BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE QUEER NIGHTLIFE IN LONDON

Queer Creatives, COVID-19 and Community in the Capital

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University of Roehampton London

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

QUEER ARTS CONSORTIUM

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FOREWORD

by Amy Lamé, Night Czar

Photo of Amy Lamé by GLA.

London's diverse and vibrant nightlife is renowned the world over and is one of the main reasons why people from across the globe choose to visit, live and work here.

That vibrancy and diversity was also one of the reasons I moved to London over 25 years ago – to be part of a welcoming community that encourages creativity, especially within nightlife, to thrive.

But nightlife has undergone an enormous amount of change over the past few years.

Many of our beloved night time businesses have closed due to increases in rents and business rates. In the decade from 2007, London lost 35% of its grassroots music venues and, even more worryingly, 62% of its LGBTQ+ venues.

Add to this the devastation of the capital's nightlife due to the pandemic, and we are now facing unprecedented challenges. Venues rightly played their part in stopping the spread of COVID-19 by closing their doors, but still dealt with a raft of changing regulations and ultimately were the last sector to fully reopen.

This important research highlights that the challenges that LGBTQ+ nightlife faced before the pandemic have been amplified by COVID-19, and provides a hugely valuable contribution to what is yet a limited field of research. London's LGBTQ+ nightlife is a vital part of the identity of our city, and it is only by ensuring as many voices as possible are heard that we will understand its true value.

While government support did help to protect many jobs and businesses, there were still significant gaps. These were felt heavily in the creative supply chain, and especially by the capital's LGBTQ+ creatives. While the community rose to the unprecedent challenge with - in the words of the authors of this research - "resilience, innovation and creative fortitude", the truth is that much more needs to be done to secure the long term sustainability of London's LGBTQ+ nightlife. The last section of this report provides solid recommendations for all relevant stakeholders that should help protect, enhance and revitalise queer nightlife if implemented.

I've spent all of my life in London working in, creating and protecting LGBTQ+ nightlife

and have been privileged to work with and employ thousands of other amazing LGBTQ+ creatives. We are passionate, ambitious and inventive people. We are risk takers who are always looking to push the boundaries. Above all, we are survivors.

We must ensure that we are doing everything possible to support LGBTQ+ nightlife and creatives, from enabling research and shar-ing best practices to fostering innovative ways of collaborating within and outside the LGBTQ+ community. We all have a vital role to play in London's economic and social recovery from the pandemic, and I commend the authors of this research for driving the conversation forward.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The global COVID-19 pandemic had a profound effect on social and cultural life. In the UK, nightlife venues were closed for 16 months between March 2020 and July 2021, with three national lockdowns and varying local restrictions being enforced for theatres, pubs and other cultural venues.

- The impact of the social restrictions related to COVID-19 on individuals, the economy and nightlife has been well documented but the intersections of sexuality and nightlife have received little attention. This study addresses this issue.

- Data collection was undertaken between July 2021 and October 2021 by Professors McCormack and Measham, who were appointed by Queer Arts Consortium following investment from Arts Council England. The Queer Arts Consortium is a collaboration between Raze Collective, Fringe! Queer Arts and Film Fest, The Cocoa Butter Club, Queer Youth Art Collective and PRIM.Black. A steering group formed by Arts Council England advised throughout the project.

- Fieldwork included an anonymous survey collecting quantitative data from 115 respondents, alongside seven focus groups and seven interviews, resulting in qualitative data from a total of 44 members of London's queer creative industries and nightlife communities, including artists, venue owners, promoters and producers.

- Queer creatives were particularly badly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. 82% of survey respondents saw their income decline, by an average of 74.4%, as most jobs vanished and working from home was not possible for many.

- Lockdowns and changing restrictions had an ongoing and cumulative negative impact on queer creatives' mental health (a net change of -22%) and general health (a net change of -15%). While the initial impact of the first national lockdown was difficult, the sustained decrease in jobs since then had been harder to deal with as pre-pandemic employment loyalties and contracts evaporated.

- The impact of COVID-19 is intersectional: impacts are experienced differently according to intersecting characteristics and forms of marginalisation. Queer creatives of colour felt particularly impacted by these changes and performers with multiple experiences of marginalization were impacted more significantly.

- Queer creatives felt less safe during the pandemic as relationship with the police worsened and public transport was unavailable at night.

- London's queer nightlife was resilient with no queer venues closing permanently over the period. This is due to queer nightlife venues being eligible for Culture Recovery Fund support and

work to support culture at risk in the capital prior to the pandemic.

■ Respondents raised concerns in relation to the mainstreaming and pink washing of queer culture and how this impacted on the sustainability and distinctiveness of queer venues and culture in London.

■ Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on queer creatives' lives: on their financial security, their health and well-being and their sense of community and creativity. This was a time of unprecedented challenge and change for London's queer creatives and broader communities, and it was one that was met with resilience, innovation and creative fortitude.

■ The impacts require actions around: 1) supporting queer creatives; 2) supporting queer venues; and 3) improving the sustainability of queer nightlife as an integral part of the world-class creative and cultural life of London as an international and diverse capital city.

■ A Queer Creatives Forum organised through the Culture at Risk Office would provide the space for queer creatives to network, build community and develop grass-roots solutions to the issues that challenge an equitable and sustainable queer nightlife. This could take a similar form to the LGBTQ+ Venues Forum and would provide a space to liaise with queer venues and mainstream organisations and explore the development of industry standards for contracts, including safe travel.

■ There is a need for clear guidelines and protocols to be developed to support queer creatives if restrictions occur in future years related to the pandemic

or other health and safety related concerns. This should include shared responsibilities and costs between promoters, organisers and artists related to cancelled bookings, self isolation and loss of income.

■ Funding for queer nightlife should be maintained, given the success of the Culture Recovery Fund. Grant application processes need to be audited for issues of equality and accessibility, and targeted funding for the most marginalised groups would help address perceived disparities. A multi-agency approach is needed to support queer venues in upgrading their ventilation and have better disabled access, for both creatives and customers.

■ Wider infrastructure needs to be supported, including safer travel at night for queer creatives. The Mayor's Office can work with Transport for London to convene a working group to understand the issues and develop solutions to the problem.

■ There remains limited research on queer nightlife and its contribution to London's cultural and creative sector more generally. Future research should examine this, as well as explore how London's interventions to support queer nightlife compare to cities and regions nationally and internationally. Research should also understand experiences of marginalisation and discrimination in queer nightlife and how best to combat this.

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION
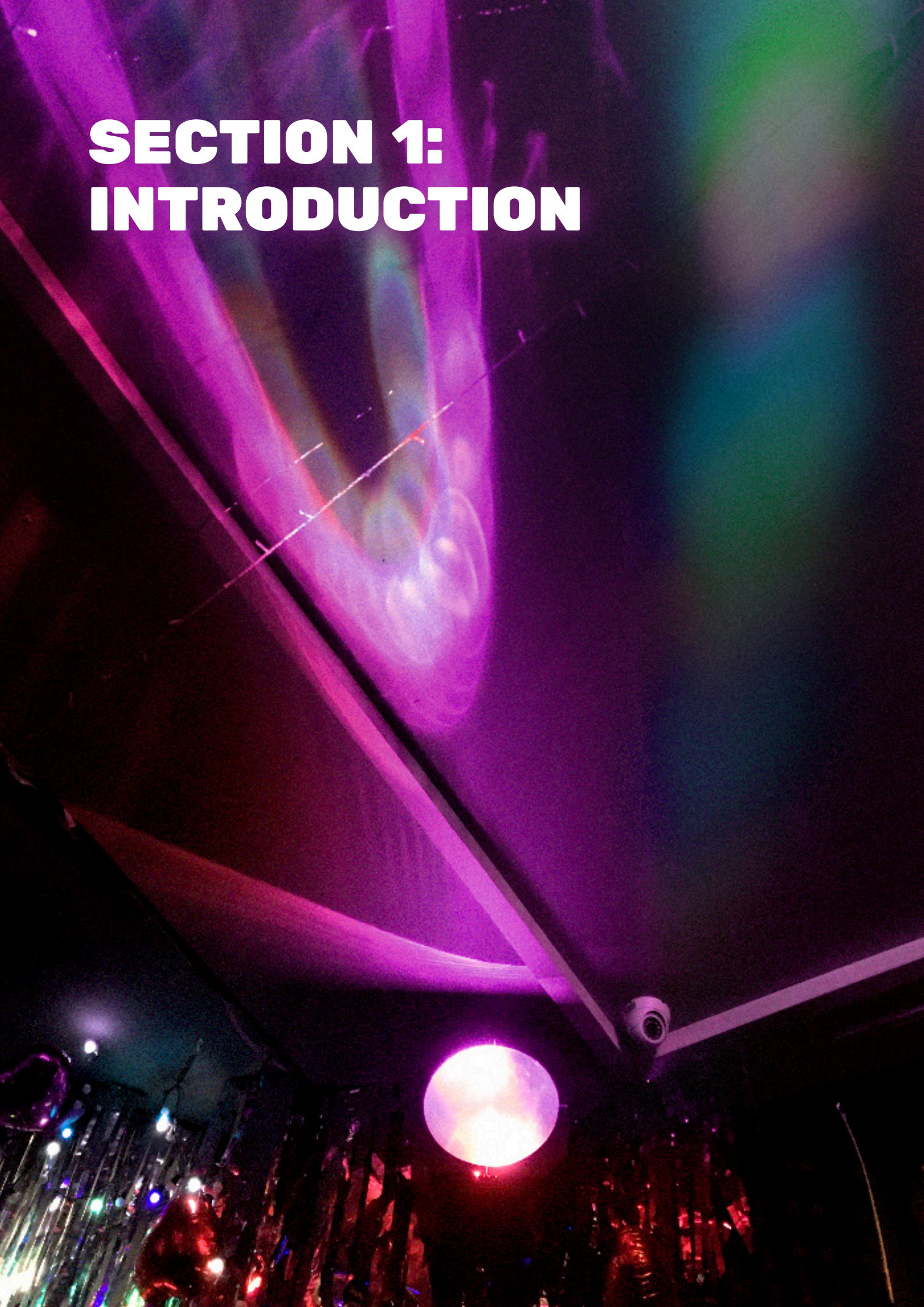
Queer nightlife is a vital element of city cultural life. London is known internationally for its sexual and gender diversity, queer history and vibrant nightlife that spans live performance venues, clubs, bars and pubs. Whether mainstream, alternative or subcultural, London's queer venues have been central to its diversity and performance innovation.

The global COVID-19 pandemic (hereafter COVID) had a profound effect on social and cultural life. In the UK, nightclubs remained closed for 16 months from 23rd March 2020 to 19th July 2021 and other licensed premises such as restaurants and bars closed periodically across the course of three national lockdowns and varying tiers of regional restrictions.

The impact of many months of lockdowns followed by physical and social distancing had damaging consequences for individuals' mental and physical health and also had a deleterious effect on cultural life. This has been widely documented in research across a range of spheres (Walmsley et al. 2022), including in the night-time economy (NTIA 2021), although queer nightlife has received little attention.

Social lockdowns were particularly damaging for those working in nightlife venues, where restrictions on opening and operating were among the longest and most severe, with social distancing restrictions affecting how they could function when they did reopen. A report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Night Time Economy (APPG NTE) in February 2021 found that 78% of UK night-life employees had been on furlough and businesses had made an average of 37% of their workforce redundant. The survey also noted that only 36% of self-employed night-life workers were able to claim through the Self Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) and that 85% of people working in the UK nightlife sector were now considering leaving the industry.

Research by Culture Hive found a collapse in jobs and working hours for creative practitioners generally , with a disproportionate affect on younger people, disabled people and those without degrees.

Alongside clarion calls for support of the cultural and creative industries in the UK, issues of equality and diversity must also be centred within this (Ali et al, 2022). The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Creative Diversity report *Creative Majority* (Wreyford et al, 2021) highlighted how the UK's creative and cultural workforces do not represent the diversity of the UK population and presented tools for government, organisations and businesses to foster diversity and support transformative change regarding equality, diversity and inclusion in the creative economy. The report purposefully focuses on strategies to support making the cultural sector more representative.

Yet, there is significant inequality within the creative economy, with some forms of art and creative endeavour valued more than others, with this value translating into substantial financial support from the state and private businesses while others receive little. Queer creatives, and queer nightlife creatives in particular, have traditionally been some of the most marginalised in the sector.

Queer creative culture receives little support and is under substantial strain, particularly in the capital. London saw a decline in numbers of queer nightlife venues of 58% between 2006 and 2016. Notably 30% of these previously queer London venues continued operating as non-LGBTQ+ specific premises (Campkin and Marshall, 2017).

These changes come from a complex mix of issues that are specific to global cities like London. Difficulties for queer venues are often attributed to gentrification, rent increases, geographic dispersal of queer people, and the growth of dating and 'hook-up' apps (Rosser, West and Weinmeyer 2008), yet London faces distinct challenges. The value of land and property in central London means that large-scale developments occur without the traditional gentrification process and a related rise in commercial and business rates made many queer venues unsustainable (Campkin and Marshall, 2017).

Queer nightlife in London was facing profound challenges before the pandemic. The appointment of Amy Lamé as Night Czar in 2016 meant that there was significant representation of queer nightlife issues in London's City Hall, with an emphasis on supporting and enhancing London's queer venues. This included the establishment in 2017 of the LGBTQ+ Venues Forum to connect venue owners across the capital and address the decline in queer venues.

The Culture at Risk Office was also set up in direct response to concerns around the loss of London's cultural infrastructure, which included LGBTQ+ venues, independent pubs, nightclubs, and grass-roots live music venues. LGBTQ+ venues were deemed some of the most at risk and received a range of support during this pre-COVID period (Ghaziani 2019). One of the challenges for queer creatives is the perception that the creative and cultural industries are a place for sexual minorities to thrive. While this is true in some contexts, and many Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans people find value and meaning in these areas, significant inequality persists as it relates to sexuality and there is limited research which explores this issue (McCormack and Wignall 2022; O'Brien and Oakley 2015).

This inequality is further exacerbated by issues of intersectionality, whereby White cisgender gay men gain privilege from other aspects of their social identities while other sexual minorities suffer multiple forms of marginalisation. Thus, queer creatives who have multiple protected characteristics from which they suffer discrimination and marginalisation, such as being a Person of Colour or being disabled, encounter more barriers to participation in nightlife and creative sectors (Eikhof 2020; Randle and Hardy 2017). This occurs alongside a desexualisation of queer spaces, where new practices privilege capitalist and entrepreneurial activities at the expense of marginalised people and practices (Bell and Binnie 2004).

Queer nightlife in London has huge diversity, in terms of education levels, class background, ethnicity, ability status as well as gender and sexuality, yet this diversity is not reflected in the ownership and management of venues, financial and cultural support or how queer nightlife is represented in the mainstream. As such, London's queer nightlife was in a unique position prior to

COVID: strengthened by pro-active support to address what were and are the profound challenges of a global city with significant costs associated with it and a hugely diverse, multi-national queer community resident and visiting London, facing precarity and adversity in a broader heteronormative social climate and against a backdrop of growing hate crime and widespread concerns about the existence of institutional homophobia in the police.

Methods

This report is based on a research study undertaken in 2021 with data collection between July 2021 and September 2021. The project was funded by Arts Council England through the Queer Arts Consortium, a collaboration between Raze Collective, Fringe! Queer Arts & Film Fest, The Cocoa Butter Club, Queer Youth Art Collective and PRIM.Black with the two authors appointed through an open call and competitive selection process. McCormack and Measham, both academic researchers at Roehampton and Liverpool universities respectively with combined research experience totalling five decades, were recruited to examine the impact of COVID on London queer creatives, communities and nightlife.

The study is based on an anonymous survey, focus groups and interviews. After data cleaning, the survey had 115 respondents. Concurrently, seven focus groups and seven in-depth interviews were conducted, resulting in data collection from a total of 44 members of London's queer creative industries and nightlife communities, including artists, venue owners, promoters and producers. Interviewees were paid £50 for their time, and a random draw awarded five survey respondents £50 each.

All data collection was undertaken by the authors, with focus groups and interviews recorded with the permission of all participants and subsequently transcribed by a professional transcriber. Ethical approval was obtained by the University of Roehampton for the study.
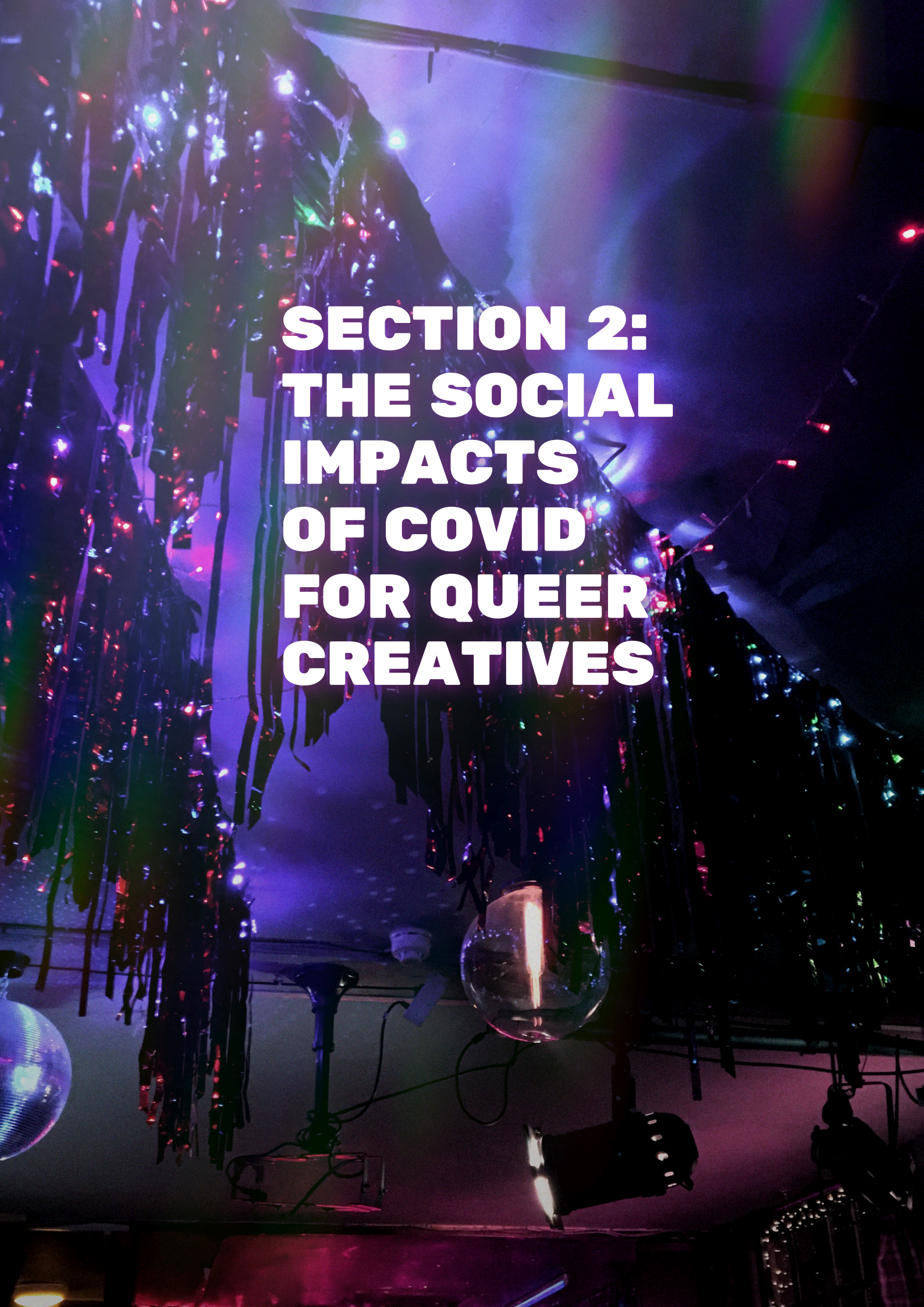
The study is grounded in community perspectives, designed in partnership with the queer community in London through work with community leaders, who were paid for their time, engagement with the Queer Arts Consortium, the Arts Council steering group, and collaborative working with Raze Collective throughout. Results were reviewed and revised with queer creatives, including a presentation and feedback from creatives at Queer Clash Diary at The Yard in East London on 7th September 2021.

For the survey, respondent demographics are as follows: respondents identified as female (34.8%), male (33.9%), non-binary (19.1%), gender fluid (7.0%) and other (4.3%), with 22.5% reporting a trans history. In terms of ethnicity, 57.4% of respondents identified as White British or White, 11.3% as mixed heritage and less than 5% for a range of other ethnicities. Nearly half of respondents (47.8%) reported a disability or health condition of some kind.

Survey respondents reported a number of primary roles including drag, cabaret, DJ and dancer, along with some self-described options as well, which mostly stated no primary role or multiple roles. Most respondents also had secondary or multiple other roles in queer nightlife.

We use the word 'queer' as an umbrella term to refer to several sexual and gender identities, including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, gender fluid, agender and queer. We use the term 'people of colour' or 'creatives of colour' in line with that used by the Cocoa Butter Club and the majority of respondents.

SECTION 2: THE SOCIAL IMPACTS OF COVID FOR QUEER CREATIVES

Economic

Income loss and government support

The lockdown and the subsequent physical and social distancing in response to COVID profoundly restricted queer creatives' ability to work. Most queer creatives surveyed lost all their work and saw their income drop significantly as venues closed in March 2020 and events and gigs were cancelled. In our survey, 82% of respondents saw their income decline, by an average of three quarters (74.4%) of its value, as most jobs vanished and working from home was not possible for many.

As one participant commented about the first lockdown, "It was an instant hit. We were planning our next party, and then everything shut. It was tough because I was relying on jobs to save money to move out of my family home, and it meant I had to delay to do that again."

> "I've been doing this for 18 years as my main job, and all of a sudden it's just gone. We all work gig to gig and don't often have one regular income. I managed to tick over financially, just, get through little bits of savings, and luckily I'm still here."

The lack of jobs was exacerbated by venues and producers not paying creatives for work that they had already delivered just before the start of the pandemic. Several respondents noted that the worst non payment of pre-pandemic work was from mainstream venues:

"It was the queer-owned businesses that paid my invoices, and it was the straight businesses with much larger capital who said they had to freeze everything."

In this context of a significant loss of income, many queer creatives found they were ineligible for government support. On average, just one third (34.6%) of income lost was recovered through government schemes or other grants, and this was unevenly distributed between queer creatives.[1]

Over a quarter (27.0%) of survey respondents received furlough. Interview data suggests that many who received furlough did so through employment outside of London's queer nightlife. The sectors that focus group participants reported being employed in and receiving furlough from included education, administration, hospitality and museums.

Grants targeted at supporting culture and nightlife were mainly for venues and organisations rather than individuals, and were mostly related to meeting their own substantial running costs. We discuss the value of support for venues in London later in this report (see pages 28-29). For queer creatives, this meant that the benefits of grant support were experienced second-hand and mostly from small one-off payments rather than a sustained amount.

Few respondents were able to access SEISS, and those that did were critical of it for not replacing prior earnings. One DJ and producer commented, "I was gobsmacked to find that we would only get between 70 or 80% of our net income over a three-month period, so our profit essentially. But a lot of us don't show a huge profit, and we're already taxed on our income."

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1   It was not possible to explore statistically significant differences by ethnicity, class, gender or disability in the survey due to sample size, except for a small number of questions reported here.

This lack of profit available for many in queer nightlife means that SEISS was often only supporting "top-up" jobs that creatives were employed in outside of queer nightlife. One performer commented that he only gained SEISS for his work in education, adding "The queer stuff was non-existent! It was irrelevant, it was invisible, there was no-one in government championing it."

"Because I am older and had a lengthy career and used to work full time, I had financial reserves so I didn't have to worry about paying rent or starving, but I could see how people around me were being impacted. I was also acutely aware that there was no money being distributed to creatives and practitioners and hospitality staff, performers, and I raised this quite a few times and I kept being told that maybe at some point that would be addressed, but a year and a half later it still hasn't been."

The multi-national diversity of London's queer creatives also exacerbated the lack of economic support. Only British nationals were eligible for SEISS, yet London's queer nightlife includes many international creatives who are not British citizens who thus did not receive funding. As one European participant noted:

"I'm working in this country, I'm paying my taxes but there's been no contingency plans for people like myself. So now I fall in this grey area, where I'm allowed to be in this country, I'm allowed to work in this country but where is the work coming from? And if I'm working, [the government is] still going to take tax and there's no plans for people like myself. I'm basically invisible."

Highlighting the general low pay and precarity for queer creatives, 29.6% of survey respondents went on Universal Credit during the pandemic. This is unlikely to capture the number of creatives who needed this level of support: only British nationals were able to claim and some British nationals missed out on this because they did not have the necessary permanent address to qualify for payment.

New sources of income

Queer creatives turned to other forms of activity and other outlets to support their income. Two key sources were working outdoors and online work, both performance-oriented and other work such as online training.

For some, the move online enabled new forms of creativity and networking. As one respondent commented:

"It was really cool learning to connect with other creatives online, because I'm so used to doing live shows. I ended up doing interviews with people in London, or podcasts or online shows and even writing new songs with people in the greater queer community in London. That was definitely cool, being able to reach out to people, with all of us sharing the experience of not being able to create and being in lockdown and having to compromise our own expression of art."

Most found that their creative endeavours were less suited to the switch online, however. As one respondent said "I did a couple of online performances, a number as a comedian and that was soul destroying, literally speaking into the abyss".

"I would say that for me during the period where doing corporate Zoom calls, it is not the artistic aim of my work, and so, as much as that was very appreciated because I needed to work, that wasn't stimulating or fulfilling on a creative level. And as creatives we do need to feel like we are fulfilling ourselves or others creatively. So that was hollow in a way."

The viability and long-term sustainability of online work was also called into question. As one performer said: "I had some online opportunities but they weren't enough to pay my rent."

There was also a drop-off both in interest in online gigs and in viewers' willingness to tip afterwards. One focus group respondent characterised the response, saying:

"People were super generous for two weeks, and then it completely dropped off. You could make money on digital drag for a bit, but then I had to tap out. These were music videos essentially, and you had to have a whole creative team behind it. To do all the work involved creating and producing new material, and then you get ten quid? It couldn't carry on."

For many of those interviewed, their social and economic situation directly related to whether they were able to switch their work successfully to online delivery. These forms of participation relied on existing experience and networks, with less experienced performers having fewer opportunities online. One participant made the point that "no-one was prepared for the amount of digital support that was needed". This further amplified the differential access to digital resources

that limited the opportunities of some queer creatives in pre-pandemic workspace.

Respondents also argued that online gigs were fundamentally a different form of art and entertainment. As one participant commented:

"I'm not an online creator, I deal with people in a theatre space. I had a few online opportunities but it's not why I make art or what I wanted to do, so lockdown was really hard."

Outdoor gigs were seen as positive and a good way to earn money, but these were only available for part of the year and were much more limited to particular venues.

Fewer than one in ten survey respondents (9.6%) reported an increase in their income. This was primarily through replacement work rather than their usual creative endeavours, with nearly two thirds of this additional income coming from outdoor gigs (64%), nearly half from online gigs (46%), with another 18% of this income generated through other types of work within queer nightlife.

Culture and Community

Living in London and the dynamics of London queer life featured throughout focus group discussions. Some participants had to move out of London when the pandemic started: for employment opportunities elsewhere, because of the cost of living in London, or because of caring responsibilities, such as moving back to their childhood home to care for ageing parents.

For those who left London, moving away meant separation from their queer communities, co-performers and friends. This sense of loneliness and loss sometimes intersected with COVID-related illness or bereavement. One participant spoke of joining "grief support groups because a couple of people had died within the community". They added, "I quit social media because I needed to, but I have to go back on for the work. Without it, my weeks are becoming emptier and emptier and emptier".

For those who stayed in London and felt broadly positive about their living situation, the experience of being in lockdown together strengthened their queer household.

"In my house I lived with two mental health workers and we got through because we made everything a creative game, we made it fun and we focused on the things that we could enjoy. Very much community care and community support and I think without them I would not have got through or be here now, so yeah, huge gratitude for my queer family."

Those living in a non-queer household or alone felt the loss of queer community more intensely and noted that lockdown resulted in them still paying the significant costs of living in the capital without the usual benefits of London life. As one respondent said:

"I live with two very good friends but I didn't realise at first how much there was a difference between how I feel at home versus how I feel in queer spaces until those queer spaces and queer community were taken away from me. I wasn't able to be with queer friends, and that actually had quite a big impact on my mental health. I realised that I was retreating into my room in the dark and watching films with queer characters in them a lot more than I normally would do, and I think that was communing with that community."

"I feel like living in London, I didn't get any London experience during lockdown and I was like 'why am I scrabbling to pay this ridiculous rent?' even though I've been brought up in London and only really known big cities. But I was like 'this is the first time in my life I'm considering leaving' because what's the point right now when we don't get to enjoy London?"

Sense of community during lockdowns came from several places, including friendship groups, housemates and community outside of queer venues, but participants also highlighted the key role that these venues and club nights played. As one participant said:

"COVID has shown me the importance of community, and it's as queer people suddenly not being able to go to a bar or go to somewhere where you see people who are similar to you and you could connect with

people and you could touch people and you have people beside you, you realise how disparate the community was [across London] and how much [venues are] still needed and how much I want it all back."

> "The whole point of the night time scene is this visceral, sweaty, multi-sensory experience where you're in the same bricks and mortar as everyone else, and you know 50% of the people in that room and you don't know the other 50% of the people in that room, and you don't know who you're going to pull and take home at the end of the night."

Some participants, living in London, explored and inhabited the city in different ways, such as making a point of socialising with friends in public parks or exploring peripheral open spaces such as Hackney Marshes. For others, the city closed in, they felt isolated from their previous work, leisure and queer communities and trapped at home.

This sense of increased isolation within the city was particularly pertinent for some disabled research participants, those with chronic health conditions and older participants: three groups at increased risk of COVID-related complications. The closure of all pubs, clubs, restaurants and cafés also resulted in the closure of the toilets on their premises which was a significant drawback for some participants with disabilities and chronic health conditions, who noted that venue toilets provide a quiet space to take medications, inject insulin or otherwise manage their condition away from public scrutiny.

With an increasing lack of accessible, available public toilets across the city (estimated to have decreased by 50% in the UK in the last

10 years (Saner, 2021)), the closure of leisure venue toilets combined with potentially increased risk of COVID infection on public transport, effectively led some participants to feel "unable to leave the house and navigate the city". This "urinary leash" to the home (Saner, 2021) meant some participants who were older, disabled or with health conditions were unable to access the COVID-sanctioned social lifeline of meeting friends in public parks and other public spaces. The Chair of the London Assembly Health Committee, Caroline Russell, recently noted:

"Public toilets are integral to making London accessible, inclusive and economically viable. Public toilets matter to everybody, regardless of their age, class, ethnic origin, gender or disability. They are even more important to certain sections of our society, including older people, people with children, delivery and transport workers, trans people, disabled people, people with medical conditions, people who are homeless, and tourists" (2021: 4).

> "I think the biggest impact for me was not having clubs, which I guess can be like a community aspect. The way I often connect with people is non-verbally, so being in a space, not speaking to people but just dancing, is where I feel that sense of connection, when I'm connecting with someone one on one."

For others, community itself was consciously considered and created during lockdown and carried forward as a project after it was over: "I was living with queer people but a really nice queer couple and it was really nice and supportive to be in that environment, because my parents aren't supportive of my identity. So that was nice to have a break and go there. And it also forced me to think about how to create a queer community and

a queer family for myself, and the importance of that."

"You have something amazing, you can't really see it or appreciate it because it's always been there. And for me, raving was always there for me, whenever I needed an escape. It's my sanctuary basically and it was just always there. And once it was taken away, it made me really realise. It really hit home when everything was taken away, absolutely everything, all the dance artists and events, everything, it just made me realise how important it was to me, and what that space actually means to some queer people."

There was also a concern raised about the decreasing number of queer venues. As one respondent commented:

"We can talk about creativity forever, and passion and performance, but a reason queer nightlife workers are in separate scenes and bubbles is they are specifically not able to exist at their full capacity in the mainstream ones. So where you have queerness being incorporated by capitalism, and drag in particular, you still don't get any of the security and the perks with that kind of temporary invitation [into mainstream spaces] you might have had if you're a non-queer person in a more conventional career."

"When I first moved to London, there was an anarchic sense of punk and there were spaces for everyone, and Monday to Sunday there was something going on in the queer world, and there were the venues for it. And even traditional straight venues were putting on queer centric nights and it worked. As time has gone on, as more and more people are coming out and drag is more visible, it's almost like those venues have disappeared and there's been less and less."

Reflecting on some of the potential positives for culture and community of queer nightlife, one creative of colour hoped that the visibility and importance of the Black Lives Matter protests that had occurred over lockdown would be incorporated into queer venues' decision-making moving forward:

"I think people really have realised that who is invited to their parties, and how you invite other people to your spaces matters – the music you are playing, where it is going to be, who you market to. These have changed as people realise their bar staff, promoters, normal dancers are all white, so they have started to reflect on what inclusion and diversity means."

Health and Well-being

Lockdowns and social restrictions impacted queer creatives' physical and mental health and wellbeing. This fluctuated repeatedly and sometimes unexpectedly with the ebbs and flows of the various national lockdowns and local restrictions. Unsurprisingly, larger numbers of our survey respondents reported negative impacts than positive ones, with this gap larger for mental health (a net change of -22%) than general health (a net change of -15%).

Reflecting on their general health, one third of survey respondents (34%) reported that their health was somewhat worse at completion of the survey (in summer 2021) than a year previously, with 10% saying it was much worse. One third of respondents (34%) reported no change in their health and just over one quarter reported an improvement.

"It was just the feeling of total loss actually. I live with depression and I go to therapy but there was just this huge loss of community, this kind of real empty space, and the loss of time. The way I normally deal with my anxiety and depression around the feeling of lost time is to go out raving, and be part of my community. And I simply wasn't able to do that."

The perceived impact on mental health was notably worse than on physical health. Nearly one third (31%) of survey respondents reported feeling that their mental health had become somewhat worse than a year ago, with nearly one quarter (23%) feeling their mental health had become "much worse"

compared to the previous summer. Over one quarter (28%) felt their mental health had improved and another 17% felt their mental health had stayed the same.

Survey respondents reporting worse mental health were statistically significantly more likely to report that their general health had worsened too. Survey respondents identifying as White were statistically significantly more likely to report worse mental health[2].

"When this hit, it kind of amplified everything, it was almost like living with my pain condition, my mental health condition was almost amplified, and living on my own – which is a great benefit and an absolute joy – brought that home. I'm on my own, I can't really go and see anybody right now, I'm stuck."

For some, their experience was so mixed across the course of the three lockdowns that they felt it difficult to come to an overall assessment.

However, experiences of physical and mental health were complex and fluid, altering in scale and nature over the periods of lockdown and social restrictions. For example, many respondents felt an initial relief that the "hamster wheel" of their creative endeavours had stopped at the start of the first lockdown in March 2020.

This relief points to the challenges and pressures of queer creative work in London prior to the pandemic, with many respondents reporting feeling that the early weeks provided a space for self-care, self-exploration and "time to reflect". One respondent noted, "actually the break was initially really good

2   (p < 0.05, Fisher's exact test).

for my mental health." Another said "I felt like I was juggling a lot before COVID".

> "It was just a very good experience for me mentally in that sense, because of the fact that I had so much space and time to create and not even worry about having to make money from that. I guess because I'm just starting as a creative and just trying to find myself."

Some of the focus group participants who experienced positive aspects of the pandemic emphasised that this was in part an indictment of the pressures of being a queer creative working in London nightlife prior to the pandemic, an issue we return to later.

For some, the experience of lockdown revitalised their commitment to being a queer creative. However, this was also complex, with some creatives framing this renewed passion in a context of encroaching and draining mainstream culture: "I've come to a place where I can no longer do work that my heart isn't in, for my mental health. It's just so fucking draining. Now I'm trying to get myself to do stuff myself, I'm finding is a challenge, like what to do, how to do it?"

Lockdown also impacted on participants' consumption of food, alcohol and illicit drugs (see Measham et al. 2011). Nearly half of all survey respondents (44%) said their consumption of at least one of these had become a problem or become an increased problem during lockdown. Of these respondents, over two in five (41.7%) reported having a less healthy diet, nearly three in ten (29.7%) reported drinking more alcohol, one in five (20.0%) used more nicotine and one in seven (15.7%) took more illicit drugs.

These changes compare with 28% of respondents drinking more alcohol than usual during the pandemic, according to a representative survey of over 2,000 UK adults by Alcohol Change UK (2020). Similarly, the Global Drug Survey found that 25% of survey respondents around the world reported drinking more frequently and 22% reported drinking larger quantities of alcohol since before Covid (Winstock et al, 2020).

As one focus group participant commented:

"I was sober for the three months before the pandemic started, that was like a personal decision, I'd started therapy in January again and made a decision that that's what I was going to do, three months of sobriety and then the pandemic happened. And it took about two, three weeks before I ordered some vodka and then another two weeks after that and I was calling my dealer, ordering weed again!"

For another participant it was tobacco rather than alcohol that they increased their use of, as a self-perceived coping strategy: "I smoked a lot! I smoked a whole lot and yeah, that's the only thing that really got me through. It was a lot, it was a lot! I mean I'm still smoking now, even more than I was smoking before, but that's my survival strategy and it's got me this far and I'm thankful."

In summary, social lockdowns had a profound impact on queer creatives' lives: on their financial security, their health and well-being and their sense of community and creativity. The social and structural changes that occurred as a result of lockdown and other social restrictions transformed queer nightlife in London. This was a time of unprecedented challenge and change for London's queer creatives and broader communities, and it was one that was met with resilience, innovation and creative fortitude.

In the next section, we explore the successes and challenges of trying to perform, work and create through various social policy interventions and evaluate some of the activities and support mechanisms that were in place during this period.

SECTION 3:
THE CHALLENGES OF "BUILDING BACK"

The Successes and Challenges of Grants

Supporting London's queer venues

Social lockdowns had a profound effect on the sustainability of London's queer venues. While this is true for queer venues across the UK, the London context also made it harder to access some financial support for venues. Small business relief was linked to rateable value, yet high rental rates in London meant that almost all venues were ineligible.

A significant success for queer nightlife was its eligibility to apply to the Culture Recovery Fund. This was an important recognition by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Arts Council of a wider constituency of cultural space, including nightclubs and queer venues, that was not previously the case and was a vital source of financial support.

The owner of one of the most established queer venues in London said "The restrictions were pretty brutal. If it hadn't been for Arts Council funding, we wouldn't be in the position we are now."

This support from government meant that no LGBTQ+ venues remained permanently closed after lockdowns ended. As London moves into the recovery stage of COVID, it is vital this wider recognition of cultural and creative life is maintained, both generally and specifically for LGBTQ+ venues.

Sources of financial support were also used by queer venues to support queer creatives, as well as cover the venue's running costs.

Some creatives spoke of receiving money through a queer venue that came from the Culture Recovery Fund, and venue owners also spoke about "getting the money out" to staff and performers.

One venue owner said that they "maintained a small core of employed staff, which was paid for out of those funds, and then we could do the streaming and the social media and put these things on for our artists. I think that was the right strategy for us."

As such, while many of the available grants were focussed on venues, this also supported queer creatives through how this allocated funding was then funnelled through directly to them.

London's City Hall worked to ensure that queer venues could access support in ways that were not necessarily on offer in other UK cities. The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, launched a £2.3m Culture at Risk Business Support Fund, which included £225,000 to support LGBTQ+ venues. Eighteen venues received money from this fund in this period, to a total of £203,800. This ability to target grants directly to queer nightlife venues was attributed to the existence of the Culture at Risk Office set up several years prior to lockdown. The pre-existing infrastructure within the Mayor's Office was able to address the challenges of COVID's impact on London nightlife more rapidly than otherwise would have been the case. Amy Lamé said:

"As soon as the pandemic hit, we had virtual meetings of the LGBTQ+ Venues forum to explore the problem and the impact. This meant that venues could feed into City Hall which facilitated a quicker deployment of money, in the context where many venues did not qualify for government grants because of their rateable value."

Money was also provided by the Mayor's Office to have a full time member of staff dedicated to supporting queer venues throughout this period, offering advice and support around grant applications, managing COVID guidelines and other associated issues, although not all venue owners found these provisions to be useful.

"I remember very clearly that first meeting we had, and I remember so many of the venue owners saying 'if we make it out of this without losing any venues, this will be a miracle.' Here we are, two years later, and we actually have three new venues that have opened. So that speaks to the resilience that was built up, but it also speaks to the innovation in the community and saying 'Hey, we're risk takers'. We're always going to the places that no-one wants to be first, trying new things and developing new offers."

The difficulties of accessing grants

Queer creatives reported that they found accessing and navigating grants confusing and difficult. Part of this was because many grants were available to venues rather than individuals, although some of this money allocated to venues was to pay staff or book performers to put on digital or other forms of live performance.

Participants praised Arts Council England for the work they did in supporting creatives in London, particularly related to the emergency grants and support that many queer creatives received. There was a general recognition that Arts Council England had adapted to the pandemic quickly and got

support to many queer creatives who needed it urgently.

Despite this, there were several concerns around accessing grants. While there were a range of sources of funding for creatives during this period, our respondents focused mostly on the problems of SEISS and the difficulties in applying for funds through the Arts Council. We interpret this as evidence of the importance of the Arts Council to queer creatives in supporting their work and the valuable role it played during COVID, even though it was not the panacea some hoped it would be. It also shows the limited knowledge of what other funds were available, due to lack of visibility, lack of access or lack of targeting to queer communities.

Participants' first concern was about recognising that the amount of grants available was insufficient to meet the drop in funding. As one participant said:

"I put in grant applications and every single one was rejected. Other applications were preferred. We heard anecdotally that they were just oversubscribed… and it became so much more competitive during COVID".

Secondly, there was also a concern about inequity in the process for these grants and how that process privileged people who had attended university and did not have disabilities. For example, several creatives reported that they did not feel they "deserved" to apply. One female creative said:

"I'm shit scared of it. I feel like I don't deserve it. I'm a working-class twat and I'm happy being that person, but I feel bad asking for that money. How do I apply for it? What boxes do I tick? I have a voice, do I use it?"

Another participant supported this saying, "It took us ten years to apply for Arts Council

funding. We never did before because we didn't feel we deserved it, we're not serious".

These feelings were exacerbated by the process of grant applications and the language that was required to successfully complete them, seeing a level of "snobbery" around it.

> "Having worked with different funding bodies in different contexts, you say 'we need support or guidance' and they say 'here's this PDF with 50 pages of bland text'. Could we have Zooms where you could ask questions, or check things?"

This requirement of writing style and type of language was seen as a "middle-class idealistic ideal" and one that excluded working class creatives.

> "I wasn't great at school because my mind thinks differently, and it's kind of how the funding application forms are, it's like I'm studying to be a professor and that's just not me. I find it intimidating."

Participants recognised that work had been done to expand access by Arts Council England in particular, including a buddy system with an adviser to give feedback, and that this helped. One successful applicant said they relied on their collaborator who is "really good at this stuff, and translates when I write crap into something that makes sense".

There were also concerns about whether queer nightlife fits the remit of grant making bodies. Some performers felt that because queer creative work often overtly

engaged with comedy rather than being "issues based", it was not as relevant for funding bodies. They also worried that their focus on comedy was seen as irrelevant, despite their firm conviction that humour is an integral part of much queer creativity. These participants, however, also made a powerful argument about why queer art should be funded.

> "Queerness and queer work should sometimes be frightening and often be quite challenging, and audiences don't always know that they want that and that's where subsidy and help around it is really important because it doesn't matter if there's twenty people in that audience, if you're doing something that's really interesting and speaking in a really unique and queer way about a specific experience, then that is still really valid."

Respondents also raised concerns about accessibility of application systems, saying that there were equality and diversity issues with the application process. One focus group participant commented:

"I'm severely dyslexic, and I looked at the Grantium form, and the way it's worded and written, and I was just 'no, forget it'. If it was an interview, I'd excel, but not a form with 46 pages of guidance".

Another respondent highlighted that the design interface of grant application portals was "appalling" for users and not accessible to partially sighted people. Respondents recognised that the budget cuts experienced by grant making bodies meant they could be faced with difficult choices including how much money could be spent on web portals, but there was a concern that the

choices that had been made had a dispro-portionate negative impact on people with accessibility needs.

These issues caused some creatives to call for additional support for creatives with experience of multiple marginalisation.

"There should be some kind of remit within organisations to support struggling queer organisations so they can access and give coverage to people on the margins. It's not just queer people, there are subsets within that. Queer people with disabilities, queer people of colour, lesbians, as just opposed to gay white men with a wig on their head."

Issues Coming Out of Lockdowns

London's queer nightlife was closed on 23rd March 2020 and nightclubs, festivals, and many large-scale leisure events remained closed until 'Freedom Day' on 19th July 2021, a duration of 16 months. Some pubs, restaurants and cafés reopened in July 2020 with various forms of social distancing and other COVID-compliant measures, then closed again for second and third lockdowns. There were additional local lockdowns and tiered restrictions, including Tier 4 restrictions introduced for London and the South East just before Christmas 2020.

The re-opening of venues progressed at a slow pace, with changing guidance and venues taking different approaches to each other: some remained closed throughout the 16-month period and others opening and implemented varying COVID-related adjustments. Given London's queer nightlife includes pubs, bars, nightclubs and other venues, this meant that only a fraction of venues were open and these venues had a range of rules and regulations. Furthermore, the lack of outdoor space for many venues in London meant that outdoor opening was particularly restricted, even when temporary planning changes meant that streets could be used in lieu of venues' own outdoor spaces.

In this context, creatives reported far fewer bookings available and that the bookings they did receive were more likely to be "one-offs" rather than regular or repeat bookings.

"The regularity of things has stopped. I had two really pivotal bookings that give you something solid to survive on, both of which I had been doing for a really long period of time. One of them, the venue shut down. The other, I got an email from the entirely heterosexual, cisgender creative staff saying they wanted to 'shake things up' and get some 'Ru girls' in. They took over the event I had built up, promoted, done the materials for. All the loyalties have gone."

Even those who received some support through grants said that while the initial impact was difficult, it was the sustained decrease in jobs that was harder. One participant commented that he was making "20% of what I did immediately before the pandemic. It's building up slowly, but the contacts and loyalties you built up have just gone."

This issue was felt particularly closely by creatives of colour. One creative of colour said "There's not a huge amount of queer venues that support queer work and really prioritise people of colour to begin with. When a few of those places closed down, you don't have an abundance of places to choose from". This then placed further pressure on the venues that do prioritise queer performers of colour.

"People were relying on the Cocoa Butter Club to do digital work and put on digital shows, so [the Cocoa Butter Club was] taking some of that responsibility from a venue and from a building into our personal spaces, and how that could work from our houses."

Queer creatives reported difficulties associated with the changing guidance as London came out of lockdown. One participant highlighted how the performers had to adopt an additional and new role in relation to COVID guidance, saying:

"What I found quite stressful about those compéring and hosting gigs in the times in between lockdowns, is that I was expected to be really clued up on health and safety. They'd say to you 'what needs to happen is X, Y and Z'. [But] you're just there to do the show. And so I found that quite difficult and very distracting from why I thought I was there and what I was trying to do with my life and how I was trying to earn a living."

There was also evidence that venues reduced the fees they paid to performers during this period to cover their own costs and thus passed on the losses of social distancing and COVID-related restrictions to queer creatives.

The subsequent national lockdowns and tiered local restrictions were also seen as particularly damaging, after having emerged from the first national lockdown. As one queer creative commented: "when July happened last year and venues started to open again and see the different performance and what people could do come up, you saw loads of drag brunches, loads of bingo and bingo brunches. It was all about the games last summer, and then it was building up for winter, all really positive, but then suddenly that November, December thing happened and it just disappeared overnight. I think it was that sudden change that really had a massive effect on people."

Increased Risks for Queer Creatives

Financial and health risks

Alongside the changes in expectations from performers, queer creatives also felt that the financial and physical risks associated with the gradual re-openings were placed on them rather than the venues or organisations. These risks included the cancellation of gigs either because of changes in rules or because the performer, or employees at the venue, had tested positive for COVID.

Creatives reported feeling isolated and unsupported by employers if they tested positive for COVID when they had upcoming work. "If you get COVID, 'it's your problem, we completely disown you'. That can't be how risk is managed".

One respondent cited a contract signed during the opening up period where if a creative contracted COVID meaning they could no longer work on the performance date, they had to pay back 90% of the fee and could only keep 10%. They said: "This club can't exist without these queer performers, so we should equally share the risk."

The shifting of responsibility from employers to creatives also did not recognize that COVID could be contracted *at* these gigs. As one creative commented: "I got COVID from one gig, so I had to cancel my next one. I lost out due to something I had little control over, and we can't be expected to space our gigs 10 days apart."

This was a particular concern for creatives with pre-existing health conditions, for whom COVID had greater health threats. One participant with a disability commented: "We don't have good changing rooms or separate space anyway, and then you have to come in and perform without social distancing and it's too much."

These risks extended to the costs of engaging in the community, too, with a loss of social life necessitated before a gig. One participant commented: "My personal costs to ensure that I can do my job safely and not be a liability have skyrocketed. Ten days before a flight or a shoot, I can't go out and enjoy club nights, or be with my friends."

Another participant noted that creatives are not able to make the decisions around risk that the majority of the population do and instead have to choose between work and a social life: "Now the restrictions have gone, you should be allowed to be doing the things that we're allowed to do, without that risking your income." For some people this meant that even though London nightlife has reopened, some queer performers haven't had the opportunity to return to their previous social lives, as other Londoners have, because catching COVID means cancelling contracts.

"I haven't been to a club – I love clubbing! The only time that I've gone out is to go to work because I feel suddenly there's this shift in people that are allowed to go out and people that actually have to behave responsibly. Well I don't like behaving responsibly, I like to be ridiculous. But in order to have any income, it's like we've been told you're not allowed to let your guard down because you're in such a high risk environment. You're highly likely to get Covid, which means that you're going to lose all of your income. Even the concept of going to a club and being among 500 people which might be the one thing you want to do, is now too much of a luxury."

Many participants argued that this was the responsibility of the government, calling for universal basic income or targeted support for queer creatives: "the only way you can really make sure no one falls through is if you have a universal income".

Personal safety

These risks in a post-COVID context extended to travel to and from queer venues. The closure of the night tube was raised multiple times as a significant issue that made queer nightlife very costly, as performers had to pay for private taxi services to get them to venues, which tended not to be added to their booking fee. The alternative, however, was to risk catching COVID on potentially crowded public transport and then have to cancel any bookings for another ten days.

Transport for queer creatives is also an intersectional issue, particularly as it relates to safety. Several queer creatives discussed experiencing racism or transphobia in private transport. One artist commented: "There have been all these price hikes for taxis and Ubers and others. Recently someone has noticed how they charge more to black and brown people as opposed to white people." The other focus group participants nodded, and transphobia was also raised as an issue.

In light of these issues, there were calls for a queer taxi service:

"I've been saying this for years, we need queer cabs, run by queers, for queers, to get us from A to B. Cis-het drivers – great – for just looking after us and just allies who are going 'I don't care what you look like or where you're going, I'm just going to drive you there'. That's all we need, that's all I want. I don't care about your judgement, I ain't judging you, please don't judge me. Just get me to where I want to go."

These discussions highlighted pre-existing problematic attitudes and behaviours in London. "The problem is the public, not the transport. The transport does what it is supposed to do, but it's really about educating the people not to be arseholes".

The lack of inclusive travel and safety arrangements had a negative impact on performers who needed it, often creatives of colour, creatives with disabilities and trans creatives. Respondents spoke of how these costs could be prohibitive to bookers, meaning that they became priced out of the booking. One respondent said this was more of an issue in smaller theatres outside of London.

These issues with transport also connected to the geographical contours of London for people of colour. Venues around Soho have a history of excluding genres of music affiliated

with people of colour, such as rap and R&B[3], whereas East London is known for being "a lot more queer" and more welcoming for people of colour.

> "Going into places like [Dalston] Superstore, they really cared about what the interactions are for black people and people of colour inside their venues, and how they make sure they support those people. If you go to the venue owner and say there is a problem, you know they will do something about it or at least listen."

There is ongoing work related to supporting travel for queer creatives, with, for example, Arts Council England funding the Cocoa Butter Club to produce events, including money for travel to and from the venue, particularly when it is outside of London. Grants have also been provided on occasion for individuals to travel to venues in London in a safe way.

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3   For a discussion of drum and bass and its followers being excluded from central Manchester dance clubs, see Measham and Hadfield, 2009.

The Problems of Mainstreaming

Queer art, performance and fashion have complex relationships with mainstream culture. It is frequently marginalised from mainstream media and cultural venues yet also mined as a source of cultural inspiration and value. This often happens in a predatory way where queer performance is appropriated or exploited without due recognition and is particularly evident in nightlife trends, from New York disco and ballroom culture, to Detroit house and Ibiza Balearic raves. Drag is one such example which has undergone a particularly rapid process of mainstreaming in Western countries in recent years, driven by the success of *Rupaul's Drag Race*, with the effect that it is one kind of cisgender male drag that is privileged as others remain marginalised (McCormack and Wignall 2022).

These issues of mainstreaming have produced significant issues for queer creatives and broader London queer nightlife. While the benefits of mainstream representation are recognised, with many respondents being employed to perform at corporate gigs and in mainstream nightlife, there was widespread concern about how this impacted on London's queer nightlife ecosystem.

One example of this relates to the second series of *Rupaul's Drag Race UK*, broadcast in January 2021, near the start of the UK's third national lockdown. During a focus group discussion about how *Drag Race* was changing London's queer scene, one gay male respondent said "I really really don't think we can underestimate the effect of the intersection of Drag Race UK with the pandemic effect. I've really had to sell my artistic soul in order to survive in this context."

This concern was echoed by trans people and lesbian creatives who discussed how they had to change what they offered to get bookings, in the context where *Rupaul's Drag Race* is known for having excluded several forms of drag primarily practiced by trans people and lesbians, even as the show has shifted to some inclusion of trans and cisgender female performers. One woman in her forties said "Everyone now is just wanting to make money, and it's now just about competing with Drag Race bookings and its baffling. Where do I sit with this now, in this brave new world?"

There was also concern for younger and more inexperienced queer creatives who could be exploited by certain producers of drag shows who specialise in performers from *Drag Race*. One participant said:

"With the growth of Drag Race, some of the productions that happen now are really poor. They are completely unregulated and run by cowboys, with people working for no money, which is not legal. People are out there making thousands off [inexperienced performers] working for forty quid and I don't know how they get away with that".

"I've nothing against cis-het people at all, but they've now come into our world via that fucking TV show, and great they want entertaining, they want their brunches and they want us to run round and be goons for them, that's fine. But we are losing our spaces as queer people, we're getting less and less space to be ourselves. I don't want to be in fucking Wetherspoons in ten years' time, trying to compete for a space where I can be myself and express myself and be who I want to be without someone doing that constant comparison to Drag Race."

Another central concern regarding mainstreaming was that straight people were encroaching into queer spaces, with a particular issue being younger heterosexual women who were fans of *Drag Race UK*, and changing the dynamics of queer nightlife spaces. This echoes the concerns expressed around the broadcasting of *Queer As Folk* television programme leading to an influx of straight young women into Manchester's Gay Village in the late 1990s, linked to a wave of café bars and nightclubs opening that came to be seen as representing a new cosmopolitan and hedonistic urban space (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004).

This was a concern echoed by the owners of queer venues. One owner said that they did not book people who had appeared on *Drag Race* for this reason, while another critiqued the show as being produced for straight audiences, saying "What about queer programming done by queers in a queer way for queer people? Obviously *Drag Race* is a product for straight teenagers now. I can't watch it."

The feeling that *RuPaul's Drag Race UK* was produced for straight audiences fed into a broader concern about the lack of support for queer nightlife from production companies and cultural institutions like the BBC.

One venue owner discussed how he regularly had television crews requesting interviews, consultations or the possibility of filming on his premises. He said:

"I have production companies on my case all the time. 'We want to do a documentary, we want to do a treatment'. They want to suck my blood. They don't want to pay me, they want to come. All these production companies ask for X, Y and Z access and they all immediately say they've got no budget, and I say 'you're all getting paid'. It's a constant battle where people think this is free. And

I'm not just talking about profits, I'm talking improving the space and improving rates of pay".

"The administration alone with me dealing with these people takes up time. There is a pot of money to come, I could pay someone to do that, which could go to the maintenance here, which in turn ends up in the profit bucket and recruit someone else as well and secure the future of the place."

This issue was one felt by creatives of colour with corporate clients more generally. Some respondents spoke about receiving good pay from these gigs but added "They're members clubs, making lots of money, and they are very white spaces, they're not diverse. So it's about weighing up what they are paying for the time to go into that space that might be quite uncomfortable." This process of displaying inclusivity through one aspect of "gay rights" while obscuring other problematic practices has been called "pinkwashing" (Holmes 2021; Puar 2011).

The Precarity of Queer Venues

Queer creatives felt that the burden in opening up after lockdown was unfairly placed on them, but they also recognised the significant difficulties that queer venues faced prior to COVID (Campkin and Marshall 2017; Ghaziani, 2019). An important distinction was made between mainstream venues and queer venues, with the latter seen as part of the struggle that London queer nightlife experiences and the former seen as benefitting from queer creativity and expertise without supporting the community more generally.

Queer venue owners were particularly concerned about the viability of their premises from several challenges. The first was the ongoing threat of closure from new waves of COVID and subsequent regional or national restrictions.

In the time between lockdowns, performances were allowed outside or venues were open to limited capacity and with table seating. These restrictions have continued in some places even as formal restrictions have lifted. One venue owner of a well-known queer venue in London said "We have kept some of the restrictions. It costs us money, but the safety of our customers and that they feel safe as well, is what is important. That makes it harder for us, but we made that decision".

Alongside this, there were also difficulties in how to run venues during this period. One queer venue owner said "You couldn't get people too ratted because people start moving around. It was a very nagging period. It was "sit down, do this, do that". You just want a boozy old club night". The venue owner added that the changes he tried to

implement during this period were also constrained by the impact on bar staff and the possibility that rules would change without warning:

> "I really feel for nightclub owners and venues trying to find an alternative [during lockdown] which was both fun and legal. What I would say is none of them achieved that [when there were restrictions]. I can't think of a night that was both fun and legal! I can think of nights that were fun and I can think of nights that were legal. I can't think of nights that were both."

"We had to do things as simply as possible. It's hard enough to get our bar staff to do waiter service without training them for new cocktails or whatever. We had to keep things simple and also be able to change on a moment because the rules would just change like that too".

Queer venues also gained from the pre-existing focus on London queer nightlife by the Culture at Risk Office and the Night Czar Amy Lamé, through structures such as the LGBTQ+ Venues Forum[4]. This forum held 13 meetings between March 2020 and December 2021, including sessions dedicated to helping venues understand restrictions, as well as a webinar from Arts Council England on grants available to venues. As one participant involved in the Forum said: "Every time the rules changed, we put out online guidance and information to abide by them. It was publicised and was there."

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4   There is an accompanying LGBTQ+ Venues Charter for London venues: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/lgbtq_venues_charter.pdf

Lamé emphasised the profound challenge that queer venues faced, alongside independent cinemas and grass-roots music venues. The Culture at Risk Office had dealt with around 300 cases in the three years prior to COVID and then dealt with 800 cases in just the first six months of the pandemic.

Still, owners of queer venues were as concerned or even more concerned about national and local government policy responses to COVID as they were about potential future lockdowns. One venue owner said he was "petrified now I'm going to be closed by the council, not by COVID". He likened dealing with them to dealing with the police, in terms of not being given the opportunity to debate protocols and decisions.

This concern about being closed down was most often related to noise complaints and sound nuisance, given that many queer venues are located in residential areas or in central areas that have had increased residential dwellings due to rapid influx of new housing and developments. As the venue owner commented:

"I'm having lots of issues regarding sound and noise issues. I've had six noise complaints lately. I never get noise complaints, but since COVID and the reopening of club nights, we've had so many complaints but we've not got any louder. I'm finding it really hard to deal with the council because I'm not sure if they are really related to noise from us or because people have spent a lot of time in this area in silence."

This also set up a conflict between necessary ventilation in a COVID context, and the rules around noise at night. Several queer venues are in listed buildings and have single glazed windows and cannot easily install ventilation systems.

"I can't have any ventilation because of sound nuisance. Councils are not legislating for those needs. Grants to help with ventilating would really help. Venues are not new, and there are rules about them. Ventilation systems make noise, so it's not simple."

Another concern was whether the public was willing to return to venues and in what format. As one queer venue owner commented: "I need to try to get the queers back to the venue. People's entertainment habits have changed, the same way they did for Netflix versus cinema."

There was evidence that the LGBTQ+ Venues Forum could be one way to address these challenges, when used effectively. An interview participant discussed how the Forum helped resolve an issue that one queer venue was having regarding a pavement licence and accessibility regarding outdoor space, following complaints by local residents. By putting the venue in touch with the correct people at the specific council and organising meetings between stakeholders, the issue was resolved in a collaborative manner that saw the continued shared use of the outdoor space by all parties during the restrictions.

SECTION 4: OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

The Towering Challenges of Being a Queer Creative in London Before COVID

Before considering how to support queer creatives and London's queer nightlife as it works to create a more sustainable and equitable culture after COVID, we emphasise a significant finding from this research: there was a clear perception that the prior dynamics and organisation of London's queer nightlife were unsustainable even while recognizing its vital cultural, social and economic contribution to London. This was brought into sharp relief when the first lockdown was introduced and queer creatives had an opportunity to pause and reflect on their working lives and, for many, their current exhaustion.

"So many artists have realised that the pre-pandemic world wasn't healthy, and we were completely burnt out, saying yes to too many things. Now we're getting back to work, we're building our stamina back up, but should we? Going back to the pre-pandemic workload was undesirable."

As such, rather than build back to how queer nightlife existed before, the pandemic and its effects demand changes to ensure that London queer nightlife is sustainable for all its participants: in terms of financial security; physical safety, health and wellbeing; and in supporting performers who often have multiple protected characteristics from

which they suffer inequalities, discrimination and marginalisation.

Supporting queer nightlife moving forward requires a multi-pronged set of actions, including support for queer venues, creatives and attendees and for wider London nightlife to become more queer-friendly.

It will also require a change in approach from mainstream organisations that gain financially by showcasing individuals from queer nightlife but who do not currently support the infrastructure beyond booking particular break-out stars.

In order to 'build back queerer', or to create a queer nightlife that is more sustainable, the unique challenges that queer nightlife faced prior to COVID must be recognised, and how these issues have been exacerbated as a result of the pandemic. This also demands an intersectional approach to understanding the issues the queer community faces, particularly related to racism, transphobia and ableism.

One respondent, an experienced producer who foregrounds the work of queer people of colour, spoke about how people of colour needed to be welcomed into queer spaces "as safe spaces, and to be welcomed in, rather than a second thought".

One of the core difficulties for queer nightlife is to develop a sustainable financial and cultural footing while maintaining the ethos, practices and values that make it queer. This balancing act has become particularly challenging in a context where broader society engages and co-opts various elements of queer culture, such as the increasing mainstream engagement with drag performance.

COVID restrictions and the associated move online has prompted profound questions for creatives. Participants said that

the pandemic had led them to focus on outcomes beyond the short term, on the meaning of their work, the creative process, and the impact of their work and leisure on queer community and also on the environment. As one participant commented:

"There are so many situations where I'm negotiating for myself, in a fairly new industry or at least in how it's expanded into some of these spaces, not always sure of how to negotiate or what the industry standards are. I'm just doing my best in these situations to try and get as much as I can and don't always know how to handle those situations."

In the rest of this section, we make a series of recommendations toward making a sustainable and equitable queer nightlife that befits London's status as an internationally renowned capital of culture and the arts.

"If there is a future, is it all going to be digital? Is it going to be in venues? How do we negotiate the future?"

Future Directions and Opportunities for Change

On the basis of this research, we call on stakeholders in London's queer nightlife to join together to provide queer nightlife with the support needed so that it can thrive in a sustainable and equitable manner that it can continue to contribute to the world-class creative and cultural life of London as an international and diverse global city.

These stakeholders include the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Mayor of London's Office, the Night Czar, local authorities, Arts Council England, the Night Time Industries Association and the BBC.

We encourage engagement with the opportunities laid out below, focussing on supporting queer creatives, employers of queer creatives, the wider infrastructure that supports London queer nightlife, and areas for future research.

1. Opportunities to support queer creatives

■ The Culture at Risk Office should set up a Queer Creatives Forum, similar to the LGBTQ+ Venues Forum. This Forum could serve multiple purposes, including:

- provide a place for discussion for queer creatives working in London, including support on fair contracts and safe travel premiums;

- a mechanism for community building opportunities among queer creatives, including support and training activities into new roles (such as producing events);

- a forum to meet with mainstream organisations and businesses so that their engagement with queer creatives supports the queer nightlife ecosystem more generally;

- work collaboratively with other sector organisations, such as NTIA and Music Venue Trust, to consider how these can broaden the wider night-time economy and include queer nightlife explicitly and inclusively;

- Such a forum would need to be supported financially to maximise its impact.

■ Develop clear protocols drawing on the experiences of the COVID pandemic that could be applied to other similar issues in the future, such as:

- Evidence-based, reasonable and clear pandemic-related guidelines and adjustments;

- Shared pandemic-related responsibilities between promoters, events and individual artists such as regarding associated cancellation clauses for bookings, self isolation and loss of income;

- Better facilities (clean, accessible and pandemic-secure work spaces).

2. Opportunities for commission- ers, employers and funders

■ Continued funding for queer nightlife in London as a valued aspect of the cultural and creative sector;

- Queer venues and nightlife should remain eligible for future funding for cultural and creative industries given the success of the Culture Recovery Fund;

- Sector-specific grants for nightlife venues relating to their size and operating costs. The APPG NTE report recommended creating a sector-specific grant scheme such as this.

■ Equity and inclusion in funding processes;

- Funders should audit application processes to ensure they are accessible, with a focus on disability, class and access to appropriate technology. Targeted financial support from funders for applicants with multiple protected characteristics.

■ Stakeholders to develop guidance to engage and support queer creativity, for public, business and third sectors. This should include diversity of queer nightlife, attendant to issues of racism, ableism, cis-heteronormativity, and support of wider community and not just individual creatives;

- Work with a Queer Creatives Forum, if established, to ensure that mainstream organisations actively support the long-term sustainability of queer nightlife in London.

- Training for staff at mainstream venues, including bar staff and security, around inclusive practice for gender and sexual minorities.

3. Opportunities to enhance wider infrastructure

■ The Mayor's Office could convene a working group with Transport for London, bringing together Night Tube representatives, London's Private Hire Providers, and a diverse range of queer creatives, producers, and venue owners to understand the issues related to discrimination and harassment in evening and night-time transport in the capital and develop solutions to issues identified.

■ Develop a multi-agency approach to support queer venues in updating their infrastructure in a post-COVID landscape;

- Through the LGBTQ+ Venues Forum, venues to be supported in addressing noise complaints with local councils, in line with the Equality Act 2010, Equality Impact Assessments, Asset of Community Value status, historical and listed building status;

- Resources for networking and community development between nightlife venues, including larger/ mainstream/commercial venues working with smaller/queer/ independent venues;

- Funding to make nightlife venues more accessible and health and safety focused, including better

ventilation and access for disabled creatives and customers.

- Support and expand the Culture at Risk Office, LGBTQ+ Venues Forum and other initiatives that enhanced the resilience of London's queer nightlife to shocks such as COVID.

- Clean, accessible toilets available 24/7 to allow people with disabilities and chronic health conditions to travel around London for work and leisure, including both public provision and nightlife venues opening their facilities to the public. This supports the recommendations of the London Assembly Health Committee (2021).
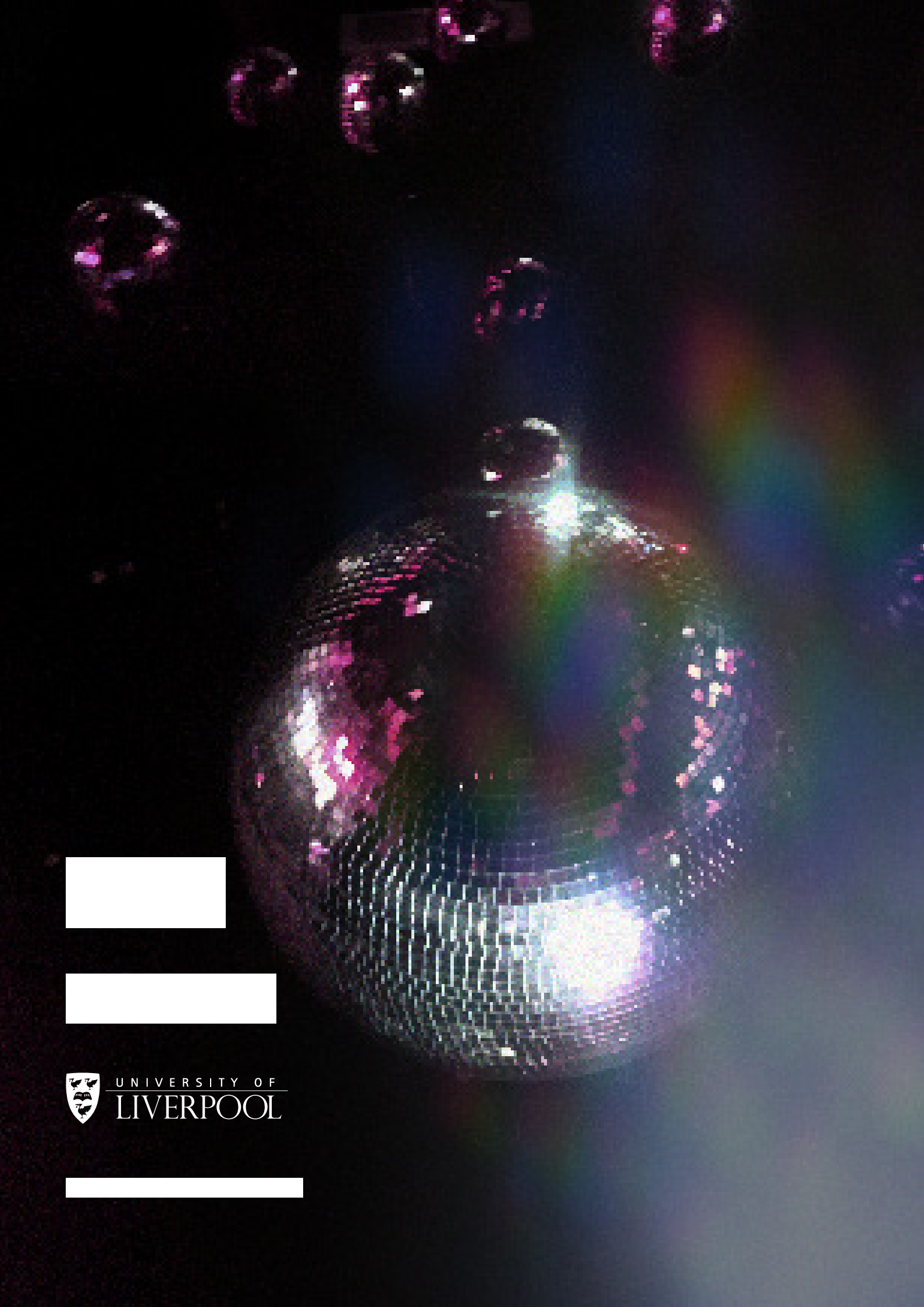
4. Opportunities for future research

- Examine how London's interventions to support queer nightlife compare to cities and regions across the country and internationally.

- Consider how queer nightlife intersects with mainstream culture in London and nationally, including;

    - The influence of queer nightlife on mainstream art and culture;

    - Queer creatives' experiences of marginalisation and discrimination in the mainstream;

    - The impact of mainstreaming on queer nightlife longitudinally;

    - The impact of "late" events in museums and cultural institutions and how they can work with queer nightlife.

- Evidence the diverse contributions, including economic, that queer nightlife makes to London's creative sector.

- Focus on different aspects of queer creativity, including the role of producers, support staff and organisations to ensure sustainable queer nightlife in the future.

- Examine the working environment of queer creatives, queer nightlife labour and their relationship to trade unions.

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