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Patterson, Jeffrey; Leurs, Koen

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Article

## ‘We Live Here, and We Are Queer!’ Young Adult Gay Connected Migrants’ Transnational Ties and Integration in the Netherlands

Jeffrey Patterson \* and Koen Leurs

Graduate Gender Programme, Department of Media and Culture Studies, Utrecht University, Utrecht 3512 EV, The Netherlands; E-Mails: jeffpatterson04@icloud.com (J.P.), k.h.a.leurs@uu.nl (K.L.)

\* Corresponding author

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### Abstract

Upon arrival to Europe, young adult gay migrants are found grappling with sexual norms, language demands, cultural expectations, values and beliefs that may differ from their country of origin. Parallel processes of coming-out, coming-of-age and migration are increasingly digitally mediated. Young adult gay migrants are “connected migrants”, using smartphones and social media to maintain bonding ties with contacts in their home country while establishing new bridging relationships with peers in their country of arrival (Diminescu, 2008). Drawing on the feminist perspective of intersectionality, socio-cultural categories like age, race, nationality, migration status, and gender and sexuality have an impact upon identification and subordination, thus we contend it is problematic to homogenize these experiences to all young adult gay migrants. The realities of settlement and integration starkly differ between those living on the margins of Europe—forced migrants including non-normative racialized young gay men—and voluntary migrants—such as elite expatriates including wealthy, white and Western young gay men. Drawing on 11 in-depth interviews conducted in Amsterdam, the Netherlands with young adult gay forced and voluntary migrants, this article aims to understand how sexual identification in tandem with bonding and bridging social capital diverge and converge between the two groups all while considering the interplay between the online and offline entanglements of their worlds.

### Keywords

bonding social capital; bridging social capital; connected migrants; digital diaspora; digital migration studies; forced migrants; gay; inter-ethnic social contact; sexuality; voluntary migrants

### Issue

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### 1. A ‘Warm’ Welcome into Europe? The Digitally Mediated Experiences of Young Adult Gay Migrants

In this article, we seek to answer how everyday online digital practices and offline experiences of young gay forcibly displaced migrants and expatriates (ages 15–25 years) in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, have impact upon their bonding and bridging social capital. We focus, in particular, on how social media affordances potentially impact intersectional identity formation and emotion management. The on- and offline experiences of young gay connected migrants are not homogeneous. Gay is the ad-

jective to describe men who endure emotional, physical, and/or romantic attractions to other men hereafter. The critical black feminist toolbox of intersectionality seeks to make visible how young gay connected migrants are differentially hierarchically positioned and differentially position themselves (Crenshaw, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 2006). The forced and voluntary migrants involved in this research are similar in many ways (i.e., age, gender, sexual orientation, and city of migration) and negotiate cultural and social contexts (McPhail & Fisher, 2015), while they differ most noticeably on the grounds of migration and the axes of migration status, class, and often religion.

The immigration processes of forced and voluntary migrants into Europe do not embody the European Union's motto 'United in diversity', signifying the continent's pride of welcoming and embracing racial and sexual orientation differences. Colpani and Habel (2014) argue this slogan functions as a "normative device" by paradoxically targeting "certain Europeans", as it produces "others from Europe as well as others within Europe" (pp. 36–37). Elite voluntary migrants travel in and out of Europe with ease in contrast to forced migrants (i.e., those fleeing from armed conflict including civil war; and persecution on the grounds of social group or sexuality) who are often met with racism and discrimination, and are situated as geopolitical dangers upon arriving in Europe (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017). Furthermore, settlement and integration experiences of gay forced migrants—particularly those hailing from Muslim majority countries—starkly differ from gay voluntary migrants from the white, post-secular Global North (Bracke, 2012; Jivraj & de Jong, 2011). There are also points of convergence: both migrant groups are increasingly "connected migrants" (Diminescu, 2008), who use information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as the smartphone and social media to exchange text, audio and video messages to maintain "bonding" connections with pre-existing social networks and communities (i.e., family, friends, etc.) across geographical boundaries in their homeland, while establishing "bridging" relationships with members of the host country (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018). Most pertinent here is both groups have to find their way through negotiating cultural and social contexts throughout their entire settlement and integration process, but while the forced migrants are often met with racism, discrimination, and class hierarchies in tandem both on- and offline (Alencar, 2018), expatriates can generally establish and grow their social capital with fewer burdens.

From the four domains important to successful refugee integration and settlement recognized in the literature: (1) conditions of employment, housing, education and health; (2) citizenship and rights; (3) processes of social connection within and between groups; and (4) structural barriers to connection (Ager & Strang, 2008), we focus here on the third and fourth domains, while also emphasizing the urgency of addressing integration and settlement of voluntary migrants such as expatriates, which are often taken for granted. As stated by boyd (2014), if individuals are surrounded by people who have social capital offline in the form of social networks, it is most likely to translate online. Forcibly displaced migrants often struggle to establish new connections having to negotiate with race and class hierarchies (Alencar, 2018), whereas expatriates are typically found to form inter-ethnic social contacts at an accelerated rate (McPhail & Fisher, 2015). We seek to contribute to emerging discussions in digital migration studies that examine the intersections of age, race and class with sexuality (Dhoest, 2018; Szulc, in press).

Research shows trajectories of sexual orientation identity development differ among gay people as a result of maturation, psycho-social development and interacting with changing social circles (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006). The process of sexual orientation identity development becomes even more challenging in the diaspora context. The life trajectory of young migrants is complex when having to juggle (sexual) identity(ies) construction and negotiate various cultural expectations in tandem. This co-occurrence not only negotiates race/ethnicity, language, culture and class, but gender and sexuality are also connected with the conception of transnational identities. For some individuals social media help elevate feelings of isolation during that particular period. Social media afford users the possibility to access and connect with a wider range of audiences surpassing national, racial and ethnic boundaries (McEwan & Sobre-Denton, 2011). Simply put, formerly unacquainted individuals can meet online and communicate typically through online groups, forums, platforms, and apps organized around common (sexual) identities and interests, including Grindr, Planet Romeo, Scruff, Blued, Line and Gaydar. These digital platforms are often publicly or semi-publicly accessible. This form of social capital is typically embedded in the local context of settlement and integration; virtually connecting with users 'here' rather than 'there' (Shield, 2018). Users have the choice of which online communities they join and with whom they connect. Online groups and communities can be resourceful places to seek and receive (and sometimes offer) cultural, emotional and social resources, and for some gay migrants, they may help lay the groundwork to receive these particular resources, potentially gaining bridging social capital.

What has been studied in excess is the role the internet and social media plays in providing gay people unique opportunities to exchange information, socialize and create communities, and explore and negotiate identities in spaces of their own (Berliner, 2018; Naezer, 2018), while the current literature neglects to bring awareness to the various role social media play in the lives of diverging groups of gay migrants (Cassidy & Yang Wang, 2018). We aim to move beyond dominant "media-centric" approaches (Smets, 2017) and therefore, this article seeks to understand how the use of ICTs and social media play a part in young adult gay migrants' everyday lives in the distinct urban setting of Amsterdam, the capital city of the Netherlands. In doing so, we seek to understand these co-occurrences through in-depth interviews inspired by a "non-digital-media-centric" approach (Smets, 2017). An ethnographic non-digital-media-centric approach allows us to move beyond digital fetishism in demanding attentiveness to wider contexts and structural power hierarchies. In our commitment to social justice research, we seek to offer a more holistic and humane perspective of young adult gay connected migrants by emphasizing situated differences, subjectivities and agency.

Before discussing the main findings, we first provide an overview of the current socio-political context. Sec-

ond, we situate our argument across the fields of critical youth, migration and internet studies. Third, we provide methodological considerations. Fourth, we present the empirical findings in three sections as follows: (1) online bonding experiences; (2) online bridging experiences; and (3) inter-ethnic social contacts in Amsterdam. Finally, we present the conclusions and highlight broader implications of this study.

## 2. Situating the Context

The Netherlands is commonly seen as a ‘promising land’ for migrants, a place of opportunity and tolerance, although this image should be met with skepticism. A substantial number of native-Dutch citizens have come to embody a “defensive localist” stance in that they are territorial of their ground and see it as their own (Keuzenkamp & Bos, 2007). The discussion of nationalism dominated the most recent 2017 national election race. Duyvendak (2011) highlights the extent to which the average native-Dutch citizen tolerates the ‘other’:

Tolerance, then, has its limits even for Dutch progressives. It is easy to be tolerant of those who are much like us....It is much harder to extend the same principle to the strangers in our midst, who find our ways as disturbing as we do theirs. (p. 90)

This homogenous conception of culture has polarized into two competing camps of conformity: (1) those of Netherlands-born citizens and those whose views are ‘progressive’ and; (2) those whose are not, which is often projected onto the Islamic cultures (Duyvendak, 2011). Central to the notion of Dutch progressiveness is not only the gay community and their rights and interests, but also the greater LGBTQ community.

The Netherlands has taken great strides over the past few decades in becoming a relatively LGBTQ-friendly society. Providing an overview of how the Dutch state historically presents itself as an inclusive and accepting nation goes beyond the scope of our argument. Some milestones include the first wave of homo-emancipation, which was achieved in 1971 when the equalization of the age of consent was passed (Jivraj & de Jong, 2011). As of 1981, the Netherlands deemed persecution on the basis of sexual orientation as reasonable grounds for seeking asylum (Bracke, 2012). In 1986, the Dutch government wrote the first “gay policy memorandum” and in 1987 the *Homomonument* was revealed in Amsterdam, a space to commemorate the LGBTQ people persecuted because of their sexual orientation (Keuzenkamp & Bos, 2007). In the 1990s, the federal government provided more protection to the LGBTQ community by criminalizing slanders against LGBTQ people and in 1994, the Equal Opportunities Act was enacted (Keuzenkamp & Bos, 2007). A second-wave of homo-emancipation is linked to the introduction of same-sex marriage and the first same-sex marriage in the world was performed in Am-

sterdam. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science created the publication *LGBT and Gender Equality Policy Plan of the Netherlands 2011–2015* (Government of the Netherlands, 2012). It should thus pose no questions why LGBTQ people who live in countries that criminalize and persecute LGBTQ people flee to the Netherlands. However, it is crucial to steer clear of the homonationalist trap of situating the Netherlands (within Western Europe) as a safe haven for all LGBTQ people while framing other cultures as homophobic (Buijs, Hekma, & Duyvendak, 2011; Jivraj & de Jong, 2011). Geert Wilders, a member of the Dutch parliament, spreads his pro-gay, anti-Muslim-immigrant framework not only in the Netherlands, but also in countries including Denmark, Sweden, Austria and Germany (Shield, 2017). This right-wing nationalist rhetoric ‘welcomes’ LGBTQ rights, but bashes mass immigration and the Muslim population as threats to their political project (Shield, 2017). It may be due in part to this pro-gay, anti-muslim-immigrant framing that shaped border policies (Shield, 2017) leaving many gay migrants, specifically from the Middle East, to face difficulties at the *Immigratie-en Naturalisatiedienst* (IND [Immigration and Naturalization Service]). During asylum procedures western ethnocentric conceptions of gay sexuality collide with non-European views; gay Muslim asylum seekers have been rejected from obtaining protective refugee status because judges ruled they were “not gay enough” (Rainey, 2017). The dominant discourse, as is also evidenced from the Netherlands rejecting 1 in 5 Syrian refugee applications as part of the EU–Turkey deal because their views are deemed irreconcilable with Dutch norms of gender and diversity (Stoffelen & Thijssen, 2018), revolves around stereotypical Orientalist understandings of the “gender oppression” of passive, vulnerable, de-historicized and victimized refugee women and LGBTQ’s at the mercy of “patriarchal, homophobic, and violent—if not terrorist—Muslim men” (Dağtaş, 2018). An intersectional reading alerts us to not only examine how sexuality differentially hierarchically positions individuals but so does race, nationality, religion, age and migration status in tandem.

## 3. Theorizing Young Adult Gay Connected Migrants

In theorizing young adult gay connected migrants, we seek to bring in dialogue critical youth, internet and migration studies. Gay people often reveal their sexuality through the process of ‘coming out of the closet’. Fox and Warber (2015) conceptualized sexual identity disclosure through four “levels of outness”: (1) “Mostly in the closet” (only a few people know); (2) “Peeking out” (a wider audience than before knows); (3) “Partially out” (certain audiences know); and (4) “Out”. Coming-out, however, is not a uniform, linear process. Although commonly considered in the light of a maturational sequential process from a first recognition of attraction during childhood towards identity commitment during young adulthood (Troiden, 1989) we also embrace the

perspective of relationality. Alongside maturation, sexual identification is co-shaped by life experiences and “social changes” (Floyd & Bakeman, 2006) and therefore strong variations, including the age of self-identification as gay, are inevitable. We focus on how the specific social changes of forced and voluntary migration are digitally mediated and differently impact the coming-out process for gay young adults. Therefore, the participants of this study could identify in any of the four levels both in the Netherlands and in their homeland.

In this study, we examine (1) the digital practices (e.g., exchanging texts, audio and video messages, online ‘friending’, and the affordances that are being used) via social media, and (2) the social and recreational activities participated in the offline realm, all in the context of settlement and integration. In the field of youth, internet and migration studies there is little known but a lot to be learnt about these particular processes especially regarding young adult gay migrants. Overlooking emerging scholarship addressing the “intersection of queer *and* migration *and* digital”, Szulc (in press) recognizes a shared concern for the complex intersectional digital identity formation of gay migrants across local and transnational geographical scales. The themes of (1) communities, (2) individuals, and (3) discrimination feature most prominently: community-oriented studies address how gay diaspora collectivities are imaginatively constructed, and may operate as counter publics; on the individual level digital practices provide insight on process of acculturation and negotiating context collapse, and research on discrimination focusses on the impact of homonationalism discourses and exclusionary ethnocentric platform designs and norms (Szulc, in press). This article seeks to contribute to the second and third theme by focussing on the distinct situated context of individual forced and voluntary migrants, negotiation of platform affordances as well as the wider context of acculturation and possible discrimination.

Social media is seen as a space to build social capital in the form of social networks (boyd, 2014; Dhoest, 2018). Affordances refer to the particular design and characteristics of a platform, which permit a certain radius of action (boyd, 2014). Social media platforms have affordances that can create, change, and challenge relationships that partly overlap with and partly differ from face-to-face communication. Online communication affords users to communicate *synchronously*. Synchronous communication, similar to face-to-face conversations, happens in real time. For example, the instant messaging app, WhatsApp, is a cross-platform messaging app that allows users to send text, audio and video messages to their contacts in real time. For migrants, the realness of being ‘there’—at distance—even though the user is ‘here’ can enhance the feeling of transnational co-presence (Madianou, 2016). WhatsApp also allows for asynchronous communication via messaging. Asynchronous media, including Facebook wall posts or Instagram comments, create space in time between the po-

tential exchange of messages. This form of communication is also used to sustain the interaction of online Facebook groups and establish a sense of user belonging with other large online communities. It enables users the time to strategically construct and manage their online presentations vis-à-vis collectively expected identity performances.

#### 4. Methodological Considerations

This study is based on the principles of grounded theory and a non-digital-media-centric approach. Grounded theory views research participants as the meaning-makers over their own lives; “to develop theories from research grounded in data rather than to test existing theory by deducing testable hypotheses from them” (van Meeteren, 2014, p. 45). Our argument draws from narrative data gathered through semi-structured face-to-face interviews. This methodological technique is particularly well-suited for explorative studies with vulnerable groups (Dhoest & Szulc, 2016). The interview topic list was divided into four sections: (1) discussing the overall experiences of living in the Netherlands; (2) talking about ethno-cultural roots and the concept of ‘home’; (3) exploring the uses of social media and bonding and bridging social capital; and (4) concerning sexual identities, coming-out, and online identity performances. The social media platforms discussed in the empirical section featured most prominently in the narratives of the study’s participants. Having chosen not to single out particular social media apps a priori is consistent with our non-digital-media-centric approach.

As this research involves vulnerable groups, for whom confidentiality is crucial, ethical considerations were taken seriously. Gaining access and maintaining trust within the forcibly displaced migrant group posed a major challenge. Our fieldwork builds on previously established positive relationships with some of the expatriate participants, however we did not know any of the forcibly displaced migrants prior to our study. We paid special attention to our language when communicating about who we were and our research aims to address existing power hierarchies (researcher vs. participant), which can greatly affect trust. At the beginning of the interview, we obtained written informed consent and asked each participant to provide a pseudonym. Their names in this article are replaced with their pseudonym in order to protect their identity. To further anonymize our study participants, only an approximation of their age is provided. The sample of this research is based on an open call for all gay young adult forcibly displaced and voluntary migrants living in the Netherlands ages 15–25 years. Several methods of recruitment were used to promote the research, including the gay dating app Grindr, Facebook pages of gay organizations and associations, including—but not limited to—those targeted towards expatriates and refugees, and some specifically for gay Muslims. None of the study’s participants were

gathered from social media platforms. Many of the messages we received were not concerning our research. Rather, they were sexually suggestive, and on many accounts were asked “What are you looking for?” or “Hi sexy, how are you?” and some users sent nude photos. There were two specific interactions in which the user was eligible and expressed interest in participating in the research, however they asked if they could get sex in return, a service we could not provide. Snowball sampling proved to be the most effective method for reaching both target groups. As Faugier and Sargeant state, the “more sensitive or threatening the phenomenon under study...the more challenging sampling will be” (1997, p. 791). As Browne (2005) notes, snowball sampling is often successfully employed in studies that need access to “hard to reach” and “sensitive” populations like sexual minorities. The expatriates we previously knew got in touch with their friends to inquire whether they would be willing to participate. A coordinator of InClUUsion, a project run at Utrecht University to provide the opportunity to students with refugee backgrounds whose status is ‘on hold’ to participate in English language courses offered at the university, connected us with potential participants. In total, 11 individuals were interviewed (see Tables 1 and 2). Due to the limited sample size, we intend to be attentive to any relevant variations within and between informant groups and it is not our aim to generalize to wider communities of gay migrants.

Of the 11 participants, five are expatriates, born in New Zealand, the United States, England, and two in Canada. Due to the fact that three of the four countries mentioned are part of the commonwealth and all four are considered progressive Westernized countries in terms of overall LGBTQ rights (Brooks & Daly, 2016) there are strong, important cultural similarities within

this group and their current social context. All five participants made the conscious choice and willingly moved to Amsterdam. Three of the participants moved to look for work and the other two moved because their partner is Dutch and lives in Amsterdam. These participants had a seemingly easy process of acquiring a legal visa to live and work in the Netherlands. All of their parents are college or university graduates as well as the participants themselves. Three of the five are Caucasian and the other two are bi-racial. The native language for all five is English. All five participants are openly ‘out’ in both their home country and in the Netherlands.

The second group consists of six forced migrants, five refugees and one asylum seeker, who all sought refuge in another country outside of their homeland because of their sexual orientation. The countries from which they come include: Syria, United Arab Emirates, and Ethiopia. Four of the six participants are enrolled in either a college or university program, and one has obtained a university degree. Three of the six participants have parents whom are highly educated. One participant has parents whom are retired and three of the six participants have fathers who work and mothers who do not. Most of them shared they could not openly and freely express their sexuality in fear of becoming criminalized or executed, thus not feeling ‘free’ to live a life they desired. Only over time participants grew more comfortable expressing their sexual orientation in the Netherlands. Informants shared they had to first navigate the new cultural values, such as gay rights in the Netherlands, as they are not in line with their home countries.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded using NVivo, the qualitative data analysis computer software package. The first part of the analysis was an iterative process whereby we coded the text according

**Table 1.** Forced migrant demographics and their personal self-identification narratives.

Participant's ID	Age	Level of outness	Self-identification narrative
Ali	21	Partially out	I live here in Amsterdam, since one year and a half. I am enrolled in university. My parents were once working in education, but they are both now retired.
Terek	23	Partially out	I came here [the Netherlands] two years ago, three almost. I was really sad leaving everything literally. Coming by myself I didn't know anyone, like not even a single person. I lived in a village, I didn't live in Amsterdam.
Shevan	25	Partially out	I used to have a normal life, like you, like everyone. And at that time when I was [living there], it was difficult for me to be myself. I felt that I'm a bad person, because I'm gay.
Hassan	23	Out	I'm here for asylum seeking in the Netherlands. I have my mother, my father and four brothers and one sister. I came here [the Netherlands] to get a protection from [my] country.
Mo	22	Out	I worked in a hotel as an assistant manager for three years and I studied interior design but I didn't continue it. I like hospitality.
Sami	24	Out	I've got two brothers. One in Germany. One, the youngest, is living in Syria and a father. My mother died.

**Table 2.** Voluntary migrant demographics and their personal self-identification narratives.

Participant's ID	Age	Level of outness	Self-identification narrative
André	24	Out	I moved to Amsterdam for love. So yeah. Of course, now my occupation is in the fitness world. I wouldn't associate myself as any religion, but I could say that I believe there's a greater being.
Chris	25	Out	I moved here a year and a half ago for work. I guess that reason alone shows, generally, my career and thinking about, uhm, my level of ambition and so forth shows why I moved here.
Tim	23	Out	I'm caucasian. I'm the second oldest of five kids. I have a mother and my father died. I moved here for work and I am a design architect.
Jack	25	Out	My ethnicity is a white, European male. I have a mother, father and two sisters, both younger than me. So, I'm the oldest in my family.
Michael	25	Out	I moved to New York for university, lived there for six years and then I moved to Amsterdam for love. Uh, I'm half Mexican, half American, so I'm pretty exotic.

to fields of interest related to bonding and bridging social capital, while also using open coding to allow other themes to emerge. Afterwards, we read and re-read the transcribed interviews to code them. Later, codes were sorted by creating charts. This resulted in the data being compiled into 40 codes consolidated into three key themes with two most relevant to this article: co-presence and emotion management. We selected these emerging patterns to structure our presentation of the empirical findings.

### 5. Empirical Findings: The Contextual Entanglements of Young, Gay Connected Migrants in the Netherlands

All of the participants perceive their smartphones as an integral part of their everyday lives. In contrast to the dominant European expectations of the 'less privileged' forced migrant as someone unable to possess and handle advanced technologies (Leurs, 2017), the majority of the participants own a version of an iPhone while the others own models from Samsung, Android, and Sony. The frequency of smartphone use is consistently "most" or "all the time". For instance, consider Michael, who rarely parts from his iPhone X: "Okay, let's just say this. If I'm awake for 18 hours a day, I'm on my phone...say, 16 hours per day". Interviewees use messenger applications like WhatsApp and social networking platforms like Facebook messenger and Skype. Their experiences and perceptions of bonding and bridging social capital seem to converge and diverge with existing literature concerning the digital practices of "connected migrants" (Diminescu, 2008).

#### 5.1. Bonding Social Capital and Paradoxes of Co-Presence

First, we found both groups maintain proximate family and friendship relations with those geographically dispersed by producing a sense of co-presence through so-

cial media. Due to its synchronous and rapid transmission of messages, social media create a virtual bond, a multi-belonging to both 'here and there', so the physical geographical borders partially no longer constrain family and friend relationships. The majority of forced migrant informants communicate with their parents every day. As Ali explains: "It's really nice to keep in contact, to let each other know. Family of course, daily contact, because, you know, Middle Eastern, we have to be a bit more connected". This daily compulsion to connect with his family may be due to the precarious conditions in which his family lives. Some of the families of the forced migrants reside in war-torn countries, which can evoke feelings of anxiety about their family's safety, and also a sense of guilt that they are living a juxtaposed life—living (mostly) in safety and securely in the Netherlands. For example, Mo, communicates with his mother on a daily basis: "to make her feel better that I'm okay, that I'm doing fine and I—That she can be a little bit proud of me at least and I send some voice messages saying that I'm fine". In this context, the exchange of messages is used to reassure his mother and to reaffirm the familial/transnational connection, by means of WhatsApp text messages and voice notes; there is an aspect of security in Mo's communication.

Although co-presence and the exchanges of messages can relieve feelings of anxiety and guilt for both parties (the sender and receiver), in some circumstances exchanges of messages or Skype video calls are not sufficient in fulfilling the emotional support and desires either party needs from their family who are geographically distanced. For instance, Terek sometimes withholds exchanging messages to his mother:

Because I would be really emotional and I know my mom would cry and I do not want that. I don't want her to know I am crying or her crying or all of that. I think that's too much. She's already suffering with a lot of stuff.

Co-presence can contribute to strengthening and tightening the cultural, emotional, and social resources within transnational families, but the effectiveness of these transnational forms of exchanges do not measure up to the face-to-face interactions that have long been the foundation of family relationships. For instance, Shevan, explains:

It's difficult for me. When I do that, I feel I am still weak and I need this emotional feelings. Sometimes I try to be cold, just to keep myself strong enough, you know. It is not like when you meet them face-to-face. I feel sometimes there is many things missing, because we don't meet each other. I miss to hug my mother. Sometimes I feel guilty because I am still fine and still okay and they are there.

The compulsion for daily contact among most of the study's forced migrants echo's Licoppe's (2004) findings in that it enhances the reciprocal exchange of reassurance and encourages feelings of connectedness and togetherness on both sides of the borders. In the context of this study, and for the majority of the forced migrant informants, transnational co-presence helps reduce feelings of fear and anxiety relating to the health and safety of their families whom live in precarious situations mostly due to civil war. The majority of transnationalism and digital diaspora literature regarding ICT-based co-presence holds utopian arguments of the "virtual bond" of transnational families and its importance for helping maintain the bi-directional exchange of emotional management of its members (Baldassar, Nedelcu, Merla, & Wilding, 2016). However, the geographical separation cannot be overlooked and social media cannot fully help to overcome feelings of guilt, anxiety, and physical absence brought on by the "death from distance" (Wilding, 2006). Shevan's statement: "I try to be cold, just to keep myself strong enough" illustrates how he sometimes strategically avoids calling or messaging his family back 'home'. As noted by Wise and Velayutham (2017), maintaining proximate social relations can have obverse effects. As intensities of reassurance and love glue some transnational families, for some, like Shevan, the intensities of guilt and physical absence implicate transnational connectedness, therefore limiting the possible virtual intimacies, as experienced by the other forced migrants. Emotion management among the forcibly displaced migrants is based on embodied intensities, typically fear and guilt, and emotional connectivity, usually concerning the bi-directional exchange of reassurance regarding the health and safety of family members, while emotion management of expatriates is centered around the act of keeping a bond rather than its content.

In discussing bonding social capital, expatriates also have a connected presence in which they maintain a sense of 'being there' for their family and friends living in their homeland. However, their narratives reveal they do not have the same sense of obligations or desire to

frequently communicate, and provide and receive reassurance regarding safety and security, as is in the following example of Jack:

Jack: Oh God, it's terrible. I'm pretty bad at keeping in contact with people....I only give my best friends a couple minute updates here and there.

Jeffrey: What about the communication with your parents?

Jack: I think I contact them once every two weeks. But then again, not set dates or anything.

In the case of maintaining bonding social capital, the act of sending messages seems to matter more than its content. For instance, Chris seldom contacts his parents: "My mom and I usually exchange messages once every couple few days. But it's often transactional. They'll often need help with something or we'll talk about the weather. It's not the most in-depth conversation". Expatriates use their smartphones and social media to 'stand in' for their lack of physical presence, ICTs do not seem to play an overly important role in sustaining transnational family and friend relations. Their relationships seem to be 'a given' and taken for granted, a reality far from the forcibly displaced migrant respondents. The forcibly displaced migrant respondents whom have family and friends living in vulnerable situations often feel a sense of obligation and devotion to ensure their health and safety, while simultaneously reassuring them of theirs.

### 5.2. Bridging Social Capital and Intersectional Identifications

Using Ager and Strang's (2008) third domain of successful integration, processes of social connection *within* groups (connoting group similarity), are a lens through which to investigate the bridging social capital for both forced and voluntary migrants. As emerging theme that is worth highlighting is Facebook is the main social media platform the informants use to connect online with members of the host country, but more specifically, the gay Dutch community. For sexual minorities who routinely face discrimination in the offline world, the online space can be seen as a safe haven to establish connections within groups and with others who have similar interests, beliefs and values, share a common identity, and can offer a sense of belonging to the larger gay community (Gudelunas, 2012). As Gudelunas (2012) points out, gay men also use Facebook in the same manner as their straight counterparts use the site; just as heterosexuals maneuver around Facebook to find and connect with friends, potential sexual partners, and to join groups, so do gay men, including the participants in this study. All interviewees are part of one or more gay inter-ethnic Facebook groups. There is an apparent difference between participants' level of engagement within these particular groups as a way to build bridging social capital. The difference is not between the forced and volun-



tary migrants; rather, between Hassan, an asylum seeker, and the other informants, refugees and expatriates. Of the eleven participants, Hassan is the only one that has actively gained bridging social capital. Hassan routinely engages in dialogues with members within several Dutch LGBTQ Facebook groups specifically for refugees, including *Rainbow Den Haag*, a group that creates awareness and conversation about sexual diversity within the migrant community in the city of The Hague:

Hassan: The social media is just the source to feel confident or to find people who we want in our life.

Jeffrey: You're referring to what?

Hassan: About the LGBT organizations here. Some things in common you share with them. So for that reason you go to there when you come to here. So, like, you need people who can, where you can feel comfort.

Jeffrey: And to what extent do you feel connected to these groups?

Hassan: Yes. Connected.

Communities individuals become a part of are no longer confined within geographical constraints but are conceivable through online networks. In the case of the informants, a shared sexual identity is a key factor in first, becoming a part of a digital network and second, possibly establishing bridging social capital. In order for a sense of community to become established active engagement is necessary, which includes shared cultural behaviours, social support, and intercultural tolerance and acceptance (McEwan & Sobre-Denton, 2011). Terek is a part of Facebook groups *COC Cocktail events* and *Gay expats in Amsterdam*. He has not gained bridging social capital due to his voluntary disengagement within the groups. What is particularly interesting is the fact that he joined these two groups on the basis of his sexuality. However, he feels connected to a lesser extent to the former group than the latter:

I didn't want to be this classified as a refugee honestly. I am, but it was just too much to hear the word the whole time. I think it's a stigmatism and it's like yeah. It's like a stamp on your head. It's all about refugee, refugee, refugee. I'm a freaking person as well. I'm a human. I think it was too much for me. Like I just was pushing it away without noticing, without thinking about it. But lately I think, I just hate the word and I just hate being treated like oh, this is how you do, this is what you have to do.

Whereas Hassan eagerly sought out to connect with people online within the greater LGBTQ inter-ethnic community to try and establish bridging social capital, Terek and the other forced migrant participants mostly use gay online communities to solely find gay-related information in relation to Amsterdam without any interaction with its group members. Due to Hassan's precarious living sit-

uation as an asylum seeker in the Netherlands, where social interactions offline are often restrained and personal growth and development is severely limited, a sense of belonging may help him feel grounded during times of uncertainty. These connections may also help Hassan answer questions he may have about his asylum-seeking procedure and to assist him in navigating what it means to be a gay forced migrant in the Netherlands. For the other ten participants, their 'stable' living conditions may not necessarily evoke feelings of necessity to establish digital connections. For example, Chris is a part of *Gay expats of Amsterdam* and *Gay parties of Amsterdam*, and he explains: "I use Facebook [groups] to often find events, so if I want to know what parties are happening this weekend I'll use Facebook to discover that". Online networks do not seem to supplant offline, face-to-face networks though they are an extension of them.

While all of the participants are a part of one or more gay-specific Facebook groups, for the exception of Hassan, the perceived level of connection to, and engagement within, the gay Dutch online community is little to none. The perceived level of connection brings forward two important notions, though symbiotically connected: *identity* and *belonging*. These two social patterns can be discussed by using an intersectional approach. The foundation of identity is found in the "articulations and stories about who we think we are (however contextual, situational, temporal or fractured these may be) as well as associated strategies and identifications" while the base of belonging lies "in the notions of exclusion, inclusion, access and participation" (Anthias, 2008, p. 8). Belonging to spaces, places, identities and locales (i.e., Facebook groups) often evoke feelings of 'cannot' and 'do not', in the context of access, participation, and inclusion (Anthias, 2008). The emphasis here, for example, is that Terek's identity, his individual "narrative of self" (Yuval-Davis, 2006) differs from Hassan's. Whereas Hassan identifies as a gay asylum seeker, thus feels like he belongs and is accepted within the gay-specific forced migrant Facebook groups, Terek identifies himself differently at the intersection of status, class, and ethnicity, accounting for his disengagement within the online group.

Terek uses social media to negotiate his identity, including migration status, class and ethnicity as he experiments in presenting himself to others via online Facebook groups. Although he is a part of *COC Cocktail events*, he does not identify himself as a refugee, extending Crawley and Skleparis (2018) claim that refugees are primarily defined in terms of their forced displacement from their homeland. Although these types of Facebook groups are generally helpful in providing important cultural, informational, emotional and social resources, it is crucial to not fall into the trap of labelling all refugees and their needs as the same simply because they are "refugees" (Anthias, 2008). In line with Terek's experiences, Crawley and Skleparis (2018) argue the "categorical fetishism" of labels including refugees should be de-naturalized to show how mechanisms of division shape

the wider “politics of bounding”. An intersectional approach is helpful to do the work of denaturalizing, by recognizing the plurality of social positions and identities individuals may be ascribed to and may themselves subscribe to. Terek expresses he is “maybe more comfortable [with expatriates] maybe because they’re mixed, they’re just like me, they’re [from] all over the world”, which may account for why he also joined the Facebook group *Gay expats of Amsterdam* and feels more connected to the expatriates and the members of the local Dutch community offline. The emphasis here is on expat, an identification marker he does not hold in the eyes of the local Dutch community. It is important to acknowledge that—due in part of their experiences of displacement—they have become transnational, displaying attributes that the elite and empowered western individuals, such as expatriates, are often characterized by (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018). This sense of global cosmopolitanism is evident in both the context of online and offline social networks for many newcomers (Dhoest, 2018).

### 5.3. Inter-Ethnic Social Contacts and Lived Experiences of Difference

Finally, as we employ the non-digital-media-centric approach to informants’ digital practices and focus on Ager and Strang’s (2008) third domain of successful integration, processes of social connection *between* groups (connoting group differences), we find both forced and voluntary migrants also form offline inter-ethnic social contacts. Whereas the informants’ bridging and bonding social capital processes connect them with family and friends and the local gay Dutch community respectively, inter-ethnic social contacts are between them and the general local Dutch community. Contact between migrants and members of the local Dutch community is seen to help establish cohesion in culturally diverse societies (Martinovic, 2013), such as Amsterdam. In particular, inter-ethnic social contacts help to advance forced migrants’ entrance into the mainstream job market and to improve their proficiency of the Dutch language (Martinovic, 2013). For the forced and voluntary migrants that joined this study, connecting offline with the members of the local Dutch community seems to be more effective in establishing inter-ethnic social contacts than establishing bridging social capital online. In line with Dekker and Engbersen’s (2014) findings, the majority of the informants illustrate that social media use does not replace the importance of inter-ethnic social contact, but rather it is an extension of it. Forced migrants and expatriates bring their offline networks and incorporate them into their online networks by “exchang[ing] some sort of social media” (Michael). Education institutions are one way to form inter-ethnic social connections. In combination with his mandatory Dutch language training, Mo studies at a local college in Amsterdam and has daily contact with native Dutch students:

So, I had to start a Dutch language course and then I had to go to school every day and that was also another—how do you say—beginning of making connections, talking to people, meeting people, not locking yourself inside your apartment.

He is also a part of a gay men’s non-religious choir where he meets gay Dutch men: “I have a couple of Dutch friends when I met them when I was in the choir and very little expats actually. So mostly they’re Dutch people, because I really wanted to speak Dutch and I learned a lot”. Shevan also actively participates in LGBTQ organizations, such as the *Federatie van Nederlandse Verenigingen tot Integratie van Homoseksualiteit COC Nederland* (COC), and notes:

Dutch people are nice. Sometimes when you meet them, when you talk to them, you feel like they have distance. And sometimes they are rude, but when you really break this wall between you and them, you will see how they are friendly.

In addition to school and extra-curricular activities, work is also a place for inter-ethnic social contact. Terek, a university graduate, works for the government and engages with native Dutch colleagues. However, he feels like he does not ‘fit in’ among the Dutch:

I think my closest is Alexander (native Dutch) and then his friends are really nice. But I tried honestly. I didn’t belong or, I don’t know there was something wrong. I think there was something wrong. I think I was not ready maybe to immediately go.

For Terek, attitudinal characters seem to affect the type of inter-ethnic contact he has. Given that forced migrants and expatriates often find themselves in differing mobility trajectories and circumstances upon arrival (i.e., forced migrants having to go through the process of *inburgering* [obligatory integration procedure]) it can create contrasting needs and desires for inter-ethnic social contact. Some inter-ethnic contact experiences have been quite traumatic for some forced migrants, like Shevan, who have faced discrimination and violence:

One time I did the [Utrecht] marathon and I ran for the LGBT rights in [the Middle East] with the Rainbow flag and that T-shirt with a logo for supporting the LGBT rights. After the marathon I was on my way coming back to my house and I met someone and he punched me at my nose because I’m gay. I went at that time to the police. And the police, they advised me or they told me, maybe it is better that you not tell that you are gay. So I was shocked...But I learned later that it’s not true, you cannot be yourself in every place in the Netherlands.

This resonates with an analysis of police reports conducted by Buijs et al. (2011) which found violence against

homosexuals in Amsterdam occur on a very regular basis. Furthermore, results from the survey amongst Amsterdam youth demonstrated high acceptance levels of homosexuality in general, but low acceptance in terms of public displays of homosexuality and gender deviant behavior (Buijs et al., 2011). The gay-friendly discourse and title the 'progressive Dutch' (Buijs et al., 2011), in relation to gay rights, that circulates the Dutch national identity must be met with caution. Shevan's experience illustrates that the homonationalism rhetoric of the Netherlands is at odds with institutional representatives that recommend individuals mask their sexuality to try and prevent hate-crimes like such from happening. It is also important to follow with extreme caution of not falling into the homonationalist trap of situating the Netherlands (within Western Europe) as the Mecca for gay people. Further investigation needs to be brought forward to examine the reason(s) why the forced migrants of our study face discrimination and violence based on their sexual orientation while the expatriates did not.

## 6. Conclusion

Upon arrival to Europe gay people inhabit an in-between space where they live between imperatives and various norms, expectations and desires scuffle. Contributing to the emerging interdisciplinary area of digital migration studies (Leurs & Ponzanesi, 2018) the focus of this article is on how gay young adults in the Netherlands negotiate their parallel coming-of-age, coming-out and migration, across online and offline spaces. In particular, drawing on a grounded theory approach to 11 in-depth interviews conducted in Amsterdam, the Netherlands we compared gay young adult forced and voluntary migrants. Sexual identification in tandem with bonding and bridging social capital at the interplay between their online and offline entanglements of their worlds diverge and converge between the two groups. Their narratives add further complexity to the concept of "connected migrants" as set out by Diminescu (2008): gay young adult migrants use smartphones and social media to maintain affective bonding ties with their home country while simultaneously establishing new bridging relationships with peers and potential sex partners in their country of arrival. Drawing on the feminist perspective of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 2006)—which alerted us socio-cultural categories like migration status, age and sexuality have an impact upon identification and subordination—we demonstrated it is problematic to homogenize these experiences to all gay young adult migrants. In our pursuit of a non-digital-media-centric approach to informants' digital practices we first noted how the personal trajectory of mobility has an influence on transnational family relations. Forced migrants demonstrated an ambiguous stance towards bonding capital and the affordances of transnational synchronous communication: while they sense a compulsion to connect

and in order to constantly reassure they are faring well, transnational co-presence is also a painful reminder of their intense juxtapositions with loved ones, family members and friends who share their emotions, fears and material hardship. The informants' digital experiences and their offline contexts illustrate the non-universality of categories, particularly sexuality and migration status, denaturalizing the hierarchical division of transnationally mobile human subjects. Findings on the institutional normalization of anti-gay violence perpetrated against young gay forced migrants also offers grounds to question the celebratory discourse of gay-friendly Netherlands. Demonstrating the dominant heteronormativity of most academic research (Szulc, in press); sexuality, beyond normative heterosexuality remains an often overlooked layer in youth studies, internet studies and migration studies. Our findings however demonstrate sexuality is an important factor which demands further scrutiny, for example to add further depth to Alencar's (2018) claims that forcibly displaced migrants often struggle to establish bridging capital having to negotiate with race and class hierarchies. One limitation of this study is its fairly small sample size. As the relationship between forced and voluntary migrants and their bridging and bonding experiences were uncovered by this study, future research could benefit from a larger number of participants to gain additional empirical insights. Further research is also needed to better understand and hear how members of the local gay receiving communities in Europe perceive online and offline connections with migrants. In order to offer a corrective to stereotypes of both refugees and western homonationalism, additional social justice oriented scholarly work is needed to achieve greater awareness of how other members of LGBTQ migrant communities engage with social media and smartphones to negotiate their positionality vis-à-vis mainstream Dutch and European norms and expectations.

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## Conflict of Interests

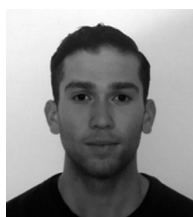
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#### About the Authors



**Jeffrey Patterson** graduated from the master program *Youth, Education, and Society* in the Department of Social and Behavioural Sciences at Utrecht University, The Netherlands. He has his undergraduate degree in Sociology and holds a minor in Psychology from Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada. His growing interest in digital diaspora research and the critical perspective of intersectionality led him to this particular study.



**Koen Leurs** is Assistant Professor in Gender and Postcolonial Studies at the Graduate Gender Program, Department of Media and Culture, Utrecht University, The Netherlands. He is the chair of the European Communication Research and Education (ECREA) Diaspora, Migration and the Media section. Recently he co-guest edited special issues on "Forced migration and digital connectivity" for *Social Media + Society* and "Connected Migrants" for *Popular Communication*. Currently, he is co-editing the *Sage Handbook of Media and Migration* and writing a monograph titled *Digital Migration Studies*.