

**Queering masculinity in the digital age:
An exploration of possibilities of
intimacy, identity, community and
activism emerging between offline and
online worlds**

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Abstract

In this thesis, I explore possibilities of queering masculinity in the digital age. Drawing on data generated through a collaborative online researcher-solicited blog/diary and participatory biographical relational map interviews with a small group of LGBTQIA+ youths identifying as male or assigned male at birth, diffractively read through some of my own wider auto/ethnographic observations, I explore how cisheteromasculine ideals often assigned or denied to such bodies come to be reproduced, ruptured and redefined. Building on literature around oppressive heteronormative and cisnormative histories territorialising bodies and desires, histories re-produced through commodified modes of resistance, I work *with* participants, aged between 18-26 and living across South Wales and South West England, to understand how digital media and technologies enable *and* displace new possibilities for intimacy, community building, identity work and activism. Nevertheless, attentive to issues of polarisation, and conscious of the internet empowering not only marginalised groups, I resist utopian visions of digital emancipation. I move beyond thinking about digital media, spaces and practices as bounded objects with inherent risks and opportunities, instead considering the internet as a site of immanent potential, with connections and embodiments actualised between online and offline worlds entangled in differentiated affective histories, digital infrastructures and emotional and economic investments. I demonstrate that digital spaces and practices, paradoxically come to both empower *and* disempower, operating to both alienate and connect users, promoting boundary crossing intimacy, empathy and solidarity while at the same time polarising and producing possibilities for narcissistic exploitative desires to flow free from concerns of care, responsibility and accountability. In thinking about digital empowerment, I question, empowerment of who and what exactly, and at whose and what's expense? I argue that possibilities of being and becoming, while certainly uprooted from many relational constraints, are far from evenly distributed, with some bodies emerging as more fluid than others.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In this thesis, I explore possibilities of queering masculinity in the digital age, considering how digital media, technologies and online practices come to both enable *and* displace new possibilities for intimacy, community building, identity work and activism against normative configurations of gender and sexuality. I am interested in how digital communication, in enabling new spatial-material-cultural possibilities of connection beyond geographical boundaries of time and place, has been changing the way we can connect and interact with one another sexually, socially, and politically. I build on literature emphasising the emancipatory participatory potential of the internet (Bruns 2006; Davies 2011), which, in LGBTQIA+ scholarship, has demonstrated how digital communication has afforded many new possibilities for intimacy, community, identity and activism (DeHaan et al. 2013; Gross 2003; Hillier and Harrison 2007; Jackson et al. 2018; McKenna and Bargh 1999). However, while indebted to such work, I remain attentive to growing concerns around a range of issues associated with digital media and communication, such as online hate and political polarisation (Ging 2017; Williams 2019), risks of sexual exploitation (Kvedar 2020; Mitchell et al. 2014; Ybarra and Mitchell 2016) and cyberbullying (Bradlow et al. 2017; Kvedar 2020). In thinking about possibilities of digital empowerment, I also remain conscious of longstanding critiques around the assimilation and commercialisation of LGBTQIA+ identities, bodies and culture – a heavily sexed, gendered, racialised and classed process that has operated to centre cis white affluent monogamous gay men (Casey 2004; Duggan 2002; Orne 2017; Puar 2007; Weber 2012), and white affluent trans people seeking medical transition (Johnson 2016; Miller 2018; Vipond 2015), causing minimal disruption to the gender binary. This process, as many scholars have identified, continues to be re-produced and made present online (Miller 2018; Robinson 2015; Siebler 2016). As such, while I am interested in how the internet enables users to challenge normative constraints, I set out to make sense of contradictory and conflicting possibilities for LGBTQIA+ youths to connect, participate and organise in the digital age (Gudelunas 2018; Miller 2018; Siebler 2016). I aim to develop an understanding of how digital communication *comes to not* only enable but also displace affirmative possibilities of affirmative connection.

Given the centrality of digital communication to many queer lives, particularly queer youths (Gross 2003), it is essential that we consider its role in mediating bodies and desires — bodies and desires which, while always relationally produced in excess of abstract structural social-material-cultural constraints remain situated in wider power relations that continue to form in ways that constrain, divide, and discriminate (Barad 2007). While digital communication may come to empower many users, it has become clear that the digital age is no utopia, urging us to develop understandings of how any given online platform, space, technology or type of media content can come to both affirm and marginalise expressions of gender and sexual difference. Drawing on data generated through a collaborative researcher-solicited social media page and participatory relational map interviews, I approach digital media, technologies and spaces not as bounded entities but rather as relationally produced sites of potential, actualised through a plurality of journeys emerging between and across multiple shifting online and offline worlds. In doing so, I build on work demonstrating how online participation paradoxically has the *potential* to both empower *and* disempower gender and sexual minority youths, sometimes simultaneously so (Brickell 2011; Gudelunas 2018; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Marston 2020; Miller 2018; Siebler 2016). I achieve this through coproducing empirical data highlighting how digital media and technologies have the potential to both alienate and connect users, promoting boundary crossing intimacy, empathy and solidarity, while at the same time polarising, producing possibilities for narcissistic exploitative and oppressive desires and actions to flow free from concerns of care, responsibility and accountability.

Nevertheless, while mapping out movements operating to disrupt definitive conclusions around possibilities of queering masculinity in the digital age, I remain attentive to the repetition and intensity of certain connections with people, places, spaces and things, both past and present, operating to limit possibilities of participation and expression (Binswanger and Zimmermann 2018). In thinking about digital empowerment, I question, empowerment of who and what exactly, and at whose and what's expense? I show how possibilities of queering masculinity in the digital age, while certainly uprooted from many relational constraints, are far from evenly distributed, situated in sexed, gendered, racialised and classed dynamics rendering

some bodies more fluid than others. Responding to critiques of divisive disembodied discursive notions of queerness held in opposition to the normative in much queer theory and activism (Green 2002; Orne 2017), I argue for a need to explore possibilities of queering gender and sexuality in the digital age as something materially situated in, and embodied through, mutually constitutive online and offline relations (Campbell 2004; Gray 2009; Kerpen 2016; Park 2018; Renold and Ringrose 2011).

Now that I have provided a broad overview of the project, I will spend the remainder of this chapter narrowing the focus and outlining how my thesis is organised. I will start by defining the scope of the project. The idea of queering masculinity is obviously quite broad, open to being applied in many ways. As such, I will provide a brief overview of the LGBTQIA+ youths I focused on, namely men who have sex with men and trans and non-binary youths AMAB (assigned male at birth) living across South Wales and South West England. I then move on to introduce the wider social-material-political context and motivations of the project, drawing on insights developed through both my MSc dissertation and through my own situated encounters as a queer man in the region. Once I have narrowed the focus and justified the relevance of the project, I move on to provide a brief overview of debates around the internet's potential, before moving on to situate the project, making clear the lines of inquiry not being pursued and elaborating further on my theoretical and methodological perspective. Finally, I finish this chapter by summarising the structure of my thesis and signposting key interventions I made.

1.1 The scope of the project

Queering masculinity could be taken to include anything that exceeds what Butler (1990) describes as the heterosexual matrix – a phallogentric order naturalised through an assumed alignment and complementarity between reproductive organs, gender identities and gender roles, hierarchically organised according to the presence or absence of a penis and subsequently assumed penetrative or penetrated positions. Situated in white bourgeois colonial masculinist constructions of western *human* civilisation (Braidotti 2013), such excess has also been heavily racialised and classed,

with working-class people and BIPOC (black and indigenous people of colour), especially those that also happen to be women and/or LGBTQIA+, othered as embodying primitive desires impervious to reason and self-regulation (Collins 2004; Chauncey 1994; Ferguson 2004; Hinchy 2019; Laqueur 1992; Krishnaswamy 1998; Morgensen 2011). As such, the idea of queering masculinity is quite broad, open to many possible roads of inquiry which extend far beyond just men and masculinities. Halberstam's (1998) concept of 'female masculinity', taken up in Renold's (2008) exploration of masculinity in girlhood and extended through Francis' (2010) notion of 'male femininity', have all contributed to queering masculinities reduced to reproductive capacities. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this thesis, the notion of queering masculinity departs primarily from the lived online experiences, perspectives and practices of a small group of racially diverse but mostly urban and university educated LGBTQIA+ youths aged 18-26, identifying or having been identified by others as male, who I recruited from across South Wales and South West England through dating/hook-up apps and LGBTQIA+ venues and events.

I decided to focus primarily on older youths aged 18-26 because I felt it would enable the participants to be more open and honest about their online activity, particularly sexual activity with the potential to raise many ethical issues if working with younger participants. My decision to focus on those under 26 was primarily made because of the unique position this age group occupied in relation to developments in digital media and technologies. As late Millennials/early Zoomers, they fell within the broad category of digital natives, i.e., young people who grew up with digital technology (Prensky 2001). However, unlike older digital natives like myself, who grew up with floppy disks and relied on slow limiting dial-up connections clogging up landlines, they represented a younger generation of digital natives that came of age with mobile technologies, broadband and the proliferation of social media platforms and proximity-based dating apps more thoroughly embedded in everyday life.

In terms of limiting the scope to LGBTQIA+ youth identifying or identified by others as male, this decision was made because I was interested in exploring tensions that readily emerge through cisheteromascularity assigned to bodies *sexed* male. This was

not to suggest that trans women and non-binary people AMAB (assigned male at birth) are defined by their assigned sex but was rather to make room for a group of people whose gender and sexually diverse experiences and practices are in tension with the oppressive force of assigned sex and the normative gender and sexual positions assumed to follow from that, operating to constrain who and what is validated in and out of the category male. Initially, I was only going to focus on the experiences of men who have sex with men. However, with femmephobia and transphobia rampant across many LGBTQIA+ communities, with many trans-exclusionary members calling to drop the T from the LGB (Brydum 2015), I wanted to challenge assumptions that transness has absolutely nothing to do with gayness by making room for individuals who have all struggled, albeit in different ways, against pressures to assimilate with cisheteromascularity. In line with Halberstam (2018), I took the position that the line between gayness and transness is not always so clear cut, with many identifying as gay before later coming out as trans and non-binary when afforded new knowledges to make sense of their gender and sexuality. I was also very much conscious of overlapping histories of oppression, spatial organisation and resistance that have emerged in tension with the oppressive conflation of transness, gayness and gender non-conformity in the figure of the invert (Tyler 1991). As D'Emilio (1992) argues, the category gay was once a lot to have in common. While differentiated in terms of gender, there is a rich history of trans women in gay male spaces and trans men in lesbian spaces (Halberstam 1998; Browne 2009), pointing to the significance of tensions emerging in response to assigned sex. In the end, due to issues around recruitment, which I will discuss in the methodology chapter, I was not able to recruit any trans men, but I did manage to recruit a trans woman.

1.2 The wider socio-material-political context and motivations for the study

I embarked on this journey following insights derived from my MSc dissertation, which focused on how the internet afforded several gay male youths with possibilities of becoming queer beyond the relational constraints of their respective offline worlds (Kerpen 2016). The men, while mostly urban, had all been raised in heavily gendered rural working-class post-industrial towns across South Wales. Building on the work

of Walkerdine and Jimenez (2012), who had documented hard, strong and proud working-class masculinities within such communities, I was interested in how digital communication afforded possibilities of queering such rigid boundaries of heteromascularity, enabling possibilities of ‘becoming-other’ beyond the geographical material boundaries and limitations of physical space and place (Deleuze and Guattari 2004). As anticipated, the internet emerged as a tool of empowerment against heteronormativity. However, it was also entangled in ‘homonormativity’ (Duggan 2002), affording possibilities of connection against constraints of commercial ‘gay’ spaces but also producing constraints of its own, with some of the participants complaining about the internet providing too much choice, often leading to superficial and shallow fleeting interactions centred around *individual* sexual gratification within a heavily gendered sexual economy of desire. It became clear that the affirmative potential of the internet, emerging between offline and online worlds, was far from evenly distributed, which led me to this project exploring possibilities of queering not only heteronormativity but also cisnormativity and conflicts and tensions emerging within the community.

Moving forward, I wanted to further develop understandings of how mediated possibilities of queering cisheteromascularity so often assigned to bodies *sexed* male and denied to men *sexed* female can themselves readily become normative. I wanted to better understand how young people must also navigate homonormativity and transnormativity. The former has been critiqued for privileging commodified depoliticised and desexualised white affluent monosexual gay cis men that assimilate with existing gendered, racialised and classed hierarchies (Duggan 2002; Duggan 2003), while the latter has been challenged for privileging trans people that re-align with essentialist medicalised cisnormative gender binaries (Irving 2012; Johnson 2016; Puar 2015; Miller 2018), which again often operate to centre white affluent bodies able to afford medical transition (Johnson 2016; Vipond 2015). Furthermore, in the context of a seemingly increasing (neo)conservatism made present both within LGBTQIA+ communities and society at large, I was interested in how linear modernist accounts of sexual liberation and identity formation, through ignoring multiple differences within and between LGBTQIA+ identities and communities (see

Bravmann 1997), can readily become homo- and trans- nationalist, with white liberal western notions of sexual liberation and progress routinely set against a regressive racialised other (Puar 2007; Puar 2015).

When starting this project back in the autumn of 2016, we had arguably entered a new era of queer intersectional visibility. Research was pointing to an increasing number of people rejecting binary categories of gender (Richards et al. 2016), with a rapid growth in the number of people coming out as both trans and non-binary, evidenced by referrals to gender identity clinics (Price et al. 2019). More affirmative diverse images of queer, trans and non-binary people were also emerging in the media. In 2013, just a few years prior to starting the project, Laverne Cox, a trans woman of colour, rose to fame for her role in the Netflix prison drama *Orange is the New Black*. A year later, she made the front page of *Time* magazine (compton and bridges 2016). 2017 saw Louis Theroux's documentary *Transgender kids* aired on the BBC, and in 2018, the US TV series *Pose*, a popular drama centring Black queer and trans history during the AIDS crisis in New York in the 1980s, hit the screen. We have since seen several prominent celebrities come out as non-binary, widely reported across both LGBTQIA+ and mainstream media (Snapes 2019). Around the same time, I was witnessing a proliferation of queer counter-cultural spaces and events across South Wales and South West England that have grown year on year. 2013 saw the emergence of the Cardiff's Big Queer Picnic, which was organised through Facebook as a 'non-commercial', 'inclusive' and 'community' based alternative to the city's mainstream Pride event (The Big Queer Picnic 2020). A few years later, a number of organisations for LGBTQIA+ people of colour were formed across the region, such as Glitter Cymru in Cardiff (Shahwar 2018) and Kiki in Bristol (Bristolthreads 2020), both of which have since managed to negotiate platforms in their respective cities' mainstream Pride (Bristol Pride 2018; Pride Cymru 2020). In 2016, Bristol became home to Trans Pride South West (Higgins 2017). During the project, Glitter Cymru came to host Wales' first ever Pride event for LGBTQIA+ people of colour in Cardiff, which took place in 2019 (Parsons 2019a), and in 2018, a couple of Cardiff-based trans and queer artists started a Facebook group to invite participation in the organisation of Wales' first Trans

Pride that took place in 2019 (Trans Pride Cardiff 2020). Nevertheless, for all this progress, being and becoming throughout this period has been heavily polarised.

I started the project just after Brexit, shortly before the election of Donald Trump. For all the exciting affirmative possibilities of being and becoming observed throughout my MSc dissertation and through my own participation across queer networks, it was starting to feel like for every step forward, we were taking two steps back. In the UK, reported hate crimes against all protected marginalised groups were on the rise, and has continued to significantly increase year on year ever since (Allen et al. 2020). The LGBTQIA+ community, particularly white gay men, have been far from immune from the growing populism and conservatism. Ging (2017) documents a worrying gay male presence within white male alt-right circles online, positioning themselves against a perceived “fag end of feminism” (p.5). 2016 marked the year that Milo Yiannopoulos, a gay white male alt-right figurehead, was banned for spreading hate on Twitter (Hunt 2016). It also marked the emergence of organisations like Gays for Trump (Scott 2016). The former athlete Caitlyn Jenner, a wealthy white trans woman, whose coming out story had made the front page of *Vanity Fair* in 2015 (compton and bridges 2016), had used her platform as a self-proclaimed ‘trans ambassador’ to support Trump (Rudolph 2016). Around this period, we also started to see a significant mainstream pushback against trans rights and recognition, made particularly visible through the TERF (trans exclusionary radical feminist) wars (Pearce et al. 2020). Since starting the project, there have been many calls to drop the T from the LGB. 2019 saw the formation of the LGB alliance, an organisation criticised for being trans-exclusionary, opposing LGBTQIA+ clubs in schools, and spreading moral panic hysteria about HIV and predatory gay men (Parsons 2019a; Parsons 2019b). Such reactionary hate, masquerading under the banner of free speech in opposition to leftist cancel culture (Ging 2017; Horbury and Yao 2020), has since led to call proposals for UK free speech laws rendering universities liable for no-platforming speakers (Weale 2021). However, read in a context of school teachers in the UK being banned from criticising capitalism and discussing racism (Busby 2020; Staufenberg 2020), calls to stop football players taking the knee in support of Black Lives Matter (Onuora 2020),

and efforts to censor LGBTQIA+ representation on screen (Duffy 2018a), it seems that the goal of such protected speech is not freedom.

In the face of such rising populism and polarisation both within and beyond LGBTQIA+ communities, I was deeply troubled by the wider political context in which LGBTQIA+ ‘progress’ was being made, not just as a social scientist and as a queer man but also as someone from a family that suffered immensely from populism and the rise of Nazi ideology and fascism in Europe during the 1930s/1940s. The pervasive populism circulating when I started this project triggered a need to take a position that not only affirmed difference but also remained attentive to questions of structuralis-*ing* anxiety ridden forces operating to limit, alienate and polarise bodies. I had initially planned to recruit participants through Cardiff’s Big Queer Picnic. However, having found such events to be somewhat detached from mainstream LGBTQIA+ culture, often seeming to over-represent an urban intellectual cosmopolitan crowd, I found myself concerned with who and what was often absent from such spaces. I found myself questioning the limited reach such alternative communities have within more mainstream cultures. As Dean (2006) argues, “lots of little micro-struggles don't automatically produce macro-level change” (p.120) Incidentally, as I will discuss in more detail in my methodology chapter, the participants, while racially diverse, ended up being mostly urban and university educated. As such, questions around absences produced through urban intellectual cosmopolitan queer cultures were far from resolved, despite my efforts to recruit participants from diverse spaces and places. Nevertheless, in *chapter 7*, I embrace this absence as a means of reflecting on how my project operated to centre some bodies and narratives over others.

1.3 A brief overview of current debates surrounding the internet’s potential

Feminist and LGBTQIA+ scholars, practitioners and activists have long taken an interest in digital technologies and the social, material and political implications of sexual content and practices online (Coleman 2012; Gross 2003; Gudelunas 2012;

Haraway 1991; Jones 2005; Jones 2008; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Senft 1996; Siebler 2016; Thomas 2016). This is unsurprising, given that advancements in technology have long been appropriated for sex and have played a key role in societal shifts in how people understand, experience and embody sex (Nixon and Düsterhöft 2018).

Telephones gave rise to phone sex, videocassette recorders and videotape gave rise to viewing pornography in one's home (versus visiting an adult cinema), handheld video cameras begat the amateur porn industry, and text messaging begat "sexting." Thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Internet has been widely adopted for sexual content (Grov et al. 2014).

As discussed, while early work hinged on dichotomous distinctions between the virtual and the real, relying on somewhat positivist notions of media and audience effects that conceptualise digital spaces, digital media content and digital practices as bounded entities carrying inherent risks and opportunities, more contemporary thinking has started to stress the importance of considering the potential of digital connections as relationally produced. Nevertheless, as Dennis (2019) identifies, popular debate around the potential of digital communication remains polarised and fraught with tension, continuing to perpetuate utopian or dystopian visions homogenising digital technologies, content and practices as either emancipatory or oppressive.

The growing digitalisation of everyday life has triggered much concern around issues such as social fragmentation, the loss of community and alienation (Bessière et al. 2008; Cooper 2005; Jones 1997), polarisation (Pariser 2011), and associated issues with mental health (Bessière et al. 2008; Duggan and Smith 2016). In popular culture, many promote the need to unplug from digital technology to reconnect with the 'real' world and become mindfully 'present' and 'fully' alive, encouraging us to "re-value connecting to other (real) people and to nature" (Mindworks 2020), advising us to "disconnect to reconnect... with ourselves, our community, nature and the world at large" (Digital Detox 2020). However, such advice begs the question, disconnect from what and to what exactly?

Many have raised legitimate concerns around digital communication. Some have raised concerns around the substitution of meaningful offline relationships for the fleeting presence of many online connections (Bessi re et al. 2008; Cooper 2005; Jones 1997). Others have drawn attention to the overload of not always so reliable information online, leading to what Dean (2010) describes as a “decline of symbolic efficiency” (p.5). There is also much work identifying issues of cyberbullying (Kosciw et al. 2017; Hern 2020; Lauckner et al. 2019; Bradlow et al. 2017) and hate speech and extremism online (Ging 2017; Williams 2019). Advancements in digital technology have also elicited work around coerced sexting and sextortion (Drouin 2018; Powell and Henry 2017); unsolicited sexually explicit pop-ups from websites (Martellozzo et al. 2016); cyberflashing (Hern 2020; Thompson 2016); and the risk of sexual exploitation (Bryce 2011), *especially* among queer youth (Mitchell et al. 2014; Ybarra and Mitchell 2016). It has also given rise to concerns around inaccurate and harmful social comparisons emerging through heavily curated sanitised social media presence (Appel et al 2016; Chou and Edge 2012; Hogan 2010; Shakya and Christakis 2017), and unrealistic and exclusionary gendered and racialised beauty standards of sexually explicit media (Albright 2008; Burke 2016; Mowlabocus 2010). Nevertheless, the internet has also afforded many affirmative possibilities. It has afforded opportunities for making and sustaining queer connections against queer diaspora (Gross 2003), connections that often materialise offline (Groves et al. 2014; Kerpen 2016; McLelland 2002). It has enhanced possibilities for connectivity, democratising collaborative participation in the production, consumption and distribution of knowledge (Bruns 2006; Davies 2011; van Dijck and Poell 2013; Gross 2003; Jenkins 2006; Hine 2015; Prybus 2015; Pullen 2010; Siebler 2016). It has afforded access to community support networks in the face of bullying and other forms of systemic violence, cyber or otherwise (Bradlow 2017; Gross 2003; Jackson et al. 2018; Kerpen 2016; Singh 2012), and it has enabled users to *consensually* solicit cybersex and participate in the production and consumption of sexually explicit content, which, while potentially exploitative, can be affirming to bodies marginalised offline (Burger 1995; Dyer 1992; Smith 2018a; Thomas 2016).

As such, when considering the socio-material implications of various types of internet use, disentangling risks from opportunities, structure from agency, empowerment from oppression becomes an impossible ideal – an ideal that can itself become oppressive in either downplaying various constraints that emerge through digital communication or failing to account for agencies that emerge with and against constraints. Often implicit if not explicit in advice to disconnect to reconnect is the assumption that online communities, and the social ties forged therein, are inherently weaker, less real, less natural and less present. However, in considering the internet as a site of immanent potential (Deleuze and Guattari 2004), I seek to interrogate such distinctions, considering the relational situatedness of digital technologies, practices and content. As Mowlabocus (2007) identifies, dystopian visions of digital communication alienating individuals from communities depend on abstract essentialised and idealised notions of community that fail to account for how many are already alienated from physical place. Online communities are sometimes the only communities with which people can feel safe and belong. The nostalgia for communities of geographical place is not necessarily a nostalgia shared by LGBTQIA+ people violently rendered placeless from such communities (D’Emilio 1992; Knopp 2004). As such, when considering possibilities of connecting online, it is essential that we consider wider relational offline embodied contexts, creating space for relationships that *can* come to matter in ways that do much more than just substitute offline connections. When denied a place in the supposed ‘real’ world, there is arguably nothing less real than virtual connections that affirm possibilities of existence and movement against oppression, even if that movement only emerges when we are alone with our devices. Such connections *materialise* offline, even if only through the material embodiment of all that they affirm. Nevertheless, recognising such potential need not collapse into utopian visions of digital media and technology, as Mowlabocus (2007) himself identifies in shedding light on the ways in which gay men construct online identities through the far from egalitarian taxonomies of gay pornography. Similarly, as Brickell (2011) argues:

We produce and reproduce ourselves in particular ways on the internet, in a forum that, while relatively new, is nevertheless anchored in the broader flow of social processes, inequalities and modes of regulation... The internet may

sometimes allow a more fluid and transformative sexuality than was previously possible, but, then again, it may not (p.13).

Such thinking urges us to consider how affirmation, while possible, does not exist free from wider power relations through which online activity emerges. It is precisely here where I question advice to disconnect to reconnect in favour of understanding connections as always already relational.

1.4 Theoretical and methodological framework:

Situating the project

While my thesis focuses on digital media and technologies, it departs from several dominant strands of existing LGBTQIA+ digital scholarship. In focusing not on digital media and technologies in and of themselves but rather in the wider relations and movements through which such media and technologies come to be actualised, my interest in digital media and technologies is not platform specific. As such, it stands in contrast with work that has drawn conclusions around the likes of goal-oriented uses and gratifications (Gudelunas 2012), affordances (Gross 2003; Mckenna and Bargh 1998) and constraints (Licoppe et al. 2015; Miller 2018; Tziallas 2015) of specific media, platforms and/or digital infrastructures. By extension, my project also departs from research addressing overlapping concerns around the likes of moderation practices and platform politics (Nurick 2019), particularly politics pertaining to economic interests behind digital media, digital infrastructures and platform designs producing certain forms of use (Tziallas 2015).

In positioning the project against such platform studies, I am not denying the many uses and gratifications that have come to be associated with certain types of digital media and technologies, such as using digital media and technologies to see and be seen to gratify needs for belonging and connection (Gudelunas 2012). Nor am I denying the power of media, platform design and political economic interests, and how owners may profit from eliciting certain forms of media consumption and use beyond the goal-oriented intentions of media consumers and users. One example of such is the promotion of objectifying and self-objectifying practices on dating/hook-

up apps (Licoppe et al. 2015) within alienating individualised racialised, classed and gendered economies of desire (Mowlabocus 2010a; Robinson 2015; Siebler 2016). As Tziallas (2015) identifies in their work on the dating/hook-up app Grindr, such apps profit not from the actual meaningful connections disrupting boundaries of self they promise but rather from the displacement of such connections to keep users in the game. Other examples include work questioning the participatory potential of digital communication, drawing attention to the likes of algorithms prioritising content that is popular in competition for clicks (Gerlitz and Helmond 2013), limiting opportunities for media consumption and production (Barberá 2020; Dahlberg 2007; Miller 2018; Pariser 2011) within digital economies that raise cause for concern when read against LGBTQIA+ users frequently drawing on normative images perpetuated in the media to construct their identities (Mowlabocus 2007; Siebler 2016). Such work around use, media ownership and platform design is not inconsequential to my thesis. In fact, I will be further elaborating on some of these lines of inquiry in *chapter 3*, where I critically engage with research responding to questions around digital empowerment. My departure from such existing lines of inquiry lies in de-centring them rather than completely rejecting them, thinking *with* rather than *from* the insights they have yielded to create space for exploring how bodies come to navigate conflicting possibilities of being and becoming with digital media and technology. Promoting and determining certain forms of media consumption, use and production are two very different things. Thinking with Hall's (2005) critical engagement of media effects discourse, which emphasises how meaning encoded through media production does not always align with meaning decoded through media consumption, we might similarly consider gaps that emerge between intended design of use and actual use.

Drawing on a new materialist more-than-human 'onto-epistemology' attentive to how bodies are coproduced between ever-shifting mutually constitutive social-material-cultural-relations (Barad 2007), my thesis explores how normative configurations of gender and sexuality come to be both reproduced and subverted through multiple and often unexpected connections, both on and offline. It builds on a body feminist and LGBTQIA+ digital scholarship, and digital scholarship more broadly, emphasising how digital media consumption and online practices are irreducible to any single site

of enquiry, navigated and negotiated through embedded and embodied mutually constitutive online-offline worlds (Baym 2009; Brickell 2011; Campbell 2004; Gray 2009; Hine 2015; Mowlabocus 2010; Papacharissi 2005; Scarcelli 2018). However, turning to notions of affect, a concept that can be broadly defined as an immanent capacity of people, spaces, places and things to both affect and be affected by one another (Massumi 2002), with varying intensities (Deleuze and Guattari 1983), my thesis contributes, more specifically, to contemporary thinking emphasising how bodies come to be actualised *with* digital media and technologies, produced in the moment between multiple ever-shifting connections that are always constituting and re-constituting one another (Cho 2015; Coleman 2012; Marston 2020; Kerpen 2016; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Paasonen et al. 2015; Warfield 2017).

Such turns to affect challenge reductionist accounts of digital media and technologies by conceptualising them as sites of potential. They reject notions of bounded subjects and objects through re-conceptualising ‘being’ as always in a state of ‘becoming-other’ with other (Deleuze and Guattari 2004). This idea of becoming, which I will be drawing on a lot throughout this thesis, allows us to think about bodies engaging with digital media and technologies as malleable, always already relational as they are actualised and re-configured through endless flows of connecting and disconnecting with an unpredictable plurality of ideas, people, places, spaces and things. It moves beyond the dichotomy of structure versus agency in favour of an understanding of agency as something that *emerges* through the coming together of irreducible parts, which *can* come to both enable *and* displace possibilities of movement. In doing so, it creates space for mapping out multiple ambivalent, creative, conflicting and contradictory possibilities of being in the digital age. Nevertheless, the broad definition of affect outlined thus far has been developed further in many ways, some more conducive to the aims and objectives of my project than others, particularly when it comes to theorising embodiment and subjectivity.

In my endeavour to consider how normative configurations of gender and sexuality are both subverted and reproduced, I turn to strands of affect theory that place a strong emphasis on embodiment, be that an embodiment that is unstable and always open to

being re-configured. Though I will be using the concept of ‘becoming’ a lot throughout this thesis, my use of the term departs from that of Deleuze and Guattari (2004), who radically deconstruct notions of the body through their concept of ‘bodies without organs’, i.e., bodies that exist not in their own right but only in terms of the ever-shifting relations from which they emerge. Like several other affect theorists, such as Massumi (2002) and Thrift (2008), Deleuze and Guattari reduce bodily capacities to affect and be affected to an uncategorisable anonymous pre-discursive and pre-conscious process, with the relationship between past and present understood as discontinuous. Acknowledging discontinuity, i.e., non-linear emergences in the present irreducible to the past, is important for understanding how bodies, identities and desires are always being reconfigured in unexpected ways. However, focusing on discontinuities alone affords limited opportunities for making sense of how bodies and desires solidify over time, some more than others. Responding to such limitations, I adopt an understanding of affect that comes closer to that operationalised by Wetherell (2012), who theorises affect not as an ontological material state that pre-exists individual bodies and minds but rather something that emerges with them.

Wetherell (2012), while still challenging notions of bounded bodies and minds, draws attention to how physiological capacities of bodies to both affect and be affected, theorised by the likes of Massumi (2002) as pre-conscious, emerge *with* language, thoughts and narratives. Thinking with their concept of *affective* practice, in which bodies and minds are theorised as mutually constitutive of one another, I turn to affect as an adjective, imbued in *affective* meaning making practices that can “stabilise, solidify and become habit” (p.14).

Affect is about sense as well as sensibility. It is practical, communicative and organised. In affective practice, bits of the body (e.g., facial muscles, thalamic-amygdala pathways in the brain, heart rate, regions of the prefrontal cortex, sweat glands, etc.) get patterned together with feelings and thoughts, interaction patterns and relationships, narratives and interpretative repertoires, social relations, personal histories, and ways of life (p.13).

Wetherell defends the notion of affective practice by highlighting a number of deeply affective historical events, where disorder and chaos was met with “an ordering of bodily possibilities, narratives, sense-making, and local social relations (p.20), such as the dancing plague of Strasbourg 1518 that was embodied through regulatory supernatural discourses of saints, demons and unruly citizens. In approaching affect this way, my thesis aims to make room for personal and collective pasts made present, building on a body of feminist and LGBTQIA+ scholarship that has emphasised how gender and sexuality, even in the postmodern digital age of seemingly infinite possibilities of connection, remains situated, to varying degrees, in biographies and place (Binswanger and Zimmermann 2018; Park 2018; Renold et al. 2017; Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012).

While open to unexpected possibilities of becoming in the present, I remain attentive to the weight of affective pasts, drawing on psychosocial insights to make room for ‘affective histories’ (Walkerdine 2016), with personal and collective traumas and anxieties rendering some bodies and places more fluid than others (Binswanger and Zimmermann 2018; Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012; Walkerdine 2016). Instead of thinking about the body as a ‘body without organs’, I favour Neimanis’ (2017) analogy of ‘bodies of water’, fluid and thus open to being constituted and re-constituted through becomings with the world but nevertheless still existing as something that can be pictured as contained to varying degrees. Returning to notions of discontinuity, the analogy of bodies of water makes room for what Barad (2010) refers to as ‘dis/continuity’, i.e., continuities of power and desire that are re-produced, albeit in multiple unexpected ways that challenge simplistic reductions of bodies re-configured in the present to past events.

In thinking about gender and sexuality as something open to reconfiguration but nevertheless still embodied and constrained by pasts made present, I start my thesis with four research questions:

1. How are cisheteromascularity and commodified forms of resistance reproduced, ruptured and redefined with digital space?

2. How does the internet come to enable *and* displace possibilities of connecting with difference?
3. Why are some bodies more fluid than others? What embodied social and material realities do young queer men across South Wales and South West England bring to the seemingly global possibilities of being and becoming in the digital age? How do their unique experiences and emotional investments limit possibilities of negotiating meaning and critically engaging with digital content?
4. What tensions emerge from embodied feelings of separation and difference? How are psychosocial limitations of different lived experiences negotiated?

As briefly mentioned earlier, I respond to these questions by generating data *with* participants through a collaborative researcher solicited blog-diary and participatory biographical relational map interviews, which I then diffractively read through some of my own situated auto/ethnographic encounters as a queer man. The diary/blog served as a community in its own right. However, it also afforded a space, much like a Facebook timeline, for participants to share experiences and wider online-offline activity *with* which possibilities of queering masculinity on the group emerged. Unlike observing already existing spaces, where it is often difficult to ascertain who and what is present (Hine 2015), the group enabled me to explore embodied possibilities of queering masculinity emerging as significant to bodies situated in a specific region. The relational map interviews afforded possibilities of digging deeper into the participants' biographies as a means of making sense of embodied constraints limiting possibilities of subverting normative configurations. My own wider auto/ethnographic observations enabled me to expand on issues raised as significant to the participants, while also grappling with questions around who what was rendered absent from the project.

Like Mowlabocus (2007), I was interested in what consumption of gendered and sexual media in one place might reveal about expressions of gender and sexuality in another. However, my approach to thinking between different media and sites is somewhat broader than that of Mowlabocus in that I am a) not only interested in men

who has sex with men and b) interested in reading between and across a much broader range of sites raised as mattering to young people themselves. Responding to challenges surrounding defining ‘the field’ in the digital age, with bodies far less spatially-materially organised than they once were (Gullion 2018; Marcus 1995; Murphy 2011), my methods build on work deploying open-end participatory methods as a means of giving voice to the unexpected complexities of bodies endlessly configured and re-configured through vast shifting social-material-cultural relations (Marston 2020; Mannay 2015; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Warfield 2017).

1.5 Outline of the thesis: Key interventions

Now that I have outlined the aims and objectives of my project and situated it within current debates, I would like to finish this chapter by giving a brief overview of the structure of my thesis, outlining the literature reviewed and signposting my key interventions to methods and existing empirical research. In line with my objective of developing understandings around the weight of personal and collective histories on possibilities of queering gender and sexuality in the present, I start, in *chapter 2*, by elaborating on work around the historical sexed, gendered, racialised and classed ordering and re-ordering of gender and sexuality. In this chapter, I consider shifting possibilities of embodiment and desire, drawing on a range of sources that highlight how what it means to queer or be queer is far from stable, configured and re-configured throughout history in multiple ways. Nevertheless, drawing on contemporary critiques around how new emerging possibilities for gender and sexual desire and expression have operated to re-centre dominant power relations through homonormative and transnormative social-material-cultural configurations, I consider how oppressive pasts continue to be made present, albeit in shifting forms. After outlining the dominant frameworks of power and resistance that have historically operated to both constrain and subvert normative configurations of gender and sexuality, I move on, in *chapter 3*, to review literature responding to questions around digital empowerment. In this chapter, I consider work around how the internet affords new social-spatial-material-cultural possibilities of connection, participation and organisation, affirming bodies and desires in excess of many normative constraints. However, critically engaging with the notion of digital empowerment, I then move on to explore literature

around the limits of online participation, drawing on work that has highlighted how many oppressive and exploitative social-material-political-economic forces continue to be made present online. I conclude the chapter by returning to the literature my thesis builds on, namely literature around the wider offline *embodied and situated* contexts *with* which online activity emerges. Thinking with such work, I defend a need for further research considering how personal and collective pasts are made present online to better understand how some bodies emerge as more fluid than others.

Once I have further situated the project within existing literature, further elaborating on existing lines of inquiry being (and not being) pursued, I then, in *Chapter 4*, outline the design and methodology of the project. In this chapter, I critically engage with existing scholarship surrounding the challenges of knowing who and what is made present online. I think with and between many different approaches to generating data *with* digitally mediated bodies, including but not limited to relational maps and timelines (Bagnoli 2009), mapping and collaging more broadly (Mannay 2015), virtual ethnographies (Hine 2015) and the use of researcher-solicited blogs/social media pages (Harricharan and Bhopal 2014). Here I further develop my mixed methods participatory approach, which, inspired by critiques of bounded research design and rigid methods of data collection and analysis, fused many existing methodological insights to create space for mapping affective embodied relations and movements, past and present, that may simultaneously come to both contain and subvert gendered and sexual bodies in unpredictable ways. In doing so, I contribute to existing efforts to generate data around bodies which, while relational and always open to re-configuration, remain situated and contained, to varying degrees, in biographies and locales.

In *chapter 5*, I start my findings and analysis, which, as with all of my findings and analysis chapters, took me in many unexpected directions. In this chapter, I respond to work around affirmative possibilities for intimacy and community against cisheteronormativity, attentive to how shifting spatial-material relations opened up possibilities of connection denied offline. However, intervening in discussions urging us to avoid disembodied notions of becoming in the digital age, I build on work urging

us to remain critical of the transformative potential of the internet and recognise the situated and embodied nature of such becomings. Thinking with the concept of bodies of water, I map out a plurality of becomings with digital media and technologies enabling the participants to flow free from many cisheteromasculine constraints. However, I identify how such flows were afforded through maintaining a degree of containment from antagonistic forces of cisheteromascularity that continued to be navigated – containment which, in some instances saw bodies flow into troubling waters of sexual exploitations. In this chapter, I generate data responsive to many strands of literature complicating questions of digital empowerment. However, I foreground a contribution to literature urging us to avoid separating risk from opportunity to make sense of how risk and exploitative encounters had afforded possibilities for the bodies and desires of several participants to flow.

In *chapter 6*, I turn to tensions emerging within the LGBTQIA+ community, exploring queer possibilities of intimacy, community, identity, and activism that emerged both with and against homonormative and transnormative constraints. In this chapter, I respond to digital LGBTQIA+ scholarship around how homonormativity and transnormativity come to be navigated online, generating data around how such systems of power operated to marginalise many of my participants. I generate data that may be of interest to numerous strands of existing literature. Highlighting issues of filtering, I identify encounters raising questions surrounding digital infrastructures and platform design, and the political economic interests those infrastructures and designs serve. I also raise questions around who and what is made present *within* specific sites, particularly dating sites, highlighting well documented issues around homonormative desires and expressions within such apps. However, through de-centring activity on the sites themselves and considering how such activity came to be navigated through becomings elsewhere, I resist, in line with my earlier discussion, making definitive claims about what specific platforms do. Building on literature from multiple strands of theorising on humour, I consider how laughter emerged as a deeply affective force for navigating homonormativity and transnormativity, subverting normative constraints emerging between and across spaces to enable bodies of water to flow. Nevertheless, attentive to work around how laughter often emerges to regulate bodies,

I again adopt a critical stance towards questions of digital empowerment, considering the limits of where laughter flows and the wider oppressive tensions it remains in tension with.

In chapter 7, I move towards considering normative positions assumed among the participants. However, as the participants, for the most part, queered normative configurations, in this chapter, I further develop my analysis of the normative constraints navigated in last chapter by drawing on my own wider auto/ethnographic encounters. Throughout this chapter, I map out many anxieties that emerged around the queering of homonormativity and transnormativity. However, sensitive to the fact that my project failed to elicit interest from rural working-class youths, I build on work urging us to avoid separating the normative from the queer. I do so through drawing on literature encouraging us to consider what strong identity attachments do, i.e., the possibilities of becoming they afford, thinking with work encouraging us to recognise how those assuming normative positions may be navigating deeply affective histories limiting possibilities of becoming. In doing so, I push back against notions of internalised oppression, arguing for a need to consider different situated embodied realities that may limit possibilities of embracing queerness, even in the digital age of seemingly infinite possibilities of becoming. Unfortunately, much of the data generated in this chapter emerged through fleeting encounters, rendering my discussion speculative at times. Nevertheless, I decided to embrace the uncertainty of who and what was made present to me online, resisting my automatic urge position those I encountered as normative through speculation. Through my speculation and the many unanswered questions generated through my encounters, I then use the uncertainty surrounding who and what was rendered present to contribute to digital methodologies scholarship arguing for a need to consider offline embodied contexts.

In *chapter 8*, I move on to consider the issue of queernormativity that emerged across the data, contributing to a body of work critical of how disembodied notions of queerness and becoming, while centring that which resists and transforms existing frameworks of power, can itself become regulatory in failing to account for the deep embodied attachments people form to identities and narratives. In this chapter, I build

on my discussion from the previous chapter, highlighting how possibilities of becoming with the world are far from evenly distributed, actualised not by individual woke subjects but rather relationally. I build on work critical of the participatory potential of the internet by thinking with data encouraging us to consider how opportunities for becoming with progressive communities online may be enabled and displaced between online and offline worlds navigated. However, after being pushed and pulled in multiple directions with the data generated, in this chapter, I foreground one trans participants desire to medically transition, caught between conflicting forces of queernormativity and transnormativity. Through a psychosocial analysis of her identity and desires, I develop an understanding of how a particular body and identity category had come to matter for her. However, building on calls to recognise the multiple embodiments trans people pursue, I map out the ways in which her becomings with her body and identity marked a transition which was far from binary, questioning the binary/non-binary dichotomy and building on work calling for a post-identity identity politics. In chapter 9, I wrap up the thesis, bringing together these key interventions to conclude that possibilities of queering masculinity in the digital age, while affording many opportunities for connection previously displaced, emerged as both uneven and heavily polarised. Returning to broad discussions around digital empowerment, I contribute to work emphasising a need to consider different offline embodied contexts navigated, resisting queernormative notions of seemingly infinite possibilities of becoming in the digital age to account for how some bodies emerged as more fluid than others.

Chapter 2: Navigating white bourgeois cisheteronormativity and commodified homonormative and transnormative modes of resistance

Now that I have introduced the project, I would like to expand on my earlier discussion around the historical ordering and re-ordering of gender and sexuality. In this chapter, I further respond to the inter- and intra- community tensions laid out in my introduction, turning to literature around how possibilities of queering masculinity have historically been caught between cisheteronormativity and commodified modes of resistance, organising and re-organising bodies within gendered, racialised and classed hierarchies of power and desire. Given my aim to understand how the internet's potential is relationally produced between online and offline worlds, embodied and embedded in wider affective histories, such literature provides historical context pertinent to my thesis. While the histories of gender and sexuality explored in this chapter may not determine possibilities of being and becoming in the present, they nevertheless continue to be made present, albeit in new ever-shifting forms, and thus bear relevance to considerations of possibilities of queering masculinity in the digital age.

This chapter is divided into two main sub-sections. The first sub-section, *section 2.1*, elaborates on work around the historical organising power of white bourgeois heteronormativity. I start this section by drawing on multiple queer and feminist insights to position heteronormativity as a heavily sexed cisnormative and patriarchal system of organisation, which I situate within the broader power relations of humanism. I then, in further defence of my decision to extend the focus of the project beyond men to include trans and non-binary individuals AMAB, move on to consider how this order has operated to render gender non-conforming bodies AMAB hypervisible, exposed to much symbolic and physical violence and trauma. I finish the section by considering how such ordering of gender and sexuality has depended on a

racialised and classed erasure of (a)gender and (a)sexual expressions between the binary, set against many historical dis/continuities of power and desire. My recognition of such dis/continuities of desire, and the systems of power that have sought to organise them, is essential for the philosophical foundations of my project, as it provides empirical evidence challenging linear biological and developmental binary accounts of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, an understanding of how normative histories of gender and sexual organisation have been racialised and classed is necessary for understanding how many must navigate multiple intersecting relations of power and privilege when queering masculinity. In the second sub-section, *section 2.2*, I move on to critically engage with work around commodified homonormative and transnormative modes of resistance, which, while operating to normalise and naturalise *some* forms of queer expression previously marginalised, have been structurally limited, re-producing many sexed, gendered, racialised and classed hierarchies, resulting in limited representation and material-spatial exclusion of many intersections of the LGBTQIA+ community. It is here where I start to think about the internet's potential, setting the scene for the following chapter, where I critically engage with literature around new spatial-material-cultural possibilities of connection fostered through becoming with digital media and technologies uprooted from geographical boundaries of time and place.

2.1. The power of white bourgeois hu-manist cisheteropatriarchal cisheteronormativities

Building on my earlier discussion around the historical organisation of gender and sexuality, I would now like to critically engage with queer and feminist insights around what Warner (1991) describes as heteronormativity – a pervasive phallogentric white bourgeois colonial social force of modernity (Chauncey 1994; Ferguson 2004; Krishnaswamy 1998; Morgensen 2011), which has served to normalise, naturalise and privatise reproductive monogamous marital heterosexual relations as the default foundation of sexual and romantic relationships. Deeply embedded in western institutions, practices and accounts, definitions and materialisations of not just sexuality but also gender, childhood, family and education (Jackson 2006; Warner

1991) have operated to uphold what Rubin (1984) describes as the charmed inner circle of good, normal and natural sexuality. Centred around oppositional gender roles, heteronormativity is simultaneously patriarchal, i.e., heteropatriarchal, with ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ entangled in histories of objectifying women within gender roles of the private sphere (Rich 1980). It is also cisnormative, thus cisheteronormative, operating to marginalise both trans identities and gender non-conforming bodies by reducing gender expression to oppositional *sexed* reproductive capacities (Butler 1990). Put simply, cisheteropatriarchal cisheteronormativity is a system of organisation that has operated to centre cisheteromale men as desiring subjects *in opposition to* a plurality of marginalised sexed and gendered others.

The emergence of cisheteronormativity can be situated within the wider power relations of a white bourgeois *hu-manist* enlightenment cut of reason, which gave birth to madness (Foucault 2001), castrated from the rational civilised white bourgeois *hu-man* subject. This subject, defined by instrumental rational goals of (re)productivity, modesty, self-control and delayed gratification, emerged against an excess desire associated with the earlier ruling aristocracies (Chauncey 1994; Hunt 1996; Laqueur 1992).¹ However, its emergence marked the start of a sexed, gendered, racialised and classed colonial project that saw dualisms flow from Cartesian efforts to separate mind from body in order to ‘liberate’ and ‘civilise’ the *hu-man* from the ‘primitive’ immanent unpredictable ‘feminine’ flows of the material, natural and animal world.

Insofar as difference spells inferiority, it acquires both essentialist and lethal connotations for people who get branded as ‘others’. These are the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized others, who are reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies (Braidotti 2013 p.15).

To know the other, they first must be excluded as such, a process which, has long been entangled in reductionist institutional narratives producing various constraints around who has been afforded the authority to speak about and legislate against who and what (Derrida 1995; Foucault 2001; Foucault 1978). The emergence of reason saw homosexuality, once conceptualised as a practice irreducible to specific bodies,

¹ The conspicuous consumption, eccentricities, and alleged sexual fluidity and promiscuity of the earlier ruling class came to be marked as an irrational frivolous excess of effeminate degeneracy (Hunt 1996).

constituted and re-constituted in the body through an array of institutional discourses that sought to set apart ‘the homosexual’ from ‘the heterosexual’ as an ‘object’ of science (Foucault 1978). This object, along with women and all differentiating forms of gender and sexual non-conformity and trans expression conflated with it (Gherovici 2011 Hocquenghem 1993), came to be psychopathologised by the likes of Freud (2000) as an arrested development, positioned as bearing the mark of a *primitive* polymorphously perverse primary narcissism in need of normalisation through oedipalisation.

2.1.1 Sexed histories of LGBTQIA+ marginalisation

Homophobia and transphobia against gender and sexually non-conforming bodies AMAB has long been instrumental to sustaining such binary classifications, operating to produce and maintain homosocial bonds of cisheteromascularity held in opposition to a feminised queer other (Sedgwick 1985).² Bodies AMAB that deviate from gender norms, whether that be in terms of gender identity, gender expression and/or sexual orientation, have historically been rendered hypervisible, othered as diseased hypersexual sexual predators and paedophiles (Chauncey 1994; D’Emilio 1992; Gross 2001; Streitmatter 2008; Weeks 1990). Even the boundaries of male-male friendships have been rigidly policed, with expressions of friendship deemed too intimate, too affectionate, and too expressive similarly othered as feminine/queer (Nardi 1999). Such rigid gender boundaries assigned to bodies *sexed* male stand in contrast to those *sexed* female. As Sedgwick (1985) identifies, the continuum between homosociality and homosexuality among women has been more fluid. Gender and/or sexually non-conforming AFAB bodies, often positioned as sexually available to men lacking any desire of their own (Gross 2001), have been rendered comparatively invisible (Gross 2001; Enright 2019; Hope 2019). As Meeuf (2017) argues in their work on trans bodies in popular culture, trans women have been much more visible than trans men, often serving “as objects of cisgender anxiety and reflection” (p.178). Such hypervisibility

² Though Sedgwick’s theory around the historical organisation of gender and sexuality did not address trans people, her argument around gender and sexual variance among men being a threat to the stability of heteromascularity can arguably be extended to include gender and sexual variance among anyone assumed to be male. Trans women and non-binary people AMAB similarly call into question the stability of the heteromascularity subject because this subject, as discussed, has been reduced to reproductive capacities.

of AMAB members of the community remains pertinent, made present through the likes of moral panics around ‘predatory’ ‘deceptive’ trans women in women’s spaces (Bettcher 2007) and drag queens reading to children in schools (Canham 2020; Hussain 2020; West 2018). It is also violently felt through disproportionate levels of homophobic and transphobic victimisation and traumatic experiences reported by AMAB members of the LGBTQIA+ community (Hudson-Sharp and Metcalf 2016), which have been associated with poor mental health outcomes (King et al. 2008), internalised homophobia (Lanzieri and Hildebrandt 2011; Szymanski and Ikizler 2013) and internalised transphobia (Bockting et al. 2020).

In pointing out such sexed modes of oppression, I am by no means suggesting that LGBTQIA+ bodies AMAB have had it harder. Firstly, the violent impact of invisibility should not be understated. Secondly, AFAB members of the community have had to navigate homophobia and/or transphobia *in addition to* their already marginalised status. As Adler and Brenner (1992) identify in their work around the historical organising of gay men and lesbians, “lesbians organize as lesbians, just as gay men organize as gays. But lesbians also organize as oppressed women” (p.33). Bodies AFAB face oppression on account of their assigned sex irrespective of whether their gender and sexuality are normatively aligned with that sex. Nevertheless, such differences emerging from sexed modes of oppression contribute, at least in part, to understanding differentiated histories of marginalisation, intra-community tensions and differentiated directions of organisation that have informed the focus of this project. For instance, the significance of cisheteronormative constructions of sex goes *some way* to understanding the split between the gay liberation and lesbian movements in the 1970s (Adler and Brenner 1992; D’Emilio 1992), with the former having been more diametrically opposed to heterosexuality than the latter. It also goes *some way* to understanding the rich histories of many trans people organising not only around their gender identity but also with LGB individuals that share certain struggles associated with assigned sex.

2.1.2 The erasure of historical dis/continuities of desire between the binary: Sexed, racialised and classed

Premised on a binary logic, cisheteronormativity has long operated to erase and marginalise (a)gender, (a)sexual and (a)romantic bodies irreducible to oppositional sex. Intersex bodies have been reduced to anomalies, medicalised and surgically ‘corrected’ to re-affirm the binary (Preves 2016). Non-binary gender identities have been denied social and legal recognition, often prevented from accessing gender-confirming medical procedures for failing to align with cisnormative binary constructions of what it means to be trans (Pasley et al. 2020; Vincent 2020). Bi- and pan- sexual/romantic individuals, when not completely erased as confused, attention seekers, closeted gays, or assumed to be gay or straight depending on with whom they are sleeping, have been othered as greedy, promiscuous and unfaithful (Erickson-Schroth and Mitchell 2009; Gross 2001; Spalding and Peplau 1997). Similarly, asexual and/or aromantic individuals, when not erased as confused attention seekers (de Lappe 2018), have been positioned as deficient in “emotions, and the ability to engage with or/and understand others” (Pacho 2018, p.117).

Sexed modes of oppression have again emerged as significant to how such bodies beyond the binary have been marginalised. For instance, any gender variance among bodies AMAB has routinely been othered gay (Barker et al. 2012; Connell 2005; Frosh et al. 2003; Messner 2005; Steinman 2000). Bisexual and pansexual men have been rendered especially invisible, emerging as practically non-existent at best (Callis 2014; Steinman 2000; Steinman 2011), diseased spreaders at worst (Gross 2001). Comparatively, bisexuality among women has been much more visible. However, fetishised in ways that deny rather than affirm women’s desires (Callis 2014; Fahs 2009), such visibility has operated to reinforce cisheteronormativity. Sexed modes of oppression have even emerged in the policing of asexual and/or aromantic individuals, with those that AMAB othered expected to perform cisheteromascularity to avoid being othered as queer, and those that are AFAB facing pressure from men to have sex (Decker 2014).

Such widespread reduction of gender and sexuality to reproductive roles has been far from stable, set against vast historical dis/continuities of non-binary (a)gender and (a)sexual expression that have been systematically erased and marginalised. Much work has documented sex, gender and sexuality as spectrums, unstable and open to re-configuration over time (Fausto-Sterling 1999; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Gherovici 2011; Gherovici 2017; Halberstam 2018; Kinsey 1948; Klein 1978; Rippon 2019). Examples of such can be found in the rich histories of differently gendered colonised societies and cultures recognising possibilities of desire in excess of the sexed binary, made present through the likes of the Hijra (third sex) population of India (Hinchy 2019); the Mohaves of South Western USA (Bech 1997); and the two-spirited people of North America (Morgensen 2011). Such differently gendered cultures have also been well documented in the western world. Chauncey (1994), for instance, draws attention to the working-class sexual culture of ‘men’ and ‘fairies’ in New York, which, up until the early 20th century, was largely organised around gender expression rather than sex. Within this culture, being a man was something one became, with men able “to transform themselves into fairies or quasi-women by changing their dress or demeanour” (p.62).³ The normalisation of such relationships within this culture was not to say that ‘the fairy’ was respected. As Chauncey acknowledges, “the men who became fairies did so at the cost of forfeiting their privileged status as men” (p.58). “Becoming a fairy meant assuming the status of a woman or even prostitute” (p.100).⁴ This culture resonated in many ways with the sexual order of Ancient Greece (Bech 1997), where “the continuum between "men loving men" and "men promoting the interests of men" appears to have been quite seamless” (Sedgwick 1985, p.4). As such, it was a sexual culture that still operated within a heavily patriarchal framework centred around oppositional gender roles. However, less rigidly defined by genitals, it

³ On this basis, Chauncey defends the work of Kinsey (1948), whose theory of sexuality as a continuum in excess of a strict hetero/homo binary has been heavily contested for over-estimating the prevalence of non-heterosexual practices. Chauncey argues that while many have since failed to replicate Kinsey’s results, often pointing to methodological issues, the high prevalence of non-heterosexual encounters at the time of Kinsey’s study could, *at least in part*, be explained by these shifting understandings and embodiments of sex.

⁴ Such fluidity is nicely captured by the etymology of the slang term ‘molly’, which, throughout the 18th and 19th century, was used indiscriminately across England to describe not only female sex workers, effeminate boys and men, and male sodomites but also lower-class girls and women in general (OED 2020)

was not in continuity with present cisheteronormative formations of gender and sexuality reduced to reproductive capacities.

Cisheteronormativity, set against such dis/continuities, has been both racialised and classed. BIPOC and working-class people, *especially* those that also happen to be women and/or LGBTQIA+, have similarly been feminised, castrated, emasculated and dehumanised as embodying a primitive rootless excess of desire impervious to reason and self-regulation (Collins 2004; Chauncey 1994; Ferguson 2004; Hinchy 2019; Laqueur 1992). As Krishnaswamy (1998) identifies in her work on the colonisation of India, “colonialism was justified, naturalized, even legitimized” through the othering of Indian men as effeminate, which, “like homosexuality... was constructed as the fallen, failed, bastardized, or incomplete form of manliness” (p.35). Such constructions of a racialised excess of desire have even been used to justify slavery, racial segregation and various other racialised forms of socio-economic-political control (Collins 2004; Ferguson 2004). As such, what it means to queer cisheteronormativity extends far beyond queering gender and sexuality, urging us to consider how this system of organisation has produced multiple intersecting forms of privilege and marginalisation.

Throughout modern history, sexual ‘improprieties’ of various sorts, alcohol and drug use, ‘lewd’ behaviour, ‘illegitimate’ children, mothers that have had to work, single female headed households, sex work, the presence of lodgers in households, beds and rooms shared by lodgers and/or relatives of the ‘opposite sex’, have all surfaced as racialised *and* classed markers of uncontrolled desire held accountable for crime and social disorganisation (see Chauncey 1994; Ferguson 2004; Laqueur 1992). Marked as sexually and by extension socially degenerate, social problems emerging from systemic oppressions of economic inequality, derived through inherited wealth built on the back of colonial bourgeois histories of class exploitation and slavery, have long been reduced to the ‘lower’ classes’ poor choices and lack of self-control. Far from a distant memory, such constructions continue to re-surface in the present, albeit in differentiating forms and intensities. From working class women read as promiscuous (Ortner 1991 cited in Skeggs 1997), stigmatised as single mothers having *too* many

children (Collins 2004; Tyler 2008), to racialised constructions of aggressive hypersexual black men (Collins 2004; Green 2008) and angry black women (Childs 2005), cisheteronormative configurations of gender and sexuality continue to be racialised and classed.

The power of phallus within this phallogentric order is thus far from reducible to the presence or absence of an actual penis. It is 'intersectional', with race, class, gender and sexuality cutting across one another in ways that resist any singular stable position (Crenshaw 1989).

Some women... "have" the phallus in our culture because it is not just the penis but all the other signs of power and privilege, which stand in a metaphoric and metonymic relation not only to the "penis" but also to "white" and "bourgeois" – the signs of a "proper" racial and class identity" (Tyler 1991, p.58).

As Skeggs (1997) argues, cisheteronormative configurations of "respectability became a way to hold together class, gender, sexuality and race: they mediated each other" (Skeggs 1997, p.32). Recognising such multiple intersecting relations of power and privilege is important because those marginalised on account of class and race face extra challenges when it comes to navigating gender and sexuality. As Orne (2017) identifies:

Being already unrespectable from one's race... [and class, I would add] makes it easier to transcend.... respectable boundaries of sexuality and gender... to be black makes queerness easier to achieve (p.207).

Men marginalised along racial and class lines have historically overcompensated masculinity to prove their manliness in a system that has denied them access to other outlets of masculinist power (Segal 2007; Collins 2004; hooks 1984).

2.2. Re-essentialising homonormative and transnormative modes of resistance

Now that I have considered how cisheteronormativity has organised gender and sexuality within sexed, gendered, racialised and classed binary frameworks

marginalising and colonising many historical dis/continuities of bodies and desires, I would like to move on to consider normative constraints that have emerged through commodified homonormative and transnormative modes of resistance. In this section, I explore the power relations of resistance, thinking through literature around how resistance has operated to sustain and re-produce many of the binary classifications discussed thus far. While acknowledging many new possibilities of gender and sexual expression normalised and naturalised through LGBTQIA+ visibility and progress, I critically engage with questions around the limits of that visibility and progress, drawing on work around how LGBTQIA+ representation, organising and community building has operated to exclude many intersections of the community. I consider how inclusion has been made based on what within existing sexed, gendered, racialised and classed hierarchies of power and desire.

Power and resistance are inseparable from one another, as resistance always re-emerges as an expression of power itself, producing new power relations that lay open to contestation from all that exceeds their grasp (Foucault 1978). For instance, the medicalisation of homosexuality and all that came to be conflated with it, while oppressive for reasons discussed, liberated LGBTQIA+ people from criminalisation “since people could say, “If we are sick, then why do you condemn us, why do you despise us?” and so on” (Foucault 1997, p.168). Likewise, the term gay, which emerged against medicalisation, affording visibility and affirmation to all that exceeded the medicalised category of ‘the homosexual’, allowed those embracing it to:

...define their problems differently by trying to create a culture that makes sense only in relation to a sexual experience and a type of relation that is their own. By taking the pleasure of sexual relations away from the area of sexual norms and its categories, and in so doing making the pleasure the crystallizing point of a new culture (Foucault 1997, p.160).

However, like the category of ‘the homosexual’, the emergence of the category ‘gay’ came to produce a politics of inclusion and exclusion of its own.

Going back to D’Emilio (1992), gayness was once a lot to have in common. Far from representing just white affluent gay men, the term originally encompassed a whole range of intersectional gender and sexual identities and expressions organising together against *both* gender and sexual oppression (Cohen 2008; D’Emilio 1992; Rivera 1972; Schulman and Bordowitz 2002; Stryker 2017). The gay liberation movement has radical intersectional roots, led by the most disenfranchised members of the LGBTQIA+ community, such as trans women of colour (Cohen 2008; Stryker 2017). However, in coming to centre some bodies and voices over others, the plurality of lived experience once organised under the gay umbrella has since been displaced, rendering efforts to reduce much gayness of the past, such as that expressed by the trans gay liberation activists Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera (Rivera 1972), irreducible to what gayness has become.⁵ The gayness of the past, far from belonging solely to the white affluent gay men that so often try to claim it, marks multiple intersectional differently gendered dis/continuities of desire, identity and expression erased and marginalised under white bourgeois ‘homonormativity’ (Duggan 2002). Such homonormativity has been heavily contested through the likes of the earlier discussed tensions between lesbian feminists and gay liberationists in the 1970s (D’Emilio 1992), and the emergence of bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer identities organising in the 1980s (Altman 2013). However, such identity categories produce power relations of their own, particularly those pertaining to transness, which, much like gayness, have been criticised for marginalising historical dis/continuities of gender identity, expression and desire within reductive white bourgeois medicalised transnormative constructions of what it means to be trans (Puar 2015; Johnson 2016).

Many recent advancements in LGBTQIA+ rights and recognition - namely equal marriage, adoption rights, military access, and medicalised gender recognition - have been fought for and won on the grounds of assimilation with a cisheteronormative

⁵ Such instability of the category is important given the current backlash against efforts to claim such historical figures as trans (Vigo 2018). While Johnson and Rivera are both on record identifying as gay men (*Pay it no mind – the life and times of Marsha P. Johnson* 2012; Rivera 1972), the way in which they expressed that gayness is irreducible to what gay has become. For example, Rivera (1972) identifies as a transvestite and drag queen, but she also speaks about being in the wrong body, which exceeds the limits of what such labels mean today.

patriarchal and (neo)colonial capitalist system which leaves gendered, classed and racialised assumptions and institutions relatively intact (Duggan 2002; Nast 2002; Puar 2007; Puar 2015; Johnson 2016). The incorporation (and production) of LGBTQIA+ culture and politics in capitalist modes of consumption has been heavily criticised for disproportionately representing the perspectives, experiences and interests of affluent members of the community (Puar 2015; Johnson 2016), particularly white affluent gay men, able and willing to assimilate with narrow class, racial, national, gender and sexual ideals (Duggan 2002; Nast 2002; Puar 2007; Weiss 2008). As Orne (2017) identifies, this process has, in many instances, seen white affluent gay men invited into Rubin's (1984) charmed inner circle of good, normal and natural sexuality. Centred around a liberal rights model emphasising "equality as sameness with normativity... [over] equality as freedom for difference from the norm" (Weiss 2008, p.89), such drives towards assimilation represent a politics of recognition which, much like cisheteronormativity, has seen a myriad of intersectional experiences, needs and desires erased and marginalised. Take equal marriage for instance. As a gendered, racialised and classed institution, the affordances of equal marriage within a capitalist system organised around inherited wealth are far from evenly distributed (Halberstam 1998), yet marriage is often taken as the pinnacle of LGBTQIA+ progress (Duggan 2003; Puar 2007). Then there is liberation on the grounds of inclusion within western military powers, which leaves a lot to be desired for the many LGBTQIA+ people around the globe subjugated by white supremacist neo-colonial forces.

Such liberal international measures of LGBTQIA+ liberation and progress amount to what Puar (2015) describes as 'pink-washing', entangled in 'trans(homo)nationalist' narratives that sees women and LGBTQIA+ people outside of the west positioned in need of saving from a regressive other through war and foreign intervention. Pinkwashing emerges as particularly strong when we look at the conditions under which trans people of colour are often afforded visibility. Snorton and Haritaworn (2013), for instance, draw attention to a trans necropolitics that appropriates the suffering and death of trans women of colour not to address the disproportionate levels of violence such intersections of the trans community face but to re-centre whiteness

through homonationalist and transnationalist discourse that positions the LGBTQIA+ community as a whole in opposition to a perceived threat from immigrants and people of colour. Often implicit if not explicit in such narratives is the idea that such bodies are forced to live a closeted lie, with coming out positioned as a measure of liberation and pride (Puar 2007). However, missing from such narratives are the voices of the actual LGBTQIA+ supposedly being protected, who, as Puar identifies, are navigating multiple systems of oppression, with many seeking liberations from oppressive and exploitative forces of racism and western intervention. Sexual liberation is not the only measure of liberation. For many, maintaining solidarities to survive and struggle against neo-colonialism, class inequality and racism take primacy over gender and sexual liberation (Decena 2008; Puar 2007), *especially* when it comes to race given the inability for BIPOC to conceal marginalised characteristics (Halley 2000). Such constructions of a regressive oppressive other also operates to obscure the west's own issues with gender and sexual oppression, erased under the illusion that legal rights attained within a biased system translate into equality. It also displaces accountability for how much gender and sexual oppression around the world is entangled in histories of colonialism, as earlier discussed. Even today, evangelical missionaries from the US have been linked with inflaming homophobia previously colonised countries. Roa (2014), for instance, draws attention to the neo-colonial influence US evangelicals had on the drafting of Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act, 2014 – a law which initially proposed the death penalty for homosexual acts but later settled on life imprisonment.⁶

Nevertheless, despite the complexity of such material-knowledge-power relations, working-class people and BIPOC are routinely positioned as less inclusive of gender and sexual diversity. Such thinking not only fails to account for how liberal white affluent bodies continue to profit from such hegemonic historical configurations (de Boise 2015; hooks 2015; Hubbs 2014; Puar 2007; Segal 2007); it also obscures the disproportionate impact of gender and sexual conservatism among white affluent people, particularly white affluent men, who hold significantly more institutional power. As hooks (2015) argues:

⁶ Roa (2014) draws attention to how these evangelicals re-appropriate desires for decolonisation by positioning themselves at the mercy of African Anglican leaders for moral support and spiritual guidance against a sexually regressive west.

A distinction must be made between black people overtly expressing prejudice toward homosexuals and homophobic white people who never make homophobic comments but who have the power to actively exploit and oppress gay people in areas of housing, employment, etc. While both groups perpetuate and reinforce each other and this cannot be denied or downplayed, the truth is that the greatest threat to gay rights does not reside in black communities (pp. 207-208).

The epitome of such whitewashed bourgeois constructions of inclusivity can be found in what Anderson (2009) describes as ‘inclusive masculinity’, which, as de Boise (2015) identifies, celebrates a woke, enlightened, open and tolerant white affluent cisgender heterosexual masculinity, ignoring how such notions of inclusivity have become “yet another hegemonic strategy for heterosexual, white, middle-class men to legitimately maintain economic, social, and political power in the wake of gay rights” (p.325; see also Puar 2007).

2.2.1 Born this way narratives

The power of normative and nationalist constructions of queer subjectivity discussed thus far is entangled in born this way claims to immutability, which have seen gayness and transness essentialised, normalised and naturalised, to varying degrees, within linear modernist accounts failing to account for historical intersectional dis/continuities in bodies, identities and desires (Halberstam 2018; Johnson 2016; Silvermint 2018; Weber 2012). As Weber (2012) identifies, homonormative born this way narratives have operated to marginalise and erase bisexual identities that challenge binary conceptualisations of sexuality – an argument that could be extended to thinking about the marginalisation of various other (a)sexual and (a)romantic desires that resist fixed binary lifelong models. Similarly, wrong body discourses have operated to reduce transness to biological essentialist understandings of binary sex, medicalising gender transitions at the expense of recognising multiple embodiments of gender detached from sexed characteristics (Serano 2007). Such discourses have excluded not only those that do not wish to medically transition but also those unable to afford the cost of medical transition, thus operating to centre white affluent trans women (Johnson 2016).

While, as Weber (2012) identifies, such claims to immutability have been strategically deployed against the religious right weaponising of notions of choice, they are structurally limited, affording limiting grounds for politicising and validating queerness that refuses assimilation. Claims to immutability see rights and recognition achieved not based on acceptance but based on the idea deviations from cisheteronormativity are an abnormality that cannot be helped. They hinge on the idea that if people did have a choice, choosing to be cis and heterosexual would be better. As such, they do little to affirm formations of queer identities, cultures and desires that are a matter of choice, such as the choice of bisexuals to date someone of the same gender (Silvermint 2018) or the choice to practice non-monogamy or other alternative relationship forms (Elia 2003). There are also intersectional concerns surrounding how such claims to immutability are often deployed through ‘like race’ comparisons, which, as Walker (2001) identifies, re-produces “a logic of racism positing blackness as a fixed, biological difference that is always marked by skin color” (p.59). Such thinking “promotes the idea that the traits of subordinated groups, rather than the dynamics of subordination, are the normatively important thing to notice” (Halley 2000). As with sexuality, a politics surrounding race as an immutable characteristic, re-produced through homonormative ‘like race’ comparisons, operates to afford inclusion based on assimilation with white bourgeois cultural norms, such as people of colour being expected to ‘tame’ their hair at work or school to meet biased standards of professionalism (Silvermint 2018).

2.2.2 The power of the pink pound?

To better understand how homonormative and transnormative narratives have come to centre white affluent bodies, we might consider the wider political economy in which ‘progress’ has been made. Efforts to capitalise on the LGBTQIA+ movement have seen a plurality of queer desires and histories re-configured within white bourgeois cisheteronormativity, reduced to de-politicised, commodified and marketised forms, causing minimal disruption to existing socio-economic power relations. As Duggan (2002) notes in her critique of homonormativity, an argument

that could be extended to thinking about transnormativity, such normative re-configurations of desire fail to:

...contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (p.179).

Under consumer capitalism, as Pook (2020) identifies, power no longer operates through exclusion, at least not directly so, but rather through inclusion. Such thinking resonates with that of Deleuze and Guattari (2004), who draw attention to how a highly adaptable consumer capitalism feeds off its own subversion, commodifying and in the process re-territorialising all that exceeds its grasp. Consumer life “is guided by seduction” (Bauman 2000, p.76), with commodified images emerging as powerful tools for re-producing and re-capturing bodies and desires, particularly when it comes to bodies and desires otherwise excluded (Gavin 2018; Mowlabocus 2007).

While ‘up from invisibility’, much representation of LGBTQIA+ people in the mass media, including LGBTQIA+ produced media, is made palpable for the majority (Gross 2001).

On television... homonormativity is embodied by whitewashed stereotypes that posit queer characters as monogamous, wealthy, comfortable middle-class men, sassy and fashionable, and more than content to pander to heteronormativity, sexism and racism (Vine and Cupples 2016, p.124).

Visibility of (a)sexual and (a)romantic desires that challenge the hetero/homo binary remain limited, with the threat of queer (a)sexual ambiguity often resolved through forces of erasure, pathologisation, or, in the case of bisexual women, sexual objectification (Barker et al. 2012; Callis 2014; Decker 2014). Similarly, in terms of trans representation, much media often centres white affluent medicalised narratives that cause minimal disruption to the gender binary. Meeuf (2017), for instance, argues that the media obsession surrounding Caitlyn Jenner aligns with our –

...culture’s assumptions about transgender identity as a “simple” inverse of biological expectations, not a messy repudiation of that gender binary

itself... Jenner's prominent place as a celebrated transgender icon comes as a result of her whiteness and normative gender performance (p.181).

Even when more diverse bodies are present in the media, they are again routinely depoliticised, included based on assimilation with white bourgeois standards of respectability, as was the case in the inclusion of race in the Netflix reboot of *Queer Eye*, which, as Byrd (2019), was used in one episode to expose prejudice against the police! ⁷ Such representation demonstrates how inclusion demands more than the presence of "people who look different" (Puwar 2004, p.1).

The pink pound has arguably played an instrumental role in this process, with the purchasing power of white affluent members of LGBTQIA+ communities, *particularly* white affluent gay men, eliciting disproportionate attention from those looking to capitalise on the movement. As Peters (2011) notes in her critique of the homonormative mass media,

...the quest for "valuable" demographics... with access to race, class, and male privilege... [has led] to whitewashed images of middle-class, primarily gender normative, gays and lesbians (Peters 2011, p.191).

A similar logic may also be applied to the centring of white affluent trans consumers seeking and able to afford medical transition, who in many places represent a lucrative market. Such normative images, when not reduced to shallow objects of consumption for the wider cis-het majority, operate to centre white affluent consumers as idealised measures of queer subjectivity. When queer people are represented as fully evolved sexual beings, they are routinely white affluent gender-normative gay men, often constructed in opposition to a desexualised feminine queer Other (Seif 2017; Sink et al. 2018; Zubair 2016) within an economy of desire replacing homophobia with femmephobia (Richardson 2009). Such dynamics have produced what Merrifield (2016) describes as the 'harmless homo', i.e., the gender-normative 'straight-acting' (Connell 1992) 'good gay' (Warner 2000). Even content produced exclusively for the

⁷ Byrd critically engages with depictions of race in the Netflix reboot of *Queer Eye*, which, while celebrated for its gender and racially diverse cast, centres whiteness. He draws attention to one particular episode where one of the fab 5, Karamo Brown, a black gay man, is 'pranked' with a deeply triggering police stop, which is 'resolved' by Karamo 'learning' that he has prejudices and that #notallpolice are bad.

LGBTQIA+ community has been limited. For example, as Burke (2016) identifies in his critique of the gay porn industry, which manufactures heavily racialised, gendered and classed hegemonic images centring white masculine bodies and desire, reproducing femme-phobic discourse, and restricting men of colour to the narrow-fetishised roles earlier discussed.

2.2.3 The homonormative territorialisation of spaces and places: The institutionalised marginalisation and erasure of sexy communities and naked intimacy

To conclude this section, before moving on to think about new spatial-material-cultural possibilities of re-organisation afforded *with* the internet, I want to finally consider how the emergence of the white affluent gay male consumer at the centre of LGBTQIA+ culture and politics is entangled in gendered, racialised and classed histories of white affluent gender-normative gay men territorialising commercial offline spaces and places (Adler and Brenner 1992; Castells 1983; Lauria and Knopp 1985). The emergence of what have been termed ‘gayborhoods’ (Gorman-Murray 2016), ‘gay ghettos’ (Levine 1979) and ‘gay villages’ (Castell 1983) etc, have played an important role in LGBTQIA+ histories of organisation and resistance. As Knopp (2004) identifies, such neighbourhoods afforded a sense of place against placelessness, which, as Orne (2017) identifies, enabled possibilities of community building out of the ruins of heteronormative rejection. The proliferation of LGBTQIA+ owned businesses, consumers and residents in concentrated voting blocs emerged as major sites of re-claiming socio-economic and political power. However, as D’Emilio (1992) and Gorman-Murray (2016) identify, such sites of inclusion also emerged as sites of exclusion. There has been much debate around how such spaces and places came to emerge this way. Castells (1983), for instance, in his work around the development of the Castro gay district of San Francisco, notes that gay men, as men, have greater need and desire for territory, arguing that lesbians, as women, are more radical and global in their resistance. However, such essentialisation of gender differences has been challenged. Lauria and Knopp (1985), for example, speculate that gay men may have felt a greater need for territory not because they are men but because of how emotional and sexual expression between men, or anyone perceived

male we might add, has been hypervisible and violently policed outside of such territories (see again Sedgwick 1985). D’Emilio (1992) and Alder and Brenner (1992) also identify differences in spatial organising emerging from the split between gay liberationists and lesbian feminists, with the former, in face of gendered hierarchies both within and beyond the LGBTQIA+ community, organising in a wider fight against patriarchy. Nevertheless, while such differences in experiences and needs may have *contributed* to such urban developments, such territorialisation of space cannot be reduced solely to a matter of choice.

As Alder and Brenner (1992) identify, “if lesbians have not yet taken the next steps toward creating a distinct neighbourhood, perhaps this reflects their lack of capital more than their lack of interest” (p.32). They also draw attention to how gay men are more likely to be childless, affording them with greater mobility in work, residence and leisure (see also Nast 2002). The power of capital necessary to live and invest in such neighbourhoods is also important for understanding wider classed and racialised dynamics at play, with the gentrification of such cultural hubs having seen working-class people including working-class LGBTQIA+ people, many of whom are also BIPOC, pushed out of such neighbourhoods. Lauria and Knopp (1985) criticise Castells for celebrating market inclusion and gentrification as a survival strategy without considering the class interests displaced in the process. D’Emilio (1992) draws attention to how gay entrepreneurs in San Francisco put their business interests over their employees, who could no longer afford skyrocketing rents, resulting in many “gay men and women of color... displaced by more privileged members of the community” (p.87). As a result, the commercialisation of such neighbourhoods have become increasingly centred around white bourgeois individual consumption over wider community needs and concerns.

Orne (2017), in his ethnography of the Boystown district of Chicago, draws attention to how commercialisation has seen a decline of what he refers to as ‘sexy communities’ held together by ‘naked intimacy’. Naked intimacy is taken as much more than just sex and nudity. While Orne’s exploration of sex clubs in the Boystown draws attention to how nudity can function to strip people of various markers of

identity and status, fostering connections across social strata, the ‘naked’ in naked intimacy refers more to a stripping back of divisive ego attachments in general, enabling desire to flow across and between bodies. It goes back, in many ways, to D’Emilio’s point about gayness once being a lot to have in common, with the power of exclusion once fostering connections across other forms of difference, with many intersectional bodies “bound together... [in] kinship family-outside-of-family” (p.41); “a “sticky, troublesome grip” for people that you didn’t choose but rather who showed up out of the ruins of rejection from straight life...” (p.57). However, with commodified homonormativity affording possibilities for many, particularly white affluent gay men, to safely become-other without relying on strict socio-spatial-material community boundaries, connections fostered and promoted in such neighbourhoods have increasingly entered the realm of choice. As Halperin (2012) argues, “gay kids these days don’t feel a political urge to manifest their sexuality... They find themselves more or less accepted everywhere they go” (p. 415). In the absence of such boundaries, many no longer become gay (in a social and political sense) because they were never made to *feel* anything other. ‘Inclusion’ has resulted in assimilation, although unlike assimilation emerging from being born into a marginalised culture and then entering a dominant culture, as is often the case for many BIPOC, gay assimilation, Orne (2017) argues, emerges from never really entering a culture strictly defined by difference in the first place. When afforded a sense of belonging with heteronormativity, gay identities, communities and cultures once emerging through exclusion are straightened out, producing what Orne describes as homosexual straight people.

It is important to note that limited engagement with queer countercultures does not automatically translate to a lack of access or participation in LGBTQIA+ spaces. Being part of a queer counterculture requires more than just turning up. Orne (2017), for instance, observes a racialised “segregation of circuits” within one ‘gay’ venue, with individual consumers simultaneously marked as commodities for consumption within a heavily gendered, racialised and classed economy of desire (see also Green 2008). Though diverse, the space celebrated cismasculine whiteness, urging us to again consider how inclusion demands more than the presence of “people who look

different” (Puwar 2004, p.1). Building on insights from contact theory (Allport 1955), Orne distinguishes between meaningful connections produced through sexy communities, enabling intimate connections that help to break down prejudiced assumptions, and superficial contact formed through a culture primarily defined by individual consumption, which often entrenches prejudices through superficial markers of identity.

Assimilation has resulted in what Orne (2017) describes as a Disneyfication of many urban gay spaces and places. He notes that with many spaces struggling to stay relevant and survive, gayness has become a depoliticised, sanitised and desexualised commodity in commercial efforts to make urban queer life palatable, respectable and desirable to a wider market. Efforts to attract a ‘tourist gaze’ (Urry cited in Orne 2017), particularly that of white heterosexual women, have operated to centre white affluent gay men both as consumers and fetishised objects of consumption. Orne draws attention to one BDSM sex club in the city that, while retaining some level of naked intimacy, see such intimacy frequently dispelled by consumers ‘on safari’, disrupting the rituals of the space with their cheap laughs and moral judgment. Meanwhile, set against this influx of newcomers, Orne draws attention to LGBTQIA+ people of colour, who have come to be othered as loiterers, outsiders and criminals, despite long being present in the neighbourhood. Ocampo (2012) similarly draws attention to a gay nightclub in LA, which once catered for predominantly Latino and African American gay crowd but under new management following gentrification had “changed the vibe” (p.458) to align with aesthetics and tastes of white gay male consumers. Many patrons complained about being rejected for looking too urban and thus not gay enough, resonating in some ways with DasGupta’s and Dasgupta’s (2018) work in London, highlighting the case of one South Asian Muslim gay man, who, upon entering a gay venue in Soho, had been repeatedly warned he was entering a gay bar, as if someone that looked like him could not be gay.

In terms of gender, Casey (2004) draws attention to a de-dyking of queer spaces, with many queer women being made to feel unsafe and unwelcome by straight women. Aitkenhead’s (2001) work in Manchester draws attention to exclusionary dress codes

across various LGBTQIA+ venues prioritising entry for gay men and straight women over lesbians. Even opposition to the increased presence of straight women has operated to re-centre white gay men, with many opposing women in general (Casey 2004; Orne 2017). Similarly, Jack (2016) draws attention to transphobia in Manchester's Gay Village, while Kerpen (2016) draws attention to the policing of gender non-conformity on Cardiff's gay scene. Such gendered, racialised and classed forces, far from separate from one another, intersect in ways that challenge abstract understandings of what it means to queer. For instance, Decena (2008) draws attention to how many Dominican gay men in the US, even those that are not strictly closeted to family, face pressures to live up to certain standards of hegemonic masculinity to create ambiguity around their sexuality to sustain kin relations necessary for socio-economic survival. Ocampo (2012), following his work around black and Latino gay men's experiences of being othered from venues for not looking gay enough, notes how in such contexts, 'straight acting' masculine expressions of gayness, while often positioned in opposition to queerness, emerge as a means of queering whitewashed constructions of gayness that have excluded them.

[Returning to the centring of coming out narratives, such intersectional politics of inclusion and exclusion beg the question, coming out as what exactly? With participation in many LGBTQIA+ venues heavily racialised, gendered and classed, coming out of the closet as LGBTQIA+ routinely sees marginalised members of the community entering new closets, facing pressures to conform to racialised, gendered and classed normative configurations of gayness (see Green 2008). Often missing from discussions around being out and proud is space for considering the possibilities of being proud of other marginalised characteristics, which are often diminished when assimilating with homonormative and transnormative notions of respectability. Nevertheless, the power of such normative social-material-cultural configurations is becoming increasingly contested. As discussed in the introduction, media and urban landscapes are changing, with the internet, as I will now go on to discuss, facilitating many new possibilities for connection, both on and offline, re-configuring such normative constraints of bodies, communities and desires. While many have drawn attention to the demise of gay spaces, events, communities and cultures (Brown 2014;

Orne 2017) within what the conservative commentator Sullivan (2005) celebrates as a 'post-gay' era, others have drawn attention to a proliferation of alternative queer countercultures contesting the limitations of dominant spatial-material-cultural relations (Gorman-Murray and Nash 2014; McLean 2013; Nash et al. 2013). While much of the work on queer countercultures has tended to focus on very large metropolitan areas, with limited academic attention paid to recent developments in my area of interest, such work, as earlier discussed, resonates with my own situated experience across South West England and South Wales.

Chapter 3: Digital empowerment: Whose empowerment?

Now that I have situated possibilities of queering masculinity between cisheteronormative, homonormative and transnormative social-material-cultural relations that have historically operated to marginalise bodies and desires, I would like to move on to explore how the internet has *both* enabled and displaced possibilities of navigating such normative constraints. In line with the aims, objectives and research questions laid out in the introduction, this chapter reviews literature responding to questions around LGBTQIA+ digital empowerment, drawing on work surrounding how the internet has *both* enabled and displaced affirmative possibilities of connecting with difference. As earlier discussed, the internet, in uprooting bodies from many geographical constraints of time and space, has enabled many new possibilities for re-organising spatial-material-cultural relations, affording many new opportunities for intimacy, identity work, community building and activism. However, normative sexed, gendered, racialised and classed configurations of gender and sexuality continue to be made present online. As such, it has become clear that some bodies are more fluid than others, rendering the question, the digital empowerment of who and what exactly, and at whose and what's expense?

I start the chapter, in *section 3.1*, by considering literature around the affirmative potential of digital communication, liberating and democratising knowledges, bodies and desires from the constraints of geographical time and place to afford affirmative possibilities of connecting and organising that have materialised both on and offline. In *section 3.2*, I move on to think through work that remains sceptical of the internet's emancipatory potential, considering the limits of online participation. Here I consider how the internet affirms not only the affirmative but also many oppressive and exploitative forces, operating, in many instances, to limit the disruptive potential of digital communication. In *section 3.3*, I think about how such limits are entangled in a wider political economy encouraging some flows of desire over others, before finally, in *section 3.4*, considering the significance of a digital divide, rendering

possibilities of becoming with digital media and technologies far from evenly distributed. Following this discussion of the various affordances and constraints of becoming with digital media and technologies, with existing research yielding many conflicting results around specific types of media, online practices and digital platforms. I then conclude the chapter by situating the project within literature thinking within, between and across multiple sites, both on and offline. It is here where I build on work emphasising the importance of embodied personal and collective affective histories, defending a need to consider possibilities of becoming in the digital age as something that remains situated in, though never determined by, biographies and places.

3.1 Affirming difference: The emancipatory potential of digital media and technologies

In today's world, young people grow up reading words and seeing images that previous generations never encountered, and few can remain unaware of the existence of lesbian and gay people. Yet despite the dramatic increase in the public visibility of gay people in nearly all domains of our public culture, most young lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people still find themselves isolated and vulnerable. Their experiences and concerns are not reflected in the formal curricula of schools or in our society's informal curriculum, the mass media. For these teenagers the Internet is a godsend, and thousands are using computer networks to declare their homosexuality, meet, and seek support from other gay youths (Gross 2003, p.262).

Digital communication has afforded LGBTQIA+ people with many new spatial-material possibilities for connection and civic participation often limited or denied offline. It has enabled us to see and be seen, both to ourselves and others, against a cisheteronormative society and culture, which, when not violently opposed to queer expression, operates to limit who and what is made intelligible and visible as LGBTQIA+.

Not unlike a coloured hanky in the back pocket of a pair of Levis or a suggestive glance in a public restroom that allowed pre-digital generations of

gay men to signal their sexual desires in spaces and places that were not always gay friendly, today SNSs [social networking sites] like Grindr allow sexual minorities to seek one another out within a not always hospitable culture (Gudelunas 2012, p.360).

Empowered by the relative anonymity of digital communication, utilised to varying degrees through affordances and constraints of shifting textual, visual and audial modalities (Jones 2005), LGBTQIA+ people, particularly LGBTQIA+ youth, have long taken advantage of such anonymity to safely come out online before doing so offline (DeHaan 2013; Grov et al. 2014; Kerpen 2016; McKenna and Bargh 1998).

Digital communication has, in many ways, enabled marginalised genders and sexualities to flow free and connect. It has also afforded new possibilities for not only consuming but also producing queer pornography and other sexual media content (Gilbert 2020; Henderson 1992; Mowlabocus 2010b; Smith 2018a), affirming marginalised desires through and with bodies rather than against them (Dyer 1992). While much of this work resists utopian visions of pornography, identifying, as earlier discussed, how such content remains entangled in a political economy that often centres white affluent gender normative bodies (something I will return to later), the participatory potential of digital communication has arguably afforded users with more space for contesting dominant mass media narratives. The internet has also opened up new possibilities for establishing social, sexual and romantic connections, including but not limited to: cybersex (Attwood 2009; Daneback et al. 2005; Jones 2008); online dating and hook-ups (Gudelunas 2012; Mowlabocus 2010; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012); community building, identity work and activism (Gross 2001; Jackson et al. 2018; Madison 2018; Miller 2018; Singh 2012). Such possibilities, can intersect to afford feelings of self-acceptance and belonging against social isolation and estrangement (McKenna and Bargh 1999; Gross 2003; Jackson et al. 2018; Singh 2012). The internet has also afforded easy access to information and support (Bradlow 2017), including that pertaining to sexual health and relationship education (Scarcelli 2018). Such information and support are often limited by adult-centred social, cultural and institutional barriers (Scarcelli 2018; Levine 2018), especially when it comes to addressing the experiences and needs of LGBTQIA+ youth (DeHaan et al. 2013;

Mustanski et al. 2015; Renold and McGeeney 2017). As Mustanski et al. (2015) identifies, LGBTQIA+ youth have fewer resources, role models and support networks to discuss and explore sex and relationships. While much of this existing literature resists utopian visions of the internet, urging us to consider, as I will later go on to discuss, various constraints that come to surround digital content and practices, such work nevertheless makes room for understanding how digital communication affirms difference, affording new possibilities of contesting the material-knowledge power relations in which we are inescapably situated.

While many such opportunities for LGBTQIA+ connection have long been available offline, the internet has arguably afforded much broader scope for connection and participation. It has added flexibility and convenience, rendering many less dependent on physical safe spaces (Siebler 2016; Orne 2017). As Orne (2017) argues, we are now able to carry communities in our pocket, particularly with the advancement of mobile technologies embedded in our movements offline, enabling us to see and be seen in even the most heteronormative of spaces. With mobile technology, there is less need to code spaces as gay or straight (Roth 2015). Today, we are able to queer the heteronormative facade through location services pinpointing otherwise invisible LGBTQIA+ bodies in close proximity from wherever we may be (Kerpen 2016).

Such opportunities for connection have proven especially popular among LGBTQIA+ people. Daneback et al. (2005), for instance, documents how gay men were significantly more likely to practice cybersex than heterosexual men. Interestingly, the same was not true for bisexual men, although this may be due, at least in part, to bisexual men being afforded other outlets for exploring desire offline. Gay and bisexual men have been shown to consume more pornography than heterosexual men (Rosser et al. 2013). Similarly, lesbian and bisexual women have been shown to consume more sexually explicit content than heterosexual women, although less than gay and bisexual men (Træen et al. 2006; Træen and Daneback 2013), which is perhaps unsurprising given the widespread media fetishisation of queer women's sexuality earlier discussed. Research has also documented that sexual minorities, especially sexual minority men, are more likely to have met romantic and sexual

partners online than their heterosexual counterparts (Albright 2008; Rosenfield and Thomas 2012). LGBTQIA+ populations have also been shown to be statistically more likely than the general population to use the internet for establishing community connections and support (Gross 2003; Ybarra et al. 2016). It will thus perhaps come of little surprise that LGBTQIA+ youth report being less invested in fixed physical LGBTQIA+ spaces than older generations (Siebler 2016). As Aunspach (2015) identifies, we have witnessed a shift from the gay bar to the search bar. Research on MSM has long documented the demise of sex-seeking in offline venues in the face of such new mediated possibilities (Weatherburn et al. 2003). As Bolding et al. (2007) identify, between 1993 and 2002, the vast majority of MSM under 30 had met their first male sexual partner online — an increase from 2.6% to a staggering 61%. Meanwhile, first time hook-ups in physical venues decreased radically during this period, with the number of first-time sexual encounters in gay bars halving from 34.2% to 16.9%, and in schools dropping from 23.7% to 1.3%.

3.1.1 Democratising participation

The demise of physical connections with offline LGBTQIA+ spaces and institutions have, as earlier discussed, triggered much concern around the loss of community. However, as Siebler (2016) argues, we must “take care not to romanticize this view of the LGBT community of a bygone era” (p. 39). The internet may have displaced many offline connections, with many LGBTQIA+ now afforded more opportunities for moving and safely disclosing their genders and sexual orientations outside of LGBTQIA+ specific networks. As such, we must consider what has been opened up in the process of digitalising LGBTQIA+ relations. The ease at which marginalised groups can now connect has been an invaluable resource for LGBTQIA+ people with limited opportunities for connecting offline, such as those isolated in rural areas disconnected from urban LGBTQIA+ networks (DeHaan 2013; Grov et al. 2014), and young people constrained within ‘adultist’ worlds (Singh 2012). However, perhaps most importantly, possibilities of participation in the production and consumption of knowledges, communities and identities online have arguably had a democratising effect on desire, affording a platform for a plurality of voices and imagery contesting

intersecting adultised, urbanised, racialised, classed and gendered material-knowledge power relations of physical space and mass media institutions.

The internet has afforded new opportunities for connection among marginalised intersections of the community, whose histories and cultures, as earlier discussed, have long been erased, marginalised and left behind through the commercialisation of mainstream LGBTQIA+ identities, cultures and politics. As Siebler (2016) argues,

With the proliferation of LGBT presence on the Internet, representations of queerness and queer community have become more complex than ever before. In many ways, digital texts have allowed queers to see them-selves in positive representations and interact with others in ways that have been impossible previously... The digital age complicates what we see and embody as queer. The pedagogy of queerness begins with these sites of media in absence of a lived community or alongside a lived community (p.34)

For many, mainstream LGBTQIA+ spaces, or should I say 'gay' spaces, are no longer perceived as safe spaces. In the face of marginalisation and erasure, both within and outside of LGBTQIA+ networks, the internet has afforded many possibilities of affirmative connection and action. From the proliferation of online trans and non-binary communities and activist networks (Darwin 2017; Jackson et al. 2018; Singh 2012), to the formation of communities centring the social, economic and political concerns and challenges of LGBTQIA+ people of colour (Singh 2012), the internet has afforded many opportunities for intersectional support, resilience and resistance not only against cisheteronormativity but also against cishomonormativity` and transnormativity. It has also afforded many opportunities for bisexual and pansexual visibility and organising (Gonzalez et al. 2017). Such opportunities are enhanced, as Madison (2018) identifies, by the multi-modal archival nature of much social media, with identity markers on many sites afforded high retention through past activity made present. Given such affordances of the internet, it is perhaps no surprise that the digital age has seen more and more people, particularly young people, embrace notions of gender and sexual fluidity and reject binary identity categories (Bennett 2010; Callis 2014; Savin-Williams 2005), challenging essentialist linear developmental

understandings of gender and sexuality. Social-material-spatial relations previously organising desire have become increasingly blurred.

3.1.2 Activism not slacktivism: Materialising offline and coming to matter to the mainstream

Such possibilities of online participation, far from marking disembodied movements bound to digital space, materialise offline. While critics have labelled such online engagement and activism ‘slacktivist’, a term coined by Morozov (2009) to express scepticism around what he saw as lazy activism, others have encouraged us to think beyond the immediacy of seemingly mundane and trivial connections and micro-movements online towards their cumulative effects, and the various forms of engagement they enable and produce elsewhere (Dennis 2019). While participation online may, in many instances, be less labour intensive than offline action, the comparatively low-cost of online action enables more people to join the conversation, affording much broader possibilities for participation (Liao 2019). It enables engagement from users that may otherwise lack the time and/or money to participate offline, thus potentially adding to, rather than distracting from, offline activism. A ‘like’, ‘comment’ or ‘share’, while limited alone, can generate major affective intensities, producing possibilities of forming alliances and raising consciousness beyond the boundaries of virtual space. Online participation has emerged as a significant enabling device for many grassroots organising and action offline. As McLean (2013) identifies in their work on LGBTQIA+ politics in South Africa, social media has been instrumental to affording connections necessary for marginalised intersections of the community to come together and organise offline against exclusion from increasingly commercialised gay/LGBTQIA+ spaces and events. Since the widespread accessibility of such technologies, the offline presence of those left behind in the LGBTQIA+ movement has arguably become much stronger. As discussed in the introduction, over the last several years in the UK, there has been a proliferation of alternative Pride events and protests emerge through efforts to decentre the homo-/cis-normative white affluent gay consumer, many of which have been heavily reliant on social media.

In thinking about the wider material impact of online activism, it is also worth considering how affective intensities generated online routinely elicit wider mass media interest, with the frequent reporting of social media trends operating to blur boundaries between online and offline media users and audiences (Chadwick 2013; Tucker et al. 2018). As many scholars have identified, users now participate, to *varying degrees*, in the process of media agenda setting, disrupting efforts to monopolise the production and distribution of media content from the top-down (Chadwick 2013; van Dijck and Poel 2013; Freelon et al. 2016). Social media and mass media, rather than existing independently of one another, are mutually constitutive within what Chadwick (2013) describes as a hybrid media system, transcending the simplistic macro/micro dichotomy. One of the most notable examples of such participatory power in action is arguably #BlackLivesMatter, which has seen online activists challenge the mainstream framing of various events and demonstrations including but not limited to the #Ferguson protests (Freelon et al. 2016). The movement's appropriation of advancements in mobile technologies and live streaming has proven deeply affective, enabling viewers to bear witness to grassroots accounts and lived experiences of injustice that could have otherwise easily been ignored by the mainstream press (see Richardson and Schankweiler 2019). Other notable examples include #MeToo, which, going viral within hours, generated much public discussion and mass media interest around gender-based sexual violence (Fileborn et al. 2019; Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019); #blacktranslivesmatter, similarly raising awareness around the systemic often fatal violence against trans people of colour, *especially* trans women of colour (LGBTQ Institute 2015); and #IAmGay, sparking an online/offline media fury that successfully resisted efforts in China to censor homosexuality online (Liao 2019; Kuo 2018). While media and audience reactions to such online movements are indeed varied, with many reactionaries rallying in opposition to efforts to disrupt existing power relations, the collective silence surrounding many important issues has been broken.

Operating within an attention/like economy (Davenport and Beck 2002; Gerlitz and Helmond 2013), such participation, far from a mere side effect of digital technology,

is actively encouraged, as it affords free affective labour from which “value... can be extrapolated into relationships of innovation, production and consumption” (p.222). As Karppi (2015) argues, “what makes us tick parallels the equally compelling question: what makes us click?” (p.225), but also what makes us watch, listen, and read we might add. As Deleuze and Guattari (2004) identify, capitalism has come to feed off excess desire, with such subversions of existing power relations marking yet to be commodified territory. As I will later go on to discuss in more detail, the emancipatory potential of uncensored access to the web should not be overstated, not least because the mass media continues to play a significant role in framing events and defining parameters of what is newsworthy, often commodifying such acts of resistance in accordance with political economic interests invested in maintaining hierarchies. However, material-knowledge power relations are undoubtedly more complex and less predictable than they once were, affording sites for affirming voices that could otherwise be easily erased.

While there may have once been *some* degree of truth to the old Marxist claim that “the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production” (Marx 2019, online), the material-knowledge power relations of the digital age are much more complex. Such relations, as discussed, have long been contested (Foucault 1978), particularly since the emergence of consumer capitalism, which, as Bauman (2000) argues, is premised on a precarious flexibility of socio-material relations in constant flux. Advancements in digital media and technologies have arguably exasperated this process. New opportunities for forming generative connections and participating in the production and distribution of media across vast spatial-material boundaries have rendered knowledge more contested now than ever. Nevertheless, such freedom is not without costs. As Bauman (2000) himself acknowledges, liquid modernity has seen power re-configured through perpetual uncertainty and scepticism. It has led to what Dean (2010) describes as a decline in symbolic efficiency, operating in many instances, to limit meaningful organisation and action. Furthermore, the process of commodifying efforts to resist existing frameworks of knowledge and desire, while always becoming

in irreducible excess of what existed before, remains situated in far from evenly distributed power relations.

3.2. The limits of participation

Gay men and the Internet can possibly be best described as a series of paradoxes. Just as the World Wide Web helped bring together geographically isolated communities, the Internet also helped spur further bifurcations of this ‘community’ into countless subcultures; as the Internet helped mainstream gay culture and provided a platform for the advancement of gay civil rights, it also became a space where unfiltered hate and discrimination flowed freely; while the Internet helped bring gay men out of closets and shadows across the globe, the same technological platform also allowed for these men to hide behind aliases, torsos and profiles that relied on subterfuge; when the Internet promised to unite the global gay diaspora, the same Internet also gave us cautionary clauses like ‘no fats, no fems, no Asians, no Blacks’ (Gudelunas 2018, p.128).

Now that I have explored literature around the internet’s potential to affirm difference, I would like to move on to think about the limits of online participation, considering literature that contributes to an understanding of how oppressive social-material-cultural configurations afford uneven possibilities of movement online. As set out in my research questions, I am interested not only in how normative configurations of bodies and desires come to be ruptured and redefined but also how they come to be reproduced to understand how some bodies and desires emerge as more fluid than others. Thus far, I have considered literature that contributes to an understanding of how the internet enhances possibilities of connection and civic participation, but I now want to question, participating *with* who and what exactly? An over-emphasis on the participatory potential of digital communication relies on essentialised notions of agencies emerging from bounded rational subjects, failing to consider how movements online are actualised relationally in ways that too often marginalise LGBTQIA+ youth. Now that I have explored literature surrounding digital opportunities for queering masculinity, I want to consider emerging risks, with the emancipatory potential of the internet entangled in technological affordances that simultaneously provide fertile

ground for objectifying oppressive and reactionary forces — forces which, as I will go on to discuss, emerge with a political economy that encourages some flows of becoming over others.

3.2.1 Context collapse: Unstable protection from the outside world

The protection afforded by anonymity online is not equally available across all platforms. Movements online, while affording many means of escaping oppressive relations offline, can also render LGBTQIA+ youth more exposed, particularly on very public platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Such platforms render users hypervisible because they remove material-spatial barriers ordinarily separating conflicting relational performances. Users of such platforms must navigate what Marwick and Boyd (2014) describe as ‘context collapse’, often resulting in shallow performances that appeal to the lowest common denominator, which for some, especially those that are closeted, will be far more restrictive than for others. As Grov et al. (2014) identify, individuals that are not completely open about their sexuality can suffer a great deal of anxiety around sexual identity disclosure across such platforms (see also Duguay 2016). While many find ways of negotiating such limitations, such as by setting up secondary accounts (Duguay 2016; Kerpen 2016), or, as discussed, taking advantage of spaces that afford anonymity, the risk of being outed from the erosion of contextual boundaries online remains immanent.

Safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ people online are frequently hijacked by outsiders. As Feraday (2016) argues:

...users aren’t protected by the transgressive potential of... [online spaces]. Having a platform where they can connect with and be seen by others can be extremely helpful to non-cis and non-straight people, but it can also allow outsiders to come into these ‘safe spaces’ to pass judgement, make criticisms, and be hateful (p.40).

Even on dating/hook-up apps, homophobic and transphobic boys and men have been known to infiltrate such spaces popular among gender and sexually diverse bodies

AMAB to publicly out users (Kvedar 2020) and/or lure them into violent attacks (Albury et al. 2020; Kvedar 2020). As such, possibilities of participation, even in the seemingly most private of online spaces, can be constrained by an imminent threat of violence, producing anxieties and fears around being outed to the wrong person. In my MSc dissertation project, I found that even omitting identifying details and photographs on dating/hook-up apps was not always enough to alleviate anxieties around being outed, with one participant reporting being triggered by the possibility of being rendered visible by proximity (Kerpen 2016). Those read as queer online, whether out(ed) as LGBTQIA+ or not, are vulnerable to various forms of cyberbullying. The internet, while affording a means of escaping bullying, also affords new opportunities for bullies, who, much like their victims, can appropriate the anonymity of digital communication to their advantage (Paat and Markham 2020). While privacy enables users to remain discreet about their gender and/or sexuality, allowing them to be more open and honest about marginalised desires, it is not without costs. In a survey of 23,000 LGBTQ students aged 13-21 in the US, Kosciw et al. (2017) found that most of the students experienced some form of bullying in school, with almost half reporting being harassed and bullied online. Similarly in the UK, Bradlow et al. (2017) found that nearly half of LGBT school pupils (64% of trans pupils) are bullied in school, with 40% of LGBT pupils targeted online. While such studies show cyberbullying to be less prevalent than bullying in schools, it is arguably much more pervasive, affording victims with far less opportunities to escape hostile interactions.

3.2.2 Platforming reactionaries

As discussed, the internet has enabled a proliferation of knowledges and desires countering dominant social-material configurations. However, it has also afforded fertile ground for the knowledges of reactionary groups, operating to reterritorialize queer excess through fake, misleading and sensationalist information fuelling hate (Ging 2017; Marres, 2018; Williams 2019). As Ging (2017) identifies, a loss of white male privilege in the face of a destabilised and feminised labour market, coupled with growing recognition of the voices and rights of various marginalised groups, has triggered much defensiveness. Such shifts in power have seen the internet emerge as

a space for hateful alt-right rhetoric, with white men co-opting narratives of victimisation and personal suffering to assert entitled grievances, felt and/or strategically deployed not against the ruling elite responsible for such de-stabilisation but against queer, feminist and anti-racist movements. The potential of digital communication has also been utilised by gender critical TERFs (trans-exclusionary radical feminists), othering trans women as sexual predators posing a violent threat to womanhood (Pearce et al. 2020). Heavily invested in the gendered, racialised and classed constructions of binary sex earlier critiqued, such narratives, perhaps unsurprisingly, align with transphobic and queerphobic narratives pushed by the anti-feminist Christian right (Provost and Archer 2018). They also again co-opt narratives of victimisation to justify and spread misplaced fears against trans women (Horbury and Yao 2020).

It will perhaps then come of little surprise that Bradlow et al. (2017) found that 97% of LGBT school pupils in the UK reported being exposed to hate speech online, 43% of which reported seeing such content often. Such figures are alarming, not least because, as the report identifies, many such youths feel unable to speak to adults offline and feel powerless against such content. 65% said they felt it was unlikely that platforms will do anything to tackle hateful content reported. Such content has arguably been fuelled by recent moral panics around ‘cancel culture’, with the spread of hateful misinformed and inflammatory rhetoric framed and defended as free speech (Ging 2017; Horbury and Yao 2020; Williams 2019). Efforts to deplatform such rhetoric has been framed as an infringement on personal liberties, operating to position reactionaries as victims of likes of ‘feminazis’, ‘the gay agenda’ and/or ‘trans rights extremists’. However, as LGBTQIA+ people, particularly trans people, continue to struggle for affirmative representation beyond normative gazes (Gross 2001; Halberstam 2018), often reported on rather than given platforms to speak for themselves, transphobic reactionaries can be found across most major media outlets across the entire political spectrum (Pearce et al. 2020).

The affective intensities of reactionary misinformation and hate circulating online may be situated within the ‘decline of symbolic efficiency’ of ‘liquid modernity’ earlier

discussed (see again Bauman 2000; Dean 2010). The overdetermined symbolic realm of bygone eras is today, in many ways, underdetermined, with an overload of conflicting knowledge claims breeding uncertainty and scepticism. While a certain degree of uncertainty and scepticism has been necessary for questioning oppressive certainties of the past, enabling, as earlier discussed, marginalised groups to contest dominant material-knowledge power relations, taken to the extreme, such scepticism and uncertainty can operate against marginalised groups. The digital age has seen truth claims become increasingly fragmented, leading to a post-truth “falsification without limit” (p.111) – an invaluable tool for questioning and discrediting the lived realities of marginalised bodies. We live in a world where every opinion seems to count, however ill-informed. The liquification of (post)modernity has seen many blinded by complexity, undermining onto-epistemological frameworks for evaluating one truth claim from another. The erasure of such frameworks, whether felt or strategically deployed, is routinely used to reject the truths of marginalised groups “as nothing more than opinion” (Dean 2010, p.111). We seem to have moved from being bound to truth to being blind to it.

3.2.2.1 Intra-community tensions made present online

In thinking about the platforming of reactionaries online, it is important to note that LGBTQIA+ people, while marginalised by such opposition to the queering of gendered, racialised and classed dualisms that flow from constructions of binary sex, are not immune from upholding and re-producing such dualisms. Ging (2017), for instance, identifies a worrying white gay male presence within reactionary groups online, with many gay men prioritising their gender over their sexuality in aligning themselves with MRAs (men’s rights activists) against a perceived “fag end of feminism” (p.5). Critical of notions of ‘inclusive masculinity’, she notes how MRA culture, while often using homophobic language, is welcoming of gay men that stand in opposition to feminist women and lesbians. I would argue that such men are tokenised as ‘the good gays’ who, as earlier discussed, leave gendered, racialised and classed structures unchallenged. Similarly, trans-exclusionary rhetoric, while resting on deeply gendered ideologies that have historically operated to territorialise not just sex but also sexuality, has been taken up by LGB people, promoted by the likes of the

LGB alliance discussed in the introduction (see again Parsons 2019b) and lesbians reducing the recognition of trans women as women in lesbian spaces to lesbian erasure (Pearce et al. 2020). Even many trans people themselves have stood in opposition to deconstructions of binary sex. As Miller (2018) identifies in their work on contesting transnormativities on YouTube, transmedicalists, often referred to as truscum, have long taken advantage of digital communication to invalidate bodies and identities that trouble the binary by overemphasising the validity of medical transitioning and passing.

Nevertheless, as Miller themselves acknowledge, efforts to queer medicalisation can also become normative, with many trans activists resisting medicalisation taking to social media to other those seeking transition as not queer or subversive enough. Such queer *demands*, which I will critique in more detail in *section 3.4* where I argue for a need to think beyond queernormativity, capture what Serano (2007) describes as ‘binary-phobia’, a defensive anxiety ridden ‘gender entitlement’ that positions those that identify with binary categories and/or seeking medical transition as duped and depoliticised. However, as Davy (2018) notes, such thinking obscures the “...multiple embodiments transsexual people pursue, and the struggles and resistances against the different gender systems worldwide” (p.7). Transitioning from one body to another does not equate from transitioning from one position to another.

3.2.3 Gendered, racialised and classed economies of desire

Now that I have laid out the groundwork for thinking about the power relations of digital space as heavily contested, operating to both affirm and marginalise difference, I would like to consider gendered, racialised and classed economies of desire that readily emerge to centre white affluent bodies that assimilate with gendered, racialised and classed binaries. As discussed, the internet affords much potential for queering normative constructions of gender and sexuality, co-producing many possibilities for marginalised communities to participate in the production of knowledge. However, such possibilities emerge *with*, not outside of, wider social-material-cultural relations,

affording uneven possibilities of movement rendering some bodies more fluid and mobile than others.

Going back to Siebler (2016), queerness in the digital age is arguably more complex than ever before. However, as they themselves identify, that which has been opened through digital communication on the one hand, has been closed with the other, with much content online serving to narrow queer imaginaries within hegemonic configurations of sex, gender and sexuality. Much like the offline gay spaces earlier discussed, Siebler notes:

...many websites that cater to gay men are filled with cut or buff “white” male bodies, displaying sculpted abdominals and bulging biceps, positioning the men portrayed squarely into a heteronormative masculinity of physical aggression and dominating body physique (p.102).

Siebler also documents the genre of coming out videos on YouTube, which, tapping into similar tags, sees users “replicating what is already out there, what they have already seen... codifying what it means to be LGBT instead of queering it” (p.22). Miller (2018), while also emphasising the participatory potential of YouTube, draws attention to how much participatory YouTube content still centres binary medical transitions of white trans folk, with those using the channel to contest racialised binary linear development narratives reporting finding it difficult to find representative content. Similarly, Steinbock (2019), while celebrating the life-affirming potential of social media for trans people, expresses concern around how much online discussion centres on trans suffering. Returning to the issue of trans necropolitics, they express concern around how “trans bodies only seem to... become valuable as a warning to others, that is, only once they are made remarkable, in danger, or taken” (p.49).

Immersed in economies of desire centring some bodies over others, those that fail to align with normative gendered, racialised and classed prescriptions of what it means to be LGBTQIA+ routinely face cyberbullying and discrimination within online communities. As discussed, trans bodies must navigate oppressive transnormativities gatekeeping definitions of transness. Similarly, LGBTQIA+ people of colour must

navigate racism and islamophobia prevalent across many LGBTQIA+ spaces online (Svensson 2015), which construct queerness against a racialised *not queer enough* other. Such constructions, as mentioned earlier, often occur through appropriating the struggles of LGBTQIA+ people of colour within homo- and trans- nationalist agendas that erase intersectional struggles of having to navigate multiple systems of oppression. Then there is the issue of various forms of sexual and romantic discrimination online, circulating to centre bodies that are white, cisgender, gender-normative, bourgeois, able and/or monosexual (gay or straight). Such discrimination is again empowered by anonymity, with the internet affording opportunities for discrimination without, or at least with less, fear of social sanctions (Smith 2018b). However, it is also arguably empowered by a hyper-personalised mediated environment, where racialised, gendered and classed desires are routinely reduced to nothing more than a consumer choice, masking wider normative structuralising forces shaping desires (Robinson 2015).

Many have raised concerns around ‘sexual racism’ within MSM spaces online (Green 2008; Phua and Kaufman 2013; Robinson 2015; Smith 2018b) – a term coined by Stember (1978) to describe racialised modes of sexual rejection. While many try to legitimise sexual racism as ‘just a preference’ detached from wider social-material-cultural relations (Callander et al. 2015; Smith 2018b), quantitative research, primarily based in the US, has consistently shown that exclusionary racial preferences are highly variable and mobile, shifting heavily across intersections of race (Yancey 2009); race and gender (Lin and Lundquist 2013; Robnett and Feliciano 2011); race and sexual orientation (Phua and Kaufman 2003); race, gender and sexual orientation (Tsunokai et al. 2014; Tsunokai et al. 2019); and gender and sexuality (Lundquist and Lin 2015). Racial preferences have also been found to fluctuate in accordance with attitudes towards immigration (Potârcă and Mills 2015); geographical location (Potârcă and Mills 2015; Tsunokai et al. 2014; Tsunokai et al. 2019); and level of exposure to different groups (Potârcă and Mills 2015; Yancey 2009). Some have questioned the malleability of racial preferences, acknowledging their relationally constituted nature but nevertheless questioning how such attachments to race, like sexual orientation, may solidify over time (Crockett 2015). Others have questioned the extent to which

anyone can claim to be completely free from bias without falling into the trap of reinforcing colour-blind rhetoric (Orne 2017). However, there is no disputing the fact that such ‘preferences’ are unstable and variable across time and place, urging us to critically engage with how bodies come to be situated within racialised hierarchies of desirability.

Without going into too much detail about all the variables found to be highly significant to the production of racial preferences, which would be enough to fill an entire thesis, what emerges as consistent across this body of work is a racialised sexual economy that places a high value on whiteness, *particularly* when the object of sexual attraction is a man. Phua and Kaufman (2003), for instance, found that MSM in the US, irrespective of race, were significantly more likely to state racial preferences on their online dating profiles than MSW (men seeking women), and of those stating preferences, white MSM were most exclusionary. While *stated* preferences are limited by self-reporting bias, Lundquist’s and Lin’s (2015) US study on the racial preferences of white daters *revealed* through *actual* interaction patterns, similarly found that white men seeking men were significantly more discriminatory than white men seeking women. However, in also measuring the interaction patterns of women, they argue that such bias is not reducible to sexual orientation per se but rather produced in relation to the gender of desired partners, with white straight women emerging as similarly exclusionary as white gay men. Meanwhile, they found that lesbians, like straight men, demonstrated less discriminatory preferences.

This racialised economy of desire places high value on whiteness is pervasive, so much so that it is even re-produced by some of the groups marginalised by it. Stated preferences of Asian American gay men, for instance, have shown an out-group bias for white men over men of all other races including their own (Phua and Kaufman 2003). A similar out-group bias has also been observed among Asian American heterosexual women, both stated (Robnett and Feliciano 2011) and revealed (Lin and Lundquist 2013). However, stated preferences for whiteness appear much stronger among Asian American gay men than Asian American heterosexual women (Tsunokai et al. 2014), especially among those with lighter skin tones (Tsunokai et al. 2019).

Such findings stand in contrast to Lundquist's and Lin's (2015) observation that sexual orientation is insignificant to the formation of such preferences and urges us to reconsider the specificity of a heavily whitewashed gay culture. Such racial out-group bias for white men stands in contrast to preferences expressed by Black MSM (Phua and Kaufman 2003) and Black WSM (women seeking men) (Lin and Lundquist 2013; Yancey 2009), leading some to theorise that such patterns relate to differentiated histories of oppression and segregation from, and assimilation with, white culture (Tsunokai et al. 2014; Yancey 2009).

Discriminatory sexual 'preferences' have also been observed around gender, with many MSM dating/hook-up profiles *stating* exclusionary preferences, such as 'straight acting only', 'no queens', 'real boys' and 'no fems' (Daroya 2018). Such exclusionary rhetoric can be understood through longstanding critiques around the normalisation of gender hierarchies among MSM (Martino 2006). Unfortunately, studies on *revealed* preferences, and how such preferences compare with those of WSM, are absent, limiting efforts to reduce such gendered economies of desire solely to gay/MSM masculinities, as opposed to a wider societal construction of desirable masculinities in general. However, operating within a sexual marketplace which, as discussed, often sees MSM very upfront about who and what they want and do not want, such biases certainly seem to be more visible within MSM spaces. Such biases again emerge as unstable across groups, not least because of the rich histories of gender and sexual organisation earlier discussed but also because they vary across different intersections of the community. Though limited, quantitative data in the US shows that such stated preferences are particularly strong among Black gay men (Phua 2002). In line with what I earlier discussed, I would argue that such differences should be contextualised within a racialised society that enables some MSM to be more gender fluid in their sexual expression than others. However, such differences nevertheless point to the relevance of relational contexts and challenge the essentialisation of such preferences.

Other work on sexual discrimination has focused on exclusion faced by trans (Blair and Hoskin 2018; Davy 2018) and bisexual/pansexual people (Feinstein et al. 2014), with preferences again emerging as unstable across different groups. While the

research I was able to find around sexual discrimination faced by bisexual/pansexual and trans people did not focus specifically on how such discrimination manifests online, it seems reasonable, given the other discriminatory preferences discussed, to speculate that such discrimination would be made present online. Finally, while under-theorised, we might consider classist and ableist forms of sexual discrimination. From the emergence of self-identifying ‘sapiosexuals’ online (Gherovici 2017), a term signifying attraction to ‘intelligence’, to the countless profiles I have come across rejecting people for having poor spelling and grammar, there are a multitude of ways in which preferences might operate against those with knowledges and ways of expressing knowledge that lie beyond white bourgeois able-bodied standards of respectability.

The issue of such gendered, racialised and classed modes of sexual discrimination extends beyond rejection to issues surrounding the sexual fetishisation of marginalised groups. In fact, a closer look at the qualitative dimensions of sexual and romantic preferences further highlights their instability in making visible discriminatory misplaced assumptions that underpin them. Work around the fetishisation of the marginalised bodies discussed provides deeper insight into social-material-cultural configurations that would ordinarily mark such bodies as undesirable. It also draws attention to the narrow gendered, racialised and classed ideals such bodies face pressure to align with to elicit sexual and/romantic interest. For instance, trans people, especially trans women, are routinely fetishised by ‘trans chasers’ as having ‘incongruent’ genitals (Eisner 2013; Riggs et al. 2015; Tompkins 2014), positioning them as something other to the gender with which they identify. In terms of race, black MSM are routinely fetishised as aggressive dominant thugs with big penises, while Asian men are fetishised as submissive and feminine (Green 2008; suk Han and Choi 2018; Robinson 2015). Similarly, in terms of class, the working-class ‘chav’ is often fetishised by MSM as aggressive and dominant (Johnson 2008). Such fetishisation affords some insight into classed and racialised biases driving much rejection in an economy of desire that privileges masculine expression over feminine expression, unless of course in hypersexual and hypermasculine excess of white bourgeois cisheteromasculine neutrality. Biases underpinning the fetishisation of black men and

working-class men as aggressive, while appealing to some, would arguably render such bodies unappealing to others. In fact, research around people of colour ‘playing the game’ to elicit attention within such narrow economies of desires demonstrates this. As Lundquist and Lin (2015) argue:

The erotic premium enjoyed by those black men who do not violate their sexually aggressive stereotype is unlikely to pay off beyond sexual relations (p.1426).

Han and Choi (2018), for instance, document gay men of colour being quickly discarded after fulfilling white gay men’s fetishised fantasies. Green (2008) highlights one black gay man speaking about ‘thugging it up’ for sex but playing down their blackness in their search for romance.

3.2.4 The prevailing power of mass media: Profiting from the commodification of some flows over others

Now that I have considered how possibilities of becoming online are far from even, with normative constraints continuing to be made present across digital media and practices, I want to move on to situate such emerging constraints within a political economy that encourages some flows of desire over others. As Siebler (2016) argues, “queer identities perpetuated online are linked with capitalist consumption” (p.11). The power of commodified images, as Gross (1991) identifies, is arguably exasperated by many young people having limited knowledge and lived experience of queerness beyond the media. While many have challenged notions of media effects, pointing to the complexity of digital engagements entangled in wider relational frameworks (Coleman 2012; Lemish 2007; Lemish 2010; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Scarcelli 2018), the power of mass media and emerging capacities to critically engage with media content are far from evenly distributed, with those lacking lived experiences to counter media narratives shown to be more susceptible to media influence (Gavin 2018). Though, as Siebler (2016) identifies, it is “today...more difficult to make the claim that gays and lesbians are being symbolically annihilated due to lack of representation” (p.31), questions arise around the conditions under which marginalised genders and sexualities are included, with many “contemporary

definitions of LGBT... put forth... relying on marketing versions of uncomplicated sex, gender, and sexuality binaries” (p.4). Such reductive images, as Siebler argues, “push us to embody not who we are, but what the marketers want us to become” (p.4) — that is, neatly packaged commodities relying on “neat stereotypes that will be familiar as a way to sell their show and products” (p.5).

In some ways, power exerted through inclusion may be more restrictive in that it alienates bodies from the need to form more radical grassroots connections. LGBTQIA+ people, particularly LGBTQIA+ youth, are heavily invested in media to understand who they are against a society and culture that marginalises them. Gay men, the group most represented, appear particularly susceptible to the power media images (Mowlabocus 2007). Such susceptibility may be tied to the level at which such bodies have been commodified and institutionalised, which stands in contrast to marginalised intersections of the community, who, due continual erasure and exclusion, have had to create their own spaces from the bottom up to explore who they are.

Morris (2018) cited in Miller (2018) draws attention to affective intensities that centre white gay masculinities on YouTube, with what they term ‘gay for play’ operating to elicit followers sold to advertisers. Mowlabocus (2007), in his work of MSM on the dating/hook-up platform *Gaydar*, identifies how such spaces are heavily pornified, with users describing themselves and filtering one another through gay pornography archetypes and taxonomies, such as ‘twinks’, ‘bears’, ‘otters’ etc. While pornography, as discussed, can afford representation against exclusion, affirming desires through the body rather than against bodies, it can also restrict desire within normative regimes that privilege some bodies over others. As Mowlabocus (2007) identifies:

Visibility is subject to specific structures of representation that may in fact restrain gay subjectivity... The acts of browsing, searching and categorizing.... serve to fragment identity and reduce it to a series of data points, which are evaluated against the corporeal benchmarks of looks, body size type and sexual role (p.66).

Even participatory amateur porn is entangled in political economic interests, as –

Amateurs transform their real bodies into (immaterial) digital bodies that can enter the XTube economy and earn capital. In doing so they simultaneously enter into a parallel economy, one that legitimates them through ratings, comments and tagging, and increases their sub-cultural capital and standing within the social network (Mowlabocus 2010c, p.82).

This process sees even participatory productions of sexual media often forced to negotiate racialised, gendered and classed hierarchies of desire.

3.2.4.1 Digital infrastructures: Ownership and design

Returning to the issue of gendered, racialised and classed preferences reduced to nothing more than a consumer choice, it is also worth considering how digital spaces, like many offline spaces, are designed to encourage hyper-personal consumption over wider community concerns. As Gudelunas (2018) identifies, despite emancipatory visions of a united online gay community, much online activity, particularly among MSM, is centred around pursuits of individual pleasure. Such centring of individual pleasure, he identifies, is structurally reinforced by political economic interests, which he exemplifies through an analysis of the then forthcoming dot gay domain, which saw a community-based NGO outbid by a commercial enterprise seeking to capitalise on the gay market. Dating/hook-up platforms similarly profit from alienating economies of desire, actively encouraging pursuits of individual pleasure with little regard for bodies marginalised in the process. Such platforms profit not from encouraging meaningful connections that cut across objectifying forces but rather from encouraging users to relate to one another as commodities. As Tziallas (2015) argues, such platforms profit from a ‘gamified eroticism’, capitalising on pleasure derived through continual play, not through facilitating social and romantic connections that could take users out of the game, even though such connections do undoubtedly occur. Continual play, as Licoppe et al. (2015) identifies, is best secured through promoting immediate self-gratification above other forms of relationality, producing fleeting, shallow and superficial interactions with minimal affective disturbance to “preclude repeat encounters and relational development, so that the

protagonists are supposedly left unaffected, emotionally, relationally and socially, by such encounters” (Licoppe et al. 2015, p. 2555). Unlike the sexy communities and naked intimacy described by Orne (2017), such spaces often operate to reduce rather than open possibilities of connection.

It is thus perhaps of little surprise that such spaces have seen discriminatory preferences become so pronounced online. As Robinson (2015) identifies in his work on race, many MSM platforms are designed in ways that enable users to ‘filter’ and ‘cleanse’ out entire races. As such, they enable users to limit their exposure to all that may challenge the arbitrary prejudiced assumptions they attribute to racial categories. In many MSM spaces, such filters appear alongside the pornified racialised and gendered taxonomies earlier discussed, with users able to select a ‘tribe’ (Mowlabocus 2007), again alienating users from possibilities of contacting bodies that may otherwise challenge their assumptions. Much like spatial segregation of the past, with private businesses bearing signs stating ‘no blacks, no Irish, no dogs’, such online platforms enable users to create spaces free from those deemed undesirable, limiting connections that could otherwise cut across desires for separation in the first place. As discussed, exposure to difference, when meaningful, can operate to deconstruct biases (see again Orne 2017).

3.2.4.2 Algorithmically generated movements

In thinking about affective flows of bodies and desires enabled and displaced online, it is also worth considering the power of algorithms. Algorithms see bodies emerge between relations that exceed simplistic distinctions between media users and producers, while at the same time operating within a political economy that constrains possibilities of connection. The internet affords vast possibilities of connecting with knowledges questioning dominant frameworks. However, such possibilities are not always actualised through the platforms we rely on to navigate the seemingly infinite worlds made present online. Movements online, far from actualised by fully conscious and rational bounded agents, are relationally co-produced in ways that often exceed conscious awareness and intentionality. As such, it is important to think beyond how we use digital technologies in also considering how technologies use us.

Movements online have become increasingly reliant on algorithms, which, while driven by user input and thus far from an external force of power, nevertheless still constrain possibilities of connection. Operating within the like/attention economy earlier discussed (see again Davenport and Beck 2002; Gerlitz and Helmond 2013), algorithms operate to maximise engagement. As such, they are responsive to user participation and desire. However, it would be wrong to assume that they are produced by users. With algorithms generating content in accordance with political economic interests, users-consumers are reduced to commodities to be sold to advertisers. Like much mainstream media, algorithms prioritise content deemed popular, elevating those most 'likeable', such as politicians, celebrities, journalists and social media influencers with large followings, over everyday users (van Dijck and Poell 2013). Returning to the possibilities of hashtag activism, the radical potential of movements like #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter emerges in tension with a political economy that centre some voices within such movements over others. As Geiseler (2019) identifies, the #MeToo movement, while initiated by Tarana Burke, a woman of colour, was far from intersectional as a whole. Many of the working-class women and women of colour present at a grassroots level were "drowned out in the viral roar" of the global movement that followed (p.57). Going back to Miller's (2018) analysis of countering transnormativities on YouTube, we might consider how reported difficulties in finding content representative of trans people of colour and/or trans people resisting medicalised narratives is entangled in algorithmic generalisations that sees transness reduced to what is most popular. We might even consider how the hashtag movements with the largest reach have centred larger demographics, with many queer social movements online, while eliciting interest from queer media, struggling to elicit the same degree of attention from mainstream media outlets.⁸ With many users relying heavily on algorithmically generated content, such as top searches that continue to centre mass media institutions (Redden and Witschge 2009) or content that finds them on social media news feeds (Bird 2011; Gil de Zúñiga 2017), such privileging of what is popular arguably limits the reach of minority voices online. While such limitations

⁸ I recently recall a conversation that broke out about LGBTQIA+ people in concentration camps in Chechnya. The gay men in the group had followed the news intensely through LGBTQIA+ media but the straight people in the group had not heard about it.

can be overcome by more active engagement with niche content, with algorithms harvesting user data to generate hyper-personalised content, the penetration of that content beyond the marginalised groups most invested in actively engaging with it can remain limited.

3.2.4.4 The emergence of polarising filter bubbles

The hyper-personalisation of algorithmically generated content can come with its own problems, namely the creation of filter bubbles and echo-chambers operating to limit cross cutting content (Barberá 2020; Dahlberg 2007; Pariser 2011). As Vaidhyanathan (2011) cited in Siebler (2016) argues, hyper-personalised and hyper-localised search results operate to limit exposure to “the unexpected, the unknown, the unfamiliar, and the uncomfortable” (p.7), reinforcing rather than deconstructing situated boundaries. Similarly, as Cavalcante (2018) documents in their work on queer Tumblr, active engagement in such spaces can produce a queer vortex. They note how algorithms curate feeds that become queerer overtime, cutting users off from dark reactionary underbelly of Tumblr users, especially when users become complacent in allowing content to find them. While it would be wrong to suggest that users are determined by algorithms, with echo chambers found to emerge through selective exposure, confirmation bias and availability bias, all of which exist offline, algorithms nevertheless operate to reinforce such biases (Spohr 2017), for some arguably more than others. Such formation of echo-chambers has raised concerns around fake and sensationalist news, particularly among conservative populations found to exhibit significantly stronger in-group loyalty (Haidt 2007) and increased levels of dogmatism (Crowson 2009; Jost 2017), rendering them more likely to share (Guess et al. 2019) and believe (Pereira et al. 2018) fake news aligned with their political orientations.

While some scholars remain critical of the notion of filter bubbles, associating social media use with increased exposure to dissimilar views and documenting a moderating effect on political perspectives overall (Bakshy et al. 2015; Barberá 2015), such findings have been limited to the average user and are therefore biased towards majority populations. As Barberá (2020) argue, “expecting to find that social media usage has a homogeneous (de)polarizing effect for all citizens seems too simplistic”

(p.12). Following an extensive evaluation of existing literature on social media and political polarisation, they argue that there are “good reasons to expect that social media interactions may lead to polarization among the minority of partisan individuals who are most active in discussions about politics on social media” (p.12). They demonstrate that issues surrounding selective exposure and confirmation bias, which operate to feed algorithms, are more prevalent among such populations, *especially* among those in more socially and politically homogenous online/offline networks.

Others urge us to consider the more specific qualities of cross-cutting content. Jacobson et al. (2015), for instance, in a big data study conducted around information resources shared on two Facebook pages, one right wing one left wing, documented 49.5% cross-cutting content. However, that 49.5% accounted for only 12.2% of the total sources, much of which were liberal/centrist, with exposure to more radical content remaining limited. Echoing such sentiments, Dahlberg (2007) notes that much work emphasising the depolarising effects of digital media and technologies has centred around exposure to a handful of different positions found in the mainstream, which “says nothing about exposure to more ‘radical’ positions” (Dahlberg 2007, p.831). Boxell et al. (2017) attempted to refute claims around the polarising effects of the internet based on findings that older generations less likely to have internet were most polarised. However, their findings failed to consider how older generations, whether using the internet or not, are still exposed to wider social-material-cultural shifts emerging in a mediated world and thus do not exist independently of the disruptive forces of digital media and technologies. As earlier discussed, social media activity routinely comes to matter to mainstream audiences in eliciting mass media interest (see again Chadwick 2013; Tucker et al. 2018).

3.2.4.4 The limits affective impact cross-cutting content: Affective polarisation versus ideological polarisation

Much of the focus on issues of polarisation centres around ideological polarisation, which rests on the assumption that exposure to different positions is enough to break through echo chambers. However, as Bail et al. (2018) demonstrate, exposure to counter-narratives online can actually have polarising effects. After getting US

conservatives to follow a liberal Twitter bot, they found that conservative views became more extreme over time. Resonating with the insights from contact theory earlier discussed (see again Allport 1955), such findings urge us to consider the affective qualities of exposure with different groups and content. Duggan and Smith (2016), for instance, found that while users reported being exposed to diverse perspectives online, the majority felt stressed, angry and frustrated by online discussions, which most perceived as less respectful and less civil than similar discussions offline. This antagonistic nature of much online communication has been linked to polarisation. Weeks (2015) cited in Tucker et al. (2018) found that anger and anxiety impacted partisan bias on susceptibility to misinformation. While users may well come into contact with people that challenge their viewpoints online, it is questionable as to whether this amounts to stepping outside of echo-chambers when engagement is superficial. As anyone politically active online will probably be aware, ‘debates’ online are often conducted in bad faith.

While users may well be exposed to divergent perspectives on the internet, such exposure remains situated in deeply affective online/offline networks, varying in terms of both intensities and social and political (dis)attachments. As many have demonstrated, stronger social ties increase capacity for information transmission (Aral and Van Alstyne 2011; Larson 2017). Perspectives associated with social and political out-groups are routinely rejected out of hand, with many reacting against posts and comments without fully engaging with the content. As Turcotte et al. (2015) found in their work on Facebook, who shares what matters, with the credibility of sources often evaluated based on content shared by friends trusted as ‘opinion leaders’. Turcotte et al. considers such sharing between friends as a positive thing, enhancing democracy by encouraging participation. However, they fail to consider the impact such reliance on ‘opinion leaders’, particularly in more socially and politically homogenous networks, might have on the circulation of fake news and misinformation, thus undermining democracy. Returning to the issue of the decline of symbolic efficiency in the digital age, a decline arguably exasperated by algorithms prioritising content for likes and profit irrespective of whether what is popular is representative or truthful, it is worth considering issues that may arise, in some instances, from over-exposure to

different positions. Such over-exposure may enhance reliance on content filtered through friends and algorithms, especially when lacking the time or skills to critically engage with content.

3.2.5 The digital divide

By now it should be clear that there exist many constraints around the participatory potential of digital media and technologies. Such constraints call into question simplistic notions of digital empowerment failing to account for how the affordances of digital communication are far from evenly distributed. While the shifting spatial-material relations of digital communication have certainly opened up many opportunities for affirmative connection, community building, identity work and activism previously constrained by the limits of geographical place, much work, as discussed, remains sceptical of utopian visions of the internet. Such work has shown how normative configurations of bodies, identities and desires continue to be made present online, co-produced with political economic interests that encourage some flows of desire over others. Building on my review of literature questioning the subversive potential of the internet, I would now like to finish this section by considering issues around what has been termed the digital divide, limiting who and what is made present online. Following this discussion, I will then conclude the chapter by re-situating my project within work responsive to complex and contradictory embodiments enabling and displacing very different possibilities of online connection and participation discussed throughout this chapter thus far.

Literature around the digital divide seeks to make sense of inequalities surrounding the use of digital media and technologies. While early work on the digital divide focused primarily on inequalities around access, more contemporary thinking has extended such concerns to thinking about gaps emerging around use more broadly (van Deursen and van Dijk 2014; Harris et al. 2017). As Bird (2011) identifies, while the internet affords many opportunities for participation, “we should not lose sight of the more mundane, internalized, even passive articulation with media that characterizes a great deal of media consumption” (p. 504). While I would reject the word passive because it obscures how meaning is always contested, the possibilities

of producing and distributing digital content are far from even. While we are all active, we are not all active to the same degree. In a survey of American adults, Wei and Hindman (2011), for instance, identified a knowledge gap that rendered those with higher levels of education and socio-economic status more likely to maximise the internet's potential for news and information. Similarly, Schradie's (2011) survey of US adults points to a production gap, with higher levels of income and education both emerging as significant predictors of user participation in the production of a range of digital content from blogs to comments on news groups. In a later analysis of 90,000 online posts, Schradie (2018) also found such predictors to be significant to participation in digital activism. Such findings resonate with work around working-class people being under-represented in activism in general (Croteau 1995) – a global phenomenon that has been linked to feelings of powerlessness and pessimism emerging from being constantly let down by whoever is in power (Chen and Seun 2015). Other inequalities around online participation emerge around language. Pearce and Rice (2014), drawing on national survey data from several post-soviet countries, point to how online engagement privileges those with English language proficiency. The hegemony of the English language over capacities for consuming, producing and distributing content creates a cultural bias in knowledge operating against the democratising potential of new media. In their evaluation of the dominance of English in international law, Mowbray (2016) challenges Deleuze's and Guattari's (2004) claim that shifting social-material practices subvert the power of language/knowledge, noting how subversion in English affords direct advantages to native English speakers (online).

Returning to my earlier discussion around algorithms operating to personalise and localise content, we might consider how such differences in participation, and the algorithm profiles generated through them, may impact levels of exposure to less mainstream LGBTQIA+ politics. Questions are also raised around geographical, racialised and classed constraints that may operate to restrict who and what is made present in the social networks through which content and online practices are produced, shared, followed, clicked and filtered. As discussed, there is evidence to suggest that polarisation online is stronger among those in more homogenous social

networks. As such, it seems reasonable to speculate that more segregated socio-economically deprived groups would, on average, be afforded less connections bridging different social and cultural groups, particularly those living in rural tightly knit post-industrial working-class towns in the region, which, as Walkerdine and Jimenez (2012) identifies, have strong gendered affective ties that have historically emerged as means of surviving against the uncertainty of the ‘outside’ world. It seems reasonable to speculate that LGBTQIA+ youth at universities in large diverse urban cosmopolitan cities with established connections with local LGBTQIA+ groups will, in many instances, have very different online networks from people living in say relatively socially and politically homogenous small towns.

3.3 Re-situating the project

In this chapter thus far, I have reviewed literature that contributes to understandings around how marginalised genders and sexualities must navigate many conflicting possibilities of becoming with digital media and technologies. I have critically engaged with literature around the participatory potential of digital communication, which, while pointing to many affordances of affirmative connection historically displaced offline, also highlights various limits around participation. The shifting spatial-material relations of mediated environments may well have afforded many opportunities for affirmative connection and movement. However, as documented in much of the literature discussed, such opportunities online do not flow free from existing power relations. Digital media, technologies and practices are produced between mutually constitutive online-offline worlds, filtered through the likes of platform designs, algorithms and social relations rendering some bodies more fluid than others. Given the complexity of possible connections in the digital age, it is perhaps of little surprise that the research discussed throughout this chapter has yielded many contradictory results around questions of digital empowerment. The research discussed points to how the internet can come to both affirm and marginalise, liberating not only marginalised groups but also oppressive and exploitative forces. Normative configurations of bodies, identities, and desires, while often subverted, continue to be made present and promoted online, complicating questions around whether the internet *either* empowers *or* disempowers users. Possibilities of digital

empowerment are clearly heavily situated, shifting in accordance with who and what connects in any given space and time.

Responding to such conflicting and contradictory possibilities of becoming in the digital age, my thesis, as earlier discussed, builds on a growing body of work that approaches digital media and technologies not as bounded entities but as sites of immanent potential, actualised through journeys within, between and across multiple mediated worlds (Coleman 2012; Kerpen 2016; Marston 2019; Park 2018; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Warfield 2017). Renold and Ringrose (2011), for instance, in their work with a group of young schoolgirls, map out unstable becomings with digital media and technologies actualised between and across multiple offline sites and intersecting social media platforms. Such work challenges simplistic notions of structure versus agency by enabling us to map out configurations of gender and sexuality enabled and displaced in the moment. It highlights how bodies are always relationally produced, affecting and affected by the multitude of connections through which they emerge. Approaching digital media and technologies this way enables us to resolve oppositional contradictory claims around digital empowerment. Such resolution is made possible not in terms of choosing one side over another but rather through acknowledging how the internet has the potential to *both* empower and disempower through highly variable connections and movements producing bodies in irreducible excess of any given piece of digital media, platform or technology.

Nevertheless, acknowledging such potential is not to render concerns around specific platforms redundant. I included such concerns in my literature review for a reason. While rejecting notions of power located in specific media and platforms in favour of an approach that sees power as something that emerges relationally, such power is far from evenly distributed. Work around the likes of platform design and political economic interests is, therefore, as earlier highlighted, far from inconsequential to my thesis. However, while platform design, and the political economic interests such design serves, may well promote and elicit certain knowledges and practices, it does not determine them. Bodies still come to subvert normative configurations of knowledge, power and desire, even when engaging with digital media and platforms

that may seek to organise and contain them. Understanding how bodies come to be produced in any given online space thus requires consideration of the wider relations through which they emerge. Nevertheless, while the boundaries of people, places, spaces and things, both on and offline, may be open to re-configuration, questions around how some bodies come to emerge as more fluid than others persist. It is here where I turn to questions of embodiment.

My thesis, as briefly alluded to in the introduction, builds on a body of feminist and LGBTQIA+ scholarship that has emphasised how gender and sexuality, even in the postmodern digital age of seemingly infinite possibilities of connection, remains situated, to varying degrees, in geographically located personal and collective histories (Binswanger and Zimmermann 2018; Gray 2009; Kerpen 2016; Park 2018; Renold et al. 2017; Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012; Walkerdine 2016). As highlighted in the work around the digital divide, possibilities of connection, access and use are far from evenly distributed. While I would reject efforts to reduce bodies to such a simplistic divide, which inevitably erases the many bodies emerging in excess of such abstract frameworks, such differentiated patterns of connection, access and use highlight a need to consider how bodies, while uprooted from many relational constraints, remain situated, to varying degrees, in social-material-cultural relations of space and place. While I am interested in how connections between people, spaces, places and things have a capacity to both affect and be affected by one another in unpredictable ways, thus blurring of categorical distinctions between such relations, some bodies are clearly more open to re-configuration than others. Challenging essentialised notions of material boundaries between people, places, spaces and things need not come at the cost of completely erasing such categorical distinctions.

Much work has emphasised the prevailing importance of space and place for understanding gender and sexuality. Hickey-Moody and Kenway (2017), for instance, draw attention to strong affective attachments to masculinity in a post-industrial town in Australia. They highlight how masculinities produced within such communities emerge in anxiety-provoking tension with perceived feminising forces of deindustrialisation and the rapid global cultural flows of the city from which they

remain somewhat detached. While drawing on an affective analysis responsive to the ways in which people, places, spaces and things both affect and are affected by one another, they highlight how possibilities of becoming fostered between such relations remain heavily constrained in such places. Similar findings have been documented more locally within my sphere of interest. Walkerdine and Jimenez (2012), for instance, as discussed, document strong ties to a hard, strong and proud working-class masculinity affectively produced and embodied in opposition to femininity in a post-industrial town in South Wales. They situate such attachments to masculinity within a long, deeply affective history of a gendered division of labour, where men's hard, exhausting and potentially life-threatening work, though heavily dependent on the emotional labour of women in the home and in the community, emerged as a symbol of economic survival. Faced with two hundred years of perpetual uncertainty, subject to the mercy of fluctuating market forces, they argue that such communities, and the rigidly defined gender roles organised therein, became a buffer against the risk of annihilation that individuals faced alone. However, such strong community ties are not without cost. As Walkerdine and Jimenez acknowledge, the holding together of such communities has long been dependent on shutting difference out, rendering attachments to a masculinity of bygone era difficult to dislodge. They document how negative affects of shame circulate within such communities to maintain the boundaries of masculine pride.

In the face of such prevailing constraints of social relations situated in time and place, connections fostered through digital communication undoubtedly have the potential to uproot bodies and complicate embodied narratives (Gray 2009; Kerpen 2016; Park 2018). However, such connections do not render bodies placeless and timeless. As Gray (2009) documents, in their analysis of the lives of rural queer youth in the US, the transformative potential of digital communication is limited by users having to navigate such rigid gender relations of such locales. Similarly, as I documented in my MSc thesis exploring possibilities of becoming queer in post-industrial towns across South Wales (Kerpen 2016), online activity exists in tension with offline normative constraints. Such tension arguably manifests not only in the limited capacity of online connections and explorations to transform bodies offline but also in embodied offline

constraints limiting possibilities of connecting and exploring online. Hillier and Harrison (2007), for instance, highlight how gay and lesbian online spaces may enable users to explore sexual identities that they cannot explore in offline spaces. However, they carefully highlight how such ability to explore does not necessarily translate into users' offline worlds. Similarly, users entering online spaces, while seemingly disconnected from offline worlds, still embody relations produced within them, i.e., they embody personal and collective histories that may operate to limit perception and expression, even when alone with their devices. The body is not left behind when we enter digital space. As Hine (2015) argues, "bodies that use the internet are socially situated bodies, and various aspects of social positioning and material circumstances shape the Internet experience" (p.44; see also Campbell 2004); they do not flow free from lived experience. On this basis, I argue that the well documented gender anxieties and traumas, produced through normative configurations and the policing of sexed, gendered, racialised and classed queer excess, remain significant to understanding how bodies come to be produced online.

3.3.1 Beyond queernormativity

In situating my project within work rejecting disembodied placeless notions of becoming, my thesis builds on work responsive to the issue of what Orne (2017) describes as queernormativity, i.e., understandings of queerness disarticulated from wider material, social and historical concerns (see also Green 2002). Such normativity is produced within much queer theory and activism, centring "radical individualist self-definition" (Orne 2017 p.220) within post-structural worlds of ever-contested knowledge emphasising incongruity between language, identity and the material body (Butler 1990; Foucault 1978; Warner 1991). It is also re-produced across some of the new materialist affect theorising that I critiqued in the introduction, which similarly operates to centre discontinuities of power and desire across time and place. In either case, such thinking has given voice to bodies, practices and knowledges that come to resist dominant configurations of gender and sexuality. However, a refusal to locate bodies is not without cost. As Orne identifies, such anti-identitarianism becomes an identity in and of itself – an identity that excludes through marginalising acknowledgement of material and structural constraints that render identity and

representation significant to many lives. Within queer circles, there can be a tendency for people to assert themselves as “more queer than though” (Orne 2017, p.224), replacing cisheteronormative respectability with an “alternative respectability... based on saying the right things and identifying the correct ways” (p.220). As such, efforts to *completely* reject identity and representation do not exist outside of signification. They come at the cost of centring bodies and desires most mobile at the expense of grappling with questions around how some bodies and desires come to solidify over time. Such thinking can easily re-produce the very politics of inclusion and exclusion it seeks to overcome. The repetition of defining individual identities and practices as queer or not results in queer as a verb, i.e., a process of doing, becoming solidified in notions of being, with queer emerging as an identity-noun held to include some bodies and practices but *not* others.

Much like homonormative and transnormative configurations of gender and sexuality, a queernormative focus on queer subversions can operate to centre white affluent urban bodies, with its individualising tendencies re-producing many of the same dynamics around gender, race and class that it is constructed against. As Orne identifies through his observation of a radical queer space in Chicago, the space was “diverse but only with words” (p.219). Highlighting issues around material access, with the space located in an affluent area, he notes that the space was just as white as many commercial venues in the city. He also identifies how the space was dominated culturally by the topics that white queer activist wanted to talk about, namely issues around language. When people of colour tried to shift discussions to more systemic material concerns, these were never picked up by the white people in the space.

Such critiques around individualising queer rhetoric are far from isolated. For instance, Ahmed (2004), in her work encouraging us to consider affective attachments, is critical of how queer politics centred on “freedom from norms... idealises movement and detachments, constructing a mobile form of subjectivity that could escape from the norms that constrain what it is bodies can do” (pp.151-152). Puar (2007), building on Ahmed, draws attention to how such ‘freedom from norms’, as an individualist liberal western-centric measure of queerness, “becomes a regulatory

queer ideal that demarcates the ideal queer” (p.22). Building on the idea of affective attachments, she problematises reductions of assimilation and transgression to simplistic matters of choice, especially in the context of queer bodies racialised other navigating multiple conflicting forces of oppression. In the face of such oppression, she encourages us to consider agencies that emerge in complicity with social norms. Similarly, Breen (2000), in a critique of queer theory emphasising radical discontinuity over continuity, argues: “...travel metaphors that foreground... flexibility and fluidity... [and] transformative possibility... can readily become the marker of cultural privilege” (p.62). Breen argues that “travel is an expression of constraint as well as desire” (p.68). Such concerns around individualising queer rhetoric, while not specifically focused on the digital, are arguably pertinent to understanding wider affective social-material-cultural relations that users come to navigate between online and offline worlds. Power may well be everywhere (Foucault 1978), with bodies emerging in irreducible to fixed structures of oppression. However, power is not distributed in equal measure.

While I do not totally abandon queer theorising, as it helps to afford insight into resistances against sedimented positions, I do argue for a need to consider queerness as something embodied and situated. It is here where I move from my first two questions around how masculinity is queered online, and how the internet enables and displaces possibilities of connecting with difference, to questioning the unique embodied relational experiences, emotional investments and feelings of separation and difference that produce different possibilities of queering masculinity in the digital age. After all, what is queerer, a gay male couple married with children living in a conservative rural town on the Bible Belt of the USA or a polyamorous gender fluid pansexual person on a university campus in a cosmopolitan city with an active queer community that affirms possibilities of gender and sexual difference? In asking this question, I am not playing the game of oppression Olympics but rather illustrating that separating the queer from the normative is an impossible task, as what it means to be queer and normative is situated across time and place.

3.3.2 Identity still matters, for some more than others

While the (post)modern digital age has seen many embrace fluidity and reject labels, such desire is far from universal, with many remaining heavily invested in traditional identity categories. In a quantitative study exploring the sexual identities of over 2500 secondary school students in California, Russell et al. (2009) found that the vast majority (71%) of 858 non-heterosexual participants surveyed identified with traditional LGB labels. With only 13.4% questioning their identities, the number of non-heterosexuals identifying outside of the traditional labels was relatively small, and this was in a region where, as Russell et al. acknowledge, possibilities of queer expression are relatively open compared to many other places. In terms of gender identity, Harrison et al. (2012), surveyed over 6000 trans and gender non-conforming people in the US. They found only 13% identified as neither male nor female. The vast majority identified within the binary (67%), with a remaining 20% identifying somewhere between binary and non-binary in feeling "part time as one gender, part time as another" (p.14). Though the emergence of non-binary and queer identities mark an important socio-political shift that should be celebrated for its revolutionary potential, a strong sense of difference and separation prevails, for some more than others. As such, questions of language and representation remain immanent.

Efforts to map out incongruities between bodies, identities and desires in excess of questions of representation can operate, as Hall (1996) argues, to erase key concepts that are far from "superseded dialectically" (p.1). Even in the (post)modern digital age where meaning is arguably up for grabs more than ever before, symbolic frameworks for organising understandings of self and other still come to matter. Of course, acknowledging a prevailing significance of language and identity need not collapse into essentialising rhetoric. Identities, as Hall identifies:

... seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond.... [However,] identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves" (p.4).

Bodies are more-than-representation, but they are not beyond it. Social-material-cultural configurations of gender and sexuality still come to matter as *something*, even if that something is unstable.

Identity categories, while limited, still hold significance, affectively contained through the narratives of some more than others. Turning to the paradox of what Riggs (2010) refers to as “post-identity identity politics” (p.345), I would argue that “identity categories continue to be understood by many people as reflecting something ‘real’ about their experiences” in a world where the way people are seen by others matters” (p.345). Gunnarsson (2011), for instance, defends the category woman, not as something that symbolises a homogenous and stable group but rather something that bears relevance to possibilities of becoming with the world. Similarly, Linke (2013) defends a ‘strategic lesbianism’, challenging the idea that people are equally queer to address gender-specific histories of marginalisation within the LGBTQIA+ community. Challenges to the erasure of categories marking difference have also been raised among trans people. Namaste (2005), for example, notes how many trans people reject the “catch-all phrase of transgender” (p.2), in favour of the not somewhat outdated and non-pc term transsexual because the idea of gender *not* sex fails to represent the specificity of their medical and social service needs. As earlier discussed, such trans bodies are routinely marked as not queer enough, despite the multiple embodiments pursued through medical transition (see again Davy 2018). As Elliot (2010) argues, the ability to pass and medically transition “opens up the possibility of affirming an embodied existence” (p.107), a possibility that in many instances can be “considered a matter of life or death” (p.107). Such material-discursive configurations of gender, while unstable and irreducible to any fixed essential homogenous position, still matter. Furthermore, they are productive, affectively contained in ways that are enabling *not* lacking, at least not lacking any more than bodies that resist such configurations because embracing particular bodies, practices and labels, much like rejecting them, produces possibilities of being and becoming with the world. It is precisely here that I turn to notions of affect emphasising bodies and practices emerging *with* language (Wetherell 2013), rejecting the disembodied strands of affect theorising that understand affect as pre-discursive and pre-conscious.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Now that I have situated my project within existing literature in the field, I would like to move on to further develop my onto-epistemological and methodological approach to grappling with the complexities of queering masculinity in the digital age. As discussed, in thinking about space and place, I am interested not only in what is made present within any single site of inquiry, which is inevitably limited by empirical observations of what is rendered visible within, but also in personal and collective histories embodied through journeys between and across multiple spaces and places, both on and offline. Such histories come to matter online, even if rendered absent from that which we can immediately observe in any given space. Much of the existing literature on gender and sexuality in the digital age discussed is platform specific. However, the more contemporary work discussed at the end of the last chapter encourages us to consider how knowledges and practices produced on digital platforms remain situated in wider offline relations creating space for mapping out bodies becoming *with*, not in or from, specific sites of inquiry. A focus on ‘becoming’, as discussed, can collapse into disembodied queernormativity, centring bodies produced in excess of representation at the expense of embodiments that solidify over time. However, an attentiveness to how possibilities of queering masculinity are situated in personal and collective histories of place and space can help us to think about bodies and desires as things that remain contained, to varying degrees, even if never fixed and always open to re-configuration through unexpected connections. As such, in this chapter, I develop an approach to generating data with participants that is responsive to questions around how some bodies emerge as more fluid than others, making room for the weight of affective embodied pasts made present while remaining open to the ways in which bodies may come to be transformed in unexpected ways.

I start this chapter by further elaborating on my onto-epistemological position – a new materialist more-than-human perspective thinking both *with and beyond* questions of representation and phenomenological psychosocial lived experience. Once I have further outlined my onto-epistemological approach, I move on to think through methodological challenges of generating data around bodies situated online,

considering questions around who and what is rendered absent from the digital spaces we encounter as both users and researchers. I think with insights derived through ethnography. However, while valuing ethnographic approaches for enabling us to observe situated practices, I challenge the boundaries of traditional ethnography through drawing on work problematising traditional notions of the ‘field’, highlighting difficulties locating bodies in the digital age. Following my discussion of such challenges, I then move on to consider possible methods for situating online activity within the wider social-material-cultural relations from which it emerges, arguing for a need to adopt creative participatory approaches responsive to the unexpected journeys and connections, both past and present, that come to matter to our participants. After a brief discussion around different creative and participatory methods researchers can adopt, including the strengths and limitations of such methods both in general and for my particular project, I then move on to discuss my research design – an open ended mixed methods approach that synthesised many existing insights to generate data attentive to both embodied experiences and situated encounters emerging through journeys within, between *and across* multiple online/offline spaces and places. As earlier discussed, this approach involved generating data *with* participants through a collaborative researcher-solicited diary/blog and participatory biographical relational map interviews, diffractively read through some of my own wider auto-ethnographic encounters. After elaborating on my approach, I move on to consider participant recruitment and ethical considerations, before concluding the chapter with an overview of my method of analysis. My method of analysis, like my methods of generating data, sought to map out disruptive possibilities of becoming with the world while remaining attentive to affective constraints and material bodily limits that emerged.

4.1 A new materialist more-than-human onto-epistemology

As earlier discussed, my thesis adopts a new materialist more-than-human onto-epistemology, turning to notions of affect responsive to how bodies come to be relationally configured and re-configured through *embodied* journeys within, between and across multiple sites, both on and offline. It adopts an approach that sees gendered

and sexual bodies and desires existing not as bounded entities *either* using *or* constituted by digital media and technologies but rather as malleable sites always in a state of becoming *with* ever-shifting *embodied* connections with ideas, people, places, spaces, technologies, platforms and things. This approach, as earlier highlighted, challenges simplistic accounts of structure versus agency, enabling us to map out multiple, conflicting and intersecting connections transcending any stable definitive boundary between technologies and users, media and audiences, and so on. It enables us to grapple with the often ambiguous, unstable and contradictory nature of becoming in the digital age.

This approach to understanding the *emergence* of bodies and desires, in many ways, builds on queer and post-structural theorising resisting the reduction of bodies to abstract structures by giving voice to that which is always produced in excess of existing social-material-cultural configurations. However, unlike post-structural and queer theorising, which focuses primarily on discourse and the productive power and re-organising effects of ever-contested knowledge (Foucault 1978), new materialism can provide a more thorough account of how possibilities of meaning making are materially situated and produced. Post-structuralism and queer theory marked an important shift towards re-theorising identity as a discursive practice — something we do and perform *with* knowledge “as we work the power relations by which we are worked” (Butler 1997, p.100). However, for reasons discussed towards the end of the last chapter, separating possibilities of meaning making from wider social-material concerns is not without cost. It can easily result in a queernormative focus on fluidity detached from wider relational constraints. It can “reduce... bodies to passive blank slates on which history and culture makes its mark” (Barad 2007, p.60), thus failing to develop an understanding of how some bodies come to be more resistant to dominant cultural forces than others. New materialism, in contrast, enables us to consider not just “how discourse comes to matter but... [also] how matter comes to matter” to discourse produced (Barad 2007, p.210). Nevertheless, as earlier discussed, such turns to matter do not always overcome the issues with post-structural and queer theorising highlighted. When completely rejecting concerns around representation through turning to notions of pre-discursive and pre-conscious affect, such thinking can operate to centre movement at the expense of recognising embodied

constraints. As such, I would now like to further situate my approach within thinking that is responsive to such issues, pushing back against new materialist and affect theorising that erases concerns around embodiment.

As discussed, I adopt a theoretical approach that rejects notions of radical discontinuity between the past and the present, whether that be discontinuity in productions of knowledge (Foucault 1978) or discontinuity in ever-shifting social-material-cultural relations (Deleuze and Guattari 2004). Such radical discontinuity is emphasised in Deleuze's (2004) concept of 'pure difference', which understands relationally produced bodies as always marking difference *outside* representation. However, in line with Spivak (2009), I take the position that:

There's not much theoretical difference between pure essence and pure difference. Discontinuity must traffic in minimal continua. We go back to *ce qui reste* [what's left], fragments of essences to reckon with rather than preserving myself from essence (p.24).

While an emphasis on discontinuity is well equipped for mapping out how gender and sexuality come to be redefined and ruptured in many new unexpected ways, it falls short in accounting for how gender and sexuality come to be re-produced with varying degrees of stability across time and place. In turning instead to a focus on 'dis/continuities' between the past and present (Barad 2010), I seek to create space for mapping out normative configurations of gender and sexuality in the digital age that re-emerge, even if in unstable shifting forms. It is here where I reject theorising around people, knowledges, spaces, places and things as anonymous disembodied 'bodies without organs' (Deleuze and Guattari 1983), i.e., bodies that exist only as assemblages of connections that emerge in the moment. As earlier highlighted, I instead favour thinking about bodies as "bodies of water...neither stagnant, nor separate, nor zipped up in some kind of impermeable sac of skin" (Neimanis 2017, pp. 65-66). As Neimanis argues, the concept of bodies without organs affords limited space for considering questions of sexual difference. Drawing on the work of Irigaray, she argues., "feminine waters tend to flow and connect, masculine waters tend to freeze, harden, and evaporate (p.89).

Bodies of water, while emerging in excess of definitive boundaries, are not boundaryless. The concept of bodies of water is attentive to how bodies are ultimately fluid, open to re-configuration through connections with people, places, spaces and things. However, it is also able to account for how some bodies emerge as more fluid than others. As such, it makes space for theorising gender and sexual bodies in ways that overcome the limitations of anti-phenomenological, anti-representation and anti-humanist strands of material-affect theory (Clough 2009; Deleuze and Guattari 2004; Massumi 2002; Thrift 2008). The concept of bodies of water is open to my questions around how the internet enables possibilities of connecting with difference while at the same time creating space for considering feelings of separation and embodied constraints emerging through a repetition of connections, ideas and practices sedimenting over time. It creates space for notions of an embodied human subject, albeit a human subject that is open to being re-configured through wider more-than-human social-material-cultural relations.

In order to make sense of the process by which some bodies emerge as more fluid than others, I turn to psychosocial insights enabling us to account for the weight of affective personal and collective pasts made present to possibilities of queering masculinity. As Frosh et al. (2003) argues, psychosocial approaches go beyond describing how bodies are organised and which positions emerge as dominant. They enable us to grapple with questions around how some people come to accept or reject dominant positions through understanding the emotional investments people have in the positions they adopt. Following such insights, I take the position that ego-identity formations, i.e., our sense of separation from the world affording *some* sense of organised self-continuity (Erikson 1964), afford possibilities for life to flourish, enabling people to navigate worlds of uncertainty. Those of us that are marginalised face an immanent risk of annihilation through becoming with social-material-cultural relations that operate to deny, erase and limit us. In the face of such oppressive forces, community and identity attachments can afford affirmative possibilities of existence. They can afford a sense of place for bodies otherwise rendered placeless. As Walkerdine and Jimenez (2012) identify in their work in the post-industrial community in South Wales, a lack of community and gender containment in the face of centuries of perpetual

uncertainty, often produces feelings of leaking and spilling out, triggering safety defence mechanisms necessary for survival. It is for this reason that I describe my approach as more-than-human. As Hackett (2020) notes, “the category of the human is being dissolved at a time when many are still struggling to have their humanity recognised” (p.6). Such sentiments are echoed by Braidotti (2019), who, while thinking beyond humanism, rejects efforts to completely flatten differences that come to exist between bodies.

Turning to psychosocial insights need not collapse into bounded notions of self. As highlighted in the introduction, my thesis builds on strands of new materialist affect theorising that refuses to separate affect from embodied psychological affective meaning making practices (Binswanger and Zimmermann; Wetherell 2013; Walkerdine 2010). Wetherell, as earlier discussed, creates space for language and materiality as mutually constitutive of one another, which enables us to consider embodied narratives of lived experience that are open to re-configuration but nevertheless still contained to varying degrees. Binswanger and Zimmermann, like Wetherell, reject understandings of affect as pre-personal, pre-representation and pre-social, instead theorising affect as something that emerges through mutually constitutive inter- and intra- psychic, social, cultural and material relations. They place emphasis on a “persistence of individual history and biography” (p.110). While still conceptualising the self as always already relational and thus open to positive regenerative connections, they emphasise the importance of recognising negative affects of anxieties and traumas emerging with histories of marginalisation made present.⁹ Building on Cvetkovich’s (2003) notion of ‘archives of feelings’, they argue for a need to consider how past traumatic events are transmitted and felt across generations, noting that though such trauma is not always experienced the same way, it still plays an important role in the process of subject-identity formations. Such thinking in many ways resonates with Walkerdine’s (2016) work around ‘affective histories’ of communities operating to hold bodies together against oppressive forces. Such histories produce what Walkerdine (2010) describes as ‘communal beingness’, with

⁹ They develop the notion of the palimpsestic subject (the palimpsest being a metaphor for subjectivity based on a reused/altered manuscript that bears traces of its earlier form).

communities, and the ego-identity attachments forged therein, affording containment through a 'second skin' necessary for ontological security. In thinking with such psychosocial of notions being not contained as absolute entities in opposition to wider social-material-cultural relations but nevertheless contained to varying degrees significant to becoming with them, I adopt an approach that is responsive not only to what is relationally produced but also what is alienated and rendered absent. Such thinking enables us to avoid reducing bodies to that which they come to lack within bounded notions of structure. However, it creates space for theorising structuralising embodied personal and collective histories that constrain possibilities of becoming.

4.2 Grappling with the uncertainty of knowing in the digital age: Difficulties defining 'the field' and locating bodies

Making sense of situated activity online presents many ontological, epistemological and methodological concerns. As such, now that I have further laid out the philosophical foundations of my project, I would like to move on to explore some of the challenges of generating data responsive to my aims of accounting for different situated and embodied possibilities of becoming *with* digital media and technologies. In this section, I think with possibilities of ethnography, which is a well-established method for generating data around situated bodies and practices. However, I consider issues that arise from traditional ethnographic approaches in the face of difficulties locating bodies and defining fields of interest. In an era where bodies and cultures emerge through complex networks transcending definitive boundaries of space and time (Castells 2010), we are far less materially organised than we once were. As such, I argue for a need for methods observing bodies between and across multiple sites. Following this discussion, I briefly turn to insights derived from using virtual ethnography as a means of observing bodies emerging in excess of any single location. However, building on Hine (2015), who argues for a need for virtual ethnographies to utilise other methods to respond to challenges around situating online activity within the wider contexts in which it is always embedded and embodied, I move on to consider methods attentive to generating data around that which may not be visible to

us online. Thinking between and across many existing insights, I then go on to develop my mixed methods approach, which, while drawing on ethnographic methods to observe bodies in situ, goes beyond observing bodies in naturalistic settings in order to generate data more responsive to the embedded and embodied journey of those observed.

There are a number of methods for generating data around embodied and situated knowledges and practices. A seemingly obvious choice would be ethnography, which, through observing speech and action gained through prolonged researcher engagement and immersion in naturalistic settings, can afford opportunities for understanding how bodies come to be organised and produced within spaces and places. Ethnography overcomes some of the limitations of more abstract methods, such as stand-alone interviews and surveys, where there is often a gap between what participants say and do (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Jerolmack and Khan 2014). It allows us to observe meaning making in action. While more abstract methods may still be used by ethnographers, they take on a different form in that they are often less formal, centred around shared experiences and encounters observed in settings, and benefit from an established rapport enabling participants to speak more freely (Murchison 2010). However, in our increasingly mobile mediated world, defining a field and locating bodies is no easy task.

Many ethnographers have moved away from bounded notions of the field, creating space for developing understandings of bodies and cultures produced between and across multiple sites (Gullion 2018; Marcus 1995; Murphy 2011). Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue:

Our historical preferences for face-to-face communities and intense, local sites of interaction should not blind us to the fact that contemporary forms of communication can transform our sense of what is 'local' into widely distributed networks, and that 'communities' can (and do) exist in many different forms (p.138)

Murphy (2011), responsive to such thinking, highlights how what it means to be somewhere has been “expanded (disrupted?) by a host of interrelated phenomena (migration, tourism, international trade policies, urbanization, natural resource exploitation, war, mass media, personal communication devices, etc.)” (p. 383). Paying particular attention to the media, he urges us to consider “the dispersed and increasingly fluid relationship that people have with media as a response to the sheer volume of texts encountered through everyday life” (p.394), with “even the most... isolated communities... increasingly connected... via mass media” (p.396). The advent of digital media, less restricted by mass media channels of distributing knowledge in enabling users to participate in the production and consumption of knowledge, has arguably operated to further dissolve such spatial and temporal boundaries. Miller (2011), for instance, argues that digital communication has seen bodies hypermediated, decontextualised and de-situated through rhizomatic flows that see bodies produced in unpredictable non-linear ways.

For reasons I have discussed, I would challenge the idea that bodies are *completely* uprooted from context, as some spaces and places, and connections forged within, come to be embodied as more salient than others. However, contextual boundaries have certainly been blurred. Thinking beyond single sites of inquiry thus enables us to develop a richer account how bodies, identities and desires come to be configured and re-configured within, between and across multiple embodied worlds. Furthermore, it enables us to account for the many bodies and expressions rendered placeless from the sites we observe due to normative oppressive constraints of spaces and places. While observations around the organisation and expression of gender and sexuality within any given field of inquiry affords important insights into relational constraints that come to be embodied (see again Hickey-Moody and Kenway 2017), I find myself interested not just who and what is made present in specific spaces and places but also in what such presence renders absent. After all, when marginalised and faced with threats of violence, our expression is often limited, especially in public settings when negotiating relationships with friends and family. When participants in a space perform being ‘normal’ to avoid social sanctions, many embodied anxieties and traumas limiting expression can be hidden from researchers. However, when thinking

beyond single sites, such absences may be revealed through becomings observed elsewhere.

4.2.1 The possibilities virtual ethnography

In considering possibilities of queering masculinity constrained and/or rendered absent from many physical spaces and places, virtual ethnography affords possibilities of observing a co-presence and co-location of bodies emerging in excess of any single locality (Beaulieu 2010). Davies (2006), for instance, draws on empirical observations to provide an insider view of a digital photography community on Flickr, considering the community as a third affinity space between spaces where new knowledges could be generated. Similarly, Darwin (2017) adopts a virtual ethnographic approach that maps out interactional challenges of doing gender beyond the binary on Reddit. However, such work is not without limits. Embedded in, and emergent from, vast global social, material and cultural offline and online relations, the contexts through which online activity is produced, negotiated, embodied and re-produced are highly variable, characterised by a great deal of ontological diversity (Hine 2015). Making sense of such diversity is no easy task.

When observing bodies made present through online activity, we, as both researchers and internet users, are often limited in our capacity to comprehend that activity from the situated perspectives of those we observe. Bodies made present within digital spaces are often reduced to a fleeting presence, resulting in limited opportunities for prolonged engagement necessary for understanding the wider embodied social-material-cultural relations from which they emerge. As Hine (2015) identifies, when becoming with the internet, we, again as both users and researchers, rely heavily on our own situatedness to deal with the ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding who and what is made present. As Hine (2015) identifies, “ethnographic studies of online spaces were key in establishing the nature of the new social formations that occurred online” (p.38). However, when failing to look beyond that which can be observed in digital space, such studies are unable to account for the ways in which the internet and online activity “means quite different things to different people” (p.38). Furthermore,

with online performances of identity often heavily selective and curated, thus open to varying degrees deception, there are many limitations to what they can reveal about bodies located offline (Wittel 2000). While I would argue against efforts to reject the importance of observing online activity on this basis, as such performances still have material impact, questions around what this impact is for those observed are often left unanswered when relying solely on that which is made present online. As Wittel argues, “the exclusion of the material worlds... is unlikely to reveal context and complexity” (online). The social configurations rendered present online do not tell us much about how what we observe online comes to matter with wider offline connections, i.e., in terms of this project, connection forged across diverse rural and urban localities of South Wales and South West England. Nevertheless, as I will now go on to discuss, there are a number of possibilities for grappling with such limitations.

4.3 Situating the virtual

Now that I have considered how online spaces afford possibilities of exploring identities, communities and practices emerging in excess of single locales, I would like to move on to consider ways we might generate data around the wider embedded and embodied social-material-cultural relations that come to matter to that which we observe online, even if not made immediately present to us. One option for grappling with uncertainties around who and what is made present online is to observe users’ becomings with digital media and technologies across multiple online and offline fields. For instance, Renold and Ringrose (2011), as earlier discussed, mapped out a group of young girls’ mediated becomings enabled and displaced between and across multiple spaces, both on and offline. Such work, while attentive to bodies situated in place, is far from bound to place. Nevertheless, there are limits to the spaces we can directly enter with those we wish to observe. Renold and Ringrose (2011), for example, observe becomings across spaces that could be described as either public or semi-public. They considered possibilities of becoming actualised between and across the likes of homes, schools and social media profiles. However, for reasons discussed, the presence of peers, family and researchers within and across such sites could limit gender and sexual expression. As earlier highlighted, many turn to the internet when rendered placeless, utilising the anonymity of online spaces precisely because they

cannot freely express themselves across such public/semi-public sites. As such, when it comes to developing an understanding of possibilities of queering masculinity in the digital age, such an approach is limited in terms of generating data around private becomings that remain hidden from such sites of inquiry. Explorations of such private worlds, emerging when users are alone with their devices, are arguably important for understanding how the internet enables us to navigate such wider relational constraints.

4.3.1 Embracing the uncertainty as part of the immersive process

Another possibility for navigating the uncertainty surrounding who and what is present online is to embrace it as part and parcel of what it means to be immersed in digital space. As Hine (2015) argues:

If we accept that in some circumstances living with a lack of certainty and an enduring ambiguity about what things mean is an inherent part of the conditions in which participants find themselves, then experiencing and embracing that uncertainty becomes an ethnographer's job... [As such,] pursuing some form of absolute robust certainty about a singular research object becomes a distraction, and even a threat to the more significant goal of working out just how life is lived under these conditions in which such stability is at best a very temporary achievement (p.5)

One way she suggests we can do this is through auto/ethnographic approaches, reflecting on how meaning comes to matter to us. Resisting an outright rejection of such methods on the grounds that they over-emphasise the self and limit diverse sites of meaning making, Hine argues that all ethnography is to some extent auto/ethnographic, emphasising an inability to fully separate observations from ourselves and the objects of our inquiry. She identifies how engaging with digital media sees the 'auto' emerge as more salient because of the fleeting unpredictable presence of online encounters, often rendering emergences of self, however unstable, the most constant thing we can observe through movements across hyper-personalised and hyper-localised digital worlds. However, remaining conscious of the limitations of such approaches, something I would argue is both an onto-epistemological and

ethical concern given the institutional privilege and authority of researcher-centred accounts, she urges us to consider making use of other methods in combination with observations to decentre taken for granted assumptions and make room for other embedded and embodied perspectives.

4.3.2 Making room for diverse sites of meaning making: Democratising efforts to grapple with uncertainty

Hine (2015) suggests a number of methods virtual ethnographers can deploy to overcome the limitations of autoethnography and create space for diverse sites of meaning making. These methods include but are not limited to ethnographic interviews, accessing website activity log files, the use of recording technologies, and getting participants to keep time-use diaries. Ethnographic interviews were deployed by Campbell (2004) in a virtual ethnography of gay online communities, enabling him to generate an understanding of the real otherwise invisible material bodies situated in virtual performances. Log files and recording technologies afford possibilities of tracking otherwise invisible movements across online spaces. However, such movements alone may reveal little about wider offline relations that come to matter online. Furthermore, when dealing with sensitive topics around gender and sexuality, asking participants to share browsing histories seems invasive. Time-use diaries were perhaps the most appealing suggestion to the aims of my project. While limited alone given my aim to generate biographical data on pasts made present, the method affords possibilities of generating data on online activity in *close* proximity to the situated moments in which it occurs. As Zimmerman and Lawrence (1977) argues:

The diary partially recovers features of scenes and events which, if witnessed via participant observation, would have been the topic for on-the-spot interrogation (p.485)

Like participant observation, diaries afford possibilities of recording an “ever-changing present” (Elliott 1997 cited in Harricharan and Bhopal 2014, p.328) and can be further contextualised through interview data (Zimmerman and Lawrence 1977). Furthermore, such a method gives participants more control over what they share.

The use of text in traditional diaries would remain somewhat detached from online activity, particularly compared to say recording technologies generating multi-modal data around the complexity of lived encounters. However, advancements in digital media and technologies have afforded many new opportunities for operationalising such methods to include images and video (Plummer 2001). While limitations can emerge around participants not keeping diaries up to date, rendering close proximity to the unfolding of events far from guaranteed, the ease at which activity can be screenshotted and shared in the moment online arguably goes *some* way to mitigating such issues. The diary method also affords more creative participatory possibilities for recording movements between and across sites that researchers are unable to access, thus avoiding reducing mediated bodies to sites that researchers assume are most significant to those they observe.

Responding to the limitations of ‘the field’ and diverse possibilities of meaning-making emerging between and across vast sites often rendered invisible to us as researchers and users, there is arguably a need for creative participatory-based approaches enabling participants us to bring hidden embedded and embodied relational worlds in view. Creating space for the unexpected is arguably now more important than ever given the vast possibilities of connection and meaning making in the digital age.

Structured approaches to design and data collection—whether through questionnaires, interviews, or focus groups—inevitably rely on researchers’ assumptions and value-judgments. They pre-suppose what is of interest and significance and stifle complexity as understanding and experience is reduced to pre-determined categories. Such approaches often assume a decontextualized coherent and unitary self, as they elicit single responses to questions with multiple answers forever in flux with social, cultural, material, and spatial contexts. They also often privilege verbal forms of communication, as that which is difficult to express is reduced to words (Kerpen and Marston 2019, online).

As researchers, we are always part of what we study, with our knowledges, experiences and biases shaping how we collect and analyse data (Hammersley and

Atkinson 2007; Dyson and Genishi 2005). Creative and participatory modes of doing research enable participants to move research in unexpected ways beyond structural constraints of rigid research designs, affording space for different modes of expression both with and beyond verbal communication (Bagnoli 2009; Mannay 2015; Renold et al. 2017). While deploying creative and participatory methods does not render us absent from what we study, it does afford possibilities of better involving participants in the process of producing knowledge.

There are many creative participatory methods that could have been utilised for this project. One interesting participatory method for navigating diverse multi-modal mediated worlds involves digital walkthroughs, as deployed by Duguay (2016) *with* participants on Facebook. However, given the huge amount of data shared on such platforms, the method can be messy, with participants easily distracted by endless posts irrelevant to the topic at hand (Kerpen 2016). As earlier discussed, there is also the issue of context collapse on such platforms, limiting what is made present. While the walkthrough method could of course be deployed for navigating more private worlds, such deployment would be quite invasive. Participants may be more open to discussing rather than showing their encounters within private spaces. Other creative and participatory methods that I considered for this project included drawing, mapping and collaging, which can be used in conjunction with personal artefacts like photographs and objects, affording rich memory and interview elicitation tools and non-verbal modes of reflection and expression (Mannay 2015). Such methods could all be used as tools for generating data on personal and collective histories, affording opportunities for making embodied pasts present to the otherwise disembodied digital content and practices we often observe online. They can also be conducted with individuals or groups. When collaborative, such methods afford possibilities of observing embodied possibilities of meaning making in situ. However, such participatory work with groups may produce many absences, with group dynamics, for reasons discussed, limiting expression.

Such creative participatory methods afford invaluable means of generating data that challenges researchers' expectations, enabling us to better navigate unpredictable

relational encounters of the digital age. However, such methods are not without limitations. Firstly, they are very labour intensive, requiring lots of time and energy from participants. Furthermore, rigidly defined, they can also end up being just as limiting, sometimes even more limiting, than more standardised methods. For instance, the drawing method, As Mannay (2015) notes, can make participants feel anxious about having “to reproduce an accurate representation of a thing or event” (Mannay 2015, p.89). I have personal experience of this as a participant in a project utilising the drawing method. Instead of drawing something I *wanted* to draw, I drew something I *could* draw. Efforts to centre participants voices also raise questions around the validity of participants claims. The ways in which participants see the world should not always be taken at face value because doing so can easily end up over-emphasising agency and recognition and collapse into radical postmodern assumptions that are all truth claims are equal. As Kerpen and Marston (2019) note:

In a neoliberal society and culture that positions individuals to rational and autonomous agents, individualizing success and failure and absolving society of responsibility, the radical postmodern assumption that truth is a matter of choice can be problematic. Although participants should be afforded the opportunity to speak, social researchers have an ethical responsibility to draw on their expertise to situate that speech in social, cultural, and historical context.

Being responsive to wider social-material-cultural relations operating to organise the ways we understand the world does not mean exhausting context under universal authoritative claims that silence participants and disregard all sense of agency. However, it does mean acknowledging that context exists, and that thoughts and practices do not emerge in a vacuum (Gill, 2007).

4.4 What I did

Thinking with, between and beyond the different approaches for generating data outlined thus far, I will now move on to explain what I did. As mentioned, the project generated data with participants through a collaborative researcher-solicited diary-blog and biographical relational map interviews, diffractively read through some of

my own auto/ethnographic encounters. The methods, as I will go on to discuss in more detail, were selected to respond to the different onto-epistemological and methodological challenges discussed thus far. They afforded space for mapping out unexpected connections and situated encounters of an ever-changing present while remaining attentive to embodied personal and collective pasts made present to those connections and encounters. I would describe my overall approach as a mixed method virtual auto/ethnography, refusing to fully separate the auto- from the ethno- for reasons discussed. While my approach to generating data beyond the boundaries of a specific time and place may be considered by some to be un-ethnographic, I describe it as ethnographic because my effort to think beyond traditional notions of the field was in service of grappling with the complexities of being immersed in highly variable shifting mediated worlds.

4.4.1 The researcher-solicited collaborative blog-diary

Responding to the challenges of mapping out rich possibilities of becoming in the digital age, I decided to create a participatory collaborative blog-diary to enable participants to share experiences and situated encounters of queering masculinity between and across multiple sites inaccessible to conventional ethnographic approaches. Much like Facebook, it served as a platform enabling the participants to both interact and share content that they had come across elsewhere. In line the aims and objectives of the project, it enabled possibilities for the participants share activity across multiple platforms. It served as a community of communities, as participants were able to interact over content derived through their unique mediated journeys. The participants were informed that they could use the space to share anything they felt was relevant to the topic of queering masculinity in the digital age, including but not limited to experiences and encounters with sexual media, dating/hook-up apps, online support services, activist networks, and LGBTQIA+ news and comments threads. Much of the existing research around blogs and social media focuses on already existing spaces and communities found online (see Davies 2006; Hookway 2008). However, as discussed, such spaces are often limited to the fleeting presence of bodies, affording limited access to the wider online/offline worlds of those we come to observe in any given space. The curation of a researcher-solicited space, in contrast, affords

some control over who and what is made present (see Harricharan and Bhopal 2014). As such, it enabled me to generate data tracing activity between and across different sites for a specific group and area I was interested in.

My decision to use the blog-diary draws on insights from the different methods of data collection discussed thus far throughout this chapter. Perhaps most obviously, as Harricharan and Bhopal (2014) identify, the method builds on the diary method, enabling researchers to generate data around the situated diverging and converging forces of an ever-changing present, thus avoiding over-emphasising continuity through more abstract data collection techniques. However, the multi-modal potential of social media affords possibilities of capturing some of the richness of situated mediated encounters beyond abstract words, with users able to share posts, articles, images, photographs, screenshots and videos in addition to text. Take, for instance, the sharing of photographs on social media. Photographs have the potential to extend togetherness across spatial and temporal boundaries (Rose 2016 cited in Mannay 2015), bringing to life relations that though presently and affectively embodied, may no longer be physically present. Photographs and images can of course be used to generate data through a great number of methods, including traditional diary methods. However, the scope for photographs in research is arguably enhanced online given the ease at which users can share and re-share images capturing on and offline encounters. The use of digital blog-diaries also affords opportunities for collaborative data, thus mirroring the conditions of found spaces online where users are always becoming with others (Harricharan and Bhopal 2014). Resonating with the likes of Facebook timelines or any other online space that diarises and archives relational mediated bodies, the participants of my project thus found themselves immersed in similar conditions found elsewhere on the web. Though researcher-solicited, such spaces are not so dissimilar from many found spaces online and thus carry the potential to develop into communities of their own in which participants want to be in (Harricharan and Bhopal 2014).

The use of social media for generating data also benefits from the creative participatory potential of collaging and mapping, enabling participants to produce

content but also share content found elsewhere. The participatory nature of such an approach also responded to my concerns around enabling the participants to map out connections that mattered to them, making visible activity emerging from sites I may have otherwise neglected to consider. Given my own position as a queer man online, which I will go on to discuss in more detail in *section 4.4.5*, the method also afforded a means of de-centring my own situated experiences, assumptions and biases, with its participatory and creative affordances fighting familiarity by creating space to make the familiar strange (Mannay 2015). While found materials often shared on social media are not inherently participatory, they are made so when participants share and assemble them. As Mannay (2015, p.15) argues, “interpretation [of found material is] historically, culturally and personally specific... Narratives and objects inhabit the intersection of the personal and the social” (Mannay 2015, p.16). If I had taken on the role of selecting and putting together media content to produce narratives through my own encounters, the participants’ becomings with such materials would have been lost. However, in providing an open platform in which the participants could bring their wider relational encounters in, I was able to create space for participants to share found content that resonated with them.

In terms of the platform used, I opted for a Google+ community for several reasons. Firstly, the platform responded to ethical concerns around protecting privacy. Many social media platforms afforded anonymity to groups but not necessarily to individual members. Ideally, I would have liked to have used Facebook because of both its familiarity and high level of integration in so many young people’s everyday mediated worlds. However, while the platform afforded private groups, when conducting the research, it was not possible to protect privacy between members. I could only find four spaces that afforded such privacy: Tumblr, WordPress, Blogger and Google+. Tumblr, due to its popularity, was my first choice, and was the platform I had initially planned the project around. However, after a trial run of the app, technical issues emerged that made it unsuitable for the project. The platform would not have allowed users to delete or edit any comments they made on other members’ posts, and due to technical issues, I encountered, may not have even allowed them to delete or edit comments made on their own posts. Though Tumblr’s website did work much better, I felt app

compatibility was necessary if I wanted the platform to exist alongside the embedded, embodied and everyday nature of the participants' mediated worlds (see again Hine 2015). On both Blogger and Tumblr, there were also issues with hyperlinks failing to generate previews of content on the mobile app, with hyperlinks shared not displaying images, which I felt was necessary to elicit interest. WordPress, while responding to these issues, only allowed eight contributors, which as I will come back to in section 4.4.4 on participant recruitment, was not enough. As such, I ended up settling on Google+, which, while not my first choice in terms of popularity, familiarity and its level of integration with other platforms, responded to all the technical and ethical concerns discussed.

Building on Hine's (2015) work around the challenges of understanding the wider material significance of what is rendered present across digital space, I decided to also draw on my own auto/ethnographic digital encounters as a queer activist and researcher online. As Hine argues, such auto/ethnographic data, while limited in terms of giving voice to diverse sites of meaning making, can emerge as "a powerful tool for exploring the ambiguities and uncertainties inherent in Internet usage" (p.17). While the project was designed to centre things that mattered to the participants, being attentive to my own situated movements and encounters afforded a means of generating data to both elicit discussion on the group and expand on wider digital media and practices that the participants raised as significant. It also afforded possibilities of grappling with questions around things rendered absent from activity on the group, which, as I will go on to discuss in section 4.4.3 on recruitment, emerged as significant due the project struggling to elicit interest from non-university educated LGBTQIA+ youth outside of urban areas.

4.4.2 The relational map interviews: Making room for the being in the becoming

In addition to developing an understanding of how experiences of gender and sexuality were negotiated and produced in situ with participants on the blog-diary, diffractively read through some of my own wider auto/ethnographic encounters, I also wanted to

make room for generating data responsive to how embodied mediated pasts come to matter to possibilities of knowing, being and becoming made present within and across digital media and technologies. As Hine (2015) argues, the affordances of the internet do not flow free from people's experience. Though embodied experience may not determine online activity, with the internet affording great potential for making new re-generative connections beyond existing embodied sociomaterial affective constraints, it arguably still enables and displaces possibilities of becoming online. As such, rather than just generating data around how gender and sexuality came to be organised in the present, whether that be through observations of the researcher-solicited Queering Masculinity group or activity observed elsewhere on the internet, I also wanted to dig deeper into participants unique biographies and affective histories to better understand how personal and collective pasts made present enabled and displaced movements. While there are certainly limitations in relying on memories through such methods, as the past is always read through the present, entangled in normative forces that often see discontinuities of the past organised in accordance with dominant discourse (Jackson 2006), pasts still come to matter. While we are unable to fully capture pasts as they were, this does not render pasts insignificant. Furthermore, the re-configuration of the past in the present through memories, while limited, affords insights of its own in that it captures how pasts come to matter to possibilities of being and becoming in the present.

I decided to approach questions pertaining to embodied relationally constituted and reconstituted becomings by getting participants to create biographical relational maps of online connections with people, places, spaces and things, real or imaginary, good or bad, that *had mattered* to them at various points of mediated lives (Appendix A).¹⁰ The presentation of the maps was left open, with the participants free to include the likes of drawings, images and photographs *if* they wished. I also gave them the option of bringing along online content. The maps were then used as interview elicitation tools. I had initially planned to conduct a second round of relational map interviews centring offline relationships. However, I ended up deciding against it because data

¹⁰ The flyers stated that I was recruiting participants aged 18-25. However, the project ended up being 18-26 due to one of the participants turning 26 during data collection

surrounding offline connections that mattered to possibilities of becoming with digital media and technologies emerged through the participants discussions around why different online spaces, places, people and things had been important to them.

The biographical relational map interviews built on insights derived from Bagnoli's (2009) use of relational maps and timelines with young people. While Bagnoli draws attention to how such methods tend to over-emphasise historical continuity of a contained subject, with timelines often representing the unfolding of time as a linear developmental process and relational maps often emerging as very subject centred, I adapted Bagnoli's use of the methods in several ways to respond to these concerns. Bagnoli's use of the relational map method focused on human relationships that mattered to her participants at a specific point in time, while her use of timelines centred an unfolding of subject-centred events. In order to bring the methods in line with my onto-epistemological perspective of bodies becoming through dis/continuous social-material-cultural relational shifts in excess of definitive spatial and temporal boundaries, I decided to extend the focus of the relational maps beyond just people to also include places, spaces and things, and combined them with insights derived from timelines in asking the participants to map out relationships that not only mattered to them in the present but had mattered to them at different points in their lives, with the aim of generating data around shifting relationally constituted and re-constituted bodies. Attentive to both positive and negative affective forces, mapping out not only affirmative re-generative connections but also connections operating to alienate bodies, my use of the method also departed from Bagnoli's focus on close relationships in getting participants to also consider connections that had come to matter for good or bad. While the notion of a contained human subject was not completely dissolved by my adaptation of the methods, in opening them up to possibilities of generating data around movements emerging between and across shifting social-material-cultural relations, I was able, in line with my onto-epistemological approach, to make room for a human subject that emerges, with varying degrees of in/stability, across time. Returning to my research questions, I was able to create space for mediated biographies emerging with varying degrees of psychosocial containment, rendering some bodies more fluid than others.

I decided on the biographical relational map method as an alternative to standard interviews primarily because of its creative and participatory affordances. As Bagnoli (2009) identifies, such maps afford space for a deeper level of reflection on connections, enabling participants to think more holistically about their lived experiences and organise thoughts in ways that may otherwise be difficult to express verbally on the spot. She argues:

Focusing on the visual level allows people to go beyond a verbal mode of thinking, and this may help include wider dimensions of experience, which one would perhaps neglect otherwise. A creative task may encourage thinking in non-standard ways, avoiding the clichés and ‘ready-made’ answers which could be easily replied (p.566)

While unstructured interviews would have similarly allowed participants to direct the focus of discussion, opportunities for reflecting on connections emerging between and across different relationships would have been limited. Furthermore, the maps afforded a means of structuring interviews to avoid veering too far off topic, while at the same time putting participants in the driving seat of determining the structure. Bagnoli’s use of the timeline and relational map methods centred heavily on text, with the creative aspect limited to connections made between relationships and events. However, through leaving the format of the maps open to drawing and the inclusion of photographs and images, I set out to further enhance possibilities of generating data beyond words. However, conscious of limitations that can come to surround such creative approaches, namely the labour-intensity and anxieties surrounding creating accurate representations earlier discussed, such additional creative input was left optional and was not taken up by the participants.

4.4.3 The participants

Through the methods discussed, I set out to explore how LGBTQIA+ youths across South Wales and South West England, aged 18-26 and identifying or identified by others as male, come to rupture, redefine and re-produce normative configurations of gender and sexuality in the digital age. As discussed in the introduction, I decided to

limit the scope of the project in this way for several reasons. To give a quick recap, the focus on youths identifying or having been identified by others as male made room for AMAB bodies caught up in sexed histories of oppression. In terms of age, focusing on those aged over 18 afforded greater scope for exploring the more private sexual worlds of the participants, which would otherwise raise many issues surrounding safeguarding if working with younger youths. Given the fact that children sharing sexual encounters could easily result in adult intervention, I also had concerns around younger youths feeling less able to open up about such private personal encounters. In terms of focusing on those aged under 26, I was interested in a specific subgroup of digital natives (Prensky 2001), who, unlike older digital natives such as myself, would have come of age in an era when mobile technologies more thoroughly embedded in everyday life. Aged 31 when starting the project, I was just a few years older than the upper age limit of the participants I set out to recruit, but these few years arguably made a big difference in terms of access to digital media and technologies growing up. The likes of smart phones, proximity based dating/hook-up apps, high speed internet and popular social media platforms like Facebook, were not released until a few years after I left high school. However, for those aged under 26, such media and technologies were released while they were still in school.

In terms of location, as discussed, I decided to focus on bodies located across South Wales and South West England because of the proliferation of various queer counter-cultural movements I had observed as a queer man living in the area. However, conscious of such movements emerging in the more cosmopolitan urban areas of the region, I set out to recruit participants from both rural and urban areas to generate data from diverse sites of meaning making. From the cosmopolitan urban lives of Plymouth, Cardiff and Bristol to the more rural post-industrial regions of South Wales, the region affords access to diverse racialised, classed and gendered situated knowledges and experience. Building on my earlier discussion around how space and place comes to matter, with bodies emerging in some places more fluid than others, I wanted to give voice not only to bodies connected to rapid global flows of many urban environments but also to those caught up in areas with strong affective attachments to cisheteromascularity.

Given that the scope of this project did not require a representative sample, I recruited participants through convenience sampling. I did this by directly contacting potential participants across urban and rural areas across the region directly through range of dating/hook-up apps and sites targeted primarily at MSM but also commonly used by non-binary people and trans women (e.g. Grindr, Recon and Hornet). I also handed out flyers and put-up posters at LGBTQIA+ venues and queer activist events accessible to me in urban areas (Appendix B). Due to the nature of the research, a random probability sample would have been both unnecessary and difficult to attain. As Kaestle and Lyons (2016) identify, such sampling is difficult for largely invisible LGBTQIA+ populations. It also serves little purpose to work that is not attempting extrapolate and make generalisations beyond the complexity of the participants embodied situated encounters. As discussed, for the purpose of the project, I was interested in mapping out the unexpected in excess of positivist frameworks. I will now go on to provide a breakdown of the demographics and number of participants for the different methods of data collection.

4.4.3.1 The Queering Masculinity blog-diary participants

For the Queering Masculinity blog-diary, I was initially aiming for up to 100 participants because I was very much conscious of the diffused nature of attention online. Given the fleeting presence of much online activity and highly variable levels of engagement within online communities, I wanted to recruit as many people as possible to ensure a regular flow of content that would capture attention and help elicit interest and engagement. With many successful found spaces online often having plenty of members to build and sustain momentum, I was concerned that a small group of participants common to say offline focus groups and workshops would not be enough to generate regular engagement. In contrast to research with groups offline, attention and activity online is much more dispersed, with users available and active at different times. Unfortunately, recruiting one hundred participants proved much more difficult than expected. After contacting over 1000 potential participants directly online, I elicited interest from 40 people. However, almost half of them failed to respond to my sign-up emails resulting in just 26 people making it on to the blog. As

anticipated, levels of engagement varied heavily, with only 16 active contributors, and the low number of active participants limited the amount of data generated. Of the 16 active contributors, only a handful posted semi-regularly, and the group was short lived, with activity declining rapidly after the first month and stopping completely after around 3 months. The group was also much more homogenous than I had hoped. Most of the active contributors were gay cis men. While racially diverse, with a couple of people of colour among the more actively engaged participants, all but one of the participants were university educated and lived in urban areas. I did have one bisexual participant but his participation on the group was limited to just one post. I had also elicited interest from one trans man, but he was one of the people I contacted that never made it on to the group. As a result of the limited participation and limited scope of participants, I ended of relying on data generated through my wider auto/ethnographic observations more than I had hoped to elicit activity on the group, further elaborate on issues the participants raised as significant, and grapple with questions around who and what was absent. The question of absence incidentally ended up forming a large part of my third analysis chapter, where I critically engage with the limited appeal of my project beyond more educated urban politically active networks.

Issues recruiting participants occurred for several reasons. Firstly, there were some issues with my use of the word queer when marketing the project. I had previously used the term without issues in my MSc dissertation and had received positive feedback when piloting my flyer with prospective participants. However, the term received a lot of backlash, and by the time I realised just how contentious the term was going to be, I had already opened the collaborative space. While I could have changed the name and framing of the project, it felt unethical to do so because the backlash centred around the term being associated with marginalised intersections of the community, particularly gender non-conforming and trans individuals. As such, changing the name of the project to accommodate those opposing it carried the danger of creating an unsafe space for the gender and racially diverse members of the group. I had named the group 'Queering Masculinity', and some of the members identified as queer. As such, changing the name had the potential to invalidate those members, as it would have changed the nature of the project in which they agreed to participate.

Nevertheless, questions around that which was rendered absent from the group ended up forming an integral part of my data. Through drawing on the negative feedback received and considering wider intra-community tensions observed through my wider auto/ethnographic encounters, I grappled with questions around who and what was absent from the group to further develop my understanding of who and what the members of the queering masculinity were up against. Other issues with recruitment revolved around the platform itself, which I had to use due to the ethical and technical issues earlier discussed. Unfamiliar to most, many were put off by the platform, and those that did agree to take part, did not make it through the lengthy sign-up process, which involved downloading the app and setting up a new Google account if they wanted to participate anonymously. Had I been using a more familiar platform like Facebook, which would not only have been more accessible but also has the functionality to integrate information sheets and consent forms into the joining process, I feel that I would have had a better chance of hitting my recruitment target.

4.4.3.2 The biographical relational map interview participants

For the relational map interviews, I initially set out to recruit around 10 participants from the Queering Masculinity group, with each interview, based on my earlier adaptation of the relational map method for my MSc dissertation (Kerpen 2016), expected to last around 2 hours in total. However, due to the challenges that emerged around generating data on the Queering Masculinity blog-diary, I ended up generating extra data with several of the interviewees through digital walkthroughs of the research group, enabling the participants to further elaborate on posts and content that emerged as significant to them during their participation in the space. Some of the interviews also ended up being much longer than anticipated, with one lasting almost 4 hours in total. As a result of this extra unanticipated data, coupled with various delays brought about through my difficulties recruiting people for the diary blog and having to change the platform used, I ended up settling on 4 participants for the relational map interviews. There was supposed to be a 5th participant but following our follow-up walkthrough interview of the Queering Masculinity group, he moved away, and I was unable to reach him for the relational map stage of the project. One of relational map interviews did not go to plan as the participant did not prepare anything. As a result,

the interview ended being more of an unstructured discussion, although the participant was still able to provide some interesting insights into online connections had matter to him online at various points of his life, and in line with the preparation instructions, made plenty of connections between different people, spaces, places and things. While the interview was quite messy without the visual map to aid the discussion, it nevertheless still generated relevant data. Given that the number of participants was not relevant to the focus of the study, as I was never seeking to generalise or extrapolate findings, the reduced sample was not a problem. The main thing was that I had enough data to respond to the aims and objectives of the project, which I did due to the unanticipated extra interview data generated.

Nevertheless, to complicate matters, I should note that 2 of the 4 relational map interviews occurred with participants that had not been active on the blog-diary, which meant that not everyone took part in the follow-up walkthrough interviews. My decision to open up the relational map interviews to participants outside of the blog-diary was primarily because of issues I again faced with recruitment. Out of the 16 active participants on the group, most of whom, as discussed, were not very engaged, I only managed to recruit 3 participants for the interviews, 1 of them being the one that moved away. Nevertheless, due to issues surrounding the homogeneity of the group discussed, I had already considered opening up the relational map interviews to new participants. While the 2 new participants were again both educated and living in urban areas, one of the new participants was a trans woman. In the end, the four relational map participants included Ross and Vince, both white gay man, Adele, a Jewish trans woman, and Sajid, a South Asian Muslim gay man, all of whom were university educated and living in urban areas. While I was not able to generate actual situated data of these new participants becomings with digital media and technology, the relational nature of the interview nevertheless centred heavily around actual connections and events as opposed abstract attitudes and hypothetical scenarios. As I am aware that my sampling ended up being quite messy rendering it difficult to follow who participated in what, I have included table below to more clearly outline which participants contributed to which stage of the project (figure 1). As you will see from

the table, the intensity of participation across the different stages of project varied a great deal.

	Queering masculinity blog-diary		Follow up interviews		Relational map interviews	
	Participants	Frequency of posts	Participants	Length	Participants	Length
1) Sajid	✓	Occasional	✓	1.5 hours	✓	2.5 hours
2) Adele					✓	3 hours
3) Ross	✓	Often	✓	1 hour	✓ ^{No map}	1 hour
4) Tim	✓	Sometimes	✓	1 hour		
5) Vince					✓	1 hour
6) Adam	✓	Sometimes				
7) Bill	✓	Occasional				
8) RH	✓	Seldom				
9) Brodie	✓	Seldom				
10) Prince	✓	Rare				
11) Jim	✓	Rare				
12) Sam	✓	Rare				
13) Dan	✓	Rare				
14) John	✓	Rare				
15) Cosmo	✓	Rare				
16) Patrick	✓	Rare				
17) Mike	✓	Rare				
18) MP	✓	Rare				

Figure 1: The participants

4.4.4 Positionality

My relationship with the participants could be described as both near and far, resonating and differentiating on different levels. As a queer person, I could be considered an insider. Similarly, my participant observation on both the collaborative blog-diary and through my wider auto/ethnographic encounters could be described as ‘complete participation’ in that I was already heavily immersed in many LGBTQIA+ spaces online (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Like Campbell (2004) –

For me, these channels are as much communities in which I share membership as they are subjects of study. In light of these critical distinctions, I am less an academic gone native than a native gone academic.

Nevertheless, as I generated data with participants and navigated LGBTQIA+ spaces online, I was neither a complete insider or outsider, with my becomings confronted with difference through unpredictable affective flows of bodies both differentiating and resonating between and across different aspects of my ever constituted and reconstituted self. After all, I am not just queer. I am also a white gay man from a working-class background that has come to adopt a degree of institutional privilege and authority as an aspiring academic and educator, with each of these abstract characteristics, among many others, emerging in constant flux with the social-material-cultural contexts in which I find myself. As such, I would reject the label ‘complete participation’ because the diverse flux of bodies emerging between such online and offline worlds, while often familiar, was not always so, not least because of the diverse intersectional possibilities of queering masculinity in the digital age. Nevertheless, in many ways, I am arguably still somewhat closer to unexpected possibilities emerging from LGBTQIA+ spaces and communities online than those situated outside of such spaces and communities, particularly when it comes to the movements of white gay cis men as a white gay cis man myself.

I take the position that my unstable emerging position as both an insider and outsider is neither inherently good or bad but simply affords different possibilities of generating knowledge. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue:

Broadly speaking, those defined as outsiders or insiders are likely to have immediate access to different sorts of information. And they are also exposed to different kinds of methodological dangers (p.87).

When outsiders, our knowledges and experiences can operate to limit the questions we ask and what we are able to see and feel as significant to those we study. However, such distance can also help break down similar issues that emerge from being too close to the people, spaces, places and things we are interested in. As insiders, familiarity breaks down “cultural and linguistic barriers” to help facilitate understanding in the research setting (Mannay 2010, p.93). However, such immersion is not without limits. As Mannay identifies, it can also lead to a lot of taken for granted assumptions as

familiarity leaves a lot of things unsaid. As Delamont and Atkinson (1995) cited in Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue, we must work to ‘fight familiarity’ in such contexts. As such, what is important is not necessarily the positions themselves, but rather how they are used and reflected upon throughout the research process. By reflecting upon the roles our emerging and affectively entangled positionalities play in the co-production of meaning in research settings, we can take measures to safeguard against potential methodological issues arising from being too close or far from phenomena of interest.

My creative participatory approach to generating data with participants responded to limitations that readily emerge from being too near or far to people, spaces, places and things we study by creating space for the unexpected. It enabled participants to share experiences, encounters and knowledges emerging within, between and across relations that I, as both an insider and outsider, may otherwise have neglected to consider. It made the familiar strange but also made the strange familiar by enabling those *emerging* as both near and far to challenge my taken for granted assumptions. My participatory approach enabled participants to queer categorical distinctions between identities, spaces, places and things. While categorical distinctions may emerge as significant and meaningful to many, when strictly defined as existing outside of the social-material relations from which they come to matter, they re-affirm essentialist notions of identity.

In terms of my involvement in the process of generating data with the participants, I set out to make the process as participant led as possible. When recruiting participants for the project, I decided to be upfront about my sexual orientation to *help* foster trust and build rapport (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Mannay 2010). As Letherby (2000) identifies, rapport and trust are vital ingredients when trying to elicit personal and sensitive information ethically. However, aside from this, I tried to keep my involvement to a minimum except under circumstances where I felt becoming more involved would help foster a safe(r) space and encourage sharing. As discussed, the Queering Masculinity blog-diary group was not as participant led as I had initially hoped, resulting in me having to elicit discussion on occasions. However, the group

did still manage to foster a reasonable amount of unsolicited data, and when I did share content, I tried to avoid inserting my values and assumptions around it to avoid leading the participants. I also shared the content anonymously (under the pseudonym of David) so that if the participants did assume my position on something, they would not have felt under pressure to agree with that position on the basis of my expertise as a researcher in the field. In the interviews, I gave the participants space to do most of the talking. When I did contribute to discussions, it was primarily to ask participants to elaborate on things that emerged as significant to them. I also contributed to discussions to signal that I was actively listening and demonstrate empathy, particularly when the trust afforded from my position as an insider was at risk, for example, when participants were sharing experiences of racism and transphobia. On a few occasions, I did divulge some of my own experiences. However, such self-disclosure was again to demonstrate empathy. I did not divulge any personal experiences unless the participants had disclosed similar experiences first. This was not unplanned because in asking participants to make themselves vulnerable and open up about sensitive encounters, I felt it was only ethical that I was willing to do the same.

4.4.5 Ethics

Now that I have outlined what I did to generate data, I will now move on to outline the ethical considerations of the project. My project was approved by the ethics committee of the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University (Appendix C). Gaining ethical approval involved thinking through the usual concerns surrounding informed consent and protecting participants privacy. However, such concerns were exasperated by my use of social media as a tool for generating data because online settings afford limited control over information flowing in and out. Unlike say an offline focus group, the participants of the Queering Masculinity blog-diary could have easily screenshotted and shared material outside of the group. While such risks are not absent from offline settings, they are exasperated online because we, as both users and researchers, have no means of knowing what participants/users are doing with shared material when alone with their devices. Concerns were also raised around possibilities of material shared on the group being in breach of copyright or violating

rights to privacy of people located outside of the study. As such, the project required a rigorous consent procedure clearly marking out what could and could not be shared, how the data generated would be used, and potential risks surrounding not participating anonymously.

For the collaborative blog-diary, each participant was provided with an information sheet detailing the project, their rights and responsibilities, and how their information would be used (Appendix D). They were strongly advised to participate anonymously and asked to confirm that they fully understood the implications of not doing so, namely my inability to control what other participants shared. They were also informed of data protection and copyright legislation requiring them to a) anonymise content shared from outside of the public domain and b) only share intellectual property in the public domain for purposes of comment and review. They were also informed that content shared on the collaborative blog-diary was not public, with the private/closed nature of the group rendering any identifying information or intellectual property shared outside of the group in breach of data protection and copyright legislation if not already considered to be in the public domain. The participants were also made aware of Google's community guidelines prohibiting unethical and illegal activities including but not limited to harassment, bullying, hate speech and threats; sharing violent content; sharing personal and confidential information; impersonating someone; spamming; child exploitation; selling regulated goods; and distributing sexually explicit or pornographic material. The participants were also informed about how their data would be used, i.e., for the purpose of this research project only, with any identifying characteristics that could compromise their privacy or the privacy of anyone represented by what they shared anonymised in the final thesis and any publications through the use of pseudonyms disguising names of people, places, spaces and things that could be traced back to them. The participants were also informed that personal photos and images would not be used without consent, and that if consent was given, they would be blurred to protect privacy. Before joining the group, the participants were asked to confirm in writing via email that they understood the information provided, had ample opportunity to ask questions, understood their right to withdraw at any time without explanation, understood how their data will be

used, and finally, understood the potential implications of not contributing anonymously.

As part of my ethics agreement for generating data with the group, as earlier discussed, the group was private. There were two ways of inviting the participants onto the group. The easiest option was through an invite link. However, conscious of the participants sharing the link to people that had not passed through the consent procedure, I decided against this. Instead, I took advantage of the second option, which involved getting the participants to request to join. I also committed to both regularly moderate the group to ensure guidelines were being followed and to intervene if the rules were broken. However, I did not have to intervene. As part of the ethics procedure, I was also required to provide details around how secondary data produced on the group and through my own auto/ethnographic encounters would be used. As with the group, anything from outside the public domain was subject to data protection and copyright legislation. The project committed to following such legislation in only using intellectual property in the public domain for the purposes of comment and review. Following data protection legislation, anything attained from outside the public domain, or anything attained that could be considered private and sensitive, was anonymised, unless opt-in consent was given. The only exception was material shared by public figures, i.e., politicians, celebrities and social media influencers and activists with large followings, without a reasonable expectation of privacy. In addition to such legislation, the project also set out to anonymise non-sensitive public data shared by private individuals who may not fully understand of how their posts could be used beyond the context for which they were intended. As Boyd (2014) identifies, such data, while public, is not necessarily intended for the public at large. Using such content, while legal, is not necessarily ethical. Nevertheless, on some platforms like Twitter, anonymising content is not possible due to terms of service requiring content to be published with usernames/handles and because content can easily be traced back to its original source through direct quotes of text strings on search engines. Responding to such issues, when using data shared by private individuals, Williams et al. (2017) suggests seeking opt-out consent for non-sensitive content and opt-in consent for sensitive content. However, due to the blurred boundaries around what is

sensitive or not, particularly in a project like this, I decided to play it safe and seek opt-in consent when using content that could not be anonymised. When such consent was not given, I paraphrased content and marked it accordingly.

For the interviews, the participants were again provided with an information sheet detailing the purpose of the interviews and how the data would be used (Appendix E). They were informed that the interviews would be recorded, transcribed and stored securely (on an encrypted drive). They were again made aware that all identifying details would be anonymised in the final thesis and any publications with pseudonyms. As with the diary-blog, any media content shared in the interviews was again anonymised and only used in accordance with the ethical and legal guidelines discussed. Very much aware of the emotional labour and the potential for sensitive information to arise, particularly due to the unstructured approach, the participants were also made aware that they were free to refuse to answer any questions they felt uncomfortable with. The participants were then asked to again provide consent, confirming that they fully understood the information provided, had ample opportunity to ask questions, understood their right to withdraw at any time, understood how their information would be used, and finally, understood they could refuse to answer questions without reason.

In addition to making the participants aware of their right to refuse to answer questions, throughout the interviews, I also tried to be responsive to non-verbal cues signalling any discomfort and prepared a list of support resources to share if necessary (Appendix F). Fortunately, this was not necessary. I also set out to create relaxed safe(r) spaces for the interviews. As discussed, I established trust and rapport by sharing my own sexual identity to signal myself as an ‘insider’. I also participated in discussions to demonstrate empathy when emerging as an ‘outsider’. Furthermore, I allowed the participants to choose the location for interviews to facilitate a more relaxed atmosphere. My only request was that the spaces were private enough for me to be able to guarantee anonymity. The interviews ended up taking place in a range of spaces, including a quiet gay bar during the day and a couple of quiet cafes. Sajid’s interview, which stretched over several sessions, took place in a range of sites

including a bar, a café and in his home. I feel that such sites helped to disrupt the formal distance between researchers and participants, enabling more fluid conversation.

4.4.6 Method of analysis: Mapping affective hotspots

Now that I have outlined how I generated data, I would like to conclude this chapter with an overview of my method of analysis. I would describe my overall method of analysis as an affective analysis. Responding to what MacLure (2013) describes as data ‘hotspots’ that ‘glow’, my analysis of the data centred around moments of affective intensity, i.e., connections *with* ideas, people, places, spaces and technologies, whether past or present, that emerged as particularly salient in enabling and displacing *bodies of water* to flow. Whether I was observing and analysing data produced within the researcher-solicited collaborative diary-blog, drawing on my wider auto/ethnographic encounters, or recording and transcribing the interviews, I paid attention to different modes of visual, written and spoken communication signalling points of expression and discussion that emerged as heavily affective, i.e., powerful in the sense that they either enabled or displaced connections and movement. My analysis centred moments in which data generated with the participants came to matter most. Homing in on parts of the data that triggered strong emotive responses from either the participants or myself, my analysis centred the likes of proliferating moments of anger, laughter and love made present through emojis and intense moments sharing and re-sharing, and the use of exclamation marks, raised voices and words to establish strong social, moral and political connections and attachments enabling and displacing possibilities of movement.

My approach took a critical stance against coding data into abstract themes. In line with St. Pierre and Jackson (2014), I was concerned with how such modes of qualitative analysis can –

...treat... words (e.g., participants’ words in interview transcripts) as brute data waiting to be coded, labelled with other brute words... [reproducing a]

Cartesian ontological realism that assumes data exist[s] out there somewhere in the real world to be found, collected, and coded (p.715).

Like Clark/Keefe (2014), I wanted to “arrive with and hold open the analytic question “what is the data doing?” as compared with “what does the data mean? (p.791). Rather than counting codes and organising the data into recurring themes, which inevitably ends of drawing from the quantitative ideal that quantity matters, my orientation to the data was attentive to the analogy of bodies of water, differentiated in terms of relational possibilities of flow but nevertheless still always open to being re-constituted. Given my aim to map out new emerging possibilities for intimacies, communities, identities and activism in the digital age, giving voice to the unexpected ways normative gendered, racialised and classed configurations of gender and sexuality come to be ruptured and redefined, I was very much conscious of how such abstractions close down possibilities of analysis, alienating us from recognising movements actualised in the moment. On a thematic level, it is easy to flatten encounters as equally significant, particularly if emerging frequently across data. However, such frequency does not necessarily indicate the extent to which that which we encounter matters to those we observe. In fact, sometimes it is that which we cannot say that comes to matter most. To better illustrate my orientation to the data through some of my own becomings with heteronormativity, as a participant in such a project, I might have shared experiences of being bullied by boys in school or encounters with being fetishised as a gay fashion accessory by women in college. However, these affective encounters did not carry equal weight.

Some might describe my analysis as thematic, as I sought to account not just for how normative configurations of gender and sexuality were affectively ruptured and redefined but also how they came to be re-produced across time and place. While mapping out many discontinuities between the past and the present, with bodies relationally constituted in unexpected unstable forms, I do grapple with questions around negative affects, embodied through narratives, operating to contain bodies and practices to varying degrees. As discussed, I was oriented to affect not as some pre-discursive force outside of representation but rather as something produced with

meaning-making practices embodied through pasts made present (see again Binswanger and Zimmermann 2018; Wetherell 2013). Nevertheless, my becoming with the data generated with participants exceeded reducing what emerged to abstract themes, considering possibilities of *becoming* enabled and displaced. While not shying away from questions around identities, desires and practices that emerged with varying degrees of stability across time and place, thus warranting some degree of categorisation, such categorisation remained open to how identities, desires and practices came to *emerge* and what they *did*. Far from foreclosing analysis by reducing bodies, identities, practices and desires to abstract things, I considered possibilities of becoming afforded *with* them. Throughout the following chapters, data generated with participants on the blog will be marked with pseudonyms and referenced in relation to the Queering Masculinity group, data from interviews will be marked with pseudonyms only, and data from my wider personal auto/ethnographic experience and participant observation as a queer online will be marked @ the respective page and/or platform it came from, i.e. @PinkNews FB (Facebook). If paraphrased, in line with the ethical guidelines laid out, I mark accordingly.

Chapter 5: Affirmative connections?

In this chapter, I start my findings and discussions by responding primarily to my first two research questions around how cisheteromascularity came to be queered through mediated possibilities of connecting with difference online. In many ways, I build on the literature around how digital media and technologies afford opportunities for intimacy, community, identity work and activism. However, in line with what I have already discussed, I take a critical stance against work centring digital media and making definitive claims about its potential without or with limited consideration of the wider shifting relational embodied contexts through which becomings *with* digital media, platforms and practices are produced. Responding to such work, I map out affirmative possibilities of connection that came to be both enabled and displaced not by any given space but rather through embodied journeys and connections between and across multiple spaces, both on and offline. In doing so, I contribute to work documenting the situated unstable mobile nature of our becomings with digital media and technologies (Renold and Ringrose 2011; Warfield 2017), navigated through multiple embodied offline contexts both enabling and displacing possibilities of expression (Adams-Santos 2020; Gray 2009; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Kerpen 2016; Park 2018),

As is to be expected, my methods for generating data took me in many directions, producing a plurality of unexpected connections with people, places, spaces and things, both on and offline. Through becoming with the participants, I was taken on journeys through disparate worlds of dating/hook-up apps, fanfiction communities and video chatrooms, actualised relationally through equally disparate shifting offline worlds. These journeys exposed many different possibilities of becoming *with* digital media and technologies, with affective connections, varying in intensities, pushing and pulling the participants in many directions. As such, the data opened many potential lines of inquiry, impossible to fully explore in any single thesis. Nevertheless, as I was not interested in making definitive claims about the connections themselves, which had the potential to emerge differently through different relational contexts, many of these lines of inquiry laid beyond the scope of my project. It was not the sites

themselves that interested me but rather the intensity of particular affective practices made present through the participants' movements within, between and across them. When analysing the data presented in this chapter, I found myself drawn to more general questions around digital empowerment, and how the participants' relationally constituted practices complicated such questions. Thinking with the concept of bodies of water, I map out relationally constituted moments through which the participants' becomings with digital media and technologies enabled them to flow free from cisheteromascuine constraints. However, the participants' flows were often dependant on a degree of containment against antagonistic forces elsewhere, made possible, in some instances, through entering risky troubling waters that saw them sexually exploited. While connections with digital media and technologies undoubtedly affirmed many possibilities of queering masculinity, such possibilities did not flow free from risk, nor could they flow anywhere. As such, the chapter builds on literature urging us to be critical of claims over-stating the transformative potential of digital media (Brickell 2011; Gray 2009; Park 2018). It also responds to work discouraging us from separating online risks from opportunities (Livingstone 2008; Kort 2018; Kvedar 2020; Pearce 2013; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Scarcelli 2018).

Concerns around online risk are of course nothing new. Much literature around online sexual cultures and practices, particularly young people's sexual online cultures and practices, has centred concerns around risk and strategies to protect users (Drouin 2015; Papadopoulos 2010). There is also a substantial body of work identifying gender and sexual minorities to be particularly vulnerable to risks of sexual harassment and exploitation online, again often centring concerns around protecting youth (Mitchell et al. 2014; Rice et al. 2012; Ybarra and Mitchell 2016). However, missing from much of this work is a discussion of what young people get out of taking risks online. Pushing back against such literature and wider media panics around online risk, in this chapter, I problematise the separation of risk from opportunities, building on a growing body of literature urging us to consider opportunities in risk, whether that be for young people in general (Livingstone 2008; Scarcelli 2018), young girls (Renold and Ringrose 2011), or, more specific to my line of inquiry, LGBTQIA+ youth (Kort 2018; Kvedar 2020; Lööf 2012)

5.1 Digital transitions: Mediated possibilities of desire, intimacy, community, identity and support

I want to start my findings and analysis by thinking through digital transitions that emerged against cisheteronormative constraints offline, with connections fostered online marking multiple intense moments where gender and sexual desires could flow free from cisheteromascularity. Such transitions emerged as deeply affective, particularly when the participants were limited in their capacity to disclose or explore their gender and sexual identities offline. They also took on multiple forms, with becomings with the internet marking many mutually constitutive possibilities for exploring desires and identities, fostering intimacies, building communities and accessing support.

In line with much existing literature, the anonymity of the internet afforded possibilities for exploring desires that could not be explored elsewhere. All but one of my interviewees spoke about coming out online before doing so offline.

Sajid: I started [my relational map] with Chat Avenue [a gay chatroom] because that was one of the first online platforms I used to speak to gay people... I wasn't even using my real msn profile; it was completely a fake one. I wasn't out at the time and so it was kind of one of the easiest ways to chat to people... I did reach a period where I was like 'oh, I wish there was an easier way to like actually meet people who are gay'. I think that was very much a product of the time.... There were no real gay people in my school, and I went to school with my brother and sister so that was a bit awkward....

Michael@QueeringMasculinity: When I was 14, I had an anonymous Bebo account for the sole purpose of collecting gays and adding them on MSN messenger...

Unable to establish queer connections offline, the internet emerged as a site of transformative potential, enabling possibilities for sexual identity exploration at a safe(r) distance from oppressive cisheteronormative constraints offline. With the relative anonymity of digital communication affirming possibilities of queering

masculinity at minimal risk to affective ties elsewhere, such connections online had mattered a great deal to the participants.

In one case, digital communication even enabled a digital gender transition to take place, affording Adele, a trans woman, possibilities of becoming-woman.

When I was 15/16, I started getting involved on the internet. I'm lucky because I've always looked a little bit androgynous so if I wear a little bit of make up and do this [poses], I looked very feminine. So, I had a fake Facebook account pretending to be a girl on Facebook.

The coming *together* of her androgynous appearance, makeup, an internet connection, social media, the anonymity and control of information such media affords, strangers, and a camera, actualised possibilities of being seen as a girl. Adele was not out at the time, not even to herself. However, being seen as a woman still mattered to her. Reflecting on the affirmation afforded through such encounters, she said:

It was gender affirming. It was nice because I was getting attention. I didn't realise it at the time but being recognised as a girl made me feel really good.

Again, the relative anonymity of such communication afforded space for exploring identity and desire free from offline constraints. However, for Adele, such affirmative potential extended far beyond just coming out. The shifting spatial-material-temporal modalities of becoming with digital technology enabled Adele to be seen the way she wanted to be seen, displacing opportunities for others to deny or invalidate her existence by masking those attributes of herself that may otherwise have seen her classified as male. Such possibilities of being seen were arguably enhanced by the modality of the communication. Adele was not just *telling* people she was a girl via anonymous chat; she was giving up a degree of control that such chat affords in visually *displaying* herself in the flesh through photographs. She even spoke about presenting as a girl through live streams with strangers on webcam, further giving up control over the capacity to curate and edit photographs to further enhance possibilities of being seen. While a certain degree of control persists through the ability to manipulate and negotiate camera angles, real time communication facilitates a

stronger sense of presence (Jones 1997), arguably enabling a transition to take place that was read, embodied and felt as more real.

In line with the existing literature, such possibilities of opening up and exploring gender and sexuality online gave way to many possibilities of intimacy, community building, identity work and support. Ross, for instance, while living in an urban area, spoke about the internet affording opportunities for connections limited in the small town in which he grew up. In our interview, he spoke about the importance of being able to connect with people he could relate to online. When asked about his first queer connection, he said:

There was an American guy who I became good friends with [online].... He's not someone I talk to now, but he is someone I spoke to a lot. After that, I can't remember what the website was called but I've got a friend that I made through it who I still talk to. I must have been 16/17 when I started talking to him... We may not talk often but when we do talk it's like, 'oh, I spoke to you last week'.

Ross was already out to his parents before connecting online. However, such relationships actualised through the internet afforded the possibility of exploring struggles that heterosexual people in his life were unable to relate to, or, in some cases, were guilty of perpetuating.

Me: And why were those relationships important?

Just so I had someone else to talk to. They might not have been in the same boat as me at the time, but they've been in that boat... It's like, my mum's all well and good and well-meaning but she doesn't know. She probably knew less about gay stuff at the time than I did. And then there was no way I was gonna go to my dad! That was never gonna happen! [Laughs].

His mother, while 'well meaning', was limited in her ability to understand what he was going through. Meanwhile, his father was completely unapproachable. Earlier in the interview, Ross had spoken about being terrified of coming out to his father, so much so that he feared physical violence. He actually ended up asking his mother to tell his father on his behalf, which resulted in his father refusing to acknowledge anything had changed, saying he 'could not think about such things'. While out to his

father on a technicality, the silence pervading their relationship was deeply affective, producing embodied constraints limiting practices. Ross said, ‘there was *no* way I was gonna go to my dad! That was *never* gonna happen!’. His emphasis on ‘no’ and ‘never’ coupled with the exclamation in his voice marked strong negative affects, entangled in anxieties and traumas, limiting possibilities of becoming with his father. Such affects, imbued in embodied narratives of pasts made present, had rendered speaking to his father about ‘gay stuff’ impossible.

Faced with such limited possibilities of becoming offline, Ross’ early online connections had come to matter a great deal. Aged 26 at the time of the interview, the friendship he established at 16/17 had lasted around ten years, affording some insight into the affective intensity such online connections can have. Far from fleeting and weak online connections that have triggered fears around a loss of community in the digital age (Jones 1997), with online connections theorised as somehow less real and less valid (Bessière et al.’s 2008), the longevity of Ross’ online friendship arguably goes to show how when denied opportunities for connecting offline, online connection can come to matter in ways that are irreducible to anything relationships offline have to offer. Such online connections emerge in excess of any simplistic comparison with offline relationships. After all, at the time in which this early queer friendship emerged, Ross did not have any comparable offline relationships, rendering offline alternatives to such connections not something better or worse but rather something that was non-existent.

Such possibilities of community, belonging and support against the oppressive constraints of cisheteronormativity also emerged in real time on the Queering Masculinity group, enabling me to bear witness to such potential in action. The Queering Masculinity diary-blog, while researcher-solicited, emerged as queer community like many others found online, affording a space for identity exploration and support. One participant created a post about a homophobic encounter he had just experienced at work, which had left him feeling unsafe.

Mike@Queering Masculinity: I thought I would share something that happened to me last week in work. I was serving a customer on the customer service desk and from nowhere, this guy came at me, had his hands around my neck, and then threw me against the desk threatening me that he's coming back for me as my kind don't belong. I never thought I'd say this I don't feel safe in my work place...

The participant included a photograph of his red neck, making visible the affective intensity of violence that had marked him both physically and emotionally. The affective intensity of the violence resonated across the group, which, like many found online/offline LGBTQIA+ spaces, came together to afford community, care and support. They made sure the Mike had adequate information and support, checking in to see if he had reported the hate crime to the police and his employer and informing him that his employer had a responsibility to make sure he is safe. Mike responded to thank the group and confirm that he had the support he needed.

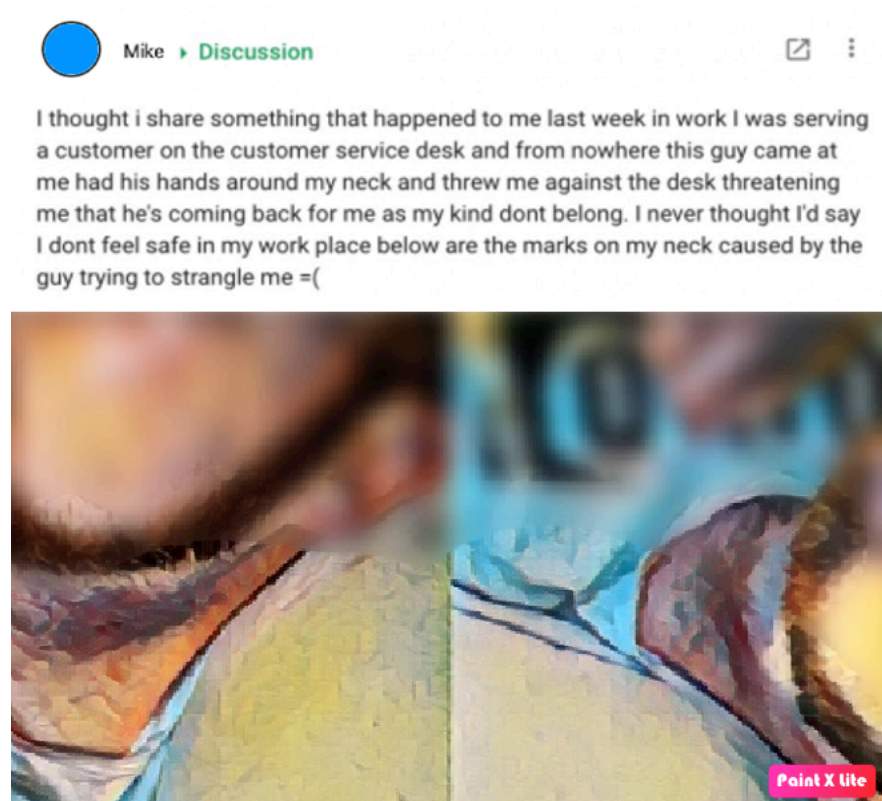


Figure 2: Homophobic attack
Opt-in consent for use of image provided by the participant

Confronted with such sensitive data, the post raised ethical concerns around my role as a researcher in making sure the participants had adequate support. However, before I had even seen the post, the participants did what LGBTQIA+ people have long had to do, i.e., they supported one another in the absence of institutional support and protection. Having been historically denied access to adequate information and resources – socially, materially, and institutionally – LGBTQIA+ people have long had to establish their own support networks. With the OP confirming that he was ok, I did not have to intervene. This moment on the Queering Masculinity group arguably marked a sense of civic duty and responsibility that remains embedded in many LGBTQIA+ networks. Returning to Walkerdine’s and Jimenez’s (2012) work surrounding the potential for communities to afford a ‘second skin’ through a sense of communal beingness, affording ontological security against feelings of leaking out into the threat of annihilation, the group afforded what I would describe as a digital skin, helping hold Mike together by affording a safe space in which he could open up and belong. It afforded affirmative possibilities of navigating violence, affording a sense of belonging and place against the placelessness that such encounters produce.

Nevertheless, such possibilities of connection affirming possibilities of being and becoming were not without limit. While the internet had enabled the participants to flow free from cisheteromascuine constraints, it was apparent that they could not flow anywhere, urging us to critically engage with broader concerns around the internet’s capacity to transform bodies located offline. Many of the online encounters reported here, while affirming, were rendered possible by keeping antagonistic forces offline at bay. The transformative potential of digital media emerged, in many instances, from keeping digital transformations of gender and sexuality hidden from offline contexts where LGBTQIA+ people, particularly those AMAB, are easily rendered visible and face threats of violence when rendered so. It would be wrong to say that such connections do not matter offline, as this would downplay how such networks afford resilience to marginalised LGBTQIA+ youths, often enabling them to cope and, as such, better navigate offline worlds (Gross 2003; Jackson et al. 2018; Singh 2012). Furthermore, such connections *can* afford LGBTQIA+ youth with the strength they need to come out in offline contexts (Campbell 2004). However, such possibilities are

not always actualised. Sajid, for instance, while out to many friends and family members, was not out to everyone. Sajid is not alone. For all the gender exploring rendered possible online, users must still navigate offline worlds – worlds in which possibilities of expression are often limited as we seek to avoid being othered, disowned or violently attacked. Offline connections still matter, with varying degrees of intensity enabling and displacing flows of desire.

The affective intensity of offline connections emerged as particularly salient for Adele, for whom coming out as trans was actualised through meeting another trans person in the flesh.

Alicia gave me the confidence to start transitioning... It was almost overnight. I've always struggled with gender dysphoria, but I always had in my mind that I couldn't transition. Then I met Alicia and thought it was a possibility... I asked her if it was sometimes too late to transition and she said no and showed me pictures of her friends and was like 'she transitioned at 35', and they looked alright. It is really horrible, but there is this idea within the trans community that unless you transition at a really early age you're going to be like, there's no point, but that's not true at all. At the time I was in that mindset, but she showed me that was wrong... I'd known other trans people through the internet by that point, so it was something I was sort of familiar with, but I never really thought that could be me.

Adele expressed having had a lot of anxiety around transitioning, particularly as someone who had already been through puberty without access to puberty blockers. Even though she had connected with other trans people online, she struggled to see transitioning as a possibility. For Adele, online connections, while affirming, were not enough to cut through anxieties embodied through becoming with a world where transness is measured by the ability to pass as cis. However, meeting another trans woman in person enabled her to actualise and embody something that had previously existed as a virtual disembodied possibility. While Adele *knew* trans women *could* transition later *in theory*, it took meeting someone to see it a practically viable option. It could be said that the physical contact and local proximity helped close the gap between her *knowing* what was valid and possible for others and feeling it for herself.

In the face of the narratives discussed in this section, it is clear that online connections can and do come to matter a great deal, evidenced through longstanding online connections that were far from fleeting. However, the potential of such connections is far from evenly distributed. That which is actualised *with* online connections is unstable for bodies located offline. The online connections presented here certainly demonstrate that online connections have the *potential* to matter just as much as any offline connections. However, I have shown that *how*, *how much*, and *where* they come to matter depends on the embodied contexts with which they emerge. While online and offline connections *can* be just as affective, they are not the same, and the differences between them can and do come to matter. In thinking about possibilities for queering cisheteromascularity with digital media and technologies, it is thus important to consider how such potential is situated and embodied. On this note, I turn to data generated highlighting the mobile potential of digital media, which came to matter differently through movements across time and place.

5.1.2 Mobile potential: Navigating the instability of the closet

Now that I have considered possibilities for intimacy, community, identity and support that emerged online, I would like to move on to consider the mobile potential of such connections, varying in intensity as bodies move across time and place. As discussed, affirmative possibilities of becoming with the internet emerged as particularly salient when the participants were unable to explore their desires and struggles with people offline, especially before coming out as LGBTQIA+. Coming out and establishing affirmative connections offline can change the relationally produced nature of such possibilities of connection, as people can become less reliant on digital media and technologies for affirmation and support. However, the phenomenon of coming out and the affirmative connections afforded through it are unstable. We are not out to everyone everywhere, nor do we always have access to the people, places, spaces and things that have come to make us feel safe and connected. Feelings of disconnection and isolation can re-emerge long after establishing queer networks offline. In this section, I explore how becomings with digital media and technologies re-intensified as one participant, Sajid, entered new unfamiliar territories, with the use of digital media and technologies re-emerging as a means of navigating isolation.

For Sajid, dating apps like Grindr emerged as a tool for re-establishing queer social networks when travelling, enabling him to again come out and be seen across new alienating unfamiliar cisheteronormative territories.

When I went travelling... in Budapest Prague and Berlin, we spoke to people on Grindr and that's how we found out where to go. So, in Prague we found out about a karaoke bar that we went to one night and then a kink bar the 2nd night... When we were in Berlin, my friend had found out about kink club through Grindr, and then when we were in Budapest, there was an LGBT night that was on at a club. It was this thing that only happened every three months and luckily, we were just there for it, but we only found out about that through Grindr. And then again when I went to The Netherlands [alone] for a conference in Utrecht, I met people. I met someone who was actually at the conference through Grindr... It was really nice because my mum was really concerned at the time because I did not like Utrecht cos there was just no one there... I was like 'no, it's fine, I'll find people to chat with and then go for drinks with' but she didn't get it.

Opportunities for establishing queer connections when travelling may be somewhat alien to heterosexual people, as exemplified in the excerpt above when Sajid's mother 'didn't get it'. However, a desire for place against feelings of placelessness renders many open to such encounters.

One thing that struck me about Sajid's narrative was a sense of being isolated and alone even when surrounded by people. Speaking about the conference he attended in the Netherlands, Sajid noted:

I was completely on my own. None of my colleagues had gone with me. I just went back to my apartment every night, and my mental health wasn't that great back then, so the alone time wasn't good.

While there are many reasons why people may struggle to network and connect in such unfamiliar spaces, heteronormativity and cisnormativity arguably add to such challenges. An embodied sense of difference, potentially entangled in traumatic

encounters with symbolic and physical violence, can result in LGBTQIA+ people feeling isolated, insecure and unsafe in such spaces, which is hardly conducive to establishing new relationships. Navigating unfamiliar spaces and places as an LGBTQIA+ person often demands proceeding with varying degrees of caution. Even when not conscious of any potential threat, we often find ourselves modifying our behaviour without even thinking about it, for example, those micro-moments when we tense up and pull back from holding a partner's hand in public. While Sajid did not express feeling threatened by the other attendees at the conference, it is worth considering how his capacity to move freely and openly at such an event, and within the city at large, may have been inhibited by feelings of uncertainty and insecurity that often emerge with being queer in unfamiliar spaces. After all, it took meeting another gay person in the city for Sajid to feel grounded in the place, affording feelings of containment necessary to feel safe and secure during his stay.

Queer connections when travelling emerged as deeply affective for Sajid, again fostering feelings of 'communal beingness' against otherwise uncertain and potentially hostile environments. The intensity of such connections was made present by his alluding to such possibilities of connection as a privilege.

I explain to people that there are actual benefits to being gay. I don't feel like a straight man, or a straight girl could go to another city and have the same kind of experience.

With such benefits emerging in response to feelings of isolation and anxiety ridden uncertainty that non-LGBTQIA+ people do not have to navigate, the idea of privilege could be contested. Nevertheless, the embodiment of such connections as a benefit speaks volumes to the power and comfort such opportunities for connections can afford.

There is something really kind of like communal about it. You meet someone for drinks, you go to a gay club and there are certain songs that come on and you're like, 'oh ok, well these are like iconic gay songs that we'll bond over.' I think there is also something in the minority status of it. At least you know if you go for a drink with a gay guy you're not gonna get beaten the fuck up.

Such connections enabled Sajid to feel safe, secure and contained in a new environment. His reference to ‘iconic gay songs’ affirming a sense of community and identity across countries speaks to the commodified globalised gay culture critiqued in the literature around homonormativity. However, such commercialisation, for all the politics of inclusion and exclusion that surround it, affirmed a sense of place and belonging against feelings of placelessness. Such music could be said to affirm what Durkheim (2008) described as collective effervescence, reaffirming a collective gay consciousness through the ritual of gay clubbing. While the collective consciousness co-produced through such rituals often operates to centre a heavily contested whitewashed homonormative and homonationalist Anglo European culture (Duggan 2002; Duggan 2003; Puar 2007), it nevertheless affords many with a much needed sense of place and belonging. Sajid, a gay British-Pakistani Muslim, was well versed on intersectional concerns. However, such spaces still mattered a great deal to him. The commodification of queer culture, for all it displaces, which I will interrogate in more detail in chapter 6 where I consider mediated possibilities of navigating homonormativity and transnormativity, still affirmed something, and that something was facilitated with digital media.

Digital media afforded the potential for what could be described as a mobile queerness, enabling Sajid, as Orne (2017) identifies, to carry community in his pocket. Such possibilities of becoming with digital technology resonated with my own, especially when travelling to places where LGBTQIA+ spaces have been deliberately hard to find to protect patrons from social or legal sanctions. In my MSc dissertation, I spoke about how proximity-based apps like Grindr afford possibilities of queering heteronormative spaces, enabling users to see and be seen without having to rely on physical gay/LGBTQIA+ spaces (Kerpen 2016). However, when travelling to unfamiliar places, such generative possibilities can become even more salient. Thinking with Mowlabocus’ (2016), we may also think about smartphones as a transitional object, affording a “digital security blanket” against the unnerving uncertainty of everyday life (p.16). Mowlabocus, drawing on Winnicott, notes that a person’s smartphone, like a child’s teddy bear or blanket, can afford comfort and reassurance through illusions of control and mastery, enabling users to “negotiate the

relationship between [an] emerging self and Other” (p.17). While, as Mowlabocus points out, our ability to know and master the world is paradoxically displaced through such technologies, with digital labour used to harvest data in a political economy that paradoxically profits from the uncertainty and distraction of ever new possibilities of consumption, the feelings of security afforded through such technologies still came to matter, affording possibilities of connection and movement that may otherwise have been denied.

The affective practices documented in this section urge us to think beyond questions of whether or not digital media and technologies affirm users, with the mobile nature of such becomings again demonstrating that *where*, *how* and *how much* connections online come to matter are situated and thus unstable. Online connections again emerged as deeply affective, enabling bodies to flow free from cisheteromascuine constraint both on *and offline*. However, the intensities of these connections were relationally produced, irreducible to abstract definitive claims about what digital media and technologies do. The fact that such online connections have the potential to re-intensify also complicates my earlier discussion around the affirmative potential of such connections for closeted youth, as such need for affirmation was not resolved through coming out and finding communities offline but re-emerged in new unfamiliar places. Returning to questions around the transformative potential of digital communication, the need to safely navigate uncertain potentially hostile environments continued to limit expression. Possibilities of flowing free from cisheteromascularity, were again produced through containment, actualised through affective connections with people, spaces and things enabling possibilities of expression that remained constrained elsewhere.

5.2 Contesting knowledge through fanfiction

Now that I have considered opportunities for intimacy, community building and identity work that emerged with connections afforded online, I would like to move on to consider intersecting possibilities for participation in the production and distribution of queer knowledges that emerged through my unexpected journey into the world of

fanfiction. Fanfiction involves fans of any fictional text (or texts), appropriating and combining characters and stories to create content of their own, often in the form of prequels or sequels. Such texts can include, but are not limited to, TV shows, novels and movies. One participant, Ross, spoke at length about his participation in the online world of writing and consuming fanfiction. He had written several pieces queering heterosexual characters through depicting sexual and romantic relationships between men, one of which had received over 50k views. I will not go into too much detail about the specifics of the stories to protect Ross' anonymity. However, what became significant through listening to him talk about his participation in this world was that it afforded him with a creative outlet for portraying sexual and romantic relationships in ways often marginalised through mainstream media. We have seen many advances in queer representation in the media. However, as Gross (2001) identifies, much media is produced by and for people that are cisgender and heterosexual, even when content is produced by minorities. As such, mainstream media content often re-produces normative sanitised, desexualised and depoliticised representations of queerness palatable to cisgender heterosexual consumers (see again Seif 2017; Sink et al. 2018; Zubair 2016). Fanfiction afforded Ross with an outlet for challenging such media.

In one of his pieces, which was a sequel to a popular TV show, Ross decentred identity and represented male sexuality as something non-binary and fluid. His story started with a m/f (male/female) couple from the original series breaking up, which then resulted in the male character, following a turn of events, getting into a relationship with one of the other male characters. However, the legitimacy of the previous relationship was never questioned.

I didn't want to tell a coming out story. It could have been like, 'oh, he's been gay the whole time'... but he was in love with his wife. I wouldn't have made him a depressed wreck if he wasn't in love with the wife.

Ross resisted a dominant media trope that has long reduced sexuality, *particularly* male sexuality, to a hetero/homo binary. He explicitly stated that he wanted to avoid the cliched coming out narrative, which, if he had delegitimised the previous heterosexual relationship, would have been inevitable. Any sexual ambiguity brought about through the characters transition from dating one gender to another was left

unresolved, thus resisting bisexual erasure, which as earlier discussed, is commonplace. Furthermore, the character he queered did not struggle with his identity. Such a narrative, if the norm, could easily fall into the trap of downplaying material struggles that limit possibilities for queer expression. However, set against commonplace victim narratives that reduce LGBTQIA+ existence to nothing but a struggle against oppression, the centring of queer desire existing beyond oppression was somewhat refreshing. It provided possibilities for thinking about LGBTQIA+ life as more than what it lacks in relation to cisgender heterosexual life.

Ross' becoming with the world of fanfiction builds on a body of work that has long emphasised the subversive potential of the genre. Fanfiction has long been celebrated for affording a platform for writers to appropriate various media in ways that matter to them, making room for experiences and desires often marginalised through canonical works. As Jenkins (2005) notes,

The fans' response typically involves not simply fascination or adoration but also frustration and antagonism, and it is the combination of the two responses which motivates their active engagement with the media (p.24).

Such fiction, dating back to the 1930s, has long been celebrated for challenging hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity (Berger 2010; Jenkins 2005). Jenkins, for instance, notes that women, who have long dominated the world of fanfiction, were drawn to the genre in the 1960s, as it afforded them with an avenue of literary contribution beyond mainstream male-dominated literary circles. By the 1960s/1970s, slash fiction emerged, a homoerotic sub-genre of fanfiction centring m/m relationships (Berger 2010; Jenkins 2005). Berger defines slash fiction as "highly sexual and transgressive... deliberately frame[d]... as non-canonical" (p.174). By the 1980s, femme slash, which centres f/f relationships. Emerged. Nevertheless, despite the long subversive queer and female-centred history of fanfiction, possibilities of participating in such communities remained limited before the internet.

As Hellekson and Busse (2014) note:

No longer do fans learn about slash face-to-face with fellow fans at conventions, with hard-copy slash zines sold under the table. Gay, lesbian, bi,

and trans fans, fans of color, queer fans—all are now vocal and visible, and fanfiction, particularly slash, can no longer be considered the aegis of straight white women (p.80).

The internet, through affording both anonymity and access to a global market of potential consumers and producers, has seen slash fiction communities boom, enabling what could be considered a new queer canon to emerge (Berger 2010). Just recently, following the uproar around J.K. Rowling's position on trans rights, some members of the Harry Potter fandom communities opted to continue writing about characters and settings as a means of reclaiming worlds they helped create (Sharma 2020). Writing fanfiction has emerged as an act of resistance, centring audience meaning making over authors' intentions.

Nevertheless, possibilities of becoming with the world of fanfiction is not without limits. The world of fanfiction, like the worlds of fiction in general, has privileged some voices more than others, urging us to critically engage with such celebrations of fanfictions subversive potential. When reflecting on the slash genre, Ross said "I tend to assume the authors are female.... I rarely come across something and think or know it's written by a gay man." His assumptions speak to much existing literature highlighting how fanfiction dealing with LGBTQIA+ themes is often written by and for cis heterosexual girls/women (Mandhani and Lobo 2020; Russ 1985). Such trends within the community have led many to express concerns around the fetishisation of queer, particular gay male, relationships and identities. Mandhani and Lobo (2020), for instance, draws attention to how slash fiction often reduces gay male identities and relationships to oppositional gender roles of a heteronormative gaze. Similarly, Zhang (2016), in their exploration of Chinese female fans of Yaoi, a manga-based form of slash fiction originating in Japan, raise concerns around how "objectifying gay men as a sexual spectacle would also likely result in reinforcing mainstream stereotypes of gay community members (p.263). Of course, acknowledging such issues need not homogenise and dismiss the world of fanfiction as homophobic or transphobic. As Mandhani and Lobo (2020) themselves identify, the genre has given voice to many LGBTQIA+ people who, like Ross, have been denied a voice in the mainstream. They argue that writing off the entire genre operates not only to erase such voices but also

entails adopting a patriarchal view against the female-led genre, failing to acknowledge how many of the cisheteronormative narratives presented in fanfiction have been “absorbed from existing [male dominated] media” (p.64). What is key here is that such communities do not exist outside of cisheteronormative power relations.

As such, to wrap up this section, it seems pertinent to question uncritical celebrations of the subversive potential of fanfiction communities. Ross’ becoming with the world of fanfiction certainly queered cisheteronormativity. However, it queered cisheteronormativity that emerges not only in mainstream media but also in fanfiction itself. It would therefore be wrong to assume that online fanfiction communities exist as some kind of queer utopia for producing knowledges enabling bodies to flow free from normative constraints. The affective potential of the stories Ross produced remains in tension with the voices of the cishet majority dominating productions of queer male sexuality. Of course, questioning the limits of the subversive potential of becoming with such communities need not amount to denying that subversion exists. The ease in which LGBTQIA+ can participate in the production and distribution of content online certainly affords opportunities to be heard otherwise denied in the mainstream media. What is at question is not whether Ross queered normative discourse but rather the intensity of that process, both within and beyond fanfiction communities.

5.3 Troubled waters of sexual exploitation: Beyond risk versus opportunity

Thus far, I have explored how becoming with digital media and technologies can afford possibilities of identity exploration, community building and support, affectively transforming bodily possibilities of gender and sexual expression with varying degrees of intensity as the participants moved across time and place. I have identified moments in which bodies *flowed* free from many cisheteromasculine constraints. However, I have critically engaged with questions around where such bodies can flow, turning, in the last section, to questioning possibilities of contesting

knowledges that continue to constrain bodies. For the final part of this chapter, I would now like to move on to think about potential risks and harms that can readily emerge *with* opportunities presented online, further complicating my previous discussions around structure versus agency in the digital age by considering with who and what bodies are becoming *with*. As laid out in my introduction, I consider how the participants' journeys took me into troubling waters of sexual exploitation. Such narratives complicated questions of digital empowerment. However, in enabling bodies to flow, my aim is not to separate risk from opportunity but rather consider opportunities emerging through these exploitative encounters to better understand the wider relational dynamics producing them.

Several of the participants spoke about exploitative encounters that emerged through their becomings with digital technology, ranging from sexual harassment, deception and sexual coercion. On the Queering Masculinity group, Patrick created a post asking the group about their worst experiences on Grindr, which elicited a range of accounts about threatening encounters. Ross shared one encounter of harassment.

My worst experience was probably just a guy messaging me over and over. The first time I had made my lack of interest clear and blocked him, but a couple of days later he'd made a new profile and message me again. It went on a couple of times before he eventually stopped.

Expanding on the encounter during our follow-up interview, it transpired that he had blocked him at least 5 or 6 times before the harassment stopped, with harasser even having gone as far as finding him through other social media platforms. Another one of the Queering Masculinity blog-diary group members, Bill, spoke about one encounter with his letting agent, who after finding him on the app, had sent him unsolicited nude pictures and told him he was going to come over.

When I said no, he said 'not to worry, I know your address and I've got the keys', which he did, but luckily he never turned up.

Tim responded to the post by sharing an encounter in which he was deceived into thinking a man he was going to meet was alone and ended up in a chem (drug) sex party.

I once ended up at an actual chemsex party when someone said they were on their own and just wanted someone to come over. I left quite sharpish after, but it was quite the ordeal. I don't particularly want to go into detail, but just imagine needles, syringes of G [GHB], bareback [condomless sex] and people not in a good way. I have a feeling this guy was asking younger looking guys over, expecting them to not leave out of politeness.

Aside from *ongoing* sexual consent restricted by the levels of intoxication observed by Tim, such deception was arguably an attempt of sexual coercion. As Tim acknowledged, once in such a situation, people may feel obliged to stay.

In these cases, opportunities for intimacy online were met with abusive encounters, triggering potential harm and trauma that could produce anxieties around further participating on such platforms. Such encounters have the potential to limit bodies, complicating questions around digital empowerment as the very apps that afforded affirmative possibilities saw risks emerge. The relative anonymity of such communication, which the participants had benefited from, complicated the idea that such online spaces are safe spaces. However, recognising this need not collapse into centring risk at the expense of recognising opportunities. Such risks do not eradicate the many opportunities reported by the participants, both within and beyond such apps. Such apps still enabled the participants' bodies to connect and flow. In fact, all three of these participants had been recruited through Grindr. The app had facilitated bringing them together on the Queering Masculinity group, where they were able to raise consciousness around such risks. The participants were risk aware, and the group facilitated discussions that could be useful for navigating risks in spaces affording opportunities against risks present elsewhere, i.e., risks of becoming visible to antagonistic forces offline.

Such inseparability of risks from opportunities was further highlighted in the interview data generated. A couple of the participants reported encounters, established on and through the internet, with sexual predators, which were embodied as affirmative, affording possibilities of becoming denied elsewhere. Sajid, as earlier discussed,

spoke of having used the internet to connect with gay men before coming out offline, enabling him to explore his sexuality free from the potential affective threat of wider heteronormative social-material-cultural relations. However, what I did not mention before was that Sajid was just 13 years old when he started engaging in adult spaces.

Sajid: When I look back it was probably really inappropriate because I was 13 and most of them were obviously much older... Everyone was looking for sex...

Me: Did they know you were 13?

Sajid: Yeah... because some of them were my age and some were a lot older...

In and of itself, such a desire to explore sexuality is not uncommon, even though adults may wish to pretend otherwise. However, Sajid, unable to explore this stuff with peers, had gone online, connecting with adults willingly and knowingly exploiting those desires. He spoke of having cybersex on webcam and arranging offline hook-ups with people he had met through Chat Avenue. While some of the people he connected with were a similar age, often they were adults in their 20s and 30s, and a few of them had allured him into sexual encounters for money.

Sajid: There was a guy, in his 30s, who I spoke to quite a lot. He used to pay for my phone credit if I went on cam for him... I think about it now and I'm like 'that was so inappropriate', but I used to do that a lot with people on Chat Avenue... It became so regular with one person that it was like, 'I need some phone credit', and he was like 'oh yeah, we'll have phone sex and I'll give you phone credit' ...

Me: Webcamming for money?

Sajid: It depended... Mostly for fun... I don't think it was ever directly money. It was always phone credit... but then when I was 15. I used to sleep someone who used to give me money so in the grand scheme of things it was all a bit like....

Me: How old was he?

Sajid: He wasn't very old. He was in his 20s

Me: How old were you when you actually first met someone [for sex]?

Sajid: 13... *It was really sad.* My value went down as soon as I turned 16

The very technology that enabled him to explore his sexuality free from heteronormative constraints exposed him to sexual predators who, like him, were able to take advantage of the anonymous potential of digital communication to explore desires, except in their case, that anonymity was utilised to exploit.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that Sajid himself never described these encounters as exploitative. While he acknowledged that the adults had behaved ‘inappropriately’, he asserted agency in the encounters. According to Sajid, connecting with people on Chat Avenue was never really about money. Money was offered, but he said it was always coincidental to other motivations for being on the platform.

Me: Were you having cybersex and sex with guys in general, or was it just in exchange for money?

Sajid: Guys in general

Even when money was exchanged, it was not something that he spoke of really needing.

Me: Did you need the money?

Sajid: Not really. I was very much just a bit like, ‘I’m going shopping and I’m meeting my friends in town’, and he was like, ‘oh, here’s some money’. I did not need it, but I never say no to money so.

His primary motivation for being on Chat Avenue was a desire to connect with other gay people. Like many LGB youths, Sajid took to the internet to explore desires that could not be discussed or explored elsewhere.

One thing that struck me when listening to Sajid talk about the encounters was the strong affective ambivalence that had come to surround them. By affective ambivalence, I mean that the encounters pushed and pulled Sajid in multiple directions, producing many conflicting ideas and emotions. By his own admission, he knew these men had behaved inappropriately. However, he *still* derived (sexual)

pleasure from the encounters with them. The intensity of such pleasure was made particularly present when he mentioned feeling nostalgic towards the past encounters.

They had a big impact because I feel nostalgic just looking back at it... Sometimes I read through some of the chat logs with people I spoke to quite a lot and I'm like, 'aww this was quite funny'. They were people I spoke to quite a lot.

Such nostalgia emerged not only in memory and verbal expression but also through his reported material practices. Sajid had recorded his chat logs with these men, which he re-visited as a source of sexual gratification.

Sometimes it's funny. I don't know. If I'm going to have a wank and don't want to watch porn, and I don't really want to read like anything on Nifty, I'm like oh, lets scroll through this.

Again, far from representing weak ties, these online connections had mattered a great deal, both then when he felt the need to record them and again when he re-visited them. The impulse to save and return to the chat logs, even after 10 years, marked affective intensities radiating through such past encounters that cannot be ignored, not least by him. As Sajid himself mentioned, they had a big impact on him.

Making sense of such strong affective ties with predatory men was no easy task. If reducing him to nothing but a victim, re-living such a past might be reduced to trauma re-enactment or trauma play – the former marking a desire to re-expose oneself to abusers and the latter being an affirmative means of gaining pleasure from otherwise painful traumatic experiences through consensual sexual role play (see Kort 2018). However, such a narrative would reduce the agencies and desires caught up in these past encounters to nothing more than a product of manipulation and abuse. While the men Sajid had encountered as a child were sexual predators, his becomings with such men were not completely devoid of agency. Such encounters, however problematic, afforded possibilities of exploring desires that he was unable to explore elsewhere.

The affective ambivalence and nostalgia surrounding Sajid's encounters with predatory men resonated across the data, re-surfacing in some early online encounters shared by Adele. However, in her case, it was the desire to be seen as a woman that

emerged as significant. As earlier discussed, Adele made use of digital technology to explore gender in ways she could not offline, making use of the ability to manipulate and control flows of information through images and text on social media. However, as with Sajid, the affirmative potential of such connections was, in many instances, actualised *with* predatory men. Reflecting on her childhood, Adele, like Sajid, spoke about live streaming with strangers on webcam through Chatroulette.com and Omegle.com.¹¹

Adele: One of the more dodgy things I used to do was wear makeup and pretend to be a girl on chat roulette if you remember what that was... I would pretend to be a girl and I would have guys sort of like hitting on me and I found that really nice...

Adele was just 15 years old. As with Sajid, the encounters were often sexually charged, again with adult men who knew she was a minor.

Me: Did you engage in cybersex?

Adele: I didn't do anything sexual. Well, I did. I would take off my shirt. They would be jacking off, but I wouldn't be jacking off. So yes basically [laughs].

Me: Did they know you were underage?

Adele: Usually no. Sometimes I'd go 'ha I'm 15' but I usually just let it happen.

Me: What did they do when you told them?

Adele: Usually just continue as if they hadn't heard or make some sort of shocked gesture then continue anyway.

However, for Adele, it was not a desire to explore her sexuality that brought her to such encounters; it was a desire to be seen, accepted and desired as a woman.

Adele: It wasn't even sexual for me. I was just entirely alone, and I felt like they accepted me and that is ultimately what I was after.

¹¹ Both websites are age 'restricted'. Chat Roulette states 18+ for 'unfiltered' video chat and Omegle.com states 18+ for any video chat. However, in either case, users only need agree to disclaimers to access content. Omegle.com even has a video chat section which by its own admission is unmoderated.

Such desire was distinct from that of Sajid, as Adele did not seek sexual pleasure from such sexual encounters. However, there was a certain resonance across their experiences in that the encounters affirmed desires that could not be affirmed elsewhere.

Listening to Adele and Sajid talk about their early online encounters on social media triggered nostalgia of my own. Before coming out, I too sexually engaged with people on chatrooms when underage. However, I have never felt exploited. I *know* I was exploited but I have never *felt* it because like Sajid and Adele, I actively sought out such connections to explore my sexuality and find belonging and validation denied elsewhere. Such disconnect between knowing and feeling arguably marks a point at which my emerging desires exceeded those of the exploitative relationships I was caught up in. I was never just an object to be exploited for someone else's desire. Like the participants, I embodied emerging desires of my own, which, while taken advantage of by predatory men, still afforded something irreducible to those encounters. Growing up in a heteronormative society and attending a catholic school during section 28, I was severely restricted offline.¹² Such encounters, however inappropriate on the part of those I was engaging with, enabled me to negotiate a sense of place against placelessness – a sense of connection and belonging. However problematic, and I know they were problematic, such encounters positively mattered and continue to matter because they mark a moment in my life where I developed strength to find myself, which says as much about the wider society and culture I grew up in as it does about those that took advantage of my desires for sexual exploration.

5.3.1 Beyond risk versus opportunity

Such narratives again challenge notions of digital empowerment. They complicate questions around what constitutes affirmative connections, as opportunities for flowing free from cisheteronormativity came to be caught up in a whole new set of power relations between underage youths and adults. Such encounters with predatory

¹² Section 28 was legislation brought in under the Thatcher government that banned the 'promotion' of homosexuality in schools

men online have raised many concerns around safeguarding young people from risks of child sexual exploitation (Kvedar 2020; Macapagal et al. 2018; Ybarra and Mitchell 2016). Ybarra and Mitchell (2016), in a quantitative study of US adolescents aged between 13 and 18, document that LGB youth are significantly more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to be sexually active online, with many, particularly YMSM (young men who have sex with men), using technology to meet sexual partners offline. Among the sexually active youths, LGB youths, again particularly YMSM, were also significantly more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to be active with people more than 5 years older.¹³ Mitchell et al. (2014) questions the idea of the internet being a safer place for LGBT teens, highlighting the disproportionate levels of sexual harassment they face online. Similarly, Lauckner et al. (2019), in a qualitative study of 20 MSM in the rural south of the US, documented frequent encounters with harassment and sexual coercion on dating/hook-up apps, with a couple of the participants reporting being repeatedly targeted and pressured into sex when underage.¹⁴ As such, the encounters I have documented render questions around risk far from obsolete, especially when engaging with questions around digital empowerment for LGBTQIA+ youths. However, centring risk at the expense of opportunities is limited. It fails to account for what was afforded to my participants through such encounters. It does little address the wider relations rendering such participation in adult spaces, and even exploitative encounters emerging with them, appealing to many LGBTQIA+ youth. As Dodsworth (2014) and Pearce (2013) identify in their work on child sexual exploitation, much exploitation occurs without explicit acts of force or coercion, and recognising what is afforded through such encounters can help to address wider dynamics rendering some more vulnerable to exploitation than others

Mitchell et al. (2014) questions whether online spaces are safer for LGBT teens. However, at no point do they engage with questions around what those teens are

¹⁴ In highlighting such risks of child sexual exploitation, my aim is not to depict online spaces as inherently dangerous, nor is it to reinforce the cisheteronormative idea that MSM, and the gender variant bodies conflated with them, are predatory, but rather to highlight risks emerging from an overwhelming flow of hidden LGBTQIA+ youth in desperate need of connection online. After all, if underage cishet children were similarly reliant of digital technology to explore sexuality, particularly cishet girls, it seems reasonable to assume, until proven otherwise, that rates of sexual exploitation would be similar.

navigating elsewhere. The question of whether online spaces are safer depends on from what and too what users connect. Questions of risk are complicated, irreducible to definitive claims around one space being safer than another. After all, it is not as if offline spaces are safe for LGBTQIA+ people, especially not for LGBTQIA+ youths constrained within adultist worlds (Singh 2012). As Kort (2018) identifies, adult online spaces, and the relationships forged therein, can afford gender and sexual minority youths belonging against the likes of bullying and erasure offline. Likewise, Kvedar (2020), while placing an emphasis on risk, acknowledges the need to consider how adult spaces like Grindr afford LGBT minors with outlets for exploring gender and sexuality denied elsewhere. While aiming to abolish underage users from the app, they account for such youths' need for a connection, suggesting the development of a youth focused networking app. They also build on existing calls for youth-centred sex and relationship education centred around harm reduction, affording young people with knowledges and tools necessary for better navigating risk online (Bradlow 2017; Buckingham and Bragg 2004; Levine 2018; Renold and McGeeney 2017; Scarcelli 2018). As this body of work recognises, a failure to acknowledge such desires and agencies is part of the problem, not the solution, as it produces social, cultural and institutional barriers to providing young people with adequate support and resources for finding means of connecting with peers, navigating risk and critically engaging with sexual content online.

Rejecting risk-centred rhetoric, the findings and analysis presented in this section contribute to such calls to recognise young people's gender and sexual agencies, refusing to separate risks from opportunities in instead emphasising 'risky opportunities' (Livingstone 2008). As my participants' narratives have demonstrated thus far, connections established online afford containment against antagonistic forces elsewhere. The 'objects' of sexual exploitation in the encounters I have identified were relationally produced. Emerging with other forms of oppression, the encounters had been rendered desirable. The sexual predators exploited *desires and agencies* to connect and be seen and heard that were denied elsewhere. A denial of such agency operates to heterosexualise and cissexualise young people's bodies, producing the very normative constraints from which my participants sought to escape. Going online

is not without risk but neither is becoming in adultist offline worlds that routinely fetishizes and sexualises young people's bodies in accordance with cisheteronormative ideals. While entering troubled waters, bodily expression and desire still flowed.

5.4 Conclusion

The becomings with the participants reported in this chapter took me in many unexpected directions, yielding possibilities of intervening in numerous fields. However, as laid out in the introduction to this chapter, throughout these becomings, I found myself drawn to broader discussions around digital empowerment within gender and sexuality studies. Thinking with the concept of bodies of water, I have, thus far, mapped out a plurality of becomings with digital media and technologies, with connections online enabling the participants to flow free from many cisheteromasculine constraints. Such becomings, irreducible to any single site of inquiry, were relationally produced, challenging efforts to make definitive claims around the affordances or constraints of any given platform or technology. For example, Adele's becomings with her camera actualised possibilities of being seen as a woman that depended on the coming together of multiple relations (e.g., make-up, a camera, camera angles, androgenous appearance, strangers online and an embodied need to be validated that was not validated elsewhere). The intensities of the online connections were also far from stable. Questions around how, how much, and where becomings with digital media and technologies came to matter emerged as heavily situated, building on work emphasising the mobile situated nature of becomings with digital media and technologies (Renold and Ringrose 2011; Warfield 2017). However, what struck me most here was the capacity for the online connections to re-intensify through movements into unfamiliarity territory.

Sajid's narrative exposed a deeply affective embodied need to navigate antagonist forces that can prevail long after coming out. Detached from the community and support networks he had established back home, online connections enabled Sajid to feel safe and connect in his new environment. Resonating with the narratives of closeted youths earlier discussed, such possibilities were afforded through

containment from the immanent risk of being rendered visible to strangers. Sajid never expressed facing homophobic violence. However, embodied anxiety and uncertainty limited possibilities of expression regardless. Such embodied constraints and needs for containment are hardly surprising given the collective history of violence faced by AMAB members of the community rendered hypervisible – a history arguably made more present in the current climate of increasing hate crimes against minorities (see again Allen et al. 2020). Such containment affords continuity against the imminent threat of annihilation (see again Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012). Far from disembodied, dis/continuities of an oppressive past re-surfaced in bodies, building on LGBTQIA+ digital scholarship urging us to consider offline constraints that continue to be navigated (Brickell 2011; Gray 2009; Park 2018). Such offline constraints were made particularly salient in my analysis of instances of sexual exploitation *affirming* desires, contributing to a body of work complicating notions of online risks versus opportunities in accounting for opportunities in risk (Livingstone 2008; Kort 2018; Kvedar 2020; Renold and Ringrose 2011; Scarcelli 2018). The participants' bodies flowed but they could not flow everywhere in equal measure, nor could they flow free from risk, with possibilities of flow affirmed, in some instances, through entering unsettling waters. Nevertheless, while complicating questions of digital empowerment, bodies still flowed, finding ways to connect and explore desire in whatever ways they could. The intensity of affirmation afforded through such troubling encounters emerged as deeply affective and embodied, particularly for Sajid who continued to receive sexual gratification from re-visiting the chat logs.

Chapter 6: Navigating homonormative and transnormative pressures to assimilate online

Now that I have critically engaged with questions around the affirmative potential of becoming with digital communication against cisheteronormative constraints, I want to move on to consider queer possibilities of intimacy, community, identity and activism that emerged both with and against homonormativity and transnormativity. To return to my research questions, in this chapter, I again primarily focus on the first two questions around possibilities of queering cisheteromascularity enabled and displaced through connecting with difference online. I think with a body of work that, as earlier discussed, has long raised concerns around how the inclusion, recognition, and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ bodies, identities and desires has operated to centre those causing minimal disruption to existing sexed, gendered, racialised and classed hierarchies. As earlier highlighted, such work has emphasised how ‘progress’ has operated to centre cis white affluent monogamous gay men (Casey 2004; Duggan 2002; Orne 2017; Puar 2007; Robinson 2015; Weber 2012) and white affluent trans people seeking medical transition (Johnson 2016; Miller 2018). However, what interests me here is not the normative systems themselves but rather how the young people I worked with came to navigate them *with* connections forged through their mediated journeys. As such, in this chapter, I build, more specifically, on the existing scholarship around LGBTQIA+ blogging and social networking as a means of queering homonormative and transnormative constraints (Cavalcante 2018; McLean 2013; Miller 2018; Singh 2012).

Thinking again with the analogy of water, I map out multiple possibilities of becoming enabled and displaced through bodies flowing between and across multiple sites, rejecting efforts to make definitive claims about platforms but nevertheless still recognising oppressive moments of becoming *with* platforms. In the last chapter, I considered how the participants navigated cisheteronormative constraints offline

through connections afforded online. I even considered troubling encounters that saw exploitative relationships emerge as affirmative. However, in this chapter, I go on to consider how digital communication emerged as a means of navigating intra-community tensions both *on* and offline, with the participants navigating the likes of racism, femmophobia and queerphobia across the very sites that had affirmed possibilities of queering cisheteronormativity in the last chapter. The data generated with the participants through the interviews and the collaborative diary-blog again took me in many unexpected directions. I was moved across multiple embodied situated worlds of gaming, Facebook and dating/hook-up apps, revealing affective mutually constitutive moments of power and desire emerging within, between and across such sites. However, what struck me the most through becoming with the participants was the emergence of humour as a means of holding the participants together and subverting the power relations that sought to contain them. As such, in this chapter I set out to extend existing discussions around possibilities of queering homonormativity and transnormativity with digital media and technologies by thinking between multiple strands of theorising around humour as a means of holding marginalised bodies together (Dundes and Hauschild 1988; Freud 1963; Hillenbrand 1995; Üngör and Verkerke 2015; Ware 2019) and subverting power (Hart 2007; Pahl 2017; Sørensen 2016). I consider how humour enabled bodies of water to flow free from normative constraints. However, again remaining attentive to work urging us to recognise how bodies produced online remain situated in broader power relations (Brickell 2011; Gudelunas 2018; Miller 2018; Siebler 2016), I avoid over-stating the subversive power of humour, acknowledging how humour can also emerge as a regulatory force (Billig 2005; Tsakona and Popa 2011; Xie et al 2022).

6.1 Gayming connections beyond commercial culture

In bringing together dispersed minorities, the internet again emerged as a space for queer connections in unexpected places. Becoming with the participants allowed me to enter the world of gaming, which had *come to* afford possibilities of intimacy and belonging around shared values and niche interests displaced offline. My journey into the world of gaming opened up many potential lines of inquiry into existing discussions around gaming platforms and cultures (Ashley et al. 2018; Shaw 2012).

However, I was not interested in gaming per se. In line with my onto-epistemological perspective, I took the position that the sites frequented had the potential to be relationally produced differently to how they emerged, and as such, had no intension of making definitive claims about them. What interested me was the wider intra-community tensions revealed through the embodied journeys of becoming with such sites, exposing dis/continuities of power again enabling and displacing bodies of water to flow but not everywhere in equal measure.

One participant, Vince, who grew up in a small town in France but now lived in an urban area of South West England, took to the world of gayming to navigate the constraints of homonormativity offline. He spoke of feeling frustrated with commercial gay culture. He took issue with many mainstream LGBTQIA+ ‘gay’ spaces, which he felt were too restrictive, catering to narrow commodified definitions of what it meant to be gay. Such spaces triggered anxieties around being out of place.

I went to OMG [a gay club in Bristol]. I almost had an anxiety attack... It didn't feel good at all. That was actually my first few times in gay clubs... I don't relate to... mainstream gay life – watching Ru Paul's drag race, listening to Lady Gaga and going to clubs. ...

Unlike Sajid, who had established a sense of belonging in such spaces, Vince felt excluded from them. His sense of being emerged in opposition to them, with the intensities produced through becoming with such spaces operating to marginalise rather than affirm his embodied sense of self. Such spaces did not enable his body to flow. Whereas digital media had, for Sajid, facilitated possibilities of becoming with such spaces, for Vince it had afforded a means of escaping them.

Such issues with mainstream gay culture could be read through the lens of homonormativity and internalised homophobia, reduced to assimilationist narratives of not being like the ‘other gays’ (Greenland and Taulke-Johnson 2017). However, for Vince, such opposition to mainstream gay culture appeared to revolve around the culture not being queer enough. He complained about commercial gay venues and pride events being “money making machines”, reducing gay identity to a lifestyle

commodity. Such disconnection was not without cost. It had limited his opportunities for dating, as he expressed little interest in dating anyone heavily invested in the consumer culture. However, the internet, in affording a much broader scope for connection than mainstream venues, afforded opportunities for connecting around shared interests and thus lessened dependence on offline spaces for intimacy.

I hung out in this French website called Jeuxvideo.com which basically means videogames.com. I met a few good friends, some LGBT some not, but I made a lot of good friends.

Through connecting online, he had established queer friendships and sexual/romantic relationships from afar.

I met this one guy Louis.... last year actually. He came to my town. We have been long term friends... Finally meeting this person who you've been talking to for years... [and] actually getting to meet the person was an experience, I guess. We had been through all kinds of relationships, I guess. We were really good friends. We would talk about own private feelings and everything. We never dated but he was the closest thing I had to a boyfriend for a while. And nowadays we are just really good friends, I guess... Like it says here [points to relational map], I made a few friends at the time, some of which I shared pictures with, nudes and everything.

In line with the existing literature, digital communication afforded possibilities for connecting with communities of choice, unleashing potential for making connections and exploring sexuality beyond various limits imposed through geographical time and space. In this instance, such potential was afforded through becoming with gaming sites and gamers. However, for someone else, navigating tensions with mainstream gay culture could involve connections elsewhere. Likewise, connecting with the world of gaming could have easily seen sexual difference marginalised (Shaw 2012). As such, I found myself drawn to the specificity of Vince's embodied journey, which had enabled affirmative possibilities of disconnecting and reconnecting *with* gamers.

Again, in the absence of possibilities of connection closer to home, such connections had mattered a great deal, producing affective intensities that afforded possibilities of becoming denied elsewhere. Vince's affective practices online resonated with the coming out narratives earlier discussed.

You can easily find people who think like you online. They might live hundreds of kilometres away and you might never meet them in real life, but they can still have a really interesting conversation with you.

None of Vince's early connections were local. Louis, for instance, lived a couple of hours drive away. It was not until several years after connecting online that they actually met in person. However, the relationship still mattered a great deal. For Vince. Louis had been a friend and (cyber)sexual partner that was 'the closest thing to a boyfriend for a while'. Vince spoke about them opening up to each other and supporting one another through various everyday struggles in much the same way friends open up and support one another offline. Skype *emerged* as a central mode of communication for maintaining such connections. On his relational map, Vince connected the app to the gaming site, its LGBTQIA+ forum, and the relationships established therein, depicting mutually constitutive affective connections coming together to actualise possibilities of relationship formation on the internet. He spoke about 'hanging out' with virtual friends through the app, and shared encounters of exchanging nudes and having cybersex. As with the other participants, such technology afforded possibilities of being seen and heard in real time. It enabled a mediated touch that connected him to others visually but also physically and emotionally. Take the cybersex for instance. Such giving and receiving of visual sexual pleasure blurs the lines between the virtual, the emotional and the physical.

What might be considered a lack of physical contact was not a lack as the connections actualised with digital media and technologies afforded something that was not available offline, thus again pushing back against assumptions that online connections are inherently weaker and less real. Had such opportunities for connection been present locally, the intensity of such online communities, and the relationships established therein, may not have been so strong. However, faced with limited opportunities for meeting likeminded people in his hometown, and feeling

disenfranchised from a local gay community centred on gay consumption, such gayming connections came to matter all the more. While the modalities of online communication are distinct from physical contact offline, they still *matter*. As earlier discussed, the connections established through them can be just as intense when emerging against offline worlds that limit bodies. In this instance, those limits, and desires to flow free from them, emerged in tension with homonormativity – the very homonormativity that had, in the last chapter, afforded a sense of familiarity and containment enabling desire to flow free from cisheteromasculine constraints. In thinking about homonormativity, and the narrow definitions of queerness, i.e., gayness, produced by it, I would now like to move on to consider how the internet afforded possibilities of navigating issues of trans-exclusion, femmephobia and racism within mainstream LGBTQIA+ culture.

6.2 Navigating homonormativities: From trans-exclusion to femmephobia and racism

As discussed, physical LGBTQIA+ spaces like gay bars/clubs, saunas and cruising spots have historically played a central role in affording possibilities of connection necessary to develop a sense of identity, community and belonging to survive and resist. However, the affordances of such spaces have not been evenly distributed, rendering some significantly less visible than others. Firstly, there are issues surrounding proximity, with many LGBTQIA+ people living outside of urban areas where much queer life operates. As discussed in the last chapter, the internet, for those with access, affords possibilities of connecting from more remote areas. However, even when living near such urban centres, homonormativity and cisnormativity can limit opportunities for connection. For marginalised intersections of the LGBTQ+ community, living in the city has not afforded even possibilities for participating in queer life because gay/LGBTQIA+ spaces have left them feeling just as erased and excluded. In the face of such normative spatial configurations, the internet, as discussed, can afford those intersections of the community, just as it afforded Vince, many new opportunities for connection. As Adele identified:

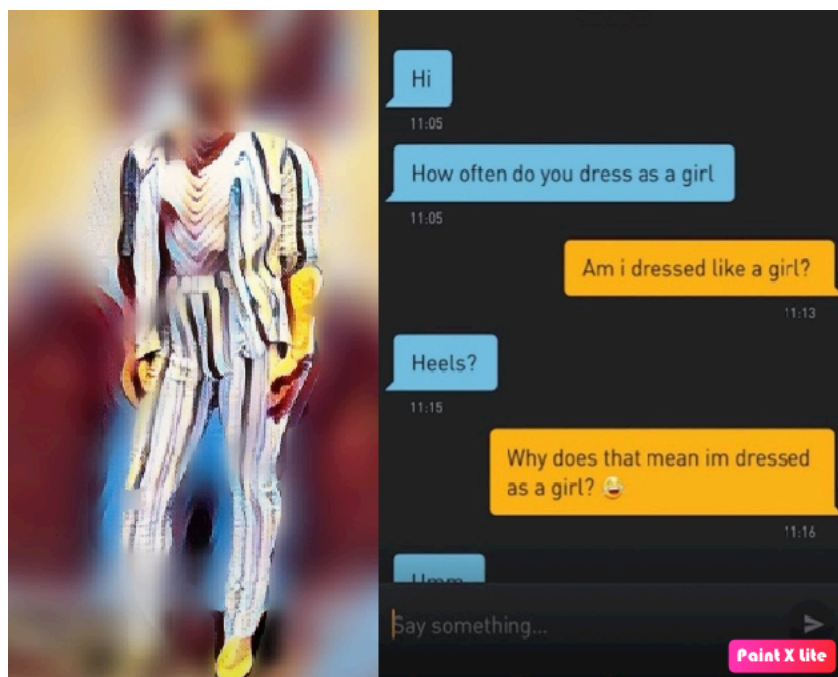
The trans community is very much online. Obviously, there are a lot of trans people in Bristol but like most trans people I've met is through like the internet. It is a very online based community to be honest because we are very few and far between.

Denied possibilities of seeing and being seen offline, such marginalised intersections of the community, like LGBTQIA+ people living outside of urban areas, rely heavily on the internet.

The Queering Masculinity group, again, like many online spaces, enabled possibilities of affirmation, community building, identity exploration, knowledge production and activism in opposition to gendered and racialised hierarchies emerging within and across LGBTQIA+ cultures. This is not to say that the group was perfect. As I will later go on to discuss, tensions did emerge, as is to be expected in any group. However, for the most part, the group evolved into a community like many others online affirming possibilities of queering homonormative and cisnormative expectations in ways that arguably extend beyond the group. Discussions emerging around personal experiences and wider online activity fostered something irreducible to the content itself, something bigger than the sum of its parts, affording what might be described as a sense of 'communal beingness' (see again Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012) - an affective community emerging in resistance to gendered and racialised histories.

In terms of gender, the Queering Masculinity group gave voice to lived experiences and bodily expressions emerging in tension with femme-phobia and trans(misogyny) across MSM communities. Sam, a self-identifying gay man from and living in a post-industrial town in South Wales, shared a Grindr message received from someone asking how often he "dressed as a girl" in reaction to a picture of him wearing heels and a pantsuit (Figure 3). Similarly, Bill, a self-identifying gay man living in Bristol, posted a Grindr message from someone telling him he was wearing "woman's nail varnish" (Figure 4). In either case, both participants challenged gender normative assumptions. Sam resisted by asking "why does that mean I'm dressed as a girl?", while Dan responded, "it's not woman's nail varnish, it's mine". Their efforts to resist

to normative assumptions around gender were quickly affirmed by other members of the Queering Masculinity group, who rallied together in support, resisting the cisheteronormative assumptions that sex, gender expression and gender identity are normatively aligned. The other members weighed in to offered insights and similar experiences of their own, again fostering a sense of communal beingness that afforded place against placelessness in both recognising and validating such fluid expressions of gender. Sam and John joked about being able to walk better in heels than some girls, subverting cisheteronormative and patriarchal attempts to gender clothing by suggesting that some women may in fact be dressing like them. Similarly, Dan capitalised on an individualist consumer narrative to subvert the idea that nail varnish belongs to women, placing ownership of such products in the hands of private individuals with the right to consumer what they want. His post again elicited support from the group, with one response from Tim asking: ‘did you expect much else from discreet horny?’, arguably reducing the aggressor’s effort to uphold cisheteronormative standards of respectability to internalised homophobia.



*Figure 3: Dressing like a boy
Opt-in consent for use of image provided by the participant*

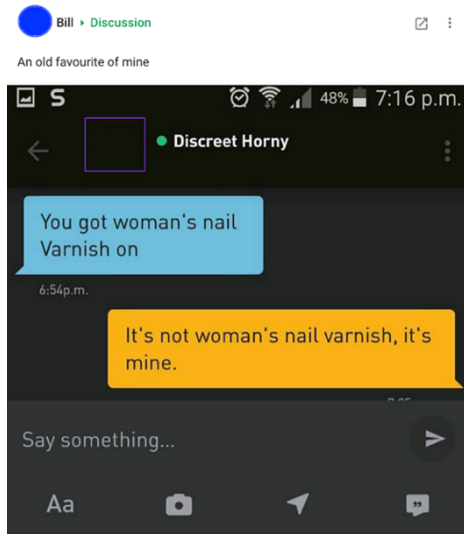


Figure 4: My nail varnish
Opt-in consent for use of image provided by the participant

The Queering Masculinity group also made visible lived experiences in tension with racialised attitudes across MSM cultures. My sample included two people of colour, Sajid, as mentioned, and RH, a self-identifying gay black man from and living in an urban area of South West England. Both had expressed issues with racism within the community, particularly from white men online. Sajid shared a confrontational message from someone asking if he was white, despite the fact that his profile description and profile picture clearly demonstrated otherwise (Figure 5). Again, other members of the group commented in solidarity against racism. Sajid expressed feeling somewhat ‘entertained’ by the ridiculousness of the question, a sentiment shared and affirmed by RH, the only other person of colour on the group, who responded ‘priceless’. During our interviews, Sajid also shared some abusive messages he had received on Grindr. One of the messages, which was completely unsolicited, responded to Sajid’s updated profile picture saying he was “still an ugly p*** fuck” (Figure 6). Another, which Sajid received after trying to start a conversation with someone, told him to fuck off, again using the racial slur p*** (see Figure 7).

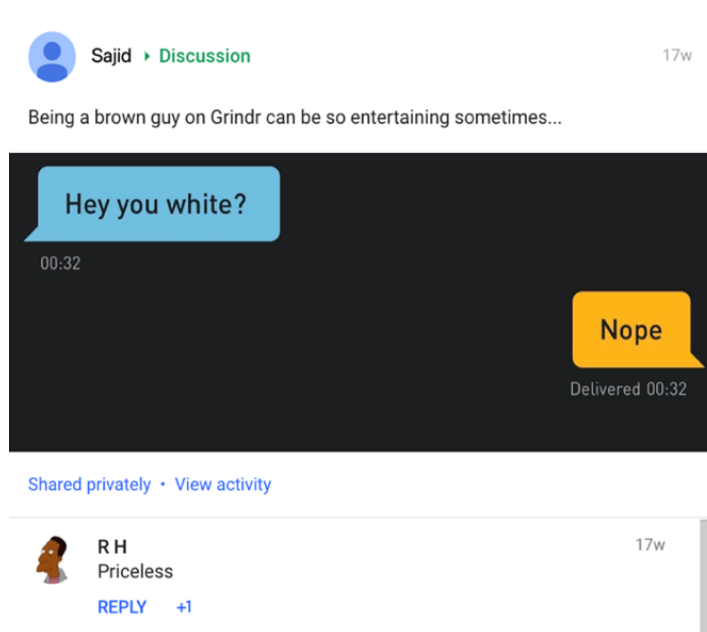


Figure 5: 'Being a brown guy on Grindr can be so entertaining sometimes'
 Opt-in consent for use of image provided by the participant

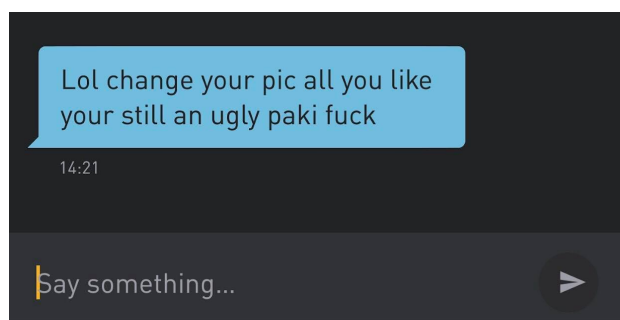


Figure 6: Racist abuse on Grindr
 Opt-in consent for use of image provided by the participant

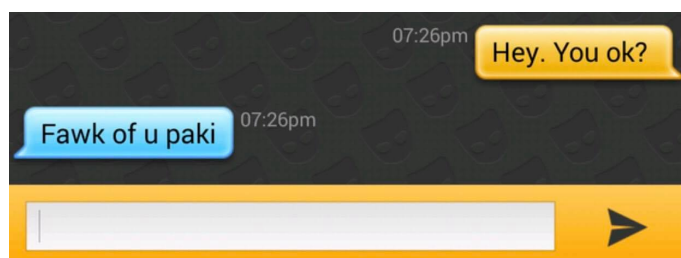


Figure 7: Racist abuse on Grindr
 Opt-in consent for use of image provided by the participant

Such encounters with racism are of course nothing new. A quick google image search for racism on Grindr will bring up an array of explicitly racist profiles and messages,

dehumanising people of colour as sexually socially, politically and culturally undesirable. The challenges raised also speak to the existing discussions around racism and femmephobia prevalent across on and offline LGBTQIA+ communities, particularly gay communities. However, what interested me here was how the Queering Masculinity group affirmed difference, enabling the participants' bodies to flow free from such homonormative constraints – a point I will return to in my later discussion around humour. As with Vince's gayming connections, it afforded a means of navigating narrow normative definitions of what it means to be LGBTQIA+. Building on existing work around homonormativity, such definitions emerged as heavily racialised and gendered, making present the history of homonormativity operating to centre white affluent gender normative gay men. However, connections on the group enabled possibilities of navigating oppression. While such becomings with group do not erase the hate encountered elsewhere, they afford insights into how connections on one site may afford a sense of belonging necessary for navigating another. The femmephobia and racism reported, while undeniably oppressive, does not define or contain bodies; it does not have a single effect. Such connections, and all they affirm, are significant to understanding how such oppressive forces come to be navigated and embodied

6.2.1 Gendered and racialised economies of desire

Now that I have considered how the participants navigated explicit encounters with racism, femmephobia and transphobia online, which saw the participants othered as socially undesirable, I would like to move on to consider how such systems of oppression played out through the participants efforts to date and/or hook-up online. In line with the existing literature, throughout my efforts to recruit participants online, I came across many profiles stating exclusionary race and gender preferences, including but not limited to: 'white only', 'I like white twink', 'masc only', 'no fems', 'no blacks, no Asians', 'straight acting only', 'masc4masc', 'men, no fairies' and 'no flamboyant guys'. When I did come across profiles looking for feminine men and men of colour, inclusion was often conditional, premised on objectifying fetishising assumptions. For example, one profile stated, 'dominant aggressive top looking to humiliate femboys, sissies and trans women', while another was looking for 'BBC'

(big black cock). As such, it was of little surprise to hear the participants, both on the Queering Masculinity group, share encounters and anxieties around such prejudices in dating.

Sajid spoke at length about encounters with such sexual racism on Grindr. One of the most affective encounters with sexual racism he recalled was when he was using Grindr with friends on holiday. Upon glancing at a former friend's phone, Sajid saw himself filtered out of physical space.

I have a friend who I am no longer friends with. We'd gone to London... there were about 5 of us. We'd all logged onto Grindr at the same time and one of the other guys I was with asked him, 'why isn't Sajid on yours'. He was like, 'oh, I've got Grindr Xtra... I have like my filter set so it's just white people. He didn't understand how angering that was. We were like friends for a while after but every time we got drunk... I would bring it up... We are not really friends anymore because I just found that racist.

Apps like Grindr afford possibilities of queer visibility against heteronormativity, facilitating queer connections through allowing users to both see and be seen. However, confronted with the presence of a race filter, Sajid saw himself removed from such potential. He could see but he was not seen. Through becoming with his friend's and the app, he had been rendered placeless, erased from proximity as an undesirable commodity based on arbitrary characteristics of sexual and/or romantic consumption. This act of erasure was deeply felt, evoking tensions so strong that the encounter eventually led to an end of the friendship.

Sajid's encounter was somewhat unique in that such filters often remain private. Such anonymity, as Smith (2018b) identifies, affords the possibility of publicly performing colour-blindness but then discriminating when nobody is *thought* to be looking. However, when Sajid's becoming with Grindr became a communal activity, the contextual boundaries between these online and offline worlds collapsed. His ex-friend's colour-bound desires were rendered visible. The encounter, through affording knowledge of something that would have otherwise remained absent, challenged the

foundations of his friendship, disrupting a presence that depended on racial bias being hidden. Nevertheless, when navigating the world of dating, the possibility of such hidden prejudices was always felt.

Sajid drew attention to much ambivalence surrounding what constitutes sexual racism online, drawing attention to moments when he had been rejected for not being someone's type. While 'type' could signify a great number of attributes, as Sajid himself acknowledged, from his affective embodied perspective as a minority navigating sexual racism, the possibility of sexual racism was ever-present. 'Type' can and often does involve race, so it is perhaps of little surprise that rejection would trigger such sensitivity to race. Going back to Phua and Kaufman (2003), no mention of race, far from automatically demonstrating openness, can simply mark a privileged position of being blind to the significance of race in dating. Sajid, as a person of colour, is denied the possibility of being colour-blind when faced with uncertainty surrounding rejection. Deeply affective and embodied personal and collective pasts made present render him race conscious, even in situations when race is not made explicit. People of colour are sensitive to such hierarchies of desire in ways that white people are not because white people get to navigate the dating scene without racist abuse or being othered as undesirable on the basis of race. When faced with rejection or a profile with no mention of race, white people get to be blind to the ways that race can and does come to matter, even when nobody talks about it.

The Queering Masculinity group again emerged as a space for affirming difference, contesting discriminatory preferences. RH shared a post calling out the hypocrisy of white gay men's calls for gay equality while stating exclusionary preferences on their profiles (Figure 8). Another participant, Prince, shared a post about Grindr's new voice feature (Figure 9), raising collective anxieties and concerns around how voice could be used as a yet another means to discriminate those that fail to live up to arbitrary hegemonic standards of masculinity. During the interviews, attitudes toward such issues raised on the group, while acknowledging that gendered and racial biases exist, stood in opposition to ruling out entire groups of people based on arbitrary characteristics.

Vince: I am fine with people having preferences but straight out rejecting anyone, refusing to talk to anybody, or even trying to meet anybody because of their skin colour, their femininity or their masculinity, it's just sad really... It's fine to have preferences but systematically rejecting other people for their race or for how they act is just sad.

Ross: I can say that on the whole, all the men I've been in relationships have been white. I might not think about it but I clearly have some predisposition to white people... I see it as conditioning from being young... The typical view of beauty that's perpetuated by the media is typically a white person, so when you are fed that a young age, that's what you're then subconsciously thinking when you're growing up.

Ross, while acknowledging he had a type, refused to 'rule out people that don't fit it'. When asked about filters, he said, 'I would get rid of the filter... You can still choose not to talk to people that you don't find attractive'. While reflecting on biases emerging from past experience, he remained open to the possibility of dating racial out-groups and felt that filtering closed down such potential. Furthermore, he contested the idea that such preferences were fixed essential asocial and ahistorical characteristics, situating his lived experience within a wider society and culture that centres whiteness.



Figure 8: White gay hypocrisy

Image in the public domain and used, in line copyright legislation, for comment and review

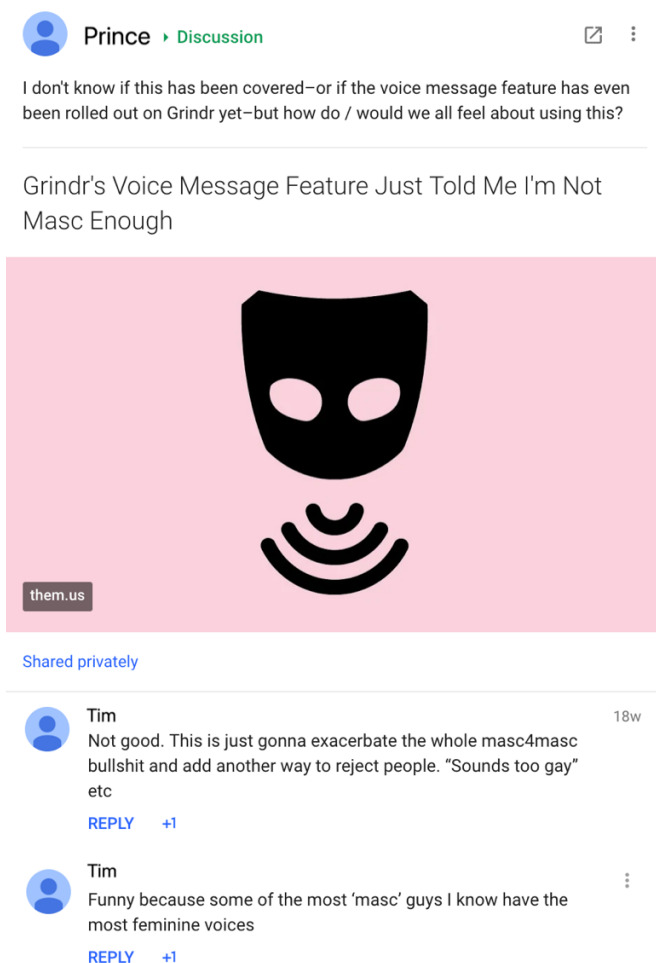


Figure 9: Gay voice

The post was generated on the researcher-solicited group for the sole purpose of this project. Opt-in consent provided by all members of the group.

When it came to resisting racialised economies of desire, knowledge emerged as a tool for empowerment. Reflecting on experiences of sexual racism, Sajid drew on knowledge acquired through his academic background in psychology to deconstruct the legitimacy of racial preferences that excluded people like him.

I feel like I come at it from a bit of a psychological point of view.... I know that a lot of attraction is based on familiarity so my issue with the whole ‘no blacks, no Asians or whatever’ isn’t necessarily about a preference but about people pigeoning themselves into dating exclusively outside of that. Firstly, they are being discriminatory based on the colour of someone’s skin, but also,

they are not allowing themselves to change or develop their preferences.... I'm just a bit like 'oh ok, well, you are a white person from the middle of Wales, like of course you've not exposed yourself to different race because it's just not there'.

When I asked whether he felt this way before studying psychology, he responded:

No, I was very much persuaded by the research...Before studying social science I would have just been like this is my experience and view of reality and that's how I was born

Drawing on psychology, Sajid drew attention to the wealth of literature linking preferences to familiarity and exposure, which, as earlier discussed, has documented a great deal of fluidity and mobility around racial attachments. For Sajid, having a preference was not the issue per se. Rather, what he took issue with was the essentialisation of preferences as something immutable, asocial and ahistorical, noting how exposure to difference can operate to challenge embodied assumptions that produce discriminatory desires.

The gendered and racialised economies of desire reported in here do not free from the racist and femmephobic encounters reported in the previous section of this chapter. As the participants themselves recognised, they are situated in personal and collective histories that have operated to limit possibilities of connection and centre white affluent gender normative bodies. Becomings with, and made present on, the Queering Masculinity group operated to decentre essentialised notions of preferences. They raised consciousness around normative constructions of desire, reinforced through technology (e.g., Grindr's voice function). Such products of consciousness raising were embodied, even by the one participant that recognised his own bias but refused to be defined by it, acknowledging its situated nature and remaining open to re-configuration. His position raised some interesting questions around the malleability of desire. As earlier discussed, some have questioned the malleability of racial preferences (Crockett 2015), with Orne (2017) arguing that a complete denial of racial preferences depends on a colour-blind rhetoric. However, essentialised notions of fixed desire amount to a colour-boundness, operating to limit reflections and practices

necessary for transforming such positions. After all, filtering users based on arbitrary characteristics limits exposure the bodies that could call existing biases into question.

6.2.2 Reclaiming the black trans and gender diverse intersectional roots of pride

Thus far in this chapter, I have considered how the participants came to navigate and contest gendered and racialised homonormativities, de-centring commodified cultures, both online and offline, to affirm queer intersectional excesses of desire. As the with the efforts to contest cisheteronormativity, opportunities for community building and identity work online again afforded opportunities for producing and distributing counter-knowledges – the most significant being the sharing of a post reclaiming black trans and gender diverse intersectional roots of pride. The post, shared by Sajid on the Queering Masculinity group, paid homage to the gay liberation activist Marsha P. Johnson, a black trans sex worker (Figure 10). It centred a history that is often forgotten, whitewashed and erased through a homonormative and cisnormative commercialised LGBTQIA+ culture. The erasure of this past is arguably epidemic of the very power relations that saw the participants navigate racism and femmephobia across LGBTQIA+ communities, operating to limit flows of desire that questioned the stability a gendered and racialised gay male subject. However, making this past present operated to destabilise racialised, gendered and classed notions of historical continuity.¹⁵

The post had gone viral across Facebook, Tumblr and Twitter, eliciting attention from not only Sajid on the group but many others elsewhere. Up until seeing Cole's social media post, I had only ever heard of Johnson through participating in niche activist circles and reading queer history. Their name had of course circulated across various

¹⁵ While, as earlier discussed, there are various issues surrounding reducing such historical figures to historically contingent identity categories, the post nevertheless highlighted an intersectional queer discontinuity displacing dominant homonormative and cisnormative narratives. While there is some debate around Marsha's participation in the Stonewall riots and their specific role within the gay liberation movement (Kohler 2020), there is no denying that they, along with the likes of Sylvia Rivera, played an active role in the movement (Cohen 2008; Stryker 2017).

media, but this was the first time I had *personally* witnessed their name go mainstream. Cole's post appeared to mark a significant moment in which Marsha's name re-entered public discourse, generating much affective intensity through the power of hashtags, comments, likes and shares. As earlier discussed, such social media trends have the *potential* to elicit mass media interest (Chadwick 2013; Tucker et al. 2018). Since Cole's post, PinkNews appears to have taken a more active interest in Johnson. A Google search for Marsha's name on the PinkNews website generates three times more results in the two years following the post than the two years preceding it. Soon after the post went viral, I came across several news articles centring the historical figure. Just days after, Metro news published a story paying remembrance and tribute to the activist (Lindsay 2018). Less than a month later, PinkNews ran a story on the history of Stonewall, reflecting on Johnson's and Rivera's contributions to the LGBTQIA+ movement. Since then, I have regularly been exposed to the activists' names through both news articles and general online/offline public discussions.

Pride exists because of a woman.
Pride exists because of a black woman.
Pride exists because of a black trans woman.
Pride exists because of a black trans woman who was a sex worker.
Pride exists because of a black, bisexual trans woman who was a sex worker that threw a brick at a cop.
Pride exists because of a black, bisexual trans woman, who was a sex worker, that threw a brick at a cop and started a riot against the state.

Her name was **Marsha** P. Johnson.

Don't lose this month in rainbow capitalism and unabashed racism because of the privilege of being white while queer.

If you aren't supporting the queer people of color, trans women, and queer sex workers, you aren't celebrating pride, you are celebrating rainbow capitalism and police brutality.

Post originator is: Kadence Cole

Shared to me by: Jeffrey Tice



Figure 10: Reclaiming Pride

Image in the public domain and used, in line copyright legislation, for comment and review

Nevertheless, my effort to make sense of the intensity of such a post beyond the group is heavily situated in social networks and activity through which exposure to such media content is algorithmically generated. Before seeing Cole's post, I had become increasingly involved in radical queer politics online. As such, it is possible that my witnessing of a proliferation of attention paid to Marsha was somewhat of a coincidence. However, given what we know about the power of trending social media to elicit mass media interest, it would not be unsurprising if the post, or others like it, had triggered a media response. As discussed throughout the existing literature, the production and consumption of knowledge through social media and mass media have

become inextricably entwined. The parameters of what is newsworthy is increasingly influenced by social media trends, producing shifts in public discourse extending beyond social media. Possibilities of community building, identity work and knowledge production afforded *with* the internet emerge not only through becoming online but also through becoming with wider offline social-material-cultural relations that are moved through online worlds materialising offline. While Cole's post may not have directly sparked media interest, it nevertheless marked a presence of a wider affective force against homonormativity that appears to be intensifying and pushing parameters around what is considered newsworthy.

While I would question the impact of the post given that it emerges in tension with productions of knowledge and normative configurations of bodies and desire that continue to circulate against marginalised intersections of the community, the once pervasive silence surrounding this past has been broken. The widespread circulation of this post, and others like it, thus builds on literature emphasising the participatory potential of digital media, affording new possibilities for activism in giving voice to those so often erased in the mainstream (Fileborn et al. 2019; Fileborn and Loney-Howes 2019; Freelon et al. 2016; LGBTQ Institute 2015; Liao 2019; Kuo 2018). It marks the presence of opportunities for pushing back against dominant discourse, producing knowledges that counter homonormative and cisnormative configurations of LGBTQIA+ identities and cultures, thus de-stabilising, frameworks of knowledge that seek to contain bodies and open up possibilities for bodies to flow, even if those flows must continue to navigate oppressive forces.

6.3 Laughing in the face of oppression: Humour as a mechanism of defence and resistance against homonormative femmephobia and racism online

Now that I have considered how the participants navigated homonormative and cisnormative histories and practices with digital media, I want to move on to consider how humour emerged as a mechanism of defence and resistance. Thus far in this chapter, I have identified how connections online, made present on the researcher-

solicited group, affirmed difference. However, I want to expand my analysis of how this occurred by turning to humour, which was deeply embedded in many of the affective practices discussed. As discussed, the Queering Masculinity group saw normative gendered and racialised constructions of queer identity and desire contested. One thing that struck me throughout my observations and analysis was how humour emerged as a deeply affectively means of both coping and producing and distributing knowledge. Returning to Sam's post capturing someone asking him why he was dressed like a girl (Figure 2) and Sajid's post of an encounter with someone asking if he was white (Figure 4), we might consider how humour emerged as a means of deconstructing oppressive assumptions, rendering such encounters non-sensical. For instance, when the participants spoke of being able to walk better in heels than some women, joking about those women dressing like them, they deployed humour to punch up at heteronormative beauty standards, subverting any kind of natural alignment between sex and gender expression. Similarly, when Sajid was 'entertained' by someone asking if he was white, a sentiment share by RH through the response 'priceless', racism encountered online was reduced to an object of ridicule.

Humour often emerged among the participants. Returning to the issue of race preferences, humour was deployed by RH on the Queering Masculinity group as a means of challenging racial fetishisation. In response to Sajid's post about the encounter on Grindr, RH joked about people asking questions about black men's penises, responding to the fetishising question of 'is it true what they say about black guys?' with 'yes I love KFC' (Figure 11). While making use of an objectifying racialised stereotype that reduces black people to loving fried chicken, that object was made subject in a reclamation of power that used humour as an affective strategy to defy the legitimacy of the question. RH's deployment of the stereotype of fried chicken defied contextual cues to produce humour exposing the arbitrary and absurd nature of such questions. Sajid, in our interview, similarly joked about someone asking if they could like curry sauce off his abs.

I don't have abs, so that was the first confusing thing [we both laughed], and I was also just a bit like, I don't really know what to do with that.

He deployed self-deprecating humour about his lack of abs as a means of rendering the attack non-sensical. When I later drew attention to his use of humour, he responded “It’s easier in general to laugh things off that are offensive and portray to other people that it doesn’t actually upset you”. The old saying ‘if you cannot laugh, you will cry’ came to mind. Far from passive, the ability to ‘laugh things off’ was consciously deployed, socially and politically, as a means of performing strength, to both himself and other, against racism.

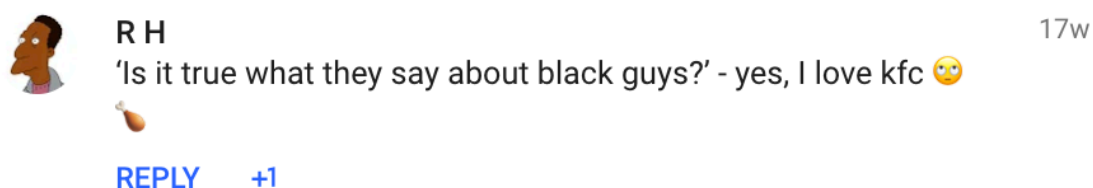


Figure 11: Racial fetishization

The post was generated on the researcher-solicited group for the sole purpose of this project. Opt-in consent provided by all members of the group.

The humour circulating among the participants did not stop here. On the Queering Masculinity group, Tim shared a post he had come across on Twitter, which challenged the well documented femmophobia expressed by many queer men. The Tweet ridiculed masculine defenders of homonormativity not for being masculine but rather for projecting internalised shame and insecurities around being seen as gay and feminine on to others (Figure 12). It drew on irony as a satirical device to mock the now somewhat cliché straight-acting archetype, highlighting how no amount of sport negates the queerness of a man having sex with another man. Eliciting crude visceral sexual imagery reminiscent of that which can easily be found in gay porn, the post juxtaposed the affective intensity of the taboo surrounding such sexual encounters against futile efforts to assimilate and appear normative. The tweet marked the emergence of a queer gaze, queering cisheteromascularity. Charged with humour, the post elicited a strong affective response with 6000 likes and 1400 re-tweets. Its capacity to affect was intense, resonating with Tim through his compulsion to share it with the group. A similar affective response was triggered by a profile caption Sajid had come across on Grindr, which he reported sharing on social media. The profile

read, ‘if you can’t handle my yaas then you can’t handle my aaasss’ (Figure 13). In our interview, he argued, “I thought it was really nice. It was very much like, ‘I don’t care that I’m camp, deal with it!’” The affective pull of the profile, capturing attention and triggering his compulsion to share, exemplified through the caption ‘this might be the best Grindr profile I’ve ever read 😂’. His becoming with digital media challenging homonormativity was again charged with humour.



Figure 12: Not like those other gays
 Opt-in consent for use of image provided by Twitter user

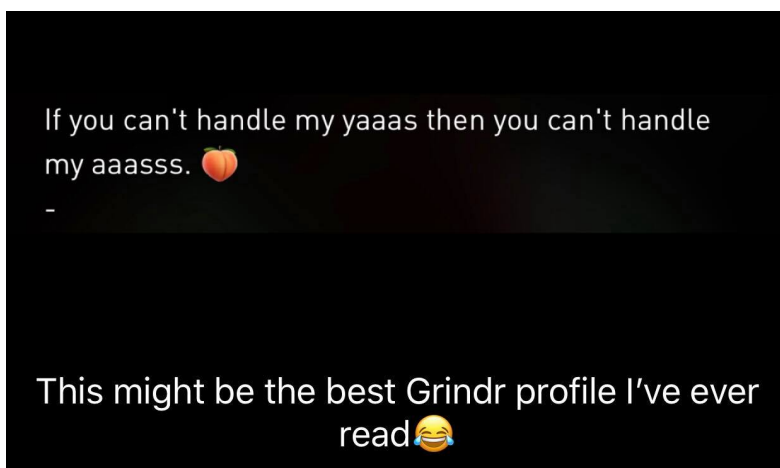


Figure 13: Best Grindr profile ever
 Opt-in consent for use of image provided by the participant

Such emergence of humour as a means of defence and resistance provides empirical data that responds to several different strands of theorising around the affective potential of humour. Humour should not be taken as trivialising the seriousness of oppression, as is sometimes assumed when people make light of pain and suffering. Instead, in grappling with the complexities of humour, we should consider possibilities of becoming afforded with it. On a psychological level, humour afforded the participants with a means of grappling with personal and collective traumas felt and embodied through exposure to systemic acts of (symbolic) violence online. It enabled them to laugh at the absurd and non-sensical nature of racism and femmephobia encountered online. Laughing in the face of oppression emerged as a defence mechanism, holding the participants together to productively navigate negative affective narratives. Such humour, even when self-deprecating, was far from passive or defeatist, operating as a means of subverting and reclaiming power to afford possibilities of continuity *against* oppression. As Freud (1963) argued,

...humour is a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that interfere with it; it acts as a substitute for the generation of these affects, it puts itself in their place.

As Dundes and Hauschild (1988) note in reference to gallows humour, i.e., humour derived from desperate and hopeless situations, laughter can afford an outlet for relieving tension around issues that are otherwise too big and too painful to confront and discuss.¹⁶

Gallows humour has been observed throughout history, made present among the likes of marginalised groups confronting genocide (Dundes and Hauschild 1988; Hillenbrand 1995; Üngör and Verkerke 2015) and HIV+ positive gay men confronting state sanctioned loss, death and oppression during HIV/AIDS epidemics (Ware 2019). Sajid's comment about it being easier to laugh things *off* that are offensive speaks to this body of work around humour. Such humour afforded deflection necessary to *empower* Sajid to better cope and survive against the harsh realities of oppression.

¹⁶ Of course, such humour, as Dundes and Hauschild (1988) identify, belongs to the hanged not the hangmen. Had I, as a white man, made light and laughed at Sajid's experiences, humour would have taken on a very different form, operating to further marginalise rather than resist.

Under such circumstances, humour can function as a “form of bravado, a kind of necessary defence mechanism, designed to articulate genuine fears and at the same time partly allay these fears through humour” (Dundes and Hauschild 1988, p.56). Writing about the Holocaust, Gross and Rohr (2010) argue that the provocative arts like comedy, often considered a lower form of representation and critique, can be “part of a widespread strategy of approximating, through emotional intensity, an event whose enormity seems to place it beyond our representational means” (p.74). Comedy can render the unspeakable speakable, affording an outlet for painful experiences. However, the affective potential of humour I observed extended beyond just coping and resolving 'internal' conflict. Its emergence subverted notions of a stable subject, producing counter-knowledges destabilising the very social-material-cultural relations with which the psyche, always open to reconfiguration, emerges.

Humour and ridicule emerged across my data as an effective strategy for disrupting existing power dynamics, with the participants' laughter punching up at oppression. As such, the data generated builds on work emphasising the broader subversive potential of humour (Hart 2007; Pahl 2017; Sørensen 2016). Humour afforded power to re-configure social-material-cultural relations that otherwise render marginalised groups feeling powerless. When considering humour and the possibilities of becoming afforded with it, there is of course a distinction to be made between jokes made by those that are oppressed and jokes made by oppressors (Dundes and Hauschild 1988; Sørensen 2016). As Sørensen identifies, humour is not inherently subversive; it often circulates to punch down at marginalised groups, thus operating to reinforce existing power relations and regulate bodies and desires (see also Billig 2005; Tsakona and Popa 2011; Xie et al 2022). However, humour can, as evidenced through my data, emerge as a powerful tool for challenging oppression.

My data also raises questions around the materiality of humour. Humour opened up possibilities of connection that exceed other modes of expression. Going back to Gross' and Rohr's (2010) point about humour approximating something beyond our representational means, we could say that humour emerged as a deeply affective mode of communication that compelled engagement. Laughter is often contagious, so much

so that its presence, whether heard, seen, or sensed through some other means, often triggers involuntary affective responses, even if only a smile from across the room. Laughter can move bodies to flow in unexpected ways. Of course, such becomings with laughter need not collapse into disembodied notions of affect. In thinking with Wetherell (2012), I would reject the idea of such affective responses existing completely outside of embodied meaning-making, as embodied knowledges or assumptions around why people are laughing are significant to how we become oriented to laughter and where laughter moves us. However, laughter arguably still triggers something that is more-than-representation – something made present through the intensity in which the politicised content deploying humour was shared and re-shared within and beyond the Queering Masculinity group. Humour emerged as a powerful force, intensified through becoming *with* digital media and technologies affording great possibilities of distribution across networks. Such possibilities of becoming with digital media and technologies made present on the group speaks to literature identifying how the affective potential of humour is enhanced through digital communication. Sørensen (2016), for instance, highlight new possibilities of circulating content online. Similarly, Rentschler and Thrift (2015) draw attention to how feminist activists, for example, “use humour and nurture other affective resonances to move feminism, not only technologically, via social media channels of distribution, but also emotionally and affectively” (p.240). As identified by the marketing organisation Ipsos (2013), funny content travels fast on the internet.

Through my becomings with the participants, humour emerged as a subversive force, both holding them together to better cope with the harsh realities of oppression while simultaneously, I would argue, affording a means of queering existing gendered and racialised power relations. Such possibilities of humour were intensified through becomings *with* digital media and technologies. Throughout this section, I have considered how the emergence of humour speaks to different strands of theorising on humour. I have considered how the data speaks to psychological insights around humour as a coping defence mechanism, affording self-continuity against oppression. I have also considered how the data builds on literature around humours broader social and material potential for subverting power relations that seek to contain marginalised

groups, thus de-stabilising notions of a stable subject. While contradictory, my data spoke to both strands of theorising, urging us to consider how such psychological defence mechanisms are necessary for holding marginalised individuals and groups together so that they have the strength to queer dominant social-material-cultural configurations of bodies, identities and desires. Nevertheless, while my data builds on work emphasising the subversive potential of humour, it does not stand against concerns around humour often operating to marginalise and regulate bodies. As Xie et al. (2020) identifies, humour is often deployed to re-affirm cisheteronormativity. As such, the emergence of humour among the participants is something that remains in tension with oppressive forces. Even though it afforded a means of navigating and contesting those forces, enhanced by digital media, it did not eradicate them. There are also unanswered questions around where the humour circulated, and how it is received by those objectified by it, a topic for discussion that I will return to in *chapter 8*. While humour marked an important means by which becomings with digital media affirmed difference, such possibilities, as earlier highlighted, do not flow free from the very internet that saw them confronted with femmephobia and racism. On this note, I will not move on to the final section of this chapter, where issues of cyberbullying had resulted in one participant having to detach from online communities.

6.4 Navigating transnormativity: Alienating connections and the prevailing power of offline connections

As testified by the participants becomings with digital media and technologies, the affirmative potential of connections established between and across LGBTQIA+ spaces online are far from even. However, thus far, through mapping out the participants' journeys, affirmative possibilities of connection did exist, and such connections are arguably necessary for understanding how oppressive forces come to be navigated and embodied, i.e., in the case of the data discussed thus far, rejected as an object of laughter. However, such opportunities for becoming with the internet do not emerge for everyone all the time. For Adele, navigating transnormativity had at

one stage proved too much, resulting in her disconnecting from trans communities online.

Adele spoke about her difficulty in finding trans communities online that were welcoming and supportive. She described many online communities as being characterised by what she defined as ‘toxic femininity’, with members projecting insecurities and ‘acting like being trans is a competition’. She reflected on some of these groups holding trans people to impossible standards that even her cisgender sister was unable to live up to. Given her experience, it will perhaps come of little surprise that these groups had come to emerge as a significant source of anxiety for Adele, so much so that one of her earliest experiences online had left her feeling alienated from the community for about a year.

I went to a website called 4chan... It was the most toxic thing I've ever been in... Someone would like to post their picture and people would like edit it to look more masculine... One of them got a boyfriend, and they were like ‘you're never going get a boyfriend because you don't pass, you're a? horrible brickie looking thing.’ And I just remember thinking like, I give up. That was one of my earliest experiences of the trans community, and I remember thinking I am really scared now; I really don't want to get involved in this community. I hate to say it, but for a long time, I did avoid getting involved in the community because that was such a horrible experience... But that's like one way in which the internet has done me a disservice because it exposed me to the worst aspects of the community straight away.

Affectively scarred by such acts of aggression, these experiences left Adele disillusioned with the community and made her reluctant to continue seeking out new connections.

Becoming with digital media and technologies had enabled other participants to flow free from many constraints of cisheteromascularity and commodified modes of resistance. However, for Adele, at this moment, connection established online had alienated her from the possibility of connecting with such affirmative communities.

While Adele, as highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, did eventually come to connect with communities online, connections I will be elaborating on in more detail in *chapter 8*, it again took meeting someone in the flesh for her to resolve anxieties and tensions produced through such transnormative politics of inclusion and exclusion. Adele spoke about how her best friend Sue had been instrumental in helping her re-negotiate a sense of belonging with trans communities online.

It wasn't until I met Sue that I realised that trans people were not all horrible....She introduced me to [better] Facebook groups and more members of the trans community and that's how I became more involved in the trans community. Because before I didn't really know any trans people apart from Alicia, and now I know lots of trans people. I'm very involved.

Getting to know Sue enabled Adele to re-build trust and break through embodied barriers to re-connect with online groups.

As such, in thinking about possibilities of queering cisheteromascularity with digital media, the question around from what and to what users connected again emerged as highly significant. In returning to the concept of bodies of water, becoming with digital media and technologies emerged here to limit possibilities of flow, producing trauma and anxiety that had limited Adele's opportunities for connection online. Her ability to flow free from those constraints and negotiate a sense of belonging with the community were actualised with connections offline. Possibilities of becoming were again heavily situated and embodied in offline space. Adele's experience adds to the literature around transnormativity, which, as earlier discussed, has highlighted how cisnormative measures of transness continue to be made present online. However, unlike say Miller (2018) who identifies how trans people contest such normativity on YouTube, the intensity of Adele's confrontation with transnormativity identifies moments in which such possibilities of participation are displaced. It urges us to consider how trans users, through such encounters, may not be able to re-negotiate connections with online communities, and how possibilities of participation in such online communities are relationally produced through connections established beyond the sites themselves.

6.5 Conclusion

My becomings with the participants again took me in many unexpected directions, leaving open many possible lines of inquiry, including but not limited to online gaming and gayming cultures; the alt-right world of 4chan; and the platform politics, infrastructures, and moderation practices of hook-up/dating apps. Concerns around platform design and politics were not inconsequential. After all, filtering on Grindr had erased one participant from physical space, thus building on concerns around how such apps profit from commodifying users within gendered and racialised economies of desire (Licoppe 2015; Tziallas 2015). However, as outlined in my introduction to the chapter, what interested me was not the sites themselves, which had the potential to be relationally produced other depending on from what and too what users dis/connected, but rather the journeys within, between and across multiple sites. Through mapping out becomings elsewhere, both on and offline, I sought to develop an understanding of how the participants *came to* navigate and embody encounters *with* such platforms.

In this chapter, I have built on existing discussions around transnormativity and homonormativity, which, as identified in the existing literature, continue to be made present online. However, de-centring concerns around how such normative systems emerge and are contested within specific sites (Miller 2018; Robinson 2015; Siebler 2016), I have considered how the participants came to be oriented to interactions on such platforms through embodied becomings with others elsewhere. While the internet certainly emerged as a hostile environment for many, it also afforded possibilities of connection that affirmed difference, enabling bodies of water to flow free, even if only temporally, from normative constraints. The data generated marked many opportunities for community building, identity work and activism necessary for developing belonging and resilience against oppressive forces, with humour standing out as a particularly powerful affective force. Thinking with different strands of theorising around humour, I have contributed to existing feminist and LGBTQIA+ digital scholarship critically engaging with questions around the participatory potential of digital communication for marginalised intersections of the community.

Humour saw bodies of water constituted and re-constituted through affective flows of laughter emerging online. It operated to both hold bodies together and subvert dominant configurations of bodies, identities and desires. Nevertheless, read against the antagonistic forces humour emerged against, and existing literature urging us to consider how humour can also operate to regulate bodies and desires within normative frameworks, I have been careful to avoid overstating the emancipatory potential of humour. I have left open questions around where such humour circulates and how it is received by those objectified by it. Given that the mere presence of gender and racial difference within the community triggered homonormative and transnormative defence, it would seem irresponsible for me to assume that the humour, for all it affirmed, would cut through such barriers.

Chapter 7: Normative backlash against queer excess

The participants, for the most part, came to resist normative configurations of gender and sexuality. However, normative positions did *emerge*, revealing anxieties, of varying intensities, against queer excess. With the participants' embodied journeys emerging between worlds requiring incessant navigation of normative configurations of bodies, identities and desires, such emergences should come of little surprise. We are always relationally becoming *with* the world. As the participants' narratives have demonstrated, we do not exist outside of the social-material-cultural relations that constitute and re-constitute us and thus cannot, as Foucault (1978) argues, assume positions outside of power. In this chapter, I thus consider how such resistance came to re-produce normative positions among the participants. However, as the participants often affirmed difference, I draw on my wider auto/ethnographic encounters to make sense of bodies rendered absent from my project. In doing so, I further develop my understanding of the normative constraints the participants navigated. Here I start to address my last two research questions by exploring tensions that emerged from embodied feelings of separation and difference to make sense of why some bodies emerge as more fluid than others. While not always centring discussions around the digital, questions around embodiment, and the pasts made present through them, are important for understanding tensions that emerge online given that online activity does not flow free from embodied lived experiences.

I start the chapter by considering homo/trans normative and nationalist configurations of LGBTQIA+ identities that emerged among the participants – namely contentious issues surrounding desires to assimilate, opposition to religion at Pride, and claims that gender dysphoria is a definitive measure of being trans. Following this, I go on to consider how the rainbow Pride flag emerged as a heavily contested gendered and racialised symbol, both among my participants and those I encountered through my wider auto/ethnographic encounters. In this section, I explore a contested desire for unity against a perceived threat of community fragmentation, with efforts to change

the flag and organise alternative Pride events positioned as divisive. I then return to the issue of gendered and racialised economies of desire. While the participants of the group challenged essentialised constructions of gender and racial sexual ‘preferences’, such perspectives emerged as heavily contested through my wider auto/ethnographic observations, with many deploying born this way narratives to justify their desires. I finish the chapter by considering how many of the wider community affective attachments and tensions observed beyond the activity of the participants were rendered present through the absence of many that refused to take part in this project because of my use of the word queer. Here I explore how queer emerged as a contested term, with many rejecting or simply failing to identify with it, considering a potential class gap that emerged around opportunities for queering masculinity in the digital age.

Throughout this chapter, I again think with Walkerdine’s and Jimenez’s (2012) notion of ‘communal beingness’. In doing so, I avoid foreclosing my analysis by reducing the participants and those I encountered through my auto/ethnographic observations to the normative positions themselves in considering possibilities of becoming afforded *with* them. In doing so, I think beyond literature around internalised homophobia and internalised transphobia (Bockting 2015; Frost and Meyer 2009; Lanzieri and Hildebrandt 2011), which reduces efforts to navigate oppression to lack. In thinking about embodied negative attitudes and practices towards queering gender and sexuality, I move away from thinking about such embodiments as just self-deprecating towards thinking about them as self-preserving. I again respond to discussions around homonormativity and transnormativity. However, in this chapter, I take a critical stance against work separating the queer from the normative (Elia 2003; Nash 2013). In thinking about homonormative and transnormative drives towards assimilation (Duggan 2002; Vipond 2015), I respond to work questioning an often-constructed binary between assimilation and liberation (Ahmed 2004; Puar 2007). I do so by building on work highlighting how possibilities of queering gender and sexuality can be situated in deeply affective traumatic personal and collective histories producing uneven possibilities of becoming (Binswanger and Zimmermann 2018), particularly in the rural post-industrial parts of the region I was recruiting from

(Walkerdine and Jiminez 2012). While it is undeniable, as Duggan identifies, that LGBTQIA+ 'progress' has privileged bodies causing minimal disruption to existing cisheteronormative hierarchies, I question the extent to which those bodies have actually assimilated in considering anxieties navigated that cisgender and heterosexual people do not have to navigate.

Nevertheless, as this chapter relies heavily on data generated through my auto/ethnographic encounters, centring fleeting interactions affording limited knowledge of the wider contexts through which the interactions emerged, my analysis throughout this chapter is often speculative. I justify the need for speculation as a means of avoiding making reductive assumptions around who and what was made present to me online. Given my limited recruitment of rural non-university educated youths, it seemed necessary to consider the existence of different contexts, even if data around those contexts was limited. However, the issues around data limitations cannot be ignored. As such, I conclude the chapter with a critical reflection of the challenges I faced trying to make sense of the fleeting interactions. In doing so, I contribute to digital research methodologies literature, treating uncertainty as data that builds on work emphasising a need to generate data around wider offline embodied contexts to better understand that made present online (Adams-Santos 2020; Hine 2015; Wittel 2000). As recommended by Hine (2015), I embrace the uncertainty around who and what was present as a means of avoiding reducing those observed to normative positions. In doing so, I leave open other lines of inquiry beyond notions of internalised oppression and assimilation. However, I acknowledge that more data around the wider offline contexts of those rendered absent is needed to further ground my analysis.

7.1 Emerging homo/trans normative and nationalist positions among the participants

While the participants, for the most part, resisted normative configurations of gender and sexuality, such configurations were, on occasion, re-produced. Ross, for instance, shared a post with the Queering Masculinity group asking the other participants about

their experiences of Pride events because he had not yet been to one and was trying to convince his boyfriend to go with him (Figure 14). The comments were positive, describing Pride as an anxiety relieving ‘wholesome celebration’ (Tim) where LGBTQIA+ people could feel ‘like one big family’ (John). Of course, for reasons made present both in the existing literature and throughout my findings, the idea of such mainstream events being anxiety relieving could be contested. Opportunities for belonging within such events, are of course far from evenly distributed – a point I will return to shortly. Nevertheless, it was clear that such events, for all the critiques of commercialisation, afforded these participants with a sense of community belonging and containment against the ‘outside’ world. However, from speaking to Ross about it in our interview, it became clear that such events can emerge as anxiety inducing, not because of the politics of inclusion and exclusion that surround them but because of a desire to assimilate.

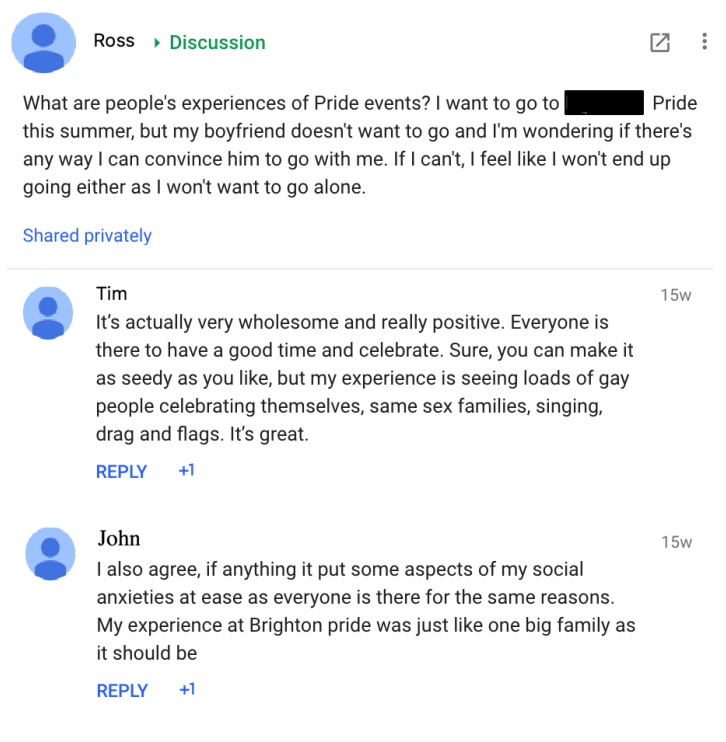


Figure 14: Pride

The post was generated on the researcher-solicited group for the sole purpose of this project. Opt-in consent provided by all members of the group.

Ross said that he and his boyfriend felt that many people attending Pride events were *too* sexual, and that they felt the goal of Pride should be to assimilate.

...you see like people wandering around in jock straps and harnesses and just sexualizing it... The whole point of pride is to tell everyone that we are there but... telling everyone 'We are like you too'... Why do we have to reduce it to sexuality? ... Is that a helpful stereotype?

What struck me here was not the aversion to such open expressions of sexuality. Public displays of sexuality can easily cross boundaries of consent, and as de Lappe (2018) identifies in their work with asexual communities, a heavy emphasis on sex at such events can be alienating for many people. However, the thing that drew me to this comment was the idea that we should be striving to be like everyone else, with such open displays of sexuality othered as a harmful stereotype. Read against a society and culture littered with heterosexualised images for a cishet 'male gaze' (Mulvey 2013), I was drawn to the idea that such displays of sexuality marked gay men as different. After all, such comments emerge from a culture that has borne mass witness to likes of Britney Spears performing '*I'm a slave 4 u*' and Rhianna performing '*S&M*'. Cisheteronormativity certainly sees such expressions of sexuality othered as 'too sexual'. However, such definitions are selectively applied. We live in a world where drag queen story time is 'too sexual' for kids, with the gender nonconforming AMAB performers othered by critics as inappropriate at best, sexual predators and paedophiles at worst (Canham 2020; Hussain 2020 West 2018). Meanwhile, the female popstars they often impersonate are thoroughly embedded in our culture. Such double standards were not missed among the participants. Tim, on the Queering Masculinity group, shared a post calling out double standards surrounding public displays of affection (Figure 15). Nevertheless, irrespective of whether such expressions of sexuality are actually significantly different does not change the fact that they are othered as such. Ross' desire to distance himself from such open displays of sexuality afforded possibilities of navigating oppressive forces that heterosexuals do not have to navigate. It enabled him to become one of 'the good gays' (Warner 2000), which inevitably involves causing minimal disruption to cisheteronormativity. However, for the reasons highlighted, I would question the extent to which this process involves becoming just like everyone else.



Figure 15: Double standards

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Another normative position that arose among the participants pertained to concerns around the presence of religion at Pride events. Following heated online discussions I had observed around a proposed Muslim Gay Pride event in London, I shared an article with the Queering Masculinity group about gay Muslims feeling excluded from mainstream Pride events (Figure 16). The article was not well received. Tim responded, ‘when faith so often precludes acceptance of what is different, is there much surprise?’. Going back to Walkerdine and Jiminez (2012), we might consider how a sense of ‘communal beingness’ affording pride against shame has been maintained by shutting religion out. Tim’s response to the post is situated in a long history of queerphobia carried out in the name of religion – a history by which many have been personally traumatised. As such, othering religion, in many ways, provides ontological security and continuity against the uncertainty of centuries of queerphobic violence carried out in god’s name. Of course, there are power implications involved in this process that we cannot ignore. Such need for security and continuity has been

exploited through the pinkwashing of homonationalist and transnationalist discourse racializing such threats as a problem ‘over there’. Returning to the work of Puar (2007), such anxieties, and the rhetoric emerging from them, operates to exclude intersectional bodies caught between religion and LGBTQIA+ communities. It is arguably the existence of those very bodies that afford possibilities for contesting the institutional power of religion, given that they mark possibilities of religious embodiment that are not held in opposition to LGBTQIA+ people. Ironically, an increased presence of religious people supporting LGBTQIA+ people arguably has the potential to relieve the anxiety expressed by Tim, rendering his opposition to religion at pride somewhat self-fulfilling. Nevertheless, thinking about what such fear of religion does allows us to decentre Tim as homonormative and understand how such a position affords possibilities of navigating the uncertainty of deeply affective cisheteronormative histories.

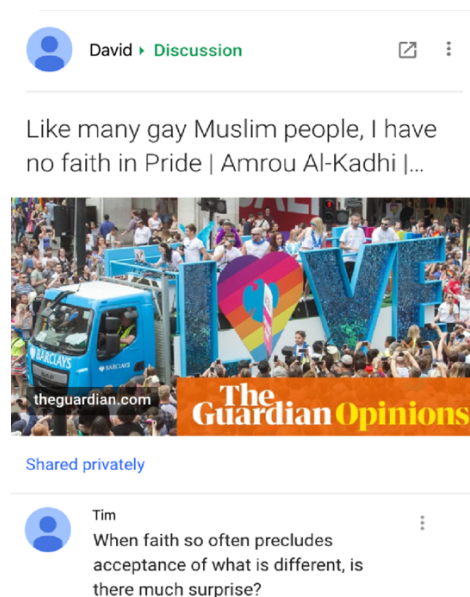


Figure 16: Muslims at Pride

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In terms of gender identity, a transnormative position was assumed by Adele in opposition to efforts to move away from gender dysphoria as a definitive measure of being trans.

Some say they have gender euphoria instead of gender dysphoria, so they don't feel particularly dysphoric about their own birth gender but when they present as female or male or whatever, they feel euphoric and that's how they realise they are trans.

Adele drew attention to people claiming to embody gender euphoria, which in line with many queer theoretical developments, seems to re-articulate earlier understandings of transness as lack within a vitalist framework. However, Adele opposed this. She felt *some* type of dysphoria was necessary to qualify as trans.

I'm not saying that you have to have all the forms of dysphoria, to be exactly the same as me, in order to count as trans. I think probably a lot of these people do have dysphoria but don't recognise it because there is still something that is driving them to transition or present as trans... They must have something that makes them uncomfortable in the first place... A lot of people seem to think that non-binary people don't have dysphoria but a lot of them do... What I am not saying is that they have to have specific forms of dysphoria. You get people who might be socially dysphoric but not particularly physically dysphoric, or it's the other way around. With me I'm sadly physically dysphoric and socially dysphoric.

Adele's assumptions were heavily rooted in her own embodied position. While she did acknowledge trans embodiments that differed from her own, she was unable to understand how being and becoming trans could be grounded in something solely euphoric. Adele had a strong desire to medically transition and pass. As discussed throughout the existing literature, such narratives of what constitutes 'trans enough' have led to many tensions online (Miller 2018). Again, there are power implications in assuming such a position that cannot be ignored. Such a position could be understood to mark what Serono (2007) defines as 'gender entitlement', i.e., an assumption about gender. "homogenizing assumption about who people are" (p.244) operating to reinforce a medicalised gender binary. Nevertheless, what interested me here was the possibilities of becoming affording with such a position.

Adele's position spoke to well documented anxieties around moves to expand the diverse experiences of trans people under the "catch-all phrase of transgender" (Namaste 2005, p.2). This shift, as earlier discussed, has been rejected by many for failing to represent the specificity of trans people's medical and social service needs.

Adele: There's a lot of anxiety amongst the trans community that if we keep pushing this you don't need to have dysphoria to be trans narrative, then those services are going to be harder to get.

Here anxieties are not completely unwarranted. As Wilchins (1997) cited in Elliot (2010) notes, a poll of surgeons revealed that most would refuse medical intervention without medical sanctioning. The idea of lack, while heavily contested for marginalising gender diverse experiences beyond dysphoria, remains pertinent to many trans people. The queering of transnormative positions in a cisnormative world thus poses a threat – a threat that is navigated through defending medicalising narratives. While trans scholars are working towards challenging existing rigid frameworks gatekeeping access to gender-affirming medical interventions (Pasley et al. 2020), at present, gatekeeping persists, understandably producing angst to be navigated.

In this section, I have mapped out multiple moments in which normative positions were assumed by the participants, which again saw me pushed and pulled in many directions. However, what interested me as I moved between and across these emergences in the data generated was the anxieties surrounding queer excess. Opposing such excess, in numerous ways, operated to maintain positions affording continuity against oppressive cisheteronormative forces. Such positions inevitably reproduce a politics of inclusion and exclusion that, like cisheteronormativity, has operated to marginalise those that queer boundaries. However, they emerge as a means of navigating and surviving against that very marginalisation. Such identity and community attachments, as I will now go on to discuss, emerged as particularly strong against efforts to change the Pride flag.

7.2 The Pride flag: A contested symbol

Given the various tensions within and across LGBTQIA+ communities on and offline, it will perhaps come of little surprise that the Pride flag emerged as a heavily contested symbol among the participants. After following heavily polarised online discussions around LGBTQIA+ media and mass media news reports on efforts to re-design the Pride flag (Baggs 2019; Jackman 2019; Stroude 2019), I decided to post one of the reports to the Queering Masculinity group to elicit discussion. The article supported a re-design of the flag that sought to raise visibility around trans and LGBTQIA+ people of colour within the community. Tim, while recognising issues of racism and transphobia within the community, struggled to see the new flag as a solution to the problem. He questioned its effectiveness, asking ‘isn’t the rainbow supposed to represent everyone already?’ (Figure 17). His use of the word ‘supposed’ was an interesting one, marking somewhat of disjuncture between what the original symbol is supposed to do and what it actually does for those resisting it. Similarly, his reference to the intersectional roots of the movement, with the flag ‘championed by POC since its inception’, marked a disjuncture between what the flag was, who it was created by and for, and what it has become. Like the category gay, which as discussed, was once a lot to have in common (D’Emilio 1992), the flag no longer united the diverse bodies that once organised beneath it. Tim felt the new flag was divisive, although as he himself went on to acknowledge, such divisiveness already existed, with many gender-diverse intersectional bodies within the community long being made to feel unwelcome. Such sentiments were shared by Ross in our interview.

The way I see it is, when I think of LGBT people, I’m not thinking of just white people, so why do we have to segregate... When I think of the rainbow flag, I don’t think of it as the gay flag, I think of it as the LGBT flag so I already associate trans people and bisexuals with it.

For Ross, the flag already included everyone under the LGBT umbrella. However, such inclusivity was not felt by all the participants.



Shared privately



Tim

15w

Isn't the rainbow supposed to represent everyone already? It's meant to be all encompassing? I completely 100% understand and support the trans, bi flags and others to support separate identities, but I think the 6 coloured rainbow one is already there to represent all and does its job well. It's simple and effective and graphically/visually very powerful. I also don't feel it is exclusively for gays and lesbians - it's been associated with trans/queer/bi and others, not to mention being championed by POC since its inception. I don't think it needs changing.

REPLY +1



Tim

The fact it also mentions the brown, black and trans colours are separated because of their 'difference in meaning' seems to show and sort of 'us and them' mentality. But maybe I'm utopian - I guess a lot of trans folk or POC may feel the rainbow flag does not represent them. And a lot of white gays probably do not make them feel included whilst using the rainbow flag. As is well known, there's an awful lot of racism and misogyny in our community

REPLY +1

Figure 17: Daniel Quasar flag re-design

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Sajid, for instance, had a particularly strong affective response to Tim's comment on the article I shared during our follow-up walkthrough interview of the group. As soon as it came up, he said, 'I just find that really privileged. ...It's not that you are utopian, it's that you are just a bit privileged'. This was not the only time Sajid had come into conflict with something Tim had posted. Following a post from Jim, a gay cis man living from and living in an urban area of the South West, about racism he had encountered on one of the queer Facebook groups he followed, Tim responded, 'I don't

think any more commentary is needed about racism in the LGBT community. It's been said time and time over and it's disgusting' (Figure 18). While taking a strong stance against racism, the idea that no more commentary was needed triggered Sajid, who, in our interview said:

... that response, that really just annoyed me...I just thought it was very dismissive and it was very much like, don't shut down the conversation because you are like 'oh it's disgusting' because that's not really advancing anything...You are not someone who has to deal with it so don't say no commentary is needed.

Sajid disputed the validity of Tim's comment on the basis that he had limited experience to understand what needs be done to tackle the of issue. Sajid's becoming with the community, as earlier discussed, did not give him the option to switch off from such issues. Racism, for him, was immanent, ever-present within the community. Becoming with the flag, as a marker of that very community, did not afford the same opportunities. Whereas Tim had earlier highlighted Pride events as anxiety relieving, affording containment for bodies to flow against constraints of cisheteromascularity, such events, for Sajid, involved navigating many constraints emerging within the LGBTQIA+ community.

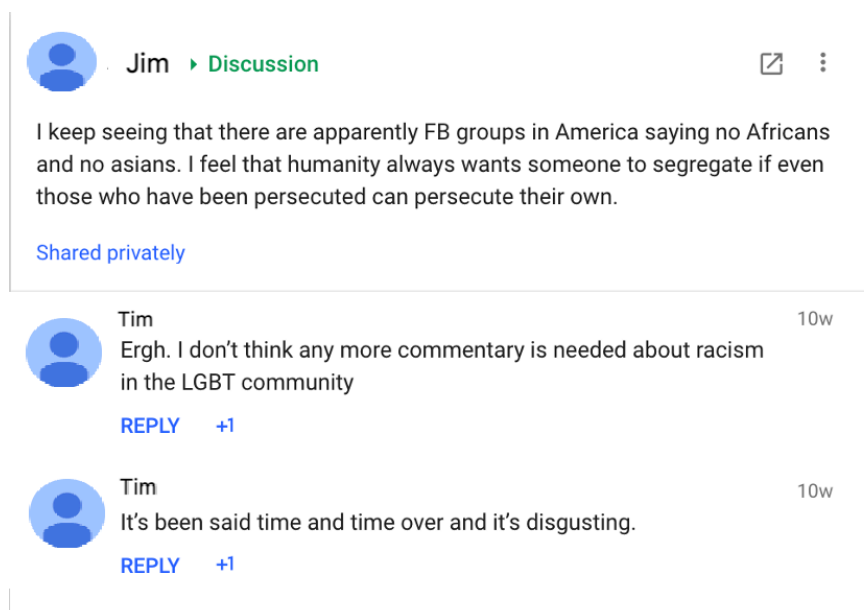


Figure 18: We already know racism is a problem

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The tensions around the flag and tackling racism that emerged between the participants resonated with those I had observed elsewhere, with efforts to tackle issues of racism and transphobia emerging as heavily polarising. The article I had shared on the group generated an affectively polarised response, eliciting over 1200 emoji reactions and over 500 comments (Figure 19). While most liked and loved the article, it nevertheless still elicited a strong negative affective response, with many angry emojis. Many also laughed at the post, although in this case, such laughter arguably operated to delegitimise the concerns of marginalised groups, which goes back to my earlier discussion around humour not being inherently subversive. Other LGBTQIA+ news reports about Manchester Pride’s decision to fly a flag with black and brown stripes (Jackman 2019; Stroude 2019) were met with similar affective response (Figure 20), producing much polarisation. Flood defences had again emerged against bodies of water threatening to de-stabilise normative positions.

All 1.2K 👍 656 😡 350 ❤️ 205 😂 37 😞 22 😱 13

Figure 19: Affective responses to the flag re-design
Image used, in line with copyright legislation, for comment and review



All 950 👍 449 😡 236 ❤️ 223 😂 24 😞 11 😱 7

All 585 👍 270 😡 187 ❤️ 81 😂 30 😞 12 😱 5

Figure 20: Manchester Pride
Image used, in line with copyright legislation, for comment and review

Like Tim, many of the comments that came to surround the article expressed feeling that the flag already represented everyone. While many rallied in support of efforts to increase visibility of segments of the community whose intersectional experiences,

cultures and histories have been whitewashed and erased under the banner of ‘gay’ pride, such decentring of whiteness and cisness clearly ruptured something, eliciting many comments that operated to re-centre the LGBTQIA+ community within universalising cismasculinist whitewashed narratives.

@Attitude.co.uk FB: If you think this is progress, check your history. The flag is an international symbol, specifically designed to represent everyone under the rainbow.

@PinkNews FB: It always was inclusive. It represents everyone, not specific genders or orientations. Leave the pride flag alone. Thank you.

Much of the discussion was blind to intersectional concerns, so much so that efforts to foreground trans people and LGBTQIA+ people of colour were read by many as divisive, positioned by some as attention seeking.

@PinkNews FB: The [new] flag just divides people, adding another layer of difference segmentation/segregation where there was none

@PinkNews FB: I find it hideous attention seeking, and so arrogant to unilaterally change our symbol in such a divisive manner.

Reactions against race emerged as particularly strong, with many, even those that recognised issues of racism, rejecting intersectional concerns and positioning racism as a broader issue to be tackled separately. Such reactions homogenised LGBTQIA+ identity, positioning race as something that exists outside of both LGB and TQ+ identities.

There are many ways in which we might explore such refusals to acknowledge racism within the community. Such positions could be understood as a means of navigating white (or cis) guilt, resolved through denying participation in oppressive systems and projecting guilt on onto others (Davids 2020; Davids 2021). An example of such might be the case of LGBTQIA+ people of colour and trans people othered as responsible for dividing the community. Confronting the reality that the community is already divided and that the cis white majority benefit from that division can produce discomfort. Such discomfort can be resolved through a defensiveness that sees racism (and transphobia we might add) othered as a problem of the past or elsewhere (Ahmed

2017). We might further consider how acknowledging privilege is further complicated by the potentially already marginalised status of many rallying under the rainbow banner. After all, acknowledging privilege disrupts victim narratives.

Nevertheless, returning to my earlier discussion around desires for a strong oppositional identity to maintain a sense of communal beingness, such efforts to re-affirm strong group boundaries may *also* be read as a means of maintaining a sense of continuity and ontological security against cisheteronormativity. As exemplified through Tim's comment about the flag on the Queering Masculinity group, such attachments to the original flag and mainstream pride events do not necessarily mean disputing the existence of racism and transphobia within the community but may rather mark anxieties surrounding the power and effectiveness of a fragmented community. Such anxieties were made particularly evident in one comment I came across in response to Trans Pride

@Pinknews FB: I get why trans people feel the need for their own [Pride], but I will say this, united we stand, divided we fall.

While understanding why trans people may feel a need to separate themselves, the comment revealed anxieties around everyone falling as a result of such fragmentation. Nevertheless, such desire for unity, and all that it affords, is far from evenly felt.

Such attachments to the original flag and a united community obscured concerns around how navigating multiple systems of oppression both within and beyond the LGBTQIA+ community produces different embodiments of LGBTQIA+ identity. The comments around what the original flag *is* and the intention and history behind it failed to capture what the symbol *does* for the LGBTQIA+ people that feel excluded from it. One thing that struck me about those opposing the flag re-design was that someone from outside of the community could say that we already have a flag, the national flag, which is supposed to represent all citizens. By their very logic, an argument could be made to remove the very original rainbow flag that they were defending. Of course, the rainbow flag emerged as a symbol of pride and inclusion against state sanctioned exclusion. The national flag did not represent all citizens equally, thus rendering

attachments to the original rainbow flag as a symbol of pride understandable. However, such understanding was, in many instances, denied to those that had been made to feel excluded under this banner of gay pride. Such symbols and events have come to exclude trans and marginalised intersections of the community, as evidenced not only through data I have generated with the participants but also across much of the existing literature discussed.

As many of the comments themselves highlighted, the community was already divided. In response to an article on Muslim gay Pride, homonationalist discourse emerged, operating to centre whiteness against a perceived threat elsewhere.

@PinkNews FB: How anyone in the LGBT community can remain part of a religion that for hundreds if not thousands of years beat, bloodied, tortured, and murdered their people is beyond me.

@PinkNews FB: Islam is a danger to gay and lesbian people.

@PinkNews FB: Without fear of getting their heads lopped of...

@PinkNews FB: In a Christ based country of course. Try it in... any other religious country and see where that gets you..

Returning to the discussion around the flag, many even claimed inclusivity on the one hand while marginalising with the other.

@Pinknews FB: I don't like seeing the trans flag inching in on the rainbow flag... I always thought the rainbow flag represented us all just fine... Can we have some respect for our past and leave it as is please?

@Pinknews FB: Ffs [for fuck's sake] we let them be part of LGB...T didn't we? There's only so much you can feed a mental illness.

Such comments demonstrated that inclusion was limited, with marginalised members and intersections of the community 'included' as outsiders if included at all. The call to respect the past was particularly interesting, marking just how deeply linear notions of gay liberation have sedimented, blind to the multiple trans and queer histories that have been erased through dominant narratives of LGBTQIA+ identities and cultures.

Such ciswashing and whitewashing of LGBTQIA+ identities and histories has become institutionalised. Efforts have been made to make the mainstream culture more inclusive, thus in many ways responding to desires for a united community. However, these have often been shut down, sometimes through deploying institutional force. During my fieldwork, a number of events proliferated across digital media around Pride events seeking to distance themselves from perceived radical members and intersections of the community.

We [queer activists] went to the front of the march in an attempt to lead it ourselves. We were quickly jumped on by uniformed officers. I was wrestled to the ground, cuffed in a very painful way, and taken to the side, my friend was held in a chokehold, and another was arrested too. We were charged with breach of the peace, and let out after seven hours in custody... We will be continuing our fight to reclaim pride and bring it back to the grassroots (Protestor at Glasgow Pride 2017 cited in Cafolla 2017, online).

Please note that any groups attending with banners or placard[s] will be viewed by the Parade Manager, any that are deemed to be 'offensive' will not be allowed in the March. Please note, it's a march of celebration, not protest" (Sheffield Pride 2018 cited in Duffy 2018b, online).

The use of police to shut down queer and trans protestors at Glasgow Pride in 2017 amounts to an act of institutional violence, produced by organisers of the event and sanctioned by representatives of the state, i.e., the police often found marching in 'support' of the LGBTQIA+ community. Similarly, Sheffield Pride's decision to ban politics at Pride operated to centre a white affluent depoliticised LGBTQIA+/ 'gay' subject, indifferent if not directly opposed to recognising intersectional, trans and queer struggles within commercialised LGBTQIA+ spaces and events. The institutionalised idea that Pride is a celebration rather than a protest exemplifies how deeply embedded homonormativity has become in 'gay' institutions, exposing the privilege of certain fragments of the community, namely white affluent gay men, that no longer see/feel the urgency of protest. Faced with such antagonism, trans people and LGBTQI+ people of colour have different priorities when it comes to navigating cisheteronormativity. The affordances of standing united are not evenly distributed. Possibilities of communal beingness afforded with the rainbow flag are not evenly felt,

with alternative symbols and organisations of Pride affording continuity against a threat of annihilation emerging within mainstream LGBTQIA+ communities.

Such othering of trans and LGBTQIA+ people of colour speak to the existing literature on homonormativity, particularly that which has highlighted how such systems of power continue to be re-produced online. It further highlights the intensity of the antagonistic forces that the participants came to navigate, as explored in the last chapter. In line with Ging's (2017) analysis of the radicalisation of white gay men online, we might consider such othering as defending a loss of privilege, emerging from feelings of victimisation felt or strategically deployed against marginalised members and intersections of the community who have become more visible. However, thinking beyond homonormativity, we might consider what such positions assumed do, which is not to deny the politics of inclusion and exclusion that come to surround them but rather to read them against histories of violence navigated. Such othering may afford a sense of security, identifying threats to relieve anxiety produced through centuries of queerphobic violence. Returning to religion, attention drawn to the 'hundreds if not thousands of years of violence against LGBTQIA+ highlights the intensity of such pasts made present. Such pasts limit possibilities of becoming with religion; they produce anxieties limiting possibilities for bodies of water to flow. Shutting difference out, as Puar (2007) identifies, comes at the cost of marginalising intersectional concerns, ignoring the fact that homophobia and transphobia are not only everywhere but also heavily situated in histories of the very white bourgeois cisheteronormativity re-centred through this process. However, it also, affords continuity against an imminent threat of annihilation, affording possibilities maintaining a sense of place against placelessness. Similarly, opposition to trans inclusion could be read as an effort to create distance from members of the community perceived as more radical. The 'good gay', as highlighted in the literature on homonormativity, is de-politicised. As such, becoming with efforts to queer homonormativity by radically deconstructing the gender binary comes at a cost. It is arguably anxiety inducing as it threatens the unstable foundations on which those assuming such positions have been afforded a sense of belonging – a point I will return to in more detail when I explore the intense negative reactions that emerged against

the project. Of course, such anxieties do not justify exclusionary politics. However, they are arguably important for understanding and addressing them.

In this section, I have explored how the flag emerged as a deeply affective symbol, pushing and pulling both the participants and users observed online in multiple conflicting directions. Both the defence of and opposition to the original flag could be understood as affording a means by which bodies of water can flow, affording containment for navigating oppressive forces. The concept of communal beingness and the ontological security it provides against threats of annihilation were significant to my discussion. However, as noted differentiated threats to communal beingness emerged. Mainstream LGBTQIA+ communities, while affording many possibilities for bodies to flow denied elsewhere, afford some more opportunities than others. For marginalised members and intersections of the community, establishing a sense of continuity and security necessary for navigating uncertainty and enabling bodies to flow could not be positioned against a clear outside, as they navigate multiple oppressions emerging from both within and beyond mainstream LGBTQIA+ communities.

7.3 The defenders of sexual prejudice: ‘Born this way’

Returning to the issue of gendered and racialised economies of desire, which, as earlier discussed, were heavily contested among the participants, I now want to consider various efforts to defend such preferences that emerged through my own encounters with the LGBTQIA+ community, primarily white MSM, online. As discussed, the participants rejected essentialised constructions of such preferences, understanding such biases as something that emerge through social-material-cultural relations. However, their position was not shared by many I had encountered through my own participation online. While I had come across many condemning exclusionary preferences, or, at the very least, condemning the way such preferences are often understood and expressed, many tried to justify and legitimise sexual discrimination as ‘just a preference’ (see again Smith 2018). However, desire does not emerge in a vacuum. It emerges with power relations, constituted and reconstituted through deeply

affective becomings with the world. Desire will always discriminate, but what, where, when, why and how it discriminates is of critical concern. Racialised and gendered sexual and romantic preferences, while often deeply embodied, do not exist independently of other forms of racialised and gendered inclusion and exclusion mapped out through this project thus far. They are situated in the very embodied social-material-cultural histories of organisation that, in the last chapter, saw Sam and Dan shamed for wearing products associated with women, Sajid racially abused, and RH fetishised. As such, in this section, I want to grapple with questions around tensions rendered absent from the data generated with the participants to try to better understand the affective forces they navigated.

Throughout my personal auto/ethnographic observations as a queer man online, I came across several articles highlighting the issue of sexual racism within the community. Through observing people defend gendered and racialised preferences, it was often made clear that such preferences were situated in reductive assumptions about the physical, psychological and/or social attributes racialised and classed others possessed.

@PinkNews FB: I'm SEXUALLY and PERSONALLY attracted to heavy rock listening, footy ball playing, rough guys who don't mind getting their hands dirty... not pop listening, disco dancing, softer guys who are afraid to miss their hair appointment. I have both guys in my friend circle. However, just because I'm attracted to the stereotypical male doesn't mean I have internalised homophobia.

@PinkNews FB: There are certain physical characteristics that I personally find attractive and many that I do not...

@Reddit: there are so many physical features that each race has exclusively (paraphrased)

race affects height too. That's why Asian men are unwanted.

Here we see whiteness and masculinity reduced essentialised traits, excluding all the tall Asian feminine football playing and rock listening men of the world. Such statements raise questions around what people mean when they exclude an arbitrary

category of people. The idea that masculinity exists as something bounded outside of femininity, reducible to specific bodies as opposed to something that always emerges with femininity in various intensities and differentiated forms, marks a politics of inclusion and exclusion that extends far beyond sexuality. The world cannot be organised and reduced to such arbitrary classifications. However, efforts to challenge such assumptions often triggered defensiveness.

Such data clearly speaks to the body of literature around discriminatory sexual preferences earlier discussed. It also again raises concerns around how such biases are reinforced through political economic interests of online dating/hook-up apps' platform design, actively encouraging users to reduce one another to commodities within a heavily gendered and racialised economies of desire (Licoppe 2015; Tziallas 2015). The centring of a lucrative white desiring subject within this economy emerged as particularly salient during my efforts to recruit participants on the Hornet dating/hook-up app for MSM, where I was confronted with an advert for a luxury gay friendly hotel in Mexico complete with the hashtag '#stayprivileged' (Figure 21). Set against race filtering options only accessible to those with the #privilege of being able to afford an upgrade to their premium services, it seems fair to say that in their quest for valuable demographics, such apps really do centre the white affluent male consumer. However, in thinking about how users, through their embodied journeys, come to navigate such apps, the thing that interested me most was not the apps themselves but rather pervasive born this way narratives alienating users from reflecting on the origins of their 'preferences'.

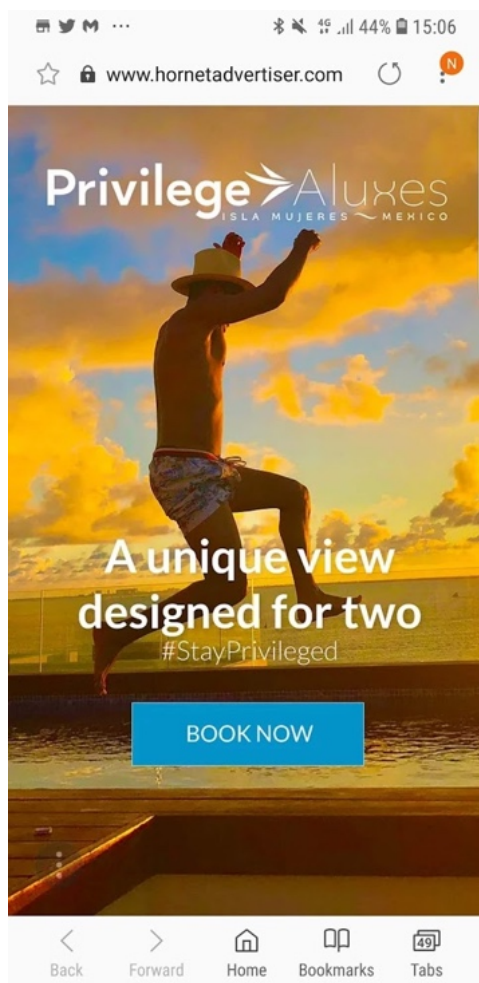


Figure 21: #StayPrivileged

Image used, in line with copyright legislation, for comment and review

Questions around the validity of discriminatory ‘preferences’ were fraught with tension, with many LGBTQIA+ people I came across online, particularly MSM, quick to defend their exclusionary racialised sexual and romantic ‘preferences’ as something essential and immutable. I came across many people deploying born this way narratives to defend their racialised preferences as indistinguishable from those to other attributes including but not limited to preferences for a specific sex/gender.

@Pinknews FB: Am I am misogynist now because I don’t like to have sex with women?

@Response: It’s getting there... that’s why we have people screaming sexuality is fluid... According to Tumblr and YouTube one now can’t be totally gay...

@Facebook: If you don't fancy someone you don't fancy them... I can't make myself fancy someone.

@Attitude FB: once you start telling people who they should find attractive, no matter if you call it orientation or preference, you still spout the same creepy stuff like any fundamentalist Christian or gay conversion therapist.

@Facebook: Oh, get real! It's no different from saying you have a height preference or a preference for a certain hair colour.

Many argued that if it was racist to not be attracted to a particular race, it was misogynistic to not be attracted to women, with some even going as far as suggesting that criticism of racial preferences was comparable to gay conversion therapy. Despite the wealth of literature earlier discussed around how attachments to race are fluid and mobile, heavily entangled in the likes of location and political beliefs, such fluidity was not felt, indicating that such biases run deep.

In the face of a religious conservative right that has long exploited social constructionist and psychoanalytic discourse to oppress and deny non-heterosexual bodies under heteronormative assumptions that everyone *can* and *should* be sexually and romantically fulfilled in heterosexual relationships, it is perhaps unsurprising that many within the LGBTQIA+ community are so heavily invested in biological discourse and reluctant to engage with sociological and psychological theories that question the validity of their desires, particularly if those desires *feel* just as natural as those embodied towards a particular sex/gender. The idea of sexual fluidity can and has been appropriated against LGBTQIA+ people. As Weber (2012) identifies, born this way narratives and claims to immutability, while limited in both who they have included and what they have achieved, have, for better *and* worse, played an instrumental role in naturalising desires that have been criminalised, medicalised and stigmatised throughout modern history. Weber's analysis of born this way narratives centres around what has been afforded through essentialising gay identity, read against the cost of affirming queer relationships as legitimate whether chosen or not. However, the data generated here can further extend such analysis to thinking about how such

affordances of born this way narratives operate to maintain not only monosexuality but also racialised and gendered desires.

Of course, my discussion here does not justify a refusal to reflect on biases and think beyond essentialist understandings of desire. However, it does perhaps offer some understanding of affective histories such narratives are caught up in, again raising questions around communal beingness and ontological security afforded through such attachments. Narratives that centre the historically contingent nature of desire, while challenging homonormativity, break down protective boundaries constructed against heteronormativity, producing feelings of leaking and spilling out into a world of uncertainty that has been weaponised against LGBTQIA+ people. Becoming with narratives deconstructing essentialised desire leave LGBTQIA+ vulnerable, even though, as Weber (2012) identifies, true freedom extends beyond claims to immutability, which inevitably reinforce the idea that if sexuality was a choice, choosing to be say gay would be a lesser one.

7.4 Queer: A contested term

During my efforts to recruit people for this project, the affective tensions discussed thus far in this chapter were made present through the absence of many that refused to take part in the project due to my use of the word queer. As highlighted in my methodology chapter, queer emerged as a heavily contested term among many men I contacted. Given that the term 'queer' is often held to exist beyond signification, irreducible to any fixed homogenous position, my use of the word was supposed to create an inclusive space for diverse gender and sexual lived experiences and practices that extended beyond reductive markers of identity and community. However, despite my best efforts to carefully operationalise my use of the term and clearly lay out the scope of the project, both on flyers/e-flyers and through follow-up interactions with potential participants, the project received a lot of backlash. As earlier discussed, many refused to take part. Far from disrupting the boundaries of representation beyond identity, queerness emerged as an exclusive category heavily associated with an identity politics that many could not relate to. Rather than opening up possibilities of

becoming with the world and enabling bodies of water to flow, the term was embodied as limiting. While I was aware of the controversy surrounding the word, I had put this down to a generational gap in knowledge and experience (see Bennett 2010) and had not anticipated so much criticism from the young people I was targeting. In some respects, I was right to assume significant generational differences, as much of the backlash received took issue with the word not because it triggered traumatic experiences but because they saw it as representing intersections of the LGBTQIA+ community they could not relate to. Aside from the gender of the people they had sex with, they saw themselves as just like everyone else. For some people, the term was unrelatable, eliciting limited affective response, exemplified through feelings of indifference towards gender and sexual identity politics. However, queerness also emerged as an object of contempt, receiving backlash from people affirming normative respectable subject positions in opposition to those perceived as too queer and too radical.

7.4.1. I am not queer!

My use of the word queer elicited much anxiety, with many taking an explicitly political stance against both the project and who/what they assumed it stood to represent. Queerness emerged as heavily associated with leftist activism, which many opposed. One potential participant argued, “I don’t like social justice stuff”, while another strongly implied that my project was exclusionary (to the majority).

It seemed to be that you come from a very specific mind-set that was very sjw [social justice warrior] -esque, using terminology that was very bespoke and sjw-esque in general... I suspected the kinds of people who would get involved would be a very tiny percentage of people who had very specific kinds of ideas and spoke about them in very specific ways

Though I had stated that the project was unstructured and participant-led, the project was read as pushing a particular political agenda, with one person going as far as saying: “I don’t think I would be welcome because I’m conservative”. I even received an unsolicited message from one Grindr user that saw the project advertised on my profile, arguing:

You know when you talk about ‘queering’ masculinity, you’re not a social scientist anymore. You are a social engineer, right?

After explaining that the project was not about making people queer anything but rather about providing an open platform for people to express their experiences, making clear that such experiences need not be gender related as even the most masculine gay men can face challenges, this Grindr user changed his caption to ‘de-queering’, affirming his position as normal not queer.

Assertions of being normal often emerged throughout my efforts to recruit participants, which ranged from very explicit and direct responses such as “I am normal”, to more implicit efforts to construct distance from those that were perceived too queer and/or too radical. Several respondents equated queerness with being trans and/or gender non-conforming. “I’m not trans”, one person immediately responded, even though the flyer I had sent very clearly stated that the project was open to gay and bisexual men. Of course, it is possible that he did not read the flyer, so he may have just misunderstood who and what the word ‘queer’ represented. As I will later go on to discuss in my chapter on queernormativity, the assumption that queerness is defined by gender presentation is not uncommon, even amongst those that embrace it, with many gatekeeping queerness in accordance with immediately visible rejections of gender norms. However, several people refusing to take part explicitly affirmed themselves in opposition to trans and gender non-conforming people, rejecting the word queer to distance themselves from members of the community deemed too radical. One man argued that the T had nothing to do with the LGB, arguing that they, namely non-binary members of the community, were “taking things too far”, while another asserted disapproval of gender non-conforming members of the community:

Queer I usually associate with very feminine gays which there is no problem with but it isn’t for me. I respect them but I have nothing to do with their lives... being extremely camp or dressing feminine turns me off... I am gay because I want to be with a man, not a princess.

Here we see clothing and mannerisms reduced to essentialist understandings of what it means to be a man, something which was reinforced by the screen name XY,

signifying a reductive biological understanding of sex and gender. In line with Butler's heterosexual matrix, an assumed alignment of sex → gender identity → gender expression saw the feminine positioned outside of possibilities of being a man, even by those that disrupted the gendered matrix in terms of their sexual orientation. While framed as just a preference, the use of derogatory term 'princess' and statement about having 'nothing to do with their lives' clearly operated to stigmatise gender non-conforming men as other.

The availability of such positions, as many have argued, can be situated within homonormativity, privileging those that can 'pass' as normal (Duggan 2002). However, I would reject taking assertions of being normal *not* queer at face value. It is easy to suggest that those asserting a position as normal in opposition to those that are queer occupy a position of privilege. In many instances, this may well be true, with growing acceptance and assimilation resulting in many no longer being made to feel other (see again Orne 2017). There are certainly questions of privilege to consider surrounding the ability to pass. However, it is worth considering how in some instances, anxieties and traumas surrounding being othered as queer may drive such desires to appear normal, resulting in a projected anxiety and shame surrounding being unable live up to cisheteronormative ideals (Lanzieri and Hildebrandt 2011). Such efforts to assert being normal speaks to notions of internalised homophobia, with gender-conforming men seeking men assimilating with white middle-class heteropatriarchal sensibilities to mitigate marginalisation and fit in as 'the good gays'. The volatile nature of some of responses exposed just how fragile the positions assumed were, held together against the threat of dissolution by projecting insecurities on to a clearly marked other. Such insecurities may be situated in personal and collective histories of being othered, with such heavily defensive investments in boundaries exposing queer cracks in the positions. However, in line with what I have already discussed, we might consider what such fitting in does, i.e., the possibilities of becoming it affords. Rather than positioning such bodies as lacking, reducing them to shame, we might consider how assuming such positions emerges as a means of self-preservation against such oppressive forces. As Puar (2007) identifies, agencies emerge through complicity with social norms, with the cost of embracing the queer

rejection of those norms far from evenly distributed. I will return to this point in 7.4.3 where I reflect on a potential class gap emerging through many refusing to take part.

7.4.2 Normal, just like everybody else?

While many of the people that refused to take part adopted an explicitly anti-queer position, others appeared to be more indifferent and apathetic towards the project, asserting weak connections with the community through comments such as “I’m not active in the LGBT community... aside from dating” and “being gay is just about who I sleep with”. One potential participant noted:

The nature of your study touts sexuality as a marker of identity, and personally, that’s not true for me. My sexuality is so far down the list of characteristics that express who I am that it verges on negligible.

Such comments, while expressing weak identity and community attachments, did not pathologize those that were more active in the community. They did not signify moral opposition towards members of the community deemed queer or queerer. As one potential participant responded, “I don’t really have an exciting experience of being gay... Just normal and boring”.

Such failure to identify with the project could be read through the lens of homonormativity, with growing acceptance and inclusion rendering many disconnected from social-material-political concerns around the significance of their lived experience as anything other. Several potential participants failed to see their experience as queering anything.

I’ve never had problem’s being gay

I don’t identify as queer... I see it as blurring and pushing the boundaries of gender and sexuality

In line with Halperin (2012), such limited “political urge to manifest their sexuality” (p.415) could be reduced to what Orne (2017) describes as ‘homosexual straight people’ who have never been made to feel as though they are anything other. From such a reading, the depoliticised queer subject emerging in opposition to the radical

intersectional politics discussed could easily be reduced to a position of privilege. However, such a reading forecloses an analysis of what a depoliticised position does, with efforts to navigate oppression rendering such positions of ‘the good gay’ fraught with tension.

In the case of those claiming to never have had problems being gay, we might consider the possibility of their experience being anything but normal. Rather than positioning them as privileged, we might consider how oppression is often normalised. This was exemplified by one potential bisexual participant that refused to take part in the project.

The issues and stigma are really far removed from my own bisexual situation, and I am therefore not relevant for your study... I consider myself super lucky in that regard! We’re getting there as a society... Occasionally I’ll get accused of not being bi and just being a gay or straight but psh.

While claiming to be far removed from stigma, the user openly acknowledged facing issues of bisexual erasure, which he brushed off as inconsequential. As Greenland and Taulke-Johnson (2017) identify, acknowledging such prejudice and politicising experiences comes at a cost because the good, marginalised subject is expected to downplay experiences of discrimination to fit in. Acknowledging and challenging (micro)aggressions can be incredibly disruptive to relationships. Like the feminist kill joy:

When we speak... it can feel like everything shatters. We can become the point from which things cannot be reassembled (Ahmed 2017, p.171).

In many ways, progress in rights and recognition have added weight to such costs against perceived benefits. When we are outwardly rejected and excluded, we are left with little to lose from challenging discrimination, but when we are afforded some conditions for inclusion, challenging those conditions carries the risk of exclusion. Furthermore, as Greenland and Taulke-Johnson (2017) identifies, contemporary encounters with prejudice are often easier to brush off because they are “attributionally ambiguous” (p.82), i.e., less obvious. As such, those that refused to take part based on ‘never having any problems’ are not necessarily privileged. The fleeting online

interactions thus left me with many unanswered questions – a point I will now explore by considering who and what was present/absent from the project.

7.4.3 A potential class gap in the data generated with the participants

Thus far in my analysis of the backlash to the project, I have considered how my use of the word queer elicited a range of responses ranging from anxiety to indifference. Making sense of these responses without data around the embodied worlds these potential participants navigated was challenging. Like elsewhere in the chapter, I have grappled with the uncertainty around who and what was rendered present by considering how the data generated could speak to different bodies of work. However, I have avoided foreclosing my analysis by refusing to reduce the positions assumed by those that refused to take part to inherent markers of privilege. It would have been easy for me to position the members of the Queering Masculinity group in opposition to a regressive other that refused to take part. However, given that most of the participants were university educated and living in urban areas with access to queer networks and lots of prior knowledge, experience and insight into queer politics and activism, it felt somewhat unethical for me to do so. Though diverse in terms of identity, i.e., race, religion, gender and sexuality, every participant bar one was university educated, and despite my best-efforts to recruit participants from rural areas, only one participant lived outside a major city. As such, it seemed pertinent that I consider a *potential* class gap emerging from my use of the word queer. The fact that queer emerged as so heavily associated with activism was particularly relevant to considering a potential class gap, as it is well documented that working-class people are less likely to be politically active both on an offline (Chen and Seun 2015; Croteau 1995; Schradie 2018). I say emerged as heavily politicised not because I was unaware of the politics surrounding the term but rather because I underestimated the extent to which the political associations would be felt by those I was contacting. The term queer is also prevalent in popular culture and is not always so radical. I thought I could tap into these broader associations to recruit people that did not necessarily relate to the term, but I was wrong.

Given the existing work identifying uneven possibilities of challenging gender across time and place, particularly masculinity (Hickey-Moody 2017) across many rural working-class areas in the region I was recruiting from (Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012), it seems pertinent to consider different relational contexts navigated. As Walkerdine and Jimenez document in their work in rural post-industrial South Wales, attachments to masculinity can be deeply ingrained, situated in histories that depended on a strong gendered division of labour. Masculinity, as they identify, can emerge as a means of maintaining connections with family and community, with a rejection of gender norms often coming with costs that many in urban educated settings do not have to navigate. One thing that concerned me throughout my efforts to recruit was how many responded to the project saying that they did not understand it, in some cases even apologising for being ‘stupid’ and expressing feeling intimidated by the language. Others felt that they would be unwelcome for not being queer enough. The language used to make the project more inclusive for some was clearly unfamiliar and alienating for others. My failure to pre-empt the appeal of my study was heavily situated in my own lived reality, which had become detached from the realities of many I wanted to recruit. As someone who had invested a lot of time and energy into learning and understanding queer theory and participating in queer and feminist social and activist spaces, I was out of touch with what many within the LGBTQIA+ community knew, thought, and felt about queerness. On reflection, I should have been more self-aware because I had not always been so informed on gender and sexual politics. However, I had put much of the cultural shift I encountered down to a more general passing of time, severely underestimating how my own position had changed. By the time I started this project, the reclamation of the word seemed to have become more widespread, which I had put down to the rapid growth of social media and mobile technologies in the late noughties rather than a shift in my own position.

For reasons discussed in my methodology, I decided not to change the language used to promote the project. Of course, I could have just shifted the focus to those relating with the word queer. However, it felt necessary to grapple with questions around who and what the participants were navigating. Failing to do so could have easily resulted in me positioning the participants as queer in opposition to the normative without

considering the potentially very different worlds navigated. Furthermore, given my decision to adopt an approach attentive to practices emerging as deeply affective, I could not ignore oppositions emerging to the queering of normative boundaries. Such oppositions were deeply felt in my effort to recruit the participants. Those rendered absent from the project had emerged as very much present. Their silence in the data generated with the participants was deafening. I have no demographic data on those that refused to take part in my project. However, the project clearly elicited strong appeal among urban educated members of the community, raising concerns around who and what queer theory and activism represents.

7.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, my exploration of normative positions assumed among both my participants and those I observed through my wider auto/ethnographic encounters took me in many unexpected directions. However, central to my analysis was an effort to understand anxieties surrounding queering normative boundaries. Such anxieties limited where bodies of water could flow. However, sensitive to personal and collective histories of oppression affording uneven possibilities of becoming with the world, I utilised Walkerdine and Jimenez's notion of communal beingness to consider possibilities of becoming such positions may afford against differentiated threats of annihilation. I argued that such strong identity attachments may afford a sense of security and continuity. In doing so, I questioned ideas of internalised homophobia and internalised transphobia, which inevitably reduce such positions to self-deprecating, instead considering how such positions may afford a means of self-preservation. Building on work urging us to consider affective traumatic personal and collective histories producing uneven possibilities of becoming (Binswanger and Zimmermann 2018; Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012), I also questioned assumptions that the normative can be separated from the queer, questioning whether assimilation is an inherent marker of privilege.

Adele's opposition to gender euphoria, strong attachments to the heavily contested Pride flag, opposition to religion at Pride, and born this way narratives limiting

reflection on the origins of racialised and gendered sexual ‘preferences’, all exposed anxieties around queering normative configurations of gender and sexuality. Sensitive to different worlds navigated, I attempted to develop understandings of what such strong identity attachments do, i.e., the possibilities of becoming they afford. Nowhere was my effort to do so more present than in my analysis of the backlash to the project, which exposed deep anxieties around notions of queering masculinity. The negative feedback spoke to various insights derived through work around internalised oppression and privileged homonormative positions. However, I attempted to think beyond that work in consider what is *afforded* through such strong investments in appearing normal. The volatile reaction exposed a deep defensiveness, raising questions around potential trauma and very different worlds navigated – questions that became especially salient in my reflection on who and what was rendered absent from the project. Unfortunately, the data was limited. However, as the one potential bisexual participant demonstrated, claims of being normal should not be taken at face value. While it would have been easy for me to assume many of those indifferent or opposed to the project were simply ‘homosexual straight people’ (Orne 2017) “more or less accepted everywhere they go” (Halperin 2012, p.415), the normalisation of clear instances of bisexual erasure served as a reminder that those that appear or declare themselves as normal may be battling challenges complicating questions of privilege. There are affordances to presenting as normal and refusing, consciously or otherwise, to politicise identity, for some more than others. Building on work around uneven possibilities of challenging gender, particularly masculinity (Hickey-Moody 2017; Walkerdine and Jimenez 2012), I considered how the uncertainty around who and what was made present in my project may speak to different opportunities for navigating gender and sexuality. Nevertheless, my efforts to do so were not without limitations.

In my effort to make sense of that which was rendered absent from the project, I faced many challenges in grounding my analysis in this chapter. Relying on fleeting auto/ethnographic encounters and minimal engagement with those that refused to take part, my analysis was, in many instances, speculative. However, such speculation builds on some of the digital methodologies literature earlier discussed, particularly

Hine's (2015) work on digital ethnography, encouraging us to embrace uncertainty and avoid grounding analysis in concrete claims around who and what is present in such fleeting connections online. The need for speculation seemed particularly important given the potential class gap that emerged, as taking that which was rendered present at face value could have easily resulted in me othering those absent from the project as normative. Throughout the chapter, I considered how the data spoke to different bodies of work. However, in grappling with the uncertainty of who and what is rendered present online, I considered how the data generated *may*, at least in some instances, build on work encouraging us to consider very different worlds navigated against oppression. My efforts to do so raised many questions around different embodied realities out of sight, thus warranting further investigation to develop more concrete understandings of the actual social-material-cultural relations navigated by those that refused to take part. However, the unanswered questions that emerged, particularly those pertaining to a potential class gap in the region, mark important findings in this project, i.e., how my use of language operated to centre some voices over others and the need to avoid using such language to better understand the lived experiences and challenges of those alienated by it.

Chapter 8. Queernormativity

Thus far, in response to my research questions, I have explored how the participants reproduced, ruptured, and redefined cisheteromascularity *with* digital connections. I have considered how the internet came to both enable and displace possibilities of connecting with difference, mapping out affirmative possibilities of becoming with the internet but also considering how such potential for affirmation emerged *with* exploitative and oppressive relations. In the last chapter, I situated some of the tensions emerging between affirmative and oppressive forces within a heavily polarised LGBTQIA+ community. The polarisation raised many questions around the different personal and collective histories navigated by those rendered present online, particularly given the limited interest my project elicited from non-university rural youths. In this chapter, I again grapple with my questions around embodied tensions negotiated through becoming with the internet to further develop my analysis of different situated embodied opportunities for queering masculinity in the digital age. I consider how possibilities of becoming with the seemingly infinite possibilities of connection online were limited through mutually constitutive online and offline worlds navigated, thus again building on work encouraging us to consider the situated embodied nature of becomings with the internet. Again, I move away from work separating the normative from the queer, considering how possibilities of queering normative configurations of gender and sexuality were situated in very different embodied relational contexts. However, in this instance, I bring such embodied constraints into conversation with what Orne (2017) describes as queernormativity, i.e., efforts to queer gender and sexual norms that can themselves become normative.

Throughout this chapter, I draw on empirical data generated both with the participants and through my wider auto/ethnographic observations responsive to the body of LGBTQIA+ scholarship critical of disembodied notions of queerness within much queer theory and activism (Ahmed 2004; Davy 2018; Gunnarsson 2011; Linke 2013; Orne 2017; Puar 2007; Riggs 2010).¹⁷ Much of this work, as earlier discussed, is

¹⁷ While the term 'queernormative' is only used by Orne (2017), the criticism of queerness as a regulatory ideal is consistent across this body of work.

critical of a centring of discussions around language and identity deconstruction in much queer theory and activism. It encourages us to recognise embodied material constraints limiting possibilities of queering gender and sexuality with language and/or material practices – constraints emerging as more salient for some than others. As earlier highlighted in my reference to Miller’s (2018) work around trans communities, people are often othered as not queer enough online, bearing the mark of an anti-identitarianism that, as Orne (2017) identifies, becomes an identity in itself. Such hierarchies of queerness emerged as particularly salient in the data generated for this project. However, opportunities for queering masculinity were not evenly distributed among the participants.

As such, responding to work around queernormativity, here I consider how efforts to resist normative social-material-cultural configurations of identities, practices and desires can themselves become normative. I consider how emerging notions of being ‘queerer than though’ failed to consider uneven possibilities of queering language and material practices that emerged across the data generated. In doing so, I again question the assimilationist versus anti-assimilationist dichotomy by considering how possibilities of becoming with language and material practices are actualised through differentiated affective relations that defy simple comparison. Building on Orne (2017), I consider how queerness, like gayness, can readily become recruited in neoliberal individualising rhetoric of identifying the correct ways and saying the right things, positioning individuals as *either* good *or* bad, *either* woke *or* duped, without considering the wider social-material-cultural relations through which bodies emerge. I consider how queer advocates sometimes end up re-affirming otherness, gatekeeping queerness according to disembodied abstract identity categories and/or reducing material practices to something inherently *either* queer *or* not. I consider how queernormativity, premised on an individualising *rejection* of social norms, like homonormativity and transnormativity, failed to consider the embedded and embodied realities of my participants, enabling and displacing possibilities of becoming. In doing so, I call into question what a radical liberated queer subject looks like, again thinking beyond homonormative and transnormative positions as abstract things in favour of an understanding of a situated queerness which, while normative in some

places, may emerge as more radical in others. To return to my earlier question, what is queerer, a monogamous gay man living in a conservative rural town or someone who is polygamous and pansexual on a university campus with an active queer community affirming difference?

This chapter grapples with data responsive to many potential lines of inquiry. For instance, it intervenes in discussions around limited opportunities for participation online, again in relation to navigating offline contexts but more specifically, in one instance, in relation to issues of context collapse (Marwick and Boyd 2014). In this instance, I extend existing discussions around constraints emerging through the erasure of contextual boundaries on many social media platforms, which, as earlier discussed, produces challenges around what LGBTQIA+ youth can do and share on public social media (Duguay 2016; Grov et al. 2014). Putting such work into conversation with the literature on algorithms and filter bubbles (Barberá 2020; Dahlberg 2007; Pariser 2011), I consider how such constraints emerging through managing context limits what is made present to algorithms to enable and displace connections and movements online. In doing so, I question the idea of filter bubbles being driven by selective exposure (Spohr 2017), which would assume agency in use, instead considering how participation is actualised between embodied social-material-technological connections emerging between mutually constitutive online and offline worlds. However, the main focus of this chapter is not the constraints themselves but rather how the emergence of queernormativity operated to a) marginalise recognition of embodied constraints and b) reduce those positioned as less queer to binary positions. Building on the work of Davy (2018), I seek to recognise constraints and resist binary phobia by accounting for the multiple embodiments pursued among those identifying with identities and practices often assumed to be binary.

8.1 Towards an understanding of the limits of queer participation online

In the last chapter, I explored various tensions that emerged around efforts to queer LGBTQIA+ identities and practices. Much of my analysis, as discussed, was

speculative. In many instances, I drew attention to different *potential* contexts navigated. However, now, in my turn to queernormativity, I seek to further ground my earlier analysis by considering embodied relational constraints marginalised through disembodied notions of queerness. In this section, I consider how the issue of queernormativity was alluded to by a couple of the participants. I draw on data generated in my interviews and through the Queering Masculinity group acknowledging uneven possibilities of queering homonormative constraints and challenging those failing to recognise different relational contexts navigated. In the subsection to follow, I move on to consider how opportunities embracing queerness were, for one participant, produced not through choice but through relational social-material-technological shifts that actualised new possibilities of seeing and being seen. The data presented across the two sections in many ways builds on my earlier discussion around a potential class gap. It intervenes in the work around the participatory potential of digital media and technologies, extending discussions around the digital divide in access and use (Schradié 2011; Schradié 2018) by considering how emerging embodied social-material constraints operate to limit where, and with what, bodies can flow.

Limited possibilities for embracing and becoming with queerness were acknowledged among a couple of the participants. Tim, for instance, when discussing the word queer in our interview, argued:

... I associate the word queer with a metropolitan liberal sort of... LGBT lifestyle, rather than a gay man brought up in say an old industrial town... who has stayed there and is getting buy in a difficult environment. They wouldn't use the word queer. Gay, reluctantly maybe, and erm, queer is like all those fashion students....

Tim acknowledged very different worlds navigated, particularly among rural working-class LGBTQIA+ people. In identifying the limits around the identity queer, he alluded to a queernormativity that I had been guilty of perpetuating through my use of the word as a catch all term for LGBTQIA+ people during my efforts to recruit participants. As Tim highlighted, the affordances of the term queer are from evenly distributed. Similarly, another participant, Cosmo, challenged a post he had come

across on Twitter. The post mocked ‘internalised homophobia’ expressed by a gay man on a dating TV show. Cosmo felt that such ridicule was counter-productive, failing to understand different journeys of self-acceptance, particularly for those who have grown up in hypermasculine environments (Figure 24). Cosmo urged us to consider how mocking such positions may solidify such positions. Returning to my earlier discussion of humour, here we might consider the limits of laughing in the face of oppression as a strategy for contesting dominant knowledges and affective attachments to cisheteromascularity. We might also complicate the question of whether such mocking is punching up when emerging from those navigating social-material-cultural relations affording more freedom for embracing queerness. Such mocking, when failing to acknowledge different contexts navigated, could be considered queernormative, operating to centre those most able to reject gender norms.

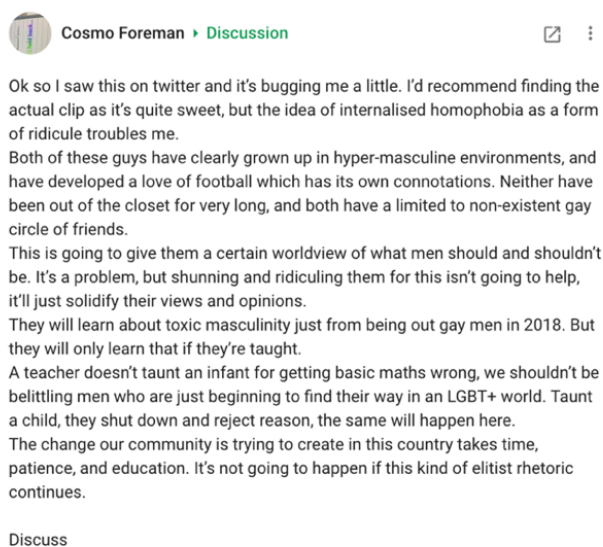


Figure 22: Internalised homophobia

The post was generated on the researcher-solicited group for the sole purpose of this project. Opt-in consent provided by all members of the group. Images featured are in the public domain and used, in line with copyright legislation, for comment and review.

Tim's and Cosmo's accounts urge us to consider how opportunities for identifying as queer and/or queering masculinity can be situated in very different contexts. Taken together, their sensitivity to regional differences and hypermasculine environments speaks volumes to my discussion in the previous chapter. While much of my analysis in that chapter was speculative due to the limited data around offline contexts navigated, Tim's questioning of who and what queer represents, and Cosmo's critique of those failing to recognise different relational constraints, further highlights a need to consider different embodied offline contexts enabling and displacing possibilities for bodies of water to flow with language. However, what interested me most here was Cosmo's recognition of issues surrounding notions of internalised homophobia, with the post he shared operating to position those with attachments to masculinity as a regressive other and thus failing to account for the different worlds navigated.

8.1.1 Limited access to queer communities and the issue of context collapse

In again thinking about the embedded and embodied nature of online activity (Hine 2015), and how possibilities of becoming online are situated and navigated through offline contexts (Adams-Santos 2020; Gray 2009; Renold and Ringrose 2011), I would now like to return to my earlier discussion around the transformative potential of digital connections. In *chapter 5*, I considered how the internet afforded many affirmative opportunities of becoming, enabling the participants to queer normative constraints, even though, as I concluded, bodies still emerged as limited in terms of where they could flow. Nevertheless, the focus of that chapter centred heavily on opportunities for connection, even if those opportunities were limited in terms of the possibilities, they afforded for bodies offline. In this section, I want to complicate that earlier discussion by considering how embodied offline constraints came to limit where one participant was able to flow online. Building on work around context collapse, which limited one participant's opportunities for connecting with difference, I respond to Orne's concern around a tendency to reduce failures to see and understand prejudice to the wilful ignorance of flawed individuals. I consider how acquiring

knowledge and unlearning biases emerged as relational for this participant, which seemed like an important point to explore given the reaction to my use of the word queer and efforts to mock those assuming normative positions.

Challenges around consciously acknowledging and resisting normative configurations of gender and sexuality may be particularly hard felt among those with limited connections within LGBTQIA+ communities. Sellers and Shelton (2003) cited in Greenland and Taulke-Johnson (2017) argue that weak in-group identification makes people more invested in maintaining respectability and less likely to call out discrimination. LGBTQIA+ people who are less socially and politically active within queer circles, which is not always a matter of choice, may lack the social and emotional support needed to reject norms and feel confident politicising the prejudices they face. While opportunities for community building certainly arise online, they are far from evenly distributed. As discussed in the existing literature, there is a digital divide leading to differentiated levels of access and use. There are also the issues surrounding the decline of symbolic efficiency for navigating information against misinformation (see again Dean 2010), raising questions surrounding gaps in knowledge and digital/media literacy skills. Ignorance, while pervasive in the digital age, is not necessarily always wilful, produced through relationships extending beyond notions of flawed individuals.

Limited possibilities of connecting with difference online emerged with one of my participants. In line with Marwick's and Boyd's (2014) work around context collapse, Sajid spoke of having to negotiate complex and conflicting relations with family, work, religion and sexual identity, limiting his engagement with LGBTQIA+ news, politics and discussions online.

I have family members on Facebook, so I tend not to like or follow specific LGBT things... On Facebook before uni, [I only had] a handful of gay friends from school and college... I didn't tend to connect with the people I met up with or spoke to on MSN messenger because they were older and remote, so I didn't want it to look suspicious to family and friends.

Similarly, when using Twitter, he spoke of challenges of having to manage professional relationships with colleagues and students.

My twitter is really weird because I have all my gay friends on there, but I also have a lot of academic people on there as well, so I'm trying to be more and more mindful, especially as I go into teaching, about what actually is on my Twitter...I worry my boss/co-workers would tell me it's inappropriate to share certain things on a public platform like that... Though I have strong views on things, I avoid posting things just in case a current or future employer has any kind of policy around it... Also, I know it's fairly easy for students to find that kind of thing online and I do sometimes worry about having homophobic students... where I post something, and the students screenshot it and share it round to laugh.

Building on work identifying how marginalised genders and sexualities must navigate conflict through the erasure of contextual boundaries on such public platforms (Duguay 2016; Grov et al. 2014), constraints emerged limiting what Sajid could do on social media. Fears of homophobia and being marked as unprofessional in an institution and a wider society primarily defined by white and heteronormative standards limited what Sajid felt able to follow and share. These concerns, far from relationally constituted in the present, extended towards thinking about potential role conflict in the future, with the archival properties of digital communication eliciting anxiety around how data could end up being used beyond the context for which it was indented.

It is important to note that Sajid's limited participation did not stop him from consuming LGBTQIA+ material shared by friends on social media.

I mean, on like Facebook and Twitter I get articles that friends have shared. On Twitter, I follow a lot of gays, so I get a lot of their retweeting or posting. I get a lot about people arguing about things to do with race or people's opinions on like drag race or things like, or like retweeting things in support of things like trans rights.

However, for a long time, such connections with gay people on social media were few and far between. Before starting university, Sajid only used Facebook, and due to the issues around context collapse discussed, he was cautious about who he connected with. Once starting university, he established stronger connections with the LGBTQIA+ community, making more connections on social media, which, by his own admission, exposed him to a lot more LGBTQIA+ content.

I didn't really use Twitter in general before university, but I definitely only became exposed to LGBT related things after following [LGBT] society friends on there.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that despite affording him some level of access to such content, his inability to actively engage with such material in the way of comments, likes and re-shares, or follow and share material of his own, still raises important questions around who and what is made present online and the implications this has on the democratising potential of such technology.

We might also consider how such becomings with social media platforms, utilising algorithms that select and prioritise content based on what they *think* users want to see, could limit opportunities for engagement with queer knowledge online. Sajid's navigation of offline constraints would have impacted the algorithm profiles generated, thus enabling and displacing content produced. Putting such issues around context collapse into conversation with discussions around the formation of filter bubbles online (Barberá 2020; Dahlberg 2007; Pariser 2011), we might consider how opportunities for engaging and connecting with queer content online *could* be limited through content filtered not based on what Sajid wanted to see but rather based on what he was able to make present on such platforms. Questions around context collapse limiting participation could thus be extended to considering how navigating offline relations is in becoming *with* algorithms. In doing so, we could question notions of selective exposure (Spohr 2017), which implies agency in use, and instead consider how filtering emerges through mutually constitutive offline-online worlds.

Limits around connecting with LGBTQIA+ content online may also present barriers for connecting with wider offline communities. With many community and activist events now organised through various social media, particularly Facebook, keeping up to date with what is going on can be difficult for those unable to follow relevant pages or groups actively. People may indeed come to negotiate such limitations. Speaking about his previous role as a ‘parent’ within the LGBTQIA+ society at university, which regularly involved checking-in with and supporting new society members, Sajid helped foster offline connections to overcome such issues with social media and create a more inclusive environment to keep those less able to connect online in the loop.

If you’re not out and you don’t want to like any of the Facebook groups or follow anything you can ask ‘when is the social? I would really like to go.’

Nevertheless, with such one-to-one support not always readily available, such limitations around connecting online pose important questions around the accessibility of offline activities organised solely through social media.

While the internet provides much potential for community building and political engagement through anonymous participation, thus displacing issues arising through context collapse, such possibilities may again be unevenly felt. Realising such potential depends on being affectively drawn to such material and resources in the first place. Sajid did not become actively involved in LGBTQIA+ communities (on or offline) until starting university and connecting with the LGBTQIA+ society. Up until this point, he was, by his own admission, ignorant of wider community concerns.

I think that was the first time it was like, ‘oh look, there is a collective community of us’. I think I understood a lot more about why societies like that are necessary. I understood a lot more about wider issues within the community around things like trans and bisexual identities. I would say all my knowledge about trans issues and non-binary things have come from interactions with people in the society... They have quite a lot of non-binary members, or at least a lot of members that identify with non-gendered pronouns... I have opened a lot from the LGBT society because they do really

just bang into you that like gender is a spectrum, sexuality is a spectrum, and they can change.

For Sajid, connections established on the internet were, for a long time, restricted to sexual gratification in terms of facilitating access to porn, cybersex, dates and casual hook-ups. Though he had connected with MSM both online and offline through chatrooms and dating/hook-up apps, his participation in LGBTQIA+ communities and politics at large was limited. As discussed, such connections can afford a sense of belonging, enabling possibilities of desire displaced elsewhere. However, such connections can also be limiting, often centred around individual desire over wider community concerns. For a long time, Sajid, by his own admission, was out of the loop, thus limited in forging meaningful connections necessary to challenge his position. His body of water, while open to re-configuration, had not emerged with the connections necessary for him to identify with queer politics. Like many that refused to take part in this project, being gay was embodied as a descriptor of who he slept with rather than a politicised identity. However, the social-material-cultural transition of going to university opened up new possibilities of connection.

For Sajid, the LGBTQIA+ society enabled him to see things that had previously gone unnoticed - things that may have continued to go unnoticed had he not joined the group. The recognition afforded through becoming with the group facilitated both intended and unintended shifts in his social media use. As discussed, his participation on public platforms was limited by context collapse. Unable to actively follow, like or comment on LGBTQIA+ content, Sajid was, for a long time, only exposed to content shared by friends, and even then, that content would have been filtered through algorithms with no knowledge that he liked such content. However, after starting university he started to actively follow people and share content on more private channels.

I only really started participating with LGBTQ discussions on Reddit after being involved with the society

While much of this participation was limited to reading and liking material shared by others, as opposed to actively sharing content of his own, what is perhaps key here is

that Sajid, through the process of becoming with the LGBTQIA+ society and developing a sense of belonging and community offline, had become more actively engaged with LGBTQIA+ communities and politics online. The desire to connect and educate himself on LGBTQIA+ issues and concerns was a relational process, actualised between shifting affective connections.

Throughout my participation as a queer activist both on and offline, I have come across many activists, LGBTQIA+ and otherwise, speaking about ignorance being a choice, which would imply that people make a conscious rational decision to listen and educate themselves on the struggles of others. However, in Sajid's case, connecting with the LGBTQIA+ group had been largely down to circumstance as he sought out friends in a new city. While such connections had made him more politically aware and emotionally invested in learning about different struggles LGBTQIA+ people face, the connections were by and large an unintended consequence of a desire that exceeds such aims. Connecting with the LGBTQIA+ society produced a shift in Sajid's knowledge, experience and embodiment of queer community and politics. It afforded new opportunities of becoming other with others, enabling his body of water to flow in new directions. While such connections could have been made online, they were not, which is perhaps understandable given the sheer amount of information available on the internet. Even the most active of activists are limited in how many issues and causes they can actively engage with. Furthermore, if people are unaware of an issue, they lack the knowledge necessary to start researching the issue. As Sajid's case highlights, 'wokeness' is not an individual trait but rather a relational process, actualised through differentiated mutually constitutive becomings with people, places, spaces, technologies and things. It responds to Orne's (2017) call to recognise the different contexts people navigate when it comes to queering cisheteronormativity.

8.2 Queer than though: Identifying with the correct ways

Now that I have considered limits to participation, I would like to move on to consider queernormativities that emerged across the data generated with the participants,

gatekeeping queerness through constructing binaries failing to consider how some bodies are more fluid than others. As earlier discussed, many rejecting the label queer associated the word with visible expressions of gender non-conformity, which they either failed to relate to and/or opposed. However, such associations with visible expressions of gender non-conformity also emerged among the participants that embraced it. While many of the participants read 'queer' as an umbrella term for diverse lived experiences and practices of LGBTQIA+ people, several of the participants saw it as representing feminine gay men.

Sam@QueeringMasculinity: To me it's more to do with a feminine homosexual male. I'm on the female side so I refer to myself as queer.

His comment was male/homo-centric, failing to account for the queerness of non-binary people, trans people and women that visibly reject gender norms. However, it also excluded masculine presenting cis men, who, in some instances, depending on location and context, may queer just as much when their identity is made visible. Such gatekeeping of queerness arguably speaks to broader discussions around passing privilege, which ultimately ignores how passing, irrespective of affordances, is unstable and comes at a cost of having to conceal marginalised attributes (Silvermint 2018). There is a difference between being normative and passing as normative, as the latter still faces the imminent threat of being violently outed and othered and is thus still navigating oppressive forces.

The idea of passing privilege emerged as a point of exclusion for one bisexual participant on the Queering Masculinity group, who, despite identifying with the concept, felt he did not *pass* as queer enough.

I like the term [queer] and think it describes aspects of my sexuality better than bisexual/pansexual does, but I feel like I'm not 'queer enough' in the way I come across to people who use it... I think that's because of the comfort I have in 'passing' as straight because I'm in a relationship with a woman.

However, his ability to pass as normative had come at the cost of bisexual erasure.

I've been seeing a counsellor about some issues that emerged with my family recently after I came out to them as bi, and one of the things that he kept

insisting was that I would have to be identifying as straight or homosexual if I got into a long-term monogamous relationship with someone. He stopped short of saying that I would have to choose whether to be gay or straight. Like he seemed to assume that the relationship I would be committed to is more a definition of my sexuality than who I could potentially date.

Furthermore, in line with the existing literature, his bisexuality had been othered as incompatible with monogamy. His becoming with the world had queered the cisheteronormative binary, yet he felt like he was not queer enough. While he liked the term queer, the idea of passing as normative operated as a barrier towards identifying with it, raising questions around what ‘queer’ as a concept does. Far from existing outside of signification, queer had been felt as an identity – an identity that excludes. Possibilities of becoming with the term had been displaced by his embodiment of what queer is (and is not) – something which was arguably reinforced through Sam’s centring of visible expressions of queerness. The intensity of such normative constructions of the correct way to be queer were particularly strongly felt by Adele, caught between assimilationist and anti-assimilationist demands rendering it difficult for her to exist without being other as too queer or not queer enough.

8.2.1 Caught between transnormative and queernormative expectations

Earlier in the thesis, I explored how Adele struggled against transnormativity, held to impossible standards of what she described as ‘toxic femininity’ that even her cisgender sister had failed to achieve. Adele expressed some deeply traumatic experiences with unsupportive and unsympathetic trans women online. However, becoming with rigid binary expectations of gender expression were not her only challenge. Adele had also faced radical queer and trans activists failing to take her desire to pass seriously. For the most part, these trans and queer radicals were well-meaning but unhelpful in what might be described as unconstructive promotions of body positivity. Speaking about her experiences of trans groups online, Adele argued:

There is literally no go-between... You also get groups that will... be like ‘wow, you look stunning’ no matter what you look like. So, then you get the opposite

that is not really any better in my opinion. I mean it's better than saying you look bad no matter what, that's not helpful at all... you need to reach a reasonable go-between where... you will give them tips on how to improve.

Unconstructive celebrations of body-positivity, however well-meaning, may understandably be read as unhelpful or even harmful. Trans people seeking medical transition are already well versed on the rhetoric of learning to love their bodies. Speaking about her experience seeking medical help, Adele noted,

... a lot of doctors are like... you just need to learn how to live with your body, but that's not really possible for most trans people... I tried so hard to accept my body and I couldn't.

Validation, for Adele, was more than just accepting her as she was, it was about supporting her in her journey towards what she wanted to become, something which is often lost in simplistic social constructionist ideas around gender and sexual fluidity that fail to account for affective material attachments people form through being immersed in a world organised by those social constructs.

Failures to acknowledge Adele's desires to pass were not always so well intentioned. In some cases, Adele's desire to pass had been outright rejected in what might be described as 'binary phobia' (Serano 2007), failing to account for the multiple embodiments trans people pursue even when passing and medically transitioning (Davy 2018). Speaking about her experience of the Bristol trans scene, she said:

One attitude I've come across is that I'm trying to show off to cis people. It's like, 'you only want to transition, you only want to look female, because you want to be cis. You hate yourself because you're trans. Why don't you be openly trans like us?

While by her own admission, most members of the community were supportive of her desire to medically transition and pass, Adele spoke of some trans women harbouring resentment towards her, positioning her as duped and depoliticised for failing to embrace a more fluid and mobile experience of gender. Adele put this hostility down to insecurity and jealousy, which may hold some truth given that Adele, by her own account, had not passed judgment on anyone's inability and/or unwillingness to pass.

By all accounts, her mere presence as someone that wanted to pass and transition had triggered anxiety ridden defence and resentment, not unlike that earlier explored against the threat of queering of normative boundaries. The queering of normativity had become normative, adding to Orne's (2017) observations of anti-identitarianism within radical queer communities paradoxically often becoming an identity in and of itself. Adele was, in this instance, on the receiving end of gender entitlement, which, as Serano (2007) identifies, can emerge against both binary and non-binary identities. As earlier discussed, Adele displayed such gender entitlement through her defence of gender dysphoria as a definitive measure of transness, which afforded opportunities of becoming with a world gatekeeping access to gender-affirming medical procedures. However, here she had been confronted with gender entitlement centred around a complete rejection of medical transitions, revealing anxieties around passing. Negotiating societal pressures to pass while feeling unable to do so may understandably trigger anxiety. Embracing a complete rejection of gender norms affords possibilities of becoming with a world that so often sees trans expression measured against cisnormative standards. Nevertheless, it is in many ways self-fulfilling, threatening the very medical procedures Adele was earlier defending. Such normative positions counter-productively reinforce one another.

When efforts to queer transnormative societal expectations were taken to the extreme, they became queernormative, gatekeeping transness in much the same way as those upholding binary narratives. Not taking people's desires to transition and pass seriously, while perhaps seeking to create a more inclusive community, emerges as exclusionary. Such thinking privileges fluid and mobile expressions of gender over those that emerge as comparatively fixed and in doing, so it fails to validate the deep internal struggles that prevent many from finding comfort in their bodies and appearance. Many trans people like Adele *already* know that there are many ways a person can be trans. However, consciously knowing of such possibilities and affectively feeling them are two very different things. Adele still wanted to medically transition, even though she respected the decision of others not to. Efforts to queer the binary by rejecting the validity of desires to pass and medically transition reduce transness to nothing more than a socio-political act.

Adele: I want to look and sound like a woman, and I believe very strongly that there is a medical basis behind that, whereas a lot of people in Bristol believe it is a political thing. They think you can be trans but still have a beard, which you can, but I just don't understand that because that would make me very dysphoric. It would make me very uncomfortable.

To reduce such desires to a 'political thing' denies the agency of trans women like Adele, invalidating their needs and desires by reducing them to nothing more than products of an oppressive system. In doing so, it fails to consider how such transitions are often a matter of life and death opening "the possibility of affirming an embodied existence" (Elliot 2010. p.107) – an embodied existence which, as with cis people, exceeds any homogenous position (Davy 2018)

Nevertheless, despite all of Adele's challenges around connecting with trans communities online, which, as earlier discussed in *chapter 6*, had at one point resulted in her disconnecting from online communities, she did eventually come to connect with online communities that struck a good balance between being open and supportive while still taking her desire to pass seriously. As earlier discussed, a friendship she had developed *offline* had been instrumental to overcoming anxieties produced through her encounters on 4chan. In the face of these newfound affirmative connections, Adele had managed to feel more comfortable in her transness.

I mean I do still really want to... pass. I will always want to look and sound like a woman, and I'd say I've done a reasonably good job, but I no longer feel like that's the be all and end all if that makes sense. Nowadays... I'm more open about the fact that I am trans and it doesn't bother me as much if people know that I am trans because it is no longer is something I think is embarrassing; it is no longer something I think is shameful.

Though passing still was held as an ideal, she had established a sense of pride in being trans that enabled her to negotiate a sense of belonging being visibly trans and passing as a cis woman.

In this section, I have built on my earlier analysis of Adele navigating transnormativity by considering how Adele was caught between assimilationist and anti-assimilationist demands. Transnormativity was not the only regulatory system of power that had operated to limit where her body of water could safely flow. Just as the presence of her failure to align with cisnormative measures of transness had elicited anxiety ridden defensive flood barriers, the presence of her desire to pass had also ruptured something, i.e., queernormativity. Adele had encounter what Serano (2007) describes as binary phobia. She had been confronted with a fragile 'regulatory queer ideal' (Puar 2007) that, just like transnormative ideals, sustained itself by shutting difference out. Adele had been confronted with what Orne (2017) describes as an 'alternative respectability', i.e., a queernormative respectability politics seeking to limit what bodies can do.

8.3.2.1 Becoming with wrong body/born this way narratives: A psychosocial reading of Adele's embodiment

Now that I have considered how queernormativity operated to invalidate Adele's embodiment, I would like to move on to consider her situated embodied reality. Adele, as discussed, strongly identified with wrong body/born this way narratives. For reasons discussed, I remain sceptical of such narratives (Halberstam 2018; Weber 2012). However, when discussing the fluid and mobile potential of gender and sexuality, I think it is important to acknowledge how embodied realities of different personal and collective pasts navigated render some bodies more fluid and mobile than others. As such, I would now like to consider possibilities of becoming afforded with such narratives, concluding the section, building on the work of Davy (2018), by highlighting how Adele's journey marked just one of many possible embodiments of womanhood, challenging the binary/non-binary dichotomy.

Adele's particular embodiment of sex/gender can be situated in her unique relationally constituted psychosocial biographical experience with men and masculinity, which had produced many anxieties that may have contributed to a real material sense of separation from men. Adele cited a range of deeply affective relational experiences growing up, which had rendered possibilities of being and becoming with men and

masculinity fraught with tension. Her body, pre-transition, had routinely been held in anxiety ridden conflict with societal expectations assigned to that body. In terms of the men and masculinity in her life, there had been little that she could positively identify with because she was so often stigmatised and othered as different. What it meant to be a man within Adele's social sphere was not something with which she could identify. Adele spoke of having no male role models growing up. Many of the men in her life had bullied her, subjecting her to all kinds of (symbolic) violence for failing to live up to hegemonic masculinity. Adele's father had consistently expressed shame and disapproval over her gender expression to the point of actively trying to stop her from doing what emerged naturally from her body.

My dad was very unhappy with how feminine I was. I've always flung my hands around and I've always had a very sort of lispy voice, and he used to try and make me not do that, which wasn't very nice... I have a lot of resentment towards him because of it... He tried to get me to talk like him...but it didn't feel natural. It basically reached a stage where I would speak a certain way around him but then the moment he went away, I would go back to speaking normally...

Adele was also bullied by boys at school, who, to affirm their masculinity, berated her gender non-conformity, often othering her as a girl.

Adele: So, I've always been a bit effeminate and I used to get bullied quite a lot at school because of it... I used to get called things like 'oh Danny, you're such a girl.' I didn't realise it at the time, but I actually liked being called a girl because it was gender affirming if that makes sense.

Though she later came to embody the experience of being called a girl as somewhat gender affirming', it is important to note that this was, at the time, embodied in conflict with who she *thought* she was. While affirming retrospectively, such othering and policing of masculinity was far from affirming at the time, operating to other and police her gender expression.

A harsh affective negativity surrounded Adele's experiences of becoming with men and masculinity. When speaking about other men in her life, the masculinity they

embodied almost always emerged as something hard and brutal, producing traumatic encounters of exclusion leaving little for her to positively identify with.

My dad was very masculine... and was always trying to *make* me do football. I just remember thinking of masculinity as this thing for like really horrible smelly violent people, who I didn't want to be like at all. I wanted to be nice and feminine and soft; I didn't want to be violent and hard. One of the things that stood out to me because I got bullied quite a lot was that being masculine meant you had to be a bully, and I really didn't want to be a bully. I remember thinking that all these boys thought they had to pick on me because they wanted to be masculine, but I was going to like to overcome that and sort of not be like that myself.

What struck me in this excerpt was the deeply affective and visceral aversion to a masculinity that had become almost seamlessly synonymous with Adele's experience of what it meant to be a man. Associated with experiences of bullying and exclusion, and the inevitable discomfort and trauma that surrounds such experiences, such constructions of masculinity did nothing to affirm her experiences and desires, rendering possibilities of being and becoming with men and masculinity disembodied as repulsive. Such trauma was so deeply embodied, it had even come to be associated with smell. Though Adele subscribed to the born this way narrative, her desire to 'overcome' the masculinity expected of her speaks volumes to the power of these deeply affective socio-material relationships.

It was clear that Adele's relationships with men and masculinity did little to validate her bodily expressions of gender pre-transition. In fact, they had done just the opposite, holding her gender expression in strict opposition to the body she was born with. Even the way she spoke, something that is deeply embodied and often beyond conscious intentionality, was othered as matter out of place for her assigned gender and body. Anything deemed other to hegemonic constructions of men and masculinity had been marginalised as different, associated with bodies assigned female, thus operating to impose affective material-discursive limits to what an assigned male body can be and do, and limiting possibilities of exploring gender beyond the binary.

On the flip side, Adele expressed several strong meaningful connections with women in her life, who, overall, had been a lot more accepting and open to her gender non-conformity growing up. Her mother, unlike her father, didn't care about how feminine she was.

My mum was a lot more accepting. I had this weird sort of scenario where my mum was a lot more accepting and didn't care but my dad didn't like it. But I don't remember my mum ever giving me any grief for it.

Though her mother later turned out to be "very cynical" towards her transition, their relationship prior to Adele coming out arguably affirmed possibilities of becoming with women and femininity denied elsewhere. Becoming with women and femininity was arguably life affirming, affording possibilities of reconciling anxiety ridden tensions and conflicts in becoming with men and masculinity. Likewise, Adele's sisters, aside from some fairly standard "sibling rivalry", had always accepted her failure to live up to heteromascularity. In fact, out of all the family she spoke about coming out to, they were the only members that had fully embraced her identity.

On her relational map of the people, places and things that had mattered to her the most, she noted that all her role models had been women. She drew attention to two particular women, namely her grandmother and Queen Esther from the Old Testament. Speaking about her grandmother, she said:

I mean she was just someone...I wanted to be like. She was very mild and very modest but also very caring and loving... She encapsulated a version of femininity I wanted to be like. I wanted to be this nice feminine person. I didn't want to be like the male members of my family who are all very macho... I was *really worried* about growing up like them so I was looking at the more feminine members of my family who happened to be women and I decided I wanted to be like them instead.

Similarly, when talking about Queen Esther, she replied:

When the Jews were in exile... she convinced the king to get rid of Haman and saved the Jews in that process. I think like what stood out to me about the Esther

story was someone using their feminine status in order to help people very empowering. Of course, at this time I had no idea why I was looking up to these people because I thought I was a boy.

Femininity was embodied as something gentle and soft, affording affirmative possibilities of connection, love and care repudiated from masculinity. In both instances, these women had come to represent possibilities of an *embodied* existence in a socio-material reality where men and masculinity had rendered her feeling disembodied. Just like cis women, Adele had been subject to much misogyny, with the femininity she embodied devalued and othered as something less than. As such, like many cis women, her identity had been constituted and re-constituted through affective relations that had come to hold her in opposition to men and masculinity. The category woman, and all that it came to imply, afforded possibilities of being and becoming. It afforded a sense of containment, of being held.

As such, Adele had been afforded possibilities of becoming with women and femininity that had been denied from her sexed body. This of course is not to suggest that Adele would have been happy with the body she was born with had her experience been different, but it is worth considering how such deeply affective social and material relations may, at the very least, have contributed to her body dysphoria. After all, such encounters did nothing to affirm that she had the right body. In many cases, they operated to deny her a body at all. Such a reading of Adele's embodiment is also not to imply that she was alienated from the potential of becoming a man because I reject man as a stable and coherent category. In line with Žižek (2016), I would argue that being and becoming trans embodies something closer to what is 'real' because trans people, irrespective of whether they pass or medically transition, consciously experience and embody a tension between their desires and a society and culture that operates to organise that desire. The trans experience, even when articulated through born this way narratives, resists societal expectations that reduce gender to something that can be assigned from birth, which is something many cis people take for granted. We are all subject to societal pressures to assimilate with dominant constructions of sex/gender. However, those of us that end up normatively gendered often fail to recognise the impact such pressure has on who we are and what have become.

It is important to note that Adele's deeply affective narrative of becoming woman defied linear development narratives and challenged notions that that her desire to pass was a desire to assimilate with an essentialised binary cisnormative position. The gender *not* sex advocates policing her body had assumed she was reducing her gender to particular body parts. However, her identification with womanhood marked an identification with a particular embodiment of womanhood irreducible to simple binary definitions of what it means to be a woman. She was far more than the body parts she desired. Her desire to transition was a desire for an "embodied existence" (Elliot 2010. p.107) – an embodied existence which, exceeds any homogenous position (Davy 2018). As such, building on Davy's (2018) call for us to recognise the multiple embodiments trans people pursue, I would like to finish this section by briefly considering how Adele's journey of becoming woman was irreducible to a binary opposed by queernormativity.

Becoming with wrong body narratives marked an important part of Adele's desire to transition. However, her becoming with womanhood was irreducible to the body parts that queernormativity had reduced her too. Her desire for medical transition was a desire to attain a position that would enable her body of water to flow. However, this flow was not linear. It did not follow the same path of other trans women seeking transition. The category 'woman' embodied in relation to particular sex characteristics, while positioned as assimilationist, may be understood as something producing rather than negating multiple possibilities of being and becoming with the world. Adele, irrespective of her desire to pass and medically transition, embodied womanhood in a way that was markedly different from that of many trans women she had encountered online. Her affective attachments with women and femininity came to represent a particular kind of womanhood and femininity that was loving, open, caring, altruistic and supportive. Her embodied affective ties with women were held in opposition to the toxic competitive femininity embodied by some of the trans women she had encountered online. She strongly dissociated herself from trans women that projected their desire to pass on to others, even though she wanted to pass herself. Despite her desire to pass and medically transition, her understanding of what it meant to be a

woman exceeded any definitive material binary. As identified by Davy (2018), desires to transition are complex and multiple. They do not mark a transition from one homogenous category to another. Adele's desire for particular body was a desire for what that body had come to mean for her; it was a desire that opened rather than closed possibilities of becoming.

Throughout this section, I have explored tensions that emerged between Adele's assigned sex and her gender expression. Such tensions saw Adele denied a body, with a desire for medical transition emerging as a desire for an embodied existence. However, building on the work of Davy (2018), I have challenged the idea that her desire for medical transition marked a desire to transition from one homogenous binary position to another. I have mapped out anxieties and tensions that sought resolution through expelling all remnants associated with a deeply traumatic visceral ugly smelly and brutal past with men and masculinity. Such earlier becomings with men and masculinity operated to severely limit possibilities of where her body could flow, so much so that she was even denied her own voice. Meanwhile, the position of *not man* afforded movement. It marked possibility, and that possibility was not singular, nor was it reducible to queernormative assumptions about what medical transition means and does for those seeking it.

8.3 The limits of language: Identifying with the correct words

Now that I have considered how queernormativity emerged through identifying the correct ways, I would like to finish the chapter by considering how it emerged around identifying the correct words, with bodies reduced to queer enough *or not* based on abstract identity categories. Much work dating back to Kinsey (1948) has emphasised an incongruity between language, identities and material practices and desire, problematising strict distinctions between notions of gayness and straightness by rightfully pointing to how many people who identify as straight have had non-heterosexual experiences and desires. I think we need to apply a similar logic when considering distinctions between say gayness, queerness, cisness and transness. Such

labels, while meaningful, do not demarcate absolute boundaries between bodies, with material practices often emerging in excess of any absolute identity. People were queering binary constructions of gender and sexuality long before we had the language to articulate it, as nicely captured by Halberstam's (2018) reference to the likes of David Bowie and Prince. While queering language undoubtedly plays an invaluable role in helping us better articulate and conceptualise experiences and possibilities beyond the binary, language and identity are not the only means by which a person might challenge the binary.

As Halberstam (2018) identifies, even gayness and transness can be difficult to separate, with many having embodied transness as gender non-conformity before later coming out as trans. As discussed, how we see ourselves in relation to others is embodied *with* the knowledge and language at our disposal. What it means to be gay, queer, bisexual, pansexual, trans, cis, male, female, non-binary etc are irreducible to any homogenous position. Despite being affectively contained and embodied through varying degrees of felt connection between group members, which emerge in relation to particular experiences and practices entangled in differentiated histories of marginalisation, what it means to identify as a member of any of these groups, and intersections thereof, is always multiple. In a material sense, such classifications are never truly binary; they are negotiated, embodied and practiced in many different ways. Practices that some of us may be able to negotiate and reconcile within one identity category may overlap, in a material sense, with what others have come to experience, understand and embody in another. This is not to suggest that these categorical distinctions are meaningless but rather to recognise varying degrees of incongruity that emerge between identity and practice in order to make room for experiences that emerge in excess of categorical distinctions. Queer theory, in considering identity as something we *do* rather than something we *are* goes some way towards acknowledging this. However, as discussed, an anti-identitarianism within queer theory can easily emerge as an identity in itself – an identity that excludes. Constructions of queerness, while supposedly post-dialectic and irreducible to any fixed position, did not exist outside of signification, caught in a quasi-dialectic of its

own (see Eyers 2007) with many embracing queerness often embracing it in opposition to that they perceived as not queer or less queer.

8.3.1 #droptheb

One of the participants of the Queering Masculinity group brought my attention to #droptheb ‘campaign’, which had been circulating on the internet (Figure 25). The participant, who self-identified as bisexual, shared the post with an angry caption about how the campaign added to the already existing bisexual erasure within the LGBTQIA+ community. #droptheb was actually created and circulated by anonymous users of the social media platform 4chan, an image board often associated with the alt-right. The post modified the LGBT acronym to LGPT, which in the context of the assertion that there are more than two genders presumably stood for pansexual, with pan- held to signify all genders. The phenomenon known as ‘attention hacking’ (see Boyd 2017) aimed to fuel tension and division within the LGBTQIA+ community by implying that bisexuality was inherently transphobic and thus exploiting existing tensions between binary and non-binary LGBTQIA+ identity politics. Though the participant that shared the post later came to acknowledge that it was all just a hoax, they nevertheless continued to emphasise that bisexual erasure was still a big problem within the community. However, this was a problem attributed to the community in general rather than specifically towards trans and queer activists as the 4chan users may have hoped.

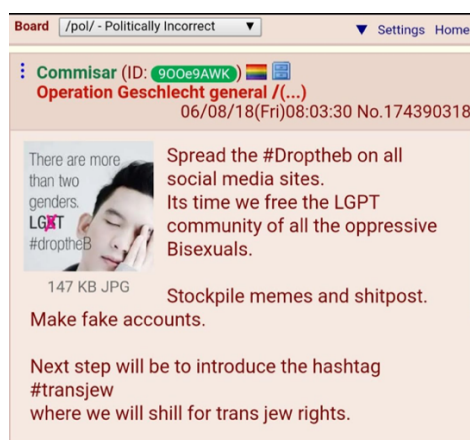


Figure 23: #Droptheb

Image in the public domain and used, in line with copyright legislation, for comment and review

Throughout my own wider auto/ethnographic observations as a participant in queer spaces online, the effort to divide the community seemed to be met with *limited* success, with the memes quickly traced back to the alt-right channel within days of going viral. Such efforts soon materialised in LGBTQIA+ media, with PinkNews quickly responding to counter division, curbing discussions and reducing the affective charge of the campaign (Andersson 2018). It was relatively short-lived and did not seem to gain much serious (visible) support from within the LGBTQIA+ community. Though there may well have been a radical fringe of the community that bought into the rhetoric pushed by 4chan, I did not encounter anyone support the campaign, at least not anyone who appeared to be within the community. Most people I had come across pushing the campaign did so through anonymous accounts on Twitter and Tumblr; accounts which, in many cases, signified alignments with socially conservative politics (i.e., displaying support for the likes of Donald Trump). Many visible members of the community were raising awareness of where the rhetoric was coming from (Figure 26). As such, it could be argued that the *4chan* users' own anxieties and assumptions about a radical leftist queer and trans 'agenda', pushing to indoctrinate and erase non- or less queer Others, were misguided. The apparent failure to gain *visible* support within the LGBTQIA+ communities I was participating in seemed to demonstrate a clear misrecognition of what queer identity and activism is generally about. The supposedly queer radical extremists were just not as radical or extreme as the *4chan* trolls might have hoped.

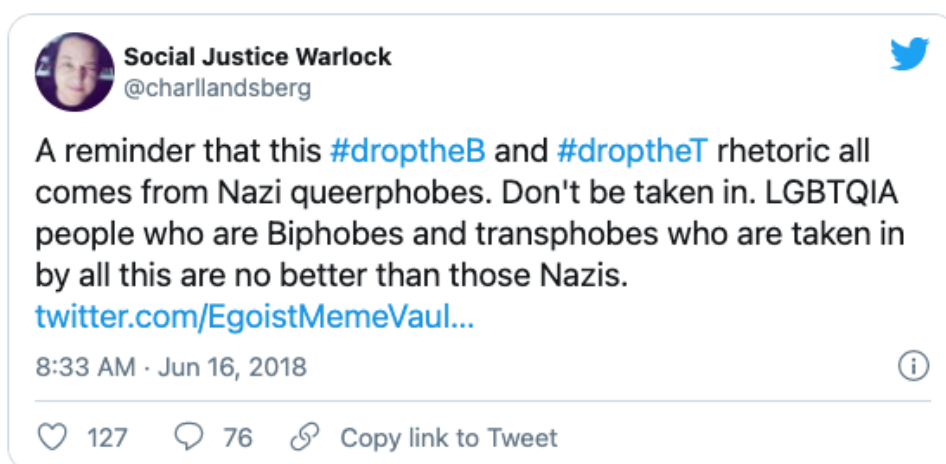


Figure 24: De-attention hacking?

Opt-in consent for use of image provided by the Twitter user

Nevertheless, the post did still trigger responses worthy of discussion. As such, questions around the affective impact the post had – what it was able to *do*, as opposed to from whom and where it came, cannot be reduced solely to the work of *4chan* trolls but rather needs to be understood in relation to already existing tensions within the LGBTQIA+ community. It appeared to ignite a particularly salient defence from many bisexuals I came across online, who felt somewhat displaced by the use of the term pansexual. In some instances, the comments I came across sought to deny the existence of non-binary people and/or re-affirmed the transphobic notion of sex not gender, denying the validity of gender transitions. Even upon becoming aware of the source, many, like the participant on the Queering Masculinity research group, still expressed feeling invalidated and attacked, with blame often attributed towards members of the community perceived as *too* radical.

@Tumblr: People only fell for it because this is the kind of rubbish you would expect from queer activists (paraphrased).

Much of the anxiety that emerged in response to the campaign was arguably driven by homonormative and cisnormative moral panic around queer and trans activism, aligning, in many ways, with the tensions discussed in my last chapter. However, in some instances, tensions appeared to arise from contested definitions of the terms, with the labels reduced to abstract material practices and desires that failed to align with different embodiments of them. I came across queernormative discussion around language and identity failing to recognise the limits of language and incongruence that often exists between the labels people use and embody and the practices those labels describe. While I didn't observe anyone explicitly supporting #droptheb, I did observe lots of assumptions being made about what bisexuality and pansexuality *is* and *is not*, which may, at least in part, have fuelled tensions

Queer efforts to disrupt traditional identity categories through the use of language capturing the irreducibility of identity ironically, in some instances, emerged as an identity in of itself, premised on strict definitions of what it was not. I came across many comments buying into the idea that bisexuality marked something ontologically distinct from pansexuality.

@Facebook: “I am Bi. I know the difference between pan and bi as should everyone else”

@reddit: Bi is two, no? (Paraphrased)

@Facebook: Bi means two. Bisect means to split in two. Bicycle means a two-wheeler.

Such efforts to define bisexuality in strict opposition to pansexuality emerged as a tension that the meme was able to exploit – a tension arguably entangled in long histories of bisexual exclusion and erasure. Many bisexuals I observed did not embody their bisexuality as a desire for two. For some, it was two or more, for others just like pansexuality, it was understood and expressed as an orientation inclusive of everyone.

@PinkNews FB: Hi. I'm bi and I'm attracted to TWO groups of people. 1. People of my gender and 2. People of other genders.

@Twitter: Bisexual includes everyone between two sides of the sexuality spectrum (paraphrased)

Some bisexuals even defined it as a desire for two but stressed that it could be any two.

@Facebook: ...those two genders don't have to be male and female.

@Facebook: I'm attracted to people of the same gender and non-binary people.

Pansexual, while adding a layer of specificity that signifies non-exclusionary desire, signifies something that, for many, is embodied as bisexual. It adds specificity to the more ambiguous term bisexual, which may *or may not* be embodied as excluding certain genders.

In short, to summarise this section, such identity categories were embodied and actualised in multiple ways that exceeded simplistic comparison. Such overlap, ironically, speaks to the long body of queer theorising urging us do away with identity categories, and would thus seem to support the very anti-identitarianism I have criticised. It certainly highlights the limits of identity politics assuming identities are

a definitive measures of material desires and practices. From my observations of discussions surrounding #droptheb, it was clear that a great deal of incongruity exists between identities, desires and practices, arguably rendering efforts to define identities in strict opposition to one another futile. However, such issues around objectively defining identity do not mean that the identities are meaningless. They are certainly unstable and open to reconfiguration, thus urging us to avoid making universalising assumptions about what any one person's identity represents. After all, it was such very assumptions that had led to the tensions observed I observed in this section. However, while such unstable definitions certainly urges us to consider what language does, or the possibilities of becoming it affords, I would challenge the separation of doing or becoming from being, as given my earlier discussions, attachments to identity categories can become sedimented and difficult to dislodge, which is not to say they are definitive markers but rather to acknowledge how they come to matter, with varying degrees of stability over time, for *those* that identify with them.

8.3.2 Gatekeeping queerness through language and identity

ALL OPPRESSED GENDERS WELCOME -EVERYONE EXCEPT CIS MEN! THERE WILL BE NO GENDER POLICING AT THIS EVENT
(Queer/feminist protest In Bristol organised on Facebook)

The last thing I want to consider is the idea of gatekeeping and measuring the legitimacy of oppression solely by language and identity. Above is a quote from a feminist/queer activist event in Bristol organised through Facebook. Such a statement fails to acknowledge how many cis men, particularly gay, bisexual, pansexual and queer* cis men, can and do often face gender-based oppression for failing to conform to cisheteromascularity. Furthermore, such thinking fails to recognise the gender-based oppression faced by gender non-conforming men, often entangled in homophobia. Oppression based on gender expression and sexuality is not the same as oppression against identity, but it still exists, and can emerge in ways that exceeds identity struggles. Going back to my earlier discussion around oppressive homonormativities, I return to Sam, a *cis* gay man that faced femmephobia for queering dominant expectations around what it means to be a man. While Sam, in identifying with the gender he was assigned at birth, did not express struggles against

being misgendered, at least not at the time of participating, he did face struggles against his performance of gender (Figure 27). Such struggles, while also often faced by the many trans and non-binary people read as such, are not inherently tied to trans and non-binary identities. Some trans and non-binary people are read as normative, enabling them to avoid such antagonisms, even though coming out as trans and/or non-binary comes with its own set of challenges. As such, when thinking about homophobia and (trans)misogyny, it seems important to acknowledge how such oppressive forces emerge materially, preceding identity in that people like Sam are othered before their identity is even known. Transphobia and homophobia operate not only against LGBTQIA+ people but also against all who are read as LGBTQIA+. Going back to Halberstam's discussion around the slippage between cisness and transness, it is also worth considering how people like Sam, while identifying as cis, may (or may not) later come to identify as trans or non-binary. It is also possible that someone identifies as cis because they are not ready to come out as anything other. Sam was the one participant living outside of the city, raising questions around how limited access to queer spaces and networks *might* limit awareness and recognition of certain identity categories.

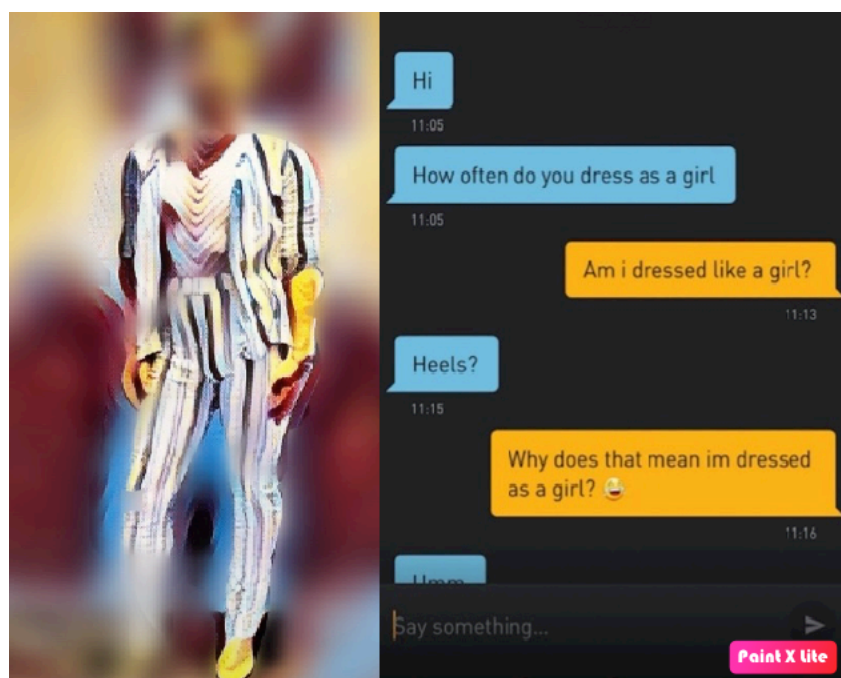


Figure 25: This is what some cis men look like!
Opt-in consent for use of image provided by the participant

To summarise, we might consider how embodied meanings attributed to categories are actualised through different socio-material-cultural contexts. Far from stable, location, age, religion, education, class and nationality could all impact how people embody, understand and articulate their desires, experiences and practices, but that doesn't mean those desires, experiences and practices are inherently different. Rejecting binary labels isn't in and of itself any more radical or progressive. Though language plays an important role in organising how we understand and embody social and material reality, affective-material relations also shape how we understand and embody language. As Wetherell (2013) argues, language and materiality are mutually constitutive of one another. The language people have at their disposal to articulate their experiences is far from evenly distributed, rendering many dependant on negotiating the categories they do have. The material practices of people are not inherently more binary simply by virtue of adopting binary identities. Here we might consider how not all languages have gender neutral pronouns - but this doesn't mean that the people using those languages are inherently more binary in terms of their material lived experiences and practices. Similarly, if we think about possibilities afforded through language here in the UK, the intelligibility of gender-neutral language and knowledge of queerness can vary a great deal.

In short, the language and knowledges we have access to makes a difference. Acknowledging this seems important given that people were queering binary assumptions around gender and sexuality through their material experiences and practices long before we had non-binary labels to articulate those practices. In negotiating the language at our disposal, we arguably push the boundaries of what binary categories can do and represent, which, in many ways, has helped render non-binary categories recognisable. A failure to recognise a material queerness that exceeds language and identity categories carries the danger of positioning people as inherently queerer and more radical purely based on language rather than material practices, which, in many instances across history, have been just as disruptive to existing social-material arrangements. Plenty of people, irrespective of prior knowledge and whether or not they reject binary labels, still queer and disrupt binary assumptions around gender and sexuality. People negotiate the language at their

disposal, and in doing so push the boundaries of what binary categories can represent. Nevertheless, somewhat paradoxically, categories are not inconsequential, with the separating of language from materiality obscuring material limits on queer potential. Categories, while limited, can be helpful in describing such limits. As earlier discussed, queer anti-assimilationist forces can certainly be empowering, queering oppressive social-material-cultural configurations. However, it can also be oppressive, positioning bodies as not queer enough, with the rejection of identities and practices emerging as a regulatory norm that fails to make room for affective dis/attachments.

8.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored data generated responsive to literature urging us to take a critical stance against disembodied notions of queerness and becoming (Ahmed 2004; Davy 2018; Gunnarsson 2011; Linke 2013; Orne 2017; Puar 2007; Riggs 2010), responding to concerns around how anti-foundationalist theoretical positions centred around freedom from norms can themselves become regulatory. I have built on work critical of a tendency for queer spaces to centre heavily around identifying the correct words and the correct ways, promoting what Orne (2017) describes as a queernormative 'alternative respectability'. Throughout the data generated both with my participants and through my own wider auto/ethnographic encounters, queernormativity emerged as heavily polarising, operating to exclude recognition of how material practices and becomings with language were heavily embodied and situated, irreducible to definitive conclusions around what any given practice or identity represents. Nowhere was this made more present than through Adele's becomings with online and offline worlds navigating conflicting forces of queernormativity and transnormativity operating to deny and invalidate her existence.

Adele, as discussed, had been othered as 'showing off'. She had been accused of harbouring internalised homophobia for 'trying to be cis'. Set against her encounters with transnormativity, she had been faced, by her own admission, with 'no go between'. Adele's journey spoke to literature on 'binary phobia' (Serano 2007). Queering normative boundaries, far from enabling bodies of water to flow, emerged here as a containing force, operating to deny Adele possibilities of an embodied

existence. Through mapping out Adele's becomings with gender, a deeply traumatic visceral aversion to men and masculinity emerged. It was clear that becoming with women and femininity afforded possibilities of becoming denied elsewhere. Her becomings with men denied her a body; they denied her the ability to exist. The way she spoke and the way she moved were othered as matter out of place, producing restrictive notions of what her body could do. The desire for medical transition could be read as a desire to escape such limits. However, building on the work of Davy (2018), my analysis of Adele's desire to escape such limits, shedding all remnants associated with a violent smelly masculinity, avoided reducing her desire to transition as a desire to transition from one homogenous position to another. Building on Davy's call for us to recognise the multiple embodiments trans people pursue, I challenged the binary/non-binary dichotomy, mapping out ways in which Adele's becomings with women and femininity were unique, markedly different embodied in opposition not just to men but also to many trans women expressing what she defined as 'toxic femininity'. Possibilities of becoming with the category woman and through material practices of transitioning thus emerged as multiple, irreducible to definitive boundaries of what any given identity or practice represents.

While the data presented in this chapter took me in many directions, Adele's narrative is significant to tensions that emerged elsewhere. It spoke to the issues raised around making definitive claims around what any given identity represents, as identified across my discussions around the #droptheb campaign and the exclusionary feminist queer protest. Across these discussions, I again highlighted a tendency to make reductive assumptions about what identity categories mean – a tendency ironically reproduced by queer efforts to deconstruct identity. However, as Sam's radical queering of masculinity identified, what it means to be man is not reducible to a simplistic binary, further contributing to Davy's work urging us to recognise the many possible embodiments pursued through identification with binary labels. Of course, the irony of my argument against anti-identitarianism based on recognising the irreducibility of identity categories to specific desires and practices is not missed. Much of my critique of queernormativity that emerged across the data generated speaks to the very criticism of identity politics put forward by many anti-foundationalist queer and new materialist

scholars. However, I have identified both here and in the last chapter that identity comes to matter, for some more than others, affording possibilities of becoming, even if those possibilities of becoming are irreducible to the identities themselves. The data I have generated demonstrates, in line with Hall (1996) a that identity and questions of representation are far from “superseded dialectically” (p.1). Meaning still matters. However, how it comes to matter is situated embodied. On this note, I would propose the need for what Riggs (2010) defines as a ‘post-identity identity politics’, accounting for how identity still matters, for some more than others, while avoiding reductive notions of identity. In thinking about the tensions observed in this section and elsewhere in my thesis, the paradox of post-identity identity politics creates space for attachments to identities of varying intensity. It creates space for the bodies of water that flowed, some more than others, converging and diverging even if irreducible to any fixed position.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

In this thesis, I set out to make sense of contradictory and conflicting possibilities for LGBTQIA+ youths to connect, participate and organise in the digital age. Following various shifts that I, as a queer man, had observed across LGBTQIA+ media and community landscapes, I was drawn to questions around how digital media and technologies, in affording vast opportunities for connection and uprooting bodies from constraints of geographical place, can enable many possibilities for affirmative intimacies, community building, identity work and activism. As much of the LGBTQIA+ digital scholarship discussed acknowledges, the internet can quite literally be a lifeline for gender and sexual minorities. As a queer man myself, it is hard for me to imagine what life would have been like growing up queer without the internet. In line with much existing work, the internet was where I came out. It was where I first connected with the LGBTQIA+ community. It was where I met my first boyfriend. As such, I had not just read the literature around the affirmative potential of the internet, I felt and embodied it. I had long been drawn to the internet as a site of opportunity and possibility. Nevertheless, as with many, my engagement with the internet had not been free from risk, nor had all the connections I made through the internet been affirmative. The internet had often felt like the best place in the world, but it had also felt like the worst.

When I started the project, it was clear that the digital age was no utopia. As highlighted in the introduction to my thesis, the digital age seemed to be both the best and the worst time to be queer. The collective silence surrounding many marginalised voices had been broken, with the internet giving voice to various #movements, and I had engaged with, many counter-cultural offline activist groups that had materialised through the internet. However, at the same time, we had witnessed a rise in right wing populism, which had also been given a voice online. The digital age was divided and polarised, which is precisely what drew me to critically engage with questions surrounding digital empowerment. I wanted to better understand how becoming with digital media and technologies could, on the one hand afford possibilities of queering cisheteromascularity and commodified modes of resistance, while displacing such

opportunities on the other. I was interested in how digital communication affords seemingly infinite possibilities of connecting with difference open to re-configuring bodies and desires, and yet how many such connections come to be displaced, or if they do emerge, emerge as sites of conflict and hostility.

From the outset, I have rejected binary notions of the internet to grapple with such conflicting possibilities of becoming with digital media. Throughout the process, I found myself drawn to much polarised debate, both in academic and popular discourse, around digital risks and opportunities, promoting *either* utopian *or* dystopian visions homogenising digital technologies, content and practices as either emancipatory or oppressive. Much of this literature, I felt, tapped into something, but it failed to account for how every given technology, type of media content or digital practice can emerge as both empowering and disempowering, sometimes even simultaneously so. As such, I moved towards literature encouraging us to approach digital media and technologies not as bounded entities but rather as sites of affective potential, actualised relationally through the coming together of platforms spaces, people, places and things constituting and re-constituting bodies in unexpected ways. Nevertheless, critical of disembodied notions of affect affording a limited understanding of how some bodies emerge as more fluid than others, I turned to questions of embodiment. Turning to the concept of bodies of water, I sought to map out embodied journeys, which, while open to re-configuration through becoming *with* digital connections, remain contained, to varying degrees, by personal and collective pasts navigated. Given the existing work emphasising how possibilities for queering cisheteromascularity are far from evenly distributed across time and place, even in the seemingly global postmodern age of infinite possibilities, it seemed pertinent to consider embodied feelings of separation and difference that prevail, producing very different investments in connections and becoming in the digital age. As such, I developed an open-ended mixed methods approach that synthesised many existing methodological insights to generate data attentive to how bodies come to be re-configured in situ but nevertheless remain contained, to varying degrees, across time and place.

9.1 Unexpected journeys: Unresolved lines of inquiry

My mapping of relationally constituted bodies, both past and present, took me in many unexpected directions. While affording many opportunities for mapping out becomings with digital media and technologies that had mattered to the participants, my unstructured participatory approach pushed and pulled me in many directions. My becomings with the participants produced many potential lines of inquiry impossible to pursue in any single thesis. Much of the data generated could be further analysed and developed to contribute to diverse bodies of work, including but not limited to: work around gaming and gayming communities; literature on queer fanfiction communities and the subversive potential of the genre and alternative media more broadly; work on attention hacking; literature around femmephobia and racism within MSM online dating/hook-up cultures; work around platform design and digital infrastructures; scholarship around context collapse among marginalised genders and sexualities; literature around algorithms; and work around child sexual exploitation. Potential lines of inquiry also emerged around the affordances and constraints shifting modalities of digital communication. Discussions around the effects proximity has connections established also emerged as an avenue for further development. Proximity, in some instances, saw online connections felt as less real, as was the case for Adele who did not see coming out as trans as possible until meeting someone in the flesh. However, in other instances, such connections were felt as just as real, in some instances more real, in that irrespective of proximity, they afforded something that could not be actualised elsewhere. Existing literature on online connections being weaker was not insignificant, but it was also far from generalisable across the data generated.

Many of these lines of inquiry could have been developed further. In some instances, such as in my discussion around gaming connections, avenues of inquiry were curtailed because my interest lay not in the specific sites and communities themselves. As discussed, I approached such sites and communities as relationally produced and thus embodying a capacity to be relationally produced as something other to what they emerged. In other instances, lines of inquiry were pursued, but came to be decentred as I was drawn to data that had emerged as more affective in terms of the possibilities

of movement enabled and/or displaced. For instance, I found myself particularly drawn to the issue of context collapse limiting Sajid's interactions on public social media, which raised many questions around how navigating contextual boundaries on social media may interact with algorithms to limit opportunities for connection and movement, thus building on work questioning the participatory potential of digital communication. However, what interested me here was not the constraints themselves but rather how such constraints came to be marginalised by queernormativity – a point I will return to shortly.

In other instances, potential lines of inquiry emerged but were not pursued due to the aims and objectives of the project. For instance, screenshots shared on the Queering Masculinity group generated rich data around racism and femmephobia on dating/hook-up apps. Such data could have been used to intervene in discussions around homonormativity on MSM dating/hook-up apps. Likewise, interview data around the deeply affective moment in which filters had seen Sajid erased from physical space raised questions around platform design and the political economic interests served by such design. However, what interested me here was not the interactions themselves but rather how such interactions came to be embodied and navigated through journeys emerging between and across connections forged elsewhere. I also found myself drawn to questions around exploited agencies in sexually exploitative encounters, with possibilities of becoming with predatory men emerging as deeply affective for Sajid and Adele. The issue of sexual exploitation raised many questions around how we understand child sexual exploitation, and the wider relational context through which it is co-produced. I was drawn to work urging us to consider agencies afforded through exploitative encounters, which was useful for thinking about online risks versus opportunities, thus responding to my aim of questioning notions of digital empowerment. However, questions around the nature of the exploitation itself laid beyond the scope of my project. Nevertheless, the data generated left me with many unanswered questions around how my analysis of the exploitation, and the cisheteronormative context from which it emerged, may contribute to existing debates and discussions around how we understand and address child sexual exploitation.

9.2. Key interventions: Lines of inquiry pursued

Now that I have outlined the many unexpected lines of inquiry that I did not seek to resolve, I would like to move on to outline the lines of inquiry that I pursued. In this section, I re-iterate the key interventions made in each chapter before moving on, in the next section, to highlight the key takeaways from the thesis as a whole. In the first two findings/analysis chapters, I responded primarily to my first two questions around how the internet enabled and displaced possibilities of connecting with difference, mapping out how cisheteromascularity and commodified forms of resistance were ruptured, redefined and re-produced through the participants embodied becomings with digital media and technologies. In the last two chapters, I moved on to focus primarily on the last two research questions grappling with concerns around how some bodies come to emerge as more fluid than others. In these chapters, I sought to understand how embodied psychosocial constraints limit the seemingly infinite possibilities of becoming in the digital age. In thinking through questions of embodiment, I sought to respond to my questions around tensions emerging through differentiated embodied feelings of separation and difference before finally, in the last chapter, grappling with my questions around how unique embodied experiences and emotional investments may limit material practices and possibilities of meaning making actualised in the digital age. Nevertheless, the questions around embodiment and possibilities of queering normative constraints overlapped, to varying degrees, across my analysis of the data presented in each analysis chapter.

9.2.1 Bodies of water can flow, but they cannot flow everywhere, nor can they flow free from risk: Beyond risk versus opportunity

In my first analysis chapter, I engaged with broad debates around questions of digital empowerment, paying particular attention to possibilities of becoming with the internet against normative constraints. I mapped out many affirmative possibilities of becoming with the internet, which had enabled bodies of water to flow free from many constraints of cisheteromascularity. The participants took me in many unexpected directions. However, I found myself drawn to broader debates around digital

empowerment within feminist and LGBTQIA+ digital scholarship. Questions around how, how much, where and with what becomings with digital media and technologies came to matter emerged as heavily situated, broadly building on work emphasising the mobile situated nature of becomings with digital media and technologies. However, what emerged as particularly significant here, through thinking with the concept of bodies of water, was that possibilities of flow were afforded through containment.

The participants' bodies flowed but they could not flow everywhere. The participants' becomings with digital media involved navigating an imminent threat of hostile and antagonistic forces offline, which, as highlighted by Sajid's entering unfamiliar territories on holiday, persisted long after coming out. The internet had, in many instances, transformed possibilities of connection, affording many opportunities for intimacy, community building and identity work. However, such potential was afforded, in many instances, through keeping a threat of violent cisheteromascularity at bay. The participants still had to navigate offline contexts that operated to constrain them, and such constraints had, in the case of Adele and Sajid, seen bodies and desires flow into troubling waters of sexual exploitation to affirm desires that could not be affirmed elsewhere. As such, the data generated in this chapter was heavily conflicting, challenging work separating risk from opportunity. It contributed to work urging us to remain critical of literature over-stating the transformative potential of digital communication, and in thinking about risk, responded to work complicating notions of online risks versus opportunities in highlighting opportunities in risk. Such recognition of the limits of digital empowerment seemed especially pertinent given literature around increasingly polarised political landscapes and rising levels of hate crimes against gender and sexual minorities.

9.2.2 Uneven possibilities of becoming online navigated through affective subversive flows of laughter

In the following chapter, I moved on to consider how the participants navigated homonormativity and transnormativity online. Whereas the first analysis chapter

centred heavily on how online connections afforded possibilities for bodies to flow free from many cisheteronormative constraints, the second analysis chapter moved on to consider how such opportunities for connection online were far from evenly distributed, emerging within heavily sexed, gendered and racialised economies of desire. In this chapter, I generated data responsive to work around homonormativity and transnormativity, particularly work around how such systems of power continue to be re-produced online. Here I decentred my analysis in the first analysis chapter, which largely centred on online connections affording opportunities for establishing place against placelessness, both on and offline. I considered how some of the very sites that had emerged as affirmative, such as dating/hook-up apps, also emerged as sites of exclusion, in some instances simultaneously so, as was the case for Sajid who had been both empowered and disempowered through connections forged on such apps. Documenting many encounters with femmephobia and racism across dating/hook-up apps, the data I presented was, as discussed, responsive to much work around online MSM dating/hook-up cultures and platform designs. However, what interested me was not the platforms themselves but rather how the challenges confronted on them came to be navigated through connections forged elsewhere.

Extending existing scholarship around LGBTQIA+ blogging and social networking as a means of queering such normative constraints through giving voice to marginalised members and intersections of the community, I considered how such encounters were met with laughter operating to affirm difference. Thinking between multiple strands of theorising around humour, I documented how laughing in the face of oppression emerged as a deeply affective force. Humour, intensified through contagious affects of laughter online, emerged as a force holding the participants facing racism and femmephobia together, both individually and collectively, and affording mutually constitutive opportunities for subverting normative configurations of bodies, identities, and desires. I say mutually constitutive because ‘laughing things *off*’, as Sajid, highlighted, emerged as a means of coping, affording continuity necessary for laughter that emerged elsewhere to afford possibilities of community building, identity work and activism. While I questioned the limits of the subversive potential of laughter, acknowledging work documenting how laughter can also emerge as a

regulatory force, the emergence of laughter nevertheless still operated to subvert oppressive forces and enable the participants' bodies of water to flow. While remaining in tension with oppressive forces, again urging us to remain critical of claims over-stating the transformative potential of such becomings with digital media and technologies, laughter still emerged with digital media to afford possibilities of navigating those oppressive forces.

9.2.3 The emergence of anxiety ridden flood defences against the queering of normative boundaries: A consideration of possibilities of becoming afforded with normative positions

In my third analysis chapter, I moved on to consider normative positions that emerged against queer excess. While my analysis in the previous chapters had centred how the participants came to navigate and subvert such positions, the third analysis chapter sought to better understand the normative positions themselves. The participants, for the most part, rejected normative positions, so I used much of this chapter as a space for considering who and what was rendered absent from the project. Drawing on my wider auto/ethnographic encounters as a queer man and researcher, I sought to better understand the normative positions that the participants navigated. I documented anxieties that emerged against the queering of normative configurations of bodies, identities, and desires – anxieties that emerged as particularly salient in the backlash to my project. Bodily flows disrupting normative configurations triggered flood defences, operating to re-centre a white cisheteromasculine binary. Much of the data presented throughout the chapter was responsive to work around internalised oppressions and homonormative and transformative drives towards assimilation. However, my analysis sought to think beyond reducing the participants and those I encountered through my auto/ethnographic encounters to normative positions. Instead, it built on work problematising the dichotomy of assimilation versus liberation through considering possibilities of becoming afforded *with* the normative positions.

The volatile defensiveness among some of those that refused to take part, coupled with the one potential participant that had normalised experiences of bisexual erasure, highlighted how assertions of being 'normal' can often be anything but. Some the data

presented in the chapter, taken at face value, could support work highlighting how gay male youths no longer have a need to politicise their identities, with assimilation rendering them never being made to feel anything other. However, among those that refused to take part, the normalisation of oppression and anxieties around the mere presence of a queer other suggested otherwise. Efforts to maintain distance from those deemed too queer and too radical raised questions around different worlds navigated, particularly given the deafening silence of rural non-university educated youths in my project. Building on work urging us to consider personal and collective histories producing uneven possibilities of queering masculinity in the region from which I was recruiting, I speculated on different embodied offline contexts navigated, considering a potential class gap in abilities to embrace notions of queerness. Here I considered how normative positions may afford continuity through the likes of maintaining familial and community ties offline, with embracing queerness producing costs to such ties that are far from evenly felt across time and place. While more data was needed to ground my analysis, embracing the uncertainty around who and what was present served to avoid taking much of that observed through my fleeting encounters online at face value, which in many instances would have seen me reduce those observed to normative privileged positions without consideration of the wider contexts they were navigating. Furthermore, the uncertainty around who and what was present served as data, building on digital methodologies literature urging us to consider offline contexts to give voice to diverse sites of meaning making.

9.2.4 Queernormativity: Embodied constraints against notions of infinite possibilities of becoming in the digital age

In my final analysis chapter, I continued to explore embodied constraints emerging through differentiated social-material-cultural worlds navigated by the participants. In doing so, I again intervened in discussions around the participatory potential of digital media and technologies, considering how opportunities for engaging in queer politics, meaning making, negotiating identity and adopting material practices were both deeply embodied and relationally produced. One example of such was Sajid's becoming with queer communities and content online displaced through limited queer connections and context collapse. As discussed, Sajid had, for a long time, been

unaware of many issues faced by many members of the LGBTQIA+ community. His journey towards becoming aware was not reducible to a simple matter of choice and active participation in educating himself but rather something that emerged through a relational shift of going to university, where connecting with the LGBTQIA+ society saw him exposed to more LGBTQIA+ content online. Another example was Adele's becoming with trans political efforts to separate gender from sex. For Adele, the countless virtual possibilities of gender identity and expression irreducible to sexual characteristics were far from felt. Becoming with masculinity and all that came to be associated with it had denied her a body. Rejecting all remnants of that masculinity, which existed not as a stable thing but nevertheless still something that came to matter as rigidly defined through Adele's lived experience, affirmed possibilities of an embodied existence. Nevertheless, the thing that I decided to foreground in this chapter was not the embodied constraints themselves but rather how such constraints came to be marginalised by queernormativity, building on literature critical of disembodied notions of queerness failing to account for different possibilities of becoming with language and identity. In line with that body of work, my final analysis chapter identified an alternative respectability that emerged in opposition to homonormative and transnormative respectability.

An anti-identitarianism became an identity in and of itself – an identity which, as observed by Orne on Chicago's queer scene, was centred around identifying the correct words and the correct ways. While this alternative respectability affirmed much difference in excess of normative configurations of bodies, identities and desires, arguably affording room for bodies of water to flow free from many normative constraints, it operated, much like that which it resisted, to regulate bodies. It excluded acknowledgement of different embodied situated possibilities of becoming with language and material practices. Efforts to queer language and material practices emerged as normative, not only among the participants and many I had observed through my auto/ethnographic encounters but also through my research practices, which, as discussed, emerged as exclusionary through underestimating how embracing notions of queerness were far from evenly distributed.

In some instances, such failures to recognise different possibilities of embracing the queering of language and practices saw binary phobia emerge against non-binary phobia. Bodies failing to reject binary identity categories and/or adopt visible gender non-conforming practices were othered as less queer at best, as assimilationist and de-politicised traitors at worst. Such binary phobia emerged as particularly salient in the case of Adele, who had been caught between transnormativity and queernormativity – both of which limited where her body of water could flow. Adele, while becoming with the binary category woman and desiring a body often reduced to that category, was not binary or assimilationist. Her becomings with language and bodies, while contained in various ways, was unique, contributing to work urging us to take a critical stance against separating the normative from the queer and consider the multiple embodiments trans people pursue through medical transition and identification with binary categories. On this note, I sought to reconcile tensions emerging between identities and practices classified as binary and non-binary by thinking about how the data spoke to work arguing for an acknowledgment of post-identity identities. Such an orientation to identity creates space for the bodies of water that flowed, differentiated in terms of where and to what extent they could flow, thus warranting a sense of separation, but nevertheless still flowing, converging and diverging in ways irreducible to any fixed position. My data showed that identity can still come to matter as something affording possibilities of becoming with the world even if that something is unstable across time and place.

9.3 Final thoughts: The thesis as a whole

Taken as a whole, my thesis builds on literature urging us to take a critical stance against claims emphasising the transformative emancipatory participatory potential of digital media and technologies. It contributes to work urging us to acknowledge how becomings with the internet do not flow free from existing power relations and hierarchies of desire. Such power relations and hierarchies continue to be made present and navigated, both on and offline. However, my thesis also urges us to remain critical of dystopian visions of bodies and connections constrained by various forms of digital media and technologies. Through mapping out becomings actualised between and across multiple sites, both on and offline, I have documented bodies

emerging in excess of definitive claims about what any given platform is or does. I have considered how possibilities of becoming with digital media and technologies are relationally produced, contributing to work emphasising the embodied and situated nature of becomings with digital media and technologies.

Possibilities of becoming documented across the chapters emerged as heavily conflicting and polarised, flowing *with* oppressive and exploitative relations but nevertheless still irreducible to fixed positions determined by bounded users or platforms. Many digital spaces, like geographical spaces, emerged as heavily gendered and racialised, and given the absence of rural non-university educated youths from my project, seemingly classed. The data generated pointed towards uneven possibilities of becoming in the digital age. Much like LGBTQIA+ spaces offline, online spaces operated to centre some bodies over others. Sites that afforded inclusion through providing a sense of communal beingness for many rendered placeless offline also emerged as sites of exclusion, sometimes simultaneously so, producing further needs and desires for place actualised through connections elsewhere online. However, such opportunities for connection elsewhere marked possibilities of becoming in the digital age somewhat unique from previous becomings constrained by geographical place and restricted mass media content. While many online spaces emerged as exclusionary, connections forged with digital media, including connections forged on the Queering Masculinity group, afforded many opportunities for community building, identity work and activism for navigating such exclusion and affirming difference. The internet platformed many hostile and oppressive forces against queering white cisheteromascularity made present across offline spaces. However, unlike offline spaces, it afforded opportunities for marginalised members and intersections of the LGBTQIA+ community to connect and come together against oppression faced, thus re-configuring opportunities for embodying and navigating oppression. While in some instances, exclusion online emerged as so severe that it temporarily displaced further opportunities for connection online, as evidenced through Adele's journey into the world of 4chan, the internet, for the most part, came to affirm difference, even if such affirmation emerged with homonormative and transnormative oppression. It afforded new opportunities for bodies of water to flow, even if often flowing in to troubling waters. Such opportunities for flow were made particularly present among the

participants, who, in a project about white bourgeois cisheteromascularity, saw such masculinity displaced. While such masculinity remained immanent to their journeys, constraining, in many instances, what their bodies could do and where they could safely flow, it was often queered and unapologetically rejected.

Nevertheless, such flows of desire enabled cannot be separated from the defensive backlash that emerged against them. In the context of rising hate crimes against marginalised groups and growing populism made present both within and beyond the LGBTQIA+ community, such defensiveness cannot be ignored. It points to a digital age that, while affirming much difference, has also seen normative positions intensify. However, questions were raised around how opportunities for connecting with queerness, much like connecting with say gayness, are also unevenly distributed. In the face of the queernormative regulatory queerness that emerged, responding to work urging us to acknowledge uneven and differentiated possibilities of queering gender and sexual norms, the polarised nature of becomings with digital media and technologies urges us to consider different personal and collective histories navigated, affording uneven possibilities of connecting with difference across time and place. Given my own perpetuation of queernormativity through my use of the word queer operating to centre a group of mostly urban university educated youths, questions around who and what a queer rejection of binary language and gender norms represents in the digital age of seemingly infinite possibilities of connections seem crucial to address. Given that the growth of queer counter cultures and activist networks resisting homonormativity and transnormativity, both on and offline, it seems pertinent to interrogate the politics of exclusion that can readily come to mark the centring of difference, particularly visible expressions of difference. As discussed, such resistance has transformed many urban and media landscapes, giving voice to many marginalised members and intersections of community. However, it also emerged as exclusionary, which is deeply significant to my project given the well documented uneven possibilities of queering masculinity in rural working-class locales in the region from which I was recruiting.

On this note, I wrap up this section with two key things that I have taken away from the project as a whole. Firstly, despite the heavily polarised nature of becoming in the

digital age, becoming with digital media and technologies still afforded many affirmative possibilities for connecting with difference. Bodies of water could not flow everywhere in equal measure, and possibilities of flow were often affirmed through containment from oppressive forces that saw risks emerge with opportunities. However, bodies of water still flowed in ways irreducible to fixed positions defined by bounded users or platforms, thus building on work urging us to consider how digital spaces, practices and content are always relationally produced. Finally, given the anxieties surrounding the queering of normative constraints, made especially present in the backlash to the project, my second take away intervenes in discussions around a digital divide in access and use, with possibilities of embracing the seemingly infinite global possibilities of connections online far from evenly distributed. While much of my discussion around those rendered absent from the project was speculative, centred around fleeting interactions with limited data on the different contexts navigated, the silence of bodies from rural working-class parts of region was deafening, warranting further investigation to a class divide in queer politics in the region.

9.4 Limitations and future developments

My project, as discussed, was not without limitations. One of the biggest limitations, given my aims and objectives, was my failure to elicit significant interest from rural non-university educated working-class youths. While I attempted to respond to bodies rendered absent through drawing on wider auto/ethnographic observations, much of my discussion was speculative, grappling with the uncertainty of who and what was present online by considering *potential* affective histories and anxieties fuelling tensions. Such speculation seemed warranted given existing work around masculinity in the region and different embodied constraints navigated by the participants themselves. Opportunities for embracing queerness, as documented in my final analysis chapter, were far from evenly distributed, re-solidifying my questions around who and what was rendered absent from my project. However, my effort to grapple with the uncertainty of fleeting interactions, while contributing to methodological insights urging us to avoid making reductive assumptions about such interactions, was not without limitations. In embracing uncertainty, I avoided reducing those I encountered to notions of internalised oppression and privilege. However, had I

managed to elicit interest from those rendered absent, I would have been able to ground my analysis in the actual embodied worlds navigated by those that refused to take part. The intense backlash to the project emerged as one of my most significant findings to questions of queering masculinity in the digital age. However, making sense of it also emerged as an area requiring significant further research and development. Going forward, I am keen to further explore such issues of polarisation within the region. In my future endeavours to do so, I would certainly avoid using the word queer.

Other limitations included limited data generated through the researcher-solicited blog. While emerging as a great platform for mapping out movements between different spaces and emerging into a community of its own, participation was still limited, and the group was short lived. While I would be interested in further exploring the potential of such an approach in the future, I would only do so if able to recruit more participants due to the diffused nature of attention online. That said, with the limitations of the method potentially driven by the unfamiliarity of the platform used, it is possible that the use of more familiar platforms more thoroughly embedded in participants everyday activity would be more effective. As discussed, since conducting the research, Facebook has enabled more privacy functions, which may afford greater potential for the use of social media for generating data with participants in the future. Finally, in terms of thinking about possibilities of subverting oppressive systems in the digital age, I feel there is much potential for further developments of the affective potential of humour in terms of activism and politics but also around its potential polarising and alienating effects.

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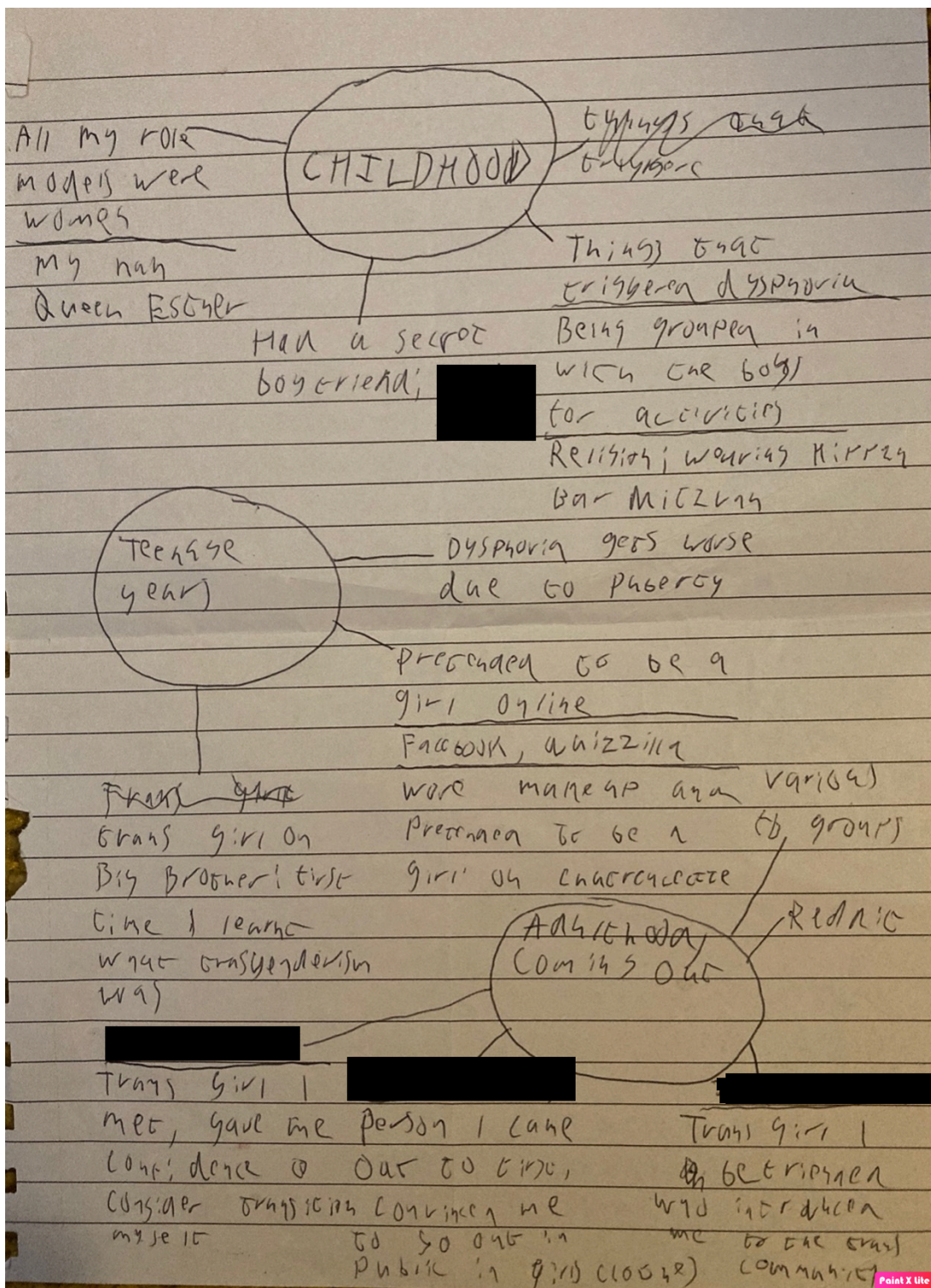
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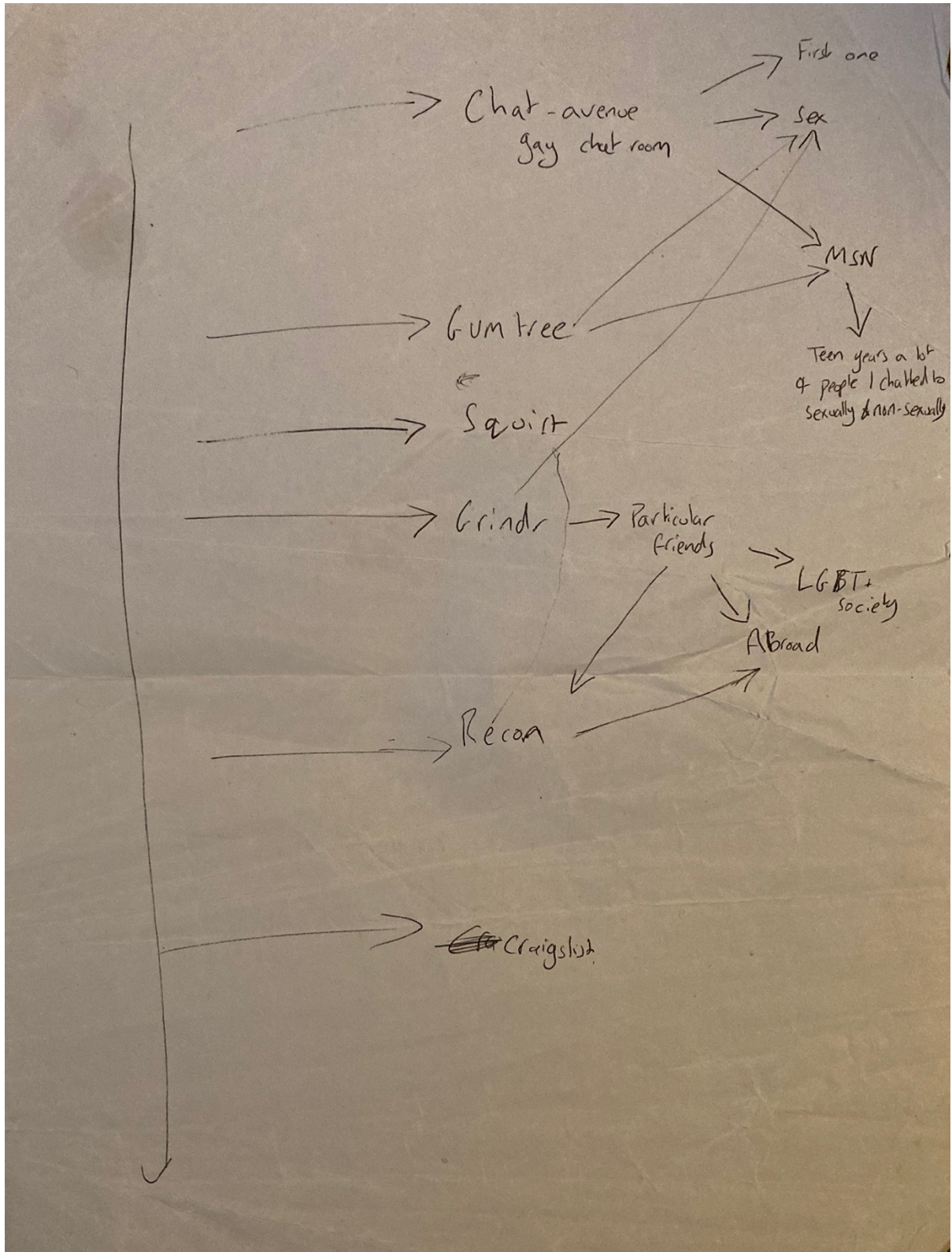
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Appendix A – The relational maps

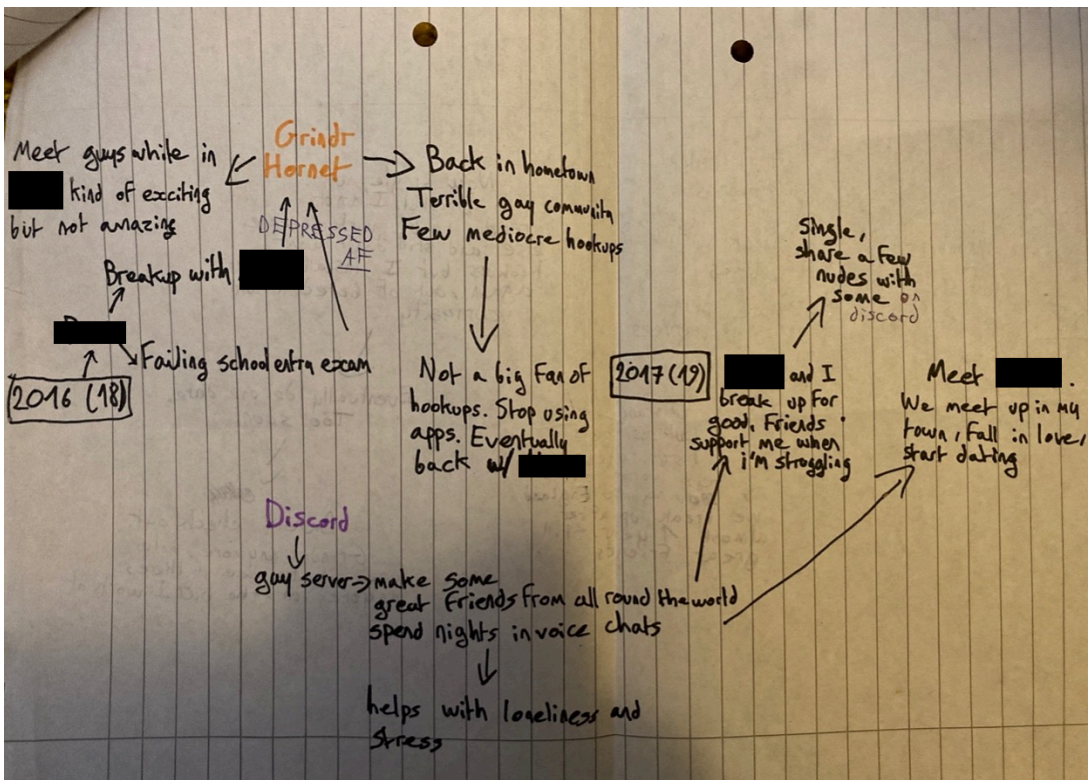
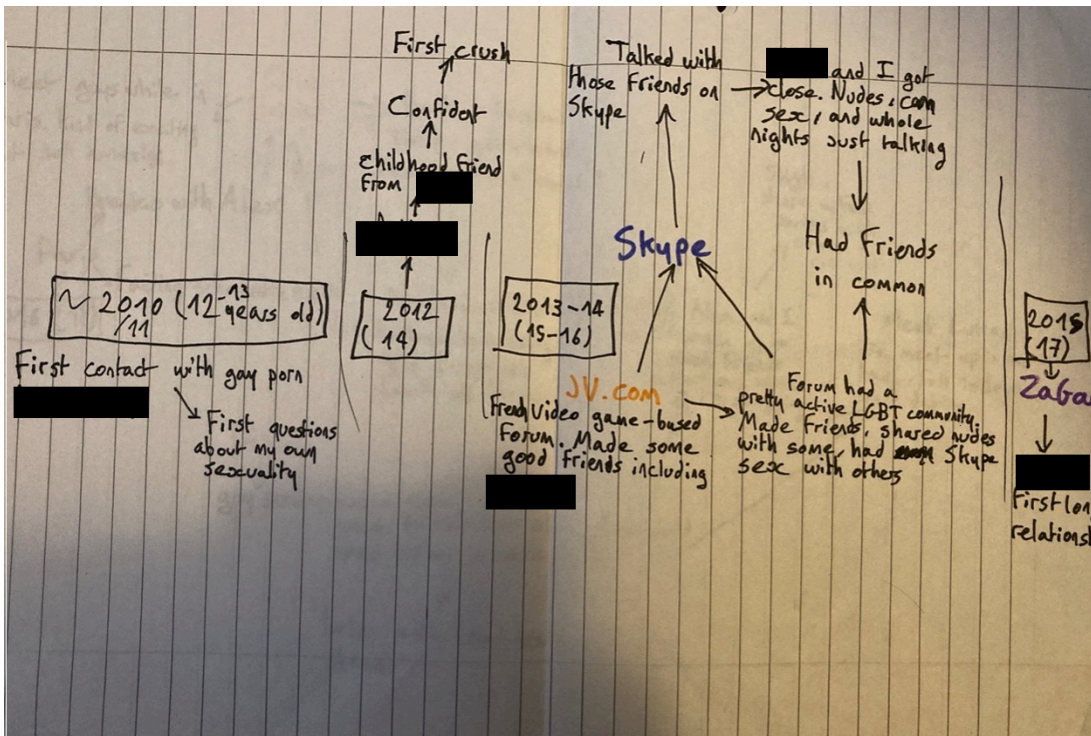
Adele:



Sajid:



Vince:



Appendix B – Flyers/Posters

QUEER(ING) MASCULINITY

queer

long a slur against those who did not conform to rigid definitions of gender and sexuality, queer has since been reclaimed as a symbol of difference and pride.

queering

to challenge, disrupt and/or resist expectations



What does queer mean to you?


*I am currently recruiting 18-25-year-olds living in South Wales and South West England to take part in an ESRC funded research project on queer masculinity and queering masculinity. I welcome participation from **men who have sex with men and trans and gender non-binary individuals assigned male**, who through gender expression/identity and/or sexual practices, share an experience of challenging expectations surrounding masculinity.*

Want to get involved?

Participation involves contributing to a private Tumblr page accessible to participants only. Like a Facebook timeline, the space is for sharing and commenting on anything from personal experiences and public opinions to news articles, YouTube videos, interactions/experiences on social media and dating apps (the list goes on). The idea is you share things that matter to you (online and offline). Though the research focuses on gender and sexuality, you could share whatever. We are all so much more than our gender and sexual identities so it would be great to see contributions that express that. Rather than reducing you to another statistic structured around questions someone else thinks are important, I would like you to play an active role in defining the focus of this research. You could contribute anonymously as and when you like but anything shared would be anonymised in any publications regardless.



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Extracts from a pilot interview study

"This masc for masc aggressive culture... It's becoming more prominent, especially with apps like Grindr, Hornet & Scruff."

"There is a Staceyann Chin quote that I love... She says 'I come in too many flavours for one fucking spoon' in one of her spoken word pieces. I absolutely love it. I think she is right. I think everybody does."

"It was like 'oh wow there's actually a hell of a lot of other people'... It was nice to know I wasn't alone & that there were people who had similar experiences."

"There is not much room on Grindr. One photo & one bio... so it is quite restrictive in some sense."

"I always felt a little bit left out... My uncle... friends of the family... were just sort of embarrassed to have me. I was a bit of an eyesore."

"...so we'd go on skype, get undressed & then just wank off on cam."

"I think the disadvantage [with dating apps] is that there are too many options... You can become quite picky."

"I was like 'I'm gay'... there was just complete silence... I got screamed at in the face for about 6 or 7 hours."

What do you think?

Appendix C - Ethics



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22 January 2018

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PhD Programme
SOCSI

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www.caerdydd.ac.uk/social-sciences

Dear Scott,

Your project entitled '*Queer masculinity : An exploration of how commodified and commercialised forms come to be reproduced., ruptured and re-defined online*' has now been approved by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Cardiff University and you can now commence the project.

If you make any substantial changes with ethical implications to the project as it progresses you need to inform the SREC about the nature of these changes. Such changes could be: 1) changes in the type of participants recruited (e.g. inclusion of a group of potentially vulnerable participants), 2) changes to questionnaires, interview guides etc. (e.g. including new questions on sensitive issues), 3) changes to the way data are handled (e.g. sharing of non-anonymised data with other researchers).

In addition, if anything occurs in your project from which you think the SREC might usefully learn, then please do share this information with us.

All ongoing projects will be monitored and you will be obliged periodically to complete and return a SREC monitoring form.

Please inform the SREC when the project has ended.

Please use the SREC's project reference number above in any future correspondence.

Yours sincerely

Professor Alison Bullock
Chair of School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
Cc: Matthew Williams, Valerie Walkerdine, Corinda Perkins



Registered Charity, no. 1136855
Elusen Gofrestredig, rhif 1136855



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Ysgol Gwyddorau Cymdeithasol
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29th March 2018

Our ref: SREC/2601

Scott Kerpen
PhD Programme
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Dear Scott,

Many thanks for highlighting the changes made to the platform for data collection. Your project entitled '*Queer masculinity : An exploration of how commodified and commercialised forms come to be reproduced,, ruptured and re-defined online*' has now been approved by the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee of Cardiff University and you can now commence the project.

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Appendix D – Information sheet for the researcher-solicited blog-diary



Queer masculinity and queering masculinity online

Scott Kerpen

Doctoral Researcher at Cardiff University

Supervised by: Professor Matthew Williams and Professor Valerie Walkerdine



The research

This research explores experiences of queer masculinity and queering masculinity online. It considers how media and technology are changing the way we interact with one another socially, emotionally, politically and sexually. You are invited to contribute to a private Google+ community. The idea is that you share snapshots of your online world in a shared space where you can comment and interact with what others share and vice versa. Possible things to consider include anything from private and personal experiences with porn, dating/hook-up apps and online support services to more public and political activity on social media, LGBT+ news and comments threads. It is an open platform for you to share your experiences of gender and sexuality and what queer(-ing) masculinity means, or does not mean, to you. You do not need to have a clear idea of what you want to share, as a lot of what is shared will depend on the group dynamic and the inspiration you draw from each other. I will also share material to facilitate discussion. *You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without question.*

How data will be used

Your data will only be used for the research purposes outlined. Everything will be anonymised in any publications. I will remove all identifying details that could compromise the privacy of either yourself or anyone represented by what you share. Personal photos and images will NOT be used without consent. If consent is given, they will be blurred to protect privacy.

Respect privacy and copyright

As this is a closed research group, you have a reasonable expectation of privacy. Data shared is not public. Any identifying details shared outside of the group by other participants without your consent would be in breach of The Data Protection Act 1998 and EU General Data Protection Regulations. As such, you should avoid re-sharing without permission from all relevant parties. Please note that privacy legislation also applies to things you bring into the group. If sharing images of data acquired from outside the public domain (i.e. Grindr conversations and interactions within closed networks on Facebook), remove all identifying details by cropping or blurring accordingly. Intellectual property (i.e. art, images, photos) are also protected. Copyright material can be shared for purposes of comment or review, but this only applies to things already public outside the group (unless it is your own material of course).

Contribute anonymously

As I cannot guarantee everyone will respect privacy, I recommend contributing anonymously and discreetly by changing your name on Google+ or by setting up a separate Google account. For existing users of Google+, you can sign into multiple accounts at once so this need not affect other groups you follow. Remember you are sharing with people you do not know so protect your privacy as you would with any other strangers online. As for those that you may know, given that the sample is relatively local, consider whether you would want them to know what you share. Once something is made public on the internet, it can be difficult to trace back and delete. If things were to be re-shared, I urge you to consider what friends, family and employers might think. I also encourage you to think about how your feelings on this may change in the future. You should also consider any potential harm or risk. There is a lot of hate speech towards gendered and sexual minorities online. Once something is made public, you have little control over who accesses it. If you are uncertain about any of this, remain anonymous.

Google's community guidelines

As a condition of contributing to this project, you must adhere to Google's [community guidelines](#). Violations include but are not limited to: illegal activities; harassment, bullying and threats; hate speech; violent content; sharing personal and confidential information; impersonating someone; spam; child exploitation; selling regulated goods; distributing sexually explicit or pornographic material. When it comes to what is sexually explicit, we can interpret this liberally because this is a closed group and everyone is over 18. However, please avoid sharing pornographic images because Google+ has no option to filter. If you want to share such images, blur them. If linking to any such material outside the group, provide a warning in the description so that others can decide whether to click or not.

Appendix E – Information sheet for the interviews



Mediated expression and desire: An exploration of gender and sexual experiences, practices and politics online

Scott Kerpen

Doctoral Researcher at Cardiff University

Supervised by: Professor Matthew Williams and Professor Valerie Walkerdine



The research

You are invited to take part in an ESRC funded research project exploring how media and digital technology are changing the way we interact with one another socially, emotionally, politically and sexually. The study aims to gain insight into the possibilities and challenges of expressing gender and/or sexuality online, with a specific focus on the experiences, perspectives and practices of men who have sex (or are interested in having sex) with men and trans and non-binary individuals assigned male at birth. You need not identify as LGBTQ+ or be active in the community to take part. Areas of interest include but are not limited to dating apps and porn; online support and advice groups and services; and LGBTQ+ news and politics.

Interview 1: Your online experience

The purpose of the interview is to gain insight into your online experience. It is divided into two parts, each estimated to last up to one-hour each depending on how much you have/want to share. The interviews are informal and unstructured, designed to allow you to determine the focus of the discussion rather than restricting your participation to a set of questions I think are important. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed but all data is securely held and everything shared will be anonymised with any identifying details removed from the final thesis and any publications. Any data provided will only be used for the project outlined.

The first part of the interview will focus on memorable and important connections you have made online; things that have mattered to you, whether that be for good or bad. In preparation for the interview, you are asked to create a mind map/timeline of any online activity you deem significant and are comfortable discussing. This can include but is not limited to people you have connected with or follow; specific online spaces, pages and apps you have used; and/or role models, who may be real or fictional. It can be as simple or as detailed as you like, and you are free to get creative and include images, sketches and drawings if you wish. The aim is to visually represent the people, places, spaces and things you have connected with online that have had an impact on who you are today.

The second part of the interview builds on data that is being collected through a Google+ social media group. For those of you that have not participated in this stage of the project, it is a collaborative and interactive space that has been set up for people to share screenshots and links relating to their gender and sexual experiences and activity online. The discussion will be structured around some of the different things shared but you are welcome to bring along material of your own. You do not need to have participated in the group but if you would like to browse and/or add to some of the existing content before the interview, let me know. If you have any further questions, please don't hesitate to ask.

Interview 2: Your offline experience

The second interview builds on the first to develop an understanding of your online activity in relation to your offline lived experience. In preparation, you are again asked to produce a timeline/mind map of any offline ties with people, places, spaces and things that have made you who you are today. As with the online relational map, you are free to get creative and include images, sketches and drawings if you wish.

Appendix F – LGBTQIA+ information, support and counselling

LGBT Foundation: A nationwide charity supporting LGBT health and wellbeing.
0345 3303030
<http://lgbt.foundation/about-us>

Spectra: A nationwide charity offering peer support, free/low-cost counselling and groups/workshops for trans, non-binary and questioning people.
0800 587 8302
<https://spectra-london.org.uk/who-we-are/>

Gendered Intelligence: A nationwide charity running youth services and offering one-to-one support for trans, non-binary and questioning young people.
0330 3559678
<http://genderedintelligence.co.uk/support/trans-youth/groups>

Mindline Trans+: Nationwide charity offering support to trans, non-binary or gender variant people and their families, friends, colleagues and carers.
0300 330 5468.
<http://mindlinetrans.org.uk/#about>

LGBTQ+ Switchboard 0300 330 0630