SOCIALLY DISTANCED QUEERNESS: DISCOVERING AFFORDANCES DURING CONVERSATIONS WITH ROTTERDAM QUEERS ABOUT THEIR INSTAGRAM USE DURING THE PANDEMIC

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MASTER OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Major:

Social Justice Perspectives

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The Hague, The Netherlands
April 2022

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my mom and dad for supporting my decision to follow a path in Human Rights and Gender where I can say I am fiercely passionate about what I do and appreciate every lesson I learn along the way.

I would like to thank my dear friends, Rochella, Lavi, Nikita and Kalia for being there besides me throughout this long long thesis journey, for believing in me and making sure I, too, believe in myself.

I would like to thank my lovely respondents who have entrusted me with their most vulnerable stories and granted me the honor of presenting them in the pursuit of liberation for each and every one of us.

I would like to thank my colleagues at Williams Canteen and Takumi, to whom the name of my study will always be too long to remember, but will always remind me to prioritize graduating when I get carried away by life.

I would like to thank my two supervisors, Silke and Karin, for believing in my potentials and for being so patient with me. And thank you, Martin, for all your understandings by which I'm amazed a single person can hold.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my late grandfather, who gave me the one last encouragement I needed to work towards my Master's degree. His achievements in academia, as shown in how much his students loved him, and on the battlefield for the liberation of Vietnam made me who I am today.

A single thank you does not do justice for the gratitude I feel, but I hope you know that for the completion of this thesis and for every further milestone I reach in life, I will be thinking of you. I could not have done it without you.

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Abstract

Employing a social constructivist lens and embracing principles of intersectionality, the study illuminates the unique experiences of queer individual within the vibrant queer KONTRA scene of Rotterdam and how they utilized Instagram as a dynamic and multifaceted platform to continue their queer journey and growth at the odds of the challenging landscape of the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing insights from six in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with queer individuals who were active on Instagram during the pandemic, the study identified six central affordances that encapsulated the breadth and depth of queer engagement on the platform: resistance, safe space, community building, learning, activism and accessibility through humor. While doing so, it uncovered several drawbacks associated with Instagram use among this demographic, namely mental health challenges, censorship and difficulties maintaining online relationships. The findings suggest nuances surrounding the use of social media platforms for political liberation purposes.

Relevance to Development Studies

The research sheds light on the digital landscape as an arena for marginalized voices such as that of the queer community to resist societal norms and assert their identities. In the context of Development Studies, this is crucial for understanding how social media platforms can serve as tools for fostering sexual diversity and inclusivity. Furthermore, it gives insights into queer well-being and the necessity of queer spaces and communities, which is pivotal for crafting policies and intervention that promote mental health and safe spaces. Furthermore, the research highlights the role of Instagram in facilitating queer learning, information exchange and activism, which provides valuable insights into how technology can be leveraged for educational and advocacy purposes, empowering communities to actively participate in shaping their own development trajectories.

Keywords

Queer, Intersectionality Sexuality, Liberation, Resistance, Social media activism, Safe Spaces, COVID-19, Rotterdam, Social media Affordances, Mental Health

Introduction

> "Some will read "queer" as synonymous with "gay and lesbian" or "LGBT." (…) While those who would fit within the constructions of "L," "G," "B" or "T" could fall within the discursive limits of queer, queer is not a stabrle area to inhabit. Queer is not merely another identity that can be tacked onto a list of neat social categories, nor the quantitative sum of our identities. Rather, it is the qualitative position of opposition to presentations of stability — an identity that problematizes the manageable limits of identity. Queer is a territory of tension, defined against the dominant narrative of white hetero monogamous patriarchy, but also by an affinity with all who are marginalized, otherized and oppressed. Queer is the abnormal, the strange, the dangerous. Queer involves our sexuality and our gender, but so much more. It is our desire and fantasies and more still. Queer is the cohesion of everything in conflict with the heterosexual capitalist world. Queer is a total rejection of the regime of the Normal."

This excerpt has been extracted from Mary Nardini Gang's "Towards the queerest insurrection" (2014) and has been circled around, reposted and endorsed multiple times by folks in the Rotterdam queer community themselves via Instagram. This research argues that this community presents an interesting case study into the ways queer people use social media platforms to engage in queer issues. Critical conversations about the social and political aspects of queerness, such as queer identities, safety, sexual health, sex work, sexual diversity, sexual pleasure, etc., have been considered a taboo and must be hushed in the public sphere (Snitow, Stansell & Thompson, 1983). The silencing of such conversations means that those who do not conform to sexual norms, most particularly women, homosexuals, transsexuals and sex workers are derived of a platform to bargain for their rights and thereby marginalized from society.

In the past two decades, however, the emergence of fast-speed internet and especially of social media has been a significant game changer. It has been theorized that this technological advancement has historically triggered a "new 'sexual revolution'" (Garlick, 2011, p. 222). The fast and vast dissemination of sexual content, namely pornography and sexually explicit photography and audio-visual, is said to have created a more "pluralistic sexual culture" where non-normative sexual representations are less censored and at the same time slowly entering the mainstream media world (McNair, 2002, as cited in Garlick, 2011). This change is particularly notable to the sexual liberation

movement since it aligns with the movement's *sex positive* ideology, which calls for the acceptance and celebration of previously frowned upon sexual practices (Garlick, 2011). Additionally, since the introduction of social media, where the general public can get direct access to the means and medium of content production, the question of the role of technological development to the sexual liberation movement becomes an even more relevant. Theoretically, this supposes that people in sexually marginalized communities can hold online platforms where they can mobilize and advocate for sexual liberation. Especially during the past two years of the COVID-19 pandemic where lockdowns prohibited face-to-face interactions, social media activism became even more prominent (Pleyers, 2020). Prompted by these concurring developments, this research is interested in how social media is used by queer individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic in connection to sexual liberation.

The current research proposes that the city of Rotterdam provides an interesting case study on online activism for sexual liberation. As the second biggest Dutch city, Rotterdam does its best to reflect the Dutch's well-known openness to sexuality. The city hosts a wide variety of spaces marketed as queer-friendly such as municipality-funded events, exhibitions, education institutions, grassroot collectives and even a queer-only gym (Gay Rotterdam, n.d.; Joosten, 2021; Rotterdam Info, n.d.). A fair number of social venues in the city such as restaurants, bars and clubs are marked as LGBT-friendly on their Google pages. Moreover, there are various events all year round aimed at celebrating sexually marginalized communities in Rotterdam, such as Rotterdam Pride, Internationale Vrouwendag (International Women's Day) or SlutWalk Rotterdam. Rotterdam is also known for its cultural and ethnic diversity, which would enrich the research in terms of exploring how intersectionality plays a role in (online) sexual liberation.

This study will look at how Rotterdam queers who participate in the local queer scene use Instagram to engage with their queerness during the COVID-19 pandemic, more specifically how they connect with one another, how they express their own sexual identity, how they mobilize and exchange information regarding sexuality.

Chapter 1 | Context

Western societies both repress and obsessed over sexuality at the same time, as Michel Foucault argues (Miceli, 2007). What talk about sexuality is silenced and what is amplified, is however, not randomized, but rather a result of socio-political power struggles. Many seem to fail to recognize how sexuality is a highly contested site of socio-political conflicts. Various power relations in society are structured around sexuality and a great deal of inequality is produced as a result, as will be further elaborated in this chapter, yet the idea of sexuality as critical area in development has yet to be thoroughly acknowledged (Bedford, 2005; Jolly, 2010; Pigg & Adams, 2005). This chapter will establish the significance of the politics of sexuality in The Netherlands. It will then refer to the current state of media technology in order to explain why it is especially urgent to discuss sexuality in this specific moment in time. Finally, it will provide a backdrop of the socio-political state of sexuality in Rotterdam, specifically in times of COVID-19, against which this research will be carried out.

1.1. The Dutch politics of sexuality

Among the Western world, the Netherlands is considered among the most politically progressive in terms of sexuality (Mepschen, Duyvendak & Tonkens, 2010; Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011). There are countless appraisals from news and media outlet all over the world on how open and liberal the Netherlands is when it comes to sex. This reputation is associated with the popularity of Amsterdam's Red Light District, one of the Netherlands' many red light districts and also the one of the largest in the world (Duyvendak & Hekma, 2011; Buijs, Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011). What also come to mind are colorful images of the annual Amsterdam Pride Walk that attracted several hundred-thousand visitors every year. In fact, the Netherlands is the first in the world to legalize prostitution and recognize same-sex marriage, in 2000 and 2001 respectively. Not only is sex work and homosexuality legally accepted here in the land of tulips, reproductive necessities such as contraceptives and safe abortion are also widely available and covered by the Dutch basic insurance. Furthermore, the Dutch school system implements a mandatory sex education curriculum for children as young as four years old (Cense, Grauw & Vermeulen, 2020). Outside their own borders, the Dutch government also openly declares their commitment to support international sexual and reproductive health and rights progress by financing "projects and programs that protect the rights of minorities such as sex workers and LGBTI persons" and by "work[ing] to

prevent sexual violence, child prostitution and sexual abuse" ("Dutch policy: Sexual and reproductive health and rights", n.d.).

This openness to sexual diversity has not always been the case in the Netherlands. Prior to the 1970s, the Netherlands was strictly conservative: prostitution, pornography, homosexuality, contraception and teenage sexuality was criminalized and intensely frowned upon (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2007). This attitude swiftly shifted over a mere decade when the country began a process called the *depillarization of society* (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2007, p. 440). Dutch society up until the 1960s was organized into three so-called *pillars*: separate communities of Roman Catholics, Protestants and Humanists. Each pillar had its own social, political and cultural institutions, two of which on the more extreme side of sexual conservatism. As secularism was adopted into the organization of Dutch society, religion ceased to be the sole body of authority and the majority of the Dutch population began distancing themselves from moral traditionalism (Mepschen et al., 2010). Free from the constraint of religion, individuals gained more autonomy to their sexual life. On a larger scale, what was considered immoral before slowly became more socially tolerated.

Coincidentally, during that same period, gay and feminist movements that promoted sexual freedom and diversity that travelled from the United States also gained significance, which further pushed Dutch sexual culture towards a liberation movement (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2007). The Stonewall Riot in 1969 inspired Roze Zaterdag (Pink Saturday) in the Netherlands, an annual event since 1977 that holds space for the celebration of and demonstration for sexual diversity, where people can meet, debate, gather information and express their sexual identity (Roze Zaterdag, n.d.). Roze Zaterdag is hosted in a different city in the Netherlands every year, which suggests that the Dutch sexual liberation movement exists on a nationwide level.

However, with all the legality being in favor of sex positivity and the countless Pride celebrations, Dutch society in practice is not all that *lekker tolerant* towards the sexually marginalized. On the contrary, they have created quite the paradox: the 2001 historical landmark of legalized gay marriage has been misinterpreted by most Dutch citizens as the final and concluding milestone of the gay rights movement in the Netherlands, leading them to believe that equality has been achieved and there was therefore no further need for fighting against sexual discrimination (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2007; Vaid-Menon & Krimpen, 2012). In reality, these legal and political progresses in Dutch sexual politics did not directly

translate to social acceptance of the sexually marginalized. If anything, the Dutch sexual tolerance has been described as pretentious and only for show. There are great criticism over how Dutch political parties often dress themselves up in rainbow flags and claim their allyship to women and to the LGBT community but never actually implement any productive policies (Hekma, as cited in Vaid-Menon & Krimpen, 2012; Vaid-Menosn & Krimpen, 2012). Rather, conservative parties like the PVV (Party for Freedom) would weaponize the Dutch's apparent sexual progressiveness in order to scrutinize immigrant communities and thereby push their anti-immigration and anti-Islam agenda (Mepschen et al., 2010; Vaid-Menon & Krimpen, 2012). The most recited argument is that of PVV's party leader Geert Wilders, who alleges that since immigrants practice inherently sexually oppressive religions, namely Islam, they cannot fit in with the sexually progressive Dutch culture and will jeopardize it if they were to migrate to the Netherlands. This has created an exclusionary and xenophobic narrative amongst gay culture in the Netherlands that many promote and uphold, even those within the community and those leading the community, namely the 2005 president of the COC, the most well-known gay rights organization in the Netherlands (Mepschen et al., 2010).

Furthermore, heterosexual people and the media in the Netherlands tend to oppose against the creation of separate communities for homosexual people, as they believe that considering how sexually progressive the Netherlands is, separate communities are redundant and may even create social segregation (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2007). Ironically, at the same time, many also find homosexual expressions in public unnecessary showy and offensive to them. In spite of the fact that 95% of Dutch people welcome gay and lesbian people, almost half of them would rather not see two men kissing in public, while only 8% have such a problem with heterosexual PDA (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011). Apparently, homosexuality in the Netherlands is only acceptable under certain terms and conditions: as long as it is behind the doors of gay bars and away from the eyes of the public. Moreover, women who are expressive and free in their sexuality are still labeled "sluts" and erotic images are still frowned upon in public (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011). At the moment there is a tense debate on relocating the Red Light District in Amsterdam, as no neighborhood wants the crimes and nuisance that are usually associate with prostitution in their backyard (Boztas, 2022) (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/12/multi-storey-erotic-centre-set-to-replace-amsterdam-red-light-district-if-locals-can-agree-where).

Similarly, while sex work is legal on paper, a social safety net for sex workers is still lacking in the Netherlands and sex workers still face a great deal of stigma and discrimination. Legislators have been constantly tightening laws and regulations regarding sex work, citing precautions about sex trafficking, abuse, etc. (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011). These are of course very valid concerns, but the legal proposals that result from them rarely reflect positively for those who they vow to care about and uplift. For instance, since 2019, there has been an ongoing proposal to the Dutch government from the Christen Union (ChristenUnie) party to raise the minimum age of prostitution to 21 and to make it mandatory for sex workers and people to run sex businesses to carry a permit stating that they participate in prostitution (Redazione, 2019). There are a number of problems with such measures. First and foremost, as those who failed to obtain a permit would be criminalized, there would be less willingness to reach out to local authorities for help in fear of criminalization. Second of all, a mandatory database registry would make sex workers vulnerable to privacy violation and expose them to danger. Third of all, sex workers with a migrant background would be make extra vulnerable due to their citizenship status. Last but not least, by enforcing a distinct permit for sex work, this bill would further push the idea that sex work is not real work and needs to be treated differently from any other forms of labor and thereby stigmatize it even more than it already is. It can thus be seen that without intervention, the Dutch government is heading towards the direction where sex workers are re-criminalized and pushed to work underground where there is even less security and social aid.

Unfortunately, while the Dutch are known for their habits of bluntly saying thing as they are (also known as their “directness”), directly calling out this obvious intolerance towards sexuality of theirs is one thing that is never well-received. Legalized gay marriage and sex work and various gay prides would be once against cited as proof that discrimination against sexual diversity does not exist in the Netherlands. Ethnic religions and cultures would also be brought up to the table only as a leverage to put sexual progressiveness in the Netherlands on a pedestal. Essentially, folks who are marginalized by their sexuality in the Netherlands are gaslit into thinking their own oppression do not exist. This creates a hostile and toxic environment that prohibits important political conversations about sexuality, which stalls the Netherlands’ sexual progressiveness even further, if not regresses it. Such an environment leads to real-life negative consequences for sexually

marginalized people who live in the Netherlands. As American Women's Studies scholar and queer activist Wendy Chapkis details, having been given the impression that the Netherlands is a "successful social democracy" with a "vibrant women's movement", she has experienced living in the Netherlands as a woman with a moustache as "infuriating" and "unremitting", (Seidman, Fischer & Meek, 2011, p. 256). She is not alone in this. Many have come to the Netherlands in hopes of finding a safe haven, or a so-called "gay paradise" (Duyvendak, 1996, p.421), only to be met with disappointment, or in worse cases, outright hatred and violence. In 2007, 201 instances of hate crimes targeting gay men were recorded in Amsterdam alone (Buijs et al., 2011). This is only the tip of the iceberg, considering that 75-95% of such crimes go unreported. In more recent reports, such as the Annual Review of the Human Rights Situation of LGBTI People in Netherlands in 2020, it is found that anti-gay hate crimes were reported by the media on a weekly basis. Attacks also take place online, with gay people facing double the amount of cyberbullying compared to heterosexual people. The need for the sexual liberation movement in the Netherlands to move forward and radicalize once again is therefore still of great imminence, which emphasizes the need for a (re)investigation into it.

1.2. Zooming in on the queer scene in Rotterdam

Almost all of the research done in the past on the politics and culture of Dutch sexuality focuses on the gay scene in Amsterdam (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2007; Seidman, Fischer & Meeks, 2007; Mespschen, 2016; Buis, Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011), which makes sense considering the city being an international historic monument and icon for sexual liberty, as well as its vibrant and multi-faceted sex culture. Little, however, is known about a rising gay scene taking place in its neighboring city of Rotterdam. Famously renowned as a "melting hotpot", the city of Rotterdam is a port city which hosts a vast range of different sub communities and cultures. More than half of the city center's population carry a migrant background, contributing to its rich cultural diversity (Entzinger, 2019; World Population Review, n.d.). Furthermore, there are various international education institutions and international companies located in Rotterdaw£††††††††††††††w£††††††††††††††m, which draws in tens of thousands of international students and expats every year (Solanki, 2017; AmsterdamYeah, n.d.). Due to this, Rotterdam has a relatively more open mindset compared to other cities in the Netherlands when it comes to values that lie outside that of the White/native Dutch and heterosexual normativity. This statement holds true regarding

the city's sexual progressiveness: Rotterdam is home to a great number of sexuality and gender rights activist organizations, as well as communities dedicated to people who are sexually marginalized. Its first official Rotterdam Gay Pride was hosted in 2014, but the city's first annual gay parade, named Keerweer Parade after the famous gay bar by whom it is organized, dated back to 2010 (https://www.dehavenloods.nl/nieuws/algemeen/39248/de-keerweer-parade-gaat-door-op-plein-1940-). In 2022, it was published in Gay Times that Rotterdam is ranked the world's third most LGBTQ friendly city, just below Iceland's Reykjavik and Amsterdam (Clark, 2022). This was judged based on three criterions: the overall LGBTQ+ acceptance level, number of dedicated LGBTQ+ establishment per 100,000 people and the average rating of these establishments. It is also the only city in the Netherlands and one of the few cities in the world that hosts an annual SlutWalk event, as part of a transnational movement designated to combatting slut-shaming and rape culture. There are numerous other events that also promote free sexuality and gender expressions happening on a regular basis in Rotterdam, hosted by organizations and communities independently or also in collaboration with one another.

One such organization is KONTRA Rotterdam. KONTRA was founded in 2018 and was active from then to 2023. It promotes artistic "subversion and *k*ountercultures, and welcomes "rule breakers and dissidents" (https://www.instagram.com/kontra.rotterdam/). Their aim is to "keep activating and stimulating those who make political and socially engaged art" and "[c]reate events that celebrate freedom of expression and question mainstream society" (https://kontrarotterdam.wordpress.com/home/). KONTRA is best known for its annual collaboration with WORM Rotterdam, a well-known local organization and venue located in the city center that focuses on alternative art production and knowledge development (https://worm.org/about/). Together, they host the FemFest, during which the SlutWalk/SlutStand would take place along with counterculture panels, workshops, exhibitions, performances and more. As indicated on Facebook, these events would attract up to over 2000 guests (https://www.facebook.com/kontrarotterdam/events). Next to these, KONTRA also helped coordinate protests and trained safety volunteers for events such as Black Pride protests, Sex Workers Solidarity demonstrations, etc. Due to the ideologies they promote on their socials and during their events, and also due to the organizations and artists, speakers,

specialists they collaborate with, KONTRA participants are largely queer or fem identifying individuals.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, KONTRA events would take place offline. These events are often a great opportunity for queer people who are sexually marginalized to freely express themselves outside the constraints of heteronormativity and connect with others who share similar values. During these encounters, it is common that participants exchange social media contacts to stay further in touch. As a result, the sexually liberating environment that is created from the events extends beyond their time and space confinement of the event itself to an online space that is open for access from any time and any place. In addition to showing up in queer spaces offline, people can digitally express queerness by, for example, display their sexual identity through sharing photos of themselves with their network, hold conversations about sexuality, show their advocation for sexual liberation and more. In this sense, the sexual liberation space in Rotterdam operates in a hybrid mode, both offline and online.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions against in-person gathering, all these interactions have migrated exclusively online. Due to this, for at least a year and a half, social media was the only place for Rotterdam queers to continue engaging with sex liberation ideologies. During this time, KONTRA hosted a number of online/hybrid events: a publication on inequality in the creative scene, an online FemFest with various online activities, an in-person SlutStand that was also livestreamed. The disruption brought about by COVID-19 thus makes more prominent the role of social media in the sex revolution, emphasizing the need to further research the phenomenon during this special time period.

1.3. Research question and relevance

This research aims to explore how Instagram is being utilized by Rotterdam queers who participate in the KONTRA scene during the COVID-19 pandemic. The objective is to understand the role Instagram plays in facilitating engagement with queer issues within this specific context. The study will examine the strategies and techniques employed on Instagram to express and maintain queerness during a time when offline interactions are limited. Additionally, it seeks to identify any challenges or limitations faced by Rotterdam queers in utilizing Instagram for this purpose. As such, the overarching research question is proposed as follows:

How do Rotterdam queers who participate in the KONTRA scene in Rotterdam engage with queer issues through the affordances of Instagram and how has that manifested during the COVID-19 lockdown period?

This research looks to contribute to the growing body of literature on digital activism and more specifically, on digital activism among the LGBTQ+ community. By employing a qualitative approach, it hopes to provide a more intimate and personal perspectives that complement existing studies on (LGBTQ+) social media activism. Furthermore, it aims to bridge the gap between digital technologies and queer studies, acknowledging the ongoing technological developments that shape this field. Another objective this research wishes to fulfill is to contribute to the understanding of queer wellness and the ways in which digital platforms like Instagram can potentially support and enhance it during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. What's more, it looks generate valuable insights not only to inform future research on relevant issues, but also to provide better understanding and support for marginalized communities for policymakers, community organizers, activists and relevant stakeholders.

Chapter 2 | Conceptual Framework

This chapter lays out the conceptual framework where academic theories foundational to this research are established. First, this chapter rationalizes the use of the term "queer" in this research and proposes the most fitting definition, which helps with determining the subject of this research. At the same time, it highlights the importance of an intersectional lens. Then, it will review Gibson's theory of affordance (1979), specifically in application to (queer) social media activism in order to guide the analysis. Lastly, this chapter will discuss previous work on the use of social media by (sexually) marginalized groups to counter against the dominant discourse to identify prominent patterns in queer social media usage.

This framework takes notes from Foucault's analysis of sexuality, which means looking at sexuality not solely as a repressive force, but also as a site for sexual liberation, as this dualism is something that Foucault constantly stresses on in his writing. Just as the institution in power can dictate the public's understanding of sexuality, individuals also have the agency to assign meanings to sexuality through the way they express and reenact sexuality. It is fundamental that this research focuses on how sexuality is a productive force, as it will reveal how respondents overcome social constraints that already exist and also in this case the unforeseen circumstances of COVID-19, to explore (new) ways of engaging with their sexuality. The constructionist approach, as opposed to an essentialist one is thus the departure point of this framework. In this research, it points at world-making potentials for queer people, whereby they themselves can make sense and build a culture of queerness on social media platforms like Instagram.

2.1. Defining queerness

There are many definitions to the word "queer", thus it is important to agree on one that is most relevant to this research. At the most basis level, queer is defined as "a label that recognizes the fluidity of sexuality, someone who falls outside the norms surrounding gender and sexuality" (Fitzgerald & Grossman, 2021, p.7). This definition, however, lacks the social and political nuances needed to facilitate this research. It is first and foremost important to note that queer was not originally used as a label by queer people themselves as it is now and actually used to have a negative connotation. Queer used to be used solely in a derogatory manner, as an insult against the LGBTQ community (Mekler, 2018). Over time, it has been reclaimed by the community and is now a "gender identity/expression indicator, an anti-assimilation marker, a non-binary declaration, and an analysis tool"

(Mekler, 2018, p.156). Queerness is therefore now deeply rebellious and political. Along these lines, bell hooks defines queer "not as being about who you're having sex with, that can be a dimension of it, but queer as being the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live" (hooks, 2004). Being queer thus entails resistance not only against heteronormativity, but also against patriarchy, against capitalism, against white supremacy and any other oppressive institutions (Gunkel, 2010, as cited in Mekler, 2018).

Another reason why "queer" is used as opposed to "gay" or "LGBT" is to avoid the criticism of the *alphabet soup*, which refers to the LGBT acronym and the letters that follow it. Although constantly adding more letters to the acronym, from GL to now LGBTQIA+ and more, has for many parts succeeded in enabling an identity politics framework for demanding human rights for members of its community, many are concerned it may be counterproductive (Budhiraja, Fried & Teixeira, 2010). It is argued that sexuality is supposed to be fluid, and thus fixating on putting it into categories to be later on reduced to a letter in an ever-expanding acronym is absurd. Furthermore, as diverse and inclusive as the acronym strives to be, it is far from moving past the gender binary as it fails to address how each letter are not mutually exclusive of one another and therefore potentially "invisibilize[s] gay trans men as well as lesbian and bisexual transwomen, and gender queer people" (Budhiraja et al., 2010, p.143). Queer is yet again the better substitute as it allows people the freedom to move in between and beyond defined categories, which aligns with the constructionist idea that sexuality is ever-changing.

To folks in Rotterdam, as evident in the introduction of this research, queer encompasses a limitless state of being that is at odds with the Norm and subject to change at any moment. At the same time, they claim the label with pride, signaling active resistance to the Norm and allyship to all who are oppressed by it. Their collective agreement and endorsement on Mary Nardina Gang's definition of what queer means perfectly captures the multifactedness of the queer identity as more than just a label for a gender identity. This research therefore chooses to use the term queer to enable an intersectional and more multi-faceted analysis that takes into account the reality of how the respondents are subject to more than one mode of systemic oppression in their queer life.

The choice to conceptualize this research through a queer lens also corresponds with the aforementioned criticism that the Dutch politics of sexuality has been significantly deradicalized and Dutch gays are therefore not queer. In two articles, one in 1996 and one recently in 2017, Amsterdam-based socialist Jan Willem Duyvendak has voiced this concern in detail (Duyvendak, 1996; Hekma & Duyvendak, 2017). He cites Steven Seidman's observation that "heterosexuality remains the organizing principle of social life" (Seidman, 1994, p.70, as cited in Duyvendak, 1996, p. 421), in that heterosexuality is still the default in almost all public domains in the gay capital of Amsterdam, while homosexuality is strictly limited only to certain spaces like gay bars, sex shops, etc. Duyvendak also argues that Dutch homosexuals have given up on the gay liberation movement as they no longer feel the need to be political, thus have not the need to claim their space. This is reflected in the attitude of the COC, who initially did not want to organize a Gay Pride in the Netherlands like in the US until late 1970s, reasoning that since gay people were "normal people", there was no need for demonstrations (Séveno, 2022) (https://www.iamexpat.nl/lifestyle/lifestyle-news/history-pride-amsterdam). Even up to these days, Pride parades have become more about a display of extravaganza and less about protesting and demonstrating against the system as they originated to be (Duyvendak, 1996; Séveno, 2022). Since this research would like to focus on people in Rotterdam who actively participate at any level in the fight against the dominant system, "queer" is deemed the suitable terminology.

2.2. The correlation between queerness and intersectionality

Having established that queerness is all-encompassing, it is illuminated how sexuality is intrinsically connected to other power organizers in society such as gender, race, class, etc. This enables an intersectional lens through which this research will be able to see how various social institution simultaneously plays into the way queer individuals experience the politics of sexuality. Intersectionality was first introduced and used in a political context in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a law professor at the UCLA and renowned civil rights advocate. It argues that "race, class, gender and sexual orientation intersect, influence, and interact with one another, creating new and unique forms of oppression" (Crenshaw, 1989, as cited in Fitzgerald & Grossman, 2021). As such, no queer person experiences queerness the same way their queer neighbor does. Everyone's lived queerness is influenced simultaneously by their own set of racial/ethnic, class, gender and other identities. That being said, "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" and

other axis of oppression, so an analysis that does not take intersectionality into account will disregard those most socially disadvantaged (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). With this framework of intersectionality in mind, this research is keen on looking at how all these social organizers present themselves in the respondents' queer experience.

2.3. Theory of affordances

2.3.1. Social media activism

In this research, social media is defined as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p.61). This definition excellently highlights where social media differs from other types of media: all users have the ability to create and exchange content with one another, as opposed to Web 1.0 or mass media where only a few create content for the rest to consume. This factor is particularly pivotal for marginalized communities such as the queer community, for whom access to traditional communication medium has not always been permitted (English, Hollibaugh & Rubin, 1982). Due to this, social media has gained popularity as a platform where counter voices seek to advance socio-political causes, particularly since the Arab Spring in 2011, during which social media played a critical role in facilitating protests and rebellions (Liao, 2019; Subramanian, 2015). Especially with COVID-19 coinciding with the resurrection of the Black Lives Matter movement, social media activism has gained exponentially even more traction. This invites further research into social media activism.

There has been various research into the role of social media for political organizing. In regard to the sex revolution, it is argued that social media has become a "crucial battle ground for sexual politics" (De Ridder, 2017, p.1). Following Altheide and Snow's (1979) concept of media logic, in which media contributes to the construction of reality, van Dijck and Poell hypothesize that social media has similar capacity to organize sexual institutions, practices and desires (as cited in De Ridder, 2017). This process is constantly shaped and negotiated by social media users, who are at the same time subject to existing social orders. It has veritably been observed how social media platforms have become sites where "sexual cultures are made visible, […] proliferating commercial and non-commercial erotic images and written texts", which are "intermingled with and scaffolded by sexual health information, activism, peer support, formal and informal pedagogy" (Herdt & Howe, 2007, as cited in Albury, 2018). Social media thus adds a new dimension to the sexual

constructionist framework where it offers the opportunity for queer folks to digitally construct their own sexual culture and challenge dominant sexual norms.

Many researchers, however, have warned about the downsides of using social media for political engagement. One prominent criticism is that online activism leads to "slacktivism", where there are no tangible outcomes nor sustained engagement in political causes, but rather leading people more to be passive. (Myers et al., 2016; Subramanian, 2015). (Fischer, 2016; Liao, 2019). Concerns about privacy and personal information security also arise, which are more stressing in contentious political environments with heavy state surveillance and censorship (McLean & Mugo, 2015; Liao, 2019). Furthermore, sexually marginalized people who are active on social media often face policing by the medium itself. Platforms such as Instagram, Facebook or Twitter are known for censoring images, captions or hashtags with sexual connotation (Albury, 2018). What's more, the online world is not immune to social hierarchies of the real world. Online spaces are cis male dominated and swarmed with hatred against women (Weiser & Miltner, 2016, as cited in Liao, 2019). For queer people, risks of harassment, hate speech and outing or doxing are looming online just as they do in real life. Additionally, as shown in the case of #Free_CeCe, where social media users rallied for justice for a Black transgender woman, white voices are still centered in online movements (Fischer, 2016). Moreover, Holstrom (2015) suggests that since sexual health information exists in an abundance on the internet, it can be difficult to verify them. It can then be inferred that the ease and vastness of spreading misinformation on social media potentially undermines the credibility and effectiveness of social media activism. Another possible downside of social media activism is the potential of algorithmic filtering and recommendation systems creating echo-chamber effects and reinforce existing beliefs, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives (Edwards, Philip & Gerrard, 2020).

However, Nielson (2013) argues that it is pointless to debate the legitimacy of digital activism back and forth. He suggests that "[t]ools do not determine action, they afford it" (p. 174). The use of the term "afford" here sprung from Gibson's theory of affordance (1979). The affordance theory claims that capabilities are not inherent to an object, but are rather built upon between the object and the environment they are in. It implies a complementary relationship between the two. Originally used in psychology, Gibson's theory of affordances can now be found in application in many fields, including media and communication.

2.3.2. Theory of affordances in application to social media activism

A recent study on affordances in media and communication argues that “an affordance is not a feature of a digital object or an outcome of its use, rather the affordance is the variable process that mediates between the two” (Evans, Pearce & Vitak, 2017, as cited in Hanckel, Vivienne, Byron, Robards & Churchill, 2019). Studying a technological development through an affordance lens means looking at “the symbiotic relationship between the action to be taken in the context and the capability of the technology” (Majchrzak, Faraj, Kane & Azad, 2013, p. 39). Many more definitions on the use of the affordance theory can be found in this field, but the following three characteristics of an affordance are proposed to be key:

> “First, affordance should not be confused with a feature of a technology; rather, a technology’s feature is its source. In addition, whereas a feature can be described as either absent or present, an affordance exists on a spectrum. Finally, an affordance is not an outcome of using a technology but can lead to multiple outcomes simultaneously, which might be good, bad, and ugly. The latter characteristic demonstrates the theoretical advantage of the concept of affordances in this context, in that technology is considered not as a deterministic drive for a utopia or dystopia but instead as offering the potential for diverse consequences.”
>
> (Evans, Pearce, Sivunen, Vitak & Treem, 2017, as cited in Miao & Chan, 2023, p. 212)

It is the last characteristic that is arguably the most pertinent to this research. It implies that social media platforms themselves do not determine the actions taken; they merely provide the means to take those actions. They therefore do not dictate whether their usage for activism has positive or negative outcomes, either. Instead, it invites the researcher to consider human agency in conjunction with social media to understand its effects. In this research, it can be applied to explore the specific affordances that Instagram enables in the context of queer people in Rotterdam during the pandemic and reject engaging in a continuous debate over the pros and cons of social media activism.

As seen in previous studies, there are several examples of affordances in queer social media activism. A noteworthy illustration emerges from the popular platform TikTok, where (queer) women employ various affordances to resist and challenge the sexual objectification of lesbian women by men. Cohen's (2021) examination reveals that TikTok's ease of content creation, sound choice, direct interaction features, and strategic use of hashtags collectively empower queer women to reclaim narratives and challenge harmful stereotypes. Moving beyond singular platforms, a comprehensive cross-platform investigation focused on gay

men in China sheds light on the nuanced differences in affordances across various social media platforms within a community context (Miao & Chan, 2023). This study underscores the importance of recognizing platform-specific affordances and suggests that future research should delve into the intricate ways in which cultural, social, and political contexts shape the manifestation of social media affordances. Moreover, an exploration into how queer individuals curate their identity and community on distinct social media platforms reveals insights into the differential utilization of affordances. Hanckel's (2019) research emphasizes that queer users adapt their expression and engagement strategies based on the unique affordances offered by each platform. It also reminds researcher to acknowledge that affordances not only enable certain actions but also impose constraints and challenges for users, such as privacy issues and the persistence of online homophobia,

2.4. Queer social media activism in existing case studies

It is frequently mistaken that online sexual expression is limited to sexual exhibitionism or seeking erotic or romantic encounters but that is not the case (Albury, 2018). Previous case studies on the use of social media by sexually marginalized individuals to engage in discourse around sexuality and to challenge dominant norms indicate four prominent ways sexually marginalized folks use social media in defiance of the dominant socio-political structure. This section will delve into each of these usage patterns, which will provide a framework to refine the scope of the study while still leaving room for other trends that might emerge.

2.4.1. Self-expression

A notable number of researchers have talked about the use of social media for self-expression and storytelling among sexually marginalized identities. Users are more empowered to showcase their identities that exist outside the in-real-life norms online and share stories about their personal life. According to Foucault, there are two aspects to sexual liberation: freedom from unnecessary control and the right to express one’s true sexual nature and identity (Seidman, 2007). For queer people whose identities are under-represented in the real world or censored, daring to unapologetically express their identities online directly challenges social norms (Albury, 2018). Online visibility can therefore also be seen as a form of political resistance. Social media platforms provide anonymity or safe communal spaces that allow sexually marginalized identities to be expressed (Albury, 2018; McLean & Mugo, 2015; Llewellyn, 2021). A study on the South African queer online space

called HOLAA! shows how digital spaces provide marginalized communities a safe space to build and express their identity, and have it validated by people who share the same values they do, a process via which they empower one another and strengthen their collective bonds (McLean, 2018). On HOLAA!, queer South Africans have more power to control their narrative instead of being portrayed through the common homophobic views, which signifies a more accurate and holistic representation of their identity. In another study on online "fandoms" where WLW (women who love women) are members and generate/consume WLW fictional content, it is argued that queer identity representation online goes beyond embracing one's sexual identity to where they can celebrate it with pride. Having access to a platform where users can publish their own content is also significant for victims and survivors of sexual violence, as demonstrated by the impactful #MeToo movement, where they find strength and empowerment through sharing their experiences with one another (Linder et al., 2016).

2.4.2. Community building

Additionally, social media platforms offer a safe space for community building for sexually marginalized people. Social media's unlimited reach allows users to connect with others regardless of their location (Alexander, 2002, as cited in Maliepaard, 2017). This enables them to find like-minded individuals who share similar interests, experiences, and identities, fostering the creation of communities that are not restricted by geography. For those who are marginalized on the basis of their sexuality, building communities on social media is particularly meaningful as offline spaces are often limited (Albury, 2018; Maliepaard, 2017). For bisexual people, for example, the cyber space is where they can connect with one another away from heteronormative structures (Maliepaard, 2017). Within this space, they are often offered a sense of belonging, communality, comfort and care, which helps them more freely explore different aspects of sexuality, such as identity and attraction. Going back to the example of online WLW fandoms, it is reported that members receive the support and acceptance from one another that is normally absent in their offline community or their family (Llewellyn, 2021). As a result, they feel less isolated, both emotionally and geographically, even when this community only exists online. Moreover, during COVID-19 where social disorder and injustices invokes negative emotions, which are heightened by social isolation caused by lockdown measures, people have become significantly more dependent on online connections for mutual support (Grant & Smith, 2021). This points to

the relevancy of looking at how queer people in Rotterdam use Instagram to foster community building during the pandemic.

2.4.3. Information exchange

Furthermore, social media offers a fast and cost-effective way to disseminate, exchange information on sexuality and addressing gaps in knowledge. Information on sexual health for example, can be found on social media when discussions are otherwise discouraged by educational or political institution (Albury, 2018). Audio-visual platforms like YouTube or Vine are often named as places where users who are a member of the queer community themselves can become sex educators (Johnston, 2016; Manduley, Mertens, Plante & Sultana, 2018). Information shared by these creators are deemed more approachable as they are often microcelebrities have built a relationship with the audience and established trust (Johnston, 2016). The setting is also more intimate, where the interaction between educators and their audience is described as "speaking *with*" instead of "speaking *at*", which signifies a constructing and mutual learning environment (p.77). Additionally, due to the interactive nature of social media and the shareability of content on it, the audience can in turn become educators themselves when they repost educational content (Manduley et al., 2018) Furthermore, online sex education is inclusive of more sexual identities compared to the binary usually taught in sex education at school, if taught at all.

2.4.4. Political advocacy and organizing

The use of social media for political advocacy and organizing is a phenomenon not new to academia. Since the Arab Spring in 2011, which is widely recognized as the first civil uprising on social media, the topic has been studied extensively across various political causes. In studying the shift from physical protesting in the streets to online activism for feminism, Subramanian (2015) finds that activism contemporarily exists social media helps participants stay in touch with the cause and with one another before and after rallies. This allows for a continual flow of conversations, sharing of opinions, gaining more perspectives and being timely informed of the agenda. An example on queer online activism specifically can be found in China where censorship is notoriously heavy: research has shown that social media facilitate the LGBT community in voicing their dissidence of the state and its policing against gay people (Liao, 2019). This is accelerated through the use of hashtags, namely #IAmGay in this case, which gathered all the voices in this discourse in one place to form a "rallying cry" how a protest would offline (Liao, 2019, p. 2020). However, there is also criticism against

the accessibility of social media for activism, as one needs to be savvy of the platform and invest time in learning how to efficiently mobilize and reach their target audience (Linder et al., 2016).

Chapter 3 | Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews (SSIs) as the primary method of data collection. Unlike traditional methods that rely on predetermined questionnaires, SSIs offer a more flexible and nuanced exploration of the chosen subject matter. The decision to employ SSIs stems from their adaptability, enabling the exploration of both predetermined topics and unexpected themes that may emerge during the course of the interviews.

3.1. Semi-structured interviews

Typically involving one-on-one interviews, SSIs are particularly well-suited for social studies that examine individual experiences (Adams, 2015). The open format allows for a balance between predetermined inquiries and the spontaneity of participant narratives (Galletta, 2013, as cited in Magaldi & Berler, 2020). Instead of using a predetermined questionnaire, an interview guide is used to keep track of predetermined topics while also remaining open to new subjects that may arise. In this study, the interview guide is composed based on the four most common social media usage patterns by sexually marginalized people to challenge dominant sexual norms, as elaborated in the previous chapter. The interviews are designed to include a mix of closed- and open-ended questions, with follow-up probes such as "why" or "how," providing a rich set of information (Adams, 2015). Unlike structured interviews, the sequencing and content of questions vary among respondents, ensuring a personalized and in-depth exploration of their unique perspectives (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). This flexibility allows researchers to obtain detailed answers and uncover unexpected issues, which is useful when looking for nuances in context-specific cases such as this one. It is also productive for exploring disruptive circumstances such as COVID-19, where extensive research is yet to be available.

3.2. Focus on Instagram

This research narrows its scope to Instagram as the focal platform. Instagram's selection is grounded in its widespread popularity in the Netherlands, being the fourth most used daily application (Coosto, 2021). Unlike other contenders like WhatsApp and Facebook, Instagram is chosen for its prevalence among the queer community in Rotterdam. From personal observation, it can be seen that Instagram is preferred as a method of connecting and maintaining contact among this group. This can be attributed to a number of reasons. Instagram is engaging yet casual as it does not require constant personal messaging like

WhatsApp to stay active and in the know. Apart from creating content and private messaging, Instagram users can use other lower-effort functions such as liking, commenting, reposting to stay engaged. Additionally, Instagram's visual-centric nature aligns with the aims of digital activism (Liao, 2019), making it a suitable canvas for storytelling and adding an additional layer of complexity to studies such as this one. The decision to focus on Instagram is also informed by its growth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the challenges posed by the global health crisis, Instagram witnessed a substantial increase in monthly users in the Netherlands by 25.5% from January 2020 to January 2021, indicating its enduring popularity, while Facebook witnessed a decline (Dixon, 2023).

3.3. Participant selection

Participants are invited based on specific criteria using non-probability targeted/convenience sampling. Individuals openly proclaiming queerness, those associated with KONTRA events, and those actively engaged on social media, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, constitute the target group.

3.4. Interview setting and transcription

Seven one-on-one interviews were conducted to facilitate a comfortable and open dialogue. The chosen settings, ranging from virtual platforms like Zoom to casual environments such as homes, cafes, and outdoor spaces, were intended to create a relaxed atmosphere for discussing the otherwise hefty topic of sexuality. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the subject matter.
All interviews were recorded using a smartphone and subsequently transcribed for analysis. The transcripts serve as the primary data source in this research. To uphold ethical standards, participants are provided with their interview transcripts for review, affording them the opportunity to rectify any inaccuracies or retract statements based on privacy concerns. In the end, one interview is omitted at the withdrawal request of one participant.

3.5. Ethical/practical challenges

Conducting this research presents both practical and ethical challenges. First and foremost, the research takes place during the COVID pandemic, which means local regulations still need to be taken into consideration when carrying the interview. For this study, we conducted one-on-one interviews with seven respondents. The one-on-one interview format is therefore ideal in order to minimize the spread of the virus. Interviewees were also asked to inform the researcher were they to experience any corona-related symptoms.

They were also given the option to give the interview via Zoom if they were not comfortable meeting in person.

Second of all, respecting interviewees' privacy and ensuring their confidentiality throughout the process is crucial, as discussing one's queerness can be sensitive and personal. All participants provided consent to be recorded, and they agreed to the use of their real name and any personal information disclosed during the interview for this research, unless stated otherwise at any point, even after the interview. Issues around sexuality can be difficult or even triggering to discuss due to them being considered a taboo by many. This is overcome by the fact that the respondents and I have already been acquainted prior to the interview, either through KONTRA events offline or online. Therefore, a fair level of trust and rapport had already been built. Additionally, due to the queer nature of KONTRA events, these are folks who are familiar with conversations about sexuality.

Third of all, this research uses non-probability targeted/convenience sampling, where I approached folks I know from the queer community in Rotterdam who I know are self-proclaimed queer and who I see had been active on Instagram, and interviewed all those who were willing. Although this method of sampling is convenient, it can be highly biased (Galloway, 2005). Nonetheless, this research does not seek to make generalizations that are representative of the whole population being studied, but rather to explore the possibilities of online queer liberation and generate deep understanding, thus the downsize of this method are more or less offset. Furthermore, convenience sampling is also beneficial considering COVID restrictions as well as the sensitive nature of the research.

Lastly, while SSIs offer the advantage of rich and in-depth data compared to structured interviews or increased reliability compared to unstructured interviews, they require extensive effort from the interviewer. Therefore, to prevent fatigue for both the interviewer and interviewee, each interview was limited to approximately one hour (Adams, 2015). It is also highly required of the interviewer to possess familiarity with the research topic to ask appropriate follow-up questions, while also remaining aware of personal biases that could unintentionally influence the interviewee's responses (Magaldi & Berler, 2020; Nederhof, 1985). In this research, I am thus mindful of my own identity as a member of the queer community in Rotterdam who has their own social media habits. My expertise in social media, acquired through my bachelor's degree in Communication and Media with a

focus on social media influencers, also informs my approach. Additionally, based on the established connection I have built with the respondents, I can ensure open and honest conversations where participants do not feel pressured to provide socially desirable or judgment-proof answers. Respondents are also reassured throughout the interview that there are no right or wrong answer. It also helps that I have been following the respondents on Instagram for at least half a year, and that they have been actively using Instagram during the COVID-19 lockdown, as evidenced by their frequency of posting on their feed or story. This grants me a general overview of what they post in order to be reflective and ask relevant questions in each interview.

Chapter 4 | Analysis

4.1. Introducing the interviewees and the multifaceted-ness of being queer

Each interview started out by inquiring the respondents about their affiliation with KONTRA and how active they are in the queer scene in Rotterdam; followed by what being queer and queer liberation means to them. This is done to establish the topic and to determine what aspects of queerness are detrimental to each respondent, so that relevant questions about their Instagram use can be formed accordingly. Each of the seven participants are unique in how they identify with queerness. For example, the first interviewee, Lisa (she/her), is a fat fem-representing woman who has just graduated from art school and now designs footwear, so it is suiting to follow up with questions pertaining her experience in the world as a fat queer femme. Marvin (they/them) is a Malukan musician/DJ that practices polyamory and can be seen vocal about it online. Monika (she/they) is a trans visual and performance artist who is active in the Dutch ballroom scene, representing the House of Vineyard. Kim (they/them/he/him) is a fat queer sex worker and politician representing Haagse Stadpartij, a left-wing political party based in The Hague. Tessa (she/her) is a queer international student who moved to the Netherlands from the States and is only recently introduced to the queer scene in Rotterdam. Joana (she/her), whom I interviewed last, is a queer fat Jewish femme and is a community organizer and also the co-founder of KONTRA.

Every interviewee has a different story about how they began embarking on their queer journey, and where they stand now. For Lisa and Joana, their queerness can be described as the product of the radicalization of their feminist activism. Lisa described herself as someone who had always consider herself a feminist, and at a boiling point of her feminism she got acquainted to queer ideology. Joana co-founded KONTRA as an art-feminist organization, where she encountered other queer people who helped her come out of the closet and realized her true queer calling through experiencing the whole spectrum of queer joy, queer pain and queer trauma in the spaces where she organizes.

Interestingly, upon giving a workshop on consent during a KONTRA festival, Joana radicalized another respondent, Tessa. Tessa leaned more into the queer world when her sexual traumas were made apparent to her during this workshop. Before that, Tessa had already identified as queer or as lesbian, but she did not have the community to help her further explore it as more than a label. After the experience, which she described as an “awakening”, Tessa began thinking of spaces in terms of their safety for people who are

queer like her and reflecting on what queerness entails. Being in a community like KONTRA and talking to other queers has shaped her definition of queerness to being more holistic and intersectional instead of just being an identifier. Other respondents who come from different upbringing also underscore the mutual challenges presented by external forces when expressing their authentic identities. Shedding light on the stigma faced by sex workers in particular, Kim links queerness with a desire for sexual freedom without external judgement. Likewise, being polyamorous, Marvin's queerness also revolves around having more than one relationship within which they have sexual relations. Adding to Kim, Marvin's perspective expands the definition of queerness beyond sexual orientation, emphasizing the importance of rejecting all societal norms. Monika's definition of queerness revolves around her not conforming to heterosexual expectations. To her, to be queer is then to not only exist outside of the norms, but also to actively resist societal pressure while doing so, especially in the context of a group.

Through exploring what queer means to the respondents, it is reiterated here that queerness is multifaceted and intersectional, and that there lies a great amount of complexity and diversity within the queer experience. The respondents come from various different backgrounds, different occupations, different ethnicities, different genders, different sexual orientations, which forms vastly different intersections, contributing to their unique queer becoming. At the same time, they are interconnected in their experience of having a marginalized identity. Furthermore, it is suggested that queerness is amplified by having a community, sharing stories and trauma, thus re-emphasizing the need to investigate how this sense of togetherness can possibly be sustained online.

4.2. The affordances

4.2.1. Here and Queer: digital visibility as resistance

Since queer expressions are often stigmatized and, in many instances, can be prosecuted, the sheer act of being visible as a queer person can be seen as a compelling tool for resistance and empowerment. In this digital era, the deliberate cultivation of visibility on Instagram has become a means of challenging the gender binary, heteronormative expectations and dismantling stigma. Especially during the pandemic, where one is not permitted in-person contact and therefore is deprived of a space to express themselves to others, the necessity for queer visibility heightens. This first section explores this

phenomenon while delving into how the respondents in this research employ visual-oriented features of Instagram to express their queer authentic self on the platform.

> “I mean, first of all, because I love my tits and I think if a man's tits can be online, so should mine and I don't think it has to be perceived in a sexual way. It can be perceived just as a body, as a free body living its life. And that's my main motivation, because I'm hot as fuck so why not?”
>
> (Joana, 2022)

Joana’s display of her body on Instagram and asserting control over her own image can be seen as a form of resistance against society norms that dictate how women’s bodies should be presented. As a fat fem, by openly embracing and showcasing her body, she pushes to normalize fat bodies on Instagram, a space notorious for the domination and monetization of thinness and diet culture.

Through wearing bold makeup looks, dresses and skirts and painting their nails on Instagram, as someone who is most often perceived as male, Marvin challenges the gender norms associated with the beauty and fashion industry. This way of asserting their queer identity can be interpreted as a form of resistance against the rigid gender binary that marks makeup, dresses, etc. as strictly feminine and otherwise a taboo for men. While they did not register this expression as a deliberate act of rebellion at first, Marvin is seen to have experienced a progression in their outward expression of queerness. Whereas they appeared nonchalant about wearing dresses and makeup when they started showing their queerness, Marvin is now intentionally wearing “outrageous” makeup and clothing to elicit certain responses from their audience. The desire to make others “feel something” about their appearance can be viewed as a form of rebellion against societal expectation. Moreover, the fact that they draw enjoyment from these responses can be interpreted as them feeling that their queerness is validated because they have succeeded in making it clear to the audience that they do not conform to the norms. They attributed this confidence to their growth as a performance artist, as the art world is more outgoing when it comes to out-of-the-ordinary expressions. However, this confidence boost can also be linked to having a platform like Instagram where they can show their queerness constantly through posting selfies and continue doing so in front of an audience even during a lockdown.

> “I tried to show myself and I guess that's showing queerness. I don't really think about it, but I realized that of course wearing makeup as someone who looks male or has a penis is queer. I was always experimenting with how I dress or look like (before the lockdown). I always used to wear dresses or put a bit of makeup and bare minimum things like wearing a nail polish or something, you know? But I think right now, I try to do it even a bit more extreme. Also, because I got more confidence to do it, I guess. But I feel like also, it has to do with me being an artist that has made it easier for me to do all these things. (…) Olike it to be, I don't know, "Oh, he's wearing makeup that's outrageous" you know, so I like to do that on purpose a bit. I will wear nail polish on purpose and wear a skirt and people would be like, feel something about it. But I like that.
>
> (Marvin, 2022)

For Monika, as a ballroom dancer, not having a physical runway to express herself during the lockdown hit hard, especially when showing out in the ballroom scene is her way of reclaiming her queerness in a heteronormative world. Coming from the southern town of Breda where the population is homogenous and mostly conservative, Monika had to conceal her identity growing up, which leads to her struggling a great deal with gender dysphoria. That was until she moved to Rotterdam and found herself in the ballroom scene. For Monika, the runway is not only an outlet for her to work on her relationship with her gender identity, but also a way for her to create her own queer reality to reclaim space, especially in resistance to having to live in a heteronormative world on a day-to-day basis.

> “[W]ithin the ballroom scene, it's all about performance, about creating character. We are creating fantasies that you can live. And I found that I really needed that to create and step in my own reality actually, within these balls or within these spaces, because it kind of balance it out, you know? The things that people like don't like about me in everyday life is celebrated in those places”
>
> (Monika, 2022)

Furthermore, like Marvin, Monika feels the need to show this alternative reality to others who might not be used to it in order to spark a conversation about it. It can be inferred that it is Monika’s intention to challenge the system by reclaiming space for herself whereas in the past she had to hide, and to have her queer presence make a political statement.

> "I think mostly it's about connecting with other people and showing your work with other and having the audience react to that. It's not a one way thing for me to express and people see it because we really need to talk about it. […] I feel like as long as I hold myself, or like not dress in a certain way because I wouldn't feel safe, then nothing will change. So every time I put something online that I feel like, 'This is very nude', for example, then I feel like if I don't do it, I'm censoring myself. I think it's still important to be trying to push [boundaries]"
>
> (Monika, 2022)

During the lockdown, "online was a big thing" for Monika to continue pushing boundaries. Using Instagram, she "created characters and fantasies" and posted photos and videos of them online. Her determination to continue to be seen by other people in her queerness can be viewed as an act of defiance against the societal pressure to hide her gender identity that she experienced before coming out.

This chapter has shown how the visual-focused tribute of Instagram enables respondents to share photos and videos of themselves and make themselves visible to an audience even in times of isolation. Through deliberate choices in clothing, makeup and the display of their bodies, the respondents challenge societal norms, establish boundaries and seek acknowledgment on their own terms. The act of expression is nuanced, taking the forms of selfies, casual fit-checks, orchestrated photoshoots or videos, either for themselves or to offer provocations that invite others to question and rethink traditional norms. Whichever way they choose, the respondents participate in reshaping societal perceptions and contribute to the broader discourse on inclusivity and the normalization of queer identities.

4.2.2. "Not for you, b*tch!": curating a safe space online

While all respondents appear to be open about their queer identity on Instagram, there exists a level of consciousness among them about whom their Instagram is visible to. Many respondents mentioned not having a safe space growing up as a queer person, either because they come from a conservative upbringing or at one point were surrounded by those with conservative thinking. Marvin, for example, recalled having straight male friends in their hometown who were outright homophobic and bigoted, which made it hard for him to be his true self. Lisa, while having moved away from her parents and from her home, still worries about having to explain her queerness to her parents in case they see something

from her online. This signifies the importance of having a safe space online where they can both shield themselves from discrimination and prevent it from happening at the same time. This section shows how Instagram features such as privacy settings and blocking/unfollowing/remove followers enable the affordance of curating a safe space online for queer people.

On Instagram, users can choose to set their account either as private or public. When one's account is public, it is visible to every user on the app. If it is private, it is only visible to the user's followers; and everyone else has to send a follow request to them to be a follower. Additionally, whether they have a private or public account, users can dictate who can comment on their posts, send them message or reply to their Stories. By toggling with Instagram's privacy settings, they can ensure that their online presence is only shared with a curated audience. After being confronted by her parents about her queer presence online in one instance, Lisa reconsidered her privacy settings. Lisa now has two Instagram account: a private one where she share queer related content only with her close friends and close it off for strangers; and another that is public where she showcases her work to get professional recognition.

> "I think Instagram's privacy features are useful because I feel quite in control of what I post because I can choose privacy levels"
>
> (Lisa, 2022)

The use of different Instagram pages for personal and professional aspects enables her to navigate social expectations while exploring her sexuality freely in a controlled environment. On the contrary, Monika opted for a different strategy: she chooses to face social stigma heads-on by having her Instagram account open to the public. This reflects a nuanced approach to leveraging Instagram privacy settings as a tool for queer liberation.

> "My Instagram account is public because I really actively want to let go of my gender dysphoria. I frequently ask myself: 'Why don't I like my facial hair? Is it because I feel like my facial hair is not mine? Or is it because other people assume my facial hair makes me a man?' (…) On Instagram, I feel like I can accomplish more with being public and just letting negative comments go, rather than keeping it private, I guess. Because also good things are coming from that: people do see my Instagram and see that I'm making a positive change"
>
> (Monika, 2022)

On top of privacy settings, on Instagram, users can remove another user from their "Followers" list or take a step further and block that individual from ever seeing and interaction with them online again. As discussed previously, Joana enjoys posting visuals of her body on Instagram that go against conventional expectations. While doing so, she reportedly rejects any sexual objectification by blocking men who make inappropriate comments or react in a way that is predatory and disrespectful.

> "I love being like, "not for you, b*tch!". If a guy even, if it's a guy I know, starts flirting with me online, I immediately block him. You react fire emojies to two pictures in a row of my body, I will block you like immediately. I did it recently even. The guy was, I'm sure very nice. But my photo was not for him to react to. Immediate block!"
>
> (Joana, 2022)

This act of blocking demonstrated by Joana serves as a firm and direct rejection to unwanted advances from men, rejecting the expectation that idea that women's bodies exist to be perceived by men. Moreover, the vulgarity and straightforwardness contradict the idea that women should always be polite and respectful to their male counterparts. In this instance, Joana's presence on Instagram is the embodiment of the feminist slogan "my body, my choice", where she takes charge of her online body autonomy while establishing boundaries over who gets to see and interact with it.

Lisa is also a fan of using Instagram's block feature against heterosexual men, which seemingly suggests that this is a popular feature among fem-presenting individuals as other non-fem respondents did not report it being useful to them. This can point to the reality that women reportedly experience a disproportionate amount of sexual harassment, namely unwanted attention in this case, from cis-het males. Lisa detailed being stalked and harassed by a man she used to date and being able to alleviate her discomfort by blocking the person online. Here, she also contrasted this instance with how there is no block button for such situations in real life, making the block feature more outstanding.

Blocking can be seen a feature that empowers the respondents to build their own queer digital landscapes. It can be seen serving as a protective measure against harassment, discrimination or any form of negativity that compromises the safe space. By exercising this feature, the respondents reclaim control over their only experiences and signal that their boundaries are non-negotiable. This act of self-preservation is not merely defensive, but

also an assertion of agency, which is especially powerful for a demographic that is most oftentimes on the receiving end of being excluded.

Furthermore, Instagram users can choose who can interact with them. This means that one can set their Instagram as public where everyone can see what they post but can restrict who can comment on it or sending them a message about it. For someone who is a politician running for office and therefore would benefit from having a public profile, but is sick of having to encounter comments from their opposition, Kim describes this feature as a "game-changer" that helped them feel safer on Instagram. Kim's experience highlights the varying levels to which a user can create an individualized barrier against unwanted attention on Instagram.

In summary, these analyses demonstrate the diverse ways in which queer individuals navigate Instagram privacy features to create online safe spaces tailored to their unique needs and identities. They also show how alert they are about her safety online and how intentional and strategic they are about their every move on the platform to ensure their own safety.

4.2.3. Boundless queer community building and bonding

Having a safe space online as such is the baseline for community building and bonding. As stresses by one of the respondents, queer individuals benefit a great deal from having an online community because more often than not they lack supporting structures in their immediate environment.

> "If you're not able to find the strategies of support, you will have a really harder time coming to terms with your sexual preferences, your gender identity, especially if you come from a conservative background. Not everybody is privileged enough to have the family and support structures around them that are open to queerness and gender expressions."
>
> (Joana, 2022)

Staying in touch with one's community online during the pandemic therefore became especially crucial during the pandemic. This section demonstrates how respondents make use of the mutual-friend signifier feature and the physical boundlessness of Instagram to build and extend their queer circle, and to offer and receive community support.

Mutual connections provide a sense of trust and familiarity. On Instagram, when users click on another user's profile, it shows whether if someone they already follow is

following this user, as well as who these followers are. In this context, it is leveraged by queer individuals to connect with other queers. This interconnectedness not only fosters a sense of community, but also ensures that their online space is populated by safe individuals who more or less share similar values and beliefs as them. This feature is significant to Tessa, who just moved from half the globe away to the Netherlands and is new to the queer scene to Rotterdam.

> "I am someone that will definitely follow someone on Instagram I don't know at all. Like, if you're cool, you're queer, you're in Rotterdam. And I think that's actually what I did before ever meeting anyone here. I did the SlutWalk and then through social media, I just started following all of these people who are queer. (…) If I see that you are queer and someone queer I know follows you, [I'm following you on Instagram]. Still now [there are] so many people that I follow that I've never actually met. (…) [I]f we have mutual friends] and I feel comfortable with the idea that people here perceive what I share in kind of the same way that I perceive it"
>
> (Tessa, 2022)

Tessa strategically uses Instagram to build a virtual community by following queer individuals in her locality based on shared connection. This is something that is usually not done easily in real life, as queer people are more pressured to conceal their identity and queer spaces are not always available. As is the case for Tessa, having a virtual community enhances her sense of belonging and connection within her local queer community. Her approach extends beyond physical borders, which illustrates how online networks are boundless and thus can be relied on during unprecedented events such as the COVID lockdown.

Tessa further told the story of how she met up in real life with a queer person she had met on Instagram where the two created a strong bond over sharing their queer experience with one another, despite having only interacted with each other online a couple times.

> "If someone is following me that I don't know, and they're reacting to my stuff, I'm like, 'Cool, we have things in common.' I still feel like it's a real relationship, even though I don't know this person in real life. Or if I saw them in real life, I feel that it wouldn't be awkward. Also, because there's just this basis of, we're both queer, we both have a certain experience. [T]hat sh*t is life changing for real! Because so many

> of the things that I experienced I felt like, I was the only one and it's so embarrassing, and it's so horrifying. (…) Because despite the fact that we, especially here, we all come from really different circumstances and definitely other people have a harder time or an easier time and like other things that intersect, you know, there's still a lot that we can relate on and understand. And that's f*cking sick."
>
> (Tessa, 2022)

It can be inferred from this story that Tessa views the relationships she makes online just as genuine and authentic as the ones she makes offline. The universality of not only queer struggles, but queer experiences as a whole, forms a basis for connection, allowing for meaningful exchanges in a non-judgmental environment. Through such mutual affirmation, these relationships validate her queer identity and experience and help her feel more comfortable with her sexuality and more validated with her gender experience.

During COVID-19, communal support became even more vital for the queer community, as they have to grapple with a global health crisis while being physically isolated, on top of existing social stigma, discrimination and the ongoing quest to find a community that accepts them. As Joana and Marvin underscores, Instagram has, during this time, become a virtual haven for fostering connections, sharing personal narratives and offering encouragement. In Joana's circle, people would open up on Instagram about the mental struggles they were dealing with, which invites others to empathize with them and initiate conversations, either in private messaging or openly about the issue.

> "A lot of people were struggling with their mental health, you know, so I also felt like I was supporting them. I felt at the time I was sort of part of these micro systems in which I was a support system. And I had a support system. (…) I still managed to keep in touch with a lot of people and then meeting them in real life which has been so cool."
>
> (Joana, 2022)

As online interactions became a primary means of communication, it can be seen here how Instagram became a tool to combat potential loneliness and keep communities together. Through sharing what mental issues they struggle with, queer individuals in this circle were made to feel seen, as though their problems were valid and they were not going through dark times alone. Marvin took this system of support one step further. Not only do they follow and talk to other queer individuals on Instagram, they also actively find ways to show

support to them. This would take the form of liking photos and giving compliments in the comment section (so-called “hyping each other up”), re-sharing each other’s original content or helping with advertising for a project that the other person takes part in. Such support strengthens the community by uplifting marginalized individuals and reinforcing their political visibility.

> “I mean, on Instagram, it doesn't matter where you are in the world, you can connect with amazing people. During the pandemic, I was able to ‘go to’, go to in air quotes, all cool conferences and trainings and I was really cool. I managed to do some cool online stuff, hear speakers that I will never be able to hear speak and stuff like that. And there is of course the safety of like you can always withdraw when you are not comfortable, right? Like, you can always be like "I'm done, bye!" and you go back to watching your movie or doing whatever you were doing and in life it's that's harder because people are just ‘there’.”

(Joana, 2022)

Joana hereby underscores the global reach of online communities, showing how the online space transcends geographical limitations. Combined with her visibility on Instagram, Instagram’s boundlessness enables her to network with individuals worldwide and further her work as an activist in time of the lockdown. Moreover, she once again draws attention to the unique advantages of the online space, namely the ability to withdraw when feeling uncomfortable. This flexibility contrasts with the lack thereof in physical spaces, highlighting one more time the safety and agency afforded by the online community.

Furthermore, the fact that Instagram is not limited to a physical location also allows for a hybrid space, both online and offline, which Joana points out is especially beneficial for online-based communities, namely (queer) people with disabilities. Due to offline events being prohibited, Joana and her colleague at KONTRA resourced to Instagram Live and Zoom to host events. Through this experience, she discovered it offered much easier access for people with disabilities. Especially during the pandemic where transmissions are accelerated during in-person interaction and therefore puts people’s health at risk, she found online spaces to be much safer and more inclusive.

> “So actually in that way, it elevated the scope of intersectionality in which we were doing things, and that's why still this year during FemFest 2022, we still having streamed events via Instagram Live. We're now trying to keep up these hybrid

> spaces. Because we see that it's useful and it's including people that for a reason or another cannot physically take part; and we can somehow be intentional. And you know, it's not that hard to sometimes have a livestream and that kind of stuff."
>
> (Joana, 2022)

This suggests that where the organizer is intentional in acknowledging and addressing the unique challenges faced by different marginalized groups, Instagram offers an easy tool to create spaces that are inclusive and responsive to the needs of various communities. Its Live feature, where events can be broadcasted in real time and viewers can interact through comments and sending likes, is a practical means to ensure broader participation.

4.2.4. Vital information exchange and queer learning

All respondents, regardless of their cultural upbringing, reported a lack of sex education growing up. They either did not receive any, or like Marvin recalled, it was very "rudimentary" and revolves around the female-male binary, so learning about queerness then was far out of the question, let alone about queer pleasure as Lisa had hoped she had learned in school. Due to this, many respondents resorted to the internet to explore their sexuality. This section looks at how Instagram provides an accessible way to effectively learn about queerness and exchange vital information, which is facilitated by three factors: its low threshold for entry, the ease to circulate content within a circle and more lenient censorship against queer content.

Tessa was more than enthusiastic to share how she had learned about her sexuality on Instagram. She disclosed it was a major part of her queer journey, and confirmed she definitely learned more from Instagram than from traditional sex education in school.

> "[I find information about sexuality and about being queer straight up from Instagram. I was following a lot of meme pages. At the time, there was this Instagram called 'What's wrong with Molly-Margaret'. (…) She's just this like super queer girl, super gay and very open. Like she wasn't a sex educator or nothing. She was just really open about like her hookups and stuff. Actually, I learned more from this Instagram account than the 20 years prior accumulated. So in terms of like, queer sex, I'm definitely following lesbian pages, but also just in terms of like sexual wellness and stuff, like, [I learn it] through Instagram accounts that talk about it and talk about it openly."
>
> (Tessa, 2022)

Furthermore, Tessa appreciated the anonymity of learning through social media as someone who thought she was late to the coming-out party. She said Instagram allowed her to explore complex topics such as sexuality without having to have the usually awkward face-to-face conversations. This helps her feel less judged in her learning experience and encouraged to learn more.

Not only do they consume educational content, but respondents in this study also use their platform to reshare what they have learned to their audience. Marvin and Tessa both actively re-share information they encounter on Instagram to their own audience. In their case, this is facilitated by Instagram's reshare function, where one can repost a post on their Stories and the viewers can be redirected instantly to the original post; or they can screenshot a piece of content and post either to their Feed or to their Stories.

> "I re-share [educational content] a lot, either because I want to share my own 'eureka moment' or I want to educate others as well, just by having it out there, you know, just in case someone might see it, read it and think about it. When I was younger, there was no information, so I find it really important for people to find it and help them in a way."
>
> (Marvin, 2022)

> "Everyone has sex, or most people have sex, so I re-share what I learn about sex to destigmatize it for myself and for people around me. Why is this a topic that I'm gonna avoid, it's a big aspect of my life, so I would rather be open about it. That's kind of cute that to my straight male friends, I would be like 'I'm teaching you indirectly'. It shouldn't be just for queer people or people who have a vagina or whatever. Everyone should be aware of certain things"
>
> (Tessa, 2022)

What's more, the fact that Molly-Margaret, the content creator mentioned by Tessa is just a mundane queer girl sharing her own stories and not a licensed sex educator yet is still able of producing content that are relevant and useful to Tessa and fifty thousand other followers (@whatswrongwithmollymargaret on Instagram) indicates how Instagram's low entry-threshold makes it fairly easy for marginalized individuals to have access to a platform where their voice is needed. Anyone with a smartphone device and internet connection can post on Instagram. Monika, for example, is working on a documentary about her transition, which she hopes to share on Instagram to give information about the process, spread

awareness about the issues in Dutch trans care and to simply tell her store. Kim and Marvin shared their appreciation the diverse source of information they can get on Instagram.

> "For me, personally, I also try to shift away a little bit from academia and focus more on people's personal experiences, because I feel like in that narrative, there is more space to see that this is what people experience. What I also like about the Black Lives Matter phase is that there was also a lot of fat Black trans people that were being promoted by white influencers. I thought that was really great, because I got to follow a lot more other people that I wouldn't normally come across, and now I have a feed of all different kinds of people"
>
> (Kim, 2022)

> "In high school, [sex-ed] was very scientific and also very men-oriented, even though it's about men and women. I feel like the information I receive on Instagram right now is way more intersectional. It's not just about sex, it's about trauma and psychology, too. If it's about people that have sex that are disabled, it's often written by people that are disabled, like, it's actually written by experts you know. And women would write about women, etc. I think that's a really big difference, and you can really see it and feel it. It's not written by a man like in those biology books. I'm conscious about trying to seek out content made by women, by people of color, by disabled people. (…) It's actual, real information by real people instead of this detached way of looking at it so it's way more real and diverse"
>
> (Marvin, 2022)

Instagram therefore can be seen as an open platform for those who are marginalized and normally censored in mainstream media. Here, they are in control of their own narrative, which facilitates the authenticity of the content they make. The diverse range of content creators that exists on Instagram also is also reflected in the range of content one can find there. Kim shared how they specifically look for kink-friendly content, or in general, content that extends beyond sex-ed and delves into more complex issues around sexuality such as sex work. "Anything with the word 'slut' in it, basically, I will watch and read", said Kim, which shows an example of how alternative Instagram content can be compared to mass media where the word "slut" is totally censored.

4.2.5. Large-scale political organizing and mobilization

While respondents generally use Instagram to do what would constitute activism as seen in previous sections, such as re-claiming spaces and narratives, asserting visibility, spreading awareness about political issues, etc., interestingly, not all are welcome to the idea of being called an activist. This section shows how whether or not respondents see eye to eye on the validity of Instagram activism, it can be deducted that within the Rotterdam scene, queer activism is afforded by Instagram through exchanging resources, raising awareness on topical issues, mobilizing and organizing.

On top of actively consuming and sharing educational material, respondents are also concerned with discussing topical political issues. Especially with the resurrection of the Black Lives Matter movement coinciding with COVID-19, Instagram became the main channel to stay updated with the movement. Being from the States herself, Tessa consciously shared relevant news update to her Instagram Stories because she believed it was necessary for people in her circle to keep up with these current events, but stressed at the same time that she would never call herself an activist for this.

> “I really don't want to post things just to post and be like, "Oh, I care about this topic." It's more like, if I share it, it's because I think that probably the people I've followed need to hear it or need to read it. But people like Joanna who dedicates her f**king life to the cause, I would never put myself with the same label as her like that. That shit is disrespectful, honestly. And there's a lot of like, online activists, you know, and that's some bullsh*t. So I wouldn't say what I post is activism.”
>
> (Tessa, 2022)

Tessa casted her doubts about whether Instagram activism is genuine or just a matter of virtue signaling, a case in which an individual attempt to “perform wokeness” and portray themselves as socially aware or progressive without actual understanding or commitment to the issue. Furthermore, she points to the “fine line” between trying to educate people who are not in the know and ostracizing them from the cause, since according to her, social media trends can be so overwhelming at times that they lead people to feeling hesitant to ask questions or seek understanding due to the fear of being “cancelled”. This fear can create a barrier to open dialogue and hinder education within online communities. Likewise, Joana expressed reservations about Instagram activism that might be performative or insincere. Joana communicated her frustration with how people’s interest in activism is evidently short-lived and potentially does a disservice to the sustainment of movements, as

she noticed a decrease in the number of people signing up for protests and volunteer work when Black Lives Matter became less topical to the mainstream public. Nonetheless, she strongly advocated for the significance of online activism and recognized the organizing power within her queer community on Instagram. Through Instagram, during the pandemic, Joana was able to publish open calls in order to look for volunteers and speakers for various protests; and also have them re-shared widely by her circle to expand the scope of her search. Moreover, as touched on previously, she was also able to host livestreams for her KONTRA demonstrations on Instagram Live, where viewers can watch activists give manifestation and engage with them as they would in an offline demonstration. Through Instagram, Joana also connected with other activists like Dutch queer activist Naomi Pieters, whom she had learned a lot from and described as the source of her inspiration and radicalism. This reveals the capacity of Instagram as a tool for political organizing, inviting political engagement and getting inspired.

> "This is the thing: online activism is activism. Don't let anybody tell you otherwise, because you have communities that organize online and there is enormous power in being able to organize within the digital online community. Digital tools can be huge in terms of mobilizing power and getting the word out there, especially when the epidemic just hit. It was awful."
>
> (Joana, 2022)

4.2.6. The meme-ification of queerness: an accessible gateway to queerness

A meme is a cultural element that spreads rapidly from person to person within a specific community. In the context of the internet and social media, memes refer to images, videos, text or any other content that bear humorous characteristic and that are shared and replicated rapidly online. This section takes a look at an unprecedented affordance that can be detected throughout every interview: the meme-ification of queerness. It reveals how consuming and sharing memes on Instagram among the queer community plays a notable role in fostering queer culture by providing a medium for shared experiences, validation, community building and learning.

Marvin reported feeling validated in their identity when they come across a meme on Instagram that they can resonate with, or when they share a meme and someone commented on it in agreement. The ability to laugh about common struggles, joys, or just in general the nuance of queer life provides a profound sense of acknowledgement and

understanding, where they realize they are not alone in navigating the complexities of queerness. Lisa also shared how queer memes have assisted her in her self-discovery journey. She found the underlying commentary on gender identity and sexuality insightful and especially accessible thanks to the humor embedded in these memes, thus making them a “gateway” to learn about queerness.

> “Just the fact that you can laugh about [the memes] makes you feel more validated. It's a feeling of validation because often it's about a situation that you've been into as well or could imagine yourself being so you can relate to it. And you're like, "Oh, I'm not the only one." I mean, there are not a lot of people actually that make this kind of content. I would like to see more of it. And in general, it makes me feel seen, you know, like yeah, not just the funny things, but also does serious things.”
>
> (Marvin, 2022)

> “Through these jokes and stuff, I’m learning a lot and I’m like, ‘Oh wait, yeah, this applies to me’. It’s like a gateway to questioning ideas about gender identity and all this kind of things through just jokes and memes.”
>
> (Lisa, 2022)

The use of memes is also a subtle way of signaling one’s queerness within the community. Similar to how Tessa would find other queer individuals in the circle by looking at mutuals of those she already knows and follows, Lisa sees queer meme accounts as a third party to identity potential queer connection. Memes then become a networking and bonding element that transcends geographical boundaries, allowing individuals to connect and form a virtual community.

> “It's kind of like trying to find the codes, in the same way that other codes before the internet existed.”
>
> (Lisa, 2022)

Additionally, memes have become a vehicle for political activism within the queer community in Rotterdam. Through Kim and Marvin, it can be seen how meme can be a unique and effective way to disseminate important messages and promote awareness on serious socio-political issues in a manner that is approachable and shareable. Memes are thus a vehicle to make one’s journey to queerness more accessible, more enjoyable and more relatable for everyone else in the community.

> “I also like sharing queer memes because it makes a way for people to engage in serious political issues without having to put much effort into it”
>
> (Kim, 2022)

> “I share queer memes because they present the matter in a less serious, more light-hearted way. Maybe because I don’t want to scare people. (…) [I]t’s more accessible if it’s funny I guess”
>
> (Marvin, 2022)

4.3. The drawbacks

While the research has identified six affordances queer people in Rotterdam can find on Instagram, it would also like to call attention to the drawbacks that Instagram can impose to them. Throughout talks with the respondents, several themes emerge, including mental health burdens, censorship and difficulties in maintaining relationships in the absence of physical proximity.

4.3.1. Mental health burdens

The lockdown period, characterized by isolation and uncertainty and coinciding with major political events has exposed participants to much emotional distress. Participants cited the overwhelming amount of traumatic content relating to the Black Lives Matter movement as the source of their anxiety and heightened stress. The overwhelming nature of the global situation, coupled with the desire to make a positive impact, lead to feelings of powerlessness.

> “I just feel really anxious about everything and hopeless. (…) Because everything you see and you feel like ‘I want to fix it somehow’, which I can’t.”
>
> (Marvin, 2022)

Joana expressed the limitation of being “just one person”, unable to bear the weight of continuous exposure to shared traumas and violent images. At the same time, she and Marvin both recognized the privilege they have to just turn off social media and take a break from acknowledge social dilemmas, which sheds light on the challenge of finding a balance between staying informed and avoiding the adverse emotional impact of distressing images and information.

Furthermore, many participants have self-diagnosed themselves with an “online addiction” where they are uncontented with the amount of time they spent on their phone, which they blamed being isolated during the lockdown. High amount of screentime is said to

be the cause of negative feelings. Marvin expressed regrets over “many hours” wasted on Instagram; Kim admitted to feeling “horrible” and “depressed” about their heavy Instagram usage; while Tessa supposed that she might be “probably actually addicted”.

> “Sometimes I would be scrolling through Instagram and I would just feel anxious. (…) And I can’t even really place it or verbalize it, but I feel it sometimes. (…) [S]uddenly Instagram doesn’t feel good anymore. It feels weird. And I feel bad”
>
> (Tessa, 2022)

This further underscores the need for elaborated discussions around the mental health implications of online platforms, especially during periods of lockdown and socio-political disruptions.

4.3.2. Censorship

Censorship and shadow-banning (Instagram’s alleged censorship of a piece of content by hiding it from the algorithm and showing it to fewer other users) of queer content on Instagram represent another downside discussed by the respondents. Joana shared that it was impossible to run paid advertisements on Instagram for the Slut Walk, as the title contains the word “slut” and the posters often contained some sort of nudity. She pointed out Instagram’s hypocrisy at the same time, frustrated how the platform would easily allow Kim Kardashian, whose content notoriously involves nudity and fatphobic ideas, to post to 350 millions of impressionable followers.

Equally annoyed by these censorships, Kim gave insights into some of the ways they have worked around them to get their content out there on Instagram. They mentioned changing their gender from female to male in their personal information settings saw a significant increase in engagement in their content, suggesting that Instagram biased in its content policy against those identifying as female. Changing the way words are spelled, such as cleverly switching out letters for symbols or numbers or changing the spelling in the way that the word will still be pronounced the same way is another method Kim has tried and succeeded with. For example, the word “sex” can be changed to “s3x”, “s€x” or “seggs”. The problem with this method is that one would have to constantly have to come up with new spellings because Instagram would catch up with the work-around.

> “They shadow-ban me most of all, and I can just easily see it because usually my Stories watchers are like 130 or something, and then it will drop down to 30-40 and that’s not possible because this is consistent, everyday it’s the same number of

> people watching. (…) I have another Instagram page for a protest that I did in February. Both of them, my personal and that page, have been flagged by Instagram for ‘suspicious activity". But I've never had that before until I had the ‘sex work’ account, specifically after the protest. Now I'm constantly ‘under revision’.”
>
> (Kim, 2022)

The act of having to constantly find ways to navigate around censorship reflects the barriers faced by the queer community in sharing their authentic narrative. This limitation hampers the free expression of queer voices and experiences, contributing to the broader discourse on how social media platforms are not exempted from the imposition of real-world heteronormative structures.

4.3.3. Difficulties in maintaining online relationships

Responses show that Instagram can both connect and disconnect people. Respondents shared that they faced challenges maintaining relationships online during the pandemic. Since interpersonal interactions mostly happened online on social media platforms, users can be fatigued by messages and reactions. Tessa felt that because everybody is assumed to be online all the time during COVID, she felt like she was expected to be available 24/7. The pressure to respond in a timely manner to numerous interactions can therefore contribute to burnout and a sense of being stretched thin.

The lack of in-person gatherings and the feeling of connection that comes with them also contributed to disconnection online. Kim described the shift from a vibrant, community-oriented queer scene in Rotterdam to a more isolated, online existence. Joana also noticed the absence of physical proximity, especially now that she could go back to “normal life” and being together with others in her queer community in person.

> “I feel like personally, I thrive on other people's energy, I get off on the thought of them seeing me like, and since the pandemic started there was no one to show off to I also felt like there was no reason to be super sexual. (…) I tried in the beginning to stay in touch online and everything, but it wasn't really my thing. (…) I like the group setting and really like to have that community setting. I really love that about Rotterdam queer scene, as well the feeling of community. And when you're like, one on one, I don't feel like you're getting the same feeling of connection.”
>
> (Kim, 2022)

> “Definitely not being together within the physical proximities might have not been as painful as I thought it would be. But now I see the trauma it did leave.”
>
> (Joana, 2022)

This highlights the importance of energy exchange that cannot entirely be replicated online. At the same time, it points to the yearn for a sense of community that online one-on-one interactions lack. It also suggests that attempts to be social online can be draining for some, requiring a strong attention span with little rewards in the case of Kim, and therefore not for everyone to venture. Like Kim, Monika also tried to recreate online ballroom runways, and also took a break after a while as it did not offer the depth and richness nor vibrancy of normal runways.

This section is best closed off by sharing an extract from one of Lisa’s poems that she wrote during the lockdown. Lisa shared that she wrote this poem about missing the open mic queer poetry nights that she would go to often. This extract perfectly encapsulates the trauma sharing on social media that at times can be relieving as someone is there listening, but at times adding even more to feelings of loneliness and isolation as one is seemingly surrounded by only strangers.

> “My brother is on Facebook, talking for many to see but all alone.
> There are secrets he can only tell strangers.
> There are sacred texts that translate into psychotic posts.
> There are cry for help on all of our timeline that can only be responded by a like, a DM or a scroll past.
> There are secrets that we can only tell strangers.
> There are strangers who sit silently and listen.
> There's us there's me writing a alone on this phone
> There is him posting about hallucinations and wondering if he is God.
> There are scary secret secrets told to strangers making them wonder.
> There are secrets that become evidences.
> There are signs that we all saw.
> There are secrets we can only tell strangers
> and there is so much pain we can never take away.
>
> (“Secrets I can only tell strangers”, 2020)

Chapter 5 | Conclusion

Through six enlightening, wonderfully animated and, at the same time, very earnest conversations with six Rotterdam queers about their use of Instagram to engage with queer related issues during the pandemic, a whole spectrum of experiences is revealed, from empowering affordances to distressing drawbacks. It is evident that Instagram has, especially during times of COVID-19, become far more than a space for visual storytelling. It is a canvas upon which queer individuals paint their narratives of resistance and build their own reality where they can authentically be themselves, connect with others, learn from others and organize with others in their community.

The six Instagram affordances revealed in this research demonstrate the ability of the users to assert their own agency over the platform in a way that is beneficial to them, and at the same time the flexible dynamic of the platform itself which allow it to adapt to the users' needs. Digital visibility emerges as a tool of resistance as queer individual harnessed Instagram's visual nature to assert their identities unapologetically, defy social norms and promote queer visibility to challenge censorship. Features such as the block button and elaborated privacy settings were leveraged to curate safe spaces online where safe individuals are allowed in the circle and anyone that poses danger is kept out. Such spaces are shown to offer a sense of belonging and acceptance crucial for the queer mental well-being. Instagram also enabled individuals to transcend geographical boundaries and forge connections with like-minded individuals all across the globe. This was particularly appreciated by the queer individuals in this study due to the barriers that come with finding queer individuals in real life, compounded with the physical isolation caused by the COVID-19 lockdown. The boundless community that they found online through strategic use of Instagram's mutual-friend signifier in combination with expressive tools they could use to share queer experiences with one another fostered a sense of security, belonging and acceptance, which was especially crucial during times of social unrest and uncertainty. Queer learning and information exchange also flourished. The transformative power of accessible queer knowledge can be attributed to the presence of marginalized and alternative voices on Instagram who are otherwise censored in mainstream media. Additionally, Instagram evolved into a hub for queer activism, where participants can organize and mobilize on a large scale, share resources and raise awareness on topical issues. Importantly, the normalization of online spaces during COVID also drew attention to

online-based communities that are usually excluded from political participation, for example the disabled community. Last but not least, the meme-ification of queerness made a breakout as a unique and influential form of expression among queer individuals. Through humor, relatability and trendiness, it not only united people who saw themselves in the memes, but also made serious political issues accessible to a broader audience.

However, alongside these affordances, the study saw notable drawbacks to Instagram use. Participants reported mental health burdens associated with exposure to traumatic content and the overwhelming nature of social media during the pandemic. The emotional toll of continuous, at times excessive online engagement also raised concerns about the impact on the mental well-being of queer individuals. Moreover, queer content censorship on Instagram much resembles that of the real world, forcing queer individuals to conform or find workarounds to be able to use the platform. This posed challenges to the free expression of queer voices. Additionally, difficulties in maintaining meaningful online relationships were highlighted, underscoring the limitations of virtual interactions and its inability to provide the same fulfillment as in-person interactions.

The findings invite us to look into the role of technology in making visible marginalized narratives, fostering diversity, inclusivity and empowering marginalized communities. As we navigate the ever-evolving digital landscape, this research hopes it can encourage future researchers to continue studying the transformative power of online spaces to serve as a catalyst for social change, knowledge dissemination and borderless global solidarity, thus contributing to the broader discourse on social development. At the same time, it serves as a cautionary note of the various cons of using Instagram as a queer person. One clear takeaway from this research, I argue, is that social media cannot be simplistically judged as either inherently detrimental or unequivocally beneficial. While the virtual world cannot completely replace that of the real one, it is best seen as a nuanced extension where alternate narratives can flourish. The constructionist approach, combined with principles of intersectionality, perfectly highlights the human agency in the use Instagram as a powerful world-building tool for queer users. As we navigate this intricate interplay between human agency and platform capacity and uncover the affordances, it is detrimental to embrace nuances and change so that we can keep moving forward in the (digital) march to true queer and intersectional liberation.

That being said, there is more that this research wishes it has accomplished but could not due to lack of resources, which it would like to invite future research to take a look at. First of all, while the respondents are diverse and all coming from different backgrounds, the convenient sampling method translated to homogeneity in their age group, which ranged from 23-27. This leaves out queer people from different age groups who might have very different experiences with using social media platforms like Instagram due to the fact that the most used social media platform differs across age groups (Coosto, 2021). Furthermore, as mentioned in the theoretical framework, popular social media platforms also differ per region, country or city. It would therefore be interesting to conduct a cross-platform investigation in how the same demography use different platforms to engage in queer issues; or a cross-border one on how different people based in different geographical locations use social media for this same purpose. The research also acknowledges that access to social media can often be taken for granted and is a privilege that not many have, which is crucial to keep in mind while studying marginalized communities. It could thus be productive to look at alternative ways queer individuals engage with queer issues outside of social media when queer spaces are limited in real life. In addition, it is worth examining desirability politics and factoring in Western-centric, heteronormative beauty standards when it comes to whose visibility is welcomed online and whose is not. As suggested by Joana, even when a space is considered sexually liberated, the question of who has the freedom to enjoy it still stands.

> "The other bodies, fat bodies, disabled bodies, Black, brown bodies, bodies of color are still seen as less attractive. Everybody likes to put a heart on a fat girl's post on Instagram but who is f*cking the fat girl"
>
> (Joana, 2022)

Last but not least, this research noticed a fascinating correlation between arts and queerness. Many respondents are artists, from musician to shoe designer, to ballroom dancer, to art curator; and many used arts, either on or offline as an outlet to express their queerness. The research is thus curious about the role arts play in enriching the queer identity and queer culture and look forward to exploring this relationship further.

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