

Queer Migration and Digital Affects: Refugees Navigating from the Middle East via Turkey to Germany

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Abstract This article explores the ways in which digital media are used as self-empowering tools by queer refugees in the course of their migration from several Middle Eastern countries via Turkey to Germany. Our discussion expands upon queer migration scholarship and insists on the need to shift attention away from refugees' vulnerability to the empowering strategies that queer refugees develop for themselves. Based on observation and interviews conducted with queer refugees in Istanbul and Berlin, we argue that not only social media activism and interpersonal message platforms such as social networks, but also dating applications, open up opportunities for refugees to develop new coping strategies and a sense of belonging during migration. This leads us to focus on the emotional and affective value of digital media for queer refugees. While translocal digital media embed refugees within transnational networks that offer interpersonal/emotional support as well as useful tools for activism, our study reveals the restrictive power of such media. We argue that digitally circulated affects can become regulatory forces, which integrate queer refugees into European regimes of racialized and sexualized difference.

Keywords Migration · Digital media · Queer · Affect · Refugee

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Introduction

The *reason why I am good in using these things* (showing his mobile phone), why I learned English, why I went to university and have become a doctor, and why I fought against Assad, is my sexuality.

This powerful statement, voiced by a Syrian man¹ in an interview conducted during fieldwork in a Berlin-based shelter for queer refugees, provides us with several starting points to think about the interrelationship between three topics that at first glance may appear unrelated: forced migration, sexuality, and (digital) media. This article is an attempt to shed light on the intersection of those three areas of research. Furthermore, the statement makes it clear what a powerful force sexuality can be in shaping every aspect of our lives. Putting queer refugees' autobiographical narratives about their own sexualities at the center of analysis, this article not only offers insights into how intricately sexuality is linked to other complex socio-political factors, but also into the crucial role(s) of digital media in the performance of sexuality. We argue that sexuality needs to be taken into account in analyses of the recent so-called 'migration crisis'.

Our argument in this article is that digital media have much to offer queer migrants; both when leaving their home countries or crossing borders, and in developing new coping strategies in destinations of refuge. We argue that not only forms of social media activism, but also interpersonal message platforms (SNS) and dating applications can be used to create new empowering migration strategies. This article traces how queer refugees adapt and appropriate certain media tools in order to make both migration and queer intimacy possible. Furthermore, via digital media platforms, queer refugees encounter unfamiliar concepts of identities, belonging, and intimacy; hence, exploring the affective meanings of digital media opens up a new way to investigate how current migration processes are reconfiguring regimes of sexuality in Europe and beyond. Thus, this article also presents an effort to rethink the cultural role and affective potential of digital media: as media that can introduce queer refugees to new affective states that shape their actions and their ideas about the different geographical, cultural, and virtual spaces they encounter along their journeys.

Instead of the terms gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender, we use the term 'queer' throughout this article. 'Queer' serves not only as an umbrella term, but also as one that takes account of all sexual and gender identity experiences that do not comply with the norms of their socio-political contexts, and moreover often do not reflect Western conceptualizations of sexual and gender identities. In some cases it is difficult to categorize certain identification processes and practices under the labels of LGBT. Moreover, some scholars (Çetin and Voß 2016; Haritaworn 2015; Massad 2007) point out that 'Western' categorizations of sexualities and genders have been historically constructed in opposition to cultural Others—and continue to

¹ This statement was made by Adnan during an interview conducted on 26th October 2016. Some interviewees' names in this article have been changed for the sake of anonymity.

be. In this context, the term ‘queer’ opens a much-needed space for such complexities of identifications and practices.

In what follows, we first raise some concerns about the general discussion on queer migration and flight, in which queer refugees are often portrayed one-dimensionally as passive and vulnerable subjects. We then outline our methodological approach, which involved a combination of interviews, virtual and on-site ethnographies. Next, we present the analysis of our empirical material, not only offering insights into the intersection of the research areas of sexuality, migration, and (digital) media, but also elaborating on the empowering and affective nature of digital media for queer refugees. Finally, we close the article with some general considerations on the affective dynamics of current migration processes that are enabled and managed by the use of digital media tools, and their specific implications in terms of (queer) sexuality.

Aims and Theoretical Perspectives on Queer Migration and Queer Flight

Several challenges for studies on queer migration and flight require critical attention. On one hand, mainstream political discourse frequently portrays refugees in (heterosexual) families as “deserving” of protection (Holmes and Castañeda 2016). On the other hand, when humanitarian interest does shift to queer refugees, it is often accompanied by a problematically celebratory tone, which tends to portray queer refugees’ migration as success stories. Narratives of success and progress use individual queer refugees’ stories to exemplify a teleological development from (‘non-Western’) repression to liberation in the ‘West’. While it is important to highlight the violence that queer refugees have faced in their home countries, such narratives risk glossing over the problems and violence that refugees encounter while in transit, as well as in destination countries. Moreover, some scholars warn that such representations of queer migration divide the world according to their authors’ perception of the respective prevalence of homophobia and transphobia, and create the illusion that discrimination-free places and regions exist (Haritaworn et al. 2014; Jenicek et al. 2009; Lee and Brotman 2011; Puar 2007). Unsurprisingly, such distinctions usually fall neatly in line with the dichotomy of “the West” versus “the rest” (Hall 1992).

On their way to Europe, many refugees travel via Turkey, where they are often obliged to stay for some time. Although UN institutions define Turkey as a safe country for queer refugees and asylum seekers, queer refugees face violence and discrimination in their daily lives in Turkey (Grungas et al. 2009; Shakhsari 2014). Shakhsari’s (2014) ethnographic research in Turkey shows how queer refugees, who often get resettled in small Anatolian towns, find themselves stuck in an in-between zone in which they feel caught in limbo between the oppression they have faced in their past and present, and the freedom they hope to embrace in the future. While they wait for a chance to gain asylum rights in third countries of asylum, most of their rights are suspended. In view of the poor conditions and long bureaucratic processes that queer refugees face in in-between zones like Turkey, Shakhsari (2014,

1000) defines the long drawn out process of gaining rights as a “slow death” for refugees.

What is more, managing to reach third countries of asylum does not always improve refugees’ conditions. Germany’s initial response to the number of people fleeing war and violence was to open its borders and welcome the refugees (Holmes and Castañeda 2016), but, although it is considered to be a safe country for queer refugees, they still experience verbal and physical violence there (Albert 2016; Katzmarzik 2016; Thielen 2006). Having arrived in Germany, refugees’ ideas and ideals of Europe as a better, more open place are often met by the harsh reality of various types of intersectional discrimination, including racism, islamophobia, homophobia, and transphobia, which perpetuate their sense of being silenced, socially excluded, and disadvantaged (Çetin 2012; El-Tayeb 2012; Rajanayagam and Awadalla 2016).

Without underestimating the vulnerability of queer refugees in places of transit or destinations of refuge, we shift our attention to the strategies of queer refugees that reveal their active engagement in digitally connecting and forging alliances to fight for their rights, clearly refuting representations that portray them as passive subjects waiting for a “slow death”. We argue that a queer perspective on refugee issues calls for a theoretical shift from narratives of vulnerability to narratives of (self-)empowerment. Even when their basic rights, such as freedom of movement and security of person, are restricted, even when immobility and waiting become what defines their daily lives, refugees do not merely passively await their fate. Current research shows how they connect with activists, build transnational networks, and act—not only against homophobia and transphobia, but also against colonial, racist, and islamophobic dynamics of power (Mountz 2011; Rajanayagam and Awadalla 2016).

Drawing on the non-media-centric approach in media studies (Couldry 2012; Krajina et al. 2014; Moores 2012; Morley 2009; Pink and Mackley 2013), this article proposes a reconceptualization of the affective meaning of digital media devices for marginalized subjects. Looking at media not as an institution, nor as mere texts to be analyzed, we are interested in the various ways that interaction with digital media is embedded within everyday practices (Lünenborg and Raetzsch 2018). Thus, we should not see digital media practices as an ‘add-on’ to everyday life, but seek to understand how they are inseparably embedded within socio-cultural relations, the experience of migration, and the affectivity of the body. Indeed, following Clough (2010), digital media are intrinsically related to bodily affectivity; not only do they call upon users to interact, they also circulate the resulting information to other users, stimulating further interactions (Clough 2010, 212). Hence, affect is produced and circulated via the interrelations of human actors and (media) technology.

Information regarding migration strategies that can be crucial for queers, such as where safe queer spaces can be found, or which places are believed to be queer havens, is circulated as a result of the way digital media work with the body’s capacity to be affected. Thus, by making it possible for users to affect and be affected by other users regardless of geographical distance, digital media create new forms of intimacy and affect (Andreassen 2017b). The affective nature of digital media has the potential to foster new intimacies and a sense of belonging, especially in moments when queer refugees feel disadvantaged, immobilized, stuck, or lost. In particular, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram function

not only as tools that affectively connect users with one another and/or circulate information that may be otherwise unobtainable, but also circulate representations of queer intimacy that may be ‘unrepresentable’ in traditional offline media in certain contexts. Furthermore, the digital circulation of representations of queer intimacy and sexuality may play an important role in the decision-making processes of refugees during their migration (Manalansan 2006, 233–234).

In this article, we are concerned with the conscious perception of affect, rather than bodily responses to certain affective states. Thus, we do not view affect in contrast to discourse, but as something that feeds into it (Wetherell 2012). This focus enables us to concentrate on the verbal articulation and the memory of affect in our analysis of autobiographical narratives told by queer refugees about their migration experiences. In particular, emotions and intimacy, which can be viewed as complex socio-cultural patterns based in and driven by affect, are not only crucial to building digital migration strategies or new intimacies, but also provide entry points for the empirical study of affects.

Our exploration of the relationship between digital affects and normativities relating to racialized, sexualized, and gendered difference is informed by the theoretical contributions of several scholars including Ahmed (2004), Berlant (1998) and McGlotten (2013). We are particularly interested in the question of how a personal history of hurtful experiences shapes a person’s affective practices when they use digital devices. Moreover, we focus on the interrelation between virtual spaces and intimacy, paying particular attention to the regulatory nature of dating applications. We argue that dating applications not only structure, but actually limit the expression of queer intimacies to fit into fixed and predefined categories of European regimes of sexuality.

Methodology and Empirical Data

The growing interest in using digital media in ethnographic research has so far mostly focused on the kinds of roles that digital media play in people’s daily lives within communities, and how digital media are involved in the formation of communities (Pink et al. 2016; Witteborn 2014). We chose to analyze the use of social media—more precisely dating and SNS applications (Facebook, Grindr, GayRomeo, Scruff)—on smartphones in our investigation of the meaning-making processes of queer refugees living in Turkey and Germany. In order to understand the role played by digital media in shaping the migration experiences of queer refugees, we conducted non-participant observation, collected digital data, and conducted semi-structured interviews from July 2016 until June 2017. Non-participant observation (Lindlof and Taylor 2002) took place during fieldwork in Istanbul and Berlin from July 2016 until January 2017.

At the time of our fieldwork in Turkey (September 2016), a group of Syrian queer refugees living in Istanbul met every Sunday at SPoD (Sosyal Politikalar Cinsiyet Kimliği ve Cinsel Yönelim Çalışmaları Derneği, *Social Policies, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation Studies Association*), one of the LGBTI+ organizations based in the city. The “Tea and Talk” meetings aimed to foster self-empowerment by

offering participants a space in which to discuss their daily struggles as queer Syrian refugees living in Turkey. During one of the meetings we observed at SPoD Istanbul, a group of twenty people discussed how they used digital media to exchange knowledge about their rights and to share ideas for developing new coping strategies.

During the fieldwork in Berlin, which took place between July 2016 and January 2017, we regularly visited a sheltered accommodation center for queers in the neighborhood of Treptow. The shelter is run by Schwulenberatung Berlin, an NGO that offers advice to queer people and is funded by the city council. All the people we interviewed in Germany had previously lived in Turkey for a while, so they were also able to give insights into their experiences in Turkey.

Interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling. People who we initially met at the queer shelter or at the meetings at SPoD later introduced us to their friends. In sum, ten people agreed to individual in-depth interviews, five of which were analyzed in depth for this paper. The interviews were held in places chosen by participants, often in a bar or café. Two interviews were conducted via Skype.

In order to break the conventional relationship between the researcher and interviewee, one of the authors started each conversation by sharing personal experiences and opinions about queer migration, which helped to create a lively dialogue and exchange of experiences. Core topics were built into a narrative relating to experiences made before, during, and after migration. During the interviews, one researcher took detailed notes about the flow of the discussion and noted statements that were particularly relevant to the research topic. Statements that were key to the research questions were written down verbatim and shown to the interviewees later to ask their consent to citation. All but two interviews were conducted in English. The two Turkish interviews were translated into English by the authors.

In addition to the interviews and the data collected during non-participant observation at the queer shelter in Berlin and SPoD in Istanbul, we also conducted virtual ethnography. We participated as users on the digital media platforms that our interviewees were using regularly. We observed the online dating platforms GayRomeo, Grindr, and Scruff, as well as following the posts shared on SPoD's "Tea and Talk" Facebook group, an online solidarity group for refugees and allies with the same name as the organization's weekly face-to-face meetings.

Analysis and Results

Online Strategies and Activism

We met Belal, a refugee from Syria, through the meetings at SPoD. He worked for an online platform based in the U.S. that helps queer refugees to flee from Syria and was also engaged in online activism for the rights of queer refugees. He participated actively in the Facebook group "Tea and Talk" and organized the meetings at SPoD. Most of those who attended the meetings that we joined were cis men and trans women, who showed respect for Belal's extensive knowledge on refugee rights.

Digital media and online activism surface as strategic tools that can aid either migration to a third country of asylum, such as Germany or the U.S., or increase a

refugees' sense of personal security in Turkey. One of the topics discussed during "Tea and Talk" meetings was how refugees could use digital media devices more effectively in emergencies. Since most of them had smartphones, they decided to use group-texting options on applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Messenger.

When we met Belal at SPoD, he was waiting to be resettled in a third country of asylum. He described the terrible conditions experienced by refugees living in Istanbul as a "slow death". With "slow death" he was referring to the long bureaucratic processes and the interminable uncertainty of waiting for resettlement. Nonetheless, during the 3 years he spent in Istanbul, and even after he left to be resettled in the Netherlands, he was engaged in digital activism to improve the legal and social conditions for queer refugees. Thus, despite describing his own and his friends' situation as a "slow death", he was clearly fighting back against the long bureaucratic procedures. When we conducted our second interview with Belal, he had already managed to migrate to the Netherlands, where he carried on his activism:

I still keep thinking about my friends in Istanbul. I talk to them every day. I am trying to help them to leave Turkey. So at the moment, I cannot focus on my new life in the Netherlands because my mind is still busy with Istanbul. (...) I will give a talk at the UNHCR Office in Amsterdam about the situation of queer refugees in Turkey soon. For this talk, I need to be up to date. I get all the news about my friends in Turkey via the Facebook group. Maybe after this talk, I can start focusing on my new life in the Netherlands. (Belal 15.06.2017)

Belal's transnational connections seem to represent both an obstacle and an advantage in his new life in Europe. He wants to focus on his new life, but social media keep him informed about the difficult situation of his friends in Istanbul. Conversely, despite his anxieties about the circumstances in Istanbul, he is unable to be physically present as an activist there. At the same time, SNS help him to turn this challenging situation into an advantage not only for himself, but also for the refugee community. Belal's translocal connectedness keeps him in touch with distant friends who can provide emotional support to help him deal with the loneliness of having arrived in a new place, as well as enabling him to start a new life as an activist in Amsterdam and to continue fighting to improve his friends' situation and/or help them to escape from Istanbul.

Most of the people we met during our fieldwork in Berlin and Istanbul were actively engaged in creating new strategies to improve their situation, in clear contrast to common depictions of refugees as passive subjects. Digital media often play an important role in such strategies because of the instantaneous transnational connectivity that they offer. Belal's statement testifies to how online activism via Facebook and interpersonal message platforms such as WhatsApp help queer refugees to stay connected with other refugees in Turkey, with their friends in their countries of origin, and with activists and refugees in their destinations of refuge. These forms of translocal connectedness of people on the move are thus both a precondition and an effect of transnational migration.

I was an activist for refugee rights in Egypt. While I was fighting for refugee rights I became a refugee. On the other hand, I am still an activist. Although

I am in Germany now, I am helping people who try to escape from Egypt.
(Yahia 17.10.2016)

Stories like Yahia's counter widespread portrayals of refugees as passive subjects who merely wait for humanitarian aid from others. It shows how Yahia has found a way to use the valuable knowledge gained from his own migration experience: to improve the situation of others who have escaped or want to. Much of his activism is also reliant on digital media devices, which keep him connected transnationally. Even during our discussion in Berlin, he was obliged to interrupt the interview because he was getting urgent messages via Facebook from people in Egypt trying to flee to Germany.

Many queer refugee activists continue to fight against human rights violations in their countries of origin after leaving those countries. Yahia started conducting online activism when he heard that a hamam in Cairo, which is known for sexual encounters between men, had been raided by the police. They had been called by a journalist who had arranged for reporters to be filming men in the hamam at the time. 25 men were arrested during the police raid, and the journalist broadcast every minute of the event on TV. Yahia's successful online activism included using online platforms to ban the Egyptian journalist from attending a film festival where one of her films was to be shown (Ahramonline 2014).

Queer refugees use digital media platforms not only in order to engage in activism, but also to create personal coping strategies for dealing with new socio-cultural contexts. For example, one of our interviewees, Sayid, used online dating platforms to earn money:

One night, after I went out to a party, on the way back home I was waiting for the *U-Bahn* [metro]. I fell asleep at the station. When I woke up, I realized that my phone had been stolen. I was very upset. That was the moment when I have decided to earn money by meeting men. I wrote that I want *Taschengeld* (German for pocket money) if someone wants to meet me. (Sayid 27.09.2016)

This statement underlines the fundamental importance a smartphone can have for one's life. Sayid defines losing his smartphone as the crucial moment that sparked his decision to practice sex work. He needed money to get a new smartphone as soon as possible. The lost phone had not only helped Sayid to stay connected with his family in Syria, but also to navigate in a city where he did not know anybody. Even after getting a new smartphone, however, he continued meeting men for pocket money. He got to know a German photographer via an online dating platform, and they started meeting regularly. During one of our meetings, Sayid showed us naked and half-naked pictures of his body—on the smartphone. The German photographer had taken the pictures; Sayid had earned pocket money. Uploading the pictures onto online platforms helped him to meet other men, earn more money, and thus improve his everyday living conditions. During our second meeting, however, he changed his mind:

I don't want to keep on doing this any more. I don't feel comfortable, because I don't like it when people reduce me to sex. (Sayid 20.11.2016)

When he started to feel that meeting men for money was degrading and objectifying him, putting him in a disadvantaged and uneasy position, he decided to quit. His ultimate decision shows powerful agency as he refuses to let practicing sex work make his a narrative of victimhood. Although Sayid had described his decision to do sex work as his own choice, the imbalance of power created by his need for money (and limited employment options due to his refugee status) and the motives of his German ‘clients’ raises ethical problems that cannot be overlooked. Sayid himself was well aware of the inequalities he was getting into, and when to get out again. Sayid recalled how disturbed he had felt when he realized that one of the visitors, who was taking care of Sayid while he was sick, was interested in him sexually.

Sayid’s use of digital media platforms as strategic tools to improve his personal situation was linked to the manifold inequalities he had experienced. His decision to use digital media to make contacts for sex work was primarily instigated by the financial difficulties and social exclusion he felt after having migrated to Berlin. This leads us to focus our attention on the ways in which spaces are experienced.

I am bored of waiting for papers. I don’t understand why the others, even the ones who came much later to Germany than me, got the papers and I did not. I am bored of waiting. (Sayid 04.02.2017)

During one of our visits to the shelter for queer refugees in Berlin, Sayid told us that he was tired of waiting for his “papers”, i.e., waiting to get asylum. He wanted to move out of the shelter, so he was waiting for a document that would grant him the approval to get extra financial support. During that period, the way he experienced the space he was living in—the shelter—had a major impact on his interaction with his smartphone. Lacking the motivation to attend his German language class, Sayid spent most of his time chatting on online platforms. He was not the only one: others living in the shelter reported using digital media to distract themselves from the boredom and frustration of having to stay at the shelter, waiting uncertainly for long bureaucratic procedures to take their course.

The migration experiences reported by the queer refugees that we spoke to reveal a specific kind of interrelationship between digital media and spatial experience. How refugees used digital media was influenced by their broader sense of space. They also used digital media to shape their experiences of spaces. They either used digital media to forget the sense of immobility in which they felt stuck, or they used the media to find their way in new socio-cultural contexts. Via the internet, they discovered the locations of places where queer encounters might take place. Furthermore, as they moved through different places, they used digital media to map new routes. They shared the knowledge and the experience they had gained while traveling those routes, to help their friends who felt ‘stuck’ in shelters, in small towns in Germany, in Turkey, or in their home countries. Thus, digital technology helped them to help themselves and others to navigate and to overcome temporal and spatial constraints.

By comparing two different stages along the so-called “refugee route”, Turkey and Germany, this study aims to outline how refugees cope with different spatial configurations at different stages of migration by using digital media, and how queer routes are traced digitally across different spaces within and between Turkey and

Germany. We found that even after arriving in countries considered to be safe havens for queer identities and sexualities, queer refugees often still felt stuck. Waiting procedures and the sense of being trapped in one place define the daily lives of queer refugees in transit countries such as Turkey as well as in destinations of refuge such as Germany. Previous research on immobility, which did not focus on queer refugees in particular, has shed light on how migrants' experience of space is characterized by feelings of being "arrested," or "stuck," at times of immobility (Witteborn 2011).

When I first migrated to Berlin I felt like I was in prison. Although there is a huge queer scene in Berlin, I was still not free. I was not allowed to leave the city, so the whole city turned into a prison. I had the freedom of movement in Cairo. I was able to move. (Yahia 17.10.2016)

This significant quote from the interview conducted with Yahia demonstrates how even a city that is renowned for being queer-friendly and legally guarantees a certain degree of freedom in terms of sexual rights can be experienced as a prison if freedom of movement is denied. This contradicts another widespread narrative about queer migration and flight, in which the migration experience of queers from East to West is represented as a journey of liberation. Despite the difficult situation in Cairo, Yahia had still had the freedom to move there, which he was denied in Berlin. However, digital media platforms helped to give him a sense of mobility by enabling him to connect with people outside of Berlin, and even with his friends in Cairo.

Research with queer refugees demands a focus on situations in places of immobility: such as refugee camps, waiting rooms, shelters, and at borders. Attention to immobility within queer migration scholarship will echo the growing body of feminist scholarship on mobility and migration that has identified the notion of "waiting" as a crucial aspect of migration (Hyndman and Giles 2011; Mountz 2011). This focus should be prioritized in research, particularly as recent anti-immigration policies aim to increase control of and restrictions on refugees' mobility. At the same time, digital media emerge as tools that can help users to—at least partly—overcome such immobility and to navigate through unfamiliar spaces. During the period of our fieldwork, the UNHCR office in Turkey stopped accepting new asylum applications. Activists who had already left Istanbul were informed via Facebook and used the platform to raise awareness about the situation of queer refugees who were stuck in Istanbul despite international law, which should have guaranteed their right to seek asylum. Belal, for example, conducted online activism to improve his friends' situation and to speed up the procedures, as a result of which they were able to leave Istanbul.

The refugees we spoke to who had managed to leave Turkey had used digital media to plan their routes even before arriving in Germany (for another study on the topic, without a queer focus, see Emmer et al. 2016). For example, Adnan, who crossed the Aegean Sea by boat, described how he had been in touch with another Syrian queer refugee living in Cologne during his entire journey to Germany. They met through the Facebook group "Tea and Talk" and stayed in contact via WhatsApp until Adnan reached Cologne. Hence, with the aid of online queer networks he was able to find queer spaces at all stages of his journey from Syria via Turkey to Germany. Similarly, Jasmine, Aras, Mohammed, and Sayid had used digital media

platforms to find the locations of queer spaces in Berlin before they even arrived in the city. Those platforms had helped them to find the queer shelter.

Those who did not live in the queer shelter made contact with queers living there via dating applications and Facebook groups. During the early stages of our fieldwork, Sayid was living in another (general) shelter in Lichtenberg. Through dating applications he met people living in the queer shelter in Treptow, who helped him to move there. At the time of our last meeting, he was using dating applications to seek accommodation once again—this time he was looking for an apartment or a room in a shared apartment.

Adnan, who migrated from Syria to Turkey after the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, engaged with digital media in different ways in different cities and countries.

When I was working in the hospital in Urfa we treated the wounded fighters from the Free Syrian Army who had crossed the border to seek treatment in the hospital. I was not only treating the fighters but also trying to raise money from supporters from several Arabic countries for the hospital, which was basically a tent built in the garden of the Turkish hospital. I mainly used WhatsApp and Skype to talk to the supporters. So I was still in a war-zone and I didn't think about meeting people like me. (Adnan 26.10.2016)

With his proximity to the war commanding all his physical and emotional capacity, Adnan had no energy to seek connections with other queers. Only after moving to Antakya, another Turkish city, where he was no longer in direct contact with the Syrian Civil War, did he start using dating applications. Then, after migrating to Germany, Adnan initially lived in a refugee shelter in Bernau, a small town close to Berlin. He felt isolated and cut off from the queer networks that he knew would exist in a big city like Berlin. So he turned to the internet to seek queer contacts. He opened an account on GayRomeo, and through the online communication with another user, he got to know and became friends with a German lesbian living in Bernau.

The need to find queer spaces and to develop a sense of belonging in new environments shapes the ways refugees engage with digital media. In situations defined by difficulties and barriers imposed by the European asylum and refugee system, digital media represent not only a way to stay in contact, but also to create a sense of belonging (Witteborn 2014). Thus, queer refugees use digital media to create routes and guide one another across different territories, which helps them to feel safer and less alone during their migration. Building intimacies is another crucial strategy that can help counteract loneliness and create a sense of belonging in new social environments.

Affect and Intimacy

The possibility of building intimacy via digital media devices is something that most queer refugees first experience after fleeing from their countries of origin. Due to the homophobic and transphobic laws and persecution in some Middle Eastern countries, using dating applications designed for queers, especially for men who

want to have sex with men, can be risky. In some cases, the dangers of online dating in countries of origin force queer subjects to seek queer friendships and intimate encounters in public spaces. This calls into question the European perception of digital platforms as safe spaces because of the anonymity that they supposedly offer their users. It also invites us to reconsider the claim that online platforms are replacing public places or are becoming the norm in contemporary forms of interactions.

There is a temporal differentiation between spaces—particularly in gay subculture. While in Europe sexual encounters in public places are seen as something ‘of the past’ or old-fashioned, building intimacies through online platforms is seen to represent the present, or even the future. Particularly in countries where public sex is illegal due to the regulations that came into force following the AIDS crises, the idea of sexual encounters in public places such as public toilets and parks is associated with the gay subculture of the pre-AIDS era (Muñoz 2009). Not only the memories of AIDS that haunt such places, but also the demographic differences between (often older) men who like to cruise public places for sexual encounters and (often younger) men who prefer to build intimacies via online platforms, may contribute to the perception that online encounters are the contemporary trend. As McGlotten (2013) shows in his book, it is particularly older gay men who avoid using digital platforms. That is not necessarily because they do not know how to use such platforms, but rather because they perceive digital spaces as limiting the range of possible random encounters. In contrast, younger generations perceive public sex as something from the past associated with internalized homophobia or fears of building intimacy (McGlotten 2013, 26).

Teleological understandings of digitalization as an inevitable process affecting all areas of life, including dating practices, do not hold beyond the global North. Yahia, for example, told us he had only started using dating applications quite recently. While he was living in Egypt he had not opened an account for fear of getting arrested. Instead of banning dating applications, the Egyptian government uses them to track down queers: Egyptian police create profiles to appear as gay users, making the platforms non-safe spaces. Egyptian queer activists, including Yahia, informed dating application platforms about the persecutions, which led Grindr to issue a warning to its users that online dating in Egypt is dangerous.

I used to meet other gays but not through online dating platforms. There was a hamam close to Tahrir square. I went there very often. To be honest I liked the language of cruising. I liked the excitement and uncertainty. I liked it more than chatting on online dating applications. (Yahia 17.10.2016)

What Yahia describes as the language of cruising is the sum of all the little moments that constitute cruising in public places. These moments are shaped by unspoken rules and codes. Moreover, the gazes, touches, and whispers that lead to sexual and social encounters in a hamam comprise a collection of affects. The language of cruising is an almost wordless language, which is primarily based upon the body’s capacity to affect and to be affected by other bodies. Unlike on digital platforms, forging intimacies in public space does not require the exchange of words, information, and pictures. Hence it opens up the possibility of random intimacy, which cannot be planned or predicted.

After migrating to Berlin, Yahia was obliged to learn the language of online dating applications on smartphones. He discovered that it was very different to the language of cruising in a hamam. As he tried to build new intimacies via digital media platforms, Yahia started thinking about the power dynamics between users of such platforms, in particular with regard to race. Most dating platforms ask users to define their ethnicity/race from a list of options such as Asian, Black, Middle Eastern, Caucasian, Mixed.

I was wondering if anyone would identify himself as ‘white’. When there are so many discussions on critical whiteness, and racism, how can anyone enter the information that he is white? (Yahia 17.10.2016)

Although Yahia expected users to be aware of racism, digital platforms actually foster a racialized economy of desire. Some studies of online dating apps (Daroya 2018; Robinson 2015) have shown that being Asian or Black, for instance, is seen as less desirable than being white. Whiteness and all the features associated with it, such as being tall or having light-colored eyes, is apparently advantageous in the online racial economy. Andreassen (2017a) has analyzed how “whiteness” is constructed as universally attractive—even on sperm donation platforms. Similarly to online dating applications’ prompts for racial self-identification, most sperm donation platforms ask customers to fill out a multiple choice form about their donor preferences, with “race” high on the list.

Not only the definition of users’ ethnicity/‘race’, but also other information featured on such platforms can lead to online interpersonal communication in which migrants feel objectified. After realizing that “white Germans” (as Yahia describes them) were led to his profile by searching for “Arabic” in the language section, he removed that entry, so that people would not find his profile for that reason. He did not want to be the object of someone’s “orientalist desire”. He had discovered that the architecture and logic of online platforms led to situations in which queer migrants felt reduced to objects of white desire within a post-colonial continuation of geopolitical hierarchies and constructed otherness.

This brings us to the potential of digitally-circulated affects to inflict emotional harm. Digital social networking is dependent on the body’s capacity to get affected by what is shown on a smartphone, but also its capacity to affect other bodies with which it is ‘in contact’ via the smartphone. Users interact with each other via digital devices and through digitalized affects. Furthermore, in the case of virtual intimacy or online dating platforms, affects come into play even before any online communication takes place. Hopes and fears shape the decisions made when setting up a profile. McGlotten’s ethnographic research (2013) illustrates, for instance, the impact of anxiety on Black gay men’s online self-representation. Online communication not only reiterates racial, gendered, and sexual difference, it even heightens forms of racial injury. The traumatic memory of racial injury leads to what McGlotten describes as “racial paranoia”. Racial paranoia and/or anxiety seem to strongly influence how users identify themselves on a platform in terms of race, and whether they choose to mention which languages they speak.

Yahia’s awareness of potential “racial injury” and his determination to avoid situations that could leave him feeling objectified is linked to his own personal history.

Ahmed (2014) describes how the lived experience of hurt or pain is closely tied to how a person has perceived “hurtful” experiences in the past (Ahmed 2014, 30). Injuries and painful experiences made in relation to racialized, gendered, and sexualized difference may lead to the politicization of certain affects. In this framework, affects are consciously recognized bodily sensations. McGlotten identifies “Black affects” as the conscious recognition and politicization of certain affects based on racialized difference (McGlotten 2013, 66). Similarly Muñoz (2006) shows how people of color use certain affective situations in empowerment strategies.

This is reflected in Yahia’s cautious approach: he is aware that some digital affects have the potential to inflict further racial injuries. So he sets his profile in a way that prevents particular kinds of users from finding it and hurting him. In this example, affects shape expectations and thus come into play even before online communication is instigated.

Navigating a digital platform to search for virtual intimacies in a new social context is a new affective experience for Yahia. Moreover, after migrating to Germany, the whole new range of affects that he discovers alter his very conception of intimacy. Digital affects are intertwined within a process that integrates refugees into an assemblage of norms that regulate intimacies:

Since moving to Germany I have become more normal. I was more radical in Egypt. When I moved to Germany and when I started using the apps I realized that I wanted to have a typical relationship. This was never the case in Egypt. I was more like a political activist there. I don’t know, maybe I am just getting old. (Yahia 17.10.2016)

Yahia describes how encountering online dating platforms has led him to aspire to a more normal (i.e., monogamous) form of intimacy. Describing his sexuality and activist engagement with sexual rights in Egypt as relatively “radical”, he feels that his sexuality has become more “normal” since coming to Germany because he has discovered a desire to build a faithful, monogamous relationship. This seems to have been triggered by his experiences with dating applications. He adds that it might be simply because he is getting older. In this quote, he associates his former radical resistance to the idea of a stable couple relationship with youth—if not immaturity. This idea follows a normative perception of time, in which a person’s lifespan is constructed as a progression from ‘playing around’ to ‘becoming sensible’. But most significantly, the idea of stable, normative intimacy seems to be a new concept for Yahia, first encountered in Germany. His migration experience has fundamentally altered his perception of intimacy.

Intimacy is highly regulated in relation to spaces, as Berlant (1998) has shown. This also applies to virtual spaces: media-based intimacies create spaces in which specific kinds of intimacies are promoted, while other forms appear less intelligible or less representable. Thus, Berlant’s thoughts about the relationship between spaces and intimacies can help us to understand how queer refugees’ perceptions of queer intimacies change after migration from one place to another.

Sayid, a Syrian refugee who we interviewed in Berlin, told us that he hadn’t had any fixed ideas about what constituted a romantic relationship between men before he migrated to Germany. It was through online dating applications that he

had discovered that a romantic relationship between two men could be possible. One of the men he met online fell in love with him. Sayid struggled initially, unsure how to respond:

There was no understanding of a relationship between men, no definition for me when I was in Syria and Turkey. We were free, we were having fun without expectations. (Sayid 27.09.2016)

The expectations Sayid associates with the idea of a relationship are experienced as a restriction of freedom. It is important to underline that while they make interpersonal connections possible, digital media also impose meanings on those connections by circulating specific ideas about what constitutes queer romantic relationships. Following Berlant (1998), virtual space functions here as a regulator that normalizes and stabilizes intimacy, and moreover forces migrants like Sayid to reconfigure their ideas about queer intimacy to correspond with European ones.

Often, such a transformation of concepts of sexuality as a result of migration is seen as emancipative and progressive. In widely told narratives of progress, it is the circulation of images, texts, and meanings via digital media in particular that is celebrated for emancipating queers the world over—with the assumption that the circulation of such images will sooner or later lead manifold local forms of queer identities to assimilate to fit into Western conceptualizations of gays, lesbians, or transgender persons.

Hence, like Yahia, who considered his desire to establish a stable romantic relationship as politically retrogressive, Sayid was also critical of the concept of a stable romantic relationship, which he had first discovered through online dating. He did not see the concept as progressive or liberating, but as restrictive.

On the other hand, we should not deny the emancipative potential of dating applications, particularly in places where there are no queer networks. Another interviewee, Tarek, described the happiness he felt when he started using online dating applications for the first time after fleeing from Syria to Turkey. After spending several months in Istanbul, he moved to Kilis, a small town at the border to Syria, to work as a psychologist in an organization promoting refugees' rights. Dating applications helped him to meet other queers living in the same place. Having queer friends in such a small town and meeting them regularly made him "happy."

Everyone asks me why I am so happy. Why I am always smiling. Being gay here is to be happy. (Tarek 04.02.2017)

Since the town is very close to the Syrian border, the ongoing war in Syria was clearly visible: traumatized refugees kept coming across. Kilis was not an obvious place to be "happy", yet having access to networks via digital media enabled Tarek to reach other queers and establish a small queer community. Thus, online dating applications helped Tarek to enjoy life in an environment that was nonetheless charged with the fear, terror, and horror of the ongoing war.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the variety of queer refugees' affective practices when using digital devices. Digital devices, which work with the body's capacity to affect and to get affected, become a powerful tool for the self-empowerment of queer refugees during their migration to Europe, as well as after their arrival. While translocal digital media embed refugees within transnational networks that offer interpersonal/emotional support as well as useful tools for activism, our study has also revealed the restrictive power of such media. We have investigated how digitally circulated affects can become regulatory forces, which integrate queer refugees into European regimes of racialized and sexualized difference. However, not all queer refugees accept this process without resistance. Contrary to dominant representations of queer migration, in which the sexual liberation of people who migrate to Europe is celebrated, our interviewees express a critical stance to the affective regimes they have encountered in Europe. Particularly in relation to digital affects, they observe and experience how the supposedly emancipative potential for diverse intimate encounters is often restricted by certain pre-defined categories of identity. Through the affordances of digital platforms, queer refugees encounter a pre-ordained structure that constructs romantic monogamous same-sex relationships as the most desirable form of intimacy, which everyone should sooner or later aspire to. Moreover, they discover that European affective regimes often reify categories of racialized difference, exposing refugees to new racial injuries and/or exacerbating old wounds.

Our research offers several starting points from which we propose (queer) migration scholarship should shift its attention from narratives of vulnerability to the moments of resistance expressed by migrants against European regimes of gender and sexuality. Queer refugees' agency and their critical reflections on their migration experiences offer crucial insights that can help researchers in host countries to expand the boundaries of reductionist identity politics and to question their own epistemologies. Thus, (queer) migration represents a *chance* not a *challenge* for the countries that host refugees.

Additionally, research on queer migration can contribute to affect theory. The entanglement of bodies, spaces, and technologies that is becoming visible here can be understood as specific forms of 'affective arrangements'. Within these arrangements, queer refugees are not passive subjects, but actively engage in the use of digital platforms to conduct transnational activism and to improve their situations. Nevertheless, the global power relations within which these practices are embedded have to be recognized: these are what shape migrants' everyday lives, experienced as violence, discrimination, and restrictions on mobility. Affective articulations of queer refugees with digital devices can be understood as affective practices of border regulation that enable hybrid spaces to be established.

Future research on affect can aid further exploration of the ambivalent and multilayered processes of queer refugees' empowerment. In this regard, digital technologies—despite their reification of sexual and racial classifications—offer new forms of affective practices that seem to expand the potential for empowerment.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Ethical Standard All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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