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Digital (dis)connectivity in fraught contexts:

The case of gay refugees in Belgium

In the wake of the so-called refugee crisis, mediated representations of refugees abound, creating an imaginary of humanitarian disaster but also threat to European society. One aspect that caught the media's attention is the strong reliance among refugees on mobile phones and social media, which is often met with surprise (at best) or condemnation. For instance, in 2015 *The New York Times* headlined: 'A 21st-Century Migrant's Essentials: Food, Shelter, Smartphone' (Brunwasser, 2015). In academic research, the key role of digital and mobile media has been recognized and studied for some years now, and it is clear that these facilitate migration trajectories in all stages, from preparation and journey to adjustment in the country of arrival as well as the maintenance of connections with the country of origin, as will be developed below.

The academic literature on the topic tends to celebrate the advantages of digital media, creating an imaginary of refugee agency, but it is important to acknowledge limitations, for instance concerning access, affordability and literacy. Moreover, the focus on the creation and maintenance of connections through digital media may obscure experiences and practices of disconnection. This is particularly the case for forced migrants with non-normative sexual

orientations, for whom experiences of homophobia in the country of origin may extend to fraught situations in the country of residence. As with digital media in general, it is important to consider the offline material, social and cultural contexts of online media uses among this group.

For this reason, after a theoretical exploration of the role of social media for forced migrants, this paper focuses on the specific challenges for LGBTQ¹ refugees, both in general and in Belgium, where this case study is set. Over the past years, an increasing number of people have applied for and obtained asylum in Belgium based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. First, the relevant regulations and practices are discussed, based on desk research as well as interviews with six people involved with associations working on and/or for LGBTQ asylum seekers. Second, the personal experiences of refugees are discussed, based on nine in-depth interviews with gay-identifying male refugees. Throughout the text, the term 'refugee' will be used to refer to all kinds of forced migrants, but in the analysis of the interviews a further distinction will be made between 'asylum seekers', who are in the asylum procedure, 'recognized refugees', who have obtained asylum, and 'undocumented migrants', who haven't applied for nor obtained asylum. The aim, through all this, is to better understand the uses and limitations of social media for this particular social group, avoiding the dual trap of overly euphoric or dysphoric accounts.

Refugees as digital diasporas

The role of media in contemporary migratory experiences is widely acknowledged. While earlier studies focused on mass media such as television, which allowed migrant communities to stay connected with the home country

and culture (e.g. Hargreaves and Mahdjoub, 1997; Elias and Lemish, 2008), recent writing deals almost exclusively with digital and particularly social media. The key figure in this literature is the 'connected migrant', who uses digital media to maintain ties with the country of origin but also to build relationships in the host country (Diminescu and Loveluck, 2014). To Nedelcu (2012), this leads to a transnational habitus among migrants who are co-present across national borders: "He or she is able to master new geographies of everyday life and strategically use his or her multiple belongings and identifications within a ubiquitous regime of co-presence engendered by the technological developments of the twenty-first century." (p. 1339) Digitally connected communities of migrants are called 'digital diasporas' (Siapera, 2014) or 'e-diasporas' (Diminescu, 2012), stressing the close entanglement between migratory experiences and digital media. The key idea, here, is that digital media constitute such an essential tool for contemporary migrants that any diasporic group can be viewed as a transnational electronically connected network. As argued by Madianou and Miller (2012), in studying e-diasporas we should not focus on individual media but consider 'polymedia', the proliferation of convergent communication technologies functioning as an integrated structure.

Oiarzabal and Reips (2012) situate the role of ICTs for migrants on two levels: developing and maintaining transnational networks, and reinforcing and shaping individual and collective identity. Dekker and Engbersen (2014), focusing in particular on social media, distinguish four functions: maintaining strong ties with family and friends through 'virtual co-presence'; reviving contact with pre-existing weak ties in one's social network; establishing new ties; and providing information outside of institutional sources, which is particularly

important for irregular migrants. Beside these connective functions, they also point at limitations, in particular the digital divide caused by inequality of access and use, which is related to socio-economic status, level of education and other contextual elements. Nedelcu (2012) equally observes that many migrants face difficulties in connecting through digital media, not only due to lack of computer literacy but also for political or legal reasons. Contextualisation is important, connecting digital media uses to 'offline' conditions shaping the diaspora. As Ponzanesi and Leurs (2014) state, digital media usage in the diaspora "is shaped by the socio-political history of the different homelands, the variety of motivations for displacement or migration (which may be political, economic, social, gendered or religious) and the present living conditions of diasporic people in their country of arrival." (p. 11) Indeed, 'offline' contexts are key in understanding the everyday uses of digital media in a non-media centric way (Candidatu, Leurs and Ponzanesi, in print; Smets, 2017).

These contexts are particularly relevant in relation to refugees, forced migrants who tend to face specific challenges before, during and after their migration process. In each of these stages, digital media play a key role, in particular social media as accessed on smartphones. Discussing refugees' media journeys, Gillespie et al. (2016) distinguish the functions of mobile phones 'back home', as a source of information; 'en route', to keep in touch with friends and family and as a navigation, communication and translation tool; and 'on arrival', as a way to access information on issues such as housing, shelter, food, clothing, social services, legal problems, health and language.

Discussing the situation 'en route', UNHCR (2016) identifies internet and mobile connectivity as a key priority for refugees while travelling and in refugee

camps, where availability (network infrastructure and reliable electricity), affordability (accessible pricing) and usability (digital literacy and access to relevant services) are recurring challenges. Xu and Maitland (2015) studied communication needs among Syrian refugees in the Zaatari camp in Jordan, where they found a high degree of ownership and use of mobile phones, in particular for social messaging and as an information source. Together with food, shelter and safety, online access is a top priority: “Displacement creates a variety of information and communication needs, including maintaining connections with family and friends, keeping updated on the latest news, and staying informed for making decisions about subsequent moves.” (p. 25)

Wall, Otis Campbell and Janbek (2017) equally studied the Zaatari camp, identifying five forms of ‘information precarity’ or instable access to news and personal information. First they discuss the issue of access, not only in technological terms (access to an operational phone network) but also socially, in terms of gender, age and class limitations on mobile phone use. Second, they mention the prevalence of irrelevant, sometimes dangerous information, which creates the need for personal verification of information. Third, there's the issue of image control, as refugees have limited control over the way they are portrayed in media. Fourth, there is a risk of state surveillance, which leads to protective communication practices among refugees, for instance using coded language. Finally, there's the issue of disrupted social support by the family, which sometimes leads to the formation of new families. Beyond social and informational functions, digital connections also have a strong affective role as pointed out by Leurs (2014) who discusses ‘transnational affective capital’, the intense feelings of togetherness originating in transnational communication.

While suspending the emotional distress caused by physical separation, these feelings are temporary and fleeting.

Discussing the situation 'on arrival', Witteborn (2014) similarly emphasises the affective role of digital media for forced migrants in shared accommodation during the asylum procedure in Germany. Based on interviews with asylum seekers, she identifies strong emotions in uses and discussions of digital media: shame, particularly among women; and fear, particularly of state control, which leads to selective media use, selective self-presentation or digital disconnectivity. Other authors focus more on practical limitations. For instance, Larsen (2016), researching cell phone use in Danish refugee centers, concludes that cell phones are vital communication tools but that refugees face a number of difficulties, both in terms of access (lack of charging areas, WiFi accessibility or access to SIM cards) and in term of control: “a lot of the refugees had to apply some degree of self-censorship to communicate with their families left behind in the war torn countries. Of fear for government control, they either kept their questions on a strictly general level or talked in codes.” (p. 46) Khorshed and Imran (2015), based on their study among refugees in Australia, stress the importance of digital media for social inclusion, which is hindered by a digital divide related to limitations in terms of access, choice, affordability and skills (in particular language knowledge and digital literacy). Despite these limitations, in her study on the use of ICTs among refugees in Australia, Wilding (2012) argues against a one-sided focus on suffering and pleads for attention to processes of resilience and activity, looking beyond the risks and limitations to also see the opportunities they offer, particularly in the formation and mediation of identities.

LGBTQ refugees and social media uses

As indicated above, at the cross-section of the fast-growing fields of research on refugees and on digital diasporas, an emerging literature deals with digital media uses by refugees, discussing their role in maintaining connections and forming identities but also their limitations in relation to access and use.² However, what is mostly missing from this literature is a sense of the diversity within the refugee population, in terms of national, ethnic, religious, education, class and gender identities (Smets, 2017), reflecting a wider lack of attention for intersections in digital diaspora studies (Candidatu, Leurs and Ponzanesi, in print; Leurs and Smets, 2018). To this list, I want to add sexuality; although many of the current refugees flee war and violent conflict, for a minority the motivations are quite different. Rather than violent conflict, a group of refugees from across the globe is fleeing homophobic societies, in terms of legislation and/or social stigmatization. The problems they face are partly similar (getting asylum, finding housing, food, health care, etc.) but also different in many respects, as they are often isolated from their families and have to hide their sexual orientation from their peers.

One key difference concerns the asylum procedure, in which they can obtain refugee status by invoking persecution because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI). While this facilitates recognition of people from countries without violent conflict, SOGI claims are precarious as they are partly based on internal factors. Beside 'fear of persecution' (which can be supported by reference to legislation and documented homophobia), SOGI claimants have to convince asylum adjudicators that they 'are' lesbian, gay, bisexual or

transgender. Evidence from Europe and other countries accepting SOGI claims shows that asylum instances tend to use stereotypical, essentialist Western ideas of sexual identity and discovery. In particular, they expect a coherent and credible narrative of self-discovery, sexual exploration and coming out (Jansen and Spijkerboer, 2011). However, it is often hard for refugees to talk about their sexuality, to move beyond the discourses of sin, deviance and pathology they are familiar with, to overcome their shame, to openly claim a stable sexual identity, to talk about sexual activities, and to tell coherent coming out narratives (Berg and Millbank, 2009; Jordan, 2011). In order to gain asylum, sexual minority refugees have to learn to think and speak about themselves in the terms used by asylum instances, “an essentialist form of socio-sexual identity that is associated with a normative Euro-American sexual identity formation, that is, a staged model of sexual identity development to one of 4 sexual identity categories (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender.” (Murray, 2011: 132).

As indicated by Lee and Brotman (2011), the expectations on behalf of asylum adjudicators are part of a broader discourse of ‘liberation’, presenting the West as a safe haven and a place of freedom as opposed to repression, which forces sexual minority applicants to describe their home countries as uniformly homophobic. Murray (2014) concurs, identifying more mixed feelings about the country of origin in his research on LGBTQ refugees in Canada, and he calls for queer migration scholarship to decenter the ‘migration to liberation nation’ narrative. His aim is to “emphasize the complex and diverse ways in which sexual desires and relationships intersect with other desires, explore how these multiple desires impact movements, relocations and regroupings within and across various national borders, and analyse how these borders impact and are

impacted by social, economic and political forces on local, national and transnational scales” (p. 454).

Murray’s endeavour is part of the broader agenda of queer migration research, which aims to deconstruct dominant discourses on queer migration: “the majority of accounts of queer migration tend to remain organized around a narrative of movement from repression to freedom, or a heroic journey undertaken in search of liberation” (Luibhéid, 2005). Instead, queer migration research “highlights the fact that normative sexualities (...) require historicization, are produced within relations of power, and change, including through migration.” (Luibhéid, 2008: 172) Manalansan (2005) agrees, pointing out that diasporic queers do not assimilate but negotiate selfhood and belonging in a process of translation and transformation.

While the specific position of LGBTQ migrants and refugees is increasingly addressed, the role of digital and social media for LGBTQ refugees has hardly been studied to date. De Ponte (2015) gives some journalistic evidence of the importance of gay blogs and Facebook pages for LGBTQ refugees, while also pointing out their fear of surveillance and the importance of anonymity. Beyond that, this particular group is mostly invisible, both in research on the e-diaspora and in the equally elaborate literature on LGBTQ digital and social media usage. Indeed, the importance of the internet for sexual minorities is well-documented. From the early years, the internet was identified as a key place for sexual minorities to share information, promote participation and activism, to socialise and form communities, to explore and negotiate identities, to come out, to chat and date, and to consume porn (author; Gray, 2009; Kama, 2007; Mehra, Merkel and Bishop, 2004; Pullen, 2010).

In the past years, social media have been identified as a promising but also challenging environment for sexual minorities. Social media provide a platform for young people to explore and disclose their sexuality (Drushel, 2010), providing social capital in the form of social networks (Venzo and Hess, 2013), and to construct, manage, negotiate and sometimes hide their LGBTQ identities (Cooper and Dzara, 2010). Compared to older internet sites where anonymity was often possible if not the norm, social media offer unprecedented visibility which is not always desirable for sexual minorities, who may not be (similarly) out to all their social networks. boyd (2011) describes this as 'context collapse', the situation where one 'performs' for audiences from different social contexts. Drawing on boyd, Duguay (2016) describes how some LGBTQs deliberately use the affordances of Facebook to come out across different contexts, while others aim to prevent context collapse by tailoring their self-performance, avoiding references to their sexual orientation, or by separating audiences within or across social media. Similarly, Fox and Warber (2015) and Owens (2017) discuss how LGBTQs use Facebook differently, depending whether they are mostly in the closet (at which time they avoid all references to their sexual identity), partially out (giving hints about their identity), or completely out (openly communicating about their identity).

While the literature on LGBTQ digital media uses is growing, only a very limited number of researchers explicitly deal with diasporic subjects, while hardly any refer to LGBTQ refugees. For instance, McPhail and Fisher (2015) discuss the importance of social media for acculturation, but they focus on privileged, 'expat' LGBTQs. Boston (2015) does include a wider range of Polish migrants to the UK in his study on the use of dating apps by gay men, as do

Cassidy and Wang (2018) in their study on the importance of social media for Chinese gay men in Australia, but none of their participants are refugees. Only Shield (2017), in his study on the use of dating apps among gay migrants in Denmark, does include two asylum seekers, but it is fair to say that refugees are largely absent from the literature on LGBTQ internet and social media uses. The participants discussed in this literature are predominantly white and belong to the ethnic-cultural majority, so there is definitely a lack of diversity.³ This is where the current research comes in: by focusing on the media uses of LGBTQ refugees, it hopes to diversify the field of LGBTQ media research, while simultaneously 'queering' the field of digital diaspora research.

LGBTQ refugees in Belgium

The remainder of this paper focuses on the Belgian case, in two steps and drawing on different sources of information. First, the situation of LGBTQ refugees in Belgium is sketched, based on desk research as well as six interviews with advocates, people involved with associations working for and/or with LGBTQ asylum seekers. At the time of the interviews, in 2013, these advocates were involved with LGBTQ asylum seekers on different levels: Joel Le Déroff was working for ILGA Europe (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association), with a focus on asylum; Kenneth Mills was working for Çavaria, the Flemish umbrella of LGBTQ associations; Jan Beddeleem was the coordinator of Merhaba, a Brussels-based association for LGBTQ people with a migration background; Bart Hermans both worked for Fedasil, at an asylum centre, and organised True Colours Café, a Hasselt-based initiative for LGBTQs with a migration background; and both Albéric Akiteretse and Christian Pratt

were recognised refugees and respectively president and vice-president of Why Me, an Antwerp-based association for LGBTQ asylum seekers.

Second, the personal experiences of refugees are discussed, based on nine in-depth interviews with gay-identifying refugees. All are male, despite attempts to reach a variety of participants in terms of gender; as a consequence, the remainder of the article will focus specifically on the situation of gay men. All interviewees felt they had to escape their country of origin partly or mostly because of their sexual orientation. They came from different countries (alphabetically: Burundi, Chechnya/Russia, Iraq, Morocco (2), Nigeria, Russia, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Tibet/China), most of which, to different degrees, criminalize homosexuality. Four had applied for and obtained asylum based on SOGI claims at the time of the interview, and will be called 'recognized refugees'. One was in the procedure and obtained asylum more recently, he will be referred to as 'asylum seeker'. Four others had not obtained asylum, and only one had applied for it at the time of interview; they will be described as 'undocumented immigrants'.⁴ All participants signed an informed consent form, and in this chapter their names are changed to other names in use in their country of origin.

To understand the situation of LGBTQ refugees in Belgium, it is important to note, firstly, that LGBTQ rights are well-protected in Belgium. For instance, Belgium was relatively quick to install antidiscrimination legislation and to allow gay marriage and adoption (Borghs and Eeckhout, 2007; Eeckhout and Paternotte, 2011). Belgian asylum authorities are also inclined to accept SOGI claims, based on a European Directive qualifying the 1951 UN refugee convention:

For the purposes of defining a particular social group, issues arising from an applicant's gender, including gender identity and sexual orientation, which may be related to certain legal traditions and customs (...), should be given due consideration in so far as they are related to the applicant's well-founded fear of persecution. (European Union, 2011)

This directive was adopted into Belgian law in 2013, but SOGI applications (in which the applicant him- or herself invokes sexual orientation and/or gender identity as a basis for asylum) were already accepted well before, their number rising steeply from 188 in 2007 to 1059 in 2012. That year, 21% of the SOGI applicants (222) were granted asylum (Addae, 2013). This proportion rose to 34% (289 of 840) in 2014 and 39% (236 of 609) in 2015 (De Roover, 2016).

Despite these relatively high recognition rates, the Belgian situation for LGBTQ asylum seekers and refugees is not without its problems. Applications are assessed by a politically independent administration, CGVS (Commissariaat-Generaal voor de Vluchtelingen en Staatlozen), which judges the credibility of sexual orientation or gender identity on the one hand and persecution on the other. In a report based on an analysis of negative decisions, Addae (2013) concludes that the CGVS uses a number of problematic, Western presuppositions about gay relationships, the discovery and experience of sexual orientation, participation in the gay scene, and the expression of sexuality.

The advocates interviewed for this project confirm this criticism. Le Déroff explains how asylum granting authorities want to assess the credibility of SOGI applications like other applications, where there is a public and visible

motivation such as an armed conflict, so they ask for proof that the applicant is really gay, which to Le Déroff is not the right question because one can also be persecuted without being gay. Similarly, the presence of anti-LGBTQ legislation supports SOGI applications, but its absence does not mean there is no repression. Mills reconfirms these problems, adding that in his experience, the applicants who are rejected are either not believed to be in danger, or not to be gay because they have not had a relationship with a man before coming to Belgium. Hermans also discusses the delicate nature of the interview, where applicants hesitate to discuss such private issues as their sexuality in front of a Belgian stranger and particularly an interpreter from their own culture, who they suspect to be homophobic and who may not (want to) translate correctly.

The academic literature discussed above criticized the application of Western concepts and assumptions about same-sex sexuality in the asylum procedure. Le Déroff agrees, arguing against assumptions of closed and fixed categories and the tendency in legal contexts to follow majority views in society, which in Europe is the gay/straight binary. Mills also notes on the imposition of Western terms such as 'homosexual', which often have very negative connotations in the applicants' home countries so they are reluctant to use these terms, but at the same time the procedure forces them to take up this identity. Similarly, they are stimulated – if not forced – to present themselves as gay and to come out within the asylum procedure. To Mills, the asylum procedure clearly affects applicants' visibility management, which actually makes it harder for them to return. In a similar vein, Hermans notes an expectation of gender non-conforming appearance in gay men, so that feminine men have a stronger chance of getting asylum. This is particularly problematic as many refugees come from

countries where homosexuality and effeminacy are so stigmatized that gay-identifying men prefer to assume a hyper-masculine role.⁵

LGBTQ refugee narratives and media uses

Having sketched the broader Belgian context for LGBTQ refugees, now the experiences of nine refugees will be discussed. While coming from different countries, all share a number of experiences but there are also some important differences, including in their social media use which is closely connected to their specific contexts. As a consequence, beside discussing some tendencies across the interviews, I will focus on three individuals to illustrate the close interconnection between their media uses and 'offline' social conditions: Samuel is a recognised refugee from Sierra Leone, Maga a recognised refugee from Chechnya (Russia), and Tashi an undocumented immigrant from Tibet. While not representative for the diversity of the sample for this study – let alone the broader LGBTQ refugee population – these three offer a good cross-section of experiences.

To start, it is important to note that all nine interviewees self-identified as 'gay', 'homo' (in Dutch), or 'homosexuel' (in French). This is partly a result of the sampling procedure which worked through associations and social media geared towards LGBTQs, but still noteworthy as the interviewees clearly identify with 'Western' identity categories and do not fundamentally question them, even if some are less happy to identify with them, as they carry stigma in their home culture. Overall, however, they are 'proud' to be gay. For instance, Samuel says: "I never regretted being gay, I am still proud to be gay. Belgium gives me the opportunity for me to live the way I want to live my life. So that makes me feel

proud, I live my life the way I want to.” However, in line with Manalansan (2005), we should be aware that such identity categories are negotiated in the diasporic context, so this identification as gay doesn't imply the wholesale assimilation into Western identity categories.

Not only do they consider their sexual orientation as an important part of who they are, it is also the reason why they are in Belgium in the first place.

Samuel had to escape Sierra Leone because of the social pressure on his family:

I had to leave, because my life was in danger. My parents could not, especially my father, could not protect me. He is a very religious man and he has too much ego and he could not swallow his pride. Discovering my sexuality wasn't comfortable with him. He acted before thinking. (...)

The pressure became unbearable, and he came back home and asked me to leave. I did not and he chased me out with a machete. It was really... I had to leave because the people in the community were actually looking for me, I had to smuggle through the night to leave the community.⁶

What emerges, in this and all other interviews with refugees, is a clear opposition between the situation in Belgium and that in their home country. All describe a difficult 'before' (in their home country) and a much improved 'after' (in Belgium). All recount how they started to realize, in childhood or adolescence, that they were attracted to men and that this was wrong, sinful, or unnatural:

Samuel: The whole part of my adult life I had to keep things to myself. It's difficult to live that way.

Q: From what age?

Samuel: From around the age of 15-16. I began to realize my sexuality. I was strange among my peers, I did not have that much friends, so many things.

Q: Was it impossible to discuss this with anyone then?

Samuel: No, you cannot. Never. Because it is something you cannot be proud of, in my country, not like here. Saying it to someone is like selling your soul to the devil. You cannot predict what will happen next.

None of the three refugees discussed here were out in their home countries; only Samuel was found out and immediately had to escape, while Maga and Tashi deliberately stayed in the closet to avoid such troubles. All refugees describe their situation in Belgium as 'better', particularly the recognized refugees who obtained asylum. They appreciate the freedom and state protection they enjoy in Belgium, as 'out' gay men, and they have very limited experiences with homophobia and overt racism (see author). In their narratives, they replicate some of the discourses which are criticised by queer migration scholars, an issue that will be further explored in the conclusion.

Turning to their media uses, it is noticeable that the refugees interviewed in this project are rather disconnected, contradicting the centrality of transnational mediated connections in the literature on the (e-)diaspora. For

instance, most broke or lost contact with some or all of their family members, particularly because of their sexuality. Thus, Samuel is in Belgium on his own and lost contact with most family members, but he does occasionally phone his mother, who however doesn't know where he is:

I normally call her, but I put my phone always on private because I don't need her to know where I am. Up to this time she doesn't know where I'm living. Because, at that time I did not have protection yet, here. I never wanted anybody to know where I was living.

In Belgium, he does not connect with people from Sierra Leone: "I keep away from them. You can't trust anybody." Similarly, Maga broke all contact with people in his country of origin, including his father who does not know he is gay. Only his sister knows, and his gay friends in Belgium. He also avoids contact with people from Chechnya in Belgium: "I had some contacts before, but that became difficult, if they saw you somewhere. If they recognise you as gay it becomes very difficult." Tashi has lost both parents and is not in touch with relatives in Tibet, not even his sister whose husband is in the military so he fears consequences. He is in Belgium with his straight brother, who does not know he is gay. Contrary to Samuel and Maga, he does have contact with other Tibetan people in Belgium, but while he's out to most other people he does not want Tibetans to know about his sexuality, because he fears gossip. Only one Tibetan friend knows he's gay.

As to the importance of digital and social media, first it is important to note that the internet, particularly for the younger participants, provided a place

where they could explore their sexual orientation, in several ways. In a context of criminalization and social taboo, the internet – if and when it was accessible – was often the only way to find information during the process of self-exploration in their country of origin. For instance, at school age Tashi did not have any information and only heard negative comments on homosexuality, but when he started working he had access to a computer with internet:

In the school, we didn't have much internet. Only in the class, we have a computer. After I left the school, I'm working one year outside one restaurant, reception. In this they have a computer, internet. I'm using the internet, normally I'm working there for the assistant manager. So we are booking... through the internet, so all day I'm chatting with internet, I know how to use internet. And then I started looking through that, watching movies and like this, gay movies.

Samuel recounts how mainstream media in Sierra Leone only covered homosexuality negatively and the internet was off limits because it was unsafe to explore LGBTQ information, so he only had access to it in Belgium:

Samuel: I really only had access to media when I was in Belgium.

Q: So there was nothing really?

Samuel: They cannot. If you hear anything about it, it is always negative. You cannot get a good picture of it. You cannot go to the public cybercafe and go to gay sites. It is impossible.

After moving to Belgium, the internet became the key site of information and gay representations for all. For instance, Samuel says:

Coming here, you have a lot of free will to access anything, especially the internet, books, films. I had access to read books, I had access to see movies, I go to gay sites, I can watch movies online, I can watch documentaries online.

Tashi, who isn't out to fellow Tibetan people, did find some testimonies online: "In YouTube I saw some people, they share their problems. But for me, right now, I don't want to share." Maga only had access to gay representations on the internet aged 27, in Belgium, when he started exploring gay sites and porn. The internet is also the key source of information on their country of origin, but quite a few participants deliberately distance themselves from it. For instance, when asked if he uses the internet to know what's happening in Sierra Leone, Samuel says:

Very little, I pay very little attention, because I am an activist now, and we want to see that the government takes responsibility and gives people their right.

Maga is even more categorical in his dismissal of news from Chechnya: "I always say: people who want to kill me don't interest me."

Beside information, digital media offer a tool to connect. For instance, if the participants stay in touch with people in their country of origin, they mostly use internet-based applications such as Skype. When asked what he uses Skype for, Samuel says: “I use it mostly with my gay friends, those that are not in Belgium, to keep in touch. And also on Facebook.” Facebook is the key social medium, which all but one participant use, mostly on their smartphone. Samuel states: “I use it for everything: for friends, for groups, to make contact...” To him, it connects everything in his world, but not his relatives and people from Sierra Leone, whom he keeps a distance from. Thus, he ‘separates audiences’, one of the tactics to avoid context collapse as discussed by Duguay (2016). Tashi does connect to people in and from Tibet, but he avoids references to homosexuality:

Tashi: I have all mixed together. I have some gay friends, and some colleagues, and some Tibetan people I know and some of them unknown.

Q: So if all these people are together on Facebook, can they see you are gay?

Tashi: No, they doesn’t know. But they saw my friends, if they saw my friends some of them are gay. But I don’t think they will suspect me, because I have a lot of gay friends and also a lot of Tibetan friends, so they are mixed.

For instance, when he posts pictures they are about daily life, and when he likes posts, they mostly deal with Tibetan matters such as the Dalai Lama. By not

referring to his sexuality, Tashi tailors his self-performance on Facebook, another tactic to avoid context collapse as discussed by Duguay (2016).

Thus duality is typical for all refugees interviewed in this project: while they tend to be rather out in their daily lives in Belgium, they either keep a low profile on Facebook if they have relatives or non-gay compatriots as Facebook friends; or they only use Facebook to communicate with Belgians and gay friends, to avoid 'context collapse' if compatriots would find out about their sexuality. Two participants take this one step further by having two profiles to separate their 'straight' and 'gay' lives. For instance, Maga is very worried about context collapse, as he absolutely does not want any relatives or other people from Chechnya to find out about his sexuality: "I have two profiles, one is gay, the other is regular, that's where my family is." He created them using different browsers (Internet Explorer and Google Chrome), to avoid automatic links between the profiles and other applications: "So the one I always use is on Chrome, there I have the gays. The other one is for Messenger, for my mother. But my sister is on my gay profile."

Many interviewees in this project also use chat and dating sites and apps to connect to other gay men. As a separate and more anonymous sphere, it was often a more secure environment for them to first explore their sexuality. For instance, Maga uses PlanetRomeo and Gaydar to make friends and to date, also using Skype to chat with them before meeting up in real life, as he doesn't trust their online pictures. Tashi is on Grindr, PlanetRomeo and Hornet, using these apps for sex dates but also to meet friends and possibly find a partner. Interestingly, he was recommended by his lawyer to include details about his hookups and letters written by his dates in his asylum application, to 'prove' his

sexuality, echoing the problems mentioned above about the difficulty to document one's sexuality during the asylum procedure.

Conclusion

Digital and social media take up a central position in the contemporary migrant imaginary, as a tool for the formation and maintenance of transnational connections. For refugees, these connections are doubly important, in view of their precarious legal, economic and social condition. However, as this paper demonstrated, for LGBTQ refugees such connections are not unproblematic, their digital and social media uses reflecting their fraught 'offline' living conditions.

LGBTQ refugees, particularly asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants, have to keep a low profile to avoid context collapse which may lead to problems if they have to return to their country of origin. Even recognised refugees prefer to keep a distance from their compatriots, both offline and online, for fear of homophobic comments and actions. For some it is more a matter of choice, as they don't want to be exposed to rejection; for others it is more a matter of force, as they fear verbal or physical abuse. However, the end result is similar: rather than connected, they are (at least partly) disconnected from their relatives and compatriots, both in the country of origin and in Belgium. As such, they are not part of any digital diasporic community, many feeling more connected to their 'chosen family' of gay friends.

It is striking how most of the participants in this research replicate the Western identity categories and narratives of self-discovery, coming out, and liberation from suppression which are criticised by queer migration scholars.

Partly, this may be facilitated by the research interview, creating a similar dynamic to the asylum interview where such narratives are expected, as also observed by Murray (2014). Partly, these identity models and narratives are also globally spread through media, and they have been internalised as they offer LGBTQs a sense of identity. As such, more than transnational connection it seems that identity formation and negotiation is of key importance to the digital and social media use of LGBTQ refugees. They try to re-define themselves in a new context and form new networks based on sexuality rather than nationality or ethnicity. To do this, they manage their online presence, either by tailoring their self-performance or by separating their audiences.

These forms of personalised social network use illustrate the broader tendency of (partial) disconnection from social network sites as discussed by Ben Light (2014), who forcefully argues that instead of focussing only on connections, we should also consider disconnections, which includes both non-use and personalised use. LGBTQ refugees, like other migrants and LGBTQs, are not continuously and undistinctly connected to everyone all the time; instead, they connect and present themselves strategically, deliberately disclosing different aspects of their lives and identities to different audiences.

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Notes

¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer. For the sake of consistency, I will use this terminology throughout the literature review, as it best captures the groups and issues under discussion. When talking about the respondents in this study, I will use the more specific term 'gay'.

² For an extensive overview of and reflection on digital connectivity and forced migration, see the special issue of *Social Media + Society* edited by Leurs and Smets (2018).

³ For an exception, see (author).

⁴ All interviews were conducted in 2013, apart from the interview with Tashi from Tibet, who was interviewed using the same protocol in 2017.

⁵ For a more elaborate discussion of these issues, see (author).

⁶ All quotes are verbatim transcriptions of the interviews, which for these three participants were conducted in English, which was not their native language.