



## Seeking space and place:

*Experiences of online engagement among queer women in Cape Town, South Africa.*

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*Keywords: Digital anthropology, LGBTQ, social media, gender, South Africa*

### 1 Introduction

What is the role of virtual platforms in creating community among queer-identifying women in Cape Town?

The goal of this research question is to understand the significance of virtual platforms in the lives of queer<sup>1</sup> women in Cape Town. It seeks to understand the motivations for engaging online, the different platforms that are used, and the degree to which these platforms facilitate meeting in physical space. The motivation behind this research comes from personal experience. As a queer woman, in every city that I have lived in or travelled through since coming out seven years ago, I have felt there is more visibility and designated physical space for queer men. Different virtual platforms have allowed me to connect in physical space, and prior to this research, I had spoken with many other queer women who share this experience. I focused specifically on community rather than romantic relationships, as I was interested in how communities are sought and curated online. I began with a hypothesis that virtual platforms would primarily be used to facilitate meeting in physical space; this notion was both affirmed and challenged during my research and analysis. I gained a nuanced understanding of the roles that online spaces play in queer women's lives, and that seeking online community does not always result in physical encounters.

### 2 Background

My research is situated within the realm of queer anthropology on a broader scale, and more particularly within queer studies in the South African context. In his review of anthropological research on sexuality published in the last few decades, Boellstorff argues that sexuality "deserves a less marginal place than it occupies today with regard to

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<sup>1</sup> "An inclusive term that refers not only to lesbian and gay persons, but also to any person who feels marginalized because of their sexual practices, or who resists the heteronormative sex/gender/sexual identity system" (Lee et al. 2013: 6).

topics of anthropological interest” (2007: 18). He found the focus of existing work dominated by research on men, particularly those who identify as gay (Ibid: 20). He suggests that, “women face barriers in accessing public and private space away from male control, making research on female nonnormative sexualities difficult” (Ibid: 21). Boellstroff’s theory provides grounds for turning to online realms for research on queer women.

McLean and Mugo discuss the importance of digital spaces for queer women in Africa and how they play a key role in creating space to express experiences, particularly when geographic spaces do not always facilitate the meeting of queer women. They state that, “marginalised communities, such as queer communities, find the internet a safer space for communication and identity formation. This is especially acute within the African context where many find offline spaces sparse, hostile and in some cases dangerous” (McLean and Mugo 2015: 97). The internet can create a safe space for queer women and allows for knowledge production and sharing to come from within the queer community (McLean and Mugo 2015).

In searching for literature on queer sexuality and online community in South Africa, I found most research focused on queer men (see Milani 2013, Livermon 2012, Tucker 2009). Studies on queer women and online communities were mostly limited to the North American context (see Istar Lev et al. 2005, Burke 2000, Wasserlein and Sween 2005). Despite the paucity of research published on queer women and online spaces in South Africa, literature on queer men provides relevant context on queer identities in post-apartheid South Africa. In 1996, South Africa became the first country in the world to provide protection to its LGBT citizens in a constitution (Livermon 2012: 301). However, Tucker argues that these legal rights do not necessary translate into improvements in lives of queer South Africans. Livermon asserts that race has a strong influence upon being queer in South Africa. He states,

adding a racial analysis to a queer analysis reveals how the white queer body is emblematic of human rights protections used to position South Africa as a progressive queer-friendly tourist destination (for white queer tourists), while the black queer body remains the threat to African culture and tradition. (Livermon 2012: 302)

### 3 Methodology

Escobar (1994) asserts that it is vital to question how the “culture of technology” has changed the human condition on both a local and a global scale. Wilson and Peterson believe that anthropology is well-suited for the study of online communication in a sociocultural context. They state, “anthropological methodologies enable the investigation of cross-cultural, multileveled, and multi-sited phenomena.” (2002: 450). Methods of online participant observation and in-person interviews allowed me to make comparisons between an online queer community and the individual understandings of the role of the online for navigating queer identities. An anthropology of online communication calls for deconstructing the binaries of offline and

online, real and virtual, and the individual and the collective (Wilson and Peterson 2002: 456). In my interviews, I explored how participants developed queer community in both physical and virtual realms, and sought to gain understanding of the relationship between the two. I employed a grounded theory approach (see Willig 2007) to develop a contextualized theory about online queer spaces for women in Cape Town.

#### 4 Positionality

My sexual orientation and gender identity impacted my research process and interpretation of my findings. I identify as a bisexual, cis-gender<sup>2</sup> woman. I have lived in Cape Town off and on since 2012, and while I know the city very well, I am a foreigner. In this sense, I am both an insider and an outsider of my community. While my experiences as a queer woman were important for conducting this research with an informed perspective, it is vital to interrogate how my identity shaped this research. Despite being queer, I am a white woman. In South Africa, my race most often places me in a position of privilege, which has a significant impact on my experiences and perceptions of Cape Town. My identity as a cis-gender woman is important to acknowledge. In formulating my research question, I did not consider how focusing on “queer women” may exclude individuals who are born female, but do not identify as women. This oversight was highlighted when I met with one of my research participants, Dani, who is gender-queer<sup>3</sup>. When I first met Dani for an interview, I didn’t realize they identified as gender-queer. I reflected on how my gender identity impacts my research.

This interview really made me reflect on my own bias as a cis-gender woman, who has never really had to interrogate my gender identity. While I have experience with questioning and exploring my sexual orientation and the terms I use to describe it, I don’t have this experience with gender identity. (Fieldnotes, 2/26/2018).

#### 5 Data collection methods and initial observations

I searched for online communities for queer women on Facebook and found many options of groups. I chose a group called “Cape Town Lesbians” (will be referred to as CTL) due to a high number of members (7,468 members at my time of joining) and active posting. In the group description, there was an emphasis on community building through in-person events, and despite the word “lesbian” being part of the title, the group is a space for any woman who identified as “queer”.

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<sup>2</sup> “A person whose sense of gender and personal identity corresponds to the sex assigned at their birth” (Thorpe 2018: 303).

<sup>3</sup> “Indicating or relating to a person who does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions, but identifies with neither, both, or a combination of genders” (Thorpe 2018: 304).



Figure 1: Defining the community: inclusivity and aims.

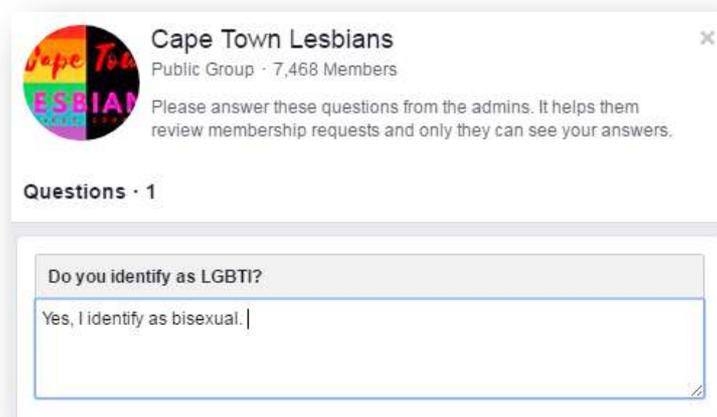


Figure 2: Becoming a member of the CTL community.

After joining the group, I could comment and react to content, but not post (restricted to the 12 admins). My participant observation period was one month (February 14<sup>th</sup> to March 14<sup>th</sup>) and I tracked every post made during this period<sup>4</sup>. A total of 36 posts were made in the group, by six different administrators. I categorized the posts into three categories: local events for the queer community (23 posts), celebrating or debating identity (gender identity /sexual orientation) (7 posts), and group sharing/community building (6 posts). Cape Town Pride took place during my participant observation period (February 23<sup>rd</sup> to March 4<sup>th</sup>), and this likely increased the number of events posted. While events were most frequent, posts that focused on community building/sharing and celebrating queer identity had the most comments and likes.

<sup>4</sup> I tracked the nature of the post (e.g. event, news, group sharing), a brief description, who posted, any comments, and high numbers of likes/shares.



Figure 3: Pride event, hosted at a lesbian bar owned by one of the CTL group admins.



Figure 4: Most popular post during my participant observation: highest number of likes (97) and shares (9).

Prior to beginning participant observation on CTL, I attended an event which came up as “suggested for you” on my Facebook profile, based on my membership in the CTL group. I consider it to be preliminary research, and it highlighted the importance of intersectionality within queer communities. Black Womxn’s Voices

was described as an event for queer womxn<sup>5</sup> and women of color, and the Facebook event and a physical sign at the event made this focus very clear.

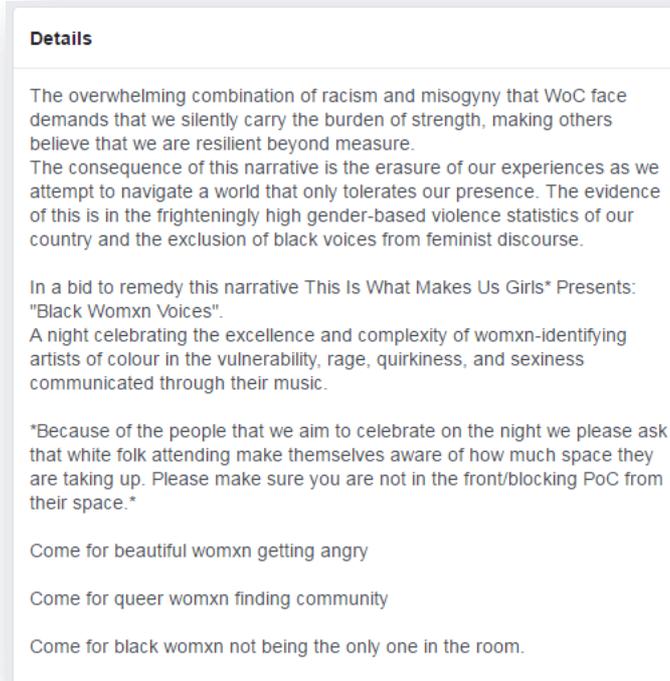


Figure 5: Black Womxn Voices Facebook event description.

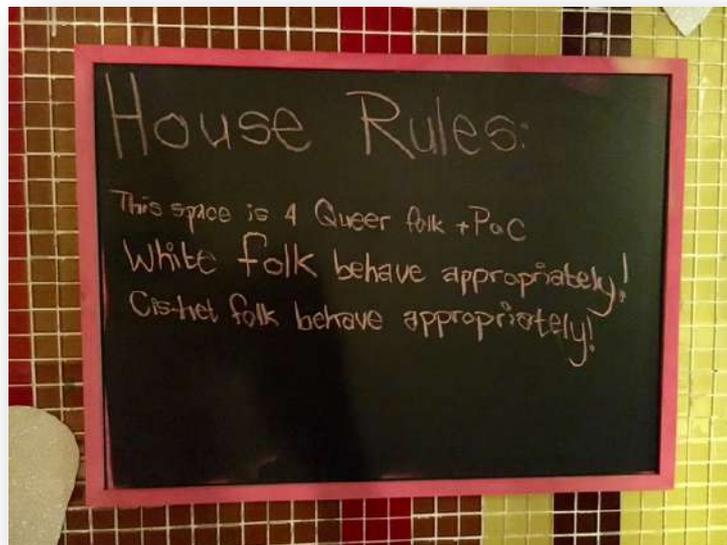


Figure 6: House Rules of the Black Womxn Voices event on the wall in the entrance of event.

<sup>5</sup> A spelling of "women" that is more inclusive and highlights the prejudice, discrimination, and institutional barriers that womxn have faced. Also shows that womxn are not an extension of men. (Urban dictionary).

The event description begins to curate the space and dynamics of the event by creating certain guidelines for attendees, which were clear when entering the event. The rules were made clear in the online event, and reinstated in the physical space as a reminder. They led me to reflect on my race and gender identity in this space.

This (house rules) is the first thing you see when you walk into the space, a reminder of the focus of the space. This is part of defining the community. I don't think that it's telling white/cis-gendered/heterosexual people that they can't enter, but they need to be aware of their identities in the space, as those identities often go unchallenged/uninvestigated. I relate to this as a bisexual person, wanting to create a safe space for self-expression and celebrating certain identities. (Field notes, 2/6/2018)

I conducted five semi-structured interviews with queer individuals in Cape Town, four of which were with individuals ages 25-35, the "young adult" group. I conducted one "key informant" interview with an older woman who manages the CTL group, Simone. I contacted Simone because she made the highest number of posts during my participant observation period (24 out of 36 posts) and learned that she manages the group. I contacted one participant, Dani off the CTL group. I connected with the other three participants through friends in Cape Town. I wanted participants who were part of CTL, to gain further understanding of the group, as well as participants who were not part of this group, so I could gain knowledge around the use of other online spaces.

Some participants expressed uncertainty around whether they were "queer enough" or "active enough" in online communities to participate in my research. Ellie initially felt she wasn't "queer enough", but realized that, "queer identity doesn't have to be first and foremost for you to be queer." I used the same interview guide<sup>6</sup> for all four "young adult" participants (see Appendix A) and an adapted guide for my "key informant" interview (see Appendix B). All interviews, which ranged from 30 to 60 minutes, were audio-recorded and transcribed by hand. I used a codebook I developed based on emerging themes to code and analyze the transcripts. I have changed all participant names to pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes. The four participant interviews were conducted in-person, and the key informant interview was conducted over Skype.

Prior to beginning the interview, I asked participants the following demographic information (described in their own words).

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<sup>6</sup> I made it clear to participants that they were welcome to skip any questions that they felt created discomfort or were irrelevant to their experiences.

Name	Roxy	Dani	Nora	Ellie	Simone
Pronouns	She/her	They/them	She/her	She/her	She/her
Age	32	25	34	34	49
Nationality	Nigerian/English	American	South African	American	South African
Race	Mixed, black, or brown (depending on the context)	Mixed race	White	White	White
Sexual orientation	Fluid	Pansexual & Polyamorous	Bisexual (but prefers not to use labels)	Fluid	Bisexual
Gender identity	Cisgender /Femme	Gender-queer	Cisgender/ "Tomboy"	Cisgender /Femme	Cisgender /Femme
Relationship status	In a monogamous relationship with a man	Two partners: one amab <sup>7</sup> gender-queer partner, one afab <sup>8</sup> gender-queer partner	Single	Single	Married to a woman

Table 1: Participant Information

## 8 Key themes

Participants (4/5) expressed how virtual spaces played an important role in finding others who shared similar experiences or preferences, and helped to create the sense that “I’m not the only one”. However, most participants described how online spaces were more important for aspects of identity, not just being queer. The online served as a space for finding community and shared experiences around marginal identities.

For Roxy, who is “quite into BDSM<sup>7</sup>”, a virtual platform called FetLife<sup>8</sup> facilitated the exploration of desires. She feels it is more difficult to find people who are openly into BDSM than people who are openly queer due to a lack of understanding and assumptions made about BDSM. She has felt more discrimination around being into BDSM than being sexually fluid. FetLife is a space where Roxy has explored her BDSM interests without discrimination or judgement. She said (of FetLife), “I don’t want to parallel it to queer spaces, because it’s a totally different thing, but in terms of the use of an online space, it’s got a lot of similar benefits- exploring at your own pace before you venture out.” Although Roxy never physically met up with anyone from FetLife, it served the role of finding a BDSM community, which helped to “normalize” her desires. She felt, “that’s quite nice, to see what you think is a bit abnormal, is normal. Which I would say is the same for the queer community.”

Dani felt that the online has played an important role in building community with other gender-queer individuals and with other people who do sex work. As someone who identifies as gender-queer, they feel that many queer communities and events are focused on cis-gender individuals. Due to a lack of attention on gender-queer/trans identities in many queer communities, they turned to online spaces that have a

<sup>7</sup> Acronym for bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism.

<sup>8</sup> Online platform/social network for people interested in BDSM, fetishism, and kink.

specific focus on gender identity. For example, they are an admin on a group called “Non-binary<sup>9</sup> nudes”, a space where gender-queer people can celebrate their bodies. They also organize a queer party called “Stripperoke”, run by queer women and sex workers. They promote the party on many online queer platforms, and said that most people find out about the party online. Dani feels it is important to have these events at designated times and spaces; if you kept things open all the time, no one would come. They said, “to keep somewhere open, you have to have money. There is more of a culture of going out and cruising in gay men’s communities. They’ve got money to blow. Lesbian bars I know are usually pretty dead, or filled with gay guys.” The online facilitates the meeting in physical space at a certain time and place. It also creates a virtual space where individuals can celebrate “non-normative” bodies and identities.

Nora has used online spaces for seeking information and stories of polyamorous folks and cases of arranged marriage. She was considering entering into a polyamorous relationship with a very close bisexual male friend, Mike, as they are interested in having children together. When Mike proposed trying a monogamous relationship, she started researching situations of arranged marriage and whether it is possible to cultivate lust within a friendship. She said,

I’m not looking for a blueprint to follow, I’m just looking at different situations. The thing with Mike is kind of like an arranged marriage- but we are doing the arranging. I’ve looked at different situations of arranged marriage, but I haven’t been able to find much about cultivating lust.

Nora felt nervous to share potential plans of a relationship with Mike among friends and family, as it is not an average relationship trajectory. Prior to telling her parents, she said, “I felt as nervous as when I came out [as queer].” Making alternative choices around romantic relationships created a need to seek online community and information.

Simone was the only participant who described online community to be centered around her sexual orientation. A virtual queer community was key when she began dating her current wife, as she was ostracized by many friends. CTL created reassurance that there is a large and thriving community of queer women in Cape Town. She also turned to blogging to share her experiences of entering into a same-sex relationship just before her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. Simone receives many direct messages from members of CTL who ask about how to meet other queer women. She said, “the internet is a wonderful place to start the ball rolling, but you do need to move into reality to actually make that a deeper connection. Meeting people in person is very important.” The group is focused on events, and posting is restricted to the 12 group admins. Admins curate the content of the group and ensure that it is not a place for seeking romance, as they aim to have a “community feel”. Simone posted in the group on my behalf, asking members to comment on their sentiments around the role of online community for queer women. Responses focused on the importance of the online for

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<sup>9</sup> Another term of gender-queer, for those who identify beyond the gender binary.

finding out about events and queer friendly spaces. One member, who owns a café in Cape Town, commented back and forth with a few other members about how the café is a “lesbian-friendly” venue. She encouraged members to check out the café’s facebook page for events she hosts, such as lesbian speed dating.

## 9 The importance of intersectionality<sup>10</sup> and contextualizing queer identity

Queer identity must always be contextualized within a set of individual identities. Race emerged as one of the most important intersections for queer identity and community. Ellie felt her race (white) has shielded her from discrimination and harassment around gender and sexual orientation. She compares her experience to her best friend, a black lesbian woman, who receives much more harassment when walking around their neighbourhood. She said, “I think that in some ways, people see the color of my skin, and it’s like I’m untouchable.” Dani, who is mixed race, but “passes as white”, echoed a similar sentiment, as she said, “there’s this idea that you don’t fuck with white women, because someone is going to come for you, the police are on their side.” Roxy, who is mixed race, but is usually read as “black or brown, depending on the context”, feels that race is a very important aspect of one’s experience as a queer person. Her friends who experiment with non-normative sexual practices (such as BDSM and polyamory) tend to be mixed race or white. She said, “My friends who are black and queer tend to be more conservative in their sexuality.”

Race plays an important role for physical and virtual community. When Ellie and her best friend began going to queer events in Cape Town, these were mostly “white spaces”. She said, “we realized that just because we’re all queer didn’t mean that racism wasn’t going to be an issue.” Dani spoke of how the CTL group has a reputation of being a “very white space”. Simone also spoke about how racial tensions and debates have emerged both online and during events in the CTL group. The Black Womxn Voices event is a clear example of how being queer is not a unifying identity; race and gender identity were a key focus of this event, and organizers requested white and cisgender folks be aware of these identities in the space. The online Facebook event emphasized the importance of intersectionality at this event, and there were reminders present in the physical space.

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<sup>10</sup> “The impact of the intersections of different elements of a person’s identity (e.g. race, class, gender, sexual orientation, etc.)” (Thorpe 2018: 304).



Figure 7: A DJ playing at the Black Womxn Voices event.

## 8 Concluding Thoughts

Two key themes of this research are the role of the online in creating a space for marginalized identities, and importance of intersectionality within queer communities. It is interesting to note how only one participant engaged online specifically around sexual orientation. For the other participants, identities and interests beyond sexual orientation created a greater drive to seek community and information in online spaces. Identifying outside of normative sexual desires, gender identity, forms of labor, or romantic relationships held greater stigma than identifying as queer in a heteronormative society. Participants spoke of being both passive and active users of virtual realms. Sometimes, online spaces served the role of simply identifying that “I’m not the only one”, and confirmed that others relate to similar desires and experiences. Other times, these spaces were used in a more active sense: promoting events, posting photos, writing blogs, and meeting in physical space for events. In both senses, the online creates a space for individuals to relate, express desires, and celebrate aspects of their identities which lie outside of social norms. Affirming this role of digital space, McLean and Mugo state, “there is a need to connect with those who you feel are ‘just like you’, be it through passive or active engagement with one another” (2015: 99).

In a Post-Apartheid context, it is key to focus on how histories of oppression play into present-day queer experiences. Perhaps the most salient finding of my research is that there is no singular notion of a queer women’s community in Cape Town. Queer identity must always be contextualized within a set of other identities, particularly race and gender identity. Future research on queer women and online community in Cape Town could focus specifically on intersections of race and/or gender identity, and the impacts of interlocking systems of oppression on queer lives.



Figure 8: The author exploring queer spaces in Cape Town.

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## Appendix A: Interview guide (Young Adult)

Tell me about when you first moved to Cape Town, and how long have you lived here?

To what degree has queer community building been a focus during your time in Cape Town?

To what degree, if any, has this queer community building been focused on gender identity?

Have these communities been focused on any other aspects of identity (e.g. race, age), apart from sexual orientation and gender identity?

Can you tell me about any physical spaces/environments that have facilitated the building of queer community in Cape Town?

Are there any organizations you've been a part of that have facilitated the building of queer community in Cape Town?

Can you share any other ways that you have met other queer people and formed friendships or relationships?

*Sensitive question/trigger warning:* Do you feel that you have experienced discrimination or stigma based on your sexual orientation and/or gender identity?

If yes: How have these experiences impacted your feelings of safety or comfort as a queer person? In public spaces?

How often (if ever) have you used virtual platforms (Facebook, Meetups, Blogs, Websites) to seek out queer community?

How often (if ever) have you used virtual platforms (Tinder, Her, OkCupid, etc.) for dating?

*If used virtual platforms:* Can you share more about the role these platforms have played in meeting other queer individuals, building community, facilitating connection?

How would you describe yourself as a user of these platforms, or member of an online community? E.g. active user (posting often, actively commenting/engaging with material), passive user (reading what is posted, but not often posting or commenting)

*If not a user of virtual platforms:* Can you tell me about anything about why you haven't used these platforms?

Can you think of a time or situation in which you would be more likely to use virtual platforms for seeking out queer community/dating?

Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences as a queer person in Cape Town?

## Appendix B: Interview Guide (Key Informant)

Tell me about when you first moved to Cape Town, and how long have you lived here?

To what degree has queer community building been a focus during your time in Cape Town?

When did you become a member (and admin) of Cape Town Lesbians? How did you become involved with this group?

I've noticed that you are one of the most active members of the group. Tell me about how you choose what to post in the group.

Can you tell me about the decision to only allow admins to make posts on the group? Has this always been the case?

How many of the women in the group have you met/do you know in person? Do you have relationships with the other admins?

In your opinion, why is it important to have an online space for queer women?

To what degree (if any) has this group affected your sense of community among queer women in Cape Town?

This title of the group is Cape Town Lesbians, but in the description, the group says it is, "a space focused on queer women who love queer women." Can you tell me about the decision to use the term "lesbian" in the title, rather than "queer"?

Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences as a queer woman in Cape Town?

Would you be willing to make a post (on my behalf) asking group members their thoughts about the importance of an online space for queer women, and why they are a part of this group?