

# Cyberqueer Techno-practices

Digital Space-Making and Networking among Swedish gay men

Spring 2012

The Department of Journalism, Media and Communication (JMK)

Stockholm University

Matilda Tudor, H10Master

Tutor: Mattias Ekman

Ägaren

# Cyberqueer Techno-Practices

---

## Abstract

*Cyberqueer Techno-practices: Digital Space-Making and Networking by Swedish Gay Men*

This study aims to highlight intersections of queer experiences and new media, by focusing on the use of digital platforms and communication practices among Swedish gay men. This is being carried out using a netnographic approach including an online survey and in-depth interviews among the target group, as well as field observations on gay catering online forums and GPS application software. Special attention is paid to the blur between online and offline, increasingly underpinned by innovations such as smartphones, tablet computers and GPS techniques, and how it may challenge and reconfigure concepts of public and private in relation to sexuality and sexual identity. Using a rich combination of queer theory and media and communication theory, the study intends to illuminate the underdeveloped potential of cross-fertilization between the fields. The concept of space has a central position, as the cyberqueer practices performed by gay men are argued to produce queer space that extends their social scope in a heteronormative environment. The interviews and the survey indicate that the use of digital media among gay men fulfill group specific purposes, for aspects such as social and sexual networking, as well as senses of community. Further, the possibility to visit digital spaces seems to have a particular significance during “coming-out processes”, since most of the informants have been dealing with their sexual identity and/or practice online, long before doing so offline. This is valid for individuals from both urban and rural areas, as the queer spaces online also are prioritized over offline alternatives when available.

Keywords: cyberqueer techno-practices, gay media, digital space-making, space, counterintimacies, queer space, networking, the closet

*Sincere thanks to all informants for their generosity and trust, to Mattias Ekman for encouragement and for keeping me on track, to Dirk Gindt for mentorship and feedback, to Patricia Tudor Sandabl for proofreading, and to Rebecka for patience and love.*

## Table of content

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>1 INTRODUCTION.....</b>  | <b>4</b>  |
| 1.1. Prolouge.....  | 4         |
| 1.2 Aim and research questions.....                                   | 5         |
| 1.3 Materials, limitations and disposition.....                       | 5         |
| <b>2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH.....</b>                                       | <b>6</b>  |
| 2.1 Coupling cyber with queer.....                                    | 6         |
| 2.2 Cyberqueer studies.....   | 6         |
| 2.3 Gay men in cyberspaces.....                                       | 7         |
| 2.4 Critical considerations regarding cyberqueer research.....        | 8         |
| 2.5 Summarization.....  | 9         |
| <b>3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTS.....</b>                      | <b>10</b> |
| 3.1 Understanding of online communities and the concept of space..... | 10        |
| 3.2 Queer theory.....   | 11        |
| 3.3 Queer Spaces.....   | 12        |
| 3.3.1 The history of queer space                                      |           |
| 3.3.2 Queer space as resistance                                       |           |
| 3.4 Queer debates and implementation of the concepts.....             | 14        |
| <b>4 METHODS.....</b>   | <b>15</b> |
| 4.1 A “semi-netnographic” approach.....                               | 16        |
| 4.2 Field observations.....   | 16        |
| 4.2.1 Selection and design  |           |
| 4.2.2 Implementation of field observations                            |           |
| 4.3 The Survey.....   | 17        |
| 4.3.1 Methodology   |           |
| 4.3.2 Selection and design  |           |
| 4.4 Interviews.....   | 18        |
| 4.4.1 Interview Methodology   |           |
| 4.4.2 Selection and design  |           |
| 4.5 Treatment of materials.....                                       | 20        |
| 4.5.1 Data collection   |           |
| 4.5.2 Analysis of materials   |           |
| 4.6 Methodology: a question of ontology and epistemology.....         | 21        |
| 4.7 Validity and reliability.....                                     | 21        |
| <b>5 FIELD OBSERVATIONS.....</b>                                      | <b>22</b> |
| 5.1 <i>Qruiser.com</i> .....  | 22        |
| 5.1.1 General profile including commercial and erotic aspects         |           |
| 5.1.2 Functions for self-presentation                                 |           |
| 5.1.3 Community-making and networking                                 |           |
| 5.2 <i>Planetromeo.com</i> .....                                      | 24        |
| 5.2.1 General profile including commercial and erotic aspects         |           |
| 5.2.2 Functions for self-presentation                                 |           |
| 5.2.3 Community-making and networking                                 |           |
| 5.3 <i>Grindr</i> .....   | 27        |
| 5.3.1 General profile including commercial and erotic aspects         |           |
| 5.3.2 Registering and self-presentation                               |           |
| 5.3.3 Community-making and networking                                 |           |
| 5.4 Summerization.....  | 28        |

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>6 INTERVIEWS – IDENTIFICATION AND SELF-PRESENTATION.....</b>                        | <b>30</b> |
| <b>6.1 Identifications and openness – sexual identity.....</b>                         | <b>30</b> |
| 6.1.1 Openly gay   |           |
| 6.1.2 Slightly restricted  |           |
| 6.1.3 Severely restricted  |           |
| <b>6.2 Limitations and self-regulation- the peculiar case of public affection.....</b> | <b>33</b> |
| <b>6.3 Contradictions and negotiations.....</b>  | <b>34</b> |
| <b>6.4 Online experiences while approaching a gay practice and/or identity.....</b>    | <b>35</b> |
| 6.4.1 A discrete place to go   |           |
| 6.4.2 Connecting and experimenting   |           |
| 6.4.3 Emancipatory experiences   |           |
| 6.4.4 Inhibiting experiences   |           |
| <b>6.5 Summarization.....</b>  | <b>38</b> |
| <b>7 INTERVIEWS – QUEER VIRTUAL SPACE.....</b>   | <b>39</b> |
| <b>7.1 <i>Being</i> within queer online spaces.....</b>                                | <b>39</b> |
| 7.1.1 Uncensored   |           |
| 7.1.2 Escaping the heteronormative gaze  |           |
| <b>7.2 Experiences of <i>Qruiser</i>.....</b>  | <b>41</b> |
| 7.2.1 A place to hang out  |           |
| 7.2.2 Different camps?   |           |
| <b>7.3 Experiences of <i>Planetromeo</i>.....</b>                                      | <b>43</b> |
| <b>7.4 Experiences of <i>Grindr</i>.....</b>   | <b>44</b> |
| <b>7.5 Further online spaces.....</b>  | <b>45</b> |
| <b>7.6 Summarization.....</b>  | <b>45</b> |
| <b>8 INTERVIEWS – SOCIAL NETWORKS AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITY.....</b>                       | <b>46</b> |
| <b>8.1 Overall sense of community.....</b>   | <b>47</b> |
| <b>8.2 Queer social networking.....</b>  | <b>52</b> |
| <b>8.3 Summarization.....</b>  | <b>53</b> |
| <b>9 INTERVIEWS – NEW TECHNOLOGY AND EROTIC PRACTICE.....</b>                          | <b>53</b> |
| <b>9.1 Love and connectedness.....</b>   | <b>54</b> |
| <b>9.2 Sexual networking.....</b>  | <b>55</b> |
| 9.2.1 The one place to go  |           |
| 9.2.2 Online cruising  |           |
| 9.2.3 In practice  |           |
| <b>9.3 Safety.....</b>   | <b>57</b> |
| <b>9.4 Summarization.....</b>  | <b>59</b> |
| <b>10 DISCUSSION.....</b>  | <b>59</b> |
| <b>12 SOURCES AND LITERATURE.....</b>  | <b>63</b> |
| <b>APPENDIX 1</b>  |           |
| <b>APPENDIX 2</b>  |           |
| <b>APPENDIX 3</b>  |           |
| <b>APPENDIX 4</b>  |           |

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Prologue

In 2002, when I was 19 years old, I temporarily moved back home to my parents, after spending one year in Gothenburg. During my time away, I had found the LGBT-community (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) my small hometown had been substantially unable to provide. However, by moving back north I was geographically cut off from this newfound community, and once again found myself in the position of “town freak”. For eight long months, me and my one gay ally spent most of our waking hours on the, by then relatively newborn, LGBT online forums. These forums became air-holes where we could express ourselves freely, and thrillingly surf thousands of profiles to make new contacts. Every now and then, long distance coaches drove us to Stockholm, the land of our dreams, to meet our new online friends and flirts face-to-face.

Looking back at this period has made me wonder about the extension of space gained by the Internet for marginalized groups in general. How can we understand the significance of new information- and communication technologies, for formations of non-heterosexual life? And how has the rapid development of such technologies since then, shaped the experience of marginalized sexual identities and/or desires? Hence, this study focuses on cyberqueer techno-practices among gay men. “Cyberqueer techno-practices” is used as a flexible term when referring to the usage of new information and communication technology for gay related purposes. The combination of “cyber” and “queer” implies that both people and spaces are being studied, while “techno-practice” aims to capture the productive interactivity of much new media. The user is not only a viewer or consumer, but often a co-producer, and the forms that the technologies take have since long transcended the computer screen. Further, the term “gay men” is treated as a loose label for the many men using the observed forums targeting a gay audience, and the social and cultural continuum of same-sex desire between men<sup>1</sup>.

The study is carried out by means of a semi-netnographic approach including in-depth interviews among the target group, as well as field observations combined with an online survey. Special attention will be paid to blurs between online and offline, increasingly underpinned by innovations like smartphones, tablet computers and GPS techniques, and how it may challenge and reconfigure concepts of public and private in relation to sexuality and sexual identity.

In an area as dynamic as new media, there is always a need for new knowledge that maps out the meanings and implementations of the latest innovations. Further, by focusing on gay men’s

---

<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, the study is well-aware of the limitations of the gay label, but due to the difficulty in properly capturing all potential LGBT and heterosexual subjects with one term, it has been preferred in order to enable a fluent reading. The survey which initially was done as an overview of the field however used the more cumbersome specification “homo- and bisexual men and other men who have sex with men”. Additionally, the survey was explicitly targeting “self-identified” men, and may thus very well include non-biologically male respondents.

use of new media, the study wishes to highlight contemporary ways in which lives are still being regulated by heteronormative forces, but also point to the creative agency of marginalized subjects. Such insight may additionally be valuable for actors and organizations targeting gay men for informational work, and social and supportive activities.

### 1.2 Aim and research question

The overarching aim of this thesis is to provide up-to-date insight into the ever-changing sphere of communication and information technologies as it intersects with queer experiences. More specifically, it aims to highlight the relations between different forms of cyberqueer technology now available, and gay life and culture in contemporary Sweden. Using a qualitative approach, the study will focus on gay catering online forums and GPS application software, with emphasize on the user perspective.

The research questions are:

- how may the observed platforms be understood to generate queer space?
- how do gay men experience the possibilities and constrains for *sexual self-expression*, *gay community-making* and *same-sex intimacy* in their offline- and online spaces respectively?

And on a more abstract level:

- how do cyberqueer offline/online dialectics relate to the division of private and public space?

The thesis further aims to discuss connections between queer theory and media and communication studies, in relation to the concept of space.

### 1.3 Materials, limitations and disposition

There is a rich flora of both nationally and internationally based communication and information technologies catering to Swedish gay men, and the ambition has been to have a macro scope, including more than one of them. The two online communities *Qruiser.com*<sup>2</sup> and *Planetromeo.com*<sup>3</sup>, and the GPS application software *Grindr*<sup>4</sup> were therefore chosen by a user generated selection among survey respondents.

The first part of the study contains a fairly extensive overview of previous research and the theoretical framework, followed by the empirical investigation. Due to the explorative approach of the study, the analysis aims to stay close to the material, using descriptive presentations. Considering the amount of materials, including eight in-depth interviews, a quantitative survey and field observations of three online platforms, the study stretches the limitations of a master thesis, which also should be regarded in light of the relatively unexplored nature of the subject.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Qruiser.com* is the largest online LGBT community in Sweden. All platforms will be more thoroughly introduced in the method section.

<sup>3</sup> *Planetromeo.com* is one of the biggest all-male online communities in the world.

<sup>4</sup> *Grindr* is the biggest application in the world for gay men, primarily used on smartphones.

### 2 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

#### 2.1. Coupling cyber with queer

The establishment of the concepts “queer” and “cyber” synchronized during the early nineties, and were soon considered a perfect match. The “cybersubject” appeared to be the ultimate manifestation of queer theory, as it was seen to transcend the physical world in a parallel space, where it freely and flexibly could pick and choose who to be. But the queer potential of the Internet was early manifested in more practical terms as well, as it offered LGBT subjects the ability to locate each other online (Gross, 2007: ix). This can be illustrated by an early example from the *Wired*'s “Top 10” list of the most populated chat rooms during 1994, where as many as three had names implying gay male users or homosexual content: *men4men*, *MenWhoWant2MeetMen* and *YoungMen4Men* (Wakeford, 2002:117). Hence, the rapid and extensive development of online gay forums implies a special importance of the Internet for individuals and groups who subvert the norms of heterosexuality, and as stated by Nina Wakeford, it is through their actions that the term ‘cyberqueer’ is best understood (Wakeford, 1997:403).

#### 2.2 Cyberqueer studies

In the “cybersexual” section of the anthology *The Cybercultures Reader* (Bell & Kennedy, et al, 2000) several central, early cyberqueer studies are republished. The collection marks a watershed in the field, as it combines optimistic theoretical accounts of representation and embodiment, with more skeptical analyses of the commercialization of the World Wide Web. Early optimistic readings often regarded presumed reformulations of body/identity relationships by online mediation, while critical reflections rather highlighted the political economy online, implying control and constraints for queer subjects. Several important contributors have thereafter followed up both tracks, illustrating the productivity of each perspective.

Critical investigations of LGBT online media organizations remain crucial, due to their transmission from community grounded into businesses focused on selling an audience to advertisers and investors (Gamson, 2003). This results, according to John Edward Campbell (2005), in “Janus-faced” online portals which “present themselves as inclusive communities to gay and lesbian consumers while simultaneously presenting themselves as surveilling entities to corporate clients” (Campbell, 2005:663). In a Foucauldian sense, surveillance is discourse, and the segmentation of LGBT audiences may hence be seen as discursive practices, aiming to produce uniform and sellable LGBT identities (Phillips & Cunningham, 2007). By turning LGBT subjects into audiences and markets, commercialization has, from this perspective, “perverted the queer project of radical imagination” (Phillips and O’ Riordan, 2007:5).

However, several well-informed theoretical readings of cyberqueer representation also illustrate the ongoing significance of issues of space, place and embodiment within cyberqueer studies (see e.g. Alexander et al, 2002). For, as stated by the editors of the collection *Queer Online: media, technology and sexuality* (Phillips & O' Riordan et al, 2007);

[w]hile attending to global economies it is also important to think about specificity, locality, and the micropolitics of everyday life. The broad sweep of queer theory as an intellectual construct is tremendously enriching, but we must also remember the everydayness of queer lives and the mundane reach of queer thinking

*Queer Online* further develops the notion of “space” online, by analyzing spatiality in relation to belonging and community. According to them, online spaces may “reconfigure geopolitical loss or marginalization”, even though struggling with their own exclusions and limitations (Phillips & O' Riordan et al, 2007:66; see also Fraser, 2009, for a discussion on cyberqueer normativity). Hence, inquiries of everyday online experiences among LGBT subjects are easily coupled with critical perspectives on heteronormativity as well as geographical locations.

### 2.3 Gay men in cyberspace

Even if LGBT-people theoretically are often treated as one homogenous category within cyberqueer studies, empirically there are often good reasons to separate them in order to capture nuances and subgroups. Gay and lesbian spaces and cultures have often been developed alongside traditional gender divisions, and also cyberqueer spaces are typically organized around either self-identifying men or women. Considering the different kinds of cyberqueer settings established by and for LGBT men and women respectively, motives for going online often seem to differ.

Looking at cyberqueer platforms particularly targeting gay men, it is important to state that they are not discursively disconnected with offline gay culture or freed from social and bodily constraints. Rather the major commercial forums that predominantly serve gay men have clear embodied dimensions, such as the importance of face and body images. Often, they also encourage exposure of personal facts including e.g. social status and ethnicity, and the goal to meet in person and to experience embodied sex commonly has a central position (O'Riordan 2007:26). Nevertheless, cyberqueer spaces do produce new ways of viewing and engaging with gay culture (Brown, Maycock & Burns, 2005). For many, the discretion enabled online, for example, means the safety to approach and negotiate their sexual identity, which has proved to have an emancipatory potential for “closeted” subjects (Mowlabocus, 2008:420). As shown by a big online survey for American LGBT youth, as early as the year 2000, as many as 57% of the male respondents came out online before doing so offline, compared to 38% of the females (Gross, 2007:viii- ix). For others, the online sites are simply seen as much more straightforward

environments for socialization and sexual networking than their offline counterparts, with “fewer social misunderstandings and mixed signals” (Brown, Maycock & Burns, 2005:71). Thus, researchers have noted that the Internet quickly has become a crucial tool for gay cruising, sometimes more or less replacing bar hopping (Tsang, 2000). The online environment also offers a more diverse range of interaction forms than available offline, including anonymous or nonymous chat rooms, bulletin boards, web-cam sites and so forth, each “possibly developing its own cultural rules and norms among very specific subcultures and groups” (Brown, Maycock & Burns, 2005:71). In addition to huge gay forums such as the US based *Gaydar.com*, gay men are thereby also able to find smaller subgroups organized around matters such as HIV-management, bare-backing<sup>5</sup>, or cottaging<sup>6</sup> (Mowlabocus, 2007, 2008).

Whatever the purposes for going online may be, the Internet has undoubtedly become an essential part of much gay male culture.

### 2.4 Critical considerations regarding cyberqueer research

When looking at cyberqueer practices, some critical aspects raised by the, often cited, Nina Wakeford (2002) are worthy of keeping in mind. Wakeford identifies four significant themes within cyberqueer research, and simultaneously expose common shortcomings of former investigations. The first theme regards the subject of “identity and presentation online”, where studies of queer sexuality and the Internet easily have tended to reduce issues of identity to issues of self-presentation. Cyberqueer research needs therefore to better capture the relationship between online activities and the implications on everyday life (Wakeford, 2002:121). Secondly, “queer virtual space” cannot be assumed as an outcome of simple online exchanges of electronic text, but need to include contextualization of the interactions within online spaces in their own right (Wakeford, 2002:121). A third theme regards the “electronic facilitation of social networks and virtual community”, where groups of users who interact online often are assumed automatically to achieve a community. More complex analyses should instead recognize electronic communication as a facilitator for both “weak and strong ties” (Wakeford, 2002:23). Wakeford also questions how online communities have been expected to replace community elsewhere, such as gay bars and clubs or other forums of the offline ‘scene’, while it remains somewhat unclear how they actually compare to one another (Wakeford, 2002:23). Finally, Wakeford means that not enough has been written about the “potential of new technology to transform erotic practice”, as the possibility for rapid exchange of electronic information in chats

---

<sup>5</sup> Bare-backing is a gay slang word which refers to acts of sexual penetration without the use of condoms.

<sup>6</sup> Cottaging is a gay slang word referring to sexual meetings in public lavatories.

(and webcam sites) promotes new kinds of sexual practices, i.e. cybersex or virtual sex (Wakeford, 2002:25). Wakeford notes that:

Whereas access to groups of those with marginalized sexual practices has largely been concentrated in urban centers, more remote users might have their first contact with the existence of such queer sexual practices through the Internet. Online spaces may provide the opportunity not only for having cybersex, but also be part of the way sexual practices themselves are defined (Wakeford, 2002: 26)

Overall, Wakeford's article actualizes the importance of empirical work and methodological triangulation in cyberqueer studies, in order to capture online/offline dialectics. This may be of much more urgent interest today, considering new technological innovations and the rapid spread of diverse and mobile Internet devices.

Due to the explorative aim of this study, the dimensions raised by Wakeford will be used as structuring subthemes in the analysis of empirical materials, in order to cover crucial aspects of the field.

### 2.5 Summarization

Even though both queer studies and new media studies constitute wealthy fields, they have in practice quite rarely been combined, resulting in a relative scarcity of cyberqueer literature and commentary. This is especially valid in a Swedish context<sup>7</sup>, which creates an important gap to fill. Because even if much new information and communication-technologies are of global nature, the needs and purposes that they may serve for marginalized groups differ nationally and locally, due to cultural contexts as well as digital divides. Hence, the experiences of e.g. American gay men cannot simply be assumed to translate to gay men living in Sweden; a place considered to be one of the most liberal in the world regarding LGBT rights.

Drawing on previous research, this study aims to combine both aspects of political economy and the issue of space by the triangulation of several methods. It also pays attention to recent information- and communication technology such as GPS application software and smartphones, in order to develop the discussion of the importance of new technology for gay male culture. In doing so, the study intends to illuminate the underdeveloped potential of cross-fertilization between the fields of new media and queer theory, in a local Swedish setting.

---

<sup>7</sup> Exceptions come from Martin Berg's dissertation *Själhets garderobiär* (2009), where he analyzes self-presentations by transgendered members of the Swedish LGBT online forum Quiser.com, and Catharina Landström's poststructuralist article "Queering Space for New Subjects" (2004). On the whole, Landström's and Berg's theoretical approaches differ from the more empirical ambition of this study.

### 3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTS

We are now moving on to an overview of the theoretical framework, where the study is placed within the academic traditions of media and communication studies as well as queer studies.

#### 3.1 Understanding of online communities and the concept of space

The terms “online community” or “virtual community” have long been used to describe gatherings online as our social worlds are going digital. But not just any collection of people in cyberspace may qualify as a community. In netnographer Robert Kozinets recently formulated guidelines for studies online, he goes back to the basic definition established by Howard Rheingold already in 1993, which describes virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the net when people carry on...public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Kozinets, 2010:8). Kozinets picks up on how the definition emphasizes collectivity as well as communication and the continuum over time. Hence, online communities are not to be understood as instant or individual, but ongoing, continuous relationships, that often extend beyond the online context into face-to-face contact. This flow of social interconnectedness, between platforms, spaces and devices makes it hard to distinguish between offline and online, or to speak about distinct “cybercultures”. Instead online communities are better understood as an integrated part of modern human cultural and social experience, which will be the case in the course of this study (Kozinets 2010:12).

Actions and interactions, composing online communities, may furthermore be argued to produce space, which lately has taken on a prominent position within the field of media and communication, often referred to as “the spatial turn” (see e.g. Falkheimer & Jansson, 2006). Space is however a multifaceted issue that is not easily aggregated into one singular definition. Hence, the basic understanding of space used throughout this study is based on “the grid of spatial practices” formulated by David Harvey (1989), in order to discuss the shifting experiences of space in the history of modernism. According to Harvey, spatial practices are closely implicated in processes of reproduction and transformation of social relations, and we therefore need analytical models to be able to generalize about them (Harvey, 1989:218). Dimensions described by Harvey, with special bearing for this study, is first of all the material and representational “domination and control of space”. Such domination may be exemplified by formal policing and zoning, as well as symbolic barriers like spaces of fear and repression, both real facts in the history of gay men. Secondly, the “production of space” may refer to the organization of both materially generated social infrastructures as well as imaginative

representations like “spaces of desire”, which will be appropriated in the analysis of cyberqueer locations. Further, the term “appropriation of space” aims to describe the material or symbolic occupation of space, e.g. by social networks of communication, here operationalized into the concept of cyberqueer techno-practices. Lastly, Harvey uses the term “distanciation”, to refer to the overcoming of the friction of space and enabling of social interaction (Harvey, 1989:220-222) central to the mobility of online communities. Overall, this kind of complex understanding of the domination and production of space, are especially central for the analysis of queer life. This has also been recognized by Judith Halberstam who has aimed to conceptualize “queer space” into a useful term. According to Halberstam’s definition, which is used throughout the following analysis, “queer space” refers to:

The place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics (Halberstam, 2005:6)

In addition, Halberstam emphasizes the binary opposition of urban and rural, as a central symbolic space within the gay imaginary, building on “metronormativity”. Therefore queer studies of space, sexuality and embodiment should pay attention to the politics of place in all its contradictions, including rural experiences of queer life (Halberstam, 2005:12). In this study, such aspects will be highlighted by the inclusion of both rural and urban informants, further drawing attention to aspects of distanciation.

### 3.2 Queer Theory

In the remainder of this theory section, the media related concepts of space and community are coupled with perspectives from queer theory. Before moving over to more specific cases of queer space and the concept of counterintimacies, a more general background will be presented about the central themes within the field.

In the past two decades, queer studies have come to be one of the most influential and controversial traditions of thought within the humanities and social sciences, due to its groundbreaking work on the complexity of sexual cultures (see e.g. de Laurits 1991, Butler 1990). At the heart of the theory lies an opposition towards the idea of sexual identity as something inherent or natural. Instead, drawing on key writings such as Foucault’s account on the history of sexualities (1978), queer theorists pay attention to the performative and hierarchical structuring of sexual behaviors into fixed identity categories within modern society. Due to dominant discourses such as the medical and psychological sciences, as well as juridical, religious and social

dogmas, sexual behaviors are organized according to values such as “normality”, “soundness”, or “sacredness”.

At the top of such hierarchy is the normative heterosexuality, which not only presupposes heterosexual desire, but also a very specific form of sexual behavior in order to pass as normal. In her classic article “Thinking Sex” (1975), Gayle Rubin states that the most favored form of heterosexuality is supposed to take place at home between two persons of the same age, who live in a monogamous relationship, and who have reproductive intentions. Further, they are not supposed to include elements of for instance fetishism, money, pornography or sex toys. However, Don Kulick (2005) means that Sweden gradually has implemented a rather specific form of official, national sexuality, which is not necessarily morally limited to marriage and reproduction, but instead is primarily based on the mandatory connection between sex and love. Truly healthy, sexual behavior is hence expected to be an expression of romantic feelings and tenderness, while other sexual behaviors are being seen as unsound or even pathological. Group sex, anal sex, prostitution and bondage, for example, thereby become incomprehensible, as well as the more anonymous forms of sex in public places that have been characteristic for groups of gay men during modernity (Ambjörnsson, 2006:99). By highlighting normative forms of same-sex relationships, some parts of the LGBT-communities have therefore been able to pass as “respectable” in the Swedish society, at the expense of others (Ambjörnsson, 2006:25).

It is in the light of such mechanisms, outside and within the LGBT-communities that the concept of queer is to be understood, in its overarching oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is formulated as a broad and destabilizing critique of normativity, or as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines it:

The open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically (Sedgwick, 1993:8)

Against such understanding, the broad object of any queer investigation is to deconstruct the constitution of sexual discourses and illuminate tensions between heterosexualized norms and queer resistance. In order to do so, this study pays special attention to the domination over and production of spaces in general, and the division of private and public space in particular.

### 3.3 Queer Spaces

#### 3.3.1 The history of Queer Spaces

To understand current productions of queer spaces we must first look back at previous developments, leading us to where we are today. The history of gay male space is often said to

have had a close relationship to public places, but how may we understand the emergence of such relation? Margareta Lindholm and Arne Nilsson (2005) argue that the division of female domesticity and male publicity in general, has had crucial importance for the development of gay versus lesbian sexual cultures. As the streets of the early cities were once a lively arena for male homosociality, it also included public gay life which was characterized by short, “anonymous” erotic meetings, enabled by the freedom of moving around the city area at nights and evenings, referred to as “cruising”. Lesbians on the other hand, whose lives, like most women’s, were expected to be centered around the private home, were significantly more devoted to long twosome relationships and shared livings. However during the late 1960s and early 70s, the public male homosocial life waned, due to new nuclear family ideals, and the development of new suburbs further away from the city center. Much of the gay male homosociality then also moved indoors into private homes, nightclubs, or video- and sauna clubs. Yet, this “cruising culture”, developed by the public gay life, has continued to characterize urban gay male homosociality, and there are still today public venues in most bigger cities, serving as erotic gay meeting places, even if not as frequented as they used to be. The public then, in a late modern sense, can be seen as a reflection of the gradual institutionalization of the modern nuclear family, which intensified the divide between public and private life, and the restriction of sexuality to the private domain.

### 3.3.2 Queer space as resistance

The separation of public and private space, is however not only a consequence of societal transformation, but also a rhetoric figure often used to disqualify some interests and issues by naming them domestic (for discussion see Fraser, 1990 ). Critical scrutiny of such separation hence becomes crucial for queer theory. In their classic article “Sex in Public” (1998), Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner argue that the separation of private and public space, including the privatization of intimacy, serves to uphold heteronormativity. “[B]y making sex seem irrelevant or merely personal”, they say, “heteronormative conventions of intimacy block the building of nonnormative or explicit public sexual cultures” (Berlant & Warner, 1998:553). Berlant & Warner illustrate their argument by referring to the “re-zoning” law by the New York City Council from 1995, which served to ban all adult businesses from residential areas. In practice, this meant a removal of gay meeting places to unsafe areas, as gay men “have come to take for granted the availability of explicit sexual materials, theaters and clubs. That is how they have learned to find each other; to map a commonly accessible world; to construct the architecture of queer space in a homophobic environment” (Berlant & Warner, 1998:551). In Sweden, the “Sauna-club law” (Bastklubslagen, 1987-2004) had similar consequences for gay men, as it criminalized public

meeting places which were designed to enable gay male intimacy. The purpose was to prevent the HIV-epidemic by discouraging promiscuity, by for example rebuilding several of the country's bathhouses, by removing the changing booths and putting up glass doors for the saunas. In many of the public parks in the cities, high bushes were also cut down to prevent cruising (Jens Rydström, 2005).

Following the argument on Berlant and Warner, this kind of public marginalization of queer spaces results in isolation and counteracts the capacity of community building as well as queer activism among gay men. Due to such regulations the queer project therefore must include "counterintimacies", meaning "forms of affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity" (Berlant & Warner 1998:562). In analyzing the cyberqueer geography of connectivity, the term of counterintimacies may thus serve as a perspective on the construction of queer space.

The formal domination of public space should also be related to the tensions between regulation, self-regulation and resistance, as formulated by Foucault (1978). This implies that the discursive regime of heteronormativity, will not automatically lead to counteracting resistance from marginalized groups, but rather shapes subject identification. Thus, each individual learn to exercises surveillance over and against himself in order to reproduce the hegemony of heteronormativity, by self-regulation and disciplining (Foucault, 1978:155). Public expressions of same-sex intimacy may in accordance with such analysis be understood as an act of resistance, while the conscious or unconscious choice to refrain from such can be seen as self-regulation. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) has described the symbolic space of homosexuality within the hegemony of heteronormativity as "the closet". In Sedgwick's account, the closet is not only a personal state, but a social institution which permeates the politics, law, medicine, academia and popular culture. It is a strategic blind spot, enabling the reproduction of a heteronormative worldview, and is also produced by sexual dissidents themselves by acts of self-regulation. Yet importantly, the closet should not only be seen as a symbolic institution, but must also be analyzed as the actual hidden spaces where queer life has been produced over the history (Brown, 2000). That means geographies of intimacy beyond the domestic borders including secret spaces like parks, public toilets and saunas. But how can it be understood in relation to the more recent queer spaces online?

### **3.4 Queer debates and implementation of concepts**

Ever since its establishment in the nineties, queer theory has been in a dialectic relationship with gay and lesbian studies, as it has been regarded to reject the very subject base for identity politics.

This has been an especially vivid debate in the United States due to its well-developed academic discipline of gay and lesbian studies, which predominantly has been studying homosexuals lives, habits and experiences (Ambjörnsson, 2006: 35). In Sweden, however, queer has instead been introduced as a development within the fields of feministic debate and gender studies, since Sweden never has had any institutionalized form of gay and lesbian studies (Ambjörnsson, 2006:39). In practice, this means that Sweden suffers from a relative scarcity of investigations of homo- bisexual and transgendered life, which calls for empirical accounts of the many, who regardless of queer critique live with fairly stable sexual and gender LGBT-identities.

Such insight characterizes how the concept of queer will be treated throughout this study. Queer is first of all considered a term that identifies heteronormative forces in the society, as a presupposition for regarding gay men as subjected to marginalization. Hence, concepts such as “queer life” and “queer spaces” are not used as a measurement of extraordinary subversiveness, but regard queer as something produced in the margins of heteronormative sexuality by actual subjects and groups. Second, simultaneously bearing the queer critique of “respectable” versions of same-sex intimacy in mind provides the study with a critical view on the identity formations and cultural expressions that are being enabled and produced.

Further the tension between regulation, self-regulation and resistance is elaborated as manifestations of domination and production of space. The observed communities will be argued to extend the social space of its members, highlighting the interconnectedness with offline contexts. This means that the online subject cannot simply be reduced to the offline subject, why the “the virtual” and “the real” will not be seen as a fruitful distinction.

#### 4 METHODS

In the following, the methods included in the netnographic approach will be presented, with regards to methodology, selection and design, and practical implementation.

There are strong arguments for working with several methodological approaches when studying online communication. Kozinets states:

[I]t is increasingly complicated to separate life online and offline; as [t]he two have merged into one world: of the real life such as people live it. That is a world that includes the use of technology for communication, socialization, expression and understanding (Kozinets 2011:11 [my translation])

Therefore, this study includes complementary methods in order to capture this complexity, where the combination of an online survey, in-depth interviews and field observations serves to deepen and enrich one another.

### 4.1 A “semi-netnographic” approach

Netnography is the kind of ethnographic research which has been adjusted in order to embrace the influence of the Internet on the social worlds of today. It emphasizes the fact that the Internet is not only a place where users go to consume published materials, but increasingly to actively communicate with each other, as “[t]hey try to form, express and deepen their social bounds and networks” ([my translation] Kozinets 2011:10). Kozinets (2011) however makes a distinction between studying online communities and studying communities online. While a consequent netnographic model is crucial for the study of online communities and phenomena directly related to the online communities themselves, it only plays a supportive role in the study of *communities online*. The latter kind of studies rather pay attention to “a certain social or collective phenomenon and then expand the horizon with the arguments or assumptions that you can learn something about the bigger community or culture that you focus on, by studying communities online” (Kozinets, 2011:95 [my translation]). Since the focus of this study is cyberqueer techno-practices, as a part of and producer of, larger formations of gay culture, it should be placed within the second alternative, which motivates a semi-netnographic approach. Therefore, the study does not include the extensive and interactive participant observations otherwise necessary, but rather use simple field observations.

### 4.2 Field observations

#### 4.2.1 Selection and design

The online LGBT-community *Qruiser.com* was chosen as the main platform to start the investigation by distributing the survey, due to its broad uptake and dominant position among Swedish gay men. The answers from the survey thereafter paved the way for the other technologies to be included, prioritizing further the two most frequently mentioned, namely the GPS application software *Grindr*, and the international all-male community *Planetromeo.com*. These three information- and communication technologies, most frequently used by the respondents, represent a fairly diverse selection, including one Swedish LGBT-forum and one internationally based all-male forum, as well as one app. While the online forums provoke questions about community-making and self-presentation, *Grindr* is particularly interesting when it comes to the blur between offline and online relations.

According to Kozinets guidelines for netnographic research, it is important that one is actually participating in the community that one is studying and not only make observations of the ongoing activities. Neither can this participation be conducted by anonymous “lurking” if one wants to reach a deep understanding (Kozinets, 2011:108). This has been somewhat of a challenge in the method design, since it would not be completely ethical of me as a woman to

actually participate in the all-male free-zones. Therefore, different approaches were chosen for different forums. A completely transparent profile was registered on *Qruiser* early on, due to its uptake from all parts of the LGBT-flora, which presented the purpose for being there, as well as the aim of the study. It also included full name and a face picture. This has been an “active” profile, including interactions with other members. Yet, on *Grindr* and *Gayromeo*, “passive” profiles were registered, meaning an account without any information about myself or the project. These passive profiles have been used only as a way to get access to the sites, and have not served any interactive purposes. Even when contacted by other members, the policy has been not to respond. I find this approach acceptable due to the fact that the focus of the field observations has mainly been to capture tendencies, climates and technological structures, and not to chart individual members by close netnographic analysis.

### 4.2.2 Implementation of field observations

The field observations were done by the collection of field notes, screenshots and sometimes interaction with other members. Field observations were first initiated at *Qruiser*, while working with the distribution of the survey and selections of informants (during week 9, 2012), and were later on complemented with observations at *Grindr* and *Planetromeo* (during week 10, 2012). Altogether, approximately 15 hours spread over one week were spent on each forum during the period of intense observations, followed by continuous visits and updates throughout the entire course of the study. The field work generated altogether 18 pages of text and 21 screenshots (for extract see appendix 2).

## **4.3 The Survey**

### 4.3.1 Methodology

Quantitative methods usually aim to create generalizable data with the purpose of saying something about patterns in “the real world”, and the goal may either be to test hypotheses or, as in this case, to search for structures and relationships within the materials (Ostbye et al. 2003:157). One way of realizing this ambition is by using surveys: a common designation for the structured use of questions and answers in order to generate data. The questions are posed to a relatively large amount of individuals which are all answering the same set of questions in order to ensure reliability (Ostbye et al. 2003:130). However, it should be recognized that surveys easily may be biased to serve the purpose of different interests, since quantitative data are highly sensitive to the selection of informants, as well as the design of the questions asked. Hence, these aspects have to be thoroughly considered.

### 4.3.2 Selection and Design

When planning the online survey, the research questions and theoretical perspectives were operationalized into a combination of open-ended and closed questions, in order to generate a varied and dynamic material (Ostbye et al. 2003:142-144). The survey was then created on the online payment service *Surveymonkey.com*, and an initial pilot test was done distributing the survey to 50 respondents in order to estimate the response rate and to get feedback on the questions (Ostbye et al, 2003:152). The distribution was made among a list of all registered male members on *Qruiser*, and the response rate was just above 10 percent. The low response rate should be understood as an effect of the distribution taking place among, not only the most active members, (which could have been done but would have risked a too homogenous selection), but randomly from a list of all registered male members. It would thus have been desirable to distribute the survey to a huge amount of members in order to at least generate a large amount of units, even if the results would not be generalizable because of the low response rate. However, that was not manageable due to the lack of distribution help from the administrators of the site, which is why the survey had to be sent out manually to every single respondent by personal message, in order not to get stuck in the spam filter.

After a few adjustments had been made in accordance with the feedback from the pilot respondents, the survey managed to be distributed, following the same procedure, to an estimated 800 respondents with a response rate of just about 13 percent (107 units). Hence, since the survey does not have a big enough response rate or amount of units to be seen as generalizable, its results have only been used as background indicators of patterns and themes to be developed and deepened by the in-depth interviews. Thus they will not be presented and discussed separately as scientific results, but univariate numbers will instead be included throughout the analysis of the interviews. However, the entire survey may be found in appendix 1.

## **4.4 Interviews**

### 4.4.1 Interview methodology

If the purpose of an interview is to reach the attitudes and opinions, or stories and life-worlds of the interviewee, then a narrative or semi structured in-depth interview is to be preferred (Kvale, 2008:97). They usually have the form of a face-to-face conversation, loosely organized around a few themes, but with a “flexible search light”, meaning that new angles and themes may appear from within the conversation (Öhlander, 1999:9). The interviewer is not supposed to control the orientation of the conversation by pushing forward their own perspectives or by using leading

questions, but to let the interviewee freely and openly explore their own view while talking. In many interview situations, especially concerning sensitive issues, it might be the first time that the interviewee actually reflects verbally on the subject, and therefore should be given time and space. This may be exemplified by the response given by one informant in the end of the interview.

Robert: I am actually not used to talking about this...so sometimes I almost surprise myself with what I am saying. [...] But I think that it is rather helpful as well... to speak about it. So it...it feels good in a way, I feel, relieved in a way...

M: Yes, how nice.

Robert: ...about your absolute most inner secrets and thoughts.

M: Yes exactly.

Robert: I mean, it is not really common that you speak about such things. No, so I think this was good.

Still, the researcher must remember their role as moderator and make sure that the conversation does not lose track, or turns too therapeutic (Kvale, 2008:143). This is often a rather time consuming method, with the need for careful preparations and self-reflexivity. In order to capture both verbal and non-verbal aspects of the interview, the transcription is also supposed to be done as “close” to the recording as possible, including hesitations, gestures, pause sounds and so on. The inclusion of verbal support from the interviewer as well as an honest description of the interview situation, also allows the reader to critically review the quality of the answers.

### 4.4.2 Selection and design

The informants were recruited among the respondents of the survey, as it included the possibility to leave contact information for those who might be willing to be interviewed. That resulted in about fifty possible informants, who were grouped due to variables according geography, age, openness, and media habits. Following 10 respondents were contacted at the time, until a selection including a satisfying variety of eight informants was fulfilled. A half-structured interview guide was then constructed around themes from the survey combined with themes related to the theoretical framework, which was memorized in order to create flexibility and dynamics. In order to establish the kind of contact where the interviewee feels safe and comfortable enough to speak freely beyond the conventions of polite conversation, Steinar Kvale’s (2008) five-step-model was used as a framework for the interview situations. This implies:

1. To start by giving the interviewee an orientation and background about the subject, as well as the chance to ask questions.
2. To try to establish good contact by listening carefully and acting relaxed. The recording equipment is a crucial tool in order to fulfill this.
3. To round off the conversation by summarizing it and ask if the interviewee agrees or/and wants to add anything that has not been touched upon.

4. To give more details about the aim and research questions when the recording equipment has been turned off.
5. Finally, to try to recall the interaction, in terms of atmosphere, mimic etc., in order to be able to analyze these aspects when working with the material. (Kvale, 2008:120-121)

Another crucial question for the comfort of the interviewee is confidentiality and anonymity (Kvale, 2008:109-110). There are no reasons not to make the reproduction of a research interview anonymous as long as it is not an expert interview. By assuring the interviewee anonymity from the very beginning, you open up for unexpected aspects of the subject that you could not have predicted beforehand.

Six long-distance interviews were done over speakerphone while two were done face-to-face, and each was about one hour long, and recorded by Dictaphone. Parts of the interviews that did not have relevance for the subject, such as small-talk and sidetracks have not been transcribed, but otherwise the transcripts have been done literally, in accordance with ethnographic requirements such as the inclusion of pause-sounds and hesitations. All together, the transcripts resulted in 92 pages of material (for extract of transcripts see appendix 3)

### **4.5 Treatment of materials**

#### 4.5.1 Data collection

The study was initiated by a pretest and the following distribution of the survey, meanwhile field observations were done on *Qruiser*, and two pilot interviews were conducted. After 10 days, the survey was collected and the field observations were extended to *Grindr* and *Planetromeo*. After decoding the survey and completing the focused field observations, the in-depth interviews and transcripts took place during a four-week period.

#### 4.5.2 Analysis and presentation of material

The analysis of the material has been done in accordance with deductive and inductive thematic models, meaning that the material was structured by themes; either extracted from the material itself, or decided beforehand (Langemar, 2008). The field observations were carried out and analyzed in relation to the research questions regarding self-presentation, community –making and intimacy, and also paid attention to commercial aspects. The analysis of the interviews was instead structured around the theoretical dimensions mentioned by Wakeford, but allowed for deductive subthemes to appear from within the text. Due to the ethnographic standard of the transcripts, the analysis has also allowed for inclusions of hesitations and contradictions within the material, implying tensions and negotiations of interest. To protect the anonymity of the informants, all names, places and details that may expose their identity are coded and they have had the chance to read and approve both transcripts and the study before submission.

Further, the quotes reproduced in the analysis have been edited to improve the reading quality, meaning that repetitive and incoherent parts, as well as pause-sounds and insignificant speech support have been taken away when not appearing to be of particular importance. This is also a way of paying respect to the informants, when working with public transcripts of speech acts, since there is a lot of discrepancy between spoken and written language, and literal reproductions may thus even have a stupefying effect on the informant's stories (Kvale, 2008:158).

### **4.6 Methodology: a question of ontology and epistemology**

Following the epistemological cautiousness combined with ontological boldness within Critical Realism (Sayer, 2000:78), I think that there are actual and real patterns to explore in the world, but that we never can expect to find any absolute scientific knowledge about them. Regardless of methodological approach “[e]mpirical material is never the description of a factual reality, but rather shows the reality such as you can reach is by a certain method” (Öhlander, 1999:19). As stated by this quote, methodology is not only a matter of tools, but of the kinds of data you expect to generate. To me, the choice between qualitative or quantitative methods is therefore not a choice between hard or soft data, but between width and depth (for discussions see e.g. Öhlander, 1999:21). Generally, I am interested in depth; the depth of human experience in its simultaneous individuality and collectivity, and in how we make sense of our lived lives in an ever-changing society. However, in the following study, this is combined with some broader insight provided by the survey, due to the former lack of such knowledge in the local context.

### **4.7 Validity and reliability**

It is of important to raise the qualitative difference in doing in-depth interviews face-to-face and over telephone, as it was understood already from the beginning of the study that this inconsequence would risk the reliability of interview materials. Still, the possibility of reaching a diverse selection of informants was regarded as more important, and thus instead called for neat precision throughout the entire process in order to keep up a high quality. From the very start, interviews were done online over chats, but it soon became obvious that this kind of contact did not enable the sincerity comparable with face-to-face interactions. Consequently, the chat interviews were disqualified and repeated over telephone, which resulted in a stunning difference in degree of honesty enabled by this more personal interaction. Overall, judging from the eight interviews, the two made face-to-face was unquestionable the ones providing the best contact, but also the telephone interviews were successful in gradually reaching beyond the conventions

of polite conversation. Sometimes and in some cases, to such a degree that it may be questionable if it even would have been possible with the decreased anonymity of a face-to-face meeting.

### ***ANALYSES PART 1 – CYBERQUEER SUBJECTS AND SPACES***

The remainder of the study will now be devoted to the analyses of empirical materials, starting with the section *cyberqueer subjects and spaces*, containing field observations and the first two parts of the interview analyses. This is later followed by a section containing the two last parts of the interview analyses centered on *cyberqueer interactions* regarding community-making, social networking and same-sex intimacy. Considering the large amount of materials that is to be taken into consideration, each chapter consists of more descriptive overviews at first, followed by brief theoretical summarizations.

## **5 FIELD OBSERVATIONS**

The field observations are structured around the aspects of self-expression, community-making and same-sex intimacy. Further, the general descriptions of the atmosphere on every platform serve to highlight commercial and erotic dimensions.

### **5.1 *Qruiser.com***

*Qruiser.com* is the biggest Nordic online community for LGBT people with approximately 100 000 active members, among which 80 000 are living in Sweden. The community is Swedish owned by *QX Förlag AB*, and has been running since year 2000. Even if *Qruiser* is intended to be a broad community for all kinds of queer existences, in practice as many as 72% of the members identify as male (*Qruiser Home Page*, and *Statistics*). Overall *Qruiser* is organized as a social forum containing profiles, statuses, text messages, chat-functions, and clubs.

#### 5.1.1 General profile including commercial and erotic aspects

The overall first impression when arriving at the home page at *Qruiser* is friendly and rather homely. The visitor is welcomed to “the largest Nordic Community for homo, bisexual, transgender and queer people and our friends”, and pictures of the latest members who logged in are shown on the right hand side. Together with the number of current online members which are always in the thousands, this implies a sense of being in a highly frequented place.

The forum is framed by advertising banners, and members are asked to affirm whether having the suitable age to receive advertisement about alcohol, pornography and sexually oriented pictures and clubs. Adult members may also mark whether or not to see, so called “XXX-

material”, implying sexual content. When marking “No XXX”, all pictures on clubs and profiles including sexual or naked imagery will instead be replaced by a pattern of red flowers. Most of the adverts are however not sexually oriented at all, but come from a variety of commercial actors, such as estate agents, the Eurovision song contest, as well as companies providing pet insurances. Some are LGBT-related but many have no further connection to the community. Apart from advertisements, commercial aspects are present in the form of a gold membership fee which gives paying members a certain VIP-status on the forum. The non-paying members are placed in a queue when logging in, due to the amount of people online, and are encouraged to upgrade their membership by credit card or by easily sending a text message or making a phone call. The gold membership is implied by a golden flower on the profile page which may be seen as a status symbol for the ones who can pay to avoid the inconvenience of queuing 10 up to 30 minutes.

### 5.1.2 Functions for Self-presentation

There is a broad variety of categorizations to make when registering a profile on *Qruiser*. Yet, the degree of diversity is limited to ready alternatives and some information is not optional to give out, such as gender, sexual identity and date of birth. The gender options however include “other” and “nothing”, and one may choose “experimental”, “queer”, “asexual”, or “other/don’t know” when it comes to sexual identity, implying an inclusive approach towards different subject positions. Optional facts regard e.g. queer gender codes such as “femme”, “very camp”, “laddish”, “butch” and “masculine”, and labels referring to sexual attitudes like “dominant”, “active”, “versatile”, “passive” and “submissive”. Further, one may fill out detailed facts covering everything from political and religious views to body hair and write a free presentation.

Once logged in, the member sees its own profile such as it is exposed to other members. This is one’s nest within the forum: a place to return to and experiment with different approaches, if one wishes to, by changing personal information, profile pictures and presentation text, or writing diary entries and blogs. Additionally one may imply personal interests or taste by public club memberships, but such may also be hidden if preferred when containing controversial or erotic content. Overall, while doing the field observations, a rough categorization of three types of profiles could be identified, of which each seems to represent about a third of the male members, even if all include diverse subgroups. The *non-profiles* refer to those with no pictures and only the mandatory or most basic information included. Most probably, these profiles may be thought of as a matter of discretion-practice for the ones who for whatever reasons do not wish to be open about being there. The *sexually oriented profiles* are usually fronted with an outspoken

desire to get in contact with others for sexual purposes and the profile picture often depict a close-up of ones genitals, flexed bottoms, sexual acts or professional pornography. Many of these profiles are totally characterized by sexual preferences from nicknames to club memberships, but others also contain more social information in the “looks and interests”-section. One observed profile was only fronted by a genital picture and several film clips of masturbations acts without any presentation text at all. Yet, when clicking the hyperlink for the further facts, it contained both cultural interests and personal characteristics, where the member described itself as “humble”, “cuddly” and “honest”. The same member had also marked “nobody knows” as a description of openness regarding his sexual identity, implying that sexually oriented profiles sometimes, as well, may be seen as a discretion practice. Lastly the *socially oriented profiles* are usually fronted by face-pictures, dressed full body-pictures, or undressed torso pictures. Often, they also contain a fair amount of information, photo-albums, and club memberships indicating interests or views. Yet, the amount of text differs a lot, and a type of nonchalant brief presentations expressing disinterest, seem to be particularly common among the younger members.

### 5.1.3 Community-making and networking

*Qruiser* facilitates several forms of interactivity and connectivity, such as discussions, personal text messages, chats or public guestbook entries. Additionally, one can give “nudges”, in the form of pins that mark what kind of attention one aims to signal such as thumbs up, a cup of coffee, or a wow. In this way, the members can easily approach one another in a fairly nondramatic way hoping to initiate a meeting or a conversation. With their cheerful design and messages the nudges seem like friendly and innocent contacts tools, with only a rainbow colored condom implying any kind of sexual hint. In order to find the right people to interact with members may mark whether they are interested in “chat”, “friendship”, “sex”, or “relationship”, and use ready lists or make advanced searches in the member-register.

A period of time during the field observations, a banner was also exposed from *QX Förlag* themselves in cooperation with *RFSL* (The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights) which encouraged visitors to support LGBT activists in Saint Petersburg due to restricted community rights. Even if not too commonly seen, this kind of content also indicates a sense of community-solidarity that stretches beyond the forum itself.

## **5.2 Planetromeo.com**

*Planetromeo.com* is one of the world’s biggest online platforms for gay and bisexual men and the transgender community, and has an international approach. Among its over one million members

from all continents, approximately 5000 are registered from Sweden. *Planetromeo* is German owned by *PlanetRomeo BV* and has been operating since 2002. It aims to be an available and community driven site, with no limitations concerning basic functions for nonpaying members, which is continuously emphasized as a unique quality (PlanetRomeo Home Page). By combining international and national features the forum enables both local and global networking.

### 5.2.1 General profile including commercial and erotic aspects

The landing-page on *Planetromeo* has a clean and laddish feeling, with dark blue colors and a logotype written in fonts connoting videogames or actions films. It is dominated by pictures that vary over time, depicting groomed and well-built men with naked torsos and daring looks. Muscles, body hair, beards, tattoos and piercings are common signifiers, and the immediate impression is that of a sexy and bold meeting place enabling everything from “horny hook-ups” to finding “the man of your dreams”. It does not signal the homegrown and inclusive community that *Qruiser* signals, but a gay space for gay fantasies on gay terms, and most advertisement comes from other gay related webpages, nightlife, and pornography. Bold golden letters indicates how many users are online worldwide, - which is usually around 100 000.

However, even though emphasizing the non-paying availability of the forum, it does have a PLUS account function offering more services for a monthly fee, and non-paying members are continuously encouragement to upgrade to a PLUS account which can be paid with credit card following a hyperlink. Such encouragements are usually emphasized by pictures from porn movies which may be downloaded for free for plus members. Interestingly enough, on *Planetromeo*, access to other members XXX-photos is seen as a benefit reserved for the paying members, while *Qruiser* offers the service to *avoid* seeing such materials. Overall, the forum has an erotic atmosphere, and while moving around, well integrated commercial banners show up every now and then, exposing erotic content. Being an international site based in Amsterdam, it also has an “Escort”- section where men selling sex can promote their services and communicate with customers. Still, the community also has other non-sexual qualities and there are several things to do while being there such as joining all kinds of clubs and searching gay guides.

### 5.2.2 Functions for Self-presentation

The registration process on *Planetromeo* is as detailed as on *Qruiser*, but the focus is primarily on bodily features such as height, weight, bodyhair, bodytype and ethnicity as well as sexual preferences. However, the choices according sexual identity and gender are very limited and do not include alternatives like “other”, “queer” or “experimental”, once again highlighting the more

narrow gay scoop of the forum. The sexually oriented facts regard e.g. preferred positions, fetishes and whether being circumcised. A range from S to XXL also indicates “Dicksize”. However, most such information is optional and due to the possibility to write a headline and a free presentation text, the forum still allows for a fair degree of flexibility.

The online experience on *Planetromeo* does not have the same homepage structure as on *Qruiser*. Instead, profiles show up as a smaller window containing a list of all filled out facts, such as “Hair: Brown”, “Relationship: Single”, “Dicksize: M, uncut”, together with club memberships and photos. This rather gives the impression of brief dating ads and it is uncommon to find the kind of socially oriented profiles that include a lot of personal information and text.

### 5.2.3 Community-making and networking

By giving your exact location when registering a profile, a radar-function indicates how close you are to the nearest members, enabling online/offline dialectic through the forum. Most members also imply whether looking for “Sex dates”, “Friends” or “Relationships”. In order to find one another, members can make advanced searches, and just like on *Qruiser* all visits are fully visible. Apart from chatting, sending private messages, or writing in public guestbooks, members may “leave footprints”, similar to *Qruiser’s* nudges. Like most functions on *Planetromeo* the footprints contain erotic alternatives like “Sexy”, “Horny pig” or “Hot cock”, but also compliments like “You’re interesting” or “Lovely eyes”. The members who get the most footprints for the categories “Very hot/sexy”, “Hot butt”, “Hot cock”, “Great body”, “Really sweet” and “Gorgeous face” are regularly published in lists. During the field observations, the interactivity online seemed to be high and the passive research profile, - even though containing almost no information at all, was continuously approached by private messages from members in the same area. Usually the messages were very short, including only a few words like “hey”, or “what are you looking for?”

*Planetromeo* also has a strong CSR-profile (Corporate Social Responsibility), through the *Planetromeo Foundation*, supporting LGBT rights on a global scale. For a long time during the field observations, the home area contained information about *The International day against homophobia and transphobia* and the possibility to check out what happens in one’s own surroundings during that day. Due to the centrality of this aspect on the site, the sense of community-solidarity beyond the forum is allowed to be a rather dominant feature.

### 5.3 *Grindr*

*Grindr* is the largest gay male application software used for smartphones and e-readers, with approximately 3,5 million users all over the world, and the owners estimate that around 10 000 new users download the application daily. By using GPS technique, the application locates other members in the users near area, and enables connectivity by chat and message functions. *Grindr* is run by the US based *Nearby Buddy Finder, LLC*, and has been in service since 2009 (*Grindr, Learn More*). Due to its format, *Grindr* is not really a forum but more of a communication tool focused on efficient and flexible targeting and networking.

#### 5.3.1 General profile including commercial and erotic aspects

The image communicated on *Grindr's* homepage as well as in the app-store is focused purely on social and romantic aspects of mobile networking. The colors are happily orange, and even if the logotype in the form of a black mask is rather cryptic, the overall impression is neat and friendly. Nothing is mentioned about sexual networking, but the ability to enable anonymity and discretion is highlighted. Further, this non-sexual image is enforced on the members, since *Grindr* does not allow for imagery exposing nudity or sex-acts.

Like *Quirser*, *Grindr* has a business model that includes advertisement form a variety of commercial actors with no necessary relation to the gay community, and when being logged in, a banner that periodically shifts in content is constantly shown at the bottom field of the window. As on the observed forums, a membership on *Grindr* is basically without charge, but also comes in a premium version.

#### 5.3.2 Registering and self-presentation

One does not need to fill out a profile in order to download the application, but instead starts with an “empty” avatar. Then, if wanted, the member may upload a photo, choose a nickname and write a headline about itself, as well as fill out some basic information, according age, height, weight, ethnicity and relationship status. Additionally it is also possible to write a free text, which usually only consists of a few words, and tends to describe what one’s looking for more than a self-presentation. Due to the application format, as well as the limitations according erotic content, most profiles look very much alike, not being either significantly social or sexual in tone. Some have face-pictures or dressed full body pictures, while others have undressed torso pictures, and most only contain the most basic facts. However, if wanted, the members may link their profiles with accounts on *Facebook*, *Twitter*, or *LinkedIn*, and more extensive information may thus be found in other places.

### 5.3.3 Community-making and networking

Hence, *Grindr* does not intend to be a complex community, but an easy device for getting in contact with and meeting others “while on the go”. Members may mark if they are searching for “chat”, “friends”, “networking” or “relationships”, but in contrast to the forums there are no ready alternatives for searching sexual contacts. The landing page consists of a continuously updated collage of the pictures and nicknames of all members in the closest proximity, and a green dot indicates who are currently online. By pressing a photo one may see the available information about the member as well as how far away it is at the moment. If wanting to get in contact, one may then send a private chat message. *Grindr* does not include any sophisticated tools for targeted searches among the members, but one may make some restrictions due to age span and location. Instead, the most obvious indication for contact seems to be the degree of distance, and the thrilling case of that someone interesting is just nearby. While logging in anywhere in Stockholm the nearest member is seldom more than 300 meters away, and at central locations it is often a matter of 5-20 meters. However the distance indication is optional to expose, and one can easily understand that it might be a fairly frightening scenario for the ones wanting to be more discrete. Obviously there are fewer members in more rural areas but still, several are to be found in towns like Hudiksvall, with approximately 38 000 citizens.

Like *Planetromeo*, *Grindr* also has a CSR profile called *Grindr for equality*, which basically means that the global network is sometimes used to send out messages to users encouraging them to participate in significant LGBT events fighting to enhance community rights. Thus, the sense of community-solidarity beyond the forum is present here as well, even if not at all significant.

### **5.4 Summarization**

In summary, the three platforms may all be seen as producers of queer space in that they are built up by the place-making practices of a large amount of queer people in search for a place to meet (as compared with Halberstam, 2005:6). At the same time, their relations to space seem to diverge due to aspects such as self-presentation, community-making and networking. *Qruiser* can, in many ways, be said to be a space in its own right where members can come to spend time as social and sexual beings. Those who wish may project a rather complex image of themselves towards a community of others, even if there are definitely certain restrictions built into the structure of the software, such as the necessity to identify ones gender or sexuality. *Planetromeo* may also be seen as a space to visit and engage in, not least in how it functions as a mobile erotic gay-zone. Yet, due to the listing of personal features rather than the construction of a profile, it seems to encourage

fast interactivity and online/offline dialectic more than community investment on spot. *Grindr* on the other hand is perhaps not at all so much a space in itself, as it is “queering” other spaces offline by exposing the invisible same-sex desire of the anonymous public and by connecting bodies with one another. Thinking about the basic definition of virtual community, and how it emphasizes collectivity, communication and continuum over time, at least *Qruiser* and perhaps *Planetromeo* should qualify as such (Kozintes, 2010:8).

Further, a comparison between the three observed cyberqueer platform’s different business models highlights the implications of market dependence on queer space. As *Planetromeo* seems only to depend on advertisers involved in LGBT activities, they may also allow for a rather untamed community with an upfront sexual attitude. For platforms like *Qruiser* and *Grindr* on the other hand, who are relying on commercial actors with no further relation with the gay community, it will be much more important to present their members as sellable audiences to advertisers and investors, as discussed by Campbell (2005). Big insurance companies or prestige brands do not want to have their banners exposed right next to flexed bottoms or genitals, and this must be taken into consideration when thinking about the fact that *Grindr* forbids their members to publish naked imagery. Further, according to the market logic of queer communities as commercial businesses, advertisers have long favored the gay male audience in search for the legendary “pink money” (Liljestrand 2003:53), often leading non-straight media organizations to adjust their content in order to attract more gay men. This can be thought of in relation to *Qruiser*, which is intended to be a broad LGBT-forum, but is often dominated by cliché images of gay male consumerist lifestyle. When wanting to present a high number of male members to its investors, segmentation becomes crucial, which is why the marking of ones gender must be mandatory when registering a profile. It is also questionable whether the detailed lifestyle-facts intend to serve the interest of the members or the marketers. In this way, market dependence certainly has the potential of perverting “the queer project of radical imagination” (Phillips and O’ Riordan, 2007:5) when it comes to queer counterintimacies, and highlights how surveillance may be understood as discourse (see Foucault, 1978).

However, within the more sexually permissive atmosphere on *Planetromeo*, sex does not travel freely over space, but has largely been turned into a product available only to the paying members. Even though presenting itself as a unique free of charge community, in practice *Planetromeo*’s premium membership implies more restrictions for nonpaying members than its Swedish counterpart. The commodification of eroticism on the forum is also implied by the highly stereotypical images of the male body, and the hang-up with bodily proportions, and even

the ones choosing not to indicate categories like “dicksizе” or “ethnicity” will still have them appearing unmarked on their profile list constantly reproducing a sense of their centrality.

### 6 INTERVIEWS - IDENTITY AND SELF-PRESENTATION

Wakeford states that studies of queer sexuality and the Internet have tended to reduce issues of identity to issues of self-presentation. Cyberqueer research therefore needs to take on the challenge of capturing the relationship between online activities and “the ways in which electronic character is implicated in everyday life and social institutions” (Wakeford, 2002:20). Hence, in order to contextualize cyberqueer techno-practices within a bigger picture, we shall start with a more general overview of the eight informants. First, expressions of sexual identification and the discourse of “openness” are regarded and second, the analysis moves closer to the sphere of intimacy by looking at issues of public affection. This is followed by examples of contradictions and negotiations exposing tensions due to “the closet” as a social institution. Having this in mind as a discursive foundation, we will then move over to online aspects while approaching a gay identity and/or practice.

#### 6.1 Identification and openness- sexual identity

Within the survey, the respondents were asked to grade whether or not they felt restricted about being open regarding their sexual identity throughout their everyday life. 36 per cent rarely experience that kind of restrictions, while 30,8 per cent do so every now and then or often. 10 per cent do not have any possibilities at all to express their sexual identity (see Question 5, Appendix 1). In the following brief presentation of the informants, they are categorized due to how they responded to this question.

##### 6.1.1 Openly gay

*Joel* is 23 years old and comes from a middle-sized town in the middle region of Sweden. He came out as homosexual three years ago when moving away to another middle-sized town in the south of Sweden, where he now lives and studies. Before, he had not been consciously aware about his desire towards men, even if he says that in one way or another “one always knows”. Today he lives openly as gay in all aspects of his life, and comes to Stockholm for gay clubbing and dating every now and then. The only place where he does not feel comfortable with his gay identity is when visiting the town where he comes from.

M: Are they, kind of, two separate worlds? [his hometown and his current life as homosexual]

Joel: (with emphasize) Yes, it’s a bit like that, I may feel that I am not fully comfortable there in my hometown [...]  
There, it may still be that you kind of fall back into, you know, that insecure straight [person] suddenly, when you meet people from school, even though that is not the one you are today.

**Viktor** 29, on the other hand, is perfectly comfortable with being open about his homosexuality in his small hometown of 3000 citizens on the southern countryside of Sweden, where he has lived his whole life. He came out at the age of 19 and today he is completely open about being homosexual, even if a gay identity doesn't seem very important to him.

Viktor: I mean, who I sleep with is nothing crucial for the person I am otherwise.

M: No, that's right. So, this whole idea about "gay as an identity", is perhaps simply not that important to you?

Viktor: Well, I do define as gay, and I am proud of who I am, but then at the same time [...] I don't think that that should affect who I am as a person and what I do, just because of that. It doesn't matter if I am straight, or what I am.

For **Ingvar**, 50, coming out has not been an uncomplicated story, even if he has lives openly as gay for seven years in a small town in the very north of Sweden where he has lived his whole life. Ingvar realized that he was gay at the age of nineteen after experiencing a short, non-passionate relationship with a woman, but then completely suppressed his feelings towards men for twenty-six years. For two and a half decade, he avoided all female attention by never going to dances or parties, and he never had any sexual or romantic contacts with men. However, after meeting his first boyfriend at the age of 43, he decided to come out for friends and family, which went smoothly, and he says that he now has "found himself".

Ingvar: I feel so much better now, [...] completely satisfied with, - yes I mean I have found myself, that's what has happened really. [...] I feel that I have won incredibly much [...] that I can be myself together with others as well, whom I spend time with and meet trough work and privately.

**Joar** is 22 years old, defines as homosexual since his early teenage years and now lives openly as gay in all aspects of his life. He comes from a big city in Sweden where he has lived his whole life, and studies in a neighboring middle-sized city. Joar started to come out for a smaller group of close friends when he was about 16, but did not come out for his family until one year ago.

Joar: I did not come out for my parents until a year ago or so. [...] Not that I have been hiding it in any way, but I just haven't explicitly said that: "this is how it is by the way".

**Nils** is 27 years old, defines as homosexual and lives openly as gay since a few years. He lives and works in a middle-sized town in the middle-region of Sweden, but has before been living on several both urban and rural locations. He has been single for four years and plans to move to a bigger city. Today, Nils rarely experience any restrictions when it comes to being open about his sexuality, but still seems to find it more complicated to be so in relation to heterosexual men than in relation to women.

Nils: My working place is so dominated by women anyhow....so that hasn't been very hard [...] Sure, with the kind of job that I am doing right now, there is probably eighty-ninety per cent men. I mean it is not as though I walk around telling [everyone], but that's more if someone asks or if someone hears something or such, so I don't know if everyone at my job knows. [...] And then with my family, they have taken it really good, it's just my grandmothers who don't know anything about it.

### 6.1.2 Slightly restricted

**Lars** is 50 years old and defines as homosexual since about thirty years. He lives openly as gay together with his boyfriend in a bigger city in the southern parts of Sweden, where he has lived his entire life. Lars has gradually built up his degree of openness. Coming out during the era of flaming aids- and HIV- debate characterized by institutionalized homophobia during the eighties, colored his early experiences of being openly gay.

Lars: I was more careful in the beginning, or that I felt actually [...] fear in the beginning of course then. I have probably been like that, a little afraid [...] [and] a little observant regarding where you are and what kind of situation you are in.

However, today Lars does not hesitate to tell anyone about his sexual identity, apart from the youths with whom he works, which he finds rather painful.

Lars: I am not open in front of them [the youths], which hurts almost every day, but that is most just because I don't want that to become a discussion actually. I don't know if I am a little bit afraid, or if I create....something that is not there.

### 6.1.3 Severely restricted

**Ville**, 24, defines as bisexual and comes from a small town in the south of Sweden, but now lives and studies in a middle-sized town in the same area since three years. He thinks of himself as a "light version" of the LGBT-people that he has seen from the Pride-festival in media.

Ville: Sure, I respect people who dress like that and have such, - I don't know, it's called fetishes I guess, but eh...no, [...] I don't feel that I can identify with that.

Ville has met intense resistance from his family when trying to come out, and was forced by his mother to deny his bisexuality and to end his first gay relationship.

Ville: She took my telephone and destroyed my SIM-card, I was not going to be allowed to speak, I was not going to be allowed to go out and such [...] I felt then, that I couldn't take the pressure, because [...] my mother said that "either you choose him or the family", and if I chose him then I was not allowed to stay in the house. So...I felt that it was the only way out.

Hence, Ville is very secretive about his bisexuality, even though he has had unofficial erotic and romantic relationships with men ever since he was sixteen years old. He does have one group of gay and bisexual friends who respects his discretion, but he has not told his straight friends, relatives or his girlfriend for one year.

**Robert**, 34, has also kept his bisexuality a secret for twelve years. He had his first intimate experience with a man at the age of 22, and since then he has had sexual relationships with men on a regular basis, but doesn't relate to it as an identity.

Robert: It is not a... [...] identity in that way so to speak, but it is more of a secret that I have for others. So it's not like I have a dream about living openly as bisexual, really. It is something that I have kept a secret, and [that] I wish to keep a secret. I enjoy having secrets from others.

After spending a few years in a middle-sized neighboring city he has recently moved back to the small society in the middle-region of Sweden where he comes from. Officially, he lives as straight and none of his family members, friends or ex-girlfriends knows anything about his bisexuality. The past ten years he has had long twosome relationships with women, and secretly met men on the side, but he has never had any romantic relationships with men. Yet, he thinks of it as something that could happen, even if that would mean having to expose his secret.

### **6.2 Limitations and self-regulation – the peculiar case of public affection**

Looking at the results of the survey, it was obvious that the respondents distinguish between openness regarding sexual identity and intimacy. Several of those who answered that they did not experience any restrictions at all in regards of expressing their sexual identity, nevertheless experienced severe restrictions when it came to the public display of same-sex affection. 24 per cent of the respondents did often experience this kind of limitations, 28 per cent every now and then, and 14 per cent answered that they do not have any possibilities at all to express love and/or affection for other men in their everyday life (see Question 6, Appendix 1).

This same pattern can be seen among the informants. While Ville and Robert are the only ones who experience serious obstacles concerning openness regarding their sexual identity, all of the informants exercise different degrees of self-regulation when being in public spaces with boy-friends or flirts. The constant sensibility to surrounding attitudes and atmospheres, and the threat of male violence are reappearing themes. Several informants express a specific insecurity regarding public affection during late evenings and weekends when the risk of being attacked is considered bigger due to drunkenness. So do even Lars and Viktor, who otherwise are the ones who generally are most relaxed about public affection among the informants. They both find it to be a frustrating feeling when deciding to keep a low profile due to threatening atmospheres.

Lars: Most of all, it just makes me so angry that you are not allowed to be yourself actually, just like... a hetero couple. [...] But then, I am not foolish either, [...] you do have a certain will to survive... [...] So of course I adjust...to the situations. But it hurts every time I know that I am doing that as a conscious choice, actually. If you refrain from kissing your partner or to take your partner by the hand just because you feel... a certain insecurity.

Joel and Joar are also extra careful during late evenings, but express a more general anxiety during other times of the day and week as well. For them it seems to be a matter of a rather diffuse discomfort and unwillingness that they sometimes find it hard to explain rationally.

Joar: I still have a kind of mental picture that “[...] if I walk hand in hand with my boyfriend...late a Saturday/Friday-night, then I will be beaten up...because I am gay, because people are drunk and stupid”. [...] I mean we walked hand in hand during the daytime without problems, and kissed each other while being in the city too, but there was always something in the back of my head like; “what if someone is offended, what if...someone wants to beat us up?”

Joel always scans his surroundings before any public affection but still finds it easier in Stockholm than in the town where he studies and lives. Like both Ville and Lars, he mentions a threatening atmosphere due to right-wing extremism, which they all experience being specifically real in their home region in the southern parts of Sweden. Thus, in the town where he lives, Joel would “definitely not feel comfortable” about any kind of public affection. Also Nils expresses intense resistance towards public affection in general, even if he says that he now has grown older since his latest relationship and perhaps would feel differently if he met someone now. However, in his past love-life affection has not been a public matter at all.

Nils: It's just this you know, holding each other's [hands] or kissing, well...for me it is a little...well, I guess I still feel actually too uncomfortable with that.

### 6.3 Contradictions and negotiations

While analyzing the informant's speech acts about openness regarding sexual identity and public affection, it often becomes clear that they are rather unused to verbalizing the subject. Sometimes this results in contradictory explanations, and often the attitude changes over the course of the dialogue, according to comfort and tone. As most of the time when working with interviews, the answers take the shape of an ongoing negotiation between official or conscious versions of explanation and glimpses of more unrefined territories. Of course it is very hard to judge what is actually what, but contradictions in themselves contain valuable traces of the complexity of human experiences. When looking for example at Robert's secretive attitude, he repeatedly says that the reason behind keeping his bisexuality a secret is only that he enjoys having secrets from others, but that it would not be anything dramatic to tell people about it if only he wanted to. However, later on in the dialogue he expresses severe fear about his situation and that it might be unsustainable in the long run.

M: It's hard when those worlds [the official and the secret] meet in that way...?

Robert: Yes, it is really hard. That is why that's the thing I am most afraid of will happen sometime; that they will collide with each other.

M: Yes, I understand that-

Robert: Even if it is unavoidable, I am aware of that it will happen sooner or later but...I am trying to slow it down at least.

Further, at one point Robert states with confidence that he doesn't really care about if people know about his desire towards men, but later admits that he has stopped drinking since it has happened that he has revealed himself while being drunk. Thus, throughout the interviews the slippery character of the discourse of "openness" becomes apparent. For what does it actually mean to live "openly as gay"? Should one "come out" every time one meets a new person in order to be open? Or as Nils says:

Nils: I have kind of had the philosophy that a hetero doesn't walk around telling everyone that it is hetero, and in the same way I was thinking that "why should I tell anyone that I am gay, until I meet someone?"

Nevertheless, hiding practices and self-regulation are common even in the interviews where informants consider themselves to rarely experience any limitations regarding their sexual identity. Such as Ingvar, who even though he is totally open towards his family, friends and colleges, is also so afraid of potential gossip that the post staff might spread in the neighborhood, to subscribe for the Swedish LGBT-magazine QX. With this ambiguous nature of "the closet" as a social institution in mind, we will now move over to cyber-queer techno-practices in relation to sexual identity and self-presentation.

### 6.4 Online experiences while approaching a gay practice and/or identity

#### 6.4.1 A discrete place to go

A common theme for several of the informants is how they created profiles on LGBT or gay forums long before telling anyone about their bi- or homosexuality. There, they felt that they could control what information to give out about themselves, who they wanted to expose themselves to and in what ways. Several of them describe not having a face picture or a clear sexual identity label on their first profiles.

Joel: I had not come out yet then, and then there were no face-picture [...] I could send pictures to people and such, but I did not have one [on my profile]. But then it was more that, I didn't want people to send me messages, but I preferred to contact them.

M: Yes. Did it only make you nervous if people contacted you?

Joel: Yes, a bit like that.

Further, the discretion online of course serves highly practical purposes for those who are not able, or do not wish to come out. Robert realized that he was bisexual when he was about fifteen years old, but it was not until seven years later, at the age of 22 that he had his first intimate experience with a man, and one year later created a *Qruiser*-account in order to find more men. Since he has preferred to keep his bisexuality a secret in his offline context, the online forums have enabled him to act on his desire towards men with full discretion.

M: Is that where your bisexual world exists [online], so to speak?

Robert: Yes.

M: Yes, exactly. And you wish to keep those worlds separated?

Robert: Yes I do.

In contrast to Robert, Ville has had boyfriends and gay-friends offline, but it is only online that he has been able to be open about it. He has known ever since he was a kid that he was attracted to both men and women, but it was not until he was about 16 that he accepted that he was in fact bisexual. He then created a *Qruiser*-account, as well as joined a few international online gay forums.

M: What did you do in order to explore your sexuality?

Ville: Well, in a small town as the one I come from, there isn't much you can do in order to explore, so I got an account on *Qruiser* and got to know people that way instead.

Ville used the forum secretly for about six years while living at home with his parents in his hometown. He did not tell anyone about his bisexuality, but instead got in contact with other LGBT-people from his hometown online that he became friends with offline as well. He also met his first boyfriend on *Qruiser* at that time. Even if the forum could not save Ville from his mother's reaction when trying to come out, it still provided him with a queer place to go when his geographic location and his mother's restrictions almost made it impossible. This enabled him to keep on dating boys secretly while still living at home.

### 6.4.2 Connecting and experimenting

Both Viktor Joel and Nils spent a long time on cyberqueer forums before coming out. There they were able to get in contact with others anonymously to experiment and negotiate their identity, resulting in a rather long period of online networking, chatting and sex-chatting without any offline counterparts. Viktor got an account on *Sylvester* and *Qruiser* when he started to reflect on his sexuality, which he used for several years before coming out.

M: Was it in your interest then to try to localize people whom you could meet, in "real life" [...]

Viktor: No, I don't really think that that was the point from the beginning, but it more lead to that, I would say, after a while.

Joel also chose to seek up *Qruiser* when trying to understand his sexual identity, even though he lived in Stockholm at the time with several offline gay forums available. During his two years in Stockholm, he never met anyone face-to-face but was fully satisfied with the online contacts by chat, which he had many. When members asked him to meet up offline, he simply said no.

M: Can you say that you kind of had this discrete time on *Qruiser* as a time when you could kind of be free to experiment a little-

Joel: Yes, absolutely!

M: -with what you really wanted?  
Joel: Absolutely! That's the way it was.

Also Ville expresses that the interaction online was good enough for a couple of years when he used the forums as a way to “explore himself”. Eventually however Ville, Joel and Viktor’s online contacts migrated from the Internet and converged into phone calls, SMS-conversations and lastly, face-to-face meetings.

### 6.4.3 Emancipatory experiences

Even if the gay lives lived online have not led all informants to embrace a gay identity offline, for some it has had clear emancipatory implications. Joel considers the initial time online as a stepping stone before coming out for friends and family: a space where his sexual identity could “mature naturally”. Also Viktor thinks that the online forums have had a particular importance for him, growing up as gay on the countryside, and that he wouldn’t be the one he is today without them.

Viktor: It was like this, that when I started to realize what it was, I mean that I was actually gay [...], when I was about twelve-thirteen or so, I mean you hardly knew what that was then. And then the Internet was a great support.  
M: Mm. How did you actually use the Internet then?  
Viktor: Well, it was that, you realized that these forums existed, you know like QX and those, I mean you met others who were in the same situation.

For Ingvar, the cyberqueer forums were the very eye-opener that finally put him in contact with his homosexuality according to himself. He had been surfing gay porn ever since he got an Internet-connection in the middle of the nineties, unaware of the existence of other cyberqueer spaces. It was not until Ingvar was forty-five years old and had lived his entire grown-up life in denial, that he bumped into the online LGBT-forum *Qruiser* where he registered 2005.

Ingvar: It [was] to get in contact with others really and, yeah but of course, perhaps be able to get some sex eventually as well [...] [to] meet someone.

On *Qruiser* Ingvar looked for people in his home region and realized that there were even members from his own little hometown in the far Northern lands, which chocked him since he was convinced about being the only one. After only a few months online he got in contact with his first boyfriend, and then eventually decided to come out for his family and friends.

Ingvar: Of course, it was *Qruiser* that kind of turned....if I hadn’t found *Qruiser*, then you never know how it would have looked like today.

### 6.4.4 Inhibiting experiences

However, importantly to note, the cyberqueer forums did not only mean a queer heaven for the informants to freely create their own safe space and joyfully experiment in peace and quiet. Many describe the period of online experimenting before coming out as charged with nervousness and paranoia, and refined strategies to minimize the risk of being exposed.

Joel: I remember having kind of that fear that [...] there would be people [...] who you would recognize, you know. That fright was always there. I actually don't know why [...] you are so incredibly worried.

The cyberqueer environments themselves also had a deterrent effect on some of the informants, who were shocked by the graphic esthetics and sexual attendance from other men.

Ville: I was a little bit afraid then, because I felt that it was...how shall I say? Well, people who published pictures with latex and leather and chains and such, which scared me a little bit actually.

For Joar, the experience from getting his first profile at *Qruiser* at the age of sixteen was so uneasy that he unregistered and did not come back until four years later. He says that it was simply “too much nakedness and old men at the same time”.

### 6.5 Summarization

The purpose of this chapter has been to capture the tensions and interplays between processes of regulation, self-regulation and resistance, as expressions for the heteronormative domination of public space (Harvey, 1989:122). Judging from the informants experiences, even the ones who practice a high degree of openness regarding their sexual identity and public affection, perceive different kinds of restrictions to do so, in their everyday lives. Such restrictions may take the shape of heterosexual male violence, the risk of losing professional authority, as well as right-wing extremism. This sense of restrictions are sometime associated with a geographical region such as the south of Sweden, but does not correlate with divisions of rural and urban experiences. Specificities worthy of mentioning regarding rural experiences are however the way several of the informants living in rural locations seem to reject the idea of a gay identity as previously indicated by Halberstam (2005:36).

Further, restrictions are often experienced, only as a diffuse sense of discomfort, reminding us about how the discursive regime of heteronormativity shapes subject identification, and thus lead LGBT-people to exercise different degrees of self-regulation by concealing same-sex desire (Foucault, 1978:155). Yet, this also highlights the ambivalent character of “the closet” as a social institution, and the impossible balancing act performed by individual subjects in order to be either “in” or “out” (Sedgwick, 1993). It is against this background that the importance emphasized by the informants regarding cyberqueer platforms is to be understood. Following the pattern of previous international research, the Internet have been of specific importance during

their “coming out- processes”, as many came out online before doing so offline (Gross, 2007: viii- ix). For all informants (except from Lars whose coming-out-process predated the Internet), getting a cyberqueer profile has been the first action taken when starting to reflect on ones sexuality. This was even the case for Joel, who was of age and lived in Stockholm at the time when he gradually became aware of his sexual identity, and thus had plenty of other offline options. Further, even if the cyberqueer spaces initially sometimes have been seen as frightening, they have also had clear emancipatory implications for several of the informants, as also indicated by previous studies (Mowlabocus, 2008:420).

### 7 INTERVIEWS - QUEER VIRTUAL SPACES

We are now moving over to more current online experiences regarding identity and self-expression. First, general experiences of being within cyberqueer spaces are regarded, while secondly covering more specific experiences of different spaces.

#### 7.1 *Being* within queer online spaces

The answers in the survey implied an interesting contradiction, since a majority of the respondents never (23,4 per cent) or rarely (36,4 per cent) experience having restricted possibilities to express their sexual identity in their everyday lives. But still as many as 68 per cent consider the use of digital media being important (25 per cent) or very important (43,4 per cent) for their possibility to do so freely (see Question 9, Appendix 1). So how can we understand the ways that cyberqueer spaces may facilitate queer subjects with means for self-expression that they do not find elsewhere? This actualizes the urgent question about cyberqueer forums as spaces in their own right.

##### 7.1.1 Uncensored

Joar came back to *Qruiser* a couple of years ago after realizing that the non-LBGT online forums that he was using instead were not helping him if he wanted to get to know other gay guys, even though being tolerant towards diversity. He pinpoints the need for queer spaces to facilitate queer networking when asked why he cannot as well get to know gay guys on *Facebook*.

Joar: If you are going to network, then you need to project an image of yourself, [...] and hopefully something that is at least similar to yourself (laughs). And then of course you want to do that somewhere, somehow where you know that you are accepted. There are not that many who, kind of, throw out [...] a status update at *Facebook* that says “this is how tall I am, this is how big my cock is, and I want to sleep with your little brother”! It just doesn't work on *Facebook*.

M: No. But it does work on-

Joar: More or less. [...] It is more ok to say that “ah, I haven't had sex in three weeks” on *Qruiser* than on *Facebook*.

Joar says that he is not as “prude” as the first time he got a *Qruiser*-profile, and now rather seems to find the sexual nature of much contents and contacts on *Qruiser* fairly liberating and exciting. Further, the freedom of expression that Joar describes above is not only a matter of potential homophobia, but also about normative standards of sexual discourse. The very thought of writing anything similar at *Facebook* is rather absurd, but on *Qruiser* it is not. Hence, whether or not reproducing it, the boundaries of sexual discourse are looser in the cyberqueer space described by Joar, and thus enabling different tones and attitudes. Joel for example chooses not to mention his sexual preferences on his profile, but finds it liberating that others do. Also Lars, who uses the forums in a very social manner, says that he appreciates the general clarity of intents.

Lars: I think that it's good sometimes when [...] you know it comes [...] only three-four words like "hey, do you want to meet up tonight?" [...], - that's quite good isn't it? Then you know what they want so to speak, and then you may answer that "no, I am taken", or "I don't have any interest in that" [...] I mean, I appreciate that it's straight up.

### 7.1.2 Escaping "the heteronormative gaze"

While speaking with Joar, he also raises the more subtle self-regulations discussed in previous chapter. From this perspective, cyberqueer spaces may serve as free zones from the disciplining heteronormative gaze, as experienced by Joar.

M: So it's a matter of not having to think about that you should dissemble yourself in any way?

Joar: Yes, kind of. At least for me, I know that "ok everybody can't like me, but they do not dislike me because I am gay and is on this page". Now, on the other hand, I don't think that anyone on *Facebook* would dislike me just because I am gay, but I am more open on *qruiser* than I am on *Facebook* you know.

M: Mm. What is it that you are being open about, when you say that you are open?

Joar: No, but I speak about my boyfriend and my exes...eh...sex life (laughs), and stuff like that you know.

As repeatedly pointed out by Joar, it is not that he actually holds it as possible that he would be unaccepted in other places, but more a diffuse feeling of the need for self-regulation. Thus the cyberqueer spaces are certainly not free from other power structures, but perhaps from the heteronormative gaze that forces queer subjects to first of all represent their sexual identity. According to Joar, the most obvious homophobia in his everyday life is the constant need to explain himself, even if only as a response to other's innocent curiosity. A “lack of understanding” in non-queer spaces means according to Joar that he is always expected to talk about and represent his sexual identity and his sex life. In contrast to what one may think then, what he is describing is actually not only the liberty to be gay in cyberqueer spaces, but the freedom from having to be *first of all* gay in the eyes of the beholders, as soon as speaking about himself.

After having gone through the general experiences of being within cyberqueer spaces as opposed to non-queer online and offline counterparts, we are now moving over to a more detailed overview of cyberqueer techno-practices as routines within specific spaces. What purposes do the different forums serve for the informants? Why should one have profiles on several different sites? And how do they actually use them while being online? As Wakeford emphasizes, analyses of cyberqueer practices must include contextualization of those practices within spaces with different preconditions, features and limitations (Wakeford, 2002:21). Hence, the following sections describe the informant's navigation within cyberqueer terrains, focusing on habits and strategies. Attention will be paid specifically to experiences regarding *Qruiser*, *Planetromeo* and *Grindr*.

### 7.2 Experiences of *Qruiser*

Among all the informants, *Qruiser* is the most frequently used gay forum online. Of course this has to be read in the light of the fact that the informants were actually recruited from *Qruiser*, but also the fact that it is the by far most popular gay platform online among Swedish users, with almost 79 000 male members predominantly registered from Sweden.

#### 7.2.1 A place to hang out

While other forums mentioned by the informants seem to serve more tailor-made purposes such as international networking or time efficient cruising, *Qruiser* appears to be a broader kind of space, just like indicated by the field observations. Many of the informants testify to use *Qruiser*, not only for the sexual networking that the name implies, but also as a place where they “hang out”. During periods of time, usually depending on whether they are single or not, they are logged on for large portions of the day, talking to friends and strangers or arranging their profiles with photographs and presentations and joining clubs. Like many of the others, Viktor is usually logged on *Qruiser* several times a day, sometimes just briefly but at other times one or two hours at a time. Lars and Ingvar also testify to sometimes spend long periods of time on the forum.

M: But could it also be that you go there and, kind of, are logged on for a longer period of time, and that you sit and speak with people and fix your profile pages and kind of just spend time in “the room” a little longer?

Lars: Yes, that happens. It changes over time a little bit depending on what else I have to do [...] Before I have been sitting pretty long periods [...] I have sometimes been sitting for several hours.

For most informants, *Qruiser* is sometimes used as a social network much like *Facebook*, where they keep in touch with offline friends, but additionally it also allows for a more outgoing networking often missing at *Facebook*, such as making new contacts, speak with strangers, flirt and sex-chat. The mobility provided by new technique such as smartphones further enables an even more frequent and flexible activity than recently possible. For Joar and

Joel, who both have smartphones, this means being logged on more or less most parts of the days.

Joel: I am logged in really big parts of the day actually, and that is not because I am actively searching for dates, [...] that's just a rather small part of the time. But it's more because, well I think that it's a nice place to be.

However, as recognized in the field observations, *Qruiser* appears to contain different groups with diverse agendas for being there.

### 7.2.2 Different camps?

When speaking about *Qruiser*, all interviews lead in to the subject of two different cultures under the same roof; the more socially, and the more sexually oriented.

M: How do you experience *Qruiser* as a forum, in general?

Viktor: Well, I mean... it's hard to say, because it is very split [...]. There are kind of two camps, so to speak: one is those who are only looking for sex, and the other is looking for someone to talk to, and kind of, make new contacts.

Robert's profile however belongs to the third category mentioned by the field observations, namely the profiles with almost no text, images or other signs of activity at all, except from the information that tells when the member was last logged in. In contrast to all other informants Robert means that he only uses *Qruiser* for sexual networking and express little interest in the social aspects.

M: Do you find it boring, if you for example are contacted by someone who wants to talk about its other interests with you or just, kind of, search for social contact?

Robert: [...] Since I come there with sex in mind, then it takes quite a lot for someone to catch my interest and, well make me interested enough in another kind of way. But of course, it has happened as well. But it's one in a hundred who are interesting enough in that way.

He does not have, or search for, community friends, and does not intentionally look for a partner at the forum. Therefore he sees no reason to invest in a presentation of himself, since he does not find it necessary in order to get sex contacts. The only information that the members that he interacts with ask for is "length, weight and size". Robert's targeted focus on establishing sexual contacts while being on the forum also makes his visits shorter and more determined than the others.

The rest of the informant's profiles are more or less socially oriented with non-erotic pictures and varying amounts of presentation text. However, none of them seem to have anything in principle against getting to know members with sexually oriented profiles.

Viktor: If he is only after one thing, then I usually answer "thanks, but no thanks". But then again, sure if he can have a reasonable conversation, then I can talk with him as well.

M: Yes, that's right, so you do not have any moral objections or anything like that against-

Viktor: No, absolutely not.

Even if some of them do express a certain degree of suspicion or lack of understanding towards extremely graphic profiles, the overall impression given by the other informants is rather that the boundaries between the groups may not be as sharp as one might first think. When asked if it is hard for Joar, - who once left the forum due to the sexual content, to find people on the forum who want to speak about other things than sex, he answers with tongue in cheek that he is the one who usually initiates the subject. Also for Joel, who has a fairly dressed profile with face-pictures, sex seems to be the main subject while logged on and he finds it hard to believe that would be any different for other members.

Joel: And then, there are profiles saying that they are looking for friends, and I guess that is really just the same as looking for people to chat with. And absolutely, I can find it meaningful to chat, but I still think that there are rather few who are actually looking for friends in that way, since there is always a kind of...sexual undertone, that's how it always is. And [...] I sure have friends who I only meet as friends, but [...] it's usually a lot of talk about sex anyhow

Thus, the first impression of the different categories may not be fully valid. Further, one might question if the different groups actually do exist offline, or if it is just the same members who use different profiles for different purposes; a hypothesis supported by most informants even if none of them claim to do so themselves.

### 7.3 Experiences of *Planetromeo*

*Planetromeo* is the second most frequently mentioned gay platform online among the respondents in the survey, and it is used by three of the informants. However with its 4900 members from Sweden, *Planetromeo* must still be considered a rather marginal phenomenon among Swedish gay men compared with *Qruiser*. Nevertheless, it is obvious that a considerable amount of people find it meaningful to use this forum besides having a profile on *Qruiser*, but why is it needed?

Joel is the one informant who seems to have most experience from *Planetromeo*, which he has used for sexual networking while living abroad for a shorter period of time. Also Viktor knows that his friends who travel a lot use the platform for networking while being in other countries, but he has never had any use of his account himself. Ville on the other hand is soon going on a holiday to a European country, and has thus used *Planetromeo* to get in contact with local guys beforehand. On the forum, he has been able to reconnaissance what clubs to go to while there, and also networked enough to have some contacts to meet up face to face. Yet, naturally the forum works the other way around as well, meaning that it can be used for meeting international contacts who are travelling in Sweden.

M: But, is it efficient to use an international site like that one, for cruising?

Joel: Yes, I think so anyhow! I mean, the positive thing there could be that [...] you can mark if you are out travelling anywhere. So you get a lot of French tourists and Spanish tourists and such [...] So I guess it is. I don't know, but I think that there is more of a cruising-culture there. Everything goes faster.

Overall, as implied by the field observations, Joel finds *Planetromeo* more oriented towards sexual networking than *Qruiser*, meaning that *Qruiser*-members go there to partake in its more vivid sexual discourse. He says that this also colors his own and others presentations and profiles on *Planetromeo*, which he describes as more “slutty”.

Joel: It's a lot more profiles to fill out [...] you know eye-color and dicksizes, it's really all of it. So it is more focused on sex I guess [...] and you notice that yourself you know, friends who have a pretty decent profile on *Qruiser*, are perhaps not fully so...

M: Not as decent there?

Joel: No, no.

Thus, even though sitting in front of the same computer set, and often interacting with the same members as on *Qruiser*, the continental sexual discourse of this international cyberqueer space allows for a more upfront erotic “way to be” inside that space. On the other hand, as suspected from the field observations, none of the informants seem to combine this with the community making or socialization more common on *Qruiser*.

### 7.4 Experiences of *Grindr*

If *Qruiser* and *Planetromeo* can be seen as two fairly similar forums but with different atmospheres and user structures, *Grindr* must be recognized as the property of another medium. Being an application software for smartphones and e-readers, it was central to see how the informants used the platform, and if it was considered a forum or a communication technology. Half of the informants; Ville, Ingvar, Nils and Joel use *Grindr*, which at first may seem a bit surprising considering the fact that none of them live in bigger cities where most members are centered. However, they primarily use the app while visiting bigger cities, and testify to that there are rarely any other members in the places they come from.

M: How does it work in the town where you live?

Nils: Well, it doesn't work that well I guess (laughs). You only find people in the neighboring bigger city you know. But it's a little bit exciting if you are in the big city or such, and well, then some new [members] appear and you write and such.

Ingvar: Yes, I think that's pretty fun really, with technique that is, that you may kind of see that “woops, it's a...homosexual guy 70 meters away from me”. That's the way it is if you are in Stockholm, then it's just packed with...perhaps in the neighboring bigger town also. So sure, I use it when I go to bigger cities.

Ville also means that the number of members where he lives has decreased lately, since people may not be as thrilled by this new innovation anymore. The ones who still are active on the app, according to him, are people that he doesn't want to associate with, implying guys devoted to

cruising. Joel however, spends a lot of time in Stockholm where the flora of *Grindr*-members are much broader. For him, it can be used as an efficient way to keep track of community friends, as well as a tool for sexual networking, even if he prefers to use forums with more information about the members. Considering the fact that he always has an interactive community map in his pocket, he says that he may as well just party with his straight friends at straight clubs, since he quickly and efficiently can localize possible flirts by his phone if he feels like it.

Joel: That's why I still, when we go out, go to regular hetero-places, just because [...] they want to chase chicks. And since I don't have that need anyhow [of flirting on clubs] [...] I can just pick up and check my phone, if that would be the case.

Thus, it would be easy to assume that *Grindr* is best used as a tool for urban sexual networking in cities with many members and a higher degree of anonymity. This is also the impression that most informants have about the app, but Nils and Ingvar have been able to use it to establish friendships as well.

Nils: From what I have understood, it's perhaps [...] a lot of sex on it, you know. People are mostly looking for that. But I have actually got to know a friend from there, whom I hang out with sometimes in the bigger city.

Hence, *Grindr* seem to be used both as a social online space, but also as an efficient community map when wanting to flirt or find sex, which excellent conditions for online/offline dialectic.

### 7.5 Further online spaces

Lastly, it should be noted that several further online spaces are mentioned by the informants, as posts for cyberqueer interaction and practices. Not least sites for consumption of gay porn, which is being found both on LGBT and gay-sites but also at more general addresses. Also broader dating and sexual networking forums like the app/forum *Badoo.com* and *Bodycontact.com* are used to seek other men, since those who use them testify that a huge majority of the members are male anyhow.

Robert: I think that it's ninety- eighty per cent men anyhow. So it is very dominated by men in that way, and a lot of people are registered as heterosexual, but you still get suggestions from them, so to speak. [...] [There are] a lot of hidden cases of bi- and homosexuals there.

Several informants also mentions the chat-function at RFSL:s homepage, which by tradition is more purely sex-oriented. For some of them, like Ingvar, it serves as a good complement to *Qruiser* when looking for sexual networking.

Another interesting point is the obvious tension between the non-queer online space of *Facebook* on the one hand, and the queer online space on the other. Many address the issue of

frequently being asked by *Qruiser*-contacts to become *Facebook* friends since it is considered easier to use, and contains more information, picture and such. However, this is generally considered a big step to take and by some simply too intimate.

Joel: Those whom you take further and become friends with on *Facebook*, that's something that I still find quite hard, it feels as though it's separated [...]

M: Yes, how? That's very interesting.

Joel: Well, I don't know what it is, with *Facebook* [...] there is really your entire life, and you've been tagged in a lot of stuff. So I don't know, I still have quite many that I have met through *Qruiser*, and whom I still have become friends with on *Facebook*, but it becomes really close all at sudden

For some, like Joar, *Facebook* is then seen as a middle step, where you invite *Qruiser* contacts to a private space before meeting face-to-face. Ville, who is rather secretive about his bisexuality, has solved this equation by creating double *Facebook*-profiles: one official and one unofficial that he uses for *Qruiser* and gay contacts. The tension between *Facebook* and queer online spaces actualizes the fact that there are no easy divisions of public and private in relation to offline and online. Rather the online space of *Facebook*, where half the population of Sweden now holds an account (Sweden, Facebook Statistics), might perhaps be the most public space we have.

### 7.6 Summarization

Following the argument made in previous chapter, about how online activities are to be understood in relation to overall regulations and self-regulations, the production of cyberqueer spaces may thus be considered as acts of resistance. The kind of surveillance said by Foucault to be exercised by the individual over itself in order to reproduce the hegemony has here been described as an internalized “heteronormative gaze” (Foucault, 1978: 155). The “heteronormative gaze” is not necessarily a matter of violent or aggressive homophobia, but the quiet marker of sexual deviance in a heteronormative society. However, due to the symbolic marginalization of queer men within the hierarchy of hegemonic masculinity (for discussion see Connell, 2003), the heteronormative gaze nevertheless contains the threat of violence, as expressed by several of the informants in the previous chapter. Like “the male gaze” becomes a part of women's identification (see Mulvey, 1975), the heteronormative gaze hence disciplines queer subject from the outside and within. Thus, cyberqueer spaces may be understood as potential free-zones for less regulated self-expressions.

However, the different spaces in themselves produce and enable different ways of “being” within that space. This may for example be seen in the way some of, especially the younger, informants largely use *Qruiser* for sexual networking and to talk to others about sex, but still project an image of themselves that is socially respectable due to Swedish normative sexuality. In contrast, if judging from Joel's testimony, the continental international space of *Planetromeo*

enables more explicitly sexual approaches. It seems like some spaces, like *Facebook* and perhaps *Qruiser* are treated by the informants as “public”, in the same way as the general public, once again highlighting the blur between the online and the offline.

After now having covered the aspect of identification and self-presentation as well as queer virtual space, we will in the next part of the analysis take a closer look at the aspects of social networking and online community, before lastly moving over to intersections of the cyberqueer and erotic practices.

### ***ANALYSES PART 2 - INTERACTIONS***

#### **8 INTERVIEWS - SOCIAL NETWORKS AND VIRTUAL COMMUNITY**

In Wakeford’s criticism of earlier cyberqueer research, she questions how online communities often have been studied in isolation from further contexts. Thus, it’s been hard to draw conclusions about the quality of contacts and communities online in relation to offline counterparts, such as gay bars and other parts of “the scene” (Wakeford, 2002:23). The online interactions cannot simply be assumed to replace or match interactions and communities elsewhere. Further, the analysis of online interactions should pay attention to electronic communication as a facilitator for both “weak and strong ties” (Wakeford, 2002:23).

Hence, the following paragraphs cover functions and qualities of queer social networking combined with the informant’s general sense of and desire for an offline queer community, aiming to provide a more complete picture.

##### **8.1. Overall sense of community**

In the survey answers, social aspects seemed to be one of the most central gratifications of using queer online spaces. As many as 47,2 per cent on the respondents answered that digital media was very important for their ability to create and maintain LGBT-friendships. (see Question 9, Appendix 1) Hence, the interviews aimed to deepen this figure by going into details about how social aspects online may be understood in relation to the further context of the individual informant. Among the eight, four different main categories emerged, due to the online/offline dialectic of queer community.

##### 8.1.1 Symmetric dialectic online/offline

Among the informants who value a queer community, Viktor and Lars are the ones who have the highest degree of symmetry between their online and offline contexts. This means that they have quite a lot of LGBT contacts and friends who are well integrated parts of their life, and that they

use several different settings outside of the Internet to meet and network with queer communities. However, even for them, the cyberqueer spaces are highly central channels for staying in touch. Lars has lived openly as gay in the same big city for three decades and thus, has had plenty of time for community-building. Over the course of time, the city has also developed an increasingly efficient queer infrastructure with clubs and bars that he frequently visits. He is also involved in an association for homo and bisexual men who have met regularly since many years, and you can tell from the way he speaks that he is fairly involved in “the local scene”. Yet, besides that, Lars uses *Qruiser* where he has been a member ever since it’s early days. Over the years, *Qruiser* has been a space for social networking which also put him in contact with his current boyfriend. Even if he was a bit skeptical towards online networking in the beginning, it has proved to work very efficiently for him.

Lars: All of those that I have met, where the first contact has been through QX or *gruiser*, - that has never been any problems at all. But all have [...] perhaps with only one exception during the years [...] become good friends of mine, with whom I still keep in contact.

Nevertheless, today he mainly use it as a tool to keep in contact with current friends, and he says that he thinks of *Qruiser* as one of his important LGBT-forums, but that it would not be too dramatic to manage without it due to his offline community.

Even though living in a completely different setting on the countryside, without any queer platforms offline, Viktor also seems to have a symmetric dialectic between offline and online when it comes to his sense of queer community. He has LGBT-friends from all over the country that he has met on Stockholm Pride Festival and his job in itself means quite a lot of contact with “the gay-world”. He usually takes the opportunity to go to gay-clubs when his work takes him to bigger cities, sometimes several times a month. However, coming out two decades later than Lars, the Internet has served as an important construction tool during Viktor’s community building. He got to know his first gay friends on *Sylvester* and *Qruiser*, and still thinks of the Internet as a crucial platform for his daily sense of community, due to his geographic location. Yet, he does not think of queer community building as fundamentally important to him, and he rarely seeks up gay clubs or other gay meeting places for no further reason.

Viktor: It happens that I am in Stockholm three-four times in two months, and in the neighboring bigger city. But usually that is because of other reasons, such as work, and then I take the opportunity to party a little bit with the friends I have there. So for me, it is really connected to friends, where I party or where I go out.

### 8.1.2 Building a community

While Lars and Viktor have had many years to build up the kind of community that they want, Joel, Joar and Ingvar have only actively been doing so for a few years. They all express the desire

to know and meet other homo- and bisexual men, and in doing so, they have mainly chosen to use cyberqueer spaces. When Joel “came out” three years ago, it was when moving to a new town to study where nobody knew him from before, but where there are no such things as queer platforms for social networking. Neither does he know about any other gay guys there, but through the Internet he has got to know people in Stockholm that he visits now and then.

M: But if you compare, with not having a [gay] network in your everyday life offline, do you experience having a network online?

Joel: (with emphasize) Yes, exactly, that’s what I have actually. I have a lot of friends there [...] who I meet in Stockholm and such [...] Just friends. And I mean, you keep in contact with them either through *Facebook*, but pretty much *qruiiser* really. And [...] in that way, you still have some sort of contact with that world. Even if it’s the same world... but you become a little bit cut off when living in a small town.

Hence, Joel rarely uses any other platforms for queer networking and community-making, but still gives the impression of living a rather vivid queer life with a lot of contact with other gay men. However, due to his geographic location, this sense of community mainly seems to take place online in different cyberqueer spaces and without them, he thinks that he would feel much “cut off”. The Internet has also been Ingvar’s main source of community-making, and over the five years that he has been living openly as gay, it has helped him to get to know a few other gay men from the northern districts and even in his hometown. A few also live in the neighboring bigger city, where Ingvar spends a lot of time in his work, but still, most of his queer social life takes place on and is organized around cyberqueer spaces.

M: Judging from your survey-answers, it seems as though you find it important socially, in order to make and stay in contact with friends?

Ingvar: Yes, well that’s perhaps what I do most of the time at QX. Perhaps some new friends as well of course and then perhaps you see someone who seems nice, and then you hope that that it could be a decent person... And I also know people and have “favorites” [*Qruiser*-term] in the south of Sweden, and actually one I’ve met in person as well last summer.

Yet, for Ingvar, the main focus is not on building up a major queer community but to have access to enough forums to improve his odds of meeting a man to love, an aspect that will be further developed in the next chapter. When Joar came back to *Qruiser* two years ago however, it was with the concrete purpose of community building. By then, he only had one distant gay friend and had never been to any queer platforms offline or had any relationships with men, even though he had known about his homosexuality for several years. Joar did not really feel the need for queer community building due to the open-mindedness of the straight forums that he was part of. However, in the end that was not enough for him, since he realized that he didn’t have any platforms for actually meeting other gay men. Hence he decided to come back to *Qruiser*.

Joar: Well, I guess I realized that: “perhaps I should try to get to know other gay guys”. It gets much easier to find someone that way (laughs). And “where are they then?”- well, they were on *Qruiser*, that was all I knew.

Since coming back to *Qruiser*, Joar have been using the forum for community building and networking, and he also met his first boyfriend there. Mainly he searches for contacts in his near surroundings so that they also can meet offline, but still it seems as though his queer community mainly takes place online. As the situation is now, he does not seem to long for any alternative ways to meet gay men, but definitely thinks that he would do so if he couldn't use the Internet.

M: But if you did not have the Internet, - where you have your gay-community at the time, do you think that you would try harder to find such offline then?

Joar: Yes. I'm hundred per cent sure! (Laughs) [...] Now I don't even know what alternatives there are, but I would probably seek something that was not first of all sexual or drug consuming. Since that suits me better.

Finally, among the informants who seem to be building up a community, we have Nils who has lost contact with most of his gay friends due to a long term relationship and geographic dislocatedness. The town where he lives now does not have much to offer in terms of queer platforms, and he does not know any other LGBT-people or gay men there. Hence the online platforms are very central for his sense of community.

Nils: I can imagine that [if] I had [still] been living in the big city and hanged out with gay people, and gone to parties and home-parties and such, then I would have met more...well perhaps potential dates and such, that way. But since I don't really do that anymore, the Internet becomes even more crucial for me.

By using cyberqueer platforms like *Qruiser* and *Grindr*, Nils now seems to be rebuilding a new community in a bigger city where he plans to move. Just like Joar, Nils also thinks that he would put more effort into finding queer offline counterparts if he did not have the Internet, but as it is at the moment it seems to be enough.

M: But, you do not go to any other [gay] places?

Nils: No.

M: No that's right. Do you think that you would do so to a greater extent [if you did not have the Internet]?

Nils: Yes absolutely. I would. Because that's what you do now instead, now you sit at home and surf instead of going to other places.

### 8.1.3 A self-sufficient online community?

While most informants either have, or are investing in a queer community with the wish for offline/online symmetry, Ville has a more ambivalent attitude towards the idea of integrating the online with the offline. His bisexuality has always been centered on cyberqueer spaces, as there are no queer platforms offline in his hometown or where he lives now. Instead Ville has been using the Internet to find gay friends and flirts, and the first person he got to know in his current hometown was a contact from *Qruiser*. Still, Ville has strived to keep his spheres divided, since he does not want most of his friends and family or girlfriend to know anything about his bisexuality.

Thus, his main contact with other bisexual and homosexual men still takes place online. However, his offline gay community seems to be expanding as he just recently started to visit gay clubs for the first time. He has also been devoted to international gay networking through *Planetromeo* with people who he intends to go and visit face-to-face.

Ville: I have spoken with a few people there [at *Planetromeo*], from the place where I am going on a holiday soon, and asked what clubs are good and which are not.

M: Yes that's great! Do you think that you will meet up any of them now when you're there?

Ville: Yes, there is one person that I have been talking to for a long time, so we're planning... well, to get to know each other and, well hang out a bit and such.

This could perhaps imply that Ville is striving for a higher degree of symmetry between his offline and online context, and that the cyberqueer spaces may be offering him the tools for doing so in a discrete enough way.

### 8.1.4 No desire for a community

The final perspective on the aspect of queer community is represented by Robert, who wishes to keep his bisexual life completely cut off from his official straight life. He does not know of any other bisexual or homosexual men on the countryside where he has his place of residence, and his contacts with gay men consist of short sexual meetings in remote places, arranged over the Internet. However, he thinks that he would get a lot out of meeting others "likeminded", but it would not come naturally to him since he does not have anywhere to go in his near surroundings, and actively planning such thing would mean too much of a statement to him.

Robert: If it would have happened, that I just walked into a place and realized that it was a gay club for example... then I would probably get loads out of that. To meet likeminded. But... that will never come naturally to me, since I don't have any of that in my near surrounding.

On the other hand, at the time Robert seems to be rather satisfied with the degree of involvement that he has in the online forums, and even there he does not really strive to find friends or expanding his social network. The cyberqueer spaces are not a social arena for him, but places that he visits briefly to be picked up by men for erotic meetings. He does not have any LGBT friends either online or offline and he does not fantasize about living on a location with further offline platforms for gay networking.

M: But, considering your sexual identity, have you ever been thinking that it would be better to live somewhere else where you had better possibilities to meet other LGBT-people, and be able to go to clubs and such?

Robert: No not really, I have not been thinking like that. That's where the Internet comes into the picture, that it is so much easier that way. I mean, I have never ever been going to that kind of places.

Consequently, one can see that the ones among the informants, who live openly as gay, all seem to value having some kind of queer community. For some who have had more time or a

suitable location, the dialectic between online and offline is rather symmetric, and the cyberqueer spaces then mostly serve the purpose of organizing and arranging existing contacts. For others however, there are few offline counterparts to the cyberqueer spaces, which then become the very centers for community building. For several of the informants, even though having offline alternatives on a reasonable distance, it has still been a more natural choice to look for a community online. However, for the ones who live openly as gay, there is an outspoken desire to merge their queer life online with their offline context, in terms of friends, networks and love life.

### 8.2 Queer social networking

Looking at the answers from the survey, cyberqueer spaces seem like well-functioning channels to establish new contacts for the respondents. As many as 65,3 per cent of the respondents agrees partly (36,5 per cent) or totally (28,8 per cent) about that digital media provides an efficient ways for them to get to know new friends (see Question 13, Appendix 1) Further only 2,9 per cent of the survey respondents have never met up face-to-face with men who they have established contact with by digital media, and 45,7 per cent do so every now and then (see Question 12, Appendix 1). Also when speaking with the informants, such online/offline dialectic seem fairly nondramatic, as part of a social networking with the potential to generate long-term friendships.

Except from Robert, all of the informants have the experience of finding new friends online, which often lead over to integration in their offline contexts. A few weeks of chatting easily results in having a cup of coffee together, - sometimes with the potential of something romantic or erotic, and sometimes purely for the purpose of social networking. Thus, many of the informants mainly initiate contacts with other members in their home area. While it would mean breaking the codex of many social networks to ask a stranger to meet up for a face-to-face chat at the nearest café, in the observed cyberqueer spaces it seems perfectly natural.

Joar appreciates if his online contacts lead to face-to-face meetings since he wants to broaden his overall gay network, and both Lars and Nils think of a cup of coffee as a natural step to take, if they have been chatting for a while.

Nils: I mean, I definitely think [...] that you should see each other fairly soon, because [...] if you write and write and write, then it's just going to fizzle out in the end. I am more of a spontaneous person you know, if I feel that "well, this is going well" or "this seems like a fun person", then I will just "well, but what the heck, I'll come over to the city now, so that we can have a coffee- see you in half an hour" [...] More just an unconditional, uncomplicated... an open, well get-together.

Independent on what the intentions may be, using cyberqueer spaces to establish new offline contacts seem very common, and most informants feel comfortable with taking the first step or to initiating the actual meeting.

### 8.3 Summarization

By trying to reflect a broader image of the informant's general sense of community, the purpose of this chapter has been to answer up to the need for contextualization of online interactions. Hence, looking at the experiences expressed by the informants as well as the survey, the cyberqueer spaces are regarded as important channels for both finding friends and staying in contact. This is true, for all the informants, regardless of degree of openness or geographical location, with only one exception. The contacts made online may also be seen to facilitate both "weak and strong ties", where some lead over to brief meetings while others become friends for life, whether only online or integrated offline (Wakeford, 2002:23).

Further, the communities experienced online have different relationships to offline counterparts depending on matters such as geography and openness. Lars, who has a high degree of symmetry between his online and offline community, express that it would not be too dramatic for him if he did not have the Internet, since he easily may find clubs and friends offline in the big city where he lives. Viktor, on the other hand, who also expresses a high degree of symmetry, is much more dependent on the Internet for organizing and keeping in contact with his community due to his rural location. Further, for the informants who are trying to network from non-urban locations, the community provided by cyberqueer spaces is crucial, and several of them do not use any offline counterparts for meeting other gay men at all. However, this is also true for Joar who lives in a big city, and do have other alternatives, and it should be remembered that also Joel preferred the Internet over other alternatives when living in Stockholm. Hence, perhaps the cyberqueer spaces may be said to sometimes replace communities elsewhere in a rather satisfying way. Yet, due to the high degree of social interconnectedness, between platforms, spaces and devices, even in the cases where all interactions are originating online, cyberqueer interactions can rarely be understood as purely online or offline (Kozinets 2011:12). This may be illuminated by the fact that even Robert, who eagerly wants to keep his bisexuality strictly separated from his offline context, still meet up his online contacts for embodied sex face-to-face.

## 9 INTERVIEWS - NEW TECHNOLOGY AND EROTIC PRACTICE

We are now moving over to the last aspect of cyberqueer research mentioned by Wakeford, by paying closer attention to cyberqueer organization of sexual practice. The analysis aims to describe how the informants experience and use the possibilities offered online for erotic and romantic interaction, and how it corresponds to their longings and needs. The chapter starts by

descriptions regarding love and connectedness online, followed by experiences of sexual networking.

### 9.1 Love and connectedness

*Most of all I would like to just meet someone while being in town, and then it would just say "click", and then that person would turn out to be gay, but that's an utopia, it doesn't work that way you know.*

*Ingvar*

There are few doubts about that cyberqueer spaces can be used as fairly efficient tools for sexual contacts. Tailor made forums for every thinkable preference enables likeminded to connect, webcam sites pleases the voyeur as well as the exhibitionist, and mass platforms like *Qruiser*, *Planetromeo* and *Grindr* offers a never ending catalogue of profiles to cruise in the search for a new playmate. But how well do they actually work when searching for love and connectedness?

For Robert, Ville, Viktor and Joel, the search for love is not expressed as a number one priority when using the online forums even it is considered as something that could happen along the way. Lars already lives in a twosome relationship with a man he met on *Qruiser*, and several of the other also witness about having found previous boyfriends online. So too has Joar, who expresses hopes of the possibility to do so again, even if he is also rather thrilled about the potential for sexual networking online that he has just recently become interested in.

For Ingvar and Nils however, the overarching aim of being within the cyberqueer spaces is to find someone to love. Since breaking up with his first boyfriend, Ingvar now wants to meet someone to share the rest of his life with. However, he says that it is not very likely that he would just run into someone in the small town where he lives, even if that seems to be his ultimate idea of romance. Hence, Ingvar uses *Qruiser*, *Grindr* and *Bodycontact* in his search for a relationship. Along the way he has met men online and arranged for dates and a few erotic contacts, but his goal has always been to build a relationship.

Ingvar: I mean I hope that...the Right One is there [on *Bodycontact*] as well, in the same way as on QX.

M: [...] You do have that as your ultimate expectation when using those sites; that you want to meet someone for a long-term relationship?

Ingvar: Yes I do.

Nils also expresses the wish to meet someone to live together with but find it hard to establish that kind of contacts online, since he finds the general tone more oriented towards sex. In his and Ingvar's stories, there is a sincere longing for tenderness and romance that the cyberqueer spaces seem substantially unable to satisfy. As a compromise Nils has instead looked for a long term sex-contact, but even in that case his expectations have been too romantic for the ones he has got in contact with.

Nils: I have had some potential sex-mates, whom I have been writing with, but then when I have started to talk about that, you know, that I don't want to only have sex, but to be able to hang out, go to the gym together, sleep together and such, then they have been like "bye bye", and nothing more has happened.

Ingvar: Since I write there that I am looking for a relationship, because that's what I do really... and that's what I am trying to do also when you find a profile that I think seem nice [...], then [...] you contact them to find out, but it's usually only the kind who is looking for sex or....the only thing they ask for, is you're dicksized (ironically) and I mean, *that's* really interesting...

Thus, even if *Planetromeo* was the only platform within the field observations that had an concrete erotic atmosphere, also a more diverse space like *Qruiser* seem to imply a sexual discourses that makes it difficult to be open about having love as an outspoken agenda while networking. It is possible that the observed cyberqueer spaces are not as gratifying to the ones in search for love and connectedness, as to the ones searching for sexual networking.

### 9.2 Sexual networking

Among the respondents for the survey, there were no doubts about that cyberqueer spaces are seen as crucial platforms for sexual networking. 51, 9 per cent of the respondents regard digital media as important or very important for their ability to create sexual contacts, and only 5,7 per cent regard it as completely irrelevant (see Question 13, Appendix 1). Once again, similar patterns may be seen among the informants.

#### 9.2.1 The one place to meet

Whether or not looking for love in the long run, many of the informants testify to the efficiency of sexual networking in cyberqueer spaces. For some it is in practice the only forum they ever use to flirt with other men. With few exceptions, both Robert Ingvar and Nils have established all their sexual contacts with men over the years online.

Joel: Actually I think, [with] one exception perhaps, that I have got in contact with all the men and guys who I have met for sex, through the net. Really *all*.

*When speaking of his first intimate contact with a man.*

Robert: It was a guy who I met on the pub. That's the only time that I have met someone that way, without first being in contact by the computer.

As seen, several of the informants do not use any offline platforms for gay men, but even Joel and Nils who are singles and occasionally do so, still seem to prefer flirting online. When they are out on gayclubs they are focused on dancing and hanging out with their friends, and cannot seem to find any reasons to try to pick up guys there when they can do it so much more conveniently from their computer or smartphone.

Nils: If I go out, - I mean, I only dance you know. So I [...] have never... picked up anyone on a dance floor [...] or even been picked up myself. So, it has been a lot like, if I go out with a friend or a few, then *we* hang out you know, so I have never met anyone on a club. So still, you have always had to surf the Internet for that [...]  
M: So you have actually got in contact with all guys that you have met in that way [dated] through the Internet?  
Nils: Yes, except for my ex, that is.

Joel also finds online flirting more sympathetic than the pick-up culture on the club-scene. When meeting guys for the first time face-to-face, he has a tendency only to pay interest to the ones who look like his ideal, but when writing to people instead, he may sometimes be charmed by the older man or the chubby guy whom he otherwise would only ignore.

### 9.2.2 Online cruising

Joel and Robert are generally the two informants who seem to be most interested in sexual networking, or what by tradition have been called “cruising” within gay communities. They both enjoy the easy ways to get in contact within cyberqueer spaces and frequently enjoy nonromantic sexual meetings with men they have met online. Further, Robert has a rather interesting perspective on the phenomenon since he is bisexual and also tries to pick up women the same way on the forum *Bodycontact*, without any success. When being on gay forums however, he only needs to log on in order to have offers dropping in.

Robert: It’s easier to meet men... much easier. You just have to log in to any of the sites really, and then it’s done in an hour if you want to...

Robert: I am surprised that this world works the way it works... but it really does. So I am very happy that I am bisexual anyhow. That you never have to... do without you know.

The frequency of sexual contacts for Robert has depended on whether he has had a girlfriend at the time. While in a relationship he would still arrange secrete sex dates with men once in a while, but while being single it may be as often as once a week. Also Joel says that it is remarkably easy to arrange sex dates as long as he is in Stockholm, thanks to the cyberqueer technique.

Joel: Well, you do sleep around a lot, and I mean especially when you are single you know [...] I mean, your straight friends go like “no way? For real? Is it that easy?”. And of course, that’s thanks to all the apps and Internet sites, I mean you *do* get laid whenever you want to.

### 9.2.3 In practice

When speaking about the cyberqueer sexual networking, most informants primarily focus on the kind of contacts that actually leads over to face-to-face erotic meetings, even if many also express the use of sex-chats, especially when they first joined the forums. Thus, cyberqueer spaces may be used rather simply, as a way of getting in contact and organize offline appointments, or as a space for flirting and foreplay, e.g. by sending intimate or naked photographs to one another. Joel

has a dressed and serious looking *Qruiser*-profile, but says that he always has some nude-pictures ready if needed.

Since several of the informants, who sometimes or often use online platforms for sexual networking, live in rather secluded areas, they need to strategically target other neighboring larger cities when initiating such contacts. Ingvar previously arranged with an apartment for sleep-overs in the neighboring city, and for Robert it only takes about half an hour to drive to the larger town nearby. He either visits the men he meets in their homes, or outdoors in secluded places depending on the season and weather. However, he does not trust the established cruising area of the city but says that he has instead been looking beforehand for suitable spots and now knows where to go in order not to be interrupted.

Robert: I know [...] about secluded places without any risk of being caught. I know that kind of things. That's the kind of things you... you reconnaissance where you could eventually be and then, I make sure that we meet up on those places.

M: Yes. Because there are no such [cruising] places in the town where you usually meet up?

Robert: [...] I don't know whether it is a myth or not, but there is supposed to be a walking path where people meet. But [...] a family with kids or anything could walk in on you there, and that's not something that you want others to be subjected to, in that way. So that's why I try to stay away from that kind of places, and try to find spots that are very secluded.

Joel has often had similar suggestion online from men in his hometown or truck drivers passing by, and who want to meet in a rest area or in a car, but he prefers to arrange sex-dates when going to Stockholm instead. He laughs and says that his visits sometimes start to look like “sex tourism”, especially now when he is single. When we meet, Joel is in Stockholm over the weekend and has arranged four or five sex-dates with people that he has met online.

Joel: I mean [...] considering that you live in a small town, - it becomes a bit like sex tourism when you are up in Stockholm, because then you have to take the opportunity while being there. So if you have a long weekend, like Thursday to Sunday [...] then perhaps in a weekend...four or five I guess.

### 9.3 Safety

The informants all witness about different strategies they have worked out online to enhance their safety and comfort. The interconnectedness of different online platforms seems to work as such for Joar, since he most often wants to become *Facebook* friends with the person before meeting face-to-face. By being able to see that the *Qruiser*-member has hundreds of pictures and friends on *Facebook*, he becomes a “real person” for Joar, and this procedure provides a feeling of security. Viktor never meets anyone face-to-face before first getting to know one another properly through other channels first, which usually means both online, telephone and SMS contact.

Viktor: I have made it quite clear to them from the very beginning that I am not going to meet anyone just like that. You never know what kind of sick bastard is sitting on the other side! No, but really, there is such a lot of fucked up people on that site [*Qruiser*], so I take it more like “Sure, we can talk a bit, give me your number so that we can talk there, you may call” you know, so then we can speak there a few times, and *then* perhaps if it feels alright.

Joel usually checks the person’s phone number on *Eniro*’s search registers before meeting, and also feels that he gets a certain feeling of personal connection from chatting with people. He prefers to do sexual networking on *Qruiser* and *Planetromeo* rather than *Grindr*, so that he has a little bit more information about potential dates. His first erotic same-sex experience was arranged over *Qruiser*, at a time when it would have been unimaginable for Joel to go to a gay club. The initial chatting however eventually made him feel “safe” and “natural” about taking the step to meet face-to-face, and he says that he has never had any bad experiences.

Robert has learned the hard way to become more careful while doing sexual networking online. Once, when having arranged a sex-date on *Qruiser* during the night, four guys were waiting for him in a car when he arrived to the meeting place and started to run after him. Fortunately, he was able to escape, but after that he more often decline attendance from other members if he gets the wrong “gut feeling”.

Robert: I am usually very careful with finding out who I am talking to [...] You can easily see that on the way people are writing [...], how they are as persons [...]. And if it doesn’t feel completely right, then I simply just decline.

Lars does not use online forums for sexual networking, but has often met up other members face-to-face for a chat or a coffee. Looking back, he thinks that many men in the gay community are used to taking risks in order to connect, and therefore find it more natural to move online contacts offline.

Lars: It hasn’t been strange to meet outside of a fixed room with four walls, so to speak, but you have been meeting outdoors among, - you have had to go to clubs on dark back streets [...] That has been the only ways to perhaps get some new contacts and of course sexual contacts there in the beginning, despite all risks it has meant. And the social media has only helped to perhaps be able to get, not only sexual contacts, but actually the possibility to get to know other people, and during other conditions.

Thus, in relation to previous alternatives for gay networking, he sees the cyberqueer spaces as a progress towards a safer practice of gay male intimacy, seen in a historical perspective.

Lars: I believe that [...] there has been a demand.. [...] [considering] the risk with meeting outdoors that is [...] So that it has been taken indoors, by the social media, where you may get in contact and then you may still reach the goal by actually meeting IRL [...]

So, while online dating has often been regarded as a risk behavior in the general public debate, it may perhaps also be considered as a risk management that provides men who openly or secretly seek other men, with a more safe and secure space to connect.

### 9.4 Summarization

Considering that Tsang (2000) stated already more than a decade ago that Internet quickly had become a crucial tool for gay cruising in the United States, it is perhaps no surprise to see the same pattern among the Swedish informants today. By the increasingly mobile and flexible means for communication and interaction placed in cyberqueer spaces, many informants and respondents seem to prefer digital flirting and dating even when there are other alternatives at hand. Further, for informants living in rural locations, the possibilities provided online enable sexual and romantic networking across geographical distances and social barriers. In addition, the cruising culture can be said to have found a sanctuary online, when relating the production of cyberqueer spaces to the Swedish banishment of gay cruising locations such as parks and saunas (Jens Rydström, 2005). Clearly, the kind of gay male intimacy that does not follow patterns of twosome relationships and domesticity does live on in some of the informant's cyberqueer techno-practices, favored by the efficiency of digital networking. Further, even if the online forums do not seem to satisfy all longings for tenderness and romance, they do facilitate strategies for safety and trust as also recognized by previous studies (Brown, Maycock and Burns, 2005). Thus, even though struggling with their own limitations, cyberqueer spaces may be seen to enhance the conditions for security and connectivity when placed within the former geographies of gay male intimacy.

## 10 DISCUSSIONS

Throughout this study, it has been argued that cyberqueer techno-practices may be thought of as production of queer space, as the digital gatherings of non-heterosexual subjects create communities by collective communication and interaction that stretches over time and geographical distances. By that, they generate locations that expand the spheres of gay men, in a heteronormative society. *Important to note, it is not the platforms in themselves that can be said to provide space in any complex sense, but the individuals, who populate them with all their dreams, longings, lusts and needs.* By observing online platforms for gay men, the impression is rather that they are best understood each one separately, with their diverse preconditions due to commercial and normative implications, as well as hardware and software structures. Due to such differences, the three platforms all reward different social approaches and digital habits, also reported by the informants. This motivates memberships at several different sites, so that each may be used for different needs. For the informants, this often means using *Qruiser* as a space for social networking, flirting, staying in touch and spending time, while additional sites like *Planetromeo* are used for the arrangement of more immediate dates. The same individuals, often interacting with the same set of members but in different spaces, hence take on diverse approaches towards

normative standards of decency depending on where they are at the time. Among the informants, no one seems to use *Grindr* as a space in its own right, but more as a tool to keep track of friends, and sometimes create new contacts. Since most of them however have got used to different safety procedures built into their online networking, *Grindr* may be seen as too shallow for senses of connectivity. Some forums, such as *Qruiser*, allow for a greater flexibility in tone and self-presentation from its members, resulting in a pattern of varied profile types. However, all platforms are used creatively by the members in order to suit their needs and wishes. Thus, a platform like *Grindr*, enforcing normative standards of decency on its members, may still be used liberally for sexual networking. In the same way, a platform like *Qruiser*, structured as a gay *Facebook* with an endless catalogue of categorizations and labels, are sometimes used as a space for complete discretion by non-profiles like Robert.

*The analysis of cyberqueer techno-practices as production of space has further highlighted the heteronormative domination of public space, affecting the informant's possibilities for sexual self-expression and same-sex intimacy in the form of public affection.* These, often subtle, forms of self-regulation illuminate ways of heteronormative discipline over queer existences in a democratic welfare country. Such insight is of special interest within the Swedish society, otherwise characterized by national discourses of tolerance towards sexual diversity, and the freedom from most forms of juridical and formal repression. *Still* however, many informants reveal constant awareness of one's subordinated position in relation to the hegemonic heteronormativity. Few experience any serious obstacles regarding their possibility to be open about their sexual identity, but instead place the issue of *intimacy* in a particularly prominent position. For several of the informants and respondents, the thought of public affection is not even imaginable, while others are consciously aware of the occasions when they refrain from such expressions due to atmospheres and timing. This draws attention to the privatization of intimacy, which makes it easier for the individual subject to explain such a behavior, as well as for the general public to regard any resistance as a violation of the common rules. Heteronormative domination is not only reproduced by the internalization of normative standards, but is also accompanied by a quiet threat of male violence, mentioned by all informants. Whether described as right-wing extremism, weekend drunkenness or male colleges, the stories of the informants illuminate how hegemonic masculinity is depending on the threat of violence in its systematic marginalization of gay men. *Thus, it is the conviction of this study, that the extensive online immigration of gay male intimacy ever since the birth of the Internet must be understood in relation to the heteronormative domination of public space.*

The study has also aimed to contextualize current gay male experiences by a historically informed background. When thinking about the formal undermining of queer architecture in the

past, gay intimacies beyond the borders of domesticity can be said to have been put in exile. Against this background, one may then ask whether the gay pilgrimage towards online spaces may be understood as a part of that exile: as a withdrawal to closet-spaces on the accepted side of the borders of public and private. If looking at Robert's and Ville's stories that would perhaps seem like a reasonable statement at first. Considering their desire for separate spheres, the Internet may appear as a hiding place, further enforcing the privatization of intimacy and clearing the public from expressions of queer desires. However, the constant bleed between different platforms, spaces and devices challenges such strict divisions, as even Robert's secretive online interactions serves the purpose of merging bodies offline, often in secluded but public places. Neither is it possible to make any easy splitting of the online as private, and the offline as public, since some online spaces are regarded, by the informants, as the most public spaces they have. This is demonstrated by the tension between cyberqueer spaces and the major social network of *Facebook*. *In that way, cyberqueer techno-practices rather seem to destabilize divisions of public and private by their very nature, in how it affects distancing and brings people and spaces together.* A technology like *Grindr* may in particular be regarded as a "visibility-practice", as the whole idea is to be marked out to one another offline. As such, *Grindr* can be seen as a refined resistance, challenging the very institution of the closet by manifesting spaces of queer desire, and queering offline space.

For most informants, the cyberqueer spaces have not been a place to hide, but are actually regarded as the emancipatory force that gradually enabled offline openness. Whether experimenting with their sexual identity, or practicing intimacy on sex-chats, or just finding out that they are not alone, cyberqueer techno-practices have had a specifically prominent position in their early experiences of approaching a non-heterosexual practice. This is true for informants from all kinds of locations including both rural and urban experiences, since online forums have been preferred over offline counterparts even when available. Thinking about this, *cyberqueer spaces may be just as important for gay male subjects all over the country while approaching their sexual identity/practice, since physical and face-to-face contact seem to be a very big step, often not taken until years later.* Instead, online forums are perhaps of a more particular importance for rural and geographically dislocated gay men after coming out, when wanting to build up and maintain a gay community as well as flirt and do sexual networking. Among the informants from rural locations, many presume that they would be cut off if not having the Internet and some even think that it would be unimaginable for them to stay where they are without it. Thinking about the extensive use of romantic, social and erotic connectivity provided by the mobile communities online, makes it reasonable to assume that cyberqueer spaces have weakened the power of heteronormativity within the gay imagination. When spaces of desire are not limited to urban locations, the alternative to stay

where you are is probably more thinkable. As such, cyberqueer techno-practices among gay men can truly be said to reconstruct a “commonly accessible queer architecture”, as requested by Berlant and Warner (see Berlant & Warner, 1998: 551). Accessible not only by urban citizens and not only for the cruisers in search for embodied sex.

However, as shown by the analysis of sexual networking, the cruising culture *does* live on online, side by side with several other forms of gay interactivity. Encouraged by the efficiency of new media which enables connectivity while on-the-go as well as provides an endless source for new contacts, the kind of gay intimacy that is not necessarily limited to domesticity and the couple-form may have had a revival online. With the ease of giving a nudge, leaving a footprint, or posting a ready-made status update indicating horniness, the ones in search for an immediate date can have it within reach in no time. Reconnecting to the underdeveloped potential by intimacies online to transform erotic practice in general, raised by Wakeford, we may state that the usage of cyberqueer flirting and cruising seem, by many, to be so well implemented that it has completely replaced other options such as bar-hopping. Further with the use of online forums as the central arena for getting in contact, cruisers are better equipped for safety procedures enhancing the sense of control.

Hence, if we agree about that there are no easy divisions to be made between offline and online when it comes to the ideas of private and public space, the cyberqueer spaces may very well be understood as counterintimacies in that they are erotic, affective and personal, while “public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity” (Berlant & Warner 1998: 562). However, it should be noted that neither the platforms nor the informants mentions LGBT or gay activism as a central feature of the cyberqueer universe, illuminating the question how these kinds of counterintimacies relate to questions of community solidarity and political organization. Echoing research on surveillance online, this could be connected to issues of how gay platforms strive to produce sellable, happy and disciplined audiences to its marketers. Even if not thoroughly discussed within this study, such insight once again implies the ongoing importance of political economy within the field.

In conclusion, cyberqueer research seems like a fruitful entry in filling the gap of gay and lesbian research within the Swedish academy. For further investigations it would be of interest with comparisons between lesbian and gay spaces online, as well as the different needs for extension of space between different national contexts. With a never ending plethora of tailor-made as well as giant forums, in national and international contexts, available from places all over the world, there are few limits for the scope of enquiry in mapping out the experiences of LGBT subjects.

### 12 SOURCES AND LITERATURE

#### Sources

*In-depth interviews with eight informants. Recordings, transcripts and notes are stored by the writer.*

Interview 1 with “Joel” performed 120331. Done face-to-face in the writers home, length 86 min

Interview 2 with “Robert” performed 120405. Recorded over speakerphone, length: 67 min

Interview 3 with “Ville” performed 120409. Recorded over speakerphone, length: 49 min

Interview 4 with “Lars” performed 120410. Recorded over speakerphone, length: 69 min

Interview 5 with “Ingvar” performed 120410. Recorded over speakerphone, length: 64 min

Interview 6 with “Joar” performed 120411. Done face-to-face in study room, length: 76 min

Interview 7 with “Nils” performed 120411. Recorded over speakerphone, length: 68 min

Interview 8 with “Viktor” performed 120419. Recorded over speakerphone, length: 46 min

*Online platforms. Extracts from the field observations, performed during week 9 and 10, 2012, are attached in appendix, and are stored in full length by the writer. All addresses are retrieved 120520*

#### Qruiser

Qruiser Home Page: [www.qruiser.com](http://www.qruiser.com)

Qruiser Statistics: <http://www.qruiser.com/info/statistics/>?

#### Planetromo

PlanetRomeo Home Page: [www.planetromeo.com](http://www.planetromeo.com)

#### Grindr

Grindr Home Page: [www.grindr.com](http://www.grindr.com)

Grindr Learn More: <http://grindr.com/learn-more>

#### Facebook

Sweden, Facebook Statistics: <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/sweden>

#### Literature

Alexander, Jonathan (2002) “Queer Webs: Representation of LGBT People and Communities on the World Wide Web.” *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 7(2/3), 77-84

Ambjörnsson, Fanny (2006) *Vad är queer?* Stockholm: Natur och Kultur

Bell, David, and Kennedy, Barbera. M (Eds.) (2000) *The Cybercultures Reader*. London: Routledge

Berg, Martin (2009) ”The “cyberqueer” option: a sociological take on queer qualitative methods”, Höskolan i Halmstad, Sektionen för hälsa och samhälle (HOS), Samhällsförändring, lärande och sociala relationer (SLSR)

Berlant, Lauren., and Warner, Michael. (1998) “Sex in Public”, *Critical Inquiry* 24(Winter), 547-566

- Brown, Michael, P. (2000) *Closet Space. Geographies of Metaphor from the Body to the Globe*. New York: Routledge
- Butler, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge
- Campbell, John Edward (2005) "Outing PlanetOut: Surveillance, Gay Marketing and Internet Affinity Portal", in *New Media and Society* 7(5), 663-683
- Connell, R.W (2003) *Maskuliniteter*. Göteborg: Diadalos.
- Fraser, Nancy. (1990) "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy", *Social Text*, no. 25/26, pp. 56-80
- Fraser, Vikki (2009) "Sex, Sexuality and Cyberspace: Intersecting Queer Spaces on and Offline", in Riha, Daniel & Maj, Anna (Eds.) *The Real and the Virtual: Critical Issues in Cybercultures*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Inter-Disciplinary Press
- Foucault, Michel (1978) *The History of Sexuality*, Vol.1. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Falkheimer, Jesper & Jansson, André (eds) (2006) *Geographies of Communication. The Spatial Turn in Media Studies*. Göteborg: Nordicom
- Gamson, Joshua (2003) "Gay Media, Inc.: Media Structures, the New Gay Conglomerates, and Collective Sexual Identities," in M. McMacghey and M. Ayers (Eds.), *Cyberactivism: Critical Theories and Practices of Online Activism* (pp. 255-278). New York: Routledge
- Graham Brown, Bruce Maycock & Sharyn Burns (2005). "Your picture is your bait: Use and meaning of cyberspace among gay men", *Journal of Sex Research*, 42:1, 63-73
- Gross, Larry (2007) "Foreword" in Phillips, J. David & O' Riordan, Kate (Eds.) (2007). *Queer Online: media, technology and sexuality*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- Halberstam, Judith (2005) *In A Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies*. Subcultural Lives. NYU Press
- Halperin, David M (1995) *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Harvey, David (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Kozinets, V. Robert (2011) *Netnografi: etnografiska undersökningar på nätet*. Lund: Studentlitteratur
- Kvale, Steinar (2008) *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun*. Lund: Studentlitteratur AB
- Kulick, Don (ed.) (2005) *Queersverige*. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur
- Landström, Chatarina (2007) "Queering Spaces for New Subjects", *Kritikos*. Vol 4, November-December, 2007, ISSN 1552-5112
- Langemar, Pia (2005) *Kvalitativ forskningsmetod i psykologi - att låta en värld öppna sig*. Korotan: Liber

AB

- Lauretis, Theresa de (1991) "Queer Theory\_ Lesbian and Gay Sexualities. An introduction," in *differences*, vol 3, nr 2, 1991
- Lindholm, Margareta; Nilsson, Arne (2005) "Rum, liv, identitet: Kvinnligt och manligt homoliv", in Kulick (ed.) *Queersverige*. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur
- Mowlabocus, Sharif (2008) "Revisiting Old Haunts Through New Technologies: Public (Homo)Sexual Cultures in Cyberspace", in *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 11(4): 419-439
- Mowlabocus, Sharif (2007) "Outside the Latex: HIV, Sex, and the Online Barebacking Community" in O'Riordan, Kate & Phillips, David J. P. (Eds.) (2007) *Queer online: media technology & sexuality*. New York : Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- Mulvey, Laura (1975) "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". *Screen* 16 (3): 6–18
- O'Riordan, Kate (2007), in O'Riordan, Kate & Phillips, David J. P. (Eds.) (2007) *Queer online: media technology & sexuality*. New York : Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- Ostbye et al (2003) *Metodbok för medievetenskap*. Malmö: Liber
- Phillips, J. David & O' Riordan, Kate (Eds.) (2007). *Queer Online: media, technology and sexuality*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- Phillips, J. David & Carolyn Cunningham (2007). "Queering Surveillance Research" in O'Riordan, Kate & Phillips, David J. P. (Eds.) (2007) *Queer online: media technology & sexuality*. New York : Peter Lang Publishing Inc.
- Rubin, Gayle (1975) "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex", in Rayna Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, New York: Monthly Review Press
- Rydström, Jens (2005) "Tvåsamhetens brunn", in Kulick, Don (ed.) *Queersverige*. Stockholm: Natur och Kultur
- Sayer, Andrew (2000) *Realism and Social Science*. London: SAGE Publications
- Sedgwick, Kosofsky, Eve (1993), *Tendencies*. Durham, Md.: Duke University Press, 1993.
- Tsang, D. (2000) "Notes on Queer 'n' Asian Virtual Sex" in Bell, David & Kennedy, Barbara (eds.) *The Cybercultures Reader*. London: Routledge
- Wakeford, Nina (2002) "New technologies and cyber-queer research", in Diane Richardson, Steven Seidman (eds) *Handbook of lesbian and gay studies*. London: SAGE Publications
- Wakeford, Nina (1997) "Cyberqueer", in *Lesbian and gay studies : a critical introduction*. Andy Medhurst and Sally R. Munt (eds), London: Cassell.
- Öhlander, Magnus (1999) "Utgångspunkter", i Kaijser, Lars & Öhlander, Magnus et.al., *Etnologiskt fältarbete*. Lund: Studentlitteratur

