The Commercialization Of The Atlanta Pride Festival: “Somebody's Got To Pay For It”

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THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE ATLANTA PRIDE FESTIVAL: “SOMEBODY’S GOT TO PAY FOR IT”

by

SARAH BEASLEY

Under the Direction of Megan Sinnott

ABSTRACT

This thesis is focused on the commercialization of the Atlanta Pride Festival during the years 1992-1997. Through personal interviews, I have concluded that the Atlanta Pride Festival produced complicated experiences for participants who had mixed feelings about the commercialization.

INDEX WORDS: Gay, Pride, Lesbian, Atlanta, Commercialization
THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE ATLANTA PRIDE FESTIVAL: “SOMEBODY’S GOT TO PAY FOR IT”

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THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE ATLANTA PRIDE FESTIVAL: “SOMEBODY’S GOT TO PAY FOR IT”

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1 INTRODUCTION

On June 28, 1969, the patrons of the Stonewall Inn began fighting back against police raids that had been occurring regularly at the bar in New York City. A year after the infamous Stonewall Riots\(^1\) in Greenwich Village, protests and marches began popping up around the United States in order to make the public aware of the violence that was happening to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer citizens. The Stonewall Riots\(^2\) sparked gay pride celebrations all over the country. In 1970, the first pride parade was held at Central Park to speak back to homophobic police raids that took place at the Stonewall Inn (Wythe, 2011). Atlanta Pride was also born in 1970 in response to the Stonewall Riots that occurred exactly a year before in New York City (http://atlantapride.org/about/history/, 2013).

Activists, involved with what is now known as the Atlanta Pride Committee\(^3\), passed out information alerting local Atlanta citizens about what had happened at the Stonewall Inn (http://atlantapride.org/about/history/, 2013). The following year in 1971, The Georgia Gay Liberation Front organized a march that went from Peachtree St. to Piedmont Park ((http://atlantapride.org/, 2012). Eventually over the years this developed into the Atlanta Pride festival (http://atlantapride.org/, 2012). The Atlanta Pride Festival is an annual event held in Atlanta, Georgia at Piedmont Park\(^4\). According to the Atlanta Pride Committee’s website, this

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\(^1\) For more historical and in-depth information about the Stonewall Riots, the social climate at the time, and other related events, please refer to David Carter’s, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Rights Revolution* or PBS’s documentary, *American Experience: Stonewall Uprising*.

\(^2\) It is important to briefly discuss Stonewall history here because this moment in history marks the beginning of Pride celebrations. Also, as Lisa Peñaloza points out, understanding the rise of marketing to LGBT people is best understood having an understanding of the historical beginnings of the mainstream LGBT movement (Peñaloza, 1996).

\(^3\) Atlanta Pride has been referred to as different names. In the early 1990s it was referred to as Atlanta Lesbian and Gay Pride. Some people in the community refer to it as Gay Pride. Throughout this paper I use Atlanta Pride and Atlanta Pride Festival because that is what it is called now and how my participants referred to it.

\(^4\) The Atlanta Pride Festival has occurred in Piedmont Park every year except for 2008 when it was held in the Civic Center. The venue change was due to a statewide drought which prompted Piedmont Park to move all large events out of the park for the year (http://atlantapride.org/about/history/, 2013).
large-scale festival is held each year to celebrate sexual diversity and promote acceptance through visibility (http://atlantapride.org/, 2013). Atlanta Pride was created with a counter-culture spirit in response to violence and harassment against queer and trans people that took place at the time\(^5\), but most famously at the Stonewall Riots (Stanley, 2011).

It is important to research this particular festival because the Atlanta Pride Festival (as with many other Pride festivals around the country) originated out of a counter-culture moment\(^6\) and is now quite mainstream, commercial and more accepted in popular culture. In 1970, Atlanta activists passed out literature in Piedmont Park and by the next year had formed a march that included approximately 100 activists. By the 1980s, Atlanta Pride became focused on AIDS activism and diversity (http://atlantapride.org/about/history/, 2013; Douglas-Brown, 2010). By the 1990s, Atlanta Pride had corporate sponsorships, high attendance, and a large line of vendor tents. Similar to the Atlanta Pride Festival, pride parades all over the United States have evolved from radical marches into elaborate festivals with huge parades (Wythe, 2011; Carter, 2004; Douglas-Brown, 2010). Through my interviews and research, I have discovered how the relatively recent (since the early 1990s) commercialization of the Atlanta Pride Festival has affected the atmosphere and experience of the festival. The commercialization simultaneously causes participants to feel validated and oppressed. More specifically, I have discovered that the increase in corporate sponsorships, consumerism, and commercialism causes participants to have complicated and mixed feelings about the Atlanta Pride Festival during the years 1992-1997. The experiences had by participants still have lasting effects on their lives today. For example, some people still honor a brand loyalty to certain companies present at the festival during the

\(^5\) Violence and harassment were definitely not just happening at the Stonewall Inn on the night of June 28, 1969, however, this particular event received a lot of public attention, which catalyzed a more public movement of LGBTQ liberation politics.

\(^6\) The counter-culture moment I am referring to is the response to the Stonewall Riots which prompted different activist based responses throughout the country. One of those responses was the creation of Pride festivals.
1990s. I chose to study the Atlanta Pride Festival during 1992-1997 because it is during this time period that corporatization and attendance rose dramatically which undoubtedly changed many aspects of the festival. Some of the noted changes that participants mentioned was feeling heavily marketed to, the crowds becoming extremely large, but also feeling a sense of acceptance by larger society. This time period marks a profound moment for Atlanta Pride that proved to change the festival permanently after that.

Although I have a fond affection for the Atlanta Pride Festival, my critique of it and pride festivals in general, is that most of the large festivals are now heavily centered on consumerism and advertising in order to gain monetary support and funding. Over time, Atlanta Pride has progressively become more focused on corporate sponsorships, materialism, and consumerism in order to survive as an annual event with a particular model and execution. Authors like Mattilda aka Matt Bernstein Sycamore, Jason Ruiz, and Susie Bright argue that the commercialization of pride festivals is a form of selling out the LGBTQ community and that gay identity is just another commodity. Mattilda argues that events like pride leave little room for identities other than mainstream consumerist identities defined by capitalism (2002). During the time period I am interested in, participants experienced a shift in local activism to corporate marketing. The atmosphere of the festival became largely focused on consumerism and supporting gay rights by spending money at gay friendly businesses. In doing so, some participants still define their consumer identities by their experience with sponsors from 1990s Pride Festivals. In my experience, some members of the LGBTQ community do not seem bothered by the commercialization of the festival; however, many people are discontented by this aspect of the Atlanta Pride Festival. Some of the vendors/booths at the festival are engaged in

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7 I spent a year and half on the Atlanta Pride Committee and thoroughly enjoyed my role there. I served on the Atlanta Pride Event Committee from January 2013 to June 2014.
consciousness raising efforts but most of them are selling products or services, or trying to win over the gays as a loyal target market.

It is through my research that I found that the commercialization of the Atlanta Pride Festival is complicated. Participants have mixed feelings about the evolution of Atlanta Pride during 1992-1997. Participants admitted feeling validated and happy to be acknowledged as legitimate consumers but they also felt discomfort in knowing they were/are shamelessly advertised to and targeted as a market. As John D’Emilio argues, gay and lesbian identities are able to exist because of capitalism (1983). To follow his argument, it seems inevitable that capitalist ideals would then fold over into other aspects of LGBTQ lives, as is the case with the Atlanta Pride Festival. The capitalist climate that was present during in the United States during the 1990s is an intensified and layered version of what D’Emilio described.

Through the data I have collected from interviewing participants, I show that simply criticizing the commercialization of the Atlanta Pride Festival leaves little room for the complex and enriching experiences had by participants and organizers of the festival. Participants described profound experiences had at the Atlanta Pride Festival and noted that attending or organizing the festival enriched their lives. Although all four participants expressed discomfort with the intense level of commercialism at the festival, this does not take away from the significance that the festival had/has on their lives.

Throughout this research, I have discovered how Atlanta Pride has evolved and changed during the years of 1992-1997 through the eyes of people who have a long-term relationship with the festival, by analyzing their oral narratives. I also utilize archived literature pertaining to the Atlanta Pride Festival to compliment the interviews. In my research, I look at the Atlanta Pride festival through the voices of those who have been involved and/or attended through the years
1992-1997 which is the time period that the festival became significantly more commercialized. Through informal conversations, I have been told that the Atlanta Pride Committee began accepting small business sponsorships in the 1980s and that corporate sponsorships picked up around the late 1990s. Through my research, I have found that the financial failure of the 1993 festival motivated Atlanta Pride to become business savvy and commercial. Through 4 participant interviews, I show the changes of Atlanta Pride over this time period to determine how organizers and participants have experienced the commodification and commercialization of the festival. I chose to research Atlanta Pride because it was one of the earliest pride celebrations in the United States and is currently the largest pride festival in the southeast (Atlanta Pride Committee, 2013).

1.1 Literature Review

I have framed this literature review to encompass general LGBTQ history, gay and lesbian identities in relation to capitalism, gay pride literature, and similarly focused studies. This literature review shows the ways that LGBTQ identities have come into existence through the new lifestyles capitalism affords (D’Emilio, 1983) but that currently the two (gay identities and capitalism) are mutually beneficial to each other (Pellegrini, 2010). Although gay/queer spaces have certainly acted as retreats, hangouts, and sanctuaries in private ways before late capitalism and before the publicized Stonewall Riots, LGBTQ people have found ways to network and navigate public life. The publicized Stonewall Riots certainly drew attention to invasive homophobic violence and began the Pride movement, but public LGBTQ identities were not invented because of the Stonewall Riots. In addition, this literature review shows that identities
are complex and cannot be neatly defined or encompassed with one single event\(^8\) (The Atlanta Pride Festival). Currently, there is not a wide body of literature specific to Atlanta Pride or Gay Atlanta history. I will fit into this conversation by adding a specific study on the commercialization of the annual Atlanta Pride festival and the way it has evolved given the history behind this particular annual gay pride event. My research fills the gaps that exist between general LGBTQ history and Atlanta history through the voices of people who have experienced the Atlanta Pride festival throughout its evolution.

1.1.1 Gay Identity

To gain insight into the history of gay and lesbian identities, I utilize George Chauncey’s *Gay New York*, John D’Emilio’s *Capitalism and Gay Identity* and Esther Newton’s *Cherry Grove: Fire Island*. This literature is a good reminder that the Stonewall Riots in 1969, did not invent a public gay identity and that there were many ways in which gay men and women publicly navigated their world prior to that event. These historical works also provide insight into the ways “gay” as an identity is a fairly recent development. By that, I mean that people have been having same-sex relationships far back into history, but naming it as gay and claiming it as an identity is a more modern concept which has come into the public’s consciousness around and after World War II and in conjunction with the intensification of capitalism (D’Emilio, 1983; Chauncey, 1994).

My research is focused on the commercialization and commodification of LGBTQ identities (specifically through the Atlanta Pride Festival). According to John D’Emilio, gay identities exist because capitalism affords the luxury of independent lifestyles away from the traditional, heterosexual family. Since lesbian and gay identities are a product of capitalism, it

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\(^8\) I make this notation in order to avoid generalizing this particular study to the entire LGBTQ population. This study does not intend to generalize all pride celebrations or try to speculate that all pride attendees/organizers feel the same way as the participants in this study.
should come as no surprise that a large amount of gay and lesbian space is now commercialized. D’Emilio explains, “Only when individuals began to make their living through wage labor, instead of as parts of an interdependent family unit, was it possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity—an identity based on attraction to one’s own sex” (D’Emilio, 1983, 105). In other words, individual earning power by way of capitalism, is the foundation for personal identity based on sexuality that is separate from the traditional productive family unit. The traditional family unit that D’Emilio describes was reliant upon one another for survival. Capitalism offers a means to individuality that was not previously possible (D’Emilio, 1983). In this way, capitalism folds over into the many areas of gay lifestyle and the Atlanta Pride Festival is no exception.

Even though many people (gay and straight alike) believe/believed that gays lived a life of isolation and invisibility prior to the Stonewall Riots (D’Emilio, 1983; Chauncey; 1994), Chauncey and Newton both show how gay and lesbian individuals had a sense of visibility before the late 1960s. Despite myths of isolation and despair, capitalism offered gay people more opportunity to form communities and find ways to network (Chauncey, 1994). In *Gay New York*, Chauncey shows the various ways that gay men found one another and formed communities from 1890-1940. Capitalism in the United States was gearing up during this time period, which provided the personal and financial freedom for same-sex relationships. Chauncey argues that often, gay men found one another through other mutual friends. Without modern forms of networking like the internet, cable, and cell phones, these men were able to create meaningful friendships, relationships, and communities. Even in the midst of marginalization, the gays of New York were able to find and make friendships centered on their sexuality. Chauncey’s work shows that gay individuals have, since the 19th century, been gathering
together and creating community on the basis of sexuality. Men and women of the 1940s acted on their same-sex desires and began creating urban subcultures which would not have been possible prior to capitalism given the character of family survival methods (D’Emilio, 1983).

In *Cherry Grove: Fire Island*, Esther Newton uses her research to showcase gay history, commercialization of gay space, evolution of space, and visibility from the 1930s up to the 1990s. Her research illustrates the ways certain identities are formed within social constructions of class among gay men and lesbians. Newton helps elucidate how gay and lesbian spaces became commercialized through her examples of Cherry Grove and Fire Island Pines. For the most part, Newton attributes the widespread commercialization of gay space to commercial development of the 1960s. Although, the residents and regular vacationers opposed the changes and “progress” to Fire Island and Cherry Grove, the advancements in road, water, and building technology came anyway. Newton argues that ultimately the economic growth was in large part due to the economic boom after World War II. Newton concludes, “It was impossible to interfere with Americans’ sacred right to make a buck, and gay Grovers had every reason to be grateful to an American Capitalism whose leveling mechanisms, more than any other factor, had made the resort’s existence possible” (1993, 141). Similar to the Atlanta Pride Festival, capitalism aided the community to reach a new level of growth that was not possible without the sort of profits and business tactics that accompany capitalist ideals. Also resembling the Atlanta Pride Festival, some community members approved the commercialized growth while others were resistant.

Whether it was on an island with other gay individuals or more subtle places, same-sex relationships were definitely happening and were not so secret. This established research is important to my study on the Atlanta Pride Festival because the whole festival revolves around identity and being proud of oneself. Since pride festivals in general came into fruition after and
in response to the Stonewall Riots, it is important to remember that there were public gay lifestyles and cultures before this event that were able to exist and flourish in part because of capitalism.

Building upon D’Emilio’s argument that lesbian and gay identities are a product of capitalism, David Eng argues that now, in late capitalism, gay identity often reinscribes heteronormative family and economic values through “queer liberalism” (2010, 45). Queer liberalism, he explains, is “a confluence of political and economic conditions forming the basis of liberal enfranchisement and inclusion for certain gay and lesbian US citizen-subjects willing to comply with its normative mandates” (2010, 39). The mainstream lesbian and gay movement is premised upon normalization and assimilation in order to obtain specific rights like gay marriage.

The Atlanta Pride Festival has followed suit with this trend, becoming intensely more focused on gay marriage and other neoliberal privileges, like to the right to serve in the military. The late capitalist model, which is obsessed with buying power and consumption, was also exemplified at the Atlanta Pride Festival during 1992-1997 by the large quantities of vendors, corporate sponsors, and strategic, rampant advertising. Two participants mentioned that along with the commercialization of the festival came the push to be more mainstream in order to be afforded mainstream rights like marriage. The trend towards gay marriage is directly related to the overall commercialization of the festival. Gay marriage is perfectly aligned with modern capitalist ideals in that it perpetuates middle and upper-class ideals that are often focused on “power, property, and capital” (Chavez, Conrad, and Nair, 2010, 393).

Finally, Ann Pellegrini complicates D’Emilio’s argument and asserts that capitalism did not simply produce gay and lesbian identities. Her argument adds another level of nuance to
D’Emilio’s notion that capitalism made gay identities possible. Pellegrini argues, “The accommodation—between market and identity, and between economic openings and social tolerance—goes both ways” (2002, 135). In other words, the two have a somewhat synergetic relationship where the economy is productive of lesbian and gay identities and in addition, gay and lesbian identities benefit the market. Pellegrini’s assertion could not be more descriptive of the way in which identities and capitalism functioned (and still does function) at the Atlanta Pride Festival during the 1990s. Identities are partially formed by dominant representations of commercialized space, while the market is simultaneously reacting to identities. In my interviews, all four participants noted that they could not differentiate whether or not the corporate sponsors were reacting to gay identities or if gay identities were reacting to corporate sponsors. This point supports Pellegrini’s assertion that the market produces gay identities just as gay identities produce the market. This seems to be why the participants in this study struggle with the notion and find the experience of commercialism to be so conflicting in space that was created out of political necessity.

1.1.2 Pride Literature

My research interest in the evolution of Atlanta Pride was, in part, inspired by Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore’s work, *Sweatshop-Produced Rainbow Flags and Participatory Patriarchy: Why the Gay Rights Movement Is a Sham*. Sycamore discusses the violence of assimilation and how it is played out in Pride festivals. This article focuses specifically on San Francisco Pride and the Castro district. Authors such as Michael Polson (2002) also critique the neoliberal commercialization of gay pride events and how gaining corporate sponsorships seems to be one of the main goals. The two authors connect the corporatization of Pride to a gay rights agenda obsessed with marriage and the military. It is within this conversation that I will address the
need for financial support in order to pull off a large-scale event, but that the current model supports a capitalist agenda, which is profit obsessed. The mainstream LGBT movement seems to fit in seamlessly with a capitalist mindset that values consumerism over all else. This aspect of our current economic moment is highly visible at the Atlanta Pride festival, which was not always the case. This work illuminates the ways in which the current LGBT movement is guilty in participating in ruthless capitalism. While acknowledging that these critiques are extremely valuable, I want to present the role of capitalism as a more complex relationship that comes with limitations but also possibilities. For instance, most participants in my study agree that the Atlanta Pride Festival would not exist today if the organization did not start utilizing corporate sponsorships or develop ways to generate profit.

To better my understanding of performativity at pride parades, I utilize Lynda Johnston’s *Queering Tourism: Paradoxical performances at gay prideparades*. Johnston combines an analysis of tourism studies, queer theory, and spatial theory in order to lay out the complexities of pride celebrations. The complexities Johnston analyzes are those concerning the clashing of consumerism, queer identity and resistance. Given that these things have not always been seen as compatible, it is interesting to see how the Atlanta Pride Festival (and most other Pride festivals) have defaulted to the model of commercializing a space which was intended for resisting societal norms. Johnston highlights certain aspects of performativity that are present at most pride parades. I find this useful in looking at performativity within the Atlanta Pride Festival during the 1990s and how this can be subversive to socially prescribed gender roles while at the same time upholding those very structures. I also utilize her discussion of how bodies are sexualized differently in different spaces depending on the circumstances and surroundings. This analysis helps me to understand why certain aspects of Atlanta Pride have remained constant (drag and
gender bending) while others have changed or intensified over time (commercialization and consumerism).

Another helpful aspect of Queering *Tourism: Paradoxical performances at gay pride parades* is Johnston’s analysis of spatial borders at pride. Johnston’s discussion of discursive and material ‘street’ borders fits nicely with other spatial theory that has informed my understanding of such topics. Johnston shows how everyday space is transformed into “queer streets” and into a queerly defined performance and celebration. This celebration disrupts the usual organization of public spaces and streets therefore resisting, even if temporarily, the normally assigned functioning of the space.

Peter Lugosi identifies the LGBT community as consumers who are affectually mobilized through consumerism and hospitality spaces. His analysis of queer consumers as seeking to reject heteronormativity through patronage of certain bars, and restaurants exemplifies the complexities inherent in being queer in a neoliberal time and space. He goes on to argue that many patrons realize they are participating in a consumptive cycle but that they continue to take pleasure in the ephemeral space and experience. This notion helps me understand the seduction of events like the Atlanta Pride Festival but also to begin to dissect the meaning behind the seemingly playful and temporary space that the festival creates annually. Lugosi’s argument reiterates the complicatedness of resisting while consuming. All 4 of the participants in this study noted how complicated it was to deal with the commercialization of the Atlanta Pride Festival but simultaneously enjoy it for different reasons.

A similar study I have found in terms of the topic of pride festivals is *Festivals, Space, and Sexuality: Gay Pride in Australia* by Kevin Markwell and Gordon Waitt. The authors rely on spatial theory combined with analysis of media sources to conclude that gay pride space is
very complex and ambiguous. The authors argue that Gay Pride is crucial to many participants’ sense of self and identity. Further, the authors conclude that pride festivals generate unlimited possibility. On the other hand, their research reveals that many Gay Pride attendees have discomfort around the commercialized space which pride festivals often offer. This study is yet another example of the ways that commercialized LGBTQ spaces are conflicted and complex.

Finally, in *The Meanings of Lesbian and Gay Pride Day: Resistance Through Consumption and Resistance to Consumption*, Steven M. Kates and Russell W. Belk analyze Lesbian and Gay Pride Day in Toronto. Their study unpacks how paradoxical consumption at pride festivals can be. Through semi-structured interviews, the authors were able to conclude that commercialization is seen as inevitable for large-scale events. Further, they argue that consumption and resistance have an intricate relationship given our capitalist moment. Many participants interviewed felt like the commercialization of the festival legitimized the lesbian and gay community. Similar to the Atlanta Pride Festival, participants hold mixed feelings about the commercialization of the festival.

By utilizing existing research concerning the history of the LGBTQ community, public gay spaces, the commercialization of gay spaces, and pride festivals, I am able to conduct my research with a strong foundation. My work on the Atlanta Pride festival fills in the gaps that exist between connecting experience to commercialism and applying it specifically to the Atlanta Pride Festival during 1992-1997. It is important to continue to document the local LGBTQ history of Atlanta by including the voices of people who have been a part of, participated, and witnessed a steadily changing LGBTQ movement reflected through the Atlanta Pride festival.
1.2 Methods/Methodology

The Atlanta Pride Festival noticeably shifted focus throughout 1992-1997. The Atlanta Pride festival was created and inspired out of protests and marches that took place right after the riots at the Stonewall Inn in 1969. In order to chart the changes of the Atlanta Pride festival throughout much of the 1990s, I have interviewed 4 individuals who were involved with the festival during 1992-1997. I have also relied on archived data and newspaper articles to aid my research. This data has helped me chart exactly when and why the festival evolved from a counter-culture energy to a focus on acceptance, normative notions of positivity, and corporate funding. While conducting my research I was on the Atlanta Pride Events Committee so I was afforded with connections that provided me with valuable information I would not otherwise have. I acknowledge that my position as an organizer on the Atlanta Pride Committee gave me access to insider information that I would not have otherwise. Because of my connections with the Atlanta Pride Committee, I have been introduced to long-time gay rights activists within the Atlanta community. I used this connection to help me gain valuable interviews for my research on the Atlanta Pride Festival and the impact it has on them personally and on the community.

To illuminate the experiences of those directly involved with Atlanta Pride and the history of Atlanta Pride, I will chart the history of this annual festival through personal narratives. I will interview people who have attended/organized the festival consistently for at least ten years. Through the participating pride attendees’ and organizers’ oral narratives, I will determine how the festival has changed since its beginning stages in 1970. Through the voices of people involved in the early stages of the Atlanta Pride Festival, I hope to learn the specific ways in which the festival has evolved over time and how attendees feel about the changes. These personal histories are valuable not only to have a written history of this huge local event, but also
to gain insight into the personal effects this festival has had on people over the years. It is important to have these voices archived in history because they tell a story that chronicles an ever-changing LGBTQ climate, specifically through the lens of the Atlanta Pride festival.

Through conversational interviews, many topics came up related to the Atlanta Pride Festival during 1992-1997. Some of the issues that came up were commodification, exclusion within and from outside, racial tensions, the effects of AIDS, fighting homophobia and gay marriage equality just to name a few. Because of the scope of my research, I could not give in-depth detail to each and every topic that arose, however, if it was related to commercialization of the festival, it is included in this thesis.

1.2.1 Method

To gain the knowledge about the commercialization of Atlanta Pride, I combined archival research with narrative inquiry. I interviewed four people who attended or were involved with the planning of the festival regularly during the time frame of 1992-1997. Participants willingly agreed to have their names in this publication. Some of the participants were involved longer than this time period so they often spoke about the 1990s as a decade instead of just the six-year time period I had originally designated. Often participants brought their stories into the present. The interviews were very much like conversations that facilitated storytelling by the participants (Chase, 2005). It is for this reason that I chose narrative interviewing rather than the traditional interviewing practice. Narrative inquiry is a method of qualitative research that utilizes conversations, testimonials, stories, journals and other personal relics (Chase, 2005; Trahar, 2009). This allowed the participants to answer with longer stories rather than short answers. This also allowed space for participants to share personal memorabilia, photos, and other things they collected from this time in their lives. This method allowed me to take in details, specific
events, and life changing moments (Chase, 2005; Trahar, 2009). For instance, Jennifer Thomas showed me a home video that she made from the Atlanta Pride Festival in 1996.

After I collected four interviews, I then performed a textual analysis on the data and the relevant archived data. Through interpreting my data, I developed analysis, which addressed issues such as commercialization and resistance. Through conversational interviewing I gained a deep insight into the personal meaning people associate with the Atlanta Pride Festival and how this has shifted over time. The interviews were meaningful to the participants and meaningful to me. The interviews were very intimate and informal so I felt close to the participants by the end of each one. I was invited into homes of participants, fed my participants, and very well received. This experience was quite significant for me and I believe it was for the participants as well.

It was very important that I remain truthful to their voice and allow them to speak for themselves. During the interviews, I wanted the spotlight to remain on the participants and to stay focused on their stories. It was for this reason that I held off on including my experience until I began my textual analysis. I did not want my experience to cloud theirs or divert attention away from the importance of their narratives. There were times where the conversation led back to my experience because participants wanted to know but in most cases I was able to hold this off until the end of the interview.

During this process I did not want theory to dictate my research. In Touching Feeling, Eve Sedgwick expresses similar thoughts in regards to the way critical theory often influences our quest for knowledge a little too heavy handedly. For her, our strict adherence to critical theory might limit us (“the seeker, knower, or teller”), in what we can know and deconstruct (Sedgwick, 2003, 124). Sedgwick explains that “privileged objects” become the go to
methodology. What Sedgwick is describing is the persistent urge to use the same approach to research time and time again. The example Sedgwick provides is the paranoia approach to research. In her example, she shows how this particular approach leads researchers to see only the negative reactions to the topic of interest, not how the topic of interest actually functions (Sedgwick, 2003). More specifically, she explains that using the paranoia approach in studying homosexuality, leads researchers to focus on homophobia rather than how homosexuality actually functions. While I do not intend to focus my research exclusively on homosexuality or homophobia, her example is a great way to show how privileged approaches can be very limiting. I want my data to determine my theory without letting popular critical theory and approaches determine what my interviewees are telling me. While I recognize that I already have a constructed view of certain happenings, I also realize that these should not alter my interpretation of others’ experiences and life events.

1.2.2 Participants

My study consisted of four participants. I found these participants mostly by word of mouth. The main characteristic shared by all four participants was that they all experienced Atlanta Pride during 1992 each year through 1997. Three of these participants served as a part of Atlanta Pride Organization at one point or another. One of my participants was a festival attendee all six years. All four participants live in the Atlanta area and were adults during the 1992-1997. I thoroughly enjoyed each interview and feel as though I have made some valuable friendships during this process.

My first participant was Duncan Teague. Duncan is a long time, social justice activist in the Atlanta community. Duncan joined the committee in 1990. He was honored as the Grand Marshall in 1993. Teague worked in HIV/AIDS education, research, and prevention for many
years as an out, gay man. He is also a recognized social change agent, performing artist, published writer and poet having been the senior member of The ADODI Muse; A Gay Negro Ensemble. He is also featured in the award winning stage work based on the anthology, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*. Teague lives in Decatur, GA with his husband, David J. Thurman. I met Duncan through a mutual friend who is currently on the Atlanta Pride Committee. The interview was conducted in Duncan’s home in Decatur on April 16, 2014. Duncan was incredibly hospitable and made homemade chicken salad sandwich with chips and grapes for us to enjoy while we talked about his experience with Atlanta Pride.

Next, I interviewed Sara Look. Sara is 44 years old and self identifies as a Queer Femme. Sara is currently the co-owner of Charis Bookstore in Little 5 Points. She first attended Pride in 1992. She later joined the Board of Directors in 1997 and served until 1999. I met Sara at community events held by Charis Circle. I simply asked Sara if she would be interested in having a conversation about her experience at Atlanta Pride and she agreed. The interview was conducted on April 23, 2014 at Charis Bookstore.

My third interview was with Jennifer Thomas. Jennifer identifies as a lesbian and is 42 years old. Jennifer first attended Pride in 1992 and attended consecutively through 1997. She continued to attend Atlanta Pride after 1997 but not consecutively. I met Jennifer through a mutual friend who told Jennifer about my study. Jennifer was intrigued and felt she met the criteria so she reached out to me to participate in my research. The interview was conducted at Jennifer’s home in Atlanta on April 25, 2014.

My final interview was with Donna Narducci. Duncan Teague (my first participant) connected us because he expressed that my project would be incomplete without her. After speaking with Duncan, Donna contacted me and asked to participate in the study. Donna is
55 years old and self identifies as an Italian-American lesbian. She and her partner Roxanne have been in a relationship for 9 years. Donna joined the Board of Directors for the Atlanta Pride Committee just prior to the 1993 festival. She served as the Co-Chair of the Board for the 1994 and 1995 festivals. She was then selected as the Executive Director of the organization in the fall of 1995. She was employed as the Executive Director from 1995 - 2008. The interview was conducted at her friend’s home in the Atlanta neighborhood of Oakhurst on May 2, 2014.

1.2.3 Memory

Documenting through narratives, storytelling, autoethnographies, observation, conversation and memory writing is a powerful response to academic elitism and the mystification of feminism that often crowds feminist spaces (hooks, 1989, Christian, 1987). We share our experiences to survive, flourish and cope with systems of power and oppression. Since I will be working with mostly lived experiences, I must acknowledge that memory is a present day construction. In order to better understand this I turn to Frigga Haug. In Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory, Haug and Others explain their writing experience,

“Thus experience may be seen as lived practice in the memory of a self-constructed identity. It is structured, by expectations, norms and values, in short by the dominant culture; and yet it still contains an element of resistance, a germ of oppositional activity” (Haug & Others, 1987, 42).

As the authors describe above, it is important to acknowledge and realize that oral narratives will be constructed in many ways whether that be social norms or modern day interpretation of past events. Memory often speaks more about who people are in the present rather than who they were then. This is acceptable and preferred in this project because memories are part of the process of becoming. Through this, Haug and Others point out how this approach achieves my goal-- that is, acknowledging memory and “the writing of history as a pathway to the present”
(Haug and Others, 1987, 46). It is through these narratives that I am attempting to chart the evolution of the Atlanta Pride Festival.

Memory work facilitates the type of raw emotion that I am seeking to uncover. Often people become nostalgic, emotional, and romantic when remembering specific life events. This says something about the time period they are remembering and something about the present moment. Since the Atlanta Pride Festival is an emotional event for many different reasons, I found this process to invoke many different emotions from participants. The experiences shared with me through memories helped me to navigate the possibilities and limitations of experience (Acker, Barry, Esseveld, 1991). Although memory is a constructed object of the past, present, and self, I firmly believe this method best suited my objective in charting the history and changes of Atlanta Pride through oral narratives.

1.2.4 Objectivity/Validity

The topics of objectivity and validity feel fraught with contradictions and uncertainty. I find myself going back and forth on how I feel about the word objectivity and if it something that is necessary for me to argue. In a utopic positivist world, objectivity would mean that in regards to research, a person’s subjective position would never interfere or sway an outcome. Pertaining to science this is a nice idea, however, no one can simply escape positionality and personal experience. With that, I do not want to escape my positionality or negate my experience. Since my project values experience very highly I turn to Donna Haraway, Ralph Bolton and Alison Jaggar to assess the different ways of interpreting objectivity and validity within my specific project.

Donna Haraway famously argues for techniques using situated, partial and embodied knowledges (Haraway, 1988). Haraway feels it is responsible to hold on to the word objectivity
but to recognize a feminist empiricism that must coincide with the term. “Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of the subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see” (Haraway, 1988, 583). Haraway demands personal accountability when one claims to know any truth, which is inseparable from feminist approaches to research. Haraway argues that objectivity and subjectivity are not divisible entities and they should not be severed. She is not claiming for universal truths and I agree with her. To claim a universal truth is to be irresponsible, unrealistic, and unaccountable. I feel it is my responsibility as a researcher to never universalize experience or make grand statements that exclude other unique experiences. It is not my goal to apply my participants’ experiences to all Atlanta Pride Festival attendees. This project is not intended to speak for all people who attended the Atlanta Pride Festival during this timer period. My intention is simply to chart the experiences of four participants concerning how they experienced the commercialization of the Atlanta Pride Festival.

Alison Jaggar argues that emotion has been stripped from the term “objectivity” and she wishes to bridge the gap connecting them in the production of knowledge. Jaggar argues that acknowledging neglected aspects of emotion, will bring us closer to a more valid, less biased view of how knowledge should be constructed (1989). She critiques the positivist approach to emotion in its use of the word and the association that it obscures validity. “This proposed account of theoretical construction demonstrates the simultaneous necessity for and interdependence of faculties that our culture has abstracted and separated from each other: emotion and reason, evaluation and perception, observation, and action” (Jaggar, 1989). I can not simply ignore my emotion and positionality, nor do I want to. My project wishes to capture characteristics that are typically not associated with the “objectivity” such as emotion, closeness,
memory and experience. In no way do I believe this invalidates the findings of my project. I believe the success of my work depended on emotionality, experience, conversation and closeness with the participants of this project.

Ralph Bolton addresses aspect of closeness to research participants in the chapter, “Tricks, Friends, and Lovers” which is featured in Taboo: Sex, Identity and Erotic Subjectivity in Anthropological Fieldwork. In this chapter Bolton argues for the importance of his personal relationships throughout his many years of research. He asserts that if he did not engage in certain relationships than he would not have gotten the type of information he was seeking. The part of his work that specifically resonates with me is his assertion of the benefits that closeness to the participants provides. “Ethnographic work, at its best, enmeshes us in the lives of the people we study” (Bolton, 1995, 159). While I definitely did not engage in sexual relationships with these people, I did form close bond with them. The interviews that shaped my research were personal (two were even in the homes of the participants) and I believe that the interviewees felt a closeness to me that facilitated trust and trustworthiness. Bolton mentions that his first responsibility was always to the people he studied and I will also uphold that value. The relationships I developed with the informants will assisted me in respecting them as people and friends first and as part of my research second.

After considering many different feminist perspectives on the objectivity and validity, I agree with Jaggar that emotion can never be removed from a researcher or a researcher’s process and evaluation. This is not a bad thing. Objectivity and subjectivity are not opposites. They are entangled to create a more valid approach to knowledge production and knowledge claims to truth. I agree with Haraway’s statement that “Feminist accountability requires a knowledge tuned to reasonance, not dichotomy” (Haraway, 1988, 588). Responsible research should take
into account one’s position, subjectivity, and lived experience but should be done ethically through a feminist empirical approach. I hope to show that claiming objectivity is not necessary for valid research through my ability to form personal relationships with the people I have interviewed while also producing valuable data, analysis and theory.

While experience is important and crucial to understanding and generating knowledge, it is important to remain aware that experience is more complicated and complex than it is often perceived to be. In her piece *Experience*, Joan Scott critiques the universalizing characteristics of experience. She notes, “The unifying aspect of experience excludes whole realms of human activity by simply not counting them as experience at least with any consequences for social organization or politics” (Scott, 276). What Scott calls for then is that experience be understood and recognized as a discursive formation shaped by individual perception. Scott not only discusses the authority afforded to experience but discusses the ways in which experience is historicized through the way “identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced” (Scott, 2008, 278). In my research, I do not privilege certain experiences over others simply by my own interpretation of what counts as relevant and valuable experience. I believe I resisted the temptation to privilege certain experiences over others and universalize the one I interpret as the experience of certain groups of people. I did not want to give in to establishing the “inconvertibility” that Scott describes as happening when experience is assumed to apply to an entire group rather than certain individuals. By universalizing experience, a sort of violence is committed by erasing the unique experience of those not included in the mass assumption of the privileged experience.

Another aspect of Joan Scott’s work that I have applied to my own is that of interpretation. I remembered that “Subjects are constituted discursively, but there are conflicts
among discursive systems, contradictions within any one of them, multiple meanings possible for
the concepts they deploy” (Scott, 278). This is very important not just for my research but also
for all Feminist research. At this point I am not certain how to handle this quandary since I have
little ways to communicate my ideas other than discursively, however, it is important to
remember that my research can be understood in other ways than what I intended. This is an
obstacle I continue to work through by imagining the many possibilities my work could be
interpreted and try to eliminate those obfuscating methods.

1.2.5 Positionality

Since I conducted research as an “outsider” and as an “insider” I incorporated
methodological theory by Kirin Narayan. In “How Native is a “Native” Anthropologist?”,
Narayan complicates the notion of insider authenticity. Narayan argues that dichotomous
categories essentialize the researcher and the researcher’s objectivity. Creating dichotomous
categories is a masculinist approach that I tried to avoid at all costs. Since I researched the
Atlanta Pride Festival having been an outsider for three previous years and as an insider for one
and a half years, I want to trouble what this means to have multiple locations as a researcher. I
was a committee member of Atlanta Pride, which could label me as having an “authentic
insider’s view” therefore leaving little room for my complexity through the minds of my readers
and research participants. I realize this could help my case of validity but it could also harm it.
Some could view my closeness as tainting my research or as skewing my interpretation. To
navigate this issue I was extremely forward and open about my multiple identity locations during
the research and interview process. Honesty is the best policy when it comes to a researcher’s
own positionality and how that potentially affects the findings. I have remained transparent in
regards to my position as a researcher and someone who was involved with the Atlanta Pride Committee.

1.2.6 Methodology Conclusion

Throughout my research, I have used Haraway’s mindset to utilize epistemologies of “location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims” (Haraway, 1988, 589). Since I relied heavily on the experience of others, and archived knowledge, I remained cognizant that my position as a researcher influenced my research in different ways, some of which benefitted my research. I acknowledge that the preconceptions I had of Atlanta Pride going into this project could have limited the scope of my research by framing the way I went about it. I actively maintained awareness of this and used it to benefit my research instead of letting it dictate which direction my research went. I tried not to let my insider status cloud my judgment or determine the outcome of my findings. Although my positionality could be seen as a limitation, I view it as a beneficial tool that allowed me to access information that could have otherwise been undiscovered.

1.3 Conclusion

Throughout my thesis I examined the time period in which Atlanta Pride became noticeably commercialized through corporate sponsorships and a formalized gay market. This happened most noticeably during the 1990s but more specifically around 1992-1997. Through personal interviews, I found out that the commercialization of the festival impacted people’s experience of it in complicated ways. Participants noted feeling validated by the commercialization of the festival but they also felt annoyed and uncomfortable by the
dominating presence of corporate sponsorships and advertisements. To inform my research I chose to utilize established research and histories that chart LGBTQ identities, the commercialization of gay spaces, capitalism and gay identity, and studies that analyze pride festivals. I collected data by interviewing four long-term attendees and/or organizers of the festival. This allowed me to chart Atlanta Pride’s history through oral narratives, personal testimonies, and experiences. Through the narrative inquiries and conversations, I gained critical insight into the way attendees perceived the Atlanta Pride Festival. This research is important not only to learn about the festival, but to also about build upon existing LGTBQ history. My work contributes to Atlanta’s history and charting our ever-changing social climate.
2 ECONOMICS AND THE LGBT MOVEMENT: THE FORMALIZATION OF GAY CONSUMERSHIP AT THE ATLANTA PRIDE FESTIVAL

2.1 Introduction

Although the progression of LGBT rights can be attributed to many things, one of the main factors is the recognition of gays’ and lesbians’ economic value (Chasin, 2000; D’Emilio, 1983). I chose to focus on 1992-1997 because of the drastic increases in attendance\(^9\) at the festival and also the accelerated presence of corporate sponsorships (visually, physically, and monetarily), which snowballed after 1993. This boost in Atlanta Pride Festival attendance during 1992-1997 is no coincidence. The 1990s proved to be a changing time for gays around the United States. Visibility and representation of gay people increased throughout this time period in television, media and activist organizations (Chasin, 2000; Walters, 2001). Of course gay niche marketing was happening before the 1990s but this targeted marketing became more direct and less closeted than it had previously been. Gay marketing became more obvious during this time period and it folded into a wide variety of platforms. One of those avenues for marketing was spaces and events intended for activism or political gain.

The relatively quick spread of gay marketing during the 1990s can be attributed to the publicized acknowledgement of gays’/lesbians’ higher than average annual income. The gay/lesbian market became legitimized through the claim that gays and lesbians had higher incomes\(^10\) than average heterosexual consumers (Chasin, 2000; Peñaloza, 1996). As Chasin points out, these studies were completely skewed and probably not accurate because the figures

\(^9\) The attendance reported varies from source to source. Mainstream media outlets purportedly under reported while some sources quite possibly over reported. It is estimated that in 1992, 70,000 people attended and by 1997 attendance was reported at over 250,000 (http://atlantapriderg.org/about/history/, Douglas-Brown, 2010).

\(^10\) Although this topic is out of the scope of this project, I find it important to note in order to fully understand how gays and lesbians became a desired market during the 1990s.
were taken from non-random samples of higher income populations (2000). Of course some gays and lesbian folks enjoyed an upper class lifestyle, but this certainly cannot be assumed of all (or even most) gays and lesbians. Although this claim has since been refuted for many reasons, it did not stop marketers from seeing dollar signs when they thought of the gay community in general. Regardless of if the claim was true or not, it served to boost gays and lesbians into the category of consumers worth targeting.

The 1990s signified a time when corporate marketers began formally acknowledging lesbian and gay people as a target market segment characterized by sexuality, purported disposable income, and a perceived lifestyle (Fugate, 1993). In 1994, Ikea aired the first American commercial that featured an obvious gay couple (Tsai, 2011). Companies were definitely catching on to the benefits of gay marketing and not being as discreet about it as was previously demanded by society. This newfound visibility and representation in advertisements and in the media provided the LGBTQ community with a way to gauge a company’s supposed gay-friendliness. This often helped consumers decide where to shop and even where to apply for employment based on the assumed open-mindedness of the participating companies (Jennifer Thomas, Interview, April 25, 2014; Tsai, 2011).

Given the subject matter of this project, it is important to briefly discuss what “gay” marketing means and how this category of people can be “targeted”. Since the term lifestyle does not necessarily equate with sexuality, the general consensus in marketing is that the category of “gay” is too broad and diverse for it alone to be a target market classification (Fugate, 1993; Peñaloza, 1996). Marketing research has indicated that although the idea of an identifiable gay and lesbian market based on lifestyle seems like an attractive and profitable idea, it is not quite that simple. One aspect that binds this so called market together is whether or not
companies/brands/corporations support gay friendly social and/or political views (Fugate, 1993). Many participants at the Atlanta Pride Festival assume that the companies sponsoring the festival are gay friendly in their practices and workplace environment (Duncan Teague, Interview, April 16, 2014; Jennifer Thomas, Interview, April 25, 2014). Of course this might not always be the case, but the participants’ perception of gay-friendliness among sponsors and vendors is a powerful tool that aids in the making of the gay and lesbian target market. The perception of gay friendliness is long-lasting and impacts participants’ consumer choices far after the festival is over (Jennifer Thomas, Interview, April 25, 2014).

Another factor that appeals to the gay market is advertising that demonstrates implicit or explicit gay and lesbian symbolism or imagery (Oakenfull, 2013). Implicit gay marketing, in general, shows people of the same-sex that could be interpreted as gay but not necessarily. Often, heterosexual consumers do not notice or interpret this type of advertising as gay. It is for this reason that implicit gay advertising is desirable from a marketer’s standpoint because they appeal to gay people but do not exclude heterosexual consumers who often do not notice the gay undertones. Explicit imagery is exactly as it sounds, the ads and marketing materials are very unambiguous about their intentions to be perceived as non-heterosexual. The marketing is definitively directed towards a certain group of people.

Another theory suggests that, in general, members of a social movement (like the LGBTQ movement) share a certain experience based on particular types of discrimination and exclusion which can allow them to be lumped together in certain types of marketing (Peñaloza, 1996). Although I find the latter theory to be a too universalizing, there are definite categories that people who fall into one or more of the LGBTQ classifications can be marketed to based on these theories.
Similar to other large pride festivals around the country, the organizers of Atlanta Pride came to understand the large amounts of funding and resources available through corporate sponsorships. As the Atlanta Pride festival grew and the organization had to accommodate a larger number of festival goers, the Atlanta Pride organizers were forced to become more business savvy in order to continue putting on a festival that the LGBTQ community had become accustomed to and expected each year. This chapter is focused on how the Atlanta Pride Festival became formally commercialized in the 1990s through business partners and corporate sponsorships. In the next section I expound upon the impending commercialization of the festival that led to the formalization of a gay market at the Atlanta Pride Festival. This was already happening around the country in many different facets of life and thus became more amplified and targeted at the Atlanta Pride Festival. Later, I discuss how inadvertently, gay consumership also became formalized at the Atlanta Pride Festival between 1992-1997. Through my research, I have come to the conclusion that the most recognizable system of formalized marketing came in the form of beverage companies who utilized targeted marketing to win over the gay and lesbian community at the Atlanta Pride Festival during this time period.

2.2 The Formalization of the Gay Target Market at Atlanta Pride

Although lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer folks have been consumers for quite some time (just as long as heterosexual consumers), it is during the time period of 1992-1997 that gay consumership became formalized at the annual Atlanta Pride Festival. The formalization of consumership at the festival did not happen overnight but rather snowballed.

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11 I use lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) in referencing festival goers here because all sorts of people attended the festival. When I speak about whom the festival was for or reference the community as a whole, I use LGBTQ to encompass those identities.

12 During the 1990s, most of the marketing and ad campaigns were not inclusive of transgender and queer populations but rather towards gay men and lesbians. Often when I speak of marketing I only refer to gays and lesbians because during the 1990s, that was the defined target market. Also, in certain parts of this paper I will only refer to gays and lesbians and that is because it was a trait of the decade (Fugate, 1993; Peñaloza, 1996).
year after year until the festival was reliant on corporate funding and sponsorships. Previous to 1992, the festival was more informal, homemade, and did not have a strict business plan (Sara Look, Interview, April 23, 2014; Donna Narducci, Interview, May 2, 2014). The festival relied on personal donations and local business sponsorships and partnerships in order to effectuate the festival and parade each year. The festival presented more like a casual event rather than a huge formal production.

Previous to 1993, Atlanta Pride consisted mostly of concerned community members and a handful of volunteers. According to Donna Narducci, the first official Executive Director\(^\text{13}\) of Atlanta Pride, the organization had no real business plan or budget before 1993. Narducci informed me that after the 1993 festival, Atlanta Pride went severely in debt and even faced lawsuits to recover debts owed to a local t-shirt company (Interview, May 2, 2014). The organization had purchased a large amount of t-shirts for the 1993 festival with the intention of selling them for a profit to fund the organization and to fund the following year’s festival. The t-shirt company did not require Atlanta Pride to pay up front but rather allowed them to pay after the t-shirts were sold at the festival. Donna estimated that Atlanta Pride bought over 50,000 t-shirts to sell at the 1993 festival. The t-shirts were not a hit at the festival and as a result Atlanta Pride was left with large amount of unsold merchandise (t-shirts) and debt.

The board had anticipated a real spike in attendance that year and were hoping for about 100,000 people to attend and we ordered something like 50,000 t-shirts. They [the board] were planning on selling them and so you know if we even sold a thousand-- so we just had boxes and boxes of t-shirts. They were the ‘93 t-shirts and I still see the emblem in my mind. So we had all those t-shirts left over and we had a $63,000 debt that we had to pay to the t-shirt company (Donna Narducci, Interview, May 2, 2014).

\(^{13}\) Narducci formally became the Executive Director in 1995. She remained the Executive Director until after the 2008 festival.
The organization went into severe debt of about $63,000 dollars that year and even had to recruit legal help to get them out of trouble (http://atlantapride.org/about/history/, 2014; Donna Narducci, Interview, May 2, 2014; Duncan Teague, Interview, April 16, 2014). The lawsuit threat was so serious that a couple of board members actually stepped down from their positions on the committee after this financial misadventure because they were afraid of losing their homes and personal assets due to the threatened lawsuit (Donna Narducci, Interview, May 2, 2014). Narducci and a few other board members took over and began an intensive fundraising campaign that consisted of donations, local fundraisers, and corporate sponsorships. She attested that they were very successful in recovering from the debt considering that they were not business savvy and had no real financial plan for the organization before that time.

The financial failure of the 1993 festival and the t-shirt disaster forced the board of directors to become cognizant of formal fundraising methods and in the process they developed a dependence on corporate sponsorships. Narducci and Teague both identify the 1993 t-shirt debacle as a major turning point for the festival,

I think up to that point it was a group of concerned individuals who put on the festival but weren’t really business minded about how it was put on. But when you get slapped with a lawsuit and $63,000 in debt, you learn business really quick. So we started putting together some plans for how to do it” (Donna Narducci, Interview, May 2, 2014).

Donna and a few key players of the organization came up with strict budgets, local fundraising efforts, and plans to utilize bigger sponsorships. In doing so, they were able to repay the t-shirt company under an agreed payment plan and prosper forward and continue to execute the festival for years afterward. She goes on to explain,

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14 The Atlanta Pride Festival still happens annually in Piedmont Park and still has an intense reliance on corporate sponsorships, donations and local business partners.
I would say that was definitely a turning point for the organization having to get business savvy. The Atlanta Pride Festival is really no different than any other festival here in Atlanta or elsewhere. You have to have the corporate dollars and you have to have the help from the businesses because you’re only going to raise so much from the attendees at the event or fees you’re going to charge people at the event. It’s just not going to cover it. So, that money has to come from somewhere. So ’93 definitely made us more business savvy. And we continued to get more business savvy (Donna Narducci, Interview, May 2, 2014).

From Donna’s perspective, the t-shirt calamity of 1993 is what propelled Atlanta Pride into a commercialized future. It was undoubtedly a defining moment for the organization and for the subsequent festivals to come. It is this precise moment in Atlanta Pride’s history that most clearly marks a change in the way organizers viewed survival options for the festival to persevere into the future. According to Donna, there was not an awareness of the festival as a financial entity until the large financial failure of the 1993 festival.

2.3 Beverage Companies at the Atlanta Pride Festival

Although research suggests that there is no way to specifically target the gay community based only on one’s sexuality (Fugate, 1993), there were many products and services that were (and still are) prominent at the Atlanta Pride Festival during 1992-1997. The most popular sponsors during this time period were Anheuser-Busch, Coors Lite\(^\text{15}\), Miller Lite, Coca-Cola, Delta Airlines, and Bud Light (1992-1997 Pride Guides). There was an obvious theme to the sponsors that were present during this time period. Most of the major sponsors during this time period appear to have been beverage companies. What these companies have in common is that they were willing to help fund the Atlanta Pride Festival in a time when a lot of companies in the

\(^{15}\) Interestingly, Coors had been openly anti-gay, but according to Duncan Teague, Coors had a gay-friendly family member who persuaded them that it was a good business move to sponsor Pride. I imagine this was because their competitors were there. The consensus is that Coors wanted gay/lesbian dollars but was not in support of gay/lesbian rights.
Southern United States would not (and even in a majority of the country). In addition, the perceived message was that these companies would treat their gay employees with respect and tolerance (Jennifer Thomas, Interview, April 25, 2014). Whether this was true or not is irrelevant because the perception of gay friendliness was strong enough to prompt many festival goers to develop a sense of consumer commitment and brand loyalty.

Big named corporations began supporting Atlanta Pride at the festival with donations and support. Although corporate support helped to continue the annual festival, the backing came at a high cost because the corporate presence affected the festival in many ways. According to my participants, the most noticeable changes were visual, affectual, and physical. The sponsorships at Atlanta Pride took many forms. Sometimes the companies would help advertise the festival, print posters and banners or provide beverages and other goods for Atlanta Pride to sell. Other times the companies would donate products or money. In the 1995 Pride Guide, there is a special thank you to the sponsors, “Pride would not happen without the financial support, help, and expertise of its sponsors” (1995).

Although corporate sponsorships may seem like an enticing way to decrease event cost and increase profit, the sponsorships come with some major drawbacks. The first and most noticeable drawback is how it changes the festival space visually. When companies become sponsors for an event, they want recognition so that their sponsorships become equivalent to paid advertising. Companies are basically paying to utilize space at an event for advertising. Although sponsorships may seem like an easy way to obtain “free” money, that could not be further from the truth. The companies proceeded to slap their logos on anything around including most media, staff t-shirts, and giveaways (Narducci, 2014). This altered the Atlanta

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16 Pride Guide is a publication that outlines the weekend’s festivities at Atlanta Pride. These often include a lot of advertisements and marketing. Pride Guides have been called different names but I use “Pride Guide” throughout this paper because that is what they are generally referred to.
Pride Festival in a way that visually polluted the atmosphere. The visual presence of company logos no doubt blemished the spirit of the festival, which had begun the 1990s with an organic feel (Jennifer Thomas, Interview, April 25, 2014). The visual presence of corporations’ brand and logos also shifted the experience of festival goers which I will go into in greater depth in the next chapter (Chapter 2).

It is through the appearance of social justice for the LGBT community that a marketplace was formalized at the Atlanta Pride Festival. As I’ve mentioned previously, 1992 marked a year that felt more intimate than other years and sponsors weren’t noticed as much even though they were there. In 1992, some of the sponsors were MARTA, Delta Airlines, and Bellsouth Mobility. Although these are major entities, participants did not feel that the advertising was very visible, noticeable or intrusive. In fact, the Pride Guide from 1992 was more concerned with social and legislative activism than it was with advertisements and marketing. From the Pride Guide, I gathered that in the moment, the LGBT community was more concerned with repealing sodomy laws and other oppressive laws rather than things like partying and gay marriage\(^{17}\).

The year 1993 marked the moment that beverage companies entered into the realm of the Atlanta Pride Festival. Anheuser Busch was a Platinum sponsor in 1993 and the following years after (Budweiser in 1994, Bud Light in 1995 and onward). Since 1993, beverage companies have created campaigns specific to pride festivals around the country and the Atlanta Pride Festival is no different. Beverage companies are arguably one of the first markets to target gay pride festivals. Following suit with other beverage companies, Coca-Cola joined the ranks in 1996 and has continued to sponsor the festival since.

Although drinking beverages is definitely not something exclusive to LGBTQ populations, there seems to be an obvious theme to the most prominent sponsors during this time.

\(^{17}\) Gay marriage is probably the most popular, mainstream platform currently.
period that I cannot conclude has to do with sexuality. Although drinking beverages (alcoholic in this case) is not a behavior exclusive to LGBTQ people, it does fit into the celebration themed festival. Since most of the beverage companies were related to alcohol, it seems that the way companies targeted gay prides at this time was by assuming gay festivals would be a great place to promote alcohol.

2.4 Conclusion

In summary, gay and lesbian target markets became a trending topic within marketing circles during the 1990s. Marketers started to realize that gay and lesbian consumers were a valuable market to tap into. The decade in general proved to change the way producers viewed gay and lesbian consumers. Thanks to a couple of biased studies, gays and lesbians were perceived as having a large amount of disposable income and were ready to spend it on “lifestyle” related goods and services. Not only was the gay community recognized as a community with expendable dollars (whether true or not), it changed the way corporations, companies, and businesses perceived the gay community as a whole.

Following suit with the rest of our capitalist nation during the 1990s, Atlanta Pride began utilizing and incorporating corporate sponsorships into the framework of the annual festival in order to pull out of a significant debt and also prosper forward into the future. The model stuck and continued to become more commercialized throughout the decade and into the new millennium.

During this time period, it appears that the most significant target market, which was formalized at the Atlanta Pride Festival, was developed through the promotion of alcoholic beverages to festival attendees. Although there were many more sponsors than just beverage companies, beer producers remained prevalent at the festival during this time period and into the
future. The gay and lesbian target market was formalized, not through strictly gay products, but through products that can be consumed by anyone regardless of sexuality. The formalization of this specific market arguably changed the entire structure, feel, atmosphere, and experience of the Atlanta Pride Festival. In the next chapter, I examine how participants experience the commercialization of the Atlanta Pride Festival and how this impacts participants’ perception of it.
Figure 1 A Bud Light advertisement from the 1994 Pride Guide
Figure 2 A Coors Light advertisement from the 1996 Pride Guide.
Figure 4 A Bud Light advertisement from the 1992 Pride guide.
1996 Atlanta Pride Celebration Sponsors

**CORPORATE SPONSORS**

**GOLD**
- Atlanta Marriott North Central
- Backstreet Atlanta
- Bud Lite
- Etc Magazine
- Southern Voice

**SILVER**
- The Coca-Cola Company
- Med Stat Ambulance
- Outwrite Bookstore
- South Cobb Computers
- Venus Magazine

**BRONZE**
- Brushstrokes
- Chapter 2
- Columbia Fun Maps
- Image Photo
- Southern Recycling

**RAINBOW**
- Abundant Grace
- Community Church
- Common Pond
- Highland Outfitters
- Naya Water

**FREEDOM**
- Southland Services

**INDIVIDUAL SPONSORS (FRIENDS OF PRIDE)**

**PURPLE**
- Mark C. Robertson

**BLUE**
- Deana Collins

**GREEN**
- James H. Knoll
- Phillip Rush

**YELLOW**
- Glen Paul Freedman and Allen Thornell
- Haven House at Midtown

**ORANGE**
- Worldspan Global

*Figure 5 A list of the 1996 sponsors.*
3 EXPERIENCING COMMERCIALISM AT THE ATLANTA PRIDE FESTIVAL

3.1 Introduction

Through the process of the Atlanta Pride Festival becoming commercialized, participants admitted feeling validated and proud while simultaneously feeling taken advantage of and marketed to. One of the major impacts commercialization had on the event was the way participants experienced the festival. Participants and organizers of the festival certainly experienced the festival in a different way once the commercialization became intertwined with almost every aspect of the festival and parade. One participant informed me that during the mid 1990s, she began to feel that her purpose of being at the festival was to be marketed to rather
than to be part of a movement. In this chapter I utilize participant interviews to show the commercialized setting can still offer meaningful experiences but that it also greatly impacts people’s perception and experience of the Atlanta Pride Festival.

### 3.2 Negotiating Identity Through Consumerism

Through my interviews, all of the participants mentioned how they navigate and experience their identities through consumerism and commercialism. The process is complicated and often induces mixed feelings for each of them. Put in the words of Alexandra Chasin, “In a consumer culture, subjectivity is negotiated in the marketplace” (Chasin, 2000, 13). The play on words in regards to Atlanta Pride is undeniable. The Marketplace at the Atlanta Pride Festival during this time period (and still today) was a long line of vendor tents at the edge of Piedmont Park. These vendors often sold things, advertised their businesses, or provided free give-a-ways that came donned with the company logos. This was a place where festival participants became aware of companies and businesses that were willing and able to participate in the Atlanta Pride Festival and presumably support gay rights. These businesses and corporations projected a message of acceptance of the lesbian and gay community at the festival. In addition to acceptance at the festival, some participants received the message that these businesses would also be accepting in the workplace and hopefully elsewhere. This in turn undoubtedly affected where participants chose to become consumers in the name of LGBT acceptance, liberation and hopefully permanent change.

Part of the marketing tactics businesses used when targeting the LGBT community during this time period was the hope that their perceived progressive views towards LGBT people would create a loyalty to their brand amongst people who also supported the same or similar causes (Tsai, 2011). This was undoubtedly motivated by profit but participants also
informed me that during the 1990s, having a company openly support LGBT rights was a big deal and something they appreciated regardless of the companies’ motives regarding marketing and advertising. During my interview with Jennifer Thomas, she admitted that although the intense level of sponsorships in 1996 and 1997 made her uncomfortable at times, it definitely influenced where she shopped and how she navigated the decisions regarding which businesses she supported.

There’s a sense of feeling okay, finally these corporations are seeing that my money matters to them, so there was a sense of feeling validated. So there’s that piece and then I think the other piece of it is that it’s materialistic. Pride to me, is not you selling things to me. It’s about me going and being with a group of people and I’m not really looking to be advertised to. You think about small town parades, that’s not what’s happening. And I get it, I’m glad Delta is on board and I have Delta Sky Miles, and I love Home Depot. All the companies that are in it, that’s where I shop. I use that to help me decide where I’m going to go and how I’m going to do my business but it feels like I don’t need that. And then there’s this piece that it speaks to a certain socioeconomic status and if you don’t fit in those then Pride is not for you. It is advertised for very wealthy, gay, white men and I obviously don’t fit into that category. That feels challenging in that it is pushing us to buy stuff and pushing us to be a certain way, and that’s unfortunate (Jennifer Thomas, Interview, April 25, 2014).

As Thomas mentioned, she is still influenced to this day because of businesses and corporations that supported the Atlanta Pride Festival during the 1990s. Jennifer shops at Home Depot over other home supply stores and flies with Delta over other airlines because in the back of her mind, she is always aware that those companies contribute(d) to Atlanta Pride and other pro-gay causes. She is also conflicted because a lot of the products that were being advertised to her are upper-class luxuries that a lot of the LGBT community simply cannot afford to partake in. She admitted struggling with the concept that a lot of the LGBT movement in general is advocating for rights for upper-class people, not the LGBTQ people who would prefer health care to gay marriage and fighting in the military. Thomas participated/participates in the middle-upper class LGBT consumption but recognizes that it is problematic. In this case, Thomas recognizes her
behaviors play into the larger capitalist mindset but she nonetheless still partakes by voting with her dollars in a way.

On a different note, it is important to comment on the point that Thomas made concerning why she went to Pride to begin with. She went to Pride during the 1990s because she wanted to hang out with people who she could relate to and have fun with in an open atmosphere. She did not go because she wanted to learn about the “gay-friendly” corporations who would later pick her as a customer. She went for community and celebration related to her sexuality and the friendships that come with that. Once Thomas became aware of the commercialization of the festival, her experience shifted. She noted that in 1992 and 1993, she felt the festival was smaller and more intimate. For her, it felt more like a political statement and activism. She recalled that at the 1996 and 1997 festivals, she noticed the intense advertising and marketing and felt turned off by it.

I felt like I was there to be sold something and not to participate in something. It felt like there was a difference in the movement as a whole. It felt like we moved from being a movement to being part of the larger society. Which is great, I think… but there are downfalls to that too (Jennifer Thomas, Interview, April 25, 2014).

Thomas no longer felt like she was part of a movement but rather part of a profit making process. She admits that this is part of the reason she does not go to Pride anymore.

Jennifer’s mixed feelings are common and not limited to just her experience. When I asked Sara Look about how she experienced Atlanta Pride during 1992-1997, she told me that there was a time when people did not go to Atlanta Pride to buy things but that now it feels like the expectation is for people to buy stuff while they are there,

I don’t have any other expectations about it anymore. And the market is so giant and I’ve been at Charis since 1994. We had a booth there in the early 90s and we stopped because it felt like it wasn’t big enough. And eventually, in the late 90s
we decided “oh we do need to have a booth again, and of course now we want to have a booth and we sell a lot and its all good. But there was a period of time where we felt that no one wanted to buy stuff. *No one wants to buy stuff at Pride!* We were told that because that’s not why you were there. Now, it feels like people are there to buy stuff (Sara Look, Interview, April 23, 2014).

As Look explains, Charis Books\(^1^8\) actually stopped going to the festival as a vendor at one point in the early 1990s because they were not selling any books and felt it was not worth the fee or their time. Now as she explained, they sell a lot of books and find it to be worth the experience to purchase vendor space and devote their time during that weekend. For Look the issue is complicated because on one hand she loves that Charis benefits from having a vendor table at Pride. They sell a lot of merchandise and are able to inform the community about Charis Books and Charis Circle\(^1^9\) and meet a wider audience than usual.

On the other hand she longs for the way the festival was in 1992. Although Look admits that she might be romanticizing the 1992 festival in her mind because it was her first Pride, she misses when it felt more homemade, intimate, and political. “They [Atlanta Pride] were still in the beginnings. Nothing felt so big and official even at that moment it was hard to get organizations on board” (Sara Look, Interview, April 23, 2014). According to Look, 1992 marked the year that was the sort of ending of an era for Atlanta Pride. She concluded that after 1992, the festival felt more organized and formal in a way that fostered a commercialized atmosphere.

Look doesn’t feel like the festival is political anymore. Although she admits it is sad, she feels like the festival is commercialized and that at this point, there is no other way that it could be. It just is.

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\(^1^8\) Charis is a feminist bookstore located in Little Five Points in Atlanta, Georgia. Charis is the nation’s oldest, independent feminist bookstore (http://www.charisbooksandmore.com/, 2014).

\(^1^9\) Charis Circle was created in 1996 as a separate non-profit entity. Charis Circle does programming for the community to enjoy (http://www.chariscircle.org/).
I don’t know exactly, over the years it has felt that Pride has become a party, it has become a celebration, it is a parade-- not a march. So it has a very different feel to me than in the beginning and it was already on that way when I started going. I think what’s sad to me is its so blatant now, it just is. I don’t have any other expectations about it anymore (Sara Look, Interview, April 23, 2014).

For Look and people who have only experienced Pride past 1992, the commercialized festival is all they know and expect. This is probably why when I asked Look and other participants what a non-commercialized Atlanta Pride would even look like; no one had a real answer. The conclusion was simply, “somebody’s got to pay for it” (Sara Look, Interview, April 23, 2014; Donna Narducci, Interview, May 2, 2014; Duncan Teague, Interview, April 16, 2014). The move towards a corporatized festival seems like it was inevitable due to survival and monetary necessity but none of the participants had another solution to offer. It seems that this is part of the larger ideas about capitalism and the supposed inevitability of it.

All of the participants in this study agree that the commercialization of the Atlanta Pride Festival was not an intentional, strategic game plan to become rich but rather a snowball happening that occurred slowly and gradually during the 1990s. As Look explains, “I don’t know that it was that deliberate. In my mind, it was just “we need money” and this is the way to get it. Because now this party is so big and expensive and the community expects this of us” (Sara Look, Interview April 23, 2014). The most common response I received was “somebody’s got to pay for it” given the model of the celebration (Look, 2014; Teague, 2014). All of the participants expressed some discontent with the way the corporate sponsors are presented currently but they agree that the move towards corporate sponsorships was somewhat unavoidable due to the lack of funds available to Atlanta Pride during the early 1990s and the economic climate of the United States. Given that the Atlanta Pride Festival began the 1990s with a homemade feel and ended the decade with a more formally commercial atmosphere, it is interesting to think of what this does to one’s perception and experience of the festival during
and long after. This does something to the atmosphere and thus certainly to the experience of the celebration.

Thomas explained that she no longer goes to the festival because there are too many people and because she feels marketed to rather than part of a movement. She explained,

I don’t go to Pride now. I have been to Pride maybe twice in the past 7 years. There’s too many people and I find it to be congested. There was definitely a shift between ‘92 to ‘97. I remember the first time I saw a big company have a booth and have something displayed there and feeling really happy about that and being like, ok, I spend my money here, this makes sense that you would be here. But I also feel like it got too big. Now there’s a mile and half of Delta, and a mile and half of Coke walking in the parade. I feel like now I’m just being advertised to as opposed to feeling part of a community (Jennifer Thomas, Interview, April 25, 2014).

Jennifer remembers feeling validated by the presence of large businesses attending the Atlanta Pride Festival but she also feels taken advantage of in some way. She also mentioned that she feels less important at the festival now. She remembers that during the early 1990s, she would always donate money at the festival but now she does not feel like her dollars matter because the big corporations provide such a large amount of funding. As a result, Thomas has less of a vested interest in the festival and believes that her contributions do not make a difference at all.

I felt less needed to give money or donate, I felt more compelled to give money to the event earlier on in the years and less like I mattered. My individual five dollar donation mattered much less in 1997 than it did in 1992. So I have a less vested interest because my money is not as important. Then you know you would have like whole sections of JUST advertisements. The markets and booths would be segregated by that. I guess you could just completely avoid going over there if you wanted to (Jennifer Thomas, Interview, April 25, 2014).

Thomas’s feelings of not making a difference and that her dollars are not as important as corporate dollars are indicative of the long-lasting effects of the commercialization of an activist movement. What does it mean that festival goers no longer feel that their dollars or presence even make a difference at a gathering meant to “promote unity, visibility, and self-esteem”? 
Jennifer’s decision to basically stop attending the festival after 1997 is a telling statement of the lasting effects of commercialism.

Another aspect Thomas mentioned was that because capitalism follows money, and during that time men made more than women, the festival was heavily centered on men’s sexuality.

So let’s think about what was on the table for giveaways... condoms, there were not dental dams for women, it was very heavily marketing towards men. For you to pick up things, there’s condoms everywhere you go, but nothing for women or even people talking about what safe sex is for lesbians. Capitalism follows where they think money is at. Men make more than women, there’s the stereotype that gay men are more wealthy than lesbians are and they market to that. I think back to the advertisements and how it is promoted. There’s no people of color on the advertisements, its just white, white men. That’s how I remember it (Interview, Jennifer Thomas, April 25, 2014).

Thomas, at times, felt marginalized by the male-dominated space and also felt that her sexuality was ignored because she was not a man. In addition, she perceived the festival as being predominantly white and upper-class.

When I asked Duncan how the atmosphere of Atlanta Pride felt before and after the commercialization of the festival, he responded,

I don’t know that you can feel the difference between 100,000 and 200,000. Its a whole lot of people and maybe what shifted for me, kind of slowly because I knew a whole lot of folks, but for other people more drastically is that when I would attend it, I would know many people there. I still do but the more hundred thousands you add, the more diluted that becomes and the more you’re in a crowd of familiar strangers. Or not so familiar strangers (Duncan Teague, Interview, April 16, 2014).

For Duncan the commercialization of the festival was directly related to the attendance boost during the 1990s. He described the event as going from an intimate political affair with friends, to a humongous event with hundreds of thousands strangers. He explained that the event started the decade as an occasion with friends and activism and that it moved towards an extremely large
party that celebrated LGBTQ identities. “I think it is still a big party but you know what, I’m ok with us having a big party once a year because I remember what it was like when that was illegal” (Duncan Teague, Interview, April 16, 2014). Even though the event ended the decade drastically different than when it started, Duncan felt that the mere fact that hundreds of thousands of LGBTQ people were gathering together in Piedmont to celebrate sexuality was (and is) a positive thing.

Sara Look expressed that she, like Duncan, believed Pride turned into a huge party, not a political statement. Look is not as comfortable with the shift as Teague. She explained,

It felt like the Dyke March\(^2\) was the only political thing happening. In our minds it was like “this [Dyke March] is where the politics are happening, no one else is doing anything or trying to make any statements” (Sara Look, Interview, April 23, 2014).

Thinking about Look’s perception of Pride the party versus Pride the march, it seems that there is a sentiment of a loss of politicalness. For her, a march is more political and demanding rather than going to Piedmont Park to celebrate and be seen. My interpretation of Look’s feelings is that for her, a march is more demanding, serious, and urgent while a parade is more celebratory and less political. Unlike Look, Duncan believes that simply “doing” Pride is political and something worth celebrating.

Another aspect that changed for Teague (unlike Thomas’s perception) was the many different types of people that began attending the festival later in the decade. Teague asserted that he is fine with a big party to celebrate LGBTQ identities and that as the attendance numbers grew, so did the diversity of the crowd (Duncan Teague, Interview, April 16, 2014, 2014). In

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\(^2\) The Dyke March at the Atlanta Pride Festival was started in 1993 by the Atlanta chapter of The Lesbian Avengers (http://atlantapride.org/about/history/, 2014). Sara Look was one of the original founders of The Dyke March in Atlanta and of the Atlanta chapter of The Lesbian Avengers.
referencing the continuous diversification of the Atlanta Pride Festival Duncan mentioned that people can no longer label the Atlanta Pride Festival as strictly white.

I’ll tell you what I do like though, is that the Pride celebration I went to, this past year, no year before [2012], was one of the most diverse experiences I’ve ever had with People of Color and especially African American and Latino participants and people lining the parade route. It was not, as some people like to call it, the white pride celebration. It wasn’t. And I wish folks would move past that. Yes there is a Black Gay Pride21, but there is also another Pride celebration where the entire community is invited. And it looks like the entire community is invited and we worked hard for that. In ‘92 I worked very hard to get the black gay organizations in town, not only to come to gay pride but to be sectioned together so that it had more of a critical mass. So we were together in the parade and together in the park so there was a section and it was a blast! And people appreciated it from all over the community because it made a statement about how prominent the black gay community is here. Now they don’t all have to be grouped together because there are so many and we are so involved and a lot of the places are integrated but there was a time when that wasn’t true. Several organizations would go by and you wouldn’t see a black face, and now that isn’t the case and especially in the younger organizations. It’s amazing. (Duncan Teague, Interview, April 16, 2014).

For Teague, the utilization of corporate sponsorships brought larger crowds and with those larger crowds came a more diverse event population. Duncan also brought attention to the fact that with more money and resources the organization was able to make the festival more accessible for people with disabilities. While I would not attribute the diversity and accessibility of the festival solely to the commercialization of it, as the festival grew, more and more people began to attend festival and take part in the atmosphere created by Atlanta Pride and their sponsors.

In addition to diversity, Narducci pointed out that because of the resources that became available to Atlanta Pride after 1992, the organization was able to provide more to the

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21 Black Gay Pride is also known as In The Life Atlanta Black Pride. The annual event started in 1996 and happens annually in Atlanta to celebrate the experience of African American LGBT people living in Atlanta (http://inthelifeatlanta.org/, 2014).
community to experience and enjoy while at the festival. Although the newfound amenities came at a price (advertising, product placement, logos, and marketing), the community seemed to come to expect a certain level of entertainment, location, and giveaways that became available through funding and sponsorships. Donna explained,

From an organizational perspective, I can tell you that we were able to provide more for the community and a lot of the expenses in putting on the event are things people don’t even think about. It costs so much money just to get the permits from the city, pay the police officers so that people can be safe, and of course those costs skyrocketed in ’96 after the Centennial Olympic bombings and from that point out we couldn’t just have our t-shirt security system. We had to have real police and so the real police took real advantage of that and got paid a lot of money. And if you -- our community has always wanted good entertainment, and our community is so diverse, so trying to be all things to every facet of our community, ya know it’s like how’s it all gonna happen? Where’s the dollars that are going to make that happen? (Donna Narducci, Interview, May 2, 2014).

From Narducci’s perspective, utilizing sponsorship money enabled the organization to provide the type of entertainment, location, security, and atmosphere that was demanded by the festival participants and by the city and park ordinances. She argues that people would not have as much to experience without the type of money that corporate sponsors provided to the festival. I cannot disagree with her. One could not execute this type of large-scale event without the sort of money obtained by the organization from corporate sponsors, business partners, and donations.

Another way the corporate sponsorships shifted the environment of the Atlanta Pride Festival was by physically reconfiguring the space. According to Look, the festival felt smaller and more community oriented in 1992, “Nothing felt so big and official, even at that moment is was hard to get organizations on board” (Sara Look, Interview, April 23, 2014). Jennifer

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22 Large events held in the city of Atlanta must pay for police presence, fees, and other charges. These “services” and thus charges are not optional. Similarly events held in Piedmont Park are subjected to rental fees and other fees associated with the rental.
Thomas also noted that at the 1992 and 1993 festival, the booths were not seemingly or blatantly corporate. By 1996, Thomas noted that the corporate sponsors basically legitimized the event but not necessarily in a way that was attractive to festival goers but more so to society at large,

   God, just the shit you would be handed. You would leave with a bag full of tons of wasted glossy paper. To the point where you are like NO! I dont want that! I’m walking around having a good time, I’m not shopping for health insurance right now. It felt like there was a difference in the movement as a whole. It felt like we moved from being a movement to being part of the larger society. Which is great, I think… but there are downfalls to that too. You’ve got HIV awareness over here and this corporate thing over there and those two things seem out of place to me-- not together. It’s dialectic (Jennifer Thomas, Interview, April 25, 2014).

For Thomas and Look, the physicality of corporate presence was not compatible with LGBTQ rights and social platforms that were happening at the festival. Interestingly though, having the corporate sponsors present at the Atlanta Pride Festival gave certain participants a feeling of validation that society was finally starting to recognize lesbian and gays (because really, at that time, that is the population that was recognized and targeted (Peñaloza, 1996) as citizens worthy of participating in capitalist market practices guised as social justice.

**Conclusion**

To sum up this chapter, participants experienced the Atlanta Pride Festival in many ways throughout 1992-1997. Some people experienced similar feelings, emotions, and sentiments regarding the commercialization that took place so rapidly throughout the 1990s. Some of those similarities included feeling lost in a gargantuan crowd, being relentlessly marketed to but simultaneously feeling validated by the presence of large, mainstream corporations. Participants found comfort (even if momentary) and validation in the presence of big name sponsors at this particular gay pride event. Even though participants felt a sense of achievement from the newly commercialized setting, most
participants admitted that at some point they became uncomfortable with the intensity and speed at which the corporations took over space at the Atlanta Pride Festival.

While some participants admitted that the commercialized setting made them uncomfortable at times, others argued that large sponsorships made it possible to have a pride celebration that could accommodate a wider and more diverse audience. According to Narducci and Teague, sponsorships are the reason the festival exists today on such grand scale. Narducci and Teague also argue that Atlanta Pride was able to accommodate a wider range of people\(^{23}\) with better results after utilizing large-scale sponsorships. In addition, Narducci and Teague acknowledged that sponsorships helped to continue providing entertainment and security at the annual event.

Participants also mentioned that during the 1990s, the presence of large corporations made them feel validated and confirmed that they were valuable, whole citizens worthy of mainstream recognition. Every participant (Sara Look, Donna Narducci, Duncan Teague and Jennifer Thomas) that I interviewed acknowledged having mixed and complicated feelings about the corporatized festival. On one hand it felt good to have support and backing but on the other hand, the new model of the festival made it less personal and intimate. The commercialized setting also opened the participants up to feeling marketed to and as a result, taken advantage of as a community. Although participants expressed discomfort with the festival, they did not offer solutions for alternative versions of a pride festival in Atlanta. In conclusion, participants maintained that they experienced a wide range of emotions about the commercialization of the Atlanta Pride Festival. The participants acknowledged that although they would have preferred a less commercialized atmosphere, the festival was quite meaningful and profound to them in many ways regardless of blatant commercialism.

\(^{23}\) One example of this is making the festival more handicap accessible.
4 CONCLUSION

This thesis project focused on the commercialization of the Atlanta Pride Festival during the years of 1992-1997. I interviewed four participants for this project who provided me with their experience, stories, and feelings. I utilized these participant interviews to gather information about the social climate during the 1990s in general and about the social climate at the Atlanta Pride Festival during this time. I also utilized these interviews to gain insight into how the commercialization of the festival impacted people’s experience of the Atlanta Pride Festival event during 1992-1997.

It is through my research that I determined that the Atlanta Pride Festival, following suit with the capitalist climate of the country, progressively became commercialized during the 1990s. The years 1992-1997 marked the time period where the changes can be noticed the most due to corporate sponsorships, rise in attendance, and participant testimony. The commercialization of the Atlanta Pride Festival did not happen overnight but rather snowballed year after year until the organization became dependent on corporate sponsorships and donations. The year that most distinctly marked this transition was 1993. Participants of this study noted that 1993 felt more crowded, bigger, more commercial, and more focused on consumerism than the festival had felt in previous years.

Target markets also became formalized at the festival during this time period. The most noticeable marketers were alcoholic beverage producers. These particular sponsors had a strong presence at the Festival during this time period. It is the only sponsor/advertiser that can be uniformly noted as targeting consumers at the Atlanta Pride Festival during the 1990s. The connection to “lifestyle” that alcoholic beverage producers were utilizing was based on the assumption that the festival was a celebration and therefore people would be prone to drinking
alcohol. Alcoholic beverage consumption cannot is not limited to LGBTQ people and is not determined by sexuality but because of the celebratory tone of the Atlanta Pride Festival, I assume alcohol companies found this to be an attractive market.

Once target markets were eventually formalized at the Atlanta Pride Festival during 1992-1997, participants noticed changes in their experience of it. Participants mentioned feeling like the festival got too big really fast and they no longer felt like they were at a political event. Participants felt that the intimacy of Atlanta Pride was no longer possible after the early 1990s but rather it became a huge production that the LGBTQ community came to demand and expect. Other participants noted that the funds from corporations were significant and allowed the organization to provide a lot more to the local LGBTQ community through entertainment, giveaways, a prime location and general accessibility.

Although participants still enjoyed the Atlanta Pride Festival and were fond of it, they also felt uncomfortable with the dominating presence of sponsors, advertising, and marketing that became blatant at the event. While simultaneously finding consolation in mainstream corporate presence and feeling uncomfortable by their presence, participants had to balance their mixed feelings while experiencing the Atlanta Pride Festival and also long after it. Some participants even admitted that they still shop and support companies that were present at the Atlanta Pride Festival during 1992-1997 but many of them do not attend the festival anymore because they feel it is too large and too commercialized. There were also not many solutions offered in regards to alternative forms of a pride festival that was not commercialized. In summary, all four participants in this study experienced and expressed pleasure and discomfort with the commercialization of the Atlanta Pride Festival during its 1990s evolution. They all acknowledged that it is nice to be recognized as a legitimate group of people, but that the
mainstream recognition of the LGBTQ community comes with downfalls that take away from the intimate atmosphere that was the Atlanta Pride Festival prior to 1993.
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