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2021

https://doi.org/10.25595/3974

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Zulier, Nino Giuliano: *Conceptualization of a Queer Cyberspace: ‘Gay Twitter’*, in: FZG (FZG – Freiburger Zeitschrift für GeschlechterStudien), Jg. 27 (2021) Nr: 1, 95–111. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/3974.

Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here: https://doi.org/10.3224/fzg.v27i1.07

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Freiburger Zeitschrift für Geschlechterstudien 27: 95-111

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Conceptualization of a Queer Cyberspace: 'Gay Twitter'

Abstract: This paper seeks to investigate the digital transition from queer, physical spaces to queer, virtual spaces and its subcultural importance within the queer community. A trialectic spatiality approach (Lefebvre 1991; Soja 1996) will be applied to the cyberspace of Twitter in order to explore a particular subversion of a social media platform into a queer cyberspace through a user-established, unique, subcultural sign and code system. By researching the particular experiences of virtual, queer identities on Twitter, the social media platform is characterized as a thirdspace, using the example of 'Gay Twitter', conceived as a spatial phenomenon. The essay examines cultural semiotics and the 'invisible,' virtual confines of a queered Twitter realm by showcasing the linguistic, contextual and visual markers which create such an 'imagined,' exclusive, virtual Twitter community. Subsequently, the cybercommunity creation and the establishment of norms and discourses reveal beneficial traits associated with a transition from physical to virtual spaces, but also negative aspects such as virtual gate-keeping, dominant gender and sexuality norms, internal discrimination and underrepresented groups and identities in a queer cyberspace.

Keywords: Cyberspace; Twitter; Queer Culture; Digitalization; Cultural Semiotics.

Konzeptualisierung einer Queeren Cyberräumlichkeit: 'Gay Twitter'

Zusammenfassung: Diese wissenschaftliche Ausarbeitung befasst sich damit, welche subkulturelle Bedeutung der gesellschaftliche Übergang queer-physischer zu queer-virtueller Räumlichkeiten auf die Queer Community hat. Um dies zu untersuchen wird vorerst ein Denkansatz der trialektischen Räumlichkeit vorausgesetzt, welcher auf den Cyberspace Twitter angewandt wird und somit den Wandel dieser Social Media Plattform, welche durch die user-etablierten, einzigartigen, subkulturellen Zeichen- und Codesysteme in einen bestimmten queeren Cyberspace transformiert wird, darstellen soll. Durch die Erforschung spezifischer Erfahrungen virtueller queerer Cyberidentitäten anhand des Gegenstandes des räumlichen ‚Gay Twitter'-Phänomens wird dementsprechend jene Twitterräumlichkeit als Thirdspace charakterisiert. In diesem Sinne möchte diese Ausarbeitung durch die Darstellung linguistischer, kontextueller und visueller Kennzeichen die kulturelle Semiotik und den ‚unsichtbaren', virtuell-begrenzten und vorgestellten queeren Twitterbereich und dessen virtuelle Community skizzieren. Folglich werden durch die Produktion einer solchen Cybercommunity in dieser ausgewählten virtuellen Räumlichkeit sowohl die vorteilhaften Eigenschaften, die ein Übergang von physischer zu virtueller Räumlichkeit mit sich bringen, als auch, durch die Etablierung von bestimmten Normen und Diskursen, Aspekte virtueller Gatekeeping-Mechanismen, dominierend-idealistischer Geschlechter- und Sexualitätsnormen, interner Diskriminierungsprozesse und das Ignorieren ausgewählter Personengruppen und Identitäten in solch einer queeren Cyberspace erläutern.

Schlagwörter: Virtuelle Räumlichkeit; Twitter; Queere Kultur; Digitalisierung; Kultursemiotik.

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Introduction

Looking back at the beginning of the global Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, individuals were forced to reorganize their daily lives in a matter of days in order to minimize the risk of contagion by reducing all unnecessary public activities and face-to-face social or professional interaction. This had drastic consequences and was backed up by lockdown measures including the closure of recreational spaces such as bars, restaurants, and cafés – venues which are integral to the culture of 21st-century society. Recreational spaces affect individuals' social affiliations by allowing them to pick a preferred cultural space according to personal preferences and subcultural belonging. Today, queer bars, as an example of such a space, can be described as important cultural 'rooms' where a subculture – in this case, a queer one – can be realized, expressed, and lived out without imminent fear of heteronormative repercussions or invasions. Weekly organized gatherings, such as public viewing of the queer cultural TV competition *RuPaul's Drag Race*, function to bring the queer community together in one physical spatiality and support the celebration of queer culture in a self-created safe space. Such events not only express communal solidarity, but also give individuals the opportunity to optimize their personal life by finding new friends, love interests, or opportunities to escape the reality of heteronormativity. With this in mind, while the pandemic's social distancing measures affect everyone, the bar closures, in particular, took the abovementioned physical, safe spaces away from the queer community – a community which already suffers from a limited amount of liberty of action.

In the wake of technological advances, however, newly established virtual spaces have gained in importance, offering the queer community opportunities to create digital queer spaces. During the pandemic crisis, this means that physical social interactions can be replaced by those taking place in a virtual spatiality, as cyberspace became the only safe spatiality in which to interact with others. The era of the internet in the 21st century promotes the digitalization of human life, expanding the limits of the possible by introducing this transition from physical to digital life. The introduction of Web 2.0 dispensed with the "tension from the 1990s, when public opinion decomposed into an amalgam of informal opinions of private individuals not entirely convinced by the formal ones, issues by publicistically effective but one-way communication media" (Ionescu 2014: 57). While user participation was further encouraged by the novel scope of user-generated content, the Web 2.0 concept enriched cyber users with a comprehensive user experience by adding functions such as clicking and enlarging images and universal, simplified web access, in particular, expedited the exponential growth of digital spaces and the number of participants.

Since interpersonal networking was part of the updated version of the web, social platforms started to multiply as well. In the early 20th century, conventional digital networking in the form of browsing through a forum or sending emails on a static PC was the norm. Nowadays, however, social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Tumblr and Twitter dominate society's digital

interactions, navigated via smartphones. This has encouraged the production of specifically queer digital platforms, allowing individuals to enter queer cyberspaces, interact with other queer people, construct queer digital identities, and enjoy a sense of belonging. Current social platforms, such as Twitter or Grindr therefore represent spaces where queer culture can thrive and non-heteronormative individuals, in particular, can interact internationally with other members of their community, construct and represent new queer identities, and escape heteronormative reality without physically entering a specific space.

Although Grindr, Her, Teadate, or Planet Romeo are digital social media dating spaces targeted towards queer users, this essay focuses on the rather unconventional digital queer space of Twitter (Yeh 2018: 7). In contrast to these other apps, Twitter was not intentionally created as a queer digital space by its founders. Yet, starting well before the Covid-19 pandemic, and gathering pace during the 'lockdown', queer individuals have gravitated toward digital spaces in order to participate in both their own and the wider online queer community's self-created spaces (Shen-Berro 2020; Haynes 2020; Hereford 2020; Hammack/Watson 2020). In fact, Twitter has shown itself to be a cyberspace with the potential to be transformed by its users into all kinds of culturally meaningful spaces.

Accordingly, this essay analyzes the concept and production of a queer, imaginary, and virtual spatiality by way of the social network site and cultural cybersphere Twitter. To this end, the particular queer cyberspace phenomenon of 'Gay Twitter' is conceptualized by focusing on its position within the queer spectrum, as well as its accessibility and unique sign and code system. Furthermore, the prospects of such a cyberspace, in terms of political, societal, and identitarian constituents in conjunction with physical spaces, necessitate discussion.

The Production of (Cyber)Space: A Theoretical Background

In Cultural Studies, a locality in a culture is defined structurally, semiotically, and semantically by its multiple layers. French sociologists Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau are essential theorists who address the particular concepts of spatiality (Lefebvre 1991; de Certeau 1984). Applying their theories to a recreational space: before a bar becomes a bar it is important to think about its specific framework. The practical layout of the bar and the objects it contains, i.e. barstools and alcohol, turn it into a space in the collective cultural imagination and by mutual consent. According to Stuart Hall's theories on cultural representation and signifying practices, a culture is navigated by a constructed sign and code system (e.g. language) which mediates between the world and the mental concepts of that culture as shared in a society. A culture's shared codes govern the translation between objects, concepts and language. Thus, codes stabilize meaning, which thus becomes conventionalized and naturalized to an extent. Such a system of representation is perpetuated by a certain agreement in a culture about the meanings assigned to objects such as a barstool. As Hall states, culture is "not given by nature or fixed" but "the result of a set

of social conventions", "fixed socially, fixed in culture" (1997: 22). Individuals use objects, products and practices deliberately in order to convey meaning. The combination of objects placed in a room determines the way they are perceived and interpreted. This example illustrates the transformation of a place – defined as the relatively static physical shape and geographical position of the location concerned – into a space, theorized as a social product formed by social practices (de Certeau 1984: 117f). Place is thus a physical, objective, impersonal, stable, and "neutralized concept of a location which can be charged with meaning," whereas space is psychological, subjective, emotional, experiential, dynamic, and existential. Notably, "vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables" are regarded as additional mobile elements of a developed space.

Following Lefebvre's and de Certeau's elaborate and advanced research, American urbanist Edward Soja continued their work, furthering the idea of Lefebvre's 'trialectics of spatiality.' Lefebvre argues in *The Production of Space* (1991) that spatiality can be categorized as "physical," "mental," and "social space" (11). In Soja's research on Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places (1996) he used Lefebvre's trialectic approach, but named the three-layered spaces "firstspace," "secondspace," and "thirdspace" (10). According to Soja, firstspace describes the perceived space. In a similar manner to de Certeau's 'place,' firstspace is a physical place which creates the material conditions in society (1984: 117). Secondspace is the conceived space which describes a space's theoretical intention and agenda. Here, a culture's conception of a space, a utopian imagination, is in the foreground. Both firstspace and secondspace represent ideational and culturally constructed space. Thirdspace, the lived space, focuses on the social relations taking place in a space; the active experience of everyday life and the subversion of a space by the individual becomes central. Thirdspace is a "purposely tentative and flexible term that attempts to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings" and it is "a space that is common to all of us yet never able to be completely seen and understood, an 'unimaginable universe'" (Soja 1996: 56; 2).

To return to the example of a bar, a queer bar can be physically built (firstspace) and introduced and presented by cultural intentions and ideals (secondspace), designating it as a LGBTQIA+-friendly space. However, an individual's perceptions of the space may run counter to the space's cultural agenda and attribution of queer inclusion. Trans[1] individuals, for example, may perceive a specific queer bar as transphobic due to the bar's atmosphere or interactions with the security guards, among other discriminatory practices, while the (cisgender queer) owner, newspapers, or other cisgender visitors simultaneously (re)present and experience it as queer-friendly (thirdspace). Thus, the concept of thirdspace becomes a powerful tool for ascertaining an individual's experience of a space and its underlying meaning to the said individual. Thereby, matters of systematic and institutionalized discrimination, collective intersectional discourses, and integral, interpersonal and subcultural dynamics within a space and a community become visible.

Since society has transitioned into a new digital age with virtual spatial dimensions, it has become important to investigate the concept of thirdspace in cyberspace alongside the digital experiences and opportunities of individuals engaging with it. Cyberspace is a relatively new space. It does not immediately appear to incorporate the place versus space or the trialectic spatiality perspectives that are intrinsic to the abovementioned theories. This is because cyberspaces have no particular initial concrete physical place, which would be necessary to effect a transformation from place into practiced space. Nevertheless, when using the internet, the virtual and structural component of the web, i.e. a programmed website or app, corresponds to de Certeau's static, fixed, purportless place, Lefebvre's physical space, and Soja's firstspace (perceived). Furthermore, the intention of a website, as communicated through its images, links, ideas, and imagination, and created by users and founders, transforms it into de Certeau's practiced, social space, Lefebvre's mental space, and Soja's secondspace (conceived). It follows that the way users experience such digital platforms and the subversions of a website's intrinsic intentions reflects Lefebvre's social space and Soja's thirdspace (lived).

Investigating Gay Twitter

Twitter as a digital platform has altered the way individuals interact with one another. On this microblogging service, users can spread information quickly by tweeting, connecting with others through comments, liking tweets, re-tweeting with or without a comment, or private messaging (Kwak et al. 2010: 591). Each tweet has a 280-character limit and each user can customize a brief profile about themselves, featuring a header and profile picture and a mini biography (592). Public profiles can also include a name, username, location, web page, and tweet count. In terms of the spatiality of Twitter, these structural, functional, and organizational components of the website can be identified as the firstspace. This means that the digital place is visibly perceived and virtually programmed. Even though it is not a physical space per se, its digital interior, similar to a bar's firstspace description of chairs, alcohol, dance floor, and bar, has a layout that encompasses fixed, purportless characteristics. This firstspace layer, however, can be said to be transformed into a secondspace by a Twitter community and the Twitter user, because as soon as a text is placed in a society, meanings will be attributed to it based on the combination of signs and codes it contains. Within this secondspace, the functions of Twitter dictate its claim to be a microblogging service, where users can interact with each other for professional or personal reasons. The imagined and idealistically conceived and mental space of Twitter, proposed by the founders themselves, does not align with its function as a queer digital space, in contrast to specifically programmed queer social media apps. Nevertheless, Web 2.0 introduced subversive possibilities; for example, Twitter's format, its users' content-producing abilities and powers, along with the functions of the social media app have enabled a queer community to subvert the initial purpose of Twitter when viewed through the thirdspace lens, as follows.

In "What is Twitter, a social network or a news media?" (2010), Haewoon Kwak et al. (2010) takes up the matter of a digital community in a virtual space by introducing the process of homophily on Twitter. According to McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook et al., homophily refers to the tendency that "a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people" (416). In Kwak, Lee, Park and Moon's research, the two parameters of investigation of homophily on Twitter are geographic location and popularity (594). Here, the focus is on the way the interaction and content enforce homophily and eventually conceptualize a so-called Gay Twitter. Users who share similar interests follow similar users. This also means that tweets by users who are not on the following list may still appear on the personal timeline, if retweeted or liked by someone who is following them. In his work "Imagined Communities" (2006) Benedict Anderson introduces a theory of nationality, community, and country togetherness. This theory can also be applied to Twitter and the queer thirdspace that is produced as Gay Twitter, since the latter can be described as an imagined but also lived community within Twitter's cyber spatiality (6). Such a virtual environment involves a constructed sense of belonging, even though not all members are known to each other. Users and their digitally-released content on Twitter come together to construct this 'imagined' Gay Twitter area.

The way individuals now experience, reproduce, or subvert a digital space like Twitter as a queer subculture and a queer thirdspace is particularly apparent in the media. In 2020, there was a rise in coverage of trending topics and discussions within Gay Twitter by popular news and blog websites. Pinknews.co.uk reported on how "Gay Twitter has taken over the London Underground with dozens of queer Valentine's Day tweets," Buzzfeed published a piece about different occasions when Gay Twitter "was hilarious." The A.V. Club (news.avclub.com) chimed in by thanking "Gay Twitter for Pete Buttigieg's new beard," and GCN (gcn.ie) claimed that "Gay Twitter has predictably lost its mind" over Lady Gaga's 2020 single 'Stupid Love.'

In contrast to the perception of Gay Twitter by the media, a 2018 article on instinctmagazine.com, written by Kevin Symes, collects Twitter users' definitions of Gay Twitter. One user states that Gay Twitter means "that because like-minded people are interested in […] the same topics and life experiences, they're more likely to gravitate towards and converse with each other" while another added that it is a "safe place" without the "fear of being shamed" (Symes 2018). Yet another user described its content as being "full of reality TV references and […] memes," and "LGBTQ+ things" (ibid). Gay Twitter is, according to a different user, an "umbrella term, underneath it has memes, pop stars, obsessions with 80's TV stars, but most of all it has a sense of community" (ibid). In sum, it "doesn't really exist but is more of an arbitrary construct" that still encapsulates a space where queer people can be who they want to be "without any form of judgement, knowing that […] peers are there to back [the community] up […] at any moment" (ibid).

Evidently, Gay Twitter represents a particular type of queer cyberspace and is only a part of the LGBTQIA+ cyberspace spectrum. Other subcultural Twitter

spheres such as "Trans Twitter" represent another type of cyber-subculture with particularly relevant discourses to the community such as transphobia or transitioning. Comparing both perceptions of the media and the users, however, it is assumed that Gay Twitter seems to be rather a somehow arbitrary construct with a sense of a particular community, safety, support and escapism from heteronormativity among queer identities that gravitate through the process of homophily together.

Accessibility and Virtual Localization through Subcultural Style

Despite these definitions, a cyberspace like Gay Twitter does not offer physical, concrete borders, set rules, or a specific advertisement of a theme, such as a Gay Leather Bar might do, by exclusively allowing rugged gay men in leather attire without a hint of cologne inside their establishment. Queer bars are usually divided into different functional areas involving several rooms and lounges with different intended functions. In contrast, the borders in a cyberspace pertain to technological, virtual, but also, unspoken, subcultural limitations. These rules and norms are communicated through the code and sign system, in which users are proficient, and are normalized through the amount of likes and retweets by the majority of (popular) queer accounts. Thus, the content and interactions within cyberspaces define the boundaries as well as norms for behavior (Berki & Jäkälä 2011: 14). The individual may be able to influence the queer content that appears on their Twitter feed; just as a choice may be made between a specific establishment or room in a queer neighborhood or a queer bar, Twitter offers users the opportunity to follow specific thematic threads, hashtags, or conversations. Unfollowing accounts, deciding on liking only specific types of tweets and visuals, or leaving a twitter thread with a clip of a queer porn star's new film and being virtually immersed in a thread about Madonna's statements on the pandemic in a matter of seconds can all be compared to leaving a specific queer establishment to go to another (Zemler 2020). This way, users are able to leave a digital 'room' and change the environment; they can share political opinions and think pieces, organize rallies, or connect with other like-minded people all over the world. They can also like tweets, compliment users in the comments, and start a private conversation. Additionally, video clips, tweets, music and sexually explicit content represent bar culture's entertainment repertoire with its backroom, outdoor area, bar, and dance floor options. Mirroring a bar, Gay Twitter thus offers users a variety of spaces within a space. Nevertheless, Gay Twitter is not a space that can be entered per se; Twitter does not offer an official Gay Twitter tab or a door to the cyberspace.

With this in mind, how do individuals access a virtual scene like Gay Twitter in order to investigate its potential or to participate in it? There are two non-exclusive options here. One way to enter the sphere is through the Twitter search function. Using the search bar, users can search for specific, prominent queer cultural conversations and discussions by entering hashtags or keywords. By

typing in phrases or terms that matter to the queer community, such as 'Stupid Love,' 'Pete Buttigieg,' or even general buzzwords like 'pride,' 'drag race,' or 'gay,' users will be exposed to tweets and users who are interested in such topics and can then read related threads, resulting tweets, and the comments connected to them. The second option is for users to customize their personal Twitter timeline by following users who tweet, retweet, and like other queer content. Platforms such as Twitter allow users to follow profiles with similar interests which then feed into their personalized Twitter timeline, filling it with the tweets of these followed Twitter users as well as interspersed tweets that these users have liked. Yet, although every timeline appears as a unique experience, it should be noted that accounts with a great number of followers, tweets, and viral or platinum tweets (tweets that have plenty of likes and retweets) are more likely to dominate queer Twitter timelines. Therefore, dominant mindsets and subcultural structures may still infiltrate each unique timeline.

Investigating methods of accessibility to Gay Twitter emphasizes the importance of digital and cultural signs and codes, including specific language, content, visuals, and sounds. These shape the overall style of Gay Twitter's subculture. Through subcultural style, codes, and signifiers, a sense of how queer identities establish their own systems and use them to (re)present themselves and the community becomes apparent. Twitter thus offers the possibility of representing a digital queer space through images, videos, and memes. Since Twitter's main tool of interaction is tweeting, it becomes a focal point in pinpointing the subverted realm of such a space. Judith Butler points to the strong connection between gender and language, emphasizing that a subject's identity is produced and established by language, since there is no gender identity that precedes language (Salih 2002; Butler 1993: 10). A cultural identity establishes not only a subject's gender identity, but also its social affiliation in terms of sexuality, sexual identity, and subculture. Language, codes or signifiers function as cultural markers – ways of differentiating oneself from others with the effect of building a stronger and safer feeling in a subculture. The 18th-century queer cryptolect Polari was a security sign system for communicating with other queers in secrecy; nowadays, the current use of queer vernacular, which is especially popular among queer people, offers a helpful tool for finding like-minded people on Twitter through the search bar, while establishing a queer subspace on Twitter (Baker 2003). The conversations, confessions, and queer-related content on Twitter have a unique linguistic style, since users have a limit of 280-characters per tweet. Attached tweets, such as a thread of tweets or comments, may be a way to bypass this limitation. Nevertheless, a single concise, relatable, and witty, funny, or serious tweet, hitting the momentum of a 'hot topic' in the community or in pop culture, attracts more users and likes in an environment oversaturated with tweets.

When investigating queer-associated language, words, and expressions, there is a difference between the vernacular used by individuals outside and within queer culture. Such distinctions apply to core and fringe vocabulary (Kulick 2000). Core vocabulary represents expressions that are well-known queer-sig-

nifying words familiar to the general public in society at large, such as 'pride,' 'gay,' 'lesbian,' or the derogatory term 'faggot.' With regard to the accessibility of Gay Twitter, core vocabulary can be used as a search term in order to get a limited glimpse of queer content and queer profiles. An easy and superficial way of entering the Gay Twitter sphere, comparable to the use of core vocabulary, is by means of visuals such as emojis. By inserting the rainbow flag emoji into the search bar, users are confronted with queer content and other users, as well as queer allies, who use the symbol to show their support. News or entertainment articles from webpages about queer culture may also use the rainbow flag in order to gain popularity among queer-interested Twitter users in the hope of receiving clicks. In a way, the core visual – the rainbow flag emoji that is international and widely known as a queer symbol – is therefore often exploited: it represents the essence of pink capitalism. Nevertheless, it can also be described as a means of representation, demonstrating queer awareness in society, and providing support.

Fringe vocabulary, on the other hand, allows a more nuanced view into Gay Twitter's space. Since such signifiers are not necessarily familiar to the general public, fringe vocabulary supports a symbolic protection against hetero-invasion. On Gay Twitter in particular, fringe vocabulary is more common since it connects queer users and represents the "true marker of group and membership" (Kulick 2000: 251). Similar to Polari, it functions as symbolic solidarity and as a communication and subcultural security system. The system of fringe vocabulary is more elaborate and thus more deeply encrypted as compared with core vocabulary. Alongside simple, linguistic constructions, there are multiple particular linguistic expressions. One type involves compounds and rhyme compounds such as 'Size Queen,' 'Cock Destroyer,' 'KiKi,' or 'Fag Hag.' Furthermore, exclamations such as 'Miss Vanjie!' or 'Yaas!;' expressions such as 'clutching one's pearls' and 'boots the house down;' something being described as 'rigga morris;' blends such as 'Bluff' (butch and fluff) or 'Bussy' (pussy and butt); abbreviated, shortened, or subverted nouns, verbs, and adjectives such as 'faguette' (faggot) and 'masc' (masculine); or changing the initial, collective understanding and meaning of words such as 'snapped' (looking good or responding to something quickly and confidently), 'gagging' (being impressed), 'tea!' (agreeing on the truth of a statement as a fact), or 'slay' (doing extraordinary well) represent the most common ways of communicating in the Gay Twitter sphere. These are not universally handed down but rather, such codes materialize from expressions that either become popular in a specific time period or are bound to a specific subculture or context within queer culture. Thus, it is important to mention that not every community individual is aware of every language sign. The queer community is a collection of varied individuals with different interests and contextual factors. Through the act of re-tweeting, some words are more widely spread than others. Thus, depending on the character of a user's timeline, some codes may appear, while others do not.

Notably, it is precisely this fluidity and the ever-changing nature of fringe vocabulary that allows queer users to maintain a security system, rather like a constant resetting of digits on a combination lock. In contrast, core vocabulary

remains basic and simple and is, therefore, not as good an indicator of a nuanced perspective on Gay Twitter. By following queer accounts and interacting with queer-related tweets, the constantly updated personal Twitter timeline automatically hands down current and newly-established fringe and trend vocabulary, keeping the queer user bound to the community. This knowledge of queer subculture, including its code and sign system, allows users to participate in and read the Gay Twitter sphere. The creation of queer content through language and published via tweets, twitter threads, or memes, fills the digital queer Twitter sphere with interactional and engaging content.

In addition, besides simple tweets and the use of queer-specific language, the combination of language and visuals characterizes the digital space and produces Gay Twitter as a queer, virtual thirdspace. While in queer bar culture earrings or handkerchiefs may indicate a queer individual's emotional, romantic, and/or sexual preference, users on Twitter communicate coded content using self-evidential language, subcultural vernacular, emojis in their profiles, or visuals to symbolize their queerness to others (Kates 2002). In particular, tweets that narrate queer realities and experiences in combination with unrelated but fitting pictures or video clips are among the most popular retweeted and liked tweets on Gay Twitter. When the new Pokémon game was released, many memes were derived from it by queer users, since the game is rather popular among queer individuals. Accordingly, they conflated material or content from the game with queer community discourses. User @pikaish gained over 13.9k likes (26 July 2020) for a tweet in which the user posted a clip of the game's main protagonist being chased by a group of big bear-type Pokémon. A fitting caption was, "twinks at a bear club" (Pikaish 2019), twinks being gay men who are perceived as young, skinny, and shaved, in contrast to bears who are older and have a more massive and hairy body type. In this meme, the user reproduces an oversimplified experience of a specific queer male identity to show how this might translate into reality in an establishment which accommodates other types of queer male identity realizations. Other examples include tweets beginning with 'Gay culture is…' (imjustinrandall 2019), or 'the bottom diet' (DJ_Stocks12 2020) threads, or queer critical memes such as a retweet of Aaron Rhode's picture of five fit, white, and – according to Western culture's ideal – stereotypically attractive men: there is an added caption, "No fats, no femmes, no Asians" (lgbtop 2020), this being a statement about queer male culture's fatphobia, racism, and misogyny. Queer identities can not only easily relate to Gay Twitter, it is also informative and eager to criticize underlying issues within the community. Further examples include a thread made by @mynameisjro, who tries to explain to "queer siblings" (mynameisjiro 2020) why presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg is not necessarily a suitable queer political representative, or a tweet by the user @hello_itsbi, who reminds queer porn artists to file a tax return (hello_itsbi 2020).

Ultimately, Twitter's queer cyberspace is represented by its established collective code and sign system, and queer content production. The individual gains the opportunity to seek support, information, or a connection with other queer

identities, even if they are closeted or anonymous queer personalities, or merely curious. Twitter also provides a platform for starting a conversation and untangling rooted discriminatory processes within queer culture. By having the opportunity to speak out on queer discourses with other queer people, such individuals are not only able to share interpersonal experiences, fears, problems, or advice, but can also improve their personal, sexual, or romantic lives by finding friends, dates, hook-ups, or business partners. The profile-building functions of Twitter, the ability to associate and interact with other users, and the tweets attached to a cyber identity all make an individual queer self-realization possible, in addition to contributing to the communities' collective queer subcultural realizations. A collection of queer tweet-narrations and queer cyber identity (inter)action play an essential part in the creation of such a queer thirdspace on Twitter.

Twitter's Deceptive, Virtual Scope and Safe Space

As much as Gay Twitter's queer cyberspace appears to be an advantage to the community in its high level of technological accessibility, the invitation to enter its sphere is not only extended to queer individuals, but also inadvertently to potentially dangerous subjects. The production of new queer spaces results in more opportunities for hate groups to target queer individuals. Premeditated crimes committed with the help of queer cyberspaces make their presence felt in today's world as well. The high incidence of gay men being murdered by their supposed Grindr dates makes the danger of queer cyber-accessibility explicit. In one single night in August 2020, a man in Texas lured three men via Grindr to meeting up with him, with the intention of shooting them (Duffy 2020). Such cases are not isolated and are closely connected to premeditated hate crimes perpetrated against the queer community, systematically organized through cyberspaces.

Individuals may experience a deceptive sense of safety in a virtual queer spatiality such as Gay Twitter. Given Twitter's accessibility through language and codes, individuals are aware of queer core vocabulary insofar as this is part of shared, collective knowledge and that it offers a comparatively secure way to identify queer spaces on the internet. The discovery of queer cyberspaces can be accomplished by searching for general, well-known, queer-connoted words. Subsequently, the queer realm can be penetrated with criminal intentions by invading queerphobic individuals or groups with mal-intent into such spaces. Since core vocabulary is likewise widely known, individuals are able to position themselves within Gay Twitter, make observations or even participate for a variety of reasons. Such a method of gathering potential victims is made possible by the virtual accessibility and Gay Twitter's concept of an imagined community. There are no closed borders, no walls, doors or any sort of physical protection. Anyone is able to enter such a queer cyberspace and allowed to do so.

In a virtual queer spatiality such as Gay Twitter, individuals experience a deceptive sense of safety, having established a comfortable Twitter timeline. The timeline includes the people they have decided to follow. The creation of a

Twitter account allows people they approve of to follow them back. If the account is public, people are able to reach out and contact the user. Yet, depending on the relationship between the account owner and the follower, the Twitter user may not be aware of who exactly is behind the follower profile, since a corporeal body confirming an identity is lacking. This represents the dangers of disguised queer-friendly identity on Twitter. Accessibility is not the only factor contributing to the high risk of crime towards queer individuals. Twitter's high level of identity construction coupled with a lack of any ability to prove an account's authenticity is also precarious. Cybercommunication and the absence of a body made of flesh and blood in a cyberspace encourages a false sense of security among users. The convenience of a missing corporeal body in cyberspace poses a threat to personal security and safety. A disadvantage of a cyberspace is the dearth of physicality and insufficient transparency: the absent corporeal body and the lack of concrete-lined walls. Anyone is able to enter a queer cyberspace virtually. The community, however, is not necessarily able to see who is targeting queer individuals. Cyber identities are able to observe a community, collect personal information, particulars about potential meetings, work affiliations or even details about an individual's favorite lunch venue. By scrolling through profiles, individuals are able to come up with a virtual and informative portrait of others. Access to such information offers queerphobic subjects or hate groups opportunities for all kinds of violence such as doxing or harassment against queer individuals and the queer community.

The relationship of cybercrime and hate crime connected to Twitter therefore requires further in-depth research. Evidently, as much as Twitter offers the queer community a way of producing a virtual subculture, it also offers groups and individuals with queerphobic views a new space to execute and realize oppressive actions.

Conclusion

Gay Twitter can be summarized as a collection of discourses, thoughts, and profiles concerned with queer culture on Twitter. It is a compound of a specific queer, virtual culture and the collectivity within Twitter's cyberspace. This investigation of Twitter's queer thirdspace uncovers the reality of Twitter's use by individuals. It showcases a non-heteronormative subculture within an app which was not intentionally created for a queer community. It thus represents Soja's characterization of thirdspace:

> Everything comes together in thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history. (1996: 57)

Theorized thus, the individual subverts a space's prevailing intention by transforming the space through individual actions, language, and subcultural codes and signs, using the given objects within the spatiality. Such a cyberspace is formed by communication, interaction, and cyber identities which "gradually transform virtual communities to active meeting places for sharing information and for supporting human actions, feelings and needs" (Berki/Jäkälä 2011: 13). This creates a sense of community described as a "set of subjective experiences of belonging, mutual respect, and commitment that can be gained only through participation" (ibid). There is a commonality to queer analog culture here: not all queer subjects know each other in a queer bar but, by being packed into a queer-defined area, they develop a sense of community and belonging. Considering the differences within systematic structures, approaches in participation, and accessibility of bars and Gay Twitter, the former is a concrete space requiring a physical body, while the latter is a digital space requiring a virtual body. In cyberspaces like this, social life and the human body become digitalized, as individuals use technological tools to adapt to the new virtual and cultural sphere. Gay Twitter is not necessarily perceived as a replacement for physical queer spaces, as both entail advantages and disadvantages.

Twitter represents a sense of internationalism, openness, inclusion, and cultural exchange. In contrast to some queer bars, there are no age, ethnicity, or gender restrictions and this, in theory, invites a broader spectrum into the community. Hence, a user can easily construct and reconstruct their identity digitally, by modifying their Twitter profile and gaining knowledge on specific issues, and by following other queer users and (re)tweeting individualized content. If Twitter users are interested in queer content and other queer tweets, identities, and texts, they can search and follow other accounts that publish tweets tailored to their personal interests. By transforming Twitter into a digital spatiality filled with queer content and visited by users who participate in queer discourses, every log-in resembles the action of an individual entering a queer bar. In a short time, the personal Twitter timeline becomes loaded with like-minded Twitter identities and queer content, thus creating a digital queer Twitter space.

However, there are also dangers concerning Gay Twitter's general accessibility. One important aspect is the lack of a fleshed body, the anonymity and the ease of intrusion into such a queer environment. This combination leads to an increased opportunity for crime. According to the FBI's latest Hate Crime Statistics report, "nearly 1 in 5 hate crimes" is "motivated by anti-LGBTQ bias" (Fitzsimons 2019). In further research, the significance of virtuality and realized hate-crime may shed light on the reality of LGBTQIA+ individuals' safety on the internet.

Besides exposure to hate groups, political ideologies and technological structures can interfere with the ability to access Twitter, thus throwing the overall internationalism and openness of the social media platform into question. It is important to conduct further research on internet censorship in general and its disruptive effects on Twitter's international accessibility and inclusion. Govern-

ments may block access to it, preventing citizens from participating in a Twitter community (Keown 2020). Such measures are especially disadvantageous for queer individuals, given that the number of queer premises society already offers is minimal. Indeed, government censorship illustrates the invisible, digital borders of a cyberspace. Another important aspect which casts doubt on Twitter's general accessibility is the extent to which users with disabilities such as visual impairments are included or not; such individuals are faced with a confined virtual experience which poses the threat of their being ostracized.

While researching Gay Twitter's cyberspace, a lack of inclusion and solidarity in the form of misogynistic content, appropriating language (appropriation of AAVE by white queer men), a focus on gay male, white experiences, and/or discrimination on the basis of age, ethnicity, and physique becomes apparent within its subcultural sphere. This bears a similarity to how a Trans identity may perceive a particular gay bar. When searching for "#GayTwitter" it becomes evident that it is mostly white male users who show up. Searching for "#BlackGayTwitter" shows that there is a subcultural, digital queer sphere within the gay community on Twitter. This may be another indicator that Gay Twitter does not exploit the benefits of intersectionality, focusing for preference on white gay man. A further point is that since it is not coined Queer Twitter or LGBTQIA+ Twitter; the sphere of Gay Twitter may therefore involve a tendency to focus on cis-individuals with same-sex desires only, particularly gay men. A long-term and thorough empirical and analytical investigation of Gay Twitter and its reciprocal relationship with its users would be necessary to uncover the reality of individuals within this queer digital thirdspace. Furthermore, the representation of such Gay Twitter individuals and their bodies indicates that there may be a focus on the physically fit, white, metropolitan, sexually self-objectified, young, attractive (according to Western society's masculinity ideals) and hegemonic masculinity, since these types showcase a high number of followers/likes. This suggests that heteronormative Western ideology's systematic racism, misogyny, and ageism is dominating the cyberspace. While this essay lays out the concept and production of this particular digital queer thirdspace, the level of queer representation and experience of Gay Twitter requires future in-depth research.

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Remarks

1 In FUMA's press release, the nonprofit organization discusses the pros and cons of using the asterisk after the term "trans". Both sides encompass thought provoking points. In consideration of trans voices such as Linus Giese („Ich bin Linus"), Felicia Ewert („Trans. Frau. Sein"), the decision has been made to use „trans" as an adjective without an asterisk in this publication. Giese, Linus (2018): https://twitter.com/buzzaldrinsblog/status/1075004484663828480?s=20; accessed 15 July 2021; Ewert, Felicia (2020): https://youtu.be/4leLo6xR1no (15:38 min); accessed 15 July 2021; FUMA: https://www.gender-nrw.de/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Position-Sternchen.pdf; accessed 15 July 2021.

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