events and it is directly related to the improvement of mental health. Iso-Ahola and Park (1996) also argued that social support achieved through leisure participation is particularly beneficial for individuals who deal with long term stressful situations or chronic stress. Other authors (e.g. Iwasaki et al., 2008; Mock et al., 2013) have argued that involvement in leisure within LGBTQ communities helps individuals who conceal parts of their sexual identity to cope and create resistance against social prejudice. Mock et al. (2013) also argued that deeper involvement in these communities helps individuals better accept and publically embrace their identity. The participants’ narratives support these studies. The data suggests that most participants felt great improvement in their mental health since they started attending the church. Interactions within this community allowed participants to work on their identities as lesbians, it helped facilitate the development of coping mechanisms, and allowed participants to create significant relationships while having meaningful leisure experiences. Attending this church was an act of self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and autonomous behaviour. For people who constantly had
to deal with homophobia, which is an uncontrollable life event, having the chance of experience some level of control and exercise choice was very empowering. By acting against the social oppression which dictates heterosexuality as the norm to be followed, going to this place was a powerful act of resistance.

4.1.6 – Practical implications

The findings suggest that the church is inclusive, vibrant, free for all, safe, predictable, fun, multi-cultural, intergenerational, thought provoking, socially and economically diverse, and spiritual. These were the main characteristics participants see in this space that they would like to see in other places. Some of these characteristics are generally associated with churches in general. The typical understanding of church is already imbibed in discourses of virtue, dignity, appropriateness of behaviour (particularly female), and spirituality, which is difficult to mimic in other spaces. However, there are some characteristics that can be recreated, allowing lesbians to have more meaningful and fulfilling leisure experiences. A community garden, for example, could shelter some of these characteristics and directions pointed out by the participants (Parry, Glover, & Shinew, 2005; Raisborough & Bhatti, 2007). A community garden can encompass different levels of skills and education. It can embrace different gender, sexual orientation, ages, races, ethnicities, and levels of physical ability. It allows different levels of involvement and commitment, as well as the circulation of positive messages among participants. It demands a routine, which enables feelings of continuity and collective goals. It can be organized in order to be free for all. It promotes hope in a (literally) fruitful future. And there are definitely elements of justice, comfort, and spirituality in the fact that independently of how our social markers define us, we all have to wait the same amount of time for a potato to grow.
These findings indicated that marginalized groups can feel empowered when they have the chance to socialize in mixed positive places where they are the majority and the ones making the rules. Leisure providers should better explore this avenue when proposing leisure programs for LGBTQ groups, as well as other minority groups.

4.1.7 – Limitations and directions for future research

The sample gathered for this study was limited to White, cisgender, Canadian born, English speaking women between the ages of 31 and 65. Variations and intersectionalities amongst other demographic variables should be explored. In addition, this study indicates that spirituality and religiosity help lesbians cope with homophobia. Further research focusing on lesbian unique experiences would help to expand the understanding about the spiritual benefits of leisure, and coping through religion.

The data also suggests that sexual orientation concealment affects lesbians’ leisure motivations, place attachment, and how they build and value communities. Since there is little research on these topics, further research would be beneficial. Also, since the findings suggested that engagement in this type of community was highly beneficial for lesbians’ mental health, further investigation on community building among lesbians is necessary to document health outcomes. Furthermore, studies should focus on intersectionalities among community building, place attachment and leisure motivations paying particular attention to aspects that are unique to lesbians’ life experiences that differ from heterosexual women (e.g. how they manage to create bonds and develop community in a context where friendship and romantic attraction are often intertwined). Untangling these complexities might help leisure professionals to develop more
appropriate ways to help lesbians improve their general health, create more meaningful places for themselves and engage in more meaningful experiences in leisure.
4.2 – Leisure Constraints for Lesbian Women

4.2.1 – Introduction

“... Freedom, a word the human dream feeds on,
that no one can explain or fail to understand ...”

(Cecilia Meireles, 2005, p.71 - Brazilian poetess)

Leisure constraints have become a major focus of leisure studies in the past two decades (Russell, 2009) and can be understood as something that inhibits or prohibits someone from participating in a leisure activity (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). The most common model of leisure constraints used in contemporary research was developed by Crawford and Godbey in 1987 which divides leisure constraints into three groups: (a) intrapersonal constraints; (b) interpersonal constraints; and (c) structural constraints. Intrapersonal barriers are related to psychological characteristics which shape and act upon leisure preferences. Examples of intrapersonal constraints include stress, fear, depression, and religiosity (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). Interpersonal leisure constraints result from interactions between individuals, and shape preferences and impact participation. Examples of interpersonal constraints include disapproval of an activity by family members or the absence of a partner with whom to participate.

Structural constraints are defined by Crawford and Godbey (1987) as “intervening factors between leisure preferences and participation” (p. 124). Examples of structural constraints are financial resources, time availability, and geographical location.

In 1991, Crawford and colleagues proposed an expansion of Crawford and Godbey’s (1987) model. Other studies gave support to this expansion (e.g. Kay & Jackson, 1991; Shaw et al., 1991;) suggesting that constraints lead to outcomes beyond just non-participation.
Constraints might be overcome through negotiation, and highly motivated individuals might feel even more stimulated to participate exactly because they have constraints to overcome (Jackson, Crawford & Godbey, 1993; Shaw et al., 1991). Research also suggests that although participation itself may not be constrained, some individuals might not fully enjoy an activity (Jackson, 2005; Shaw et al., 1991;). Other individuals might have their preferences defined by a constraint and even though they participate, they would rather engage in another activity (Liechty, Freeman, & Zabriskie, 2006). Kleiber and colleagues (2008) even argue that constraints can be beneficial for leisure in certain cases because they help to narrow the list of possible choices to a more manageable number and help people appreciate the leisure they can participate in.

With the expanding conceptualization of Leisure Constraints Theory, researchers are beginning to explore the unique constraints of different marginalized groups (Bialeschki & Pearce, 1997; Mock, Plante, Reysen & Gerbasi, 2013; Taylor, 2001). One group that has only recently received more attention is the LGBTQ community (Bialeschki & Pearce, 1997; Iwasaki & Ristock, 2004; Johnson & Samdahl, 2005; Theriault, 2014). For example, research suggests that constraints associated with homophobia affect how LGBTQ individuals develop place attachment (Mock & Hummel, 2011; Pritchard et al., 2002; Taylor, 2007), identity (Atencio & Wright, 2009; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000), faith (Valentine, 2012), and how they build community and social support systems (Taylor, 2007). There are, however, innumerable aspects of LGBTQ experiences of leisure constraints that still need to be better explored. There is also a need to account for differences within this. Most of the existing research has lumped sexual minorities into one sample rather than exploring these differences. Lesbians and gay men, for example, face different constraints because, even though they have the same sexual orientation, men have more
power in society than women. Therefore, gay men benefit from hegemonic masculinity while lesbians face misogyny. This study, therefore, aimed to address some of the gaps in the literature by exploring the lived experiences of a group of lesbian women who attend a straight-friendly (LGBTQ oriented) church and their experiences of leisure constraints in this and other leisure settings.

4.2.2 – Literature Review

4.2.2.1 – Leisure Constraints for Women

In North America, research suggests that women typically face more leisure constraints than men (Oftedal, Kang, & Schneider, 2015). Henderson and colleagues (2002) suggest that, when compared to men, the time that women have available to engage in leisure activities is reduced and more fragmented. In heterosexual families, even though many couples believe that household chores and parenting should be shared duties, women are still disproportionately responsible for most of these activities. As a result, most women, especially mothers, are more likely than men to establish their leisure around their family and home responsibilities (Harrington, 2006; Henderson et al., 2002). In addition, women face constraints that are associated with gender roles and expectations, discourses about respectability and appropriateness of female behaviour (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007; Green & Singleton, 2006;), and fear of harassment and violence (Koskela, 1999; Lloyd & Auld, 2003; Scraton & Watson, 1998; Valentine, 1992).

Although women face more constraints than men, it is also important to account for differences within the same sex (Henderson et al., 2002). Feminists have been challenging the concept of a unified “women’s experience”, and putting into perspective that social markers (e.g.
race, parental status, sexual orientation) profoundly differentiate women's existence as well as their level of constraints (Foss et al., 1999; Henderson & Gibson, 2013). Lesbians, for example, face constraints associated with the intersectionality of gender and sexual orientation. Although they share experiences of constraints with heterosexual women, their sexual orientation grants them lower status in society and greater levels of constraints than straight women. There is, however, an increasing amount of research arguing that constraints can be overcome or negotiated and that highly motivated individuals can find meaning in their leisure despite (or even because) of these constraints (Fendt & Wilson, 2010; Lyu, Oh, & Lee, 2013).

Unfortunately, little research has explored if and how lesbian women negotiate leisure constraints.

4.2.2.2 – Leisure Constraints for Lesbians

There are four socially constructed concepts that highly impact the lives of individuals who are not heterosexual. These concepts are: heterosexism, heteronormativity, homophobia, and internalized homophobia. Heterosexism refers to the socially constructed notion that everyone is and should be heterosexual (Yep, 2002). Heteronormativity is the idea that heterosexuality is the only essential, natural sexual orientation attributing status of pathology, abnormality, and unintelligibility to any other sexual expression. In modern societies, heteronormativity became synonyms of the only valid social union between two people, in this case, a woman and a man (Yep, 2002). Homophobia can be described as a personal discomfort, anxiety or fear of being physically close, or being associated with gay men or lesbian women. It can range from mild awkwardness to strong feelings of horror, disgust and hatred toward homosexuals (Herek, 1984; Weinberg, 1973; Yep, 2002). Internalized homophobia refers to the
LGBTQ’s internalization of these negative attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality generating self-hatred (Barnes & Meyer, 2012).

Although both lesbians and gay men face constraints associated with these concepts, their lived experiences can be very different (Pritchard, Morgan, & Sedgley, 2002; Skeggs, 1999). Even though gay men do not practice masculinity in a traditional way, they still benefit from hegemonic masculinity and have more power in society than lesbians (Johnson & Samdahl, 2005). Nevertheless, the majority of studies that focus on homosexuality tend to encompass these two groups disregarding differences (Rich, 1983). Lesbians, therefore, face invisibility as women in studies that disregard differences between straight and gay women, and face invisibility as homosexuals in studies that disregard differences between lesbians and gay men. Because of this invisibility, there is a fairly small number of studies that focus on or acknowledge the uniqueness of experiences of leisure constraints faced by lesbian women.

For many years, Bialeschki and Pearce’s (1997) study was the only one in the leisure literature that focused on the unique experiences of leisure among lesbian families. These authors argued that, in comparison to heterosexual relationships, homosexual ones are more likely to provide liberation in terms of power balance since both partners are the same gender and were raised with the same gender rules. Since there is no rigid and defined social expectation among lesbian families, they have more freedom in choosing and establishing their parameters for the relationship (Bialeschki & Pearce, 1997). These unique circumstances make their home based constraints easier to negotiate compared with those faced by heterosexual women. The reality outside of the home, however, tends to be much harder because of homophobia. Their study, therefore, emphasized the need for a specific research framework when studying lesbian families.
Focusing on the intersection of social markers (gender, sexual orientation, and age), Jacobson and Samdahl (1998) discussed the leisure experiences of lesbians over the age of 60. The authors found that stigma and discrimination have a great impact on their leisure choices and constraints, and that the intersectionality among these social markers brings disempowering messages about the self. Some women described feeling even more discrimination from younger lesbians than from society in general, which points out the need to better understand the process of aging in lesbian communities. Many researchers have focused on the impacts of aging on women’s leisure (Henderson & Gibson, 2013), however, little attention has been given to older lesbians. Although aging might put lesbians and straight women in similar situations (such as menopause, memory loss, loss of family members and friends), the social support these women have access to is likely to be different. For example, the loss of a husband might receive more social sympathy and support than losing a same-sex partner, especially for those women who conceal their homosexuality. Jacobson and Samdahl’s study indicated, therefore, that differences in the aging process of lesbians and straight women should be further explored, as well as how meaningful leisure experiences might help create coping mechanisms for lesbians.

Some authors have focused on other aspects that differentiate lesbians’ experiences from other women and from gay men. Skeggs (1999) and Pritchard et al. (2002), for example, argued that lesbians did not feel the same entitlement to urban leisure spaces as gay men and straight women, which constrained their leisure in gay neighborhoods. Taylor (2007) focused on class differences within the lesbian group and emphasized that working-class lesbians felt discriminated against in the gay scene because of their lack of financial resources to present themselves in the “correct” way. These authors, therefore, point to the need for a more thorough discussion of lesbians’ leisure constraints.
4.2.3 – Methods

For this study, I adopted a qualitative approach, which is able to capture the nuances of social meanings of leisure and privileges the perspectives of participants (Henderson, 2006; Tirone & Shaw, 1997). Specifically, phenomenology was appropriate because it focuses on understanding participants’ lived experience and allows participants to have their voices expressed in their own terms, from their particular point of view (van Manen, 1990).

4.2.3.1 – Participants

I used purposive sampling to recruit participants who represented a range of relevant characteristics, including age, socio-economic status, level of involvement in the church and relationship status. Initial contact was made with 3 women who attend a straight-friendly church in Eastern Canada who had different levels of involvement in the church. An email explaining the purpose of the research and inviting participation was sent to these three women (Pamela, Emma, and Bree). These three women became participants and the rest of the sample was recruited through snowball sampling. The final sample consisted of seven women whose ages ranged from 31 to 65 with a mean of 45.7. All participants self-identified as Caucasian. Six participants were in a relationship with a woman and one was married to a man, but identified as a lesbian. See Table one for more information about the participants.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Church Attendance</th>
<th>Volunteer Involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pamela</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Single (in a committed relationship with a woman)</td>
<td>Christian (Evangelical)</td>
<td>Every Sunday</td>
<td>Choir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Single (in a committed relationship with a woman)</td>
<td>Non-denominational</td>
<td>Once or twice a month</td>
<td>Women's retreat committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Married to a man</td>
<td>Christian (United Church)</td>
<td>Every Sunday</td>
<td>Choir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bree</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Divorced from a man (in a committed relationship with a woman)</td>
<td>Christian (Anglican)</td>
<td>Every Sunday</td>
<td>Coffee time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corine</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Divorced from a woman (in an open relationship with a woman)</td>
<td>Non-religious</td>
<td>Every Sunday</td>
<td>Coffee time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tatiana</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Single (in a committed relationship with a woman)</td>
<td>Buddhist / Christian</td>
<td>Once or twice a month</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Single (in a committed relationship with a woman)</td>
<td>Christian (United Church)</td>
<td>Once or twice a month</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2.3.2 – Data Collection

Participants completed semi-structured interviews which lasted from forty-five to ninety minutes and were conducted in a location chosen by the participant (restaurant, participant’s home, or researcher’s home). To initiate discussion, participants were asked to describe themselves and their experiences with being a lesbian. Participants were the asked to discuss their perceptions of their leisure constraints and their experiences with the church. The data collected during the interviews were transcribed verbatim and returned to the participants allowing them to add or remove any information (Merriam, 2009; Somekh & Lewin, 2011). No participant, however, asked to add or remove any part of the transcript. To protect confidentiality, all participants were assigned pseudonyms. Similarly, the church was assigned the pseudonym Christian Hope Revival (CHR).

4.1.3.3 – Focus

Although this study focused on the experiences of a group of women who attend a Christian church, I made a conscious choice of not focusing on religion specifically when investigating the phenomenon. As an attendee of the church, I had previous knowledge that many people attend this church even though they do not have any particular religious affiliation. Therefore, I decided to focus on the church as a broader leisure opportunity rather than a specifically religious place. As anticipated, spirituality and religiosity were a part of the findings, but they will not be discussed using religion as a framework in order to focus on the leisure experiences.
4.2.3.4 – Data Analysis

First I read and re-read each transcript to familiarize myself with the material and to get a sense of the lived experience as a whole. Then I proceeded with data analysis using Szklarski’s (2007) four stages which include: listing (the researcher makes a list of relevant statements made by the participant), reduction (the researcher groups similar statements together), elimination (the researcher eliminates repetitions of similar statements) and hypothetical identification (identify themes that emerged constantly).

Each sentence was read and analyzed in order to understand what was being described about the phenomenon. Key statements were underlined (listing – Szklarski, 2007). During the reading, emerging themes were noted in the margins of the transcripts making use of labels that summarize the passages’ major message, trying to make use of the participant’s language as much as possible. After that, the emerging themes were compared among all interviews in order to find commonalities, repetitions, and differences. Similar statements were grouped together (reduction – Szklarski, 2007). Repetitions of similar statements were eliminated (elimination – Szklarski, 2007). And, finally, overall themes that emerged constantly and best described the lived experience were identified (hypothetical identification – Szklarski, 2007). The description of themes and the relationship among them continued until the lived experiences was captured.

In order to improve trustworthiness, I used note-taking and kept a reflexive journal (Creswell, 2009; Dupuis, 1999). Also, throughout the study I engaged in debriefing with peers (Broussard, 2005). Since I am a member of this church, I had the opportunity to informally chat with participants after their interviews when I needed them to clarify certain parts of their narratives during the data analysis. I made jotting notes to register this information. Furthermore,
to conduct formal member checks, a summary of the data analysis was sent to each participant via email and they were asked to comment on it. Participants responded with positive feedback and emphasized their joy for the opportunity to share their stories.

4.2.4 – Findings

The constraints discussed by the participants in this study were diverse. They discussed how homophobia affected their lives in general and how it shaped their leisure. The analysis revealed three intertwined themes. They were: churches and religion as leisure constraints; partners and peers as leisure constraints; and homophobia and self-consciousness as leisure constraints. The discussion about these three topics emphasized the relevance of CHR as a leisure space where these women could negotiate the leisure constraints they faced.

4.2.4.1 – Churches and Religion as Leisure Constraints

The most recurrent source of leisure constraints mentioned by the participants was the cultural role of churches and religion. Participants argued that churches in general tend to be highly prejudicial (and sometimes even hostile) towards homosexuality, which usually leads to non-participation in this leisure activity. They argued that many LGBTQ individuals have been hurt by churches and have a negative attitude toward any form of organized religion. Although they emphasized that this particular church was unique and did not present any form of intimidation or discrimination, they felt that CHR as a religious institution still faced negative views from the LGBTQ community. Corine (53) summarized:

As much as CHR is respected, the whole idea of going to church is not. So a lot of gay people, like my ex-wife for example, who have lived a life where they were very much
repressed by their religious experience growing up, and shamed and just ran away from it, are not going to run to another church.

Participants in this study reported noticing three main attitudes LGBT individuals have towards churches in general. The first attitude, as Corine mentioned, was to completely avoid going to churches or associating with any religious community. The second attitude was to attend worship services but keep a distant and reserved relationship within the church community. The third attitude was to engage and be active within that community, but to keep their sexual orientation concealed.

For some participants, previous to their connection with CHR, religion was not a big part of their identity. Some reported going to church as children and enjoying that leisure activity with their families. However, when they grew older, they stopped going for various reasons. The most commonly mentioned and highly emphasized of these reasons was the institutionalized homophobia they perceived in churches. They mentioned the homophobic messages spread during the worship associating homosexuality with sin and eternity in hell. These messages were reported as disturbing and disempowering, which lead to the development of low self-esteem as well as internalized homophobia. Ashley (31) explains:

[Before I started going to CHR] I didn't realize the layers of internalization of different homophobic messages. I went to church as a kid (…) and it wasn't openly homophobic. They were very accepting, inclusive and progressive. But having CHR mentioning and acknowledging of it being a safe space for queer LGBT people, it was eye-opening. [CHR] really helped with my uncertainty of feeling like: ‘how much is [religion] going to be part of my identity?’
Ashley discussed that she avoided churches for many years without realizing that she was not attending because of these underlined homophobic messages. Other participants had similar narratives and described having become disconnected from religion and churches in order to shield themselves against these messages. As a result of this disconnection, they did not feel constrained in their leisure in churches because they actually had no desire to pursue this leisure activity.

For other participants, going to church on Sundays and being engaged in the church community had always been a core part of their identity. Bree (53), for example, emphasized that churches were a place where she felt connected to God and with others, where she felt at home:

> I can just walk into a church and I’m home. So for me, church is where you see an expression of the divine. I mean, you see it here and everywhere. But that’s my core and that’s where I get fed [spiritually] and if I don’t have that, well then I’m not going to be a happy camper anywhere else.

Since religion was such an important part of her identity, she described her frustration when she attended conservative churches:

> It would make me nervous to be [frequently] there. I just wouldn’t feel like I could express myself. I know from my past that some people would be very angry about homosexuality. You’re going to meet some [people] who think that [homosexuality] is just of the devil or something.

Bree felt highly constrained in her leisure experiences in churches because of the need to conceal her identity as a lesbian. She emphasized that even churches that describe themselves as gay-friendly are not completely supportive of homosexuality. Ashley (31) also had a similar
perspective. According to Bree and Ashley, there was not a hostile attitude towards LGBTQ attendees, but they felt like there was an expectation that homosexuals will never comment on their romantic and emotional lives. Bree explained:

Even if they’re just not interested... [If they think:] ‘Oh, talking about [your partner] again?’ I don’t want to be in that group because [being a lesbian] is like a core of my identity and it’s the kind of thing I want to talk about. So if I had to cut that off and not talk about it, why would I want to be there?

Even though Bree (53) has been involved in church communities all her life, her experiences of leisure constrains only started after she realized that she was a lesbian. After that, she was constantly self-conscious and always felt the need to negotiate her lesbianism in order to fit in. Lauren (65) described a similar experience and emphasized that having to conceal her sexual orientation made her feel disconnected and lonely for many years within church communities. She explained that she used to be a part of another church’s choir and sewing group, but all the time that she spent with those people, she would feel like she did not completely belong. She described her frustration with the group: “I was so disconnected with everybody there that when I decided to quit, not a single person from both groups called me to ask me why [I quit]. I could be dead as far as they know”.

It is worth noting that some of these women were married to men for several years and only discovered their homosexuality later in life. While they were living a heterosexual life, they did not feel that their experiences within church communities were constrained. Having heard heteronormative and homophobic messages for many years, after they realized that they were lesbians, they felt like they could not disclosure their sexual orientation. Having to hide their
identity as homosexuals, they became self-conscious and disconnected, which constrained their leisure experiences in churches. Craving for a place where they could practice their faith and participate in spiritual leisure without being self-conscious about their homosexuality, they actively looked for a gay-friendly church. They found CHR to be a unique, positive, and inclusive institution compared to other churches. A place where they “can be themselves”, enjoy their leisure, and experience spirituality and religion without constraints. As Bree (53) described:

I’m just glad to be in a place where you can be totally free to be with somebody that you love and express your feelings to them and have the ups and downs of, like, breaking up with somebody and meeting somebody else and it’s all just very much in the norm. It makes a huge difference. I mean, that means I can just go to church and worship and be as spiritual as I want to be and enjoy myself and meet people and not have any of those other kinds of concern.

On varying levels, participants had to overcome and adjust their attitude towards churches in order to start attending CHR. Some, as Bree and Lauren, got there because they were actively looking for an inclusive church and shopped around until they found CHR. Some were introduced to the church by their partners or their friends who assured them that this church was different and worth the visit. They initially went there because of the social aspect of the experience and ended up reconciling with their faith. Some went because they were looking for a positive LGBTQ community where they could socialize with other likeminded individuals. Although coming from different paths, they all found a meaningful community which helped them to overcome leisure constraints. Participants explained that they had become highly motivated to overcome their previous attitude towards churches in order to be a part of this community. Not having to deal with constraints associated with homophobia, they reported
experiencing a great deal of spiritual and emotional healing as well as a sense of belonging. Having the chance to work on their internalized homophobia in a safe and positive environment, they were able to build strength to successfully cope with homophobia in other areas of their lives. Some participants reported having built the courage to come out to their families, friends, and coworkers through their association with CHR. Participants felt that negotiating the constraints associated with churches and religion granted them with significant improvement in their leisure experiences in churches, as well as their overall quality of life.

4.2.4.2 – Partners as Leisure Constraints

Another theme presented by the participants as a source of constraint was their relationship with partners and friends. According to participants, partners could be a constraint that led them not to participate or to participate less often than they wished. Corine (53), for example, discussed a time when she was married and her wife did not want to go to church. Because of her wife’s negative attitude towards churches and religion, Corine restrained from participation in religious activities. She commented:

My ex-wife grew up in a very fundamentalist Baptist religion, so she had a very strong association with church being oppressive to gay people from her family’s experience. But then we got legally married and we were going to have children. I said to her, “I want to have a church where we can take our children because I think that’s important.

In her narrative, it could be observed that initially she was willing to compromise and not engage in any church community or even attend worship services. However, she would not compromise anymore if they were to have children. She went on to say that her marriage ended and she found herself in a “very hard time in [her] life” when she had to deal with depression and
loneliness. Without a partner acting as a constraint and in search of emotional support, Corine
started attending church again. As she explained:

I started thinking, ‘I need to find community’. So then I thought – I had lots of friends
[when I was in church] and I spent more time with them and they were very helpful. (…)
That’s what [church] is for me… more than anything else is an opportunity to create
community.

After she started attending church again, the church community became a great support system
that helped her deal with depression and heal from her divorce. Although she did not consider
herself a religious person, she did understand the church community as a significant source of
emotional support. It is worth mentioning that, in contrast to some other participants who joined
the church in search of a spiritual place, Corine joined for the opportunity to socialize with other
LGBTQ individuals in a positive environment. This is particularly interesting because she
attributed her emotional healing to the support she got from the community, and not to the
strengthening of her faith or spirituality. When her partner prevented her from participating,
Corine felt highly disconnected from a community she valued. She did not socialize as much as
she wished and found herself lonely and in a vulnerable condition when they got divorced, which
almost drove her to suicide. Therefore, it was possible to observe how meaningful this leisure
activity was for her. The constraints she faced because of her partner not only impacted her
leisure, but also had serious consequences to her overall wellbeing.

Other participants also mentioned having to adjust their leisure in churches because of
partners. They emphasized that even when their partners want to be engaged in the church
community and commit to go to church on Sundays, they still had to negotiate how often they
would go and their level of involvement. They often ended up going to church less frequently than they preferred because they would only attend on days when both partners were available and wanted to go. Ashley (31) commented that “usually there is a lot going on Sundays, so we always have to check with the other one and see [if we are going to attend church]”.

Ex-partners are also seen as a source of constraint. Some participants mentioned that some people had stopped attending this church because they did not want to socialize or be in the same environment or community as their ex-partners. They emphasized that CHR is a very unique church and that it is hard for them to find the same level of support in other churches. Therefore, after going through a break-up, unable to find other churches with the same characteristics, they stopped attending church all together.

Partners acted as constraints in different ways. However, for some participants, having a partner was also an important factor both in their engagement in and enjoyment of leisure experiences in church. The opportunity to attend church with a same-sex partner and not having to conceal their sexual orientation was reported as highly important in their commitment with the church, as Emma (39) explained:

When we first started attending the church, even though I didn't feel included, I didn't know people at the church, I did feel that it was a place where we could go as a couple and it wasn't a big deal if I had my arm around my partner and it was a community. It was a really important place where I felt I could be myself.

Pamela (37) also argued “being able to have [her] arms around [her] partner was huge”. Lauren (65), who had never had a lesbian partner, also mentioned how significant it was for her to see so many women doing that in the church because it normalized lesbian relationships. Participants
highlighted the meaning of feeling validated in their relationship with their partners, which increased their commitment to the church as well as the enjoyment with the leisure activity.

In conclusion, relationships with partners and ex-partners could be a leisure constraint or a motivator. To varying degrees, people who were in partnered relationships had to negotiate their leisure preferences in order to accommodate the interests of both partners. For leisure activities that involved religious aspects, however, it seemed that this negotiation reached social and cultural constraints that went beyond the leisure activity itself. Thus, in order to have more meaningful leisure experiences within churches, partners had to adjust not only their leisure preferences, but also their world views.

4.2.4.3 – Homophobia and Self-Consciousness

Participants made a clear distinction between CHR and other churches. They described this community as inclusive and they felt relaxed and safe “to be themselves”. When describing their leisure experiences at this church, one of the aspects they presented as highly valuable to them was the absence of self-consciousness. In other settings, however, all participants described having to be frequently aware or their surroundings and worried about how they were being perceived by people around them. Emma (39), for example, who was a teacher, explained that she worked and lived in the same neighbourhood. Because of that, she occasionally met students during her leisure time. She mentioned that she usually avoided holding her partner’s hand on the street because she feared that a student might see and she might have to deal with an uncomfortable situation in her workplace as a result of this encounter. She explained:

I certainly am aware of where I am in terms of whether [my partner] and I would hold hands, I would tend to think about what neighbourhood I am, or who might see me.
I can remember a particular incident where one of my colleagues said something about all her students knowing I was a lesbian and I was actually kind of taken aback. I was just floored that the students would know this.

Ashley (31) had a similar experience and described her discomfort around her co-workers. She said:

I’m very self-protective around how I would and who I would choose to use the term [lesbian] because it’s very situational, unfortunately. (...) I’m not entirely [out of the closet]. At work I’m sort of in that gray zone of if someone asks: ‘do you have a partner?’ I say yes but I’m not gonna reveal anything further. So I’m very limited. With my family is totally the opposite and friends and everything, but for some reason at work, I’m still not comfortable.

Ashley and Emma emphasized that their leisure was affected by self-conscious and particularly a fear of been seeing by someone from their workplace. Having dealt with homophobia in the past, they were constantly protective of their privacy and their identity as lesbians.

All participants in this study reported either a situation when they had to deal with homophobia, or their anxiety related to concealing their sexual orientation. Lauren (65) described feeling guilty when she would socialize with other LGBTQ individuals. “[She] felt like [she] was neglecting or cheating on [her] family”. However, she did not feel the same way when she would socialize with her straight friends. Corine (53) discussed a time when she had a girlfriend in Florida and went there to visit her. Her girlfriend refused to hold Corine’s hands in public because gay bashing was very common in that region. Corine felt self-conscious, angry, and feared for her safety. Similarly, Pamela (37) had to negotiate her presence in an evangelical
retreat because the camp had a strict policy against the presence of LGBTQ individuals. She explained:

> When we had a family gathering at a religious camp that actually explicit has anti-gay views, forbids anything gay in the premises or [emphasizes that] homosexuality is anti-scriptural, against the bible. My aunt thought [my partner and I] should be able to go. Other people sort of making phone calls asking: ‘is this going to be a problem?’ (…) Finally, the person in charge of the camp said: ‘We don't want to rent to gay people, but it is okay if your niece comes’. So it is a very tense, awkward situation that could be very difficult to deal with emotionally.

Even those who had not experienced many instances of discrimination described feeling anxious thinking that they could face homophobic confrontation. This anxiety often led them to conceal their sexual identity. Tatyana (45) explained that she actively avoided talking about her personal life with coworkers or people she met in leisure situations whom she did not know very well because she did not want to disclosure her identity as a lesbian. She felt that “homophobia is still very much accepted in society” and her way to protect herself against undesirable situations was being self-conscious and keeping her privacy. Bree (53) who said that she had never dealt directly with homophobia, still described being completely aware that she would face hostile situations if she was to disclose her homosexuality.

In this context of open or veiled social hostility against LGBTQ individuals, for these women, CHR became a valuable escape from self-consciousness and homophobia. A place where they could work on their identity, make peace with their spirituality (independently of what that meant to them), develop friendships, improve their mental health, find community and
emotional support, and experience meaningful leisure. The findings emphasized how their sexual orientation affected their leisure choices and their relationships with friends, partners, and strangers. Being able to overcome these constraints and finally find a place where they could experience leisure without homophobia was greatly appreciated. In summary, borrowing the words of Ashley (31), “CHR is a place where we can finally be”.

4.2.5 – Discussion

The participants in this study discussed two sides of leisure constraints for lesbian women. They described homophobia as a leisure constraint, but also their experiences of constraint negotiation and leisure as a source of coping. When discussing homophobia as a leisure constraint, churches and religious beliefs promulgated in society were linked to their negative experiences with heterosexism and to the development of their internalized homophobia. When discussing negotiation and coping-mechanisms, the participants discussed the challenges they faced to keeping good mental health in unfavorable environments, as well as how communities like CHR and partners can be a great source of coping.

4.2.5.1 – Homophobia as a Leisure Constraint

This study showed that leisure associated with churches and religious environments can lead to various types of constraints for lesbian women. By Crawford and Godbey’s (1987) definition, these constraints were generally interpersonal and intrapersonal constraints. Religion acted as an interpersonal constraint when these women started encountering negative messages about homosexuality within religious environments. Even though the participants did not describe facing direct confrontation within church communities, they felt social pressure forcing
them to suppress and conceal their sexual orientation because homophobic messages were disseminated. The homophobia presented in churches was reported as leading to non-participation, less frequent participation, and/or reduced enjoyment (Jackson, 2005; Shaw et al., 1991). However, because many of these women did go to church when growing up, they internalized these negative messages. Once internalized, homophobia became an intrapersonal constraint experienced on an individual psychological level (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). This internalized homophobia generated fear of having their identity as lesbians exposed, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, fear of confrontation or embarrassing situations, fear of losing the love of their families and friends, among other negative feelings and attitudes towards the self. These findings are consistent with the internalized homophobia discussion proposed by Szymanski and Chung (2001), who also emphasized that these negative feelings can be both conscious and unconscious, which makes them harder to identify and battle.

The findings of this study also support work by Barnes and Meyer (2012) who investigated the relationship between exposure to homophobic (which they referred to as nonaffirming) religious environments and internalized homophobia and mental health. Their research indicated that higher exposure to homophobic religious environments caused higher levels of internalized homophobia. They also indicated that lesbians, gays, and bisexual individuals tended to avoid mainstream religious places trying to avoid constant contact with negative messages about homosexuals. For many individuals, including all the participants in the present study, being in religious places and learning religious doctrine and traditions was very much a part of their everyday lives during childhood and early teenage years. For people who grew up surrounded by homophobic and heteronormative religious environments, the internalization of antigay attitudes and stigma is, therefore, intertwined with their socialization
process. Constant contact with these settings can promote the maintenance of internalized homophobia, suppress the positive effects that religious or spiritual leisure can have on mental health, and become a stress factor that highly impacts their identity (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Heintzman, 2009; Meyer, 2003; Morrow, 2008).

It is also important to emphasize that homophobia is not only encountered in churches and religious environments. It is spread in the culture around us (Morrow, 2008). As emphasized by some participants, although Canada is a country that demonstrates respect for all religions and traditions, it is, nevertheless, a predominantly Christian country. It follows Christian holidays and traditions that are often disseminated and assimilated by its population. Therefore, mainstream ideas about homosexuality that are defended by many Christian religions/denominations became a part of these women’s culture and identities, even if they did not attend church. In this context, homophobia acts as a powerful interpersonal constraint that not only affects religious leisure experiences, but virtually all experiences a LGBTQ individual might have. Homophobia as an interpersonal and intrapersonal constraint led the participants in this study to have poorer opportunities to build friendships, develop their spirituality and religiosity, and further explore the intersection of their spirituality and their identity as lesbians. For fear of discrimination, they often concealed their sexual identity in religious and non-religious leisure settings.

Understanding that homophobia represents both an interpersonal and intrapersonal constraint might be particularly helpful for leisure providers because it provides insight into ways to help LGBTQ populations create leisure-based coping mechanisms. It might seem like a Herculean task to change how societies think about and discuss homophobia, but providing proper conditions for lesbians to work on their internalized homophobia may be a more feasible
task. Homophobia is a social phenomenon that it is felt on an individual level. For example, when participants spoke about their city, they described as very open and accepting. At the same time, all participants described feeling discriminated against in the very city they described as accepting. This discrepancy can lead to the conclusion that, even in societies that are perceived as generally non-homophobic, homophobia still affects sexual minorities individually. Therefore, the development of leisure programs that focus on creating coping mechanisms against internalized homophobia might be more significant and more effective than creating activities that aim to sensitize straight people to LGBTQ struggles. Also, this research showed that having agency in their lives, controlling how, when, and to what extent people around them will know about their sexual orientation seemed to be linked to emotional healing and easement of internalized homophobia. Further research in this area is necessary.

Some participants in this study emphasized that they feel a great difference between a gay-friendly and a straight-friendly environment. They argued that gay-friendly churches do not necessarily help lesbians to experience emotional healing because the silence about struggles that are specific to lesbians still acted as heteronormative messages. According to these participants, in order to really feel accepted and included, and experience leisure without constraints, lesbians need to hear positive messages about homosexuality. The absence of homophobic discourses alone did not promote healing from internalized homophobia. Indeed, for some participants the silence about LGBTQ struggles only reinforced homophobic ideas. These findings should be particularly considered for gay-friendly leisure organizations that want to be inclusive and offer opportunities for meaningful leisure experiences.
4.2.5.2 – Negotiation and Coping Mechanisms

Although the main objective of this research was to explore experiences of constraint, the participants also discussed how they negotiate these constraints and, above all, how this church acted as a source of coping with homophobia and internalized homophobia. In the past two decades, some scholars have increasingly discussed the influences of homophobia in non-heterosexual populations’ health as well as how these individuals develop coping mechanisms (Mock & Hummel, 2011; Theriault, 2014). Szymanski and Owens (2008), for example, discussed two main coping strategies: problem-solving and avoidant coping. They explained:

Problem solving coping strategies are actions taken to change the source of stress, such as planning, taking direct action, and focusing on the current problem (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989). Avoidant coping strategies include denial, giving up, and distraction or mental disengagement. (p.95)

They argued that individuals who use problem-solving coping strategies instead of avoidant have lower psychological distress. They also reasoned that individuals who are able to reduce their internalized homophobia are more likely to develop proactive coping strategies, more likely to come out of the closet, reach out for community and social support, confront homophobic behaviour and become activists (Szymanski & Owens, 2008). Based on Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003), Szymanski and Owens (2008) argued that LGB individuals can develop coping strategies individually and as a community emphasizing that community building and social support are very relevant for lesbians’, gays’, and bisexuals’ mental health. They argued that it is important to identify sexual minority role models, as well as have access to positive messages about lesbianism/homosexuality. They argued that internalized homophobia
not only can lead to psychological distress, but also lead dysfunctional coping strategies (e.g. alcoholism, eating disorders). Therefore, internalized homophobia should be addressed not only to improve health, but also to prevent future health conditions.

The findings of this study suggest that leisure can serve as a means of coping with internalized homophobia through problem-solving strategies. For example, participants in this study engaged in active discussion, developed supportive friendships, and validated their romantic relationships through the church. Some studies have discussed coping and negotiation in the context of the dynamics of lesbian couples and how they affect mental health and other areas of their lives. Burch (1997) discussed that lesbians express a greater desire to spend time with their partners than any other kind of partnership. In this context, leisure negotiation is highly necessary. This negotiation of constraints is understood as the discussion and compromising among partners as well as collective effort to overcome interpersonal and structural constraints, as defined by Samdahl, Hutchinson, and Jacobson (1999).

In the present study, participants discussed partners as constraints (e.g. “I want to go to church but my partner wants to do something else, so we don’t go”; “My partner doesn’t like churches, so we don’t attend”). However, their main focus when discussing partners was the positive impact that being in a partnered relationship can have in their experience of leisure at this church. Participants emphasized that they felt a great level of emotional healing for being in a place where they were respected individually, but also validated as a couple. All the participants (even the one who is not in a committed relationship with a woman) talked about the liberating aspect of being able to put their arms around their partners’ shoulders while in a pew. The fact that it was common for couples to do that in the church granted them a sense of normality, as well as entitlement to that place and to that relationship. Their narratives indicated
that they felt that the community was validating that they were indeed a couple, two partners in a committed relationship, a real family, which was a form of active resistance to heterosexism and heteronormativity.

Understanding this aspect of their leisure experience as a couple extends existing literature. Researchers have studied leisure satisfaction associated with romantic relationships (Siegenthaler & O’Dell, 2000), but no studies have discussed the unique experiences of lesbians in a relationship. For these participants, being in a partnered relationship seemed to result in meaningful leisure and, instead of constraints, partners acted as a motivator to leisure participation. It seemed, therefore, that individuals who attended this church and were in partnered relationships might have had even greater opportunities to fight internalized homophobia as well as develop coping mechanisms (Caldwell, 2005; Iwasaki et al., 2008; Mock et al., 2013; Mock & Hummel, 2011; Szymanski & Owens, 2008). This research indicated, therefore, that lesbian relationships should be better explored because of their potential to improve these women’s general health and overall life experiences.

4.2.6 – Limitations and directions for future research

The sample used for this study was a group of white, Canadian born women between the ages of 31 and 65 years old. Only 2 of the 7 participants had children and these children were adults. Therefore, it was not possible to investigate how race, ethnicity, and limitations of having young children affected their lives. Future research should explore the leisure experiences of lesbians with more diverse backgrounds. Also, participants were either Christians or not religious. Further research is needed to investigate how other religions might affect lesbians’ leisure experiences and how religion can help lesbians develop coping mechanisms against
homophobia. Finally, participants indicated feeling constrained and, to a certain extent, discriminated against in gay-friendly churches. Therefore, there is a need to further investigate how religious institutions can more effectively embrace LGBTQ attendees and eradicate homophobia in their communities.

4.2.7 – Conclusion

This research indicated that lesbian women are still in search of leisure experiences that are not constrained by homophobia and heteronormativity. Churches, even the ones that define themselves as gay-friendly, were still reported as the main institution promoting homophobic discourses. For those individuals who want to explore and develop their spirituality and faith, homophobic messages are a serious constraint preventing than from fully enjoying the benefits of this type of leisure. A straight-friendly church was reported as a powerful space that allowed lesbian women to work on their internalized homophobia, build community, and experience a great improvement of their mental health and overall quality of life. Positive spaces like the particular church used for this study are a fine example of how leisure can improve people’s lives. This church community also demonstrated that, given the appropriate conditions, marginalized groups can change their reality while fully enjoying the benefits of meaningful leisure experiences.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Researchers have argued that women and men have different access to leisure. They have also argued that it is necessary to problematize the idea of a unified “women’s experience” and account for the innumerable differences among women. Lesbians face additional constraints in leisure based on the intersection of sexism and homophobia. Although this discussion is not new, there is, nevertheless, only a small number of studies in the leisure literature that have focused on lesbians’ experiences of constraints as well as their interactions with leisure spaces. There is also a predominance of studies that encompass lesbians and gay men, disregarding the great differences between these two groups. The main motivation for this study was, therefore, to address some of these gaps in the literature. In order to address some of these gaps, I investigated the experiences of a group of lesbian women who attended a straight-friendly church in Eastern Canada. Using a phenomenological approach, this study attempted to learn how these women understood their experiences of leisure and constraints, and what meaning they attributed to their leisure experiences in a space where they can freely express their sexual orientation and identity.

5.1 – Summary of Findings and Implications

Participants reported meanings such as emotional healing, community building, an expanded network for leisure experiences, and an opportunity to cope with internalized and institutionalized homophobia. When discussing constraints, participants reported that religious beliefs that are disseminated both in churches and in society strongly impacted their wellbeing as well as their experiences in leisure. Although partners were also reported as a source of constraints, participants indicated that being in a partnered relationship can act as a powerful mechanism for coping with homophobia as well as a motivator to pursue leisure at the church.
This research indicated that lesbian women are still in search of spaces where they can experience life without the effects of homophobia. There are, therefore, innumerable nuances of lesbians’ experiences of leisure that need to be studied. Heterosexism and homophobia are still very much a part of our culture and greatly impact individuals who are not heterosexuals. According to these findings, marginalized groups can greatly benefit from communities that work together on minimizing the effects of social control and oppression. Being a part of such a community can allow lesbians to work on their internalized homophobia, meet new friends, be involved in activism, find emotional support, and get to know about other leisure opportunities. There is also an indication that spaces which differ from bars (e.g. no alcohol consumption) and gay neighbourhoods (e.g. no push for consumerism and concerns with appearance) might be more empowering for lesbian women.

Spiritual and religious places were discussed as a desirable alternative by the participants in this study. However, participants reported that churches in general, even the ones that define themselves as open to LGBTQ individuals (gay-friendly), are still the main institution promoting homophobic discourses. For those individuals who want to explore and develop their spirituality and faith, homophobic messages are a serious constraint preventing than from fully enjoying the benefits of this type of leisure. Straight-friendly churches, where LGBTQ individuals are the majority and are the ones making the rules, are powerful spaces that allow lesbian women to experience a great improvement in their mental health and overall quality of life. Positive spaces like the particular church used for this study are a fine example of how leisure can improve lesbians’ lives. This church community also demonstrated that, given the appropriate conditions, marginalized groups such as homosexuals can change their reality while fully enjoying the benefits of meaningful leisure experiences.
This church is a positive story and leisure providers can learn a lot from it. Leisure providers can learn, for example, that minority groups may not necessarily need spaces that are exclusive. Having mixed environments and the presence of allies may in fact be desirable, helpful and empowering. They can also learn that guaranteeing positive reinforcement (either by positive discourses, showcase of role models, stimulation of activism) can greatly impact peoples’ psychological wellbeing. Even if the participants are not the ones doing the activism themselves, being involved in an association/organization/institution that practices activism seems to be highly beneficial. Leisure providers can also learn that it is important and desirable that participants may choose between different levels of involvement. Some participants in this study, for example, were shy initially but found their way into the choir or became volunteers for the organization of the women’s retreat. The more they became engaged with the institution, the stronger were their sense of belonging, their desire to change reality around them, and their strength to fight discrimination. This is an indication that providing space and options for volunteering is highly beneficial to stimulate attachment to the community.

Leisure providers can also learn that it can be highly beneficial when communities are able to minimize their social differences. For example, the women’s retreat committee organizes fundraisers in order to provide scholarships for women who cannot afford to pay the fee for the retreat. The participants, however, never know who is there on a scholarship. They will sleep in the same lodge, eat the same food, and participate in the same activities. There is an intentional effort to minimize financial (or any other social) differences during the retreat. Therefore, during the retreat is very likely that someone who lives in a women’s shelter will find commonalities with a wealthy, white collar lesbian. This kind of effort to guarantee equal opportunities and balanced power relations makes members proud to belong to such community and, indeed,
promotes interactions that otherwise would not happen. Leisure providers should, therefore, better explore this type of community as well as this type of leisure environment when proposing leisure programs for sexual minorities, or any other marginalized groups.

5.2 – Reflection on the Position of the Researcher and Methodology

In the beginning of this thesis, I discussed some studies that focused on the influence of the researcher during the research process (Alcoff, 2008; Fine & Weiss, 1996; Wolf, 1996). These studies argued that advocacy for an oppressed population should be done primarily by these people themselves because they are the only ones who can be truly authentic in their epistemological location. According to these authors, researchers should focus on studying groups in which they have membership. In my case, I decided to study a group of women with whom I share the same sexual orientation, the love for a certain church community, and a valorization of spirituality. Indeed, during the course of this study, I realized that it was very important for my participants that I had membership in all these groups, but most emphatically, my identity as a homosexual woman. I felt like they were empowered by the fact that a lesbian was doing something important, a lesbian woman was proving herself as a smart capable woman conducting a study that would give voice to other lesbians. It felt like my accomplishment as a researcher would empower these women as if it was their own, which made me realize that, to a certain extent, it was their own. I am their sister in oppression and having a sister finding her way to speak up about our pain and invisibility is indeed something empowering. Many lesbians before me (the ones I really consider the brave ones) have paved the way for my study, they fought to bring to light lesbian existence, women’s emotions and sexuality as autonomous individuals, independent of men. However, for my participants, I felt like they were glad that I
was fighting the second round of this fight. The fight that comes from the idea that lesbians are no longer discriminated against in society, that homophobia no longer exists.

My relationship with my participants became very proximal to a point where they asked me to conduct the interviews at their house or my house because they would feel more comfortable than being interviewed at the church as I first had planned. Instead of taking advantage of the access to psychological support they would have at the church, they felt close enough to me and they trusted me enough to handle any discomfort they could feel. Also, they argued that they would rather have privacy to talk about their personal life, their experiences with the church and the other parishes without worries that anyone else would hear. Facing these circumstances, I felt both privileged and humbled to work with them and shed light on their stories. At the same time, this sympathy my participants developed for me and I developed for them posed as a challenge when I was analysing the data and discussing the findings. I noticed that my membership sometimes got in the way of my objectivity and I had to be very careful in not letting my own opinions and impressions take the place of my participants’ stories. In order to ensure trustworthiness, I had countless hours discussing these findings with the participants and my peers to make sure that my analysis was going in the “right” way. Therefore, what I have learned from this process is that having membership in a group makes the research both very easy and incredibly difficult at the same time. It is wonderful to have a balanced power relation with participants, but it can become rather challenging and messy when researcher and participants are both in the same fight. I do, however, still agree with researchers (e.g. Alcoff, 2008; Fine & Weis, 1996; Wolf, 1996) that say that advocacy for oppressed people should be done by these people themselves, even if it poses challenges that an outsider would not face.
In the proposal of this research, I conjectured that my membership in some other groups could potentially interfere particularly in the collection of data. I hypothesized that the fact that I am a Brazilian and, therefore, speak Portuguese as my mother tongue could present two relevant aspects in my social location, (a) the fact that I speak English as my second language, and (b) the fact that I am an immigrant in Canada. Neidert and Farley (1985) have reported the power relation that grants an inferior status to immigrants and non-English speakers in Anglophonic countries. At that moment, I could not anticipate the results of the interaction of power as researcher and absence of power as a Brazilian immigrant interviewing Canadians. Therefore, I kept that dynamic in mind during the data collection. However, I did not feel that these two aspects interfered in the process and that our similarity in sexual orientation was indeed the most relevant aspect related to membership.

For future research, I suggest (as I did in the manuscripts) that more studies focus on the benefits of spirituality in leisure for lesbian women. Particularly, I suggest a deeper investigation into the processes that religion imposes on non-heterosexual people and how leisure focusing on spirituality can be used as a more efficient tool against homophobia. Some studies presented in this thesis suggested that religion can have great positive impact on people’s mental health, but non-heterosexual individuals do not have full access to these benefits. There are numerous studies in other fields discussing the physical and psychological negative impacts sexual concealment and discrimination can have in non-heterosexuals. Depression, death thoughts, anxiety, stress, fear, compulsion, addiction, eating disorders, are only a few of the already studied outcomes internalized homophobia can have (e.g. Koh & Ross, 2006). In the long run, these outcomes can lead to obesity, anorexia, diabetes, heart diseases, and many other serious illnesses. Leisure has already proved to be a great tool to help people create coping mechanisms
as well as helping promote social changes through mixed groups’ integration. Therefore, I recommend a deeper investigation of how we could use leisure and spirituality to promote better overall quality of life for women who are lesbians.

5.3 – Conclusion

I would like to conclude this study on a personal note saying that, as a beginner researcher, it was immensely gratifying to study a topic that it is so close to my heart. I was passionate about the theme and I wanted to learn as much as I could in order to do a great job writing the participant’s stories. However, the great knowledge I bring with me at the end of this process, was the ability to recognize my own processes of internalization of homophobia. One might argue that I most likely lost my objectivity and no longer could separate what was my truth from what was my participants’. However, I argue that learning from and with these women (and all the authors I studied in order to conduct this study), opened my horizons to new perspectives and new understandings of the phenomenon that connect all lesbian women. The experience of homophobia can (and should!) be studied and described by many, but it can only be fully understood by those who have to confront it on daily basis. I learned that, although homophobia is a single phenomenon, it presents many faces. The homophobia I face differs from the one faced by my married participant, or the one who lost her job because her boss realized she was gay, or the ones who are mothers, and the one who is a 7th grade teacher. The great knowledge I bring with me is the ability to recognize what makes us similar, what makes us different, and how leisure experiences have the potential to empower us all. That is the great knowledge I hope I can pass forward.
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Appendix A: Recruitment email

Dear (name),

This email is an invitation to participate in a study that is examining the leisure experiences of lesbian women. The title of my project is “Leisure spaces and leisure constraints for lesbian women.” This study is part of the requirements to my Master’s degree in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Health Studies at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan, under the supervision of Dr. Toni Liechty. In case you decide to participate, here you will find some useful information:

- Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to attend to a face-to-face interview that will last for approximately one hour.

- The interview will preferably take place at the church. However, we might agree in another location if you think it will be more convenient for you.

- This research will examine your experiences at the church and examples of possible asked questions are:
  o (a) what do you think are the positives and negatives aspects of attending to a LGBTQ oriented church?
  o (b) how long have you been attending to the church?
  o (c) do you think that this church is a source of leisure or it has another aspect that might be more significant for you to keep coming back?

- You may decline to answer any of my questions if you do not feel comfortable doing so. You also may withdraw from the study at any time by notifying me.

- With your permission, the interview will be audio or video recorded to facilitate the collection of information, and the interview will later be transcribed verbatim for analysis.
- If you do not want to be identified, all information you provide will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear in the thesis or any reports resulting from this study. In case I need to use any direct quotes from your interview during the process of writing the thesis, a pseudonym will be assigned for you. The data collected during this study will be retained for two years and only I and my supervisor will have access to it.

- If you decide to allow me to video record your interview, with your consent, the video might be used for future projects or made available in a website such as Youtube.

Examining your experience in this church will contribute to a better understanding of how lesbian women use public spaces and the constraints they might face in their lives when pursuing leisure. With your help, I might be able to make recommendations to leisure providers in order to guarantee a more accurate and enjoyable leisure experience for lesbian women.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information, feel free to contact me by phone at 306-551-6531 or by email at barbosa@uregina.ca. You can also reach my supervisor, Dr. Toni Liechty, by phone at 306-585-4912, or by email at toni.liechty@uregina.ca.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics approval of the Office for Research, Innovation and Partnership at the University of Regina. However, if you have concern or comments resulting from your participation, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at (Toll Free) 866-966-2975.

I look forward to hear from you and I would like to thank you in advance for your participation.

Respectfully,

Carla Barbosa
barbosac@uregina.ca
Appendix B: Participants Profile

Pamela (37) is a lawyer who grew up in a very evangelical family with an Anglican minister. She has been in a relationship with her first girlfriend for nine years. She found the church a few years before they started dating and she was the one who introduced her partner to the church. She is a member of the choir and, for a few years, she was on the committee which organizes the Annual Women’s Retreat. Because of her family’s background in religion, she had been involved in church communities all her life.

Emma (39) is a 7th grade teacher who identifies as bisexual, but had been in a committed relationship with a woman (Anna) for the past nine years. She did not identify herself as particularly religious and ended up at this church because of her partner. At the time of the research, she explained that she went to church more for the social element than for the religious aspect of the place. She was part of the committee that organizes the Annual Women’s Retreat, which is volunteer work that she enjoys.

Ashley (31) worked with insurance, but did not consider her work as part of her identity. She grew up in a religious household that would go to church often, but she stopped attending when she was in her late teens because of homophobic discourses. She had been in a relationship with another woman (Trish) for 6 years and they went to this church for the first time a little after they started dating. She was the participant who most discussed her experiences with homophobia, both institutionalized and internalized. She described having a direct problem caused by homophobia when she lost her job when a health situation forced her to disclosure that
she had a female partner. She was never able to prove legally that she suffered homophobic discrimination, but she was sure that that was what happened.

**Tatiana** (45) was an entrepreneur who had her own business and did not talk about her personal life at work. She lived with her partner (Alison) in the city’s gay village and socialized sporadically in bars at that neighbourhood. She did not consider herself Christian and described herself as “more into Buddhism”, but explained that she very much enjoyed going to this church. She argued that she built the courage to go to CHR with her partner because they could rely on each other in case the experience was unpleasant. After attending, she realized that her beliefs were very much aligned with what the church preached and, after this realization, she became a regular attendee.

**Corine** (53) was unemployed at the time of the interview, but she had worked for 27 years as a train conductor at Via Rail. She came out as a lesbian at the age of 14 and she was very much involved in the lesbian community. She volunteered as a facilitator in a lesbian group at a LGBTQ institution and she was responsible for managing the coffee hour at CHR once a month. She considered churches to be a place where she could serve other people and being helpful is very important for her. She had been married to a woman for 15 years and they got a divorce about 6 years prior to the study. At the time of the research, she was involved with another woman she met at the church. She did not consider herself a religious person but she understood this particular church as a place where she could live spiritual experiences, which she greatly appreciated.
**Bree** (53) was a mother of 5 (2 biological children and 3 adopted children) and until 5 years prior to the study she was still married to an Anglican pastor with whom she was together for 27 years. At the time of the research, she worked at a drop-in program for female sex-workers and drug addicts. She provided any help these women might need (e.g. – finding a family doctor, enrolling their children in school, providing access to education about rehabilitation programs, having access to clean needles). Christianity was important for her and she considered church communities her family of choice. She was in a relationship with a woman she met at the church, and this woman was her second girlfriend. Her first relationship lasted less than a year, so she considered herself a “new lesbian”. She tried to be involved with the church and volunteer as much and as often as she could because she thought that was important as part of being a good Christian and a good human being.

**Lauren** (65) was a housewife and a retired early childhood educator. She was a mother of two adult children and a grandmother of one little girl. She explained that although she had never had a lesbian experience in her life, she knew in her heart that she was a lesbian. She was married to a “wonderful man” and, because she had never actually met a woman with whom she could and would engage in a romantic and sexual relationship, she had never built the courage to get a divorce. They had been together for 42 years. Lauren had a physical disability which led her to have very low self-esteem. She had been in and out of therapy and it was a therapist who told her about this particular church. She checked it out and never stopped coming back. After she began attending, she was able to accept her sexual orientation, come out to her family, build community with other lesbians, and work on her internalized homophobia. Although she was
still very much in the closet, she was very grateful that she found this church and had this place as an outlet for all her years of repression.
Appendix C: Interview guide

1) Tell me about yourself. Whatever you think that is important in defining you as an individual (e.g., your profession, your ethnicity, your religious beliefs, your age, your marital status).

2) Tell me about your experiences with being a lesbian.
   2.1) What does that mean to you?
   2.2) Lesbians are women who have sex with other women; lesbians are women who want to be in a romantic relationship with another woman; what being a lesbian means to you?
   2.3) Are you openly lesbian?
   2.4) Do you feel any discrimination based on your sexual orientation? Can you give me an example?

3) Tell me about your experience in this church.
   3.1) When did you join it? Do you feel any difference in your life after you join it?
   3.2) Do you have any specific role in this congregation?
   3.3) What is the main reason that makes you keep coming? Is this space different than other spaces? How so?
   3.4) What do you think that are the strengths and weakness of this church?

4) Do you understand this place as a leisure space?

5) Do you have other places where you socialize with other lesbians and gay men? If yes, do you think these places are similar or do you see any significant difference among them?

6) Do you understand the church as a community you belong to?
   6.1) Are you friends with other people in here? Do you socialize outside the church with people you met here? Are they a support system for you?
   6.2) Do you think that this church is a good place to meet friends? And to meet potential partners? Is this one of the reasons you come here?
   6.3) Can you give me an example of why or why not you understand this church as a community?

7) Do you feel any discrimination at this church? Maybe based on your faith, your gender identity, your age, your socio-economic status?
Appendix D: Participant consent form

Faculty of Kinesiology and Health Studies
Centre for Kinesiology, Health and Sport, Room 173
3737 Wascana Pkwy, Regina, Saskatchewan S4S 0A2

Participant Consent Form—Use of Data

Project Title: Leisure Spaces and Leisure Constraints for Lesbian Women

Researcher: Carla Barbosa, (Graduate Student), Faculty of Kinesiology and Health Studies, University of Regina, 306-551-6531, barbosac@uregina.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Toni Liechty, Faculty of Kinesiology and Health Studies, University of Regina, 306-585-4912, toni.liechty@uregina.ca

Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of lesbian women who to attend a straight-friendly (LGBTQ oriented) church in Toronto. The main objectives are (a) to investigate what makes this kind of environment appealing to you; (b) how the construction of meanings associated with the church affects your experiences in leisure.

Procedures:

- Your participation in this study will involve one interview session with the researcher at the church that will be schedule at your convenience. This session will last approximately 60 minutes.
- The interview will be audio or video recorded (you will choose), upon your consent, and saved for further analysis.
- I will book a quiet and private office in the dependencies of the church to ensure a pleasant experience. Psychological support will be available to you in case you want or need it.
- You will also be provided with a summary of the findings and potential quotations. You will have the opportunity to make suggestions and changes to this material. At this point you will be presented with a second consent form concerning how the material collected throughout the interview will be used in the future.
- Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role.

Potential Risks:

- There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research

Potential Benefits:
• This study is significant because it will address the gaps observed in the literature about leisure for lesbian women, engendering knowledge about other possible experiences of leisure that could lead to the empowerment of these women.

Confidentiality:

• The participants will be allowed to choose if they want their information to be kept confidential of if they would allow the researcher to video record them and use their images in future projects. The use of video recorded interviews has increasable been used as a form of activism for LGBTQ individuals.
• In case the participant does not want to be identified, all information provide by her will be kept confidential. Her name will not appear in the thesis or any reports resulting from this study. In case the researcher needs to use any direct quotes from the interview during the process of writing the thesis, a pseudonym will be assigned for the participant.
• The data collected during this study will be retained for two years and only the researcher and her supervisor will have access to it.

Right to Withdraw:

• Your participation is voluntary and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort.
• Whether you choose to participate or not will have no effect on how you will be treated.
• Should you wish to withdraw, you are free to do so. You just have to let me know and you’re your information will be destroyed.
• Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until the results have been disseminated. After this date, it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.”

Follow up:

• To obtain results from the study, please contact me by email: barbosac@uregina.ca

Questions or Concerns:

• Contact the researcher using the information at the top of page 1;
• This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the UofR Research Ethics Board on (insert date). Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Research Ethics Office (Toll Free: 866-966-2975).
Consent:

- Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. I consent to be audio-taped. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

__________  ___________  ___________
Name of Participant   Signature   Date

__________  ___________  ___________
Name of Researcher   Signature   Date

* A copy of this consent form will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*
Participant Consent Form—Use of Data

Project Title: Leisure Spaces and Leisure Constraints for Lesbian Women

**Researcher:** Carla Barbosa, (Graduate Student), Faculty of Kinesiology and Health Studies, University of Regina, 306-551-6531, barbosac@uregina.ca

**Supervisor:** Dr. Toni Liechty, Faculty of Kinesiology and Health Studies, University of Regina, 306-585-4912, toni.liechty@uregina.ca

Use of data:

- After reviewing the project summary of findings read the following statements and initial those to which you agree.

  ___ I have received a copy of the summary of findings and potential quotations which may be used in the final research report, publications or presentations.

  ___ I have been given the opportunity to review this summary and offer any suggestions and/or changes to this material.

  ___ I consent to the use of this data in its present format.

  ___ I consent to the use of this data with the following restrictions…

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to the use of this data in this research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

_________________________  ________________________  ________________
Name of Participant  Signature  Date

_________________________  ________________________  ________________
Name of Researcher  Signature  Date

*A copy of this consent form will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*

**Visually Recorded Images/Data:** Participant to provide initials:
• Videos may be taken of me for: Analysis ____ Dissemination* ____

*Even if no names are used, you may be recognizable if visual images are shown as part of the results.