'Party for everybody'? Interrogating the shaping of sexual identities through the digital fan spaces of the Eurovision Song Contest

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PhD   2021

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ABSTRACT

This research critically examines Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) fandom to explore how sexuality is shaped within digital fan spaces. Transformations in social media technologies have revolutionised ESC fan practices and what it means to be an ESC fan. I make a case for ESC fandom as a sprawling context through which its digital practices intersect with the performance of sexuality. This research uses a mixed-method approach, that involves experimenting with social media platforms as tools for conducting qualitative research. This includes developing and applying WhatsApp 'group chats' with ESC fans and an auto-netnography of my personal Twitter network of ESC fans.

I contribute to the geographies of social media, fandom and sexuality in the following ways: I provide the first comprehensive analysis of the digital ecosystem of ESC fandom by mapping the online and offline fan spaces where ESC fandom is practiced. I argue that ESC fan spaces are fluid and dynamic and ESC fans travel between them. I then explore two social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter, to understand how ESC fans express, make visible, and negotiate their fan and sexual identities within and across these digital fan spaces. I demonstrate how digital practices of ESC fandom augment the performance of sexuality in new creative ways. Through a critical analysis of socio-sexual digital codes (such as text, images, GIFs), through the lens of queer code/space, I explore how social media ESC fandom simultaneously breaks down and challenges the queerness of ESC fandom. I then proceed to examine the ways straight male ESC fans experience and practice ESC fandom. I develop the theorisation of 'the closet', to conceptualising the 'ESC closet', to understand how straight men 'come out', 'stay in' and negotiate their ESC fan and straight identities in online and offline socio-spatial contexts. I conclude by suggesting two ways through which we can use social media technologies and internet-enabled objects to deepen our knowledge regarding the expression of identity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Eurovision has never been more important in these pandemic times and long may it continue!

To Mufty, who I don't think I could have coped without during this. You're a fabulous friend and you've always been there at the end of the phone with any PhD or publishing questions, issues or worries I've had (sometimes over really trivial things!). Sending 'Love unlimited' to you and GJ, and I really, really hope I can get to Eurovision in Rotterdam in 2021 and see you and meet Luigi the cat! xx

The 'Cranks': Sarah, Meg, Maria, Pat, Adam, Rob and Kate, you're just beautiful and amazing friends and thank you always for making me smile and giggle.

To the extended fam – Auntie Mandy, Uncle Ian, Melissa, Sam and Leo, Auntie Jill and Cousin Vincent for all your support, advice and encouragement.

Lastly, to Mum and Dad. We've had lots of ups and downs recently and we will keep on pulling through. With lots of love xx

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1.1   Contextualising the study

This research critically examines Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) fandom to explore how sexuality is shaped within digital fan spaces. The ESC attracts an international television audience which in 2019 reached 182 million viewers across 40 countries (EBU, 2019). The ESC is a global television and media phenomenon that originated in 1956 and was conceived by the chairman of Swiss television, Marcel Bezençon. It is based on an imaginary political ideal that (re)united the countries of, initially Western Europe, after the traumatic events of two previous World Wars. The contest was based on the San Remo music festival format in Italy that was established in 1951 (Raykoff and Tobin, 2007). The ESC is produced by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and countries wishing to participate have to be members of the EBU and send a song and artist to the ESC. The EBU is a supranational body comprising of public service media entities, the majority of which are in Europe (with associate members outside this area such as Australia and USA). It facilitates the exchange of news and media content between members and the broadcasting of other international events such as the FIFA World Cup, the annual Vienna New Year's Day concert from the *Wiener Musikverein* and hosts and broadcasts debates regarding the presidency of the European Commission. These international events, along with the ESC, demonstrate the importance of broadcasting technology which serve to connect peoples and cultures globally (Raykoff, 2007).

The contest is also highly significant for host nations as it can facilitate nation building, such as in Azerbaijan[1] (Ismayilov, 2012), and it provides them with

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[1] The flagship development of the Baku Crystal Hall in 2012 that was built for hosting the ESC in 2012, was met with controversy amongst human rights campaigners. Baku municipal officials illegally evicted local residents from their homes in order to make way for the venue (Human Rights Watch, 2012).

opportunities to raise their international profile and demonstrate their desire to be seen as European (Jones and Subotic, 2011). The contest has been used as a platform for European nations to perform a sense of national identity through music, dance and costume which can also demonstrate feelings of 'Europeanness'. Since the expansion of the contest from the 1990s, the contest has become an important event for post-socialist and post-soviet nations seeking integration with Europe both geopolitically and socio-culturally (Baker, 2017). The ESC has been subject to many academic analyses that have focused on its role as an international event for the showcasing and performance of post-socialist and post-Soviet national identities (Björnberg, 2007; Baker, 2008, 2020; Jones and Subotic, 2011). However, although there has been some work that has centred on analyses of stage performances of lesbian (Vänskä, 2007), drag (Miazhevich, 2012) and transgender (Lemish, 2007) identities, how the ESC has become an important platform for the expression of sexuality has received considerably less attention in the literature.

The ESC has become popular within wider lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) culture. This is due to a diverse range of factors, including the competition's celebration of gender and sexual identity and its camp aesthetic. I use LGBT as an encompassing term to describe the ways the ESC provides visibility for divergent genders and sexualities, but also acknowledging that there are tensions between different sexualities. The contest is often represented and perceived as an event for gay men, whose experiences have been examined within the literature (Lemish, 2007; Singleton et al., 2007). This thesis advances this literature in the following ways: firstly, I argue that gay men's experiences of the contest have not been understood and situated within digital and social media contexts and secondly, I explore the experiences of bisexual and heterosexual male ESC fans within these digital contexts and how they seek meaning and practice their sexualities in relation to the ESC's representation as a 'gay event'.

This thesis is incredibly timely and contributes to knowledge by revealing the pivotal role of social media and the internet in shaping sexual identity through digital ESC fandom and its practices. These technologies provide endless opportunities for ESC fans to engage in the cultural (re)production of the contest, through recirculating, appropriating, and manipulating media content. Advancements in Web 2.0 technology have facilitated social changes as fans can network, converse, and communicate globally about the ESC through social media platforms such as Twitter (Highfield et al., 2013). ESC fandom has been transformed by social media platforms and other internet spaces, such as YouTube. These technologies have spurred a participatory culture that shifts in the direction of cultural production within the hands of individuals, that stimulates cultural diversity and democratic participation (Jenkins, 2012, 2014).

These technological shifts, I argue, intersect with the ways that social media platforms shape the performance and expression of socio-cultural identity. I argue that these practices are augmented by social media platforms (such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) which provide different forms of language output such as text, emojis, images, videos and GIFs[2], which can facilitate fan networking, identity making and reworking. This thesis synthesises geographies of social media, sexuality and fandom in order to analyse how sexuality through ESC fan practices is performed and technically mediated by social media technologies.

This introduction is organised as follows. I will outline the motivations of this research and identify how it was developed from my own personal experiences as an ESC fan and how it has enabled me to practice my gay sexuality and connect with other ESC fans of divergent sexualities. I will then emphasise the significance of the ESC for LGBT identities and their representation, as well as defining my approach to queer theory. I proceed to critically reviewing some of the contest's technological innovations in terms of its production and through national

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[2]GIF is an acronym for graphics interchange format. It refers to a short, animated digital object where a group of images are collected and played in a sequence, so they appear to move.

performances. I then underscore my approaches towards geographies of social media geography, sexuality and fandom, before stating the aims and objectives of this research and outlining the structure of the thesis.

1.1.1 'It's my life'[3]: Motivations for the research

This research stems from my passion with the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC), which helped me develop an imagined geography of an expanding Europe, which has granted me access to different national cultures and musical styles that have shaped my music tastes. My interest began in 1997 when I watched Katrina and The Waves win for the UK through a small cathode-ray television screen while holidaying in the family caravan in Lancashire. Technological shifts in connecting to the internet from dial-up to broadband in the late 2000s also granted me enhanced access to the contest (without holding up the phone line) and watching YouTube clips of ESC entries and the Swedish television selection process for the contest, *Melodifestivalen*, enriched my fandom. In 2013/14, after meeting another fan in person, they recommended I listen to an ESC internet radio show called 'Wales 12 points!' that broadcast weekly from South Wales and had a large Twitter following. It was at this moment I had an epiphany – I began to understand the role of the social media platform Twitter as a vital component of the ESC fan experience. ESC fans of 'Wales 12 Points!' would join in and contact the radio show during its live broadcast and this is where I began making ESC fan connections and friendships.

The idea that the contest could bring people together from different genders, sexualities, and cultural backgrounds through music fascinated me. From my early observations, I became aware of the ESC as socially and culturally significant for people of divergent genders and sexualities (Baker, 2017). It allowed people to bring their identities into being through ESC fandom and social media platforms, internet spaces, house parties, attendance at the ESC, and spinoff events and

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[3] Cezar – 'It's my life' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgHWFiavqjA accessed 27/12/2020.

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parties at other LGBT and commercial venues. As a cis-gay male ESC fan, the sexual ambiguity of ESC fan spaces and events has provided comfort, particularly where I have found urban gay bars and clubs to be hostile. Accessing digital ESC fandom through the screen has broken down face-to-face barriers that can cause social anxiety when meeting other gay men and eventually meeting them in person at ESC events. Transformations in digital technology and internet-enabled devices, such as smartphones, laptops and tablets provide instant accessibility to the contest and have contributed to a dynamic ESC fan experience. From these experiences and through my observations of different social media platforms (such as Facebook groups and Twitter), I began to understand how ESC fandom is practiced across social media platforms and internet spaces, but also how ESC fans negotiate their fandom and its visibility online.

From my position as a UK-based ESC fan, I was aware of the wider cultural contestation of the event through accusations of 'political voting', criticisms of the cultural value of European music and its associations with Euroscepticism (Coleman, 2008; Fricker, 2013; Wellings et al., 2019). Growing up, these tropes were circulated within the UK national consciousness by long-running commentator for the UK, Terry Wogan. Through his acerbic wit, he established an imaginative geography by differentiating the UK as culturally superior to its European neighbours and its cultural and political Other. These discourses, coupled with academic analyses that have centred on the event's popularity amongst gay men in particular (see Lemish, 2007; Singleton et al., 2007), made me think of the motivations and mechanisms ESC fans put in place to negotiate, self-manage and/or 'closet' their fan, gender and sexual identities within their daily lives (Sedgwick, 1990; Brown, 2005; Brown et al., 2011). I will now provide an outline of the contest's geopolitical importance in providing representation and visibility to LGBT people and define my approach to queer theory.

1.2   Rising like a phoenix: coming out as LGBT through the ESC

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the ESC began to generate a strong gay following internationally, but the expansion of the contest into bigger arenas since the late 1990s, the dawn of the internet and social media, and the win of Israeli transgender singer Dana International in 1998[4] have provided more visibility for LGBT people (Lemish, 2007). Bohlman (2007:43) argues that the ESC is an international platform that embodies and represents a 'tolerance for the extraordinary and distaste for the ordinary'. Bohlman's quote associates the contest with the 'extraordinary', in other words, with the non-normative and thus, the non-heterosexual. This partial reading also intersects with representations of the contest as camp in relation to notions of excess and the non-gender normative that contribute to the popularity of the event amongst gay audiences internationally. In Figure 1.1, I outline some of the key performances from the ESC that celebrate gender and sexual visibility and inclusivity.

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[4] In 1997, Iceland's entry 'Minn hinsti dans' ('My final dance') was also ground-breaking in terms of the expression of gender and sexuality. It was an international performance of subversive leather fetish culture, with singer Paul Oscar dressed all in leather and his female singers wearing short leather dresses and fishnet stockings. Also, a performance of sexual liberation for Oscar, himself gay, who was subject to bullying, harassment and homophobia during his childhood. Link to performance https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyt3nv3eCik accessed 5/1/2021

Figure 1.1 Moments in ESC history that have celebrated gender and sexual diversity

Dana International (ESC winner 1998 for Israel, left) and drag artist Conchita Wurst (ESC winner 2014 for Austria, right) perform together at the closing of 'Eurovision's Greatest Hits' in 2015 to celebrate 60 years of the event[5]. Source: Alexander (2015).

Israeli winner Netta performs 'Toy'[6] at the ESC in 2018, challenging gender norms of female body image, who was argued to symbolise the #MeToo movement. Source: Cabral and Matthieussent (2018).

Duncan Laurence of The Netherlands won the ESC in 2019 with the song 'Arcade'[7] and one of the only openly bisexual winners of the contest. Source: Eurovision.tv (2019)

Singers and backing singers of the Lithuanian entry in 2015 kiss to advocate support for same-sex marriage. Source: Denham (2015)

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[5] https://youtu.be/8Z6_RXwRTa8 accessed 5/1/2021

[6] https://youtu.be/84LBjXaeKk4 accessed 5/1/2021

[7] https://youtu.be/R3D-r4ogr7s accessed 5/1/2021

The images in Figure 1.1 are political statements that demonstrate progressive European attitudes towards gender and sexual diversity and attempt to encourage solidarity and recognition between LGBT categories. This constructs the non-European Other as less progressive and more homophobic, this is similar to work that has examined Central and Eastern European discourses in relation to European sexual modernity that have characterised these nations as not-fully European (Kulpa and Mizielińska, 2011). This is evident within social media networks where prejudice towards LGBT people is pervasive, for example, the widespread circulation of dragphobia within post-Soviet social media networks during and after the win of drag artist Conchita Wurst at the ESC in 2014 (Miazhevich, 2015). Post-socialist and post-Soviet nations have incorporated representations of LGBT people within their entries in order to demonstrate Europeanness and advocacy for the European/EU project, even if those individuals are not fully recognised by law in their respective nations. For example, the performance of lesbian identity and its association with the European project in Serbia with their 2007 winner Marija Serifovic (Vänskä, 2007) and the performance of drag identity within post-Soviet nation building in Ukraine by Verka Seduchka (Miazhevich, 2012).

ESC research has primarily focused on gay men's emotional attachments to the event. This work has explored the significance of the win of Israeli transgender singer Dana International at the ESC in 1998 amongst gay men in Israel (Lemish, 2007) and the associations gay men make with the event while growing up as gay (Fricker et al., 2007; Singleton et al., 2007). These experiences of ESC fandom enable gay men to come out, but also come in to an imagined European family through collective viewing of the ESC. Dana International's win in 1998 was a turning point that has been argued as the moment when the contest became queer (Singleton et al., 2007). The contest more broadly contributes to understandings of queerness that attempt to challenge normative representations of gender, sexuality, masculinity and femininity (Vänskä, 2007; Baker, 2008, 2017, 2020). In this thesis, I continue to examine the significance of

the ESC for gay people. However, with digital shifts towards engagement with social media technology, it enables ESC fans of divergent gender and sexual orientations to converge, network and practice fandom within everyday life. I use queer theory in this thesis to understand how the contest deconstructs, challenges and breaks down meanings of sexuality (Warner, 1999). Thus, we can then understand how ESC fan spaces, both online and offline, enable gay and non-gay fans to challenge, reconstruct, mould and regulate performances of sexuality. Consequently, I adopt (Dowson, 2000:163,165) position on queer theory as the ESC is not unique to gay men, but encapsulates individuals who feel they are marginalised:

> Queer theory is very definitely not restricted to homosexual men and women, but to anyone who feels their position (sexual, intellectual, or cultural) to be marginalized … Queering … empowers us to think what is often the unthinkable to produce unthought-of pasts [presents and futures]

Dowson's emphasis on how people may feel their sexual, intellectual or cultural positions marginalised is useful as ESC fan spaces provide people with the opportunity to engage and demonstrate their knowledge of the contest with other likeminded individuals. However, in other aspects of their lives fans could be marginalised and/or silenced because of their interest and enjoyment in the ESC. Dowson also identifies how queer theory can be used to understand how gender and sexual identity can be expressed and reconfigured in socio-spatial contexts. The digitisation of the ESC in recent years and the ubiquity of social media platforms for practicing ESC fandom enables fans to perform their identities in complex ways, which will be analysed within this thesis. This stance on queer theory also considers how heterosexuals may be marginalised. This reading can be analysed through ESC fandom because of the contest's affiliations with queerness and its wider cultural contestation. We can then understand how practicing ESC fandom may queer heterosexuality (Gorman-Murray, 2013; Grzanka et al., 2015) and how straight fans practice their fandom, in light of the contest's popularity amongst gay audiences. These issues are explored in more detail in Chapter Six.

I argue in this thesis that 'coming out by coming in' to ESC fandom can accommodate individuals of divergent sexualities who may feel marginalised by heteronormative societies – ESC fandom can provide these people with an environment to belong to and feel accepted in (Seidman, 2002; Brown, 2005). However, ESC fandom can also be constraining as bullying, stigma and trolling can take place within social media platforms and networks that can challenge the queerness within media and fandom representations of the contest (Singleton et al., 2007). The next section will outline some of the ESC's technological developments and how shifts in social media technology have revolutionised the ways ESC fans practice their fandom.

1.3   'Staring at the screens'[8]: Using social media to practice ESC fandom

Throughout its history, the ESC has always engaged with advances in technology in terms of its production and its dissemination into people's homes through television and radio. Table 1.1 highlights some of the key technological advances the contest has made in relation to its production.

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[8] 'Screens' was one of the Danish song candidates for the ESC in 2020 and was performed by Sander Sanchez. The lyrics focused on the influence of the internet and social media in young people's lives. Link to performance here https://youtu.be/zvbZwPr9zYQ accessed 5/1/2021.

Table 1.1 Chronological history of some of the key advances in technology within the ESC

1994	For the first time, the contest 'beamed in' the national spokespersons from television studios around Europe to give their votes, which replaced the telephone system.
1996	In 1996 at the contest in Oslo, Norway, early virtual reality technology was implemented through the 'blue room', a 3D arena where host Ingvild Bryn immersed herself in the scoreboard by moving through its two portions to speak to the jury spokespersons (see Halliwell, 2019).
2004	With a record number of 36 European nations wishing to take part in the contest, the EBU introduces a semi-final
2015	For the first time, Australia competes in the contest demonstrating the globality of the event in relation to satellite technology. Australia were invited to take part by the EBU for the contests' 60th anniversary celebrations and have participated in the ESC ever since.
2016	In 2016, the Swedish contest in Stockholm enabled participating countries to use holographic technologies to augment their stage performances. The Australian entry 'Sound of Silence' performed by Dami Im used these effects as she navigated different holographic screens featuring digitised information and faces using haptic gestures in the form of swiping her hand to move between online content. The song lyrics centred on socio-digital narratives that implied being able to connect with others through social networking platforms (see Halliwell, 2019). The lyric "trying to feel your love through face time" identifies the emotional connections we can embody when calling people using video conferencing applications, which help to mediate and maintaining connections with family and friends at varying distances within our daily lives (Longhurst, 2013, 2016b, 2016a).
2020	For the first time in its history, the ESC was cancelled due to the global pandemic of COVID-19. It was due to be held in Rotterdam, The Netherlands. The pandemic has further emphasized the importance of social media platforms and internet sites to practice ESC fandom. These technologies have redefined the ways that ESC fans connect with others. For example, digital re-watching activities such as #EurovisionAgain have become popular digital ESC events where fans can watch previous ESC's that are livestreamed weekly on YouTube and they can connect with others in real time through Twitter.

Table 1.1 identifies the technological significance of the ESC in relation to how it is produced, communicated and broadcast into millions of homes globally, and how it encourages engagement through the internet and social media which have revolutionised the ways that audiences engage with the contest. The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the importance of the internet and social media technologies in maintaining contact with the event and ESC fans. In the early days of the internet and prior to social media, community forums, messaging boards and mailing lists would be a primary source of information for the contest, allowing fans to network with others and forge digital fan communities online. Social media platforms stimulate global networking and conversation and provide an alternative way to engage with the ESC. This can include engaging with the event using official hashtags (for example, #Eurovision) or national broadcaster hashtags (for example, #BBCEurovision) which are often used interchangeably (Highfield et al., 2013). In Chapter Five section 5.4, I explore these practices within the context of Twitter and how fans share images of male ESC musicians to signal and develop fan networks of same-sex male desire.

However, practicing ESC fandom within social media platforms has much more profound significance with regard to the performance of identity. ESC fans engage in the cultural production of the contest on a daily basis, through recirculating and appropriating media content. What has been neglected in the literature, however, is the ways these ESC fan practices intersect with the shaping of gender and sexual identity online. This research contributes to knowledge by analysing in Chapter Five how these digital shifts influence identity shaping and reworking across the social media platforms of Facebook and Twitter and within their respective interfaces. ESC fans navigate these multiple social media platforms to negotiate and express their fan and sexual identities. I now turn to focus on the geographies of social media, sexuality and fandom as the conceptual underpinning for this research and identify how this research will move these debates forward within these areas.

1.4 Approaching geographies of social media, sexuality and fandom

In its early development, the internet has been theorised as a cyberspace. The term cyberspace is an interstitial and ontic space and digital entity that is inherently aspatial; as de-tethered and separated from offline space (Graham, 2019). The term has been criticised as contemporary uses of technology are tethered/untethered and embedded/disembedded within our daily lives which identifies the intertwining nature of the online/offline (Dodge and Kitchin, 2003). Before the rollout of broadband, accessing the internet required wiring up to a modem and was limited to business use and for private consumption within the home through a desktop computer. This piece of equipment has traditionally been perceived as a domestic object through which individuals, children and families participate and access an interconnected global system (Holloway and Valentine, 2001).

The dawn of Web 2.0, the development of Wi-Fi and the creation of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and video hosting website YouTube, permeate our global and material lives and interweave the online and offline – they can be used socio-spatially by accessing them through smartphone and internet-enabled devices. These recent developments in social media technology have provided multiple outlets through which ESC fans can make themselves known to others, and express their identities in unforeseen ways (Zebracki and Luger, 2019). Space and software are mutually constituted through coding practices, which have been theorised as code/space (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011). Smartphones, for example, are coded objects that provide multiple functionalities which are used through space by accessing Wi-Fi hotspots and 4G data, enabling geotagging functions to social media posts (Shelton, 2017) or discovering people nearby through geolocative media for hook-ups on dating apps such as Grindr (Bonner-Thompson, 2017). Code/spaces are both local and global, but they are grounded in their spatiality, geographically contingent and are accessed anywhere. Social media operates in the same way – individuals are able

to access these platforms where there is an internet connection through smartphones, laptops and tablets.

Social media platforms are important sites that assist in the performance and expression of our socio-cultural identities and are more than simply sites for generating and mapping quantitative 'big data' (Lansley and Longley, 2016; Shelton, 2017), which neglect human agency and its creativity online. Researchers have examined social media platforms as public sites of political activism (Kitchin et al., 2013), which also create collective networks of emotion to motivate social and grassroot political movements (Jenkins, 2014; Papacharissi, 2016). However, in this research, I respond to calls made by Sandover et al. (2018) who argue that we need to understand the performative role of social media platforms. Social media users have access to multiple communication tools, such as text, emojis, images, videos and GIFs that can manipulate and create new meanings for media content, but they can also shape identity dynamically online. I contend in this thesis that qualitative analyses and methodological approaches towards social media data are needed to analyse the technical dimensions of socio-cultural identity shaping and how they are produced through practice within social media platforms (Chen and Neo, 2019; Kaufmann and Peil, 2020).

Digital ESC fandom is one such context where fans of different genders and sexualities converge to share and manipulate media representations of the contest, express their opinions, and network with like-minded others (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008; Jenkins, 2014). In Chapter Four section 4.2, I map these digital ESC fan spaces and I emphasise how their practices interweave the online and offline. The development of smartphone technologies and rise in the use of same-sex hook-up applications have contributed to the dispersion and segmentation of LGBT people (Lewis, 2012; Nash, 2013). Through these applications, the boundaries of sexuality can be reworked and manipulated as sexuality becomes digitally mediated and expressed 'through the screen'; these practices break down the social anxieties that face-to-face communication fosters. Same-sex dating

applications such as Grindr have contributed to these processes, which enable men seeking sex with other men to engage in erotic chat and sex instantly, and hook-up based on geolocation (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Miles, 2017, 2018). Mainstream social media applications such as Tumblr enable trans people to develop like-minded connections and fluid identities, by reworking their usernames, in order to navigate heteronormative and cis-gendered socio-digital worlds (Jenzen, 2017). However, social media platforms can reinforce isolation and loneliness for many LGBT people and also be environments for internalised homophobia, racism, stigma and prejudice towards how people look, behave, and represent themselves within social encounters (Bonner-Thompson, 2017).

Debates surrounding queer code/space are also pertinent to social networking practices. This theory emphasises that digital environments provide opportunities to re-invent and break down normative expressions of gender and sexuality (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017b; Gieseking, 2017). However, through an analysis of Facebook and Twitter ESC fandom practices in Chapter Five, I argue that social media platforms by their design can simultaneously rework and liberate ESC fan expressions of their gender and sexuality, but also how it can constrain and uphold particular identity behaviours and expressions online. Moreover, I argue that ESC fans make visible and negotiate their ESC fandom within online and offline environments. For many ESC fans, self-managing and regulating how they 'come out' about their fandom within online/offline spaces is necessary for the following reasons: firstly, the contest has been widely culturally contested, for example, it has been labelled as not 'serious' and/or 'trite' (Fricker, 2013; Wellings et al., 2019), and secondly, the contest is associated with gay identity.

Debates regarding 'the closet', I argue, are also pertinent to the ESC fan experience. The closet is the defining feature of gay life in which gay people come out of, stay in and negotiate their sexual orientation in many different socio-spatial contexts (Sedgwick, 1990; Brown, 2005; Brown et al., 2011). I conceptualise the 'ESC closet' as a metaphorical and material space where issues surrounding knowingness,

visibility, concealment, denial of and shaming towards ESC fandom are spatially specific which shape how ESC fans 'come out' and 'stay in' the ESC closet about their fandom and sexual orientation (Munt, 2007, 2019). In Chapter Six, I produce a unique angle to the closet by flipping it on its head, as I examine straight men's experiences and practices of ESC fandom and how they come out as straight within ESC fan spaces. Consequently, I address the gap in the ESC literature as previous academic analyses have centred on gay men's affiliations with the event (Singleton et al., 2007; Baker, 2017).

From identifying my approaches to the geographies of social media, fandom and sexuality in order to investigate the shaping of sexuality within digital ESC fan spaces, the Aim and Objectives of this thesis are as follows:

Aim:
To examine the construction of sexuality within the spaces of Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) fandom

Objectives:
1. To map the spaces of ESC fandom

It is important to contextualise and map the different digital and offline spaces where ESC fandom is practiced. Understanding how these spatial practices operate and function are required to explore how ESC fandom provides alternative meanings towards fans' sexual lives. Moreover, instant accessibility to the internet and practicing fandom daily also provides new and complex ways through which sexuality is constructed, negotiated and made visible.

2. To analyse the construction of fan and sexual identities within the digital geographies of ESC fandom

As ESC fandom has increasingly permeated virtual space, it is appropriate to explore how this is digitised and how it assists in the construction of fan and sexual identities. Social media is a highly important medium through which individuals and fans share their everyday lives. Consequently, this technical mediation

encourages identity construction, however, software within social media platforms can differ, which can contribute to our geographic understandings of how socio-cultural identity is expressed across multiple social media networks.

3. *To critically examine how straight male fans, engage and express their identities within spaces of ESC fandom*

The contest is not solely engaged with by gay audiences and acknowledgement of straight men's experiences is important as these individuals are often under-researched within geographies of sexuality and the digital. I do not wish to neglect gay audiences in this research, but the contest provides opportunity to explore the wider significance of the contest with straight male audiences and how they construct and negotiate their identities both online and offline in light of the popularity of the contest amongst gay audiences.

1.5   Structure of thesis

In order to critically examine the shaping of identity within ESC fan spaces, this thesis is organised as follows. In Chapter Two, I provide a critical review of the literature which will begin with a discussion regarding research that has used the ESC in relation to ideas surrounding national identity and music, the event's cultural contestation in national, media and social contexts, and the importance of the event for global gender and sexual diversity and visibility. The review then progresses to examine the fandom and geographies of fandom literature and develops a critical point that the internet and social media have transformed these practices which require further academic scrutiny. I then underpin the role of identity and its intersection with these digital fan practices by delving into the literature regarding the geographies of social media. I contend that social media platforms have produced multiple outlets for the performance of identity online which can mould their visibility. To conclude the review, I examine research regarding digital geographies of sexuality and how technologies have transformed gay culture but also the role of 'the closet' and its respective dimensions.

In Chapter Three, I outline the methods I have developed and applied in this research, beginning with an argument focusing on the appropriateness of netnography and queer theory to investigate ESC fandom through social media (Kozinets, 2015; Dadas, 2016). In order to investigate issues surrounding digital ESC fandom, I contend that qualitative mixed-method approaches incorporating social media research methods and online interviews are necessary. Thus, I develop creative and experimental digital methods by using the social media application WhatsApp to coordinate group chats with ESC fans and how these transform traditional focus groups that have been used in qualitative geographic research. I also apply an auto-netnography by analysing my own personal Twitter account to examine how fans express their identities through the platform. I raise issues regarding the ethical considerations in using social media platforms as data collection tools and sites for geographical research. Then, I critically reflect on my positionality in this research and how my academic life is intertwined with my ESC fan identity and the examine the benefits and challenges of negotiating these identities during data collection and analysis.

In Chapter Four I break down the homogenous view of the ESC as a 'gay event' by arguing that ESC fandom is much more heterogeneous in terms of identity. I map ESC fan spaces and conceptualise ESC fandom as a digital ecosystem that incorporates a diverse range of online and offline spaces through which ESC fandom is practiced. I argue that ESC fans perceive ESC fan spaces as environments to practice a more ambiguous sexual orientation when socialising and practicing fandom at ESC events. I then proceed to analyse how one particular ESC fan space – the ESC Press Centre – produces fan hierarchies. The ESC Press Centre is an exclusive, backstage arena through which ESC fans involved with international fan community outlets (IFCOs) practice their fandom and communicate with their wider fan audiences. I also highlight how the internet and social media platforms are essential for the operation of IFCOs within and beyond the ESC Press Centre. Lastly, I argue that the ESC Press Centre can police the expression of gender and sexuality, which challenges the ESC's representation as a dominantly queer event.

In Chapter Five, I break down the digital ecosystem of ESC fandom further by focusing on the social media platforms of Facebook and Twitter. I explore how they are used for practicing ESC fandom and the expression of identity. I conceptualise these applications in relation to debates about code/space and queer code/space as they can help us understand how social media platforms encourages expressions of sexual and fan identity (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011; Cockayne and Richardson, 2017b; Gieseking, 2017). I explore how fans negotiate their fan and sexual identities across Facebook's internal applications, such as Facebook groups, pages, and public timelines. In relation to Twitter, I explore the shaping of fan and sexual identities in relation to male fans who express same-sex desires towards male ESC musicians and hosts and how gay men produce complex relational geographies through these interactions. I argue that both these platforms can simultaneously liberate and constrain the shaping of gender, sexual and fan identity.

In Chapter Six, I conclude the analysis by critically examining straight male experiences of practicing ESC fandom. I provide an interesting angle to the closet by turning the concept on its head – I do this by analysing how straight men 'come out' as straight and as ESC fans in a range of spaces, including the family home, ESC events and social media platforms (Sedgwick, 1990; Brown, 2005; Brown et al., 2011). I also examine how some fans closet and regulate the 'outness' of their ESC fandom to others, which is bound up in ideas around shame and wider assumptions that the contest has a wider gay male following. Finally, I explore how engaging in the ESC has enabled straight men access to wider LGBT and Pride culture at a distance, and through watching the ESC and practicing fandom online has allowed them to negotiate the boundaries of their heterosexuality.

In the Chapter Seven, the Conclusion, I identify the key contributions of the thesis towards the geographies of social media, sexuality and fandom. I make a methodological contribution regarding how digital research methods can be deployed for qualitative data analysis. I do this by contributing to digital

geographies by developing and applying the social media platform WhatsApp as a research tool that advances ethnographic focus group methods and produce new social realities and qualitative data. This thesis contributes towards analyses of the ESC as it is the first to map and document the fluid and interconnected online and offline spaces of ESC fandom. I argue that ESC fans produce new meanings of their sexualities through their participation within digital and offline ESC fan spaces. I contribute to research surrounding queer code/space and argue that both Facebook and Twitter within the ESC fandom liberate, but also constrain the expression of identity. Lastly, I emphasise how this research contributes to ideas regarding the closet in digital times. I make a critical point by claiming that the closet and the ESC closet are useful to understand how social media platforms shape how ESC fans negotiate their ESC fandom, sexual visibility and its respective 'outness' (Sedgwick, 1990).

Chapter Two: 'Building bridges' between the ESC, social media, fandom and digital sexuality

'Building Bridges' was the official slogan that was used at the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) that was held in Vienna, Austria in 2015. Source: Eurovision.tv (2014).

Overview of key arguments

This literature review introduces the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) then critically reviews three key themes; geographies of fandom, social media geographies and geographies of digital sexuality. It will argue that ESC fandom is a unique site where these themes coalesce. ESC fandom has become transformed by social media applications and has become increasingly digitised. Consequently, I argue that social media platforms are creative sites where sexual and fan identities are performed and expressed. The intersections between the ESC and queer culture provide alternative ways through which ESC fans express their identities. Moreover, I contend that criticisms of the ESC and its associations with queer culture provide opportunities to examine how ESC fans of divergent sexualities make themselves visible in online/offline contexts.

Section 2.1 will begin by unpacking the literature surrounding the ESC and sexual visibility. I argue that sexual identities and their respective visibilities are shaped by wider cultural contestations of the ESC. This section will then explore how the event provides international visibility for LGBT individuals and how the ESC produces a sense of queerness as it can enable the expression of ambiguous

gender and sexual identities. I argue that shifts towards practicing ESC fandom through social media platforms can shape fandom and sexuality in unforeseen ways. I also problematize the ESC's representation as a gay event and how it can break down sexual identification categories. I address gaps in the ESC literature by arguing that other sexualities, such as bisexuality and heterosexuality are also neglected within analyses of ESC fandom and require further academic attention. I argue that the ESC presents a unique opportunity to explore the expression of fan and sexual identity, given its associations with queer culture and its cultural contestation.

In section 2.2, I critically review the fandom and geographies of fandom literature, a new and emerging research theme within geography, where I contend that fandom practices are being transformed as a consequence of the increased use of social media platforms. In section 2.3, I shift the focus towards digital and social media geographies by critically analysing their role in identity making. I emphasise that identities can be manipulated, reshaped, negotiated and expressed across multiple social media platforms. I argue how these issues can be approached through theories of code/space (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011). I then address the limitations of Goffman (1990) and Butler's (1990) work on ideas surrounding the performance of identity by arguing that further questions need to be asked as to how social media technologies shape the expression and (re)production of sexuality. I stress that social media users have access to digital communication tools such as messaging, sharing images, videos and emojis, which provide alternative and creative ways through which identity is expressed. I then contend that stigma towards the ESC contributes to negotiating fandom and sexuality. I develop this by arguing how literature on the closet and shame can be applied within the ESC fandom context to understand how ESC fans negotiate their fan and sexual identities as public/private.

In section 2.4, I focus on the geographies of digital sexuality. I begin by focusing on pre-digital geographies of sexuality by drawing on issues regarding shame and

the closet and their relationship with ESC fandom. I justify how these theories can be used within the ESC context to understand how fans of divergent sexualities conceal, deny and camouflage their fandom within ESC fan spaces. I argue that these negotiating strategies of fan visibility permeate ESC fandom, as a consequence of negative attitudes towards the ESC and common representations of the ESC as a 'gay event'. I then emphasise how this thesis addresses gaps in the geographies of digital sexuality literature by moving beyond the existing focus on sexualised hook-up apps, such as Grindr, to examine how mainstream social media applications such as Facebook and Twitter shape the sexual politics of everyday practices such as ESC fandom. I then review debates regarding queer code/space and emphasise how they can be developed in this research in order to understand how sexualities are regulated, negotiated and moulded within mainstream social media platforms (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017b, 2017a; Gieseking, 2017). Lastly, I will conclude by addressing how this thesis will address gaps in knowledge by raising four critical points, before outlining its aims and objectives.

2.1   ESC, geopolitics, gender and sexuality

This section will introduce the ESC and will argue that the ESC has been understood as a site of identity contestation. However, to date, this literature has focused on issues such as national identity, its intersection with music, geopolitics, gender and sexuality, and this section moves the literature forward by arguing that the cultural contestation of the ESC also shapes fan and sexual visibility – an aspect that has so far been neglected in the literature. I make two critical points regarding the ESC literature: first, it has neglected how gay ESC fans practice their fandom online and, second, how it has also neglected other sexualities such as bisexuality and heterosexuality. Finally, in this section, I argue that ESC fandom can challenge and break down sexual identification categories and we require further academic analysis regarding how the internet and social media shapes their expression and visibility.

Since its inception in 1956, the ESC has been a site for the contestation of identity. In Chapter One, I identified how the event was initially developed to unite Europe from the devastation of two World Wars. The event has also evolved in its use of technology, such as digital scoreboards and hologram technology within national performances in 2016. This also includes the role of social media platforms and how they have transformed the ESC fan experience – it is these more recent developments that will be analysed in this thesis. I will begin this section by reviewing research that has examined the ESC as a site of cultural contestation of national identity, music and geopolitics.

The ESC is a politically contested space and one example of this is through practices of 'political voting'. Political voting has largely been understood as the ways that European nations produce voting blocs and 'friendship networks' which are forged between nations based on geographic proximity. This is further defined as nations who border each other and vote based on reciprocity and to a lesser extent, meritocracy (Gatherer, 2006; Dekker, 2007; Ginsburgh and Noury, 2008; Charron, 2013). In 2007, public televoting between nations that assisted the production of these neighbourly voting practices aggrieved some Western European nations, including the UK (BBC, 2007a, 2007b) and the UK's commentator, Terry Wogan (Fricker, 2013; Wellings et al., 2019). To minimise these activities, the ESC organising committee introduced two semi-finals in 2008 to separate nations who had historic patterns of voting for each other and later in 2009 introduced the split 50/50 public televoting and jury voting format that has been used since (EBU, 2020)[9]. Other arguments suggest that neighbourly voting is not politically motivated but is an expression of shared cultural values between nations (Yair, 1995; Yair and Maman, 1996). This research is problematic, as it does

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[9] The 50/50 public televoting and jury voting format changed in 2016 in order to produce a more exciting finish to the contest. Jury votes are cast first, then the public televotes are combined and announced separately https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wd_RHS3f5-4. This was tweaked further in 2019 where televoting points were awarded from last to first place based on the results of the jury vote to capture an exciting climax.

not unpack the various elements and meanings that are embodied within national stage performances and how they express different forms of identity.

There has been much research that has examined the social, cultural and political construction of identity in the ESC. I will now review the literature that has centred on representations of national identity. The ESC reproduces representations of Europe that have shifted continuously throughout its history. National stage performances at the contest showcase multiculturalism and diversity through, for example, national costumes, languages, and dancing (Sieg, 2013; Kyriakidou et al., 2018). Ukraine is a particularly good example of the use of apparently folklorist elements in the construction of a particular version of Ukrainian national identity. This includes their winning entry 'Wild Dances'[10] by Ruslana in 2004, which is an example of Eurovision's 'return to ethnicity' (Björnberg, 2007:22) as it featured foot-stamping and 'trembita' horns that contributed to a distinctively exotic performance of Ukrainianness that captivated European viewers (Baker, 2008).

The contest has thus become an important event for post-socialist and post-Soviet nations to seek integration into Europe both geopolitically and socio-culturally (Baker, 2008, 2017). They have been marginalised and constructed as not quite 'European'; they have been Othered by politically and culturally dominant Western European states and cultures (Björnberg, 2007; Jones and Subotic, 2011). These representations have been theorised using Said's (1994) concept of Orientalism in order to explain how UK/Western Europe distorts representations of Eastern Europe compared to that of the 'West' within the ESC context (Bakić-Hayden and Hayden, 1992). This relational geography is also reproduced and represented through the interplay of geopolitical tensions within and between post-Soviet states, that have taken place during the contest. Existing research has tended to focus on geopolitical controversies around the staging of the event in specific political contexts, such as human rights controversies in Azerbaijan (Human Rights Watch, 2012; Ismayilov, 2012) and Russia's non-participation in the

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[10] Ruslana – 'Wild Dances' https://youtu.be/10XR67NQcAc (accessed 03/06/2020).

ESC in Ukraine in 2017 (Baker, 2020). Russia/Ukraine tensions were also heightened at the contest in Stockholm in 2016 because of Jamala's winning, visceral performance of '1944'[11], that centred on the deportation of Crimean Tatars by Stalin. This was inflected with wider geopolitical resonances regarding Russia's appropriation of Crimea in 2014 (Baker, 2020). What this research contributes is that the ESC can be analysed as the site of complex processes of identity formation and contestation. What is lacking, however, is the acknowledgement of sexual identity in their analyses.

Some analyses have considered how the ESC is also a site of the construction of sexual identities. At the same time, despite the contest's evident popularity, it has been routinely denigrated and attacked by (homophobic) cultural commentators, including a Hungarian far-right wing and pro-Orbán journalist who condemned the event as 'a homosexual flotilla' (Walker, 2019:online), and UK commentator Terry Wogan (Fricker, 2013). Terry Wogan has received some academic attention in this regard, who – through his, at times, acerbic witticisms and satirical commentary – positioned the UK audience at an ironic 'distance' from its European counterparts. This, coupled with the UK's poor performances in the contest in recent years, have fuelled negative attitudes towards the contest, which in turn have contributed to wider social perceptions that watching the ESC is something counter-cultural (Fricker, 2013; Wellings et al., 2019). The ESC can be a site of a positive process of identity formation, but also less positive. The contest has earned a reputation as the 'Gay Olympics' (Baker, 2017), 'Gay Christmas' (Rehberg, 2007:60) in some media outlets, and local ESC events such as the annual London Eurovision Party (LEP) are assumed to be attended by gay male ESC fans, where gay press and fan websites make up the press corps (Geoghegan, 2016). These examples show that displaying one's fandom for the event may in turn lead to personal criticism, stigma and shaming of ESC fans.

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[11] Jamala – '1944' https://youtu.be/B-rnM-MwRHY (accessed 03/06/2020).

In this section, I have emphasised that the ESC is a site for the contestation of identity. I have broken this down to explore the role of the ESC as a site of political contestation through 'political voting' practices, and as a site of the social, cultural, political construction of national identities. Where the ESC is a site for the construction of (national) identities, it is also a site for the construction of other forms of identity, such as sexualities. Displaying fandom may also lead to shame and stigma of ESC fans, which can shape their identities. The literature has largely ignored the contest's role in the shaping of gender and sexual identities and I will focus on this in more detail in the next section.

2.1.1 Gender and sexual diversity within the ESC

Throughout this section, I make the following critical points of the literature that has centred on the role of the ESC as an international competition that celebrates gender and sexual diversity (Bohlman, 2007; Lemish, 2007; Rehberg, 2007; Singleton et al., 2007; Miazhevich, 2012; Cassiday, 2014; Baker, 2017). Firstly, much work on the ESC has neglected the heterogeneous, individual LGBT voices and their experiences within the competition. Secondly, I emphasise that the ESC is not solely an annual event – it is kept alive by fans on an ongoing basis within a diverse range of online and offline spaces which require deeper academic analysis. Lastly, we need to further unpack the relationship between the ESC and wider gay culture and how ESC fans of different sexualities – such as bisexual and heterosexual men – forge associations with the contest. These associations are also manifested through participating in ESC fandom in digital spaces, which have transformed how ESC fans practice their sexualities and it is these issues that require further academic analysis.

Within national stage performances at the ESC, there are many different expressions and constructions of identity. In other words, they are not solely statements of national identity, but they also incorporate, for example, gendered, sexual and ethnic stereotypes in articulating visions of European nationhood. This is evident within the stage performances for some post-Soviet nations that

attempt to reconfigure relationships with shared Soviet pasts, such as in Russia[12] (Johnson, 2014) and in Ukraine through drag act Verka Seduchka[13] (Miazhevich, 2012). Seduchka's song 'Dancing Lasha Tumbai' in Ukraine was seen as a political statement, with the lyric 'Lasha Tumbai' translating as 'Russia goodbye' in order to distance the country from its associations with Russia and the Soviet Union. It also intersected with a performance of drag that could be seen as more liberal and European than its homophobic Russian neighbour (Miazhevich, 2012). Seduchka's performances are portrayed as 'camp' through the media and the ESC fan base because they are staged in an overly exaggerated, theatrical, and audacious way.

Performances of gender and sexuality at the ESC are also used by nations to express feelings of 'Europeanness'. The winner of the 2007 contest Marija Šerifović[14] was perceived as butch and self-identified as lesbian and Roma. Her performance of 'Molitva' ('Prayer' in English) championed gender and sexual diversity which demonstrates a desire to be seen as European, which evokes feelings of Europeanness. At the same time, however, her victory was used by Serbian politicians to evidence claims of Serbian belonging within Europe; as evidenced by Šerifović's nationalist three-finger salute upon winning the competition (Bohlman, 2007; Vänskä, 2007; Mitrovic, 2009). These expressions of identity demonstrate complex national and European political ideals. The contest's advocacy of gender and sexual diversity produces an imaginative geographical logic that progressive LGBT politics is associated within occidental constructions of European and sexual modernity and belonging against a non-European and Eastern European homophobic Other (Kuus, 2004; Binnie and Klesse, 2011; Kulpa and Mizielińska, 2011).

These representations and performances of LGBT identity, both in terms of national performances and through the event's production and organisation,

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[12] 'Party for Everybody' by Buranovskiye Babushki https://youtu.be/BgUstrmJzyc accessed 03/07/2020

[13] 'Dancing Lasha Tumbai' by Verka Seduchka https://youtu.be/hfjHJneVonE accessed 03/07/2020

[14] 'Molitva' by Marija Šerifović https://youtu.be/FSueQN1QvV4 accessed 03/07/2020

helps to challenge nations who are anti-LGBT. Russia has received much international attention in this regard; the hosting of the ESC in Moscow in 2009 intersected with LGBT rights protests and their suppression (Stella, 2013). More recently, Russia has been shamed for its poor treatments of its LGBT citizens by booing from the ESC audiences in 2014 and 2015. This prompted ESC organisers to install 'anti-booing technology'[15] in the 2015 contest to mute these responses. This, coupled with wider media discourses have positioned the country as Other to the West, as well as its anti-LGBT legislation (Baker, 2017). Previous male gendered ESC performances from Russia, such as Dima Bilan in 2006[16] and in 2008[17], can be read in a gay or bi-curious way and with camp sensibility to generate votes from the European continent (Fricker et al., 2007; Cassiday, 2014).

So far, I have unpacked the literature that has focused on the recognition of LGBT identities within national stage performances. However, this literature has neglected how LGBT audiences receive and interpret these representations. Cultural performances within the ESC have been appropriated as camp or queer amongst gay men. But also, gay male audiences perform the ESC as queer by dressing up and waving their flags in the arena (Singleton et al., 2007). The de/coding of the ESC as camp is situated within wider debates surrounding the contest as not 'serious' and its integration of *Schlager*[18] music styles. Some examples that embody the ESC's campness include the use of wind machines, excess use of glitter, sequins and audacious costumes. The festival converts the 'serious into the frivolous' (Sontag, 2018:2) and challenges heteronormative assumptions of gender and sexuality (Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2008). There has

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[15] This used 'sound-reducing technology' in an attempt to limit booing noises made by spectators towards Russian representative, Polina Gagarina (Aubusson, 2015:online).

[16] 'Never Let You Go' by Dima Blian https://youtu.be/waYpnAexrUA accessed 03/07/2020

[17] 'Believe' by Dima Bilan https://youtu.be/-72s4WzUcKI accessed 03/07/2020

[18] *Schlager*, which translated into German as 'hits', is a popular music style which is created with the intent for commercial success. *Schlager* songs are usually catchy melodies made with simple composition structures (Hindrichs, 2007). Ralph Siegel is one composer who has written ESC songs throughout its history and was responsible for San Marino's entry in 2012 'The Social Network Song', which is highlighted in Chapter Five.

been research that has examined the role of camp in producing feelings of solidarity and belonging (Browne, 2007) and social cohesion and validity amongst lesbians and gays at festivals (Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2008). The ESC can produce similar feelings of conviviality amongst LGBT people and camp performances of music are important in making non-normative genders and sexualities more visible on an international platform (Singleton et al., 2007). But at the same time, this literature is rather limited in that it does not account for the individual and heterogenous voices and their associations with the contest.

One criticism of much of the literature on the ESC and LGBT identities is that they have neglected the diverse range of fan spaces through which these people engage with the event. The victory of Israeli transgender singer Dana International in 1998[19], for example, was considered a defining moment in the ESC's coming out; she became an icon of representing LGBT identity struggles not only in Israel, but also internationally (Lemish, 2007). In 2014, Austrian winner, drag artist and 'Lady with the beard' Conchita Wurst[20] became an icon of a progressive Europe for tolerance, respect and equal rights (including for LGBT citizens) and has also spoken about these issues internationally at EU-organised summits (Fricker, 2015). These examples highlight how the contest can permeate the media and other spaces, such as online and offline. Consequently, the expression and construction of identity through the ESC involves many other spaces, places and processes that require further academic analysis. In Chapter Four section 4.2, I develop this point by examining the many different spaces that make-up the digital ecosystem of ESC fandom.

I argue that the contest is not solely a gay event and we need to understand how other sexualities experience ESC fandom and respond to the ESC's relationship with gay culture. Heterosexual men have been neglected from ESC research and examining their experiences can shed new light into how they respond to gay

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[19] 'Diva' by Dana International https://youtu.be/fZ5B6w-Baxs accessed 03/07/2020

[20] 'Rise Like A Phoenix' by Conchita Wurst https://youtu.be/QRUIava4WRM accessed 03/07/2020

representations of the event. This enables us to understand how the ESC may queer heterosexuality (Gorman-Murray, 2013; Grzanka et al., 2015). For example, how participating in ESC fandom can produce new practices of, and challenge normative constructions of, heterosexuality; issues which I examine in Chapter Six. Bisexuals have also been neglected in ESC research and through practicing ESC fandom it gives them a plurality of fan spaces through which they can negotiate and regulate their bisexuality. In Chapter Five, I analyse bisexual male ESC fan experiences and how they navigate social media platforms and use their respective software strategically as their sexual orientation may be misinterpreted as gay. There has been some research that has examined the struggles bisexuals have faced in negotiating and navigating urban space (Maliepaard, 2018) and digital spaces (such as internet and social media platforms) in order to seek solidarity and belonging with other bisexuals (Maliepaard, 2017).

Moreover, work within geography has explored how urban spaces have become increasingly blurred in terms of their sexual identities. This includes the queer camouflaging of urban space in Spitalfields (Brown, 2006) and the diversification of LGBT neighbourhoods in Sydney and Toronto, beyond 'traditional' gay villages (Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014; Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2017). These diversification processes demonstrate how LGBT life has become much more heterogeneous – the internet and social media technologies have also transformed these processes. The ESC – and its fandom – have also transformed as a consequence of the internet and social media. These technological developments coupled with the ESC's associations with queerness can shape ambiguous and ambivalent sexualities; issues which require further investigation. Social media platforms can also shape sexuality in complex new ways and this thesis will develop deeper understandings of their role in how they bring these identities into practice.

2.1.2   Social media, the internet and ESC fandom

The continued development of social media platforms has changed the nature of what it means to be an ESC fan. The convenience and accessibility of these applications through internet-enabled devices have transformed ESC fan practices and the expression of identity. Engaging and watching the ESC is no longer an annual practice. Fans use the internet and social media daily to interact and connect with others, and at other times to watch national selection shows for the ESC around the world. These activities also intersect with the construction of sexuality and it is these issues that will be explored in this thesis.

Some work has pointed to the importance of the role of ESC backstage areas where fans' experiences are mediated and shared with other fans via the internet. Research by Fricker et al. (2007) has examined the networking of Irish ESC fans at the ESC and how the internet produced new forms of global fan networking. This digital connectivity allowed fans to share their emotional investment in the contest and how dialogue exchange within chatroom and forums reproduced the ESC's competitive elements. This included the sharing of trivia and knowledge about the contest, which allowed fans to connect with the ESC in an intimate way. This work has also touched upon the networking of ESC fans backstage at the contest and how this space provided status within fan circles. Other work that has examined ESC backstage areas has focused on the linguistic dimensions of ESC press conferences in question and answer sessions. Dialogue between male ESC fans and male ESC musicians took on sexualised tones, which conceptualised the ESC backstage arena as a site of queer visibility (Motschenbacher, 2013).

This research suggests that this backstage area also plays an important role as a space of identity formation. However, this only touches on one of a number of potential spaces, and these have multiplied with technological developments in social media which has transformed these practices and provides fans new ways to practice fandom and express their identities. Research must go on to map out and analyse the role of these other spaces and I develop this in Chapter Four.

In this section, I have argued that to develop knowledge regarding the ESC, we need to shift analyses towards the shaping of fan and sexual identities within ESC fandom. Where the literature has focused on gay male experiences of the ESC, this thesis therefore aims to develop this work in the following ways: firstly, by focusing on how these people practice their fan and sexual identities within social media platforms and secondly, how bisexual and heterosexual men experience the ESC and how they construct identities as part of their fandom practices associated with the contest. Continuous developments in social media technology provide opportunities to practice ESC fandom, which can produce new performances of fan and sexual identity. Questions around fan and sexual visibility also need to be addressed. The cultural contestation of the ESC as not 'serious' and/or trite amongst (homophobic) cultural commentators coupled with the contest's associations with gay male identity can determine who, where and in what digital ESC fan spaces ESC fans come out and expose themselves as ESC fans. Now I have explored these issues, I will proceed to unpack the literature on the geographies of fandom.

2.2   Towards geographies of digital fandom

Practicing fandom online involves a diverse set of practices that are shaped by internet and social media platforms. This represents what Jenkins (2008, 2014) has argued to be a convergence of technologies and culture. Social media platforms, for example, empower users to create, share, (re)appropriate, and give new meanings to media content. As a consequence of these digital transformations in media distribution, fans are simultaneously and interchangeably producers and consumers of media content. These activities also intersect with the expression of identity. Within fan studies it has been argued that engaging with fandom and developing a fan identity is an extension of the self (Sandvoss, 2008). Practicing fandom also intersects with the expression of other socio-cultural identification categories, such as age, sexuality, and gender. These identities can also be

maintained and negotiated spatially, and digital spaces can also support and challenge their respective visibility.

I contend that shifts towards digital fan practices require further research in order to understand how they intersect with identity making online. I begin this section by discussing fan studies research and its overlaps with subcultures. I explain my rationale for focusing on fandom as opposed to subcultures by emphasising that the boundaries of fandom, and in particular digital fandom, are more fluid and dynamic. Following this, I then review the literature that has examined the geographies of fandom, including science fiction and football fandom. I then move on to review the literature that has examined representations of popular culture, such as movies, television programs and music, and how they shape meanings regarding space, place and identity. I also question how smartphone and internet technologies provide many different spaces through which identity can be constructed. Finally, I examine analyses of digital fandom within geography and I argue how social media platforms can shape dynamic expressions of sexuality through the decoding of ESC representations.

2.2.1 Fandom and subcultures

The majority of fan studies research has emanated from cultural studies that explores how fans consume and build affective relationships with mediated texts, such as film, television, and music (Sandvoss, 2005). It also involves enthusiastic, partisan, and participatory fan engagements with such texts (Fiske, 2010). Fandom is often perceived as a subversive practice as it challenges popular interpretations of media texts. Fans construct their own cultures by deconstructing their own meanings of popular media texts (Jenkins, 2012). They are also creative individuals and groups who construct alternative readings and content, through practices such as fan fiction (Bacon-Smith, 1992). Fandom takes place within a variety of locations such as festivals and sports stadia (Sandvoss, 2005), through the reimagining of theme parks which establish spatial and strong embodied connections for fans and visitors (Waysdorf and Reijnders, 2016), domestically

around the television set (Morley, 1992), and in online discussion forums (Brennan, 2014).

There are also overlaps between fandom and subcultures which require unpacking. Work on subcultures has examined the ways that individuals establish groups and communities and assert their difference to the mass Other (Williams, 2011). These socio-cultural groups are spatially distributed and have been historically constructed as resistance movements against mainstream societies. Individuals develop status through involvement with these groups, such as club cultures and establish subcultural capital (Thornton, 1995; Malbon, 1999). However, group identifications with subcultures can be problematised, as their attitudes and values change over periods of time and are increasingly fragmented, as individuals distinguish themselves from particular subcultural characteristics (Muggleton, 2006). This is also challenged when practicing subcultures in online environments as it provides scope for individuals to assert their identities and differentiate themselves from each other in complex and fluid ways (Hodkinson, 2003). Within youth cultures, for example, practicing their identities on social media platforms stimulates reflexive, fluid and dynamic processes in identity making and reworking (Robards and Bennett, 2011; Taylor et al., 2014). Parallels have been made between subcultures and fandom, particularly as they develop their own social and cultural norms and practices (Williams, 2011). In this thesis, I focus on fandom specifically as within the digital context its boundaries can be reworked and fluid. Through this theoretical lens, we can understand how socio-cultural groupings can be established and also resisted online (Hodkinson, 2003). The spatial dimensions of fandom have also become transformed by internet technologies and I now turn to this in the following section.

2.2.2 Geographies of fandom, popular culture and music

In this section, I argue that issues surrounding identity intersect with practicing fandom spatially. Within geography, there has been fruitful research that has explored the spatial dimensions of the study of fandom. Early research focused on

how science fiction fandom and cyberfiction have reproduced imaginations of space and place (Kneale, 1999, 2001; Kitchin and Kneale, 2001, 2002). These scholars have explored how science fiction produces an imaginative geography of postmodern urbanism in the early 21st century (Kitchin and Kneale, 2001) and how literary science fictions explore subgenres of cyberfiction and cyberpunk which feature elements of the internet, cyborging and how digital technologies could transform our societies within their narratives (Kneale, 1999, 2001). This literature has been written by authors of different genders and sexualities and has therefore begun to address how science fiction novels empower authors to reflect and seek pleasure (Kitchin and Kneale, 2002). However, these studies neglect how gender and sexuality is performed and interwoven between online/offline fan spaces and it is these issues that require more academic scrutiny.

One further context through which fandom has been analysed within geography is the socio-spatial construction of identity. Research in football fandom has explored how regional identities are imagined and inflected with local constructions of white, working-class masculinity through male performatives of beer-drinking and camaraderie (Brown, 1998; Lawrence, 2016). Similar work has focused on sports stadia as sites of transience and identity politics, such as cultural resistance to socio-economic change and Irish nationalism in Northern Ireland (Bairner and Shirlow, 1998). Yet, practicing fandom takes place across multiple online and offline spaces and can be situated in many different spatial contexts. Kraszewski (2008) has examined how displaced fans of an American football team turn to watching televised sports in American sports bars for example, to revitalise their local identities and reconnect with their former homes. This work argues that these American sports bars become communal spaces for football fans of different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Fandom thus takes place over many different socio-spatial contexts and in Chapter Four, I address this gap in geography by mapping the different online and offline fan spaces where ESC fandom takes place. It is these practices that intersect with the expression of sexuality.

Even though there are limited interdisciplinary approaches to geography and fandom, there has been work within the discipline that has focused on the decoding of popular culture, such as movies, television programs and music and how they represent ideas of space and place. These forms of media produce different audio-visual representations of what we see, which shape how we perceive and experience the world around us (Gilmartin, 2004; Saunders, 2017). Such analyses have examined the intersection of geopolitical narratives within superhero movies and Hollywood cinema, that have become an important lens for audiences to understand post-9/11 United States foreign policy and American exceptionalism (Dittmer, 2011, 2012). Some of this work has examined the televisual and cinematic in relation to their expression of socio-cultural identity. This has included the construction of violent gendered masculinity through the Jason Bourne series of movies to restore characters' 'manly' dignity (Dodds, 2011) and how the Tintin series of comics by Hergé centralised and embraced European ideologies as progressive, in an era of the rise of the USA and Soviet Union (Dunnett, 2009). Where this research has opened doors in understanding and decoding the relationships between popular geopolitics through cultural media texts and real-life scenarios, it needs to go further to explore human agency and how individuals and audiences experience and interpret the world around them (Saunders, 2017).

As the ESC is an international music competition, we must also acknowledge academic literature that has addressed the geographies of music. Music is a medium through which identity and place can be 'lived', 'relived' and imagined. Sound-based methods are one such way through which issues regarding identity, space and place are analysed and these techniques have been applied to research that has explored, for example, place-making (Stevenson and Holloway, 2017). Resounding techniques are another sound-based method that are used to collapse the time between the present and the past that produce imaginative and emotional connections to historical landscapes (Holloway, 2017). Researchers have also identified the importance of music as an economic commodity (Gibson

and Connell, 2005), as an expression of national identity (Kong, 1996, 2006; Wood, 2012), and as a site for political activism (Carroll and Connell, 2000). Music has also been conceptualised as something that is heard, felt, embodied, and brought into being through performance (Wood et al., 2007). Anderson et al. (2005) also identify the importance of recognising the performative nature of music and how it assists in the production of identity within different soundscapes. This literature also overlaps in to geographies of affect and emotion (Gallagher, 2016) that explores the relationships between the physical appearances of sound and the affect it has in moving the body.

However, we do not simply just listen to music. Music is more of an 'expanded listening' practice that should also include analyses of 'how bodies of all kinds – human and more-than-human – respond to sound' (Gallagher et al., 2017:618). Music is often experienced simultaneously with other senses, such as sight. There has been interest amongst geographers to understand the interrelationship between sound and vision (Pocock, 1993). Music is embedded into visual mediums, such as films, television programmes, and music videos which convey deeper meanings and trigger affectual and emotional responses. There has been work that has unpacked this interplay between vision and sound and how they express geographical knowledge and identity. Kirby (2021) has examined the composition, stylisation and structure of James Horner's film scores, such as the movie *Apollo 13*, which normalises and reproduces gendered binaries and their spatiality – the domestic female versus the working male. As listening is often positioned at the centre of sonic geographies, I argue similar to Paiva (2018) that technology can develop our understandings of the relationships between space, place and identity. More specifically, I emphasise that the internet and social media are one set of spaces that have been largely neglected within this literature. These are spaces which have transformed audience engagement and where people construct and perform their identities through music and share them online using visual representations, such as images, videos and text. I explore the literature that has touched upon these issues in more detail in section 2.3.1.

In this section, I make a critical point by suggesting that we need to shift analyses towards social media technologies as they are increasingly convenient for fans to practice fandom and forge attachments to their media texts. Social media platforms have fundamentally changed the consumption of popular culture – from watching films, television programs, and engaging in music, concerts and festivals. There has been some research in this regard in geography that has examined the decoding of geopolitical narratives online and their respective spatiality. Thorogood (2020) has examined how the popular animation *Archer* creates meaning online through analyses of Reddit forum threads and YouTube comments which can inform the cartoon's geopolitical satirical narratives. One further paper has combined theories of cultural studies and popular geopolitics that uses intersectional approaches to understand how audiences engage with Christianity and geopolitics on the internet (Dittmer and Dodds, 2008). Both these works identify the shift towards thinking about how audiences can produce meanings and create relationships with media texts through internet technologies. The convenience in accessing social media technologies through smartphone devices provides multiple outlets through which ESC fans can practice their fandom and, in this thesis, I will provide a contribution to knowledge by examining how they negotiate their fan and sexual visibility within socio-digital contexts.

One criticism of much of the literature on the geographies of fandom is that it has primarily focussed on the spatial practices of football fandom (Bairner and Shirlow, 1998; Kraszewski, 2008), and the role of internet technologies as sites for the de/coding of popular media texts and how they inform understandings of geopolitics (Dittmer and Dodds, 2008; Thorogood, 2020). Moreover, the geographies of music literature has centred on how identity and emotions are performed (Anderson et al., 2005; Wood et al., 2007; Gallagher, 2016), but we need to develop these analyses and explore how they are expressed online. Thus, I develop this literature in this thesis and consider the role of identity and its expression within digital ESC fandom. Fandom is practiced across the online/offline and I will analyse how these fan spaces shape their practices. In the

following section, I discuss the literature regarding social media geographies and how they provide multiple ways of expressing and performing our identities, which intersect with digital ESC fan practices.

2.3 Social media geographies, identity and visibility

This section explores the critical debates around social media platforms and how they inform wider geographical debates about the digitisation of our socio-cultural lives. I argue that in order to advance our understandings of these processes, we need to understand how identity is constructed within these volatile environments. I problematize issues surrounding Butler's (1990) and Goffman's (1990) theories of performativity as a consequence of the different expressions of communication that are available to individuals through social media software (Sandover et al., 2018). I build on ideas surrounding code/space within geography to suggest how social media platforms also encourage the construction of fan spaces, networks, and identities (Dodge and Kitchin, 2003; Dodge et al., 2009; Kitchin and Dodge, 2011). I then progress to explore the role of social media platforms in facilitating engagement with popular culture and fandom and how these practices intersect with the expression of identity. Finally, I suggest how social media platforms provide opportunities for individuals to mould their sexualities, where the discussion will then shift towards digital geographies of sexuality.

In Chapter One, I identified the problematic use of the term cyberspace in relation to the internet as it is understood as a universe separated from the offline world (Bell, 2001). Social media platforms challenge these definitions as they are liminal spaces that operate as an '…*ongoing* mutual constitution of the "human" and the "technical"' (Kinsley, 2014:378, emphasis in original). In other words, social media platforms are a product of the interweaving between the online and offline, they are mutually constitutive. The theory of code/space has been deployed within digital geography to identify the ways that software becomes embedded within everyday life and how it is always in a process of coming into being (Dodge and

Kitchin, 2003; Kitchin and Dodge, 2011). Social media platforms are products of code and are produced through the online/offline and they are interwoven in our daily social and material lives. Social media platforms can also be conceptualised as code/spaces as they can be accessed anywhere through smartphone and internet-enabled devices and are inherently spatial.

One major drawback of much of social media research within geography is that they use quantitative approaches; they neglect human agency and social media platforms have more profound significance in identity shaping. Quantitative research has often used 'big data' sets in order to examine how individuals become physically attached to places on social media through, for example, geo-tagged social media data (Shelton, 2017) that identify the physical aspects and distribution of urban functions and their populations through analysing the spatiality of 'tweets' (Stefanidis et al., 2013; Croitoru et al., 2015). These approaches use GIS technology to map social media activity and urban functions. What this research contributes is that social media is analysed to understand how social media users use urban space. However, what is lacking is a consideration of qualitative approaches to social media data, which are more appropriate if we are to explore issues surrounding identity and its expression.

There have been a limited number of papers that have used mixed method approaches that incorporate qualitative analyses of social media data. This research has explored how social media platforms shape our understandings surrounding space, place and identity. Butler et al. (2018) examine how Twitter users imagine places by denigrating their hometowns by participating in networks that share the '#shithole' hashtag. Sandover et al. (2018) explored how Twitter encouraged the organisation of environmental activists amid controversies of state sanctioned badger culling in England. This involved running data queries through an application programming interface (API) using narrow search terms, such as '#badgercull' to generate both quantitative and qualitative data. These studies demonstrate the importance of Twitter as a site for engaging with

space/place making practices and activism. In Chapter Three, I contribute to these debates by applying digital research methods and qualitative data analysis to social media data in order to understand how social media platforms, such as Twitter, inform identity making practices.

The way in which we disclose information provides other users with ideas of how we express our identities online. Social media therefore produces multiple code/spaces and lenses through which media content and opinions are disseminated (Kitchin et al., 2013). For its users, social media becomes an important medium through which the sense of self is expressed and documented. The transcendence of identity and the digitisation of the self through social media has undeniably complicated both Goffman (1990) and Butler's (1990) work on the presentation of the self and performativity respectively. Goffman (1990) identified how individuals prepare themselves 'backstage' in performing a sense of self. He approaches performance as a period of continuous presence that has an influence on observers, whether 'authentic' or cynical. Social media platforms are the digital 'setting' that encourage users to perform a sense of self in front of an audience. These 'settings' are influential in the construction and performance of identity as they allow individuals to express themselves using multiple textual, audible and visual forms (Crang, 2015). This also includes how individuals manipulate cultural media texts in order to express and inform an opinion. Social media phenomena such as memes have been analysed as sites of socio-political public art (Zebracki and Luger, 2019) – activities which also intersect with the performance of identity.

Similarly, Butler (1990) developed the concept of performativity to identify how identities, such as gender and sexuality are effects that are produced by bodies and embodied acts. More recently, there have been calls within geography to address the performative nature of social media platforms (Sandover et al., 2018; Zebracki and Luger, 2019) and to do this analyses of digital communication tools

embedded within social media software, such as emojis [21] , text-based messages/comments and the media content associated with them, such as GIFs, photos and videos is needed. These methods of digital communication can shape how individuals develop networks and communities based on like-minded interests and one set of spaces where we can study this is in digital ESC fandom. We need to further our understanding of how these issues within social media culture influence identity making and reworking across different social media platforms.

There is no denying that social media platforms augment and extend socio-spatial relations, and re-orient bodily relations between people and places (Longhurst, 2013); they bring us closer together by accessing smartphones and internet-enabled devices. Questions around attachment also relate to the role of smartphones as mobile digital cultural objects, where our social lives are accessed anywhere and instantly (but taking care to acknowledge that there remain digital inequalities) (Rose, 2016). Consequently, social media reconfigures our familial and sexual relationships as the internet stretches intimacy beyond the domestic realm (Wilkinson, 2014). The internet provides access to a global space, which allows connection with multiple intimacies and maintaining relationships at a distance (Bell and Binnie, 2000).

There has been fruitful work within feminist geography on the role of digital screens, such as computers, laptops, and tablets that reduce feelings of 'distance' between mothers and their children through the free video conferencing software Skype in real-time (Longhurst, 2013, 2016a, 2016b; Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017). These socio-digital practices can be what Ash (2013) describes as 'affective atmospheres', as they blur the boundaries between online/offline and are increasingly hybridised, because they reconfigure socio-spatial relationships and bring users closer together. These arguments are also pertinent

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[21] Emojis are micro-images that can be embedded within written text that operate as reflecting an emotion that an individual is trying to express. These can also replace words to emphasise an object or place.

for mainstream social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp which incorporate technologically diverse ways of communicating, such as text messaging, voice calling, image and video sharing on a public and private basis. These social media platforms are spatio-temporal atmospheres that are accessed through smartphones and internet-enabled devices where users come in and come out of social media applications frequently, which transform social and cultural activities (Ash, 2013).

Social media platforms also enable individuals to engage with popular culture, and these practices also intersect with the expression and performance of identity. Social media platforms are more fluid and dynamic; they disrupt the traditionally passive from 'here' to 'there' 'arc of communication' (Adams, 2018:591), as individuals rework these paths of information and their identities. In other words, these technologies enable fans and audiences to subvert mass media representations, but they can also uphold wider social perceptions and rhetoric. Kinsley (2016) argues that social media produces a culture that determines what cultural media texts are deemed 'popular', 'ordinary' and 'vulgar' by the way they are distributed and shared by individuals online. This informs class-based distinctions between valued and devalued media texts, for which social media platforms encourage the sharing of opinion and tastes (Kitchin et al., 2013). Tastes are self-directed and shared through social media platforms through mass-self communication. This is defined as individual content that is tailored towards a public audience through an online social network (Castells, 2013, 2015). Communicating online in this way can also be used to forge temporal networks around individual taste to seek out like-minded others who share their interest and to trigger public debates.

2.3.1 Experiencing music using social media platforms

One particular aspect of popular culture that is practiced by fans and audiences online is that they share their experiences of festivals, concerts, and music. Fans' capture moments and share their experiences through photographs, videos and

text messaging, as well as sharing their experiences in real time through social media. There has been some research within fandom that has explored these phenomena and how concert and festival goers reach out to fans who are not physically present to stretch feelings of inclusion and connection (Bennett, 2014; Baym, 2018). Social media platforms, such as Twitter, reconfigure the relationships and distances between audiences, musicians and music events (Baym, 2018). There are wider debates to consider here, particularly as music evokes different expressions of socio-cultural identity, such as sexuality and how they permeate social media networks (Anderson et al., 2005).

Interacting with music also transcends personal boundaries and encourages the sociality of the self, which can also reconfigure the experience of the self as separate and individualised (Kahn, 1999). In section 2.1, I argued how ESC musicians – such as Jamala, the winner from Ukraine in 2016 – could emotionally connect with audiences through their music and stage performances (Baker, 2020). These practices are also transformed within social media spaces, where human emotions are communicated and translated through multiple textual, visual, and audible forms (Gallagher, 2016). Technical mediation makes it possible for soundscapes to exist digitally and allows audiences to share and perform their 'lived' experiences of music concerts through social media. Yet, audiences do not necessarily need to attend music events for the experience, individuals can interact without being present through social media and can thus produce a highly embodied, but also disembodied, experience. We need to understand how online music cultures can assist in the production of individuality, identity and communities and how social media has transformed the ways that individuals engage with cultural objects (Cottrell, 2005).

Accessing multiple social media platforms to practice popular culture and fandom is necessary to make oneself visible in a social network. Yet, what requires further academic analysis is addressing questions of fan and sexual visibility across multiple social media platforms. It is worth noting that even though social media

is more frequently ubiquitous, there still remain digital social inequalities (Dodge and Kitchin, 2003). Social media can generate anxieties amongst individuals who do not socialise or document their lives; this can result in exclusion, invisibility and demonstrates neglecting digital social ties. In relation to digital sociality and identity visibility, video conferencing software digitally mediates emotion where it can often be concealed or hidden in other areas of social life (Longhurst, 2016b). The digital screen takes on an important role as it shapes how individuals make themselves visible within socio-digital and socio-sexual contexts. Consequently, individuals regularly determine which aspects of their identity, including their sexuality, is made private and/or public within social media platforms; issues which require greater academic analysis.

Issues surrounding the private/public can also be theorised within debates surrounding 'the closet'. This can be used to understand how access to multiple social media platforms encourages individuals to come out and stay in 'the closet' about their sexualities online. The socio-spatial ontology of the closet has been the defining structure of gay oppression as a consequence of dominant heteronormative society (Sedgwick, 1990; Brown, 2005; Brown et al., 2011) and has been bounded with feelings of shame (Munt, 2007, 2019). It can also be used to understand how ESC fans of different sexualities mould and self-regulate their fan and sexual identities online (I discuss the role of the closet in relation to digital sexuality more explicitly in section 2.4). The closet is complicated by social media platforms, as they produce different publics and counterpublics through which individuals engage with their socio-cultural and political lives (Warner, 2002) and how and where they practice their sexualities (Martin, 2000). For example, Facebook groups produce bounded publics which can produce feelings of cohesion and Twitter can produce networked publics that are shaped by engagement with hashtags and trends, number of followers, likes and retweets. These forms of communication and networking through the digital screen produce close, but unfamiliar relationships as participants can be known, but also unknown

to others (Weiner and Young, 2011). This thesis will explore these operations of social media platforms and how they transform the ontology of the closet.

Individuals also use social media platforms to tailor content towards specific publics, which can also shape their identity. Truong (2018b, 2018a) has examined how young people network on social media platforms, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, around shared drinking and nightlife practices. WhatsApp allows young people to participate who are absent and thus remain participants. Young people strategically silence particular identities from Facebook, as there is greater surveillance from parents who may criticise them for their behaviour. Young people define on their own terms what 'lenses' of their socio-cultural lives they make public (or even private) on social media (Leyshon et al., 2013; De Jong, 2015). This may be necessary as individuals can be shamed for their interests or how they express themselves in public. This can encourage the movement of bodies between different social networking platforms where different (or even similar) identities can be constructed and performed (Taylor et al., 2014). As ESC fandom is often perceived and placed at the 'margins' of mainstream society and popular culture, it provides a unique opportunity to examine issues surrounding fan and sexual visibility online and their negotiation. We can then understand how social media software and its design can shape self-management and self-regulation of ESC fandom and sexual identity. In Chapter Five, I explore how Facebook public timelines and ESC Facebook fan groups encourage self-management of fan and sexual identity expression as they are both spaces where individuals are exposed to shame for their fan practices and interests.

What requires further research is how ESC fans construct different or multiple lenses of, socio-cultural identity on social media platforms. I have argued that the theories of code/space and performativity are useful in order to critically examine the ways identity is performed online, the ways identity is intertwined between the online/offline, and the ways it can be produced similarly or differently between different social media platforms. Communicating through multiple

textual, audible and visual forms and thus multiple representations empowers users to 'fit in' to online groups and networks and perform identities in new and complex ways (Sandover et al., 2018). Social media platforms also provide spaces of respite, particularly for people from various social and cultural backgrounds that may feel marginalised (Taylor et al., 2014). This links back to ideas developed in section 2.1 in relation to ESC fandom, as it is widely perceived as counter-cultural and non-normative. Therefore, further analysis is required to unpick the relationship between fandom and socio-cultural markers of identity, such as sexuality, and how social media platforms shape their visibility. The next section will therefore focus more specifically on the digital geographies of sexuality and how these issues regarding fan and sexual visibility can be contextualised through ideas of shame, the closet and queer code/space.

2.4   Digital geographies of sexuality

In this section, I argue that developments in technology have transformed sexual practices and the geographies of sexuality (e.g. van Doorn, 2011; Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014; Blackwell et al., 2015; Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Miles, 2018). The ubiquity of smartphone technologies and access to 'free' hook-up applications, such Grindr, an application used by men seeking sex with men, have revolutionised where and when these individuals meet up for social encounters and sex. Men can be increasingly visible within these applications, but they can also operate as spaces to conceal or camouflage a queer identity. I make a critical point that issues regarding sexual visibility online can also be analysed through conceptualisations of 'the closet' and shame. I argue that the closet can be adapted to understanding heterosexual male ESC fan experiences in order to document how they come out, conceal, deny, and camouflage their fandom in online/offline ESC fan spaces and social encounters. I contend that smartphone technologies and the practicing of sexualities online challenge theorisations of the closet as individuals can simultaneously come out about sexual orientation, but

also re-enter the closet; sexuality can be negotiated and shaped by accessing multiple social media platforms.

I also provide an overview of the development of technology and its influence on sexual visibility, before focusing on the same-sex hook-up application Grindr which has received much academic attention in transforming the spatial practices of sexuality. Where researchers have examined how sexuality is practiced within hook-up apps, I argue that mainstream social media applications can be involved in sexual identity making, which can contribute to analyses of queer code/space (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a; Gieseking, 2017). I consider how these sites of digital communication can be explored through an analyses of digital ESC fandom as they can produce ambiguous and ambivalent social spaces for the production of queer visibility.

The focus on geographies of sexualities has shifted away from the study of gay urban neighbourhoods and business districts to capture a wide range of sexualised spaces; partly in response to some of the broader societal, legal, and political transformations in specific geographic contexts (Duggan, 2002; Nast, 2002; Puar, 2006). Some of these analyses have focused on the acknowledgement and acceptance of homosexuality in cities, such as Toronto, Sydney (Nash, 2013; Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2017), and Spitalfields, London (Brown, 2006) where there has been a growing recognition and acceptance of sexual diversity (Brown, 2008). However, same-sex hook-up applications, such as Grindr, coupled with urban gentrification projects have been argued to be key factors in the decline of gay public space, which raises questions surrounding queer visibility in the city (Nash, 2013; Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014; Ghaziani, 2015). This augmentation of gay identity through hook-up applications also influences its organisation across the city; gay identity is located spatially and is not necessarily constrained to ghettos, villages or neighbourhoods (Waitt and Gorman-Murray, 2008). These socio-cultural transformations of how individuals engage with the erotic also reconfigure where they take place.

Where gay men traditionally entered urban gay venues, such as clubs and bars, to meet potential sex partners, the boundaries of gay space now vary in their permeability and can be temporarily conditioned. Geographical and social sciences research on digital sexualities has tended to focus on hook-up applications, such as Grindr, and have overlooked other applications and digital contexts for the production of sexual identities, such as fan spaces.

2.4.1 'The closet' and shame

Questions around the spatial dimensions of sexual visibility have also permeated theorisations of 'the closet' and shame – these are important theories for analysing and understanding ESC fandom. I propose a radical re-thinking of the closet through analysing how it can apply to straight men; as a consequence of the contest's associations with gay culture and its cultural contestation, issues which I examined earlier in section 2.1. The social conditioning and imposition of the closet has dominated gay life and its oppression in heteronormative societies. The closet is argued to be a defining factor in the organisation of gay life[22] and is a metaphorical and material space where these individuals conceal their sexual orientations from public view (Sedgwick, 1990; Sedgwick and Frank, 1995; Brown, 2005; Brown et al., 2011).

For many gay people, coming out about their sexual orientation can be triggered in order to seek validation, belonging and emotional connections with others. Family and friends can be accommodating towards openly gay people, but it does not necessarily mean acceptance (Seidman, 2002). Intersectional subjectivities such as age, class and race also shape how gay people conceal, deny and camouflage their sexual orientation in different socio-spatial contexts. Coming out of the closet does not separate gay people's relationship with the closet, it is also

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[22] Where my emphasis is on gay people's experiences with the closet, it must also be noted that LGBT and queer people also regulate their gender and sexual orientation expression in relation to the closet.

shaped by the individual(s) receiving this disclosure, and how they are implicated by it (Sedgwick, 1990).

Gay men can be vilified and deemed out of place by performing their sexualities out of the closet in spaces that are established as heteronormative (Brown, 2005). Gay men are also susceptible to scapegoating tactics by heterosexuals, who use homophobic slurs and language (such as 'sissy boys') to maintain a dominant heterosexual and masculine identity and culture. Heterosexuals and their respective activities (such as playing football) are defined as 'other' to same-sex desires and their influences (Sedgwick, 1990). Despite this and Brown's (2005) work on closet geographies, there is still a need for more research on the geographical dimensions of the closet. I will do this in my thesis by examining how fans negotiate coming out and staying in the closet about their fandom in different online/offline spaces. Internet and social media technologies are also transforming and complicating areas of public/private, and hence meanings of the closet. This sets up the discussion of ESC fandom as a suitable focus for expanding our understandings of the closet. In Chapter Six, I address the gap in the literature regarding heterosexual male experiences and practices of ESC fandom and I explore through the contextualisation of the 'ESC closet' how these fans conceal, deny and camouflage their fandom within online and offline socio-spatial contexts.

The closet is not a simple in/out binary, but it is a process where gay people routinely negotiate coming out and staying in the closet about their sexual orientations in many social and spatial contexts (Fuss, 1991; Brown, 2005). The closet is also complicated by the internet and social media platforms and can produce new socio-spatial dimensions, which are co-produced through publicity/privacy, inside/outside and sexual visibility. Lewis (2012) has examined how gay men are involved with segmented journeys of coming out of the closet. Gay men re-enter the closet short-term, which demonstrates the closet's discontinuous nature as they search for and try out spaces and places in order to relocate for gay life. Imagine if we flipped the concept of the closet to apply to

straight men? Studying the closet could be more interesting if we consider how straight men practice their ESC fandom and sexualities within an arena that is often represented as 'gay'.

As I discussed in section 2.1, the ESC has been criticised by many cultural commentators and is often associated with queerness. Given these representations, the concept of shame is highly relevant to how ESC fans practice and 'come out' about their fandom in socio-spatial contexts. The emotion of shame is produced in relation to the closet, which can be felt if one is 'found out' about their homosexuality. Shame is constructed through dichotomous, but interrelated processes of attachment/disattachment, concealment/exposure and is often embodied with other feelings, such as disgust and anger (Munt, 2007; Ahmed, 2013). For those that shame and for those who are shamed for their non-heterosexuality, there are embodied feelings of excitement, both positive and negative, that influence self-attention (Munt, 2007, 2019).

Shame is also produced in relation to a socio-cultural and spatial context or interest that triggers enjoyment, but in some way is considered 'strange' and thus non-normative. This also produces paranoia which can serve to suppress innovative or different alternatives to the mainstream. This involves cognitive processes through which individuals determine where and to whom they come out, but also stay in the closet (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995; Sedgwick, 2003). If fans are 'found out' about participating in ESC fandom, it can threaten the dimensions of the closet as it is often represented as queer or gay (Lemish, 2007; Singleton et al., 2007; Baker, 2017). These processes can be transformed within social media platforms as they can be used for engaging with ESC fandom, but they also intersect with other aspects of socio-cultural life and prescribed social relations, such as family and friends (Truong, 2018b, 2018a).

This thesis is significant as it addresses gaps in knowledge regarding social media practices; the ESC's associations with gay culture and its wider negative perceptions amongst cultural commentators can also shape sexual and fan

visibility across the online/offline divide. The accessibility and convenience of smartphone and social media technologies add further dimensions in how LGBT people 'come out' and self-manage their sexualities online.

2.4.2   Smartphones, hook-up applications and sexuality

As ESC fandom is more frequently being practiced through technology, smartphones, internet-enabled devices and social media platforms provide ways through which fan and sexual identity is constructed. This section will unpack the literature that has examined how sexual identity has become digitally mediated and (re)produced through smartphone technologies and hook-up applications, such as Grindr. Mobile digital platforms have revolutionised the ways in which individuals engage with sexual practices and the locations where sexual activities are practiced. Internet space, like everyday material space, is coded and normalised as heterosexual. There have been feminist (Haraway, 2006; Elwood and Leszczynski, 2018) and feminist, black and queer (Gieseking, 2017; Elwood, 2020) analyses of the internet that have challenged its heterosexual distinctions. The internet provides new levels of sexual visibility and its expression, as sexuality is not necessarily directly mapped offline. The internet, for example, provides respite to gay people who do not want to be seen as gay in other socio-spatial contexts (Mowlabocus, 2008).

One common theme regarding the internet and social media platforms with regard to sexual visibility, is that they can be constructed as ambivalent 'spaces of encounter' (Cockayne et al., 2017:1118), as LGBT people who use them do not necessarily have to declare their sexual orientation to others; it can be manipulated. Hanson (1995) situates sexual experiences and their encounters within the historic context of the telephone. The telephone performs as a technical space, which is queered through sexual imagination and play. Phone sex is perceived as a transgressive practice and provides anonymity and promiscuity to practice sexuality both intimately and at a safe distance. These practices allow individuals to express themselves 'beyond the skin', as sexuality is electronically

enhanced which questions the distinctions between humans and machines (Haraway, 2006). As van Doorn (2011:542) also argues, sexualities are partly virtual phenomena 'that have to be repeatedly actualized in order to assume their material shape in both physical and digital environments'. In early incarnations of the internet, this included LGBT individuals producing 'cyberqueer spaces' such as newsgroups, websites and chatrooms to practice their sexuality and engage with likeminded individuals (Wakeford, 2000). The internet also acts as an intermediary for men who have sex with men to engage in sex practices that are deemed socially unacceptable, such as sadomasochism (Rambukkana, 2007) and cottaging (Mowlabocus, 2008). These can be arranged in digital space (through websites or forums) that are often safer, anonymous and 'closeted' from mainstream society, so they can be participated in physical spaces. However, the evolution of Web 2.0 and development of smartphone applications have transformed the ways LGBT people practice their sexualities online and how they seek to make themselves visible within social media platforms.

One particular smartphone application that has revolutionised the ways men seek sex with men is the hook-up application Grindr. Within the application, users create a profile and establish an identity using socio-cultural demographics (e.g. age, race, sexual preference), their sex position (e.g. top, bottom, versatile) and upload photo(s) to identify themselves within a grid, where other users view their profile. The application organises prospective candidates to hook-up based on geographic proximity and uses GPS technology to locate and position users (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Miles, 2017, 2018). Grindr encourages sexualities to be more mobile and it has made same-sex sexual encounters and erotic chat more immediate (Tziallas, 2015). Grindr puts men who are seeking sex with men in control of where and when they hook-up with others, which can take place outside of traditional inner-city gay clubs and bars. For example, Grindr has been likened as a 'gay bar in my pocket', according to Blackwell et al. (2015:1126), and was used in a 'straight bar' by one interview participant to hook-up with another gay man. However, hook-up applications are sites of oppression within some

heteronormative societies, for example, they can be monitored by state surveillance particularly where same-sex acts are considered unlawful, such as in Egypt (Jankowicz, 2017) and Indonesia (Solomon, 2016).

The immediacy of Grindr facilitates human interaction in real-time, where men meet up for sex, pleasure, fantasy and erotic practices (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Miles, 2017, 2018). Sexuality can be moulded, reconfigured and anonymised through the smartphone screen. Gay men have previously found it easier to come out in digital space than in material space, because technologies provide anonymity and reduce the anxieties of face-to-face communication (Wakeford, 2000; O'Riordan, 2007). This theorisation is problematic, as research on same-sex hook-up applications stimulates practices of body shaming, racism and internalised homophobia. Men seeking sex with men can be less in control of how they use hook-up applications; there is a politics with how users construct their profiles and display social, cultural, economic, bodily and erotic capital (Bonner-Thompson, 2017).

Where much of digital sexualities research has examined sexuality in relation to sex and the erotic, we must not neglect this (Binnie, 1997), but also analyse how mainstream social networking platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp shape sexuality and its negotiation between them. We can then also address gaps in knowledge by understanding how the operations of the closet are transformed digitally and how ESC fans negotiate their fan and sexual identities as public/private across these social media applications.

2.4.3   Social media platforms and queer code/space

Accessing different social media platforms enables ESC fans to negotiate and manage their fandom and sexualities across them. There is a plurality of digital spaces through which gay people practice and express their identities, which is also the case for digital ESC fandom. The ESC's associations with gay culture and its cultural contestation shape sexual and fan visibility across the online/offline

dichotomy. In order to examine the role of sexuality and its performance through social media platforms, the concept of queer code/space is also useful in understanding the intersections between ESC fandom, technology, and sexuality. Code is theorised as the prescribed social norms and sets of algorithmic instructions that underpin software infrastructures, which assist in the production of queer code/space (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a, 2017b; Gieseking, 2017). Queer code/space emphasises the differences and normativities of living with technology, which assist in the regulation of socio-spatial experiences. It is also used to interrogate the complex ways that software systems (such as social media platforms) disrupt dominant heteronormative digital coding practices and how socio-sexual digital practices challenge social norms and mainstream culture (Dowson, 2000; Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a; Elwood and Leszczynski, 2018).

I argue that these debates regarding queer code/space theory can be developed in relation to spaces of ESC fandom. ESC fandom provides possibilities to understand the ways individuals challenge mainstream cultural production, but also how fans can live differently together through coded objects, such as smartphones and internet-enabled devices (Cockayne et al., 2017). There has been some research that has investigated the ways LGBT individuals negotiate and construct their identities through social media platforms. Research by Jenzen (2017) has explored how social media sites such as Tumblr are used by trans youth to engage with LGBT issues as it provides these individuals with greater fluidity in defining their identities; particularly in the midst of widespread online transphobia. Jenzen (2017) also examined how social media platforms encourage creative forms of resistance for trans youth, as they strategically express themselves, forge communities and navigate binary gendered social media worlds.

One further way through which fan and sexual identity is expressed and can contribute to debates surrounding queer code/space is by the multiple forms of communication that are available to social media users. Digital language such as text, emojis, pictures, videos and GIFs directly created by users or secondary

media sources, can express fandom and sexuality in surprising ways (Zebracki and Luger, 2019). Practicing fandom and sexuality using these mediums through social media technologies disrupts the ordering of human behaviour (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a; Jenzen, 2017). These relationships are constructed as ambivalent as they produce a politics of digital and data visibility within the socio-digital and material lives of queer people (Gieseking, 2017). These more recent debates surrounding the relationships between technology, sexuality and ambivalence can also be inflected through practices of ESC fandom. Thus, in Chapter Five, I explore how social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter shape sexuality through ESC fan practices. I argue here how these technologies are simultaneously liberating and constraining for identity expression through ESC fan practices, which challenges the perceived queerness of the ESC.

The evidence presented in this section suggests that we can advance the theories of 'the closet', shame and queer code/space by turning towards the construction of sexuality within ESC fandom. Fans can be shamed for their fandom as a consequence of the cultural contestation of the ESC and its associations with queerness. This sets up the discussion for ESC fandom as a suitable focus for developing our ideas on the geographical dimensions of the closet. I have suggested that the concept of the closet could be more interesting if it was flipped in order to understand how straight men practice their fan and sexual identities within online/offline fan spaces. I explore these issues in Chapter Six, where I develop the term the 'ESC closet' in order to think about how straight men come out, conceal, deny and camouflage their fandom within online/offline spaces. I have also argued that we need to shift analyses towards mainstream social media applications and how they shape sexuality. In order to do so, I have identified the concept of queer code/space as a theoretical framework to understand the intersections between ESC fandom, technology, and sexuality. In Chapter Five, I explore how fan and sexual identities are expressed in surprising ways through access to digital language and communication tools within social media software and how they challenge ideas surrounding queer code/space.

2.5   Chapter summary

This chapter has critically examined the literature in four key areas: the ESC, geographies of fandom, social media and identity and geographies of digital sexuality. I have made four key critical points, which I outline below.

Firstly, there remain several aspects of the ESC, about which relatively little is known. **We need to delve deeper into researching the online and offline spaces where ESC fans practice their fandom and their sexualities.** Issues surrounding the cultural contestation of the ESC and its associations with gay male culture can shape where fandom and sexuality is practiced. There is a need to explore how the ESC challenges ideas surrounding LGBT identity and belonging and how it provides spaces (both online and offline) to practice ambiguous sexualities. In section 2.1.1, I raised a critical point by emphasising that the ESC is much more than an annual event but permeates a dynamic range of everyday spaces online and offline and in media. Consequently, further research is needed to map the online/offline ESC fan spaces and how they facilitate socio-sexual and fan belonging. We also need to shift analyses towards social media practices of ESC fandom. ESC fandom has become transformed by social media platforms and these spaces provide many opportunities to engage with cultural media texts that can be reworked and manipulated. Greater attention is needed to understand how these practices intersect with online identity making and the different social media platforms where they take place. In Chapter Four, I challenge the homogenous view that the ESC is simply a 'gay event' by mapping the different online and offline ESC fan spaces where fandom and sexuality are practiced.

Secondly, **social media platforms have transformed the ESC fan experience and we need more research into how these technologies shape its practices and intersect with the expression of sexuality.** Social media platforms are volatile environments through which sexuality is brought into being, expressed, and performed. Theories surrounding code/space can be adapted within the social media context as they are embedded within everyday life and are always in a

process of coming into being (Dodge and Kitchin, 2003; Kitchin and Dodge, 2011). Social media platforms are accessed anywhere through smartphone and internet-enabled devices and are inherently spatial. We need to shift from quantitative towards qualitative data analyses in order to understand the performance of identity within social media platforms. We can then understand how different social media platforms assist in the construction and negotiation of different or multiple lenses of socio-cultural identity. We also need further research into how the wider cultural contestation of the ESC and its associations with queerness can lead to a shaming of ESC fans, and how these associations with the contest shape fan and sexual identities online.

Thirdly, similar to Sandover et al. (2018) and Zebracki and Luger (2019), I question how social media platforms are considered performative. Through their design, **I argue that social media platforms provide access to diverse textual, visual and audible forms of information and we need further research to explore how these forms of communication shape sexuality through digital ESC fandom.** Further academic attention also needs to be paid towards mainstream social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp to explore how they (re)construct the sexualised self. The theory of queer code/space has largely overlooked how social media platforms disrupt, challenge and effectively queer identities (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a; Gieseking, 2017; Elwood and Leszczynski, 2018) and we can interrogate these issues through digital ESC fandom. These questions regarding sexuality and its visibility require further analysis and in Chapter Five, I explore the role of two different social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter as ambivalent queer code/spaces, as they reconfigure, but also limit sexuality expression through ESC fan practices.

One final critical point is that although the ESC embraces queerness, **we need to understand how the event is experienced by ESC fans of different sexualities.** One of the major limitations of existing literature on sexuality and the ESC is that it centres on gay men's experience of the event (Singleton et al., 2007; Baker,

2017). While this is still important, we need to break down these analyses by exploring bisexual and heterosexual experiences of the contest. In section 2.4.1, I argued that we could flip the term of the closet on its head to explore straight men's experiences of the ESC. This is possible as the ESC has been contested as not 'serious' and/or trite, and it is associated with gay male identity and culture. Consequently, we can then seek to understand how straight male fans closet through concealing, denying and camouflaging their ESC fandom in ESC fan spaces and in social encounters. I have argued in relation to ideas regarding the closet, how normalised heterosexual male practices (such as football) are demarcated from same-sex male culture through vociferous language, such as the use of homophobic slurs to question their heterosexuality (Sedgwick, 1990). These issues remain pertinent to ESC fandom and in Chapter Six, I pivot the analysis towards heterosexual male fan experiences of the contest and how they navigate a widely perceived gay dominant environment; both online and offline. By acknowledging these research gaps within the geographies of social media, fandom and sexuality, we can understand how fan and sexual identity is brought into practice, expressed and negotiated between social media platforms.

Chapter Three: 'Making your mind up': Using digital methods to investigate ESC fan spaces and negotiating an 'aca-fan' positionality

In 1981, 'Making your mind up'[23], performed by Bucks Fizz was the UK entry and consequently won the contest that year. Their performance featured the male singers ripping off the *ladies* longer skirts, to reveal shorter skirts underneath.
Source: McLean (2018).

To recap, the Aim and Objectives following the literature review are as follows:

Aim

To examine the construction of gender and sexual identity within spaces of Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) fandom

Objectives

1. *To map the spaces of ESC fandom*

2. *To analyse the construction of fan and sexual identities within the digital geographies of ESC fandom*

3. *To critically examine how non-gay fans, engage and express their identities within spaces of ESC fandom*

To interrogate the aim and objectives, this chapter will develop a strong and original contribution of netnography methods and methodology. It does this by using innovative research methods in the research design. This includes using social media applications as research tools to explore issues around sexuality in

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[23] 'Making your mind up' by Bucks Fizz https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iua3QxRoj1I accessed 27/12/2020.

online and offline ESC fandom. To do so, I collect qualitative data from the social media applications WhatsApp and Twitter. This is achieved by: firstly, co-ordinating digital focus groups with ESC fans through WhatsApp and secondly, conducting an auto-netnography – which moves beyond auto-ethnography – by immersing myself in and analysing fan networks on my own Twitter account. I emphasise that these research methods are experimental in their approach. I address throughout this chapter how social media applications can be used to generate qualitative data which is vital for understanding issues surrounding identity and its construction in and through social media. This is the case for sexual and fan identities in order to understand their experiences in using social media to participate in ESC fandom.

As well as situating the research within social media worlds, I incorporate traditional qualitative research methods in the form of semi-structured interviews. These took place in under-researched ESC fan spaces, such as the ESC Press Centre during the contest in Vienna in 2015 with fans involved with international fan community media outlets (IFCOs). IFCOs are the collective term given to fans who are involved with, for example, fan websites and other media that report on the contest inside the ESC Press Centre. They also function throughout the year to report on the contest and national final season. The ESC Press Centre is located alongside the main ESC event and can only be accessed by applying for accreditation via the contest's website. Thus, only a select number of fans and official press outlets are granted access.

This chapter will also raise significant insights into my fan and researcher positionality. I identify my 'love affair' (Cupples, 2002) with the ESC throughout this research to explore how I have constantly negotiated my fan and researcher positions. I stress that this has often been difficult as my fandom has become my research. My engagement as an ESC fan on social media and collecting data through WhatsApp and Twitter has made it impossible to divorce my fandom from my research. The blurring between my fan and researcher positions, I argue, raised

issues regarding my sexual embodiment, researcher emotions, and desires. I explore this within digital and corporeal spaces, including direct messages from participants outside of the field site of WhatsApp focus groups, through Skype interviews with straight male ESC fans, and meeting ESC fans in person.

In this chapter, I will begin by discussing how researching social media worlds can be analysed using a queer netnography conceptual framework. What follows is a contextualisation of ESC spaces that were chosen for this research, the development of the research and its incorporation of mixed-method, traditional and non-traditional geographic approaches, to explore ESC fan spaces. In the remaining sections, I focus more specifically on my original use of WhatsApp and Twitter to generate qualitative data within ESC fan networks and the ethical issues associated with them. I then turn towards the data analysis techniques that were deployed to interpret data produced through WhatsApp, Twitter, and interviews. Lastly, I provide a critical reflection and evaluation of my experiences throughout the research. This includes raising issues surrounding my experiences and positionalities of being a fan/researcher. I also draw upon my emotions, sexual desires and my gay sexual orientation in online and offline fieldwork sites and their influences and impact on the wider research process, before identifying the key methodological contributions to take forward from this study.

3.1   Queering Netnographies

The intersections between queer theory and poststructuralism are highly appropriate research philosophies to engage with in order to conduct digital research and use digital methods. Queer theorists are argued to draw upon postmodern and poststructuralist approaches in their work (Browne and Nash, 2016). For Dixon and Jones III (1998:254), poststructuralists seek to understand and investigate the relations between 'processes of categorisation and operation of social power'. As my research applies digital methods, then the notion that the 'field' is always in a state of flux and process is highly appropriate, given the volatility of social media platforms as sites for social networking and the sharing

of cultural artefacts (e.g., text, images, emojis, GIFs). Poststructuralism also seeks to undermine relational dualisms (such as subject/object and the researcher/researched – please see section 3.7 for further discussion). For queer theorists, this includes challenging the taken-for-granted organisation of identities along the homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy. This also includes contesting the social ordering and privileging of heterosexuality as 'natural' and homosexuality as its deviant 'other'. As I argued in Chapter One, some queer scholars also argue for a 'queering' of heterosexuality through analysing its relations, organising principles, and heterosexist assumptions (Browne and Nash, 2016). Fundamentally, queer theory aims to explore the shaping of sexual subjects and challenges processes that seek to 'homogenise certain sexual and gender practices, relationships and subjectivities' (Gorman-Murray et al., 2016:99).

In order to understand how fan and sexual identities are constructed and negotiated across multiple social media platforms, poststructuralism is appropriate as it seeks to challenge understandings of the 'subject' of research as a unified and coherent entity and think about identity as multiple and spatially contingent (Dixon and Jones III, 1998). However, as Binnie (1997) identifies, there is a tendency for poststructuralists and queer literary theorists to understand space as metaphorical rather than 'real'. This represents a challenge for (queer) digital researchers as we can approach social media platforms as 'spaces' in their own right, but we also must be aware of how research subjects (i.e., ESC fans) inter-penetrate other online and offline spaces.

As my research seeks to understand how ESC fans use social media to express their identities, the methodology of netnography is an emerging and appropriate epistemological framework to engage with. Using a queer epistemology within this context is pertinent, given the ways social media software can shape fluid identity making and the destabilising of gender and sexual identity (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a). Firstly, I will define and justify the use of netnography within this research. Netnography is a branch of ethnography which seeks to understand

the meanings and consumption patterns of people's online interactions and sociability through information exchange (García, 2011; Kozinets, 2015). The term originated in the United States in the 1990s and has been used to explore how individuals socialise and share information within text-based online communities, such as forums. These open access platforms allow strangers to congregate to discuss topics of mutual interest and permit long-term and transient interaction (Costello et al., 2017). Netnography has also been compared to other digital and qualitative methodologies, such as 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2000), and ethnography for the internet (Hine, 2015). There have been calls by researchers to distinguish between these qualitative methodological frameworks for digital research (Sharma et al., 2012). For example, the branch of 'pure' netnography is used exclusively within cyberspace and data collection 'originates in and manifests through the data shared freely on the internet' (Kozinets, 2015:79).

Where netnography is entirely focused in online forums, developments in technology have transformed social interaction online and are no longer simply text-based messaging services. The term also transforms traditional ethnographic research methods. The ever-evolving nature of netnography requires a different set of practices and terms from ethnography. Cyberspace operates as a vast ecosystem where humans store their social interactions and develop digital identities. Netnography data can be incredibly rich or thin, protected or unprotected. This data can be created by multiple actors, including humans, machines or software agents and generated by scouring through digital archives or interactions between an individual and a researcher (Kozinets, 2015). The forms of data that are produced vary enormously. For social media applications, such as Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp this includes sharing and relaying information through text, emoticons/emojis, photographs, video clips, GIFs, and external internet links. Users also interact through the use of hashtags (#) to engage with current news stories and to associate themselves with trends on a given topic, which help to create multiple digital cultures and communities (Kitchin et al., 2013).

Netnography adopts mixed-method approaches to examine the human understanding of online social interaction. Longhurst (2013, 2016) applied face-to-face interviewing techniques with mothers to examine how Skype stimulates emotional connections with their children via screens that reduce feelings of distance. Longhurst used her position as a mother to develop close emotional ties with her respondents, but her research did not use Skype to facilitate interviews. Research within the geographies of sexuality has examined how sexual dissidents embody their sexual identities within online platforms. Much of this research examines multiple digital realms, such as social media, that employ traditionally 'offline' research methods, such as interviews, and focus groups. Such methods were used by Taylor et al. (2014) to examine online embodiment and emotion of queer religious youth through participants' Facebook practices. Geographers have also engaged with ethnographic methods (such as interviews and participant field diaries) to understand how men who have sex with men use the male same-sex dating and hook-up application Grindr in urban spaces (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Miles, 2017). This research has used mixed-method approaches, including semi-structured interviews and reflective field diaries for participants to recount their Grindr experiences.

I argue that it is important for geographers to embed themselves within technology and use qualitative data that is produced within social media applications to understand their role in shaping social connections, culture, and identity. There has been some fruitful research in this regard that has analysed online content, such as YouTube vlogs and Tumblr microblogs to understand how trans youth construct their identities online and navigate cis-gendered digital worlds (Jenzen, 2017). Dadas (2016) analysed Facebook posts and YouTube comments to explore issues around marriage equality by joining Facebook groups that espoused homophobic ideals to explore polarising opinions on the topic. Researchers have also used both qualitative and quantitative data to explore public issues and group activism against badger culling in England (Sandover et al., 2018) and the circulation of imaginations of place through Twitter, through an

examination of tweets using '#shithole' (Butler et al., 2018). These papers identify the possibilities of using social media and the internet in contributing to geographic research and I argue that creating and applying netnography mixed-method approaches within the discipline can be useful in examining issues surrounding identity construction and negotiation online.

I argue that we should also adapt netnography research methods to explore the construction of identity within social media spaces. The 'presentation of the self' that Goffman (1959) famously theorised is still remarkably relevant for how people perform and represent their identities on social media. The way people express themselves on social media can determine how they are welcomed into an online community and share mutual knowledge. Netnography is hence appropriate to use within this research as we can seek to understand the human presence and their continuity of narratives within social media spaces (Costello et al., 2017). The instability of digital research, however, leads to reiterative reflections of research methods as digital communications are often mobile, transient, and ever-evolving.

Queer epistemologies and netnographies disrupt normative research practice and can produce methodologies that are 'messy', but flexible. This suggests that our research and epistemological approaches need to constantly change, if we are to use technology for research (Porter, 2009). Dadas (2016), who deploys a dynamic range of queer methodological approaches from geography (such as Browne and Nash (2016)), explores how this framework allowed her to feel comfortable with the messiness of using social media as a way of recruiting participants and generating data. Law (2004) has also argued for 'mess' where our methods for data generation are frequently in flux; as is often the case when conducting digital research. Therefore, this research is experimental in its nature and is likely to produce more questions, than provide answers, as queer methods and methodologies often acknowledge (Browne and Nash, 2016).

I argue that deploying mixed-method approaches and collecting data from within and outside social media platforms is important, given previous studies that often neglect generating qualitative data from internet and social media spaces. These studies have largely focused on obtaining geotagged social media data that is mapped using GIS software (Stefanidis et al., 2013; Croitoru et al., 2015). As these studies take quantitative approaches, they ignore individual experiences of using social media applications (van Doorn, 2011). I argue throughout this thesis for the need to engage with social media interfaces more explicitly to understand how our socio-cultural identities are (re)-shaped and performed across the online/offline dichotomy and between social media platforms.

3.2   The four netnographies

There are four sub-categories of netnography, according to Kozinets (2015). These are outlined in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1 The four new netnographies

Digital netnography

Symbolic netnography

Humanist netnography

Auto-netnography

LOW – hunger for masses of online data – **HIGH**
HI – capacity to involve lots of imaginary and introspective self-reflection and a new appreciation for self and others – **LO**
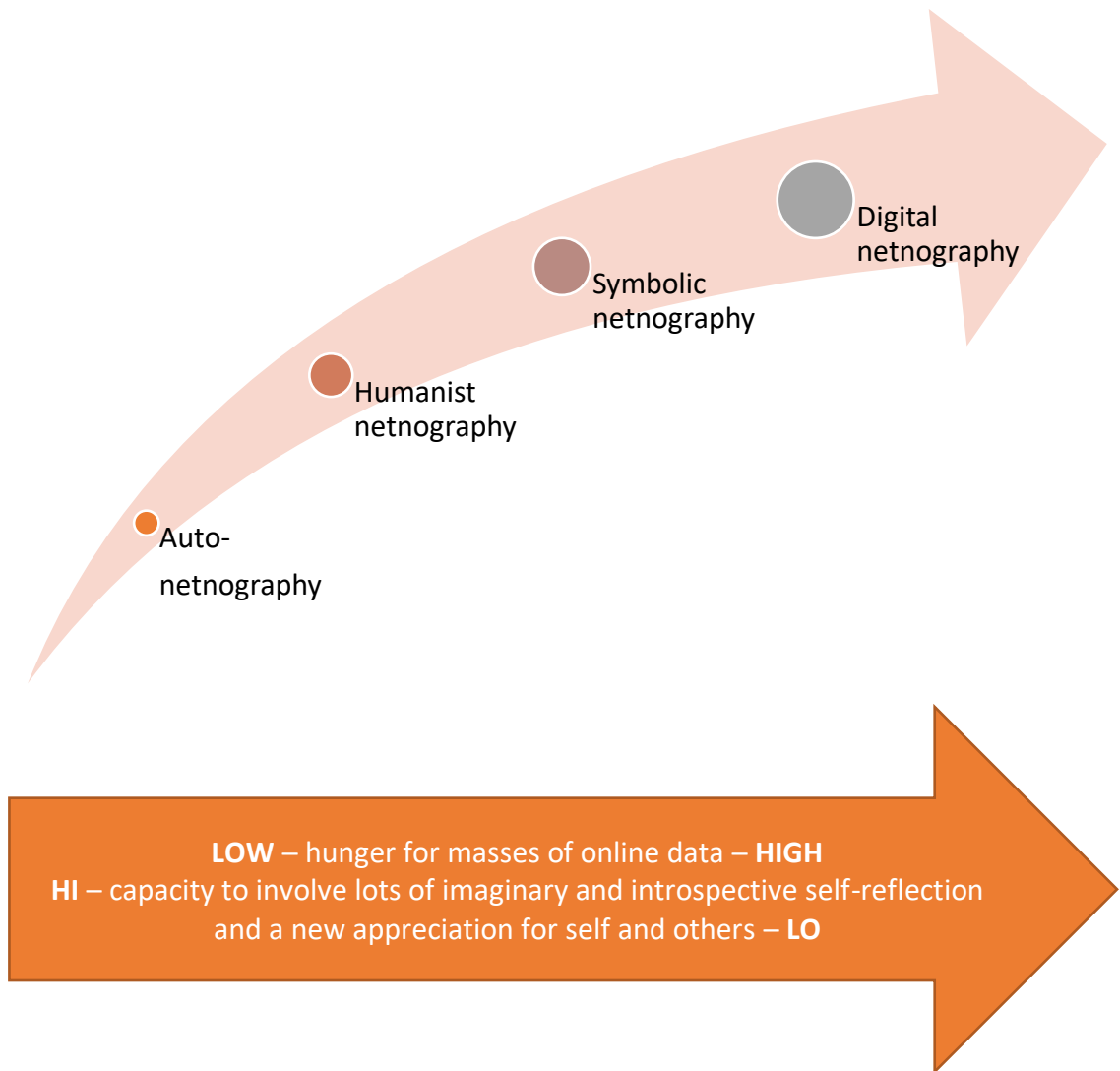
Source: Adapted from Kozinets (2015:222)

In Figure 3.1, the circles represent the dataset size that is appropriate for conducting each variation of netnography. The arrow behind the orange circles and the orange arrow underneath identify the increases in online data each respective netnography usually collects and the level of involvement the researcher has with the data. For example, the researcher is highly embedded within the data and is likely to collect qualitative data in an auto-netnography, whereas in a digital netnography, the researcher will use quantitative data for statistical analysis. Table 3.1 defines the four ethnographies in further detail.

Table 3.1 Detailed definitions of each of the four netnographies identified in Figure 3.1

Auto-netnography	This is an extension from traditional auto-ethnography, which incorporates digital storytelling and embodiment in the data collection and analysis. Auto-netnography requires the 'personal observation of online participation' (Kozinets and Kedzior, 2009:8). It is employed to understand the breadth of a particular online group's lived existence and raises the awareness of ethnographic reflexivity as a valuable contributor to knowledge and theory.
Humanist netnography	This takes an anthropological stance and identifies the importance of human agency in online interactions; activities that should be demonstrated by critical thinking and evidence. It explores the ways humans define themselves as unique individuals by seeking meaningful paths to contribute to purposeful lives (Kozinets et al., 2018). Technology is seen as a livelihood in order to connect with others and can be addictive. Humanistic netnography should also illuminate the narratives of individuals on the internet, where they express similar (or different) structures of common thought.
Symbolic netnography	Researchers seek to locate cultures where their meanings are translated as values and online social rituals and discourse is important. Symbolic netnographers represent the online social experiences and interactions of different socio-cultural groups and formations, such as different languages, nationalities, cultures, genders and sexualities. This also involves drawing on particular sites to develop narratives of, for example, conflict, exploration, sharing and empowerment. Symbolic netnography attempts to examine the ways groups and individuals organise their digital social experiences and interactions to develop an augmented reality which is embodied, materialistic and symbolic.
Digital netnography	This is deployed to accumulate masses of online data, for example from social media platforms, which is more suited to statistical analyses and mapping of quantitative data that uses GIS science.

Source: Adapted from Kozinets (2015)

Now I have defined each of the different types of netnography, I will focus more specifically in justifying my use of auto-netnography in this research and its relevance for examining digital ESC fandom.

3.2.1 Applying auto-netnography to examine online ESC fandom

Auto-netnography can be applied as a research method for queering netnography. Being embedded in one's research digitally and being reflexive throughout the research process are key components for a queer epistemology and netnography. I position this research using an auto-netnography approach, but one that incorporates other elements from humanistic and symbolic netnography. In this research, from Table 3.1, I adopt from humanistic netnography ideas around acknowledging human agency, as understanding ESC fan experiences and how they are shaped by social media is fundamental to my aim and objectives. From symbolic netnography, I adopt ideas surrounding developing an understanding of different social and cultural experiences, such as examining the online fan experiences of fans of different sexualities. These approaches allow me to use WhatsApp to co-ordinate group chats to examine fan experiences from a range of sexualities (see section 3.4.1), and Twitter to observe fan tweets within my own Twitter network (see section 3.4.2).

Auto-netnography is complicated – it problematises characteristics of auto-ethnography as it requires the researcher to engage in personal observations of online interactions (Kozinets and Kedzior, 2009). Doing research online breaks down the position between myself as a fan and researcher (Kozinets et al., 2018); I am familiar with, and always involved with, the wider ESC fandom on social media platforms, such as Twitter. Consequently, I cannot exist as a researcher from 'a totally detached stranger perspective' (Hayano, 1979:102); my embedded position as an ESC fan has also allowed me to collapse the boundaries between my professional and private life – they are intertwined. Being embedded within my research as an ESC fan who has actively used Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp to practice ESC fandom enables me to understand the lived experiences of ESC

fandom online; allowing me to produce a persuasive and credible narrative (Kozinets, 2015). In this research, I am involved with my participants and I interact with them by: messaging them in WhatsApp group chats and in personal observations of my own fan network on Twitter. Thus, I conducted an auto-netnography that is inflected from my own online social interactions and observations and from my participants who can produce data in the form of digital language and media (such as text, images, videos).

As an ESC fan and an academic, I have intermingled with my informants; I follow them and interact with them on Twitter (even before conducting this research) and I have met some ESC fans in person and interviewed them for research; enabling me to produce rich and detailed netnography data. These relationships, alongside my knowledge of ESC Facebook groups have enabled me to create WhatsApp group chats with ESC fans to explore virtually the breadth of their experiences of ESC fandom. My academic and fan positionalities have enabled me to develop a creative auto-netnography that uses multiple social media platforms to explore the various lived experiences of ESC fans online. This less structured stance towards auto-netnography is suitable to a queer epistemological framework, as it challenges prescribed and 'normative' ways of doing online research and encourages researchers to be experimental in their approaches to exploring online worlds (Browne and Nash, 2016).

From outlining my research philosophy and methodological framework above, the following sections will highlight the digital research methods used in this thesis. The methods are influenced from my own personal engagements within ESC fandom, both online and offline. The social media applications Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp were used in this research as they facilitate interactions between ESC fans. As I use these platforms to practice an ESC fan identity, by using this knowledge I was able to embed myself in my research to recruit participants and generate rich data. This research gets unashamedly 'personal', as England (1994) emphasises, both in terms of my fan involvements, but also the issues and

challenges I faced regarding my sexual orientation, emotions and desires in the field. Firstly, I contextualise ESC fan spaces and map the fieldwork sites used in this research, before addressing the research methods to fulfil the aims and objectives of the study.

3.3   Contextualising ESC fan spaces

ESC fan spaces are extensions of the main ESC event and are located in both online and offline environments. Broadly speaking, fans practice their fandom offline in different spaces that vary in scale, such as large capacity arenas, backstage areas, smaller clubs, and domestically. In online environments, fans engage with the ESC daily, using the internet and social media. A contextualisation of these fan spaces is discussed in more detail in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 Photographs and descriptions of ESC fan spaces examined in this research

Photograph	Name and Source	Description
	Inside the 'ESC Press Centre' at the Wiener Stadthalle Arena in Vienna 2015 Source: Author's Own (2015)	The first fieldwork site that was used in this research was the 'ESC Press Centre', a venue that is situated alongside the main ESC concert arena and requires access, which was applied for by submitting an accreditation request through the ESC website. I used my position as an editor at the fan website and international fan community outlet (IFCO) *Eurovoix* to conduct interviews with fans, who were also involved with IFCOs inside the Press Centre. These fans report on the daily happenings of the contest, using the internet and social media, in the lead up to the ESC grand final each year and work in the same arena as other official media organisations. I critically examine this space in relation to code/space theory and subcultural capital in Chapter Five.
	Poster advertising 'EuroClub' in Vienna 2015 Source: Author's Own (2015)	'EuroClub' takes place alongside the ESC Press Centre above in the ESC's host city. Accreditation granted to the ESC Press Centre is also granted to the EuroClub and is also an exclusively accessible space where accredited journalists, fans and musicians socialise. ESC themed club nights take place at EuroClub in the week leading up to the ESC Grand Final. Chapter Five examines the shaping of fan and sexual identity within the ESC Press Centre and EuroClub.

	ESC fans outside the ESC venue in Kyiv, Ukraine, 2017. Source: Troy, research participant in the 'Only Teardrops' WhatsApp group chat (2018)	WhatsApp group chat participant Troy shared his photo of him (in foreground) with his 'Aussie crew' in attending the ESC in Kyiv, Ukraine, in 2017. The ESC Press Centre, EuroClub and attending the ESC are all dependent on code for fans to be granted access, as it is necessary to use social media and the internet to apply for tickets and accreditation
	Research participant attending her friend's ESC house party. Source: Laura, research participant in pilot WhatsApp group chat (2017)	Laura attends her friend's ESC house party, the photo shows her 'getting ready' before the main event as she watches a music channel that broadcasts ESC songs; pictured is Gina G's 'Ooh, aah, just a little bit' the UK ESC entry in 1996. This represents a traditional form of watching the ESC, inside the boundaries of the home through the television screen and where ESC fans and audiences socialise with family and friends. These events are not solely experienced in offline spaces but are also expressed and materialised through social media platforms and often become blurred.

	Research participant watching the Romanian song selection show 'Selecția Națională 2018' online Source: Daniel, research participant in 'Amos Pelos Dois' WhatsApp group chat (2018)	Daniel, like many other fans, engages in practices that exist outside of the main ESC event itself. Developments in online television broadcasting encourage passive and active engagement with ESC fandom and its culture. ESC fandom is not just about the ESC, but also expands to individual national song contest events that take place transnationally. Fans will participate in 'watchalong' practices on social media platforms, such as Twitter, which occur when fans watch international broadcasts of ESC song selection shows through web-based devices and communicate with other fans through social media platforms.
	Conchita Wurst performing at the London Eurovision Party (LEP) at Café de Paris, London in 2018 Source: Author's Own (2018)	The annual LEP event takes place inside the cabaret-style music venue Café de Paris each year and is one of the 'warm up' events prior to the ESC. The event features the chosen ESC acts for the upcoming contest and performances from previous ESC stars. Attendees are often ESC fans of different genders and sexualities. However, given the ESC's representation as a popular gay event, male fans are often challenged that their sexual orientation is gay. To address these issues, I continue to explore gay male experiences of ESC fandom but within online and offline contexts. But I also explore how bisexual and straight male ESC fans practice their sexualities within ESC fandom within online and offline contexts.
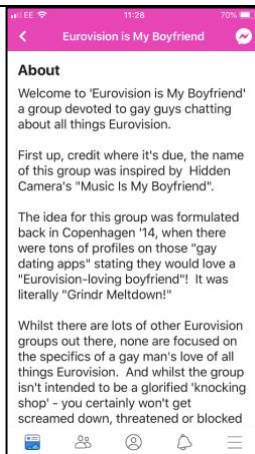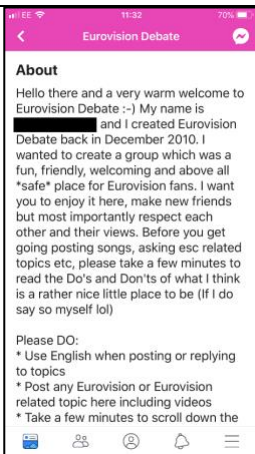
		iPhone screenshots of two ESC Facebook groups and their descriptions. Left image: 'Eurovision Debate' Right image: 'Eurovision is My Boyfriend' Source: Author's Own (2019)	There are many ESC-related Facebook groups where fans will practice their fandom in a communal setting. The images left identify the characteristics of two groups, written by gatekeepers, who delimit discussions and who they are tailored for. For example, 'Eurovision is my Boyfriend' is focused for gay men interested in the ESC as a less threatening alternative to widely perceived shaming culture that takes place on Grindr. In Chapter Four, I explore the role of these groups for the ESC fan experience and how they operate as 'closets' through which fandom can be practiced.
		iPhone screenshots of ESC 2019 winner Duncan Laurence (left image), promotion of the ESC event 'Eurovision in Concert' (left image) and ESC fan discussions (right image) taking place on Twitter. Source: Author's Own (2019)	Twitter is a highly public medium where individuals express their thoughts and socio-cultural identities. Twitter encourages fluidity in identity making and fans often (but not always) use Twitter handles that incorporate aspects of 'Eurovision' in their names (for example in the right image) and use '#Eurovision' to network with wider fans and audiences. Twitter is a highly playful arena where fans practice their fandom and materialise a fan identity, which can intersect with other socio-sexual networking, which is examined in Chapter Five.
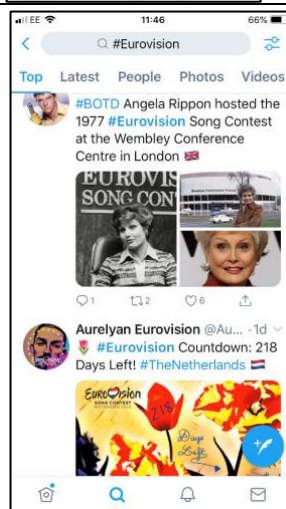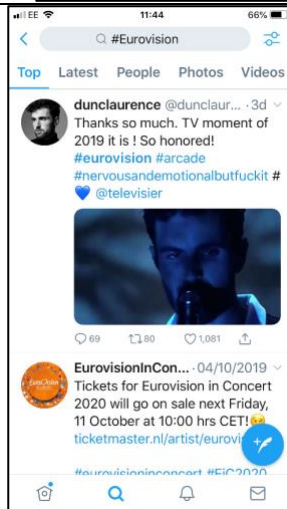
Table 3.2 identifies a range of ESC fan spaces that are examined in this research. This includes online and offline spaces including: social media platforms and inner-city urban venues, large arenas and the domestic space of the home. These latter 'offline' ESC events are embedded with technology, which have transformed the fan experience. This can include applying for and purchasing tickets online to attend events and watching the ESC at home, which requires access to a television and/or internet connection to engage with the event on social media in real-time. These activities on social media can take place daily, which also involve the sharing of ESC content in the form of messages, videos, links, and pictures. These forms of digital socio-cultural engagement also intersect with the expression of identity. I also explore in this thesis how participating in ESC fandom intersects with sexuality and how the contest's representations of queerness shape its practices. The next section will provide an account of the qualitative research methods, including interviews and digital research methods and how the ESC fan spaces in Table 3.2 will be analysed.

3.4   Research methods

Table 3.3 identifies the research methods deployed in this study and the locations where they took place.

Table 3.3 Chronological timeline of the research methods deployed and the research locations where they took place

Date(s)	Research location	Research method	Recruitment procedure
May 2014 *PILOT PHASE*	ESC Copenhagen ESC Fan Café, Copenhagen	Semi-structured interviews with ESC fans attending the ESC in Copenhagen.	Interviews took place inside the ESC Fan Café, a temporary event space where fans socialise during the week of the contest. Fans were availability sampled from within the Fan Café
August – September 2014 *PILOT PHASE*	One-to-one Skype call. As well as research visits to Llanelli and Haworth to conduct interviews	Semi-structured interviews with 3 ESC fans involved with ESC fan websites	Interviews took place across different online and offline locations. Fans were chosen from my own personal connections on social media as a starting point.
November 2014 – March 2015 *PILOT PHASE*	One-to-one Skype call.	Semi-structured interviews with 6 ESC fans. These incorporated questions about tweets they had posted on Twitter. For two participants, I invited them for a second interview at a later date to follow-up questions about their tweets since their previous interview.	Phoning-in to an ESC fan radio show discussing my research and requesting for participants live on air.
11th – 25th May 2015	ESC Vienna, Austria. ESC Press Centre, Wiener Stadthalle Arena	Semi-structured interviews with 18 ESC fans attending the contest who are involved with IFCOs. This generated 717 minutes of audio recording and interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes.	Interviews were availability sampled inside the Press Centre. Interviews co-ordinated around country rehearsal and conference schedules, were fans were reporting for their media outlets.

July 2017	One-to-one Skype calls.	Semi-structured Skype interviews with 10 straight male and 3 bisexual male ESC fans. This generated 683 minutes and 56 seconds of recording time. Interviews lasted between 45 and 80 minutes.	Via social media, through my personal Twitter profile and posting in Facebook groups, such as 'Eurovision Debate', 'Eurovision Passion', 'OGAE UK', 'OGAE International', 'The Official UK at Eurovision fan club' and 'Australian Eurovision chat'. Permission was granted from gatekeepers of these groups before posting to members of the group.
February – March 2018	WhatsApp 'group chats' (Pilot group chat took place in May 2017)	Critical analysis of messages and associated media (pictures, videos, GIFs) posted in the focus groups. 8 focus groups created, 4 participants in each (with the exception of 3 participants in one focus group) totalling 31 participants.	Via social media, same recruitment method as outlined during July 2017 data collection phase above.
January – May 2018 and 2019	Twitter ESC fan networks.	Participant observation and critical analysis of Twitter interactions and tweets from my own ESC fan networks.	Not applicable

The development of the research methods identified in Table 3.3 is also informed by the development of my fandom and the critical points raised in the literature review. The next few sections will be structured around the key contributions this thesis will make in terms of its research methods. Firstly, it will demonstrate and apply the social media application WhatsApp as a research method to co-ordinate focus groups with ESC fans, and secondly, it will identify Twitter as a site to critically analyse fan tweets. Fundamentally, both social media platforms can be used to collect qualitative data, which I identify is crucial in exploring ideas surrounding identity in geographic research.

3.4.1 Applying WhatsApp as a research method for critical qualitative data analysis

Transforming identity and social life through WhatsApp

The global free social media application and messaging service WhatsApp is used by over 2 billion people in more than 180 countries, making it one of the most popular social media applications internationally (WhatsApp, 2020). WhatsApp is used by individuals for various purposes, such as to maintain social connections at long and short distances. WhatsApp offers opportunities to connect on a one-to-one basis, but also with multiple users, by incorporating them into group chats. Group chats operate as a nexus where individuals converge and can be used for everyday social organisation and business. Users can name group chats, providing them with an identity and a sense of community, which can be associated with a profile picture.

WhatsApp advances traditional text-based and short messaging service (SMS) messaging, which has received much attention in geography to understand how such technology assists in the organisation of our social lives and identities (Thomson and Cupples, 2008). Using SMS as a research tool enables participants to communicate with researchers 'on their own terms' (Leyshon et al., 2013:180), as they can offer insight into activities that are currently unfolding (S. Wilkinson,

2016). WhatsApp is also a direct and private communication tool that works similarly to text messaging, but it also advances these methods of digital thinking by incorporating multiple (and creating universal) languages of communication within its platform. In addition to text-based messaging, this is achieved through sharing photos and images, videos, web links, documents, animated GIFs, emojis, share their location and conduct voice calls and voice messages securely. It incorporates end-to-end encryption within its software so third parties, including WhatsApp, cannot access them (WhatsApp, 2020). This digital communication vernacular provides multiple possibilities to materialise our identities and our social lives through quick access to smartphone devices. Smartphones and their associated social media applications, such as WhatsApp, also make it possible for researchers to delve into intimate and personal aspects of participant's lives. Participants are increasingly willing to share such private information through social media networks (Ess, 2015). These technologies can encourage (semi-) anonymity amongst participants as the digital screen operates as a porous barrier through which they express their identities and socio-cultural lives.

Developing WhatsApp 'group chats': A new digital method

Using WhatsApp to co-ordinate digital focus groups (which I define as 'group chats') is a new and innovative research method. There has been limited research that has used WhatsApp as a research tool to collect qualitative data to examine its role in shaping everyday sociality. Kaufmann and Peil (2019) used WhatsApp to conduct mobile instant messaging interviews with young people in order to understand how technologies have shaped their daily habits of media consumption. Chen and Neo (2019) trialled WhatsApp within the focus group setting which generated extensive responses and facilitated group interaction amongst young, digitally savvy, participants. I continue to contend that using WhatsApp is experimental, and this section will justify the appropriateness of this application in transforming the ethnographic and corporeal research method of focus groups. Firstly, it is important to identify the similarities and differences

between digital focus groups and in-person focus groups. Bedford and Burgess (2001:121, emphasis added) define a focus group as:

> We define focus groups as a *one-off* meeting of between four and eight individuals who are brought together to discuss a particular topic chosen by the researcher(s) who moderate or structure the discussion.

Bedford and Burgess (2001) above emphasise focus groups as a 'one-off' event and are fixed to a day, time and location. I move things forward from this definition to identify how digital focus groups are temporal – the researcher and participants can come in and go out of the focus groups frequently; in other words, they are not always present. Digital focus groups can also be accessed and engaged with immediately and anywhere.

Adopting Kneale's (2001) distinction between focus groups and 'in-depth small groups' is more appropriate, as participants meet on more than one occasion. In the digital context, participants have multiple opportunities to enter and leave the focus group as they wish and are permanently attached, until they decide to leave. I use the term 'group chats' as opposed to focus groups, as in other social media applications, such as Facebook Messenger, a chat that incorporates multiple users into its platform is termed a group chat. This helps to distinguish and move forward definitions of focus groups that are deployed in ethnography. WhatsApp group chats are also distinct from other digital focus groups that can be used in other internet applications (such as Skype/Zoom). WhatsApp has a unique software that is embedded within everyday digital socialisation and it can produce multidimensional data.

WhatsApp group chats transform the more traditional focus group approach, as users engage during a period, instead of meeting up at a predetermined venue or location. Such was the case in Kneale's (2001) research with science fiction fans, where some participants found it difficult to travel to the venue location because they were unavailable to participate on the given day/time slot. This could also be costly if future focus groups would need to be arranged and applying group chats

counteracts this issue as they would be facilitated through internet enabled devices (Conradson, 2005). This can be a barrier to participation as participants are required to own smartphones to take part in the group chats. They must also have access to Wi-Fi or mobile data to be involved, which can impact on the types of data generated. For example, sharing videos and photos with others carries a larger file size and can incur additional data charges, than text-based messaging. It is also possible to use WhatsApp as a desktop version; however, a phone number is still needed to use the application. Solely using WhatsApp as a desktop version may also restrict the time and locations where participants would engage with the group and the researcher. Using the WhatsApp smartphone application enables the researcher to contact participants, but also conduct the research anywhere, as they travel with their smartphones.

Exporting the WhatsApp data for analysis requires no transcription and is emailed to a destination of the researcher's choice in a .txt file. Any images, videos and GIFs that were delivered in the group chat are exported as a separate file; this data is optional to export. Each message is formatted with a date and time stamp, alongside the name of the participant delivering the message. Emojis were also present in the .txt files, providing a further language for the researcher to analyse. For easier readability, I transferred the data from the .txt files to Microsoft Word, linking the images and videos from the separate folder into the chat file. The .txt file provides an image/video file name, which can then be cross referenced with the folder containing images and videos to identify when and where in the chat these were sent to the group. A screenshot of the raw exported data is shown in Figure 3.2.

Recruitment and sampling strategies for WhatsApp group chats
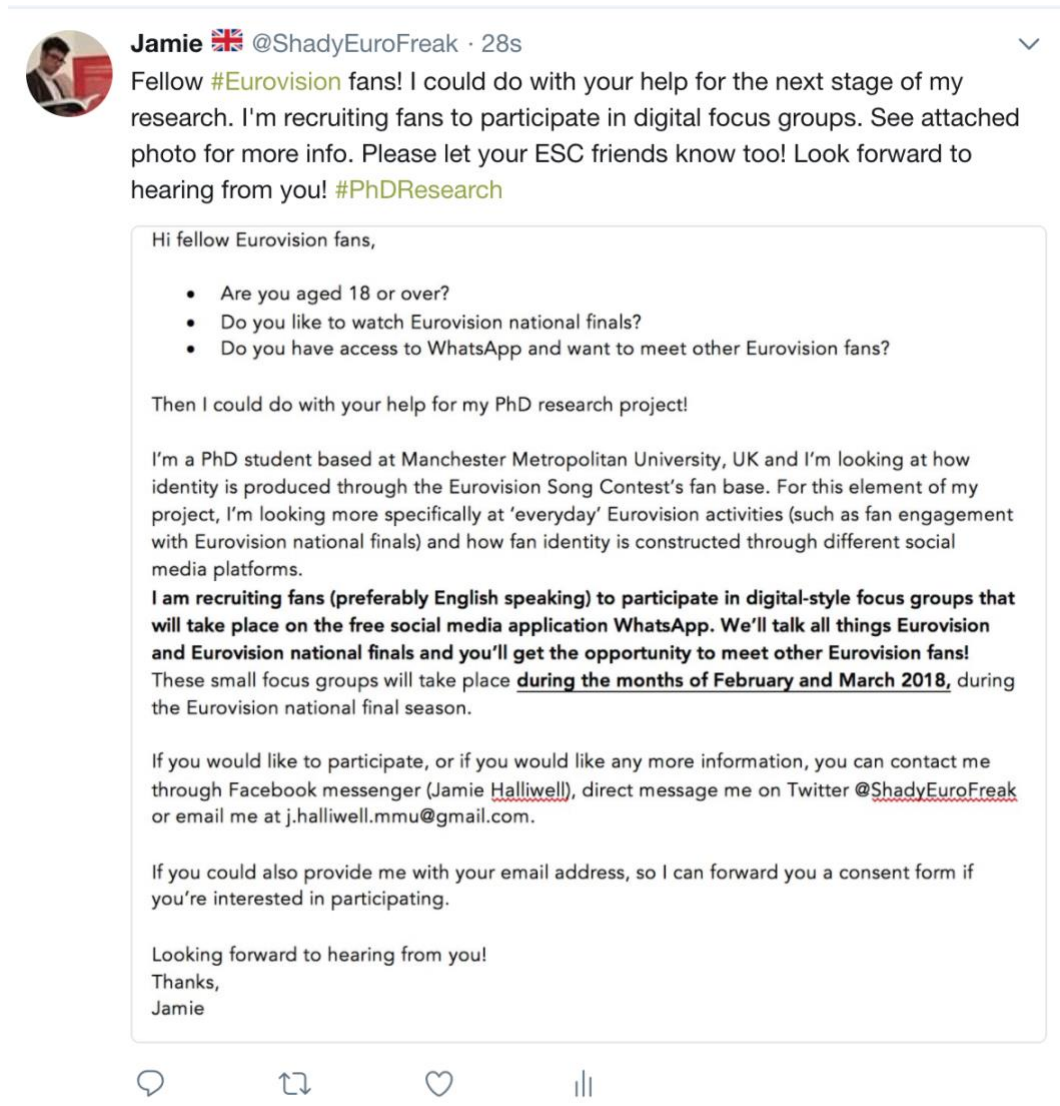
As previously discussed, the group chats arranged for this research took place over a 7-day period, thus differentiating themselves from traditional focus groups that are fixed and in situ. A total of 8 group chats took place between February and March 2018 and each contained myself and 4 participants, with the exception of

one group that featured 3 participants. A total of 31 participants were recruited for this stage of the research. Participants were recruited using ESC fan Facebook groups and my personal Twitter account. This included posting a tweet (and frequent retweets of my original post) on my personal Twitter profile advertising for participants (as shown in Figure 3.3), as I have garnered a large fan network on the social networking site.

Figure 3.2 Screenshot of raw .txt file containing messages from one group chat


```
                    WhatsApp Chat with 1944.txt  ⌄

17/02/2018, 14:27 - Messages to this group are now secured with end-to-end
encryption. Tap for more info.
17/02/2018, 14:28 - You created group "Eurovision focus group B1"
17/02/2018, 14:29 - Jamie: Hi everyone! Please use this group for our focus group, my
WhatsApp went a bit crazy and made two
17/02/2018, 14:29 - Jamie: So we have Adrian, Anita, Becky and Gavin, great to have
you all on board! Could you all introduce yourselves and tell everyone how you became
a Eurovision fan 😊
17/02/2018, 14:30 - Jamie: Hope you don't mind me creating this a bit earlier than
our Monday start date, just wanted to make sure everything was working!
```

Figure 3.3 Tweet posted and pinned on my Twitter profile recruiting participants

Jamie 🇬🇧 @ShadyEuroFreak · 28s

Fellow #Eurovision fans! I could do with your help for the next stage of my research. I'm recruiting fans to participate in digital focus groups. See attached photo for more info. Please let your ESC friends know too! Look forward to hearing from you! #PhDResearch

Hi fellow Eurovision fans,

- Are you aged 18 or over?
- Do you like to watch Eurovision national finals?
- Do you have access to WhatsApp and want to meet other Eurovision fans?

Then I could do with your help for my PhD research project!

I'm a PhD student based at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK and I'm looking at how identity is produced through the Eurovision Song Contest's fan base. For this element of my project, I'm looking more specifically at 'everyday' Eurovision activities (such as fan engagement with Eurovision national finals) and how fan identity is constructed through different social media platforms.
I am recruiting fans (preferably English speaking) to participate in digital-style focus groups that will take place on the free social media application WhatsApp. We'll talk all things Eurovision and Eurovision national finals and you'll get the opportunity to meet other Eurovision fans! These small focus groups will take place **during the months of February and March 2018,** during the Eurovision national final season.

If you would like to participate, or if you would like any more information, you can contact me through Facebook messenger (Jamie Halliwell), direct message me on Twitter @ShadyEuroFreak or email me at j.halliwell.mmu@gmail.com.

If you could also provide me with your email address, so I can forward you a consent form if you're interested in participating.

Looking forward to hearing from you!
Thanks,
Jamie

I also posted recruitment calls in a variety of ESC-related Facebook groups, including 'Eurovision Debate', 'Eurovision Passion', 'OGAE UK', 'OGAE International, 'The official UK at Eurovision fan club' and 'Australian Eurovision chat'. Facebook group administrators were contacted before I posted in their groups and I was required to become a member of these Facebook groups to recruit participants. These Facebook groups were chosen for their large numbers of ESC fans and I attempted to find fans outside of the UK to participate. This was possible as some groups, such as 'OGAE International' are not specific to a given nationality and 'Australian Eurovision chat' was chosen as participants were more likely to speak English and the contest is also popular in Australia (Carniel, 2015).

Sampling across multiple Facebook groups was necessary in order to maximise recruitment and I would often 'repost' my call within these groups to trigger further responses. In each group, I used availability sampling and recruited participants who were readily available (Daniel, 2012) . Although, similar to my post on Twitter, a snowballing strategy emerges as group members and confirmed participants could share the recruitment call to other social media platforms or spread word of mouth to other fans. Where this occurred, I attempted to separate pre-existing fan friendships in order to provide an equal balance of power between participants (Kneale, 2001). However, it was unavoidable to prevent fans discussing outside of the group chats and two friends who participated in two different group chats breached ethics (see section 3.5). Existing sampling strategies were often uncontrolled when recruiting participants online as the wider sample of ESC fans can share recruitment calls through multiple social media platforms, who can influence participation in the research, unbeknownst to the researcher.

My sampling strategy across Facebook and Twitter, however, did raise issues, including not knowing how digitally literate ESC fans are, and requiring fans to have WhatsApp installed on their phones. Some fans had not used the application previously, which limited the ways in which they used the application. This should

have been made more explicit in the sampling and recruitment strategy, in order to understand the embeddedness of WhatsApp within ESC fan's social and cultural lives. Pre-existing knowledge and use of the application could transform the operations and data output of the group chats (Kaufmann and Peil, 2020). This was evident as some individuals in group chats were more digitally savvy in using WhatsApp's software than others. Also, I advertised for 'ESC fans' for this research, which generated participants of different levels of fandom and interest in the competition, which influenced group chat dynamics.

Putting WhatsApp group chats in to practice

Each participant was asked to identify which week they would be available to participate in the WhatsApp group chats, by choosing a first and second preference. Greenbaum (1998:62) argues that:

> The more homogenous the group is, the better the participants will relate to each other and the higher quality of the input they will generate.

As I have explored sexuality within ESC fandom, I did attempt to organise group chats around these commonalities, however, this was challenging due to participant availability (Conradson, 2005).

From my sample, I found it challenging to balance gender in each group as I recruited 23 men and 8 women for the research and consequently some groups comprised solely of men. I considered the appropriateness of asking participants to identify their sexual orientation in order to organise the groups, however, I decided against this and issues regarding sexuality permeated discussions. In some groups containing queer men, they were able to share their experiences of attending ESC events. As some groups contained participants of different sexual orientations, it was difficult for straight men to share their experiences with queer-identifying men. On some occasions, this resulted in one-way communication between myself and the participant(s) in order to explore these issues in further detail. Kitzinger and Barbour (1999:8) have argued that balancing identity

characteristics within focus groups is necessary because 'differences between participants are often illuminating'. I argue that organising groups based on differences between gender and sexuality was challenging, as participation and group chat organisation was driven by participant availability. Where participants shared similar fan and sexual experiences, however, these groups produced unique dynamisms and rapport.

All group chats produced a relaxed atmosphere that produced a different dynamic from traditional focus groups. Removing face-to-face communication and using a 'screen' through which individuals participated provided semi-anonymity, where participants bonded through sharing personal stories of their fan and sexual lives (Ess, 2015). Thus, participants were able to communicate 'on their own terms' (Leyshon et al., 2013:180) as well as respond to my questions throughout the data collection period. Responses produced data of various lengths, from one sentence, or one-word responses to longer, in-depth quotes, producing interactional and detailed data that also contained multimedia (e.g. text, images, GIFs, web links). Participants did not have to respond to questions immediately, but occasionally they would miss questions as they moved 'away from view' on the screen as the latest responses would show on screen. Thus, these group chats produced a shift in power dynamics between the researcher and the participants, as participants could choose when and where to participate.

I named each of the group chats using ESC-related song titles, including ESC winning songs, to differentiate between groups to provide a sense of identity and community. The 8 group chats were named as follows: 'Heroes', 'Shady Lady', 'Spirit of the night', '1944', 'Amar Pelos Dois', 'Euphoria', 'Only Teardrops' and 'Rise Like a Phoenix'. I trialled one WhatsApp group chat a year previously to explore the capabilities of WhatsApp for developing digital focus groups. This was entitled 'Eurovision 2017', as they took place between 9th and 14th May during the broadcast of the two semi-finals and grand final in Kyiv, Ukraine. Figure 3.4 shows a WhatsApp group chat and how it can be operated.

Figure 3.4 iPhone screenshots from WhatsApp group chats, incorporating text and pictures as methods of digital communication

The screenshots from Figure 3.4 are taken at various points during the WhatsApp group chat data collection phase. As can be seen, I proactively prompted questions during the week (in green speech bubbles) the group chat took place, but also engaged with participant responses to my questions, invoking my own experiences and opinions. Participants also actively posed questions to others, (where I would also respond) with responses focusing on the ESC, but also discussions surrounding their personal lives and personality traits (C. Wilkinson, 2016). In some instances, I would take a 'back seat', usually employed in traditional ethnographic settings, to observe how such discussions would unfold (Barbour, 2007). For one participant, Iain, he felt that he 'wasn't even aware we [the group] were participating in anything, so it was very relaxed!' and the process was less 'regimented'. For Iain's group, 'Shady Lady', participants were social media savvy and interact on other social media platforms with other fans by generating conversations. As fans have developed this pre-conditioned knowledge, this helped create a relaxed environment within the 'Shady Lady' group chat.

Critical reflections and evaluations in using WhatsApp as a research method

Given the digitised nature of ESC fandom in contemporary life, using WhatsApp as a data collection method capitalised on fans use of smartphones and social media to practice their fandom. This was important to understand the embeddedness of social media and the internet in shaping ESC fan and sexual lives. Since employing WhatsApp as a research method is a relatively new concept (see Chen and Neo, 2019; Kaufmann and Peil, 2019), it is important to share my reflections and evaluations of using it to generate data for qualitative research. In offline focus groups, the moderator can interrupt the discussion for a participant to elaborate on a given point. The ephemeral nature of the group chats did make it difficult for me to follow discussions where I was absent, as a result of my part-time work and other non-academic commitments. If a participant had missed out on a question I prompted, they would follow it up at a later time, which would disrupt the flow of

the conversation. This also occurred when participants would miss questions due to their other commitments.

I attempted to generate as many responses as possible by reposting questions in each group chat. One participant followed up questions through private messaging me on WhatsApp and his responses were tailored for a one-to-one context, as opposed to a public context. Where I had missed a discussion on a given topic, I would read back on discussions in the group chat later, which provides an alternative form of data capture. This occurred on occasions while participants were messaging each other and participating in 'watchalongs' to European national selection television broadcasts for the upcoming contest.

On occasions, I would be absent from collective viewings of European national selection shows and missed potential data. This occurred while I was attending the UK's 'Eurovision You Decide' in Brighton in February 2018 and I was not checking my phone for data. Thus, I was required to read back on discussions, however, where I was absent I could be reading messages out of context. I needed to refer to secondary sources (such as song performances) in order to re-contextualise these discussions, which would be needed during data analysis. The ephemerality of these group chats was challenging as myself and participants would participate when we were available and when we had access to our smartphones (Pain et al., 2005). This shaped the data produced, particularly as some groups featured more active participants and it was difficult to predict participants' availability on specific days. Where participants took part at various locations, it was difficult to have all participants playing an active role in the group chats, which impacted the flow and richness of the conversation (Chen and Neo, 2019). Power dynamics between participants was still an issue, which occurs in both focus groups and group chats. Despite this, fans were able to develop familiarity and rapport between each other over a week period and participating through a digital screen broke down barriers and anxieties that face-to-face communication can fester.

One participant Adrian, however, explained on reflection towards the end of his participation in the group chat how he felt compelled to write full sentences in responses to my questions, similar to traditional style face-to-face interviewing. This is illustrated below from an extract from the '1944' WhatsApp group chat (please see Figure 3.5 for information on how WhatsApp group chat data is presented in this thesis):

Figure 3.5 Presenting WhatsApp group chat data

Key

Yellow: Date and time WhatsApp message was posted in the group chat
Green: Name of participant posting WhatsApp message in the group chat
Blue: Content of participant's WhatsApp message to the group chat

Where WhatsApp data is presented, it will reference the group chat name from where it originated. Group chat conversations are laid out chronologically; in the order they were posted in the group chat. Breaks in conversations will be identified using an ellipsis […] to identify messages in group chats that do not follow on from one another.

'1944' Group Chat

25/02/2018, 11:22 - Adrian: I sometimes felt that I would explain things better in person, because I'd use shorter sentences or clauses that would do a better job than full sentences. Better as in easier for me to do than thinking of full sentences here.
25/02/2018, 11:23 - Adrian: And random side note: we rarely used emoji. Weird.

Adrian addresses his anxiety in engaging in conversations, particularly through WhatsApp and prefers to talk face-to-face as he feels he would "explain things better". Identity expression here is limited to text-based messaging for Adrian, as there was a lack of engagement in using emojis. Adrian had time to prepare 'backstage' before delivering his responses to questions, which produces a sense of self that is digitised but also 'inauthentic' (Goffman, 1959). One further reason for Adrian's detailed responses was that he often used the desktop version of WhatsApp instead of the smartphone version. These multiple spatialities of using

and accessing WhatsApp across devices shapes how participants respond and interact with the group chats. Similarly, participants would produce shorter, more instant responses when the group chat research intersected with ESC song selection shows; programs that would also be watched through internet-enabled devices. Where this would produce additional data, participants would stray off topic, particularly if I was not present during these shows. Where this data collection method is experimental, future research may wish to integrate other WhatsApp tools, such as voice messaging or video conferencing to produce hybridized online/offline focus groups. This may also include setting deadlines for when questions should be answered by participants for them to maintain regular participation.

Where some of the group chats bonded and created a strong group dynamic, these groups frequently entered other social discussions. This allowed participants to delve in to their private and social lives outside of an ESC fan context. This is also combined with participants identifying the need to leave the group while they participate in other aspects of their social lives. This reiterates wider discourses within social media culture that social networking sites become embedded within our everyday social lives and we are constantly attached to them through mobile phones and smartphone devices (Dodge and Kitchin, 2003; Butler et al., 2018; Sandover et al., 2018). Individuals feel they need to explain their reasoning for leaving the group temporarily. These practices are demonstrated in the WhatsApp group chat messages below, which occurred with Will in the 'Euphoria' group chat and Lucy and Jas in the 'Heroes' group chat:

'Euphoria' group chat

> 05/02/2018, 13:12 - Will: Sorry for the delay on my side as well. I had a big lecture to deliver this morning and was working all weekend. Now I have a little more time to respond.

'Heroes' group chat

> 02/02/2018, 18:07 - Lucy: Right I gotta go for a min for dinner :)

[…]
03/02/2018, 19:00 - Jas: Hey guys! Sorry I haven't been to talkative today, my boyfriend surprised me with a trip to London! Promise to browse through everything tomorrow and reply to some of the stuff you've said
[…]
04/02/2018, 17:58 - Lucy: Won't be able to talk much now, my best friend just called me to say she's had her baby!!! Super excited, heading to Nuneaton to see her.
04/02/2018, 17:58 - Lucy: She doesn't have any family so I'm the one going over bless her
04/02/2018, 17:58 - Jamie: That's great congratulations!
04/02/2018, 17:59 - Lucy: I'll pass on. The baby is a month early but he's ok, he's doing very well etc.
04/02/2018, 17:59 - Emma: Congratulations!
04/02/2018, 17:59 - Lucy: So excited to meet him, I'm godmother haha!
04/02/2018, 18:29 - Michael: Congratulations Lucy

Will, Jas and Lucy provide reasons for being absent from the group. This is unique to digital focus groups because of their ephemerality and fluidity of when participants take part. Where owning a smartphone encourages immediate access to social media applications, such as WhatsApp, these fans regulate when they participate. WhatsApp group chats are unlike traditional focus groups as participants are required to participate within a given time slot and think of responses on the spot. This was challenging as participants such as Will were unavailable for more than two days, due to their work commitments, thus limiting data output. These absences led to participants 'forgetting' about earlier questions as other participants would respond timely. As the researcher, I would be dependent on participants scrolling back through the group chat to respond to or repost questions. Both the researcher and those being researched are prone to forgetting and remembering questions and responses, as they would not always be present in the group chat, and they would participate when they were available. These issues pose recurring challenges in deploying WhatsApp as a research method.

Participants who notified the group that they were leaving and returning to the group chat reaffirmed feelings of togetherness within the group. Similarly, Lucy declared that her friend had given birth and that she would pass our

congratulations on to her. Fandom becomes entangled with other aspects of fans' social lives and even though none of us had met previously, our shared interest and identification as ESC fans demonstrates feelings of validation and belonging with the other group members. Fans contribute to the development of a group chat community by sharing their social and cultural lives outside of ESC fandom, and within a safe space where participants can be confident in sharing their experiences (Bergold and Thomas, 2012). This becomes digitally mediated by WhatsApp as it generates a 'group history' as a consequence of frequent interactivity within the group (Kneale, 2001). Where these groups produced rich data, other groups lacked a group dynamic, reducing the amount of data produced between participants, requiring myself as the researcher to play a more active role in stimulating responses and discussion. Where I was absent from the group for a given time period and participants were given free rein to discuss their ESC experiences, this produced surplus data that was lacking relevance to my aims and objectives. Thus, posting regular questions to the group was essential in producing relevant data and facilitating group dynamism.

3.4.2 Auto-netnography or lurking? Participation observation of ESC fan tweets

This stage of the research centred on my participant observation of ESC fan Twitter tweets between January and May 2018 and 2019. This involved observing and immersing myself in a regular 'netnographic slog'[24] (Costello et al., 2017:9) of my own Twitter network. I regularly scrolled through my Twitter feed to examine the multiple ways fans practice their ESC fandom online and how they express their sexualities. This method was chosen as Twitter is a mainstream and highly popular social media that is used for daily fan practices. I conducted a semi auto-netnography on my personal ESC fan Twitter network that was the focus for my data collection. I define a semi auto-netnography in relation to the

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[24] Costello et al. (2017) use this to describe the variation of emotions that the researcher can experience while being immersed in an online social network to collect data. For me, this included laughing at tweets, feeling inspiration, and reflecting on the data collection process.

development of my ESC Twitter networks since I began using Twitter in 2013. For the last 5 years I have actively engaged with fans through Twitter prior to collecting data (Kozinets and Kedzior, 2009). I have developed knowledge of these networks through Twitter and have been a participant observer throughout. One challenge when employing Twitter as research method is that it is constantly updated by its developers. It has evolved enormously since 2013 by incorporating multiple communication forms, going beyond text-based messages to incorporate images, videos, GIFs and polls in tweets. In 2017, the tweet character limit increased from 140 characters to 280 characters. Both Twitter software and my ESC fan networks are highly temporal, modified and remodified. Figure 3.6 provides examples of tweets inside the Twitter application.

Figure 3.6 In-app iPhone screenshots from Twitter showing its various forms of data output
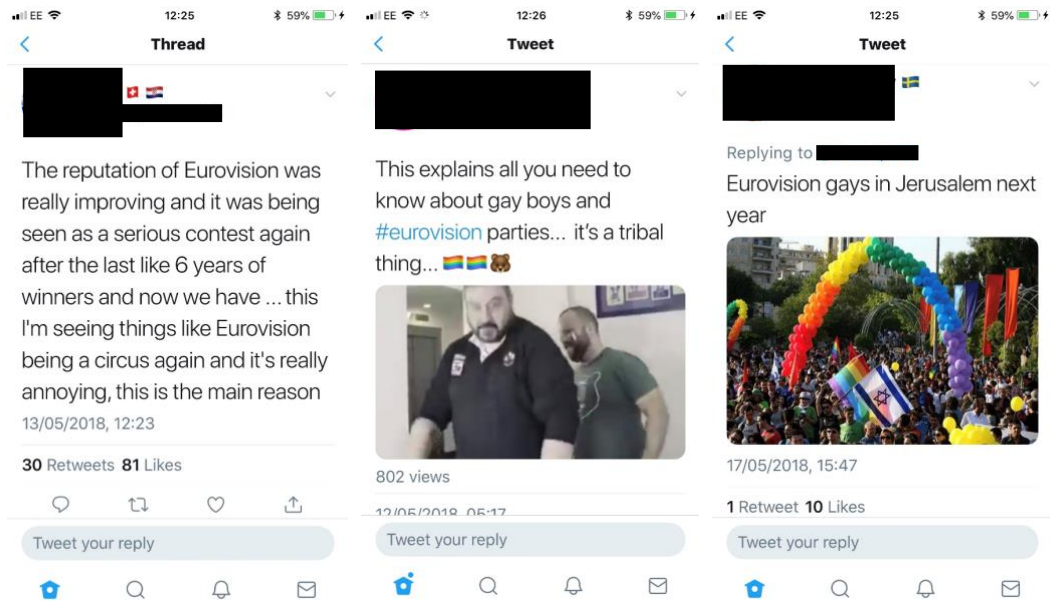
Screenshot of a tweet featuring text

Screenshot of a tweet featuring text and still video

Screenshot of a 'replying' tweet featuring text associated with an image

The content of user tweets was collected as data, however there are more forms of data that could be obtained, such as how many 'likes' and 'retweets' Twitter posts received. This was considered, as it can demonstrate the popularity of an individual tweet in real-time. However, more focus was made on tweet content, which provides significant insight into digital ESC culture and identity making. It must also be considered how much data is collected from a Twitter tweet and the responses to an original tweet, which generates a thread of data. These longer exchanges can produce detailed interactional data (Barbour, 2007) and I made subjective decisions, depending on each tweet case as to how much data would be obtained. This process also shaped my sampling strategy and tweets were sampled from within my own ESC fan Twitter network and Twitter account. This required iteration, as my fan network would often change and the algorithms on Twitter could determine what data was pushed on my home feed in the application. As my participant observation took place over two 5-month periods I was required to observe my Twitter feed at regular intervals and at different times to examine different representations of fan practices (Guest et al., 2017). More specifically, I focused on fan practices that intersected with expressions of sexuality on the platform. I ignored tweets that did not reference the ESC, as these were not relevant, however, tweets that intersected with the ESC were analysed.

It is also arguable that I participated in 'lurking' through my Twitter feeds. This is an internet practice were individuals navigate social media platforms by reading their social media feeds without publishing any content. Where traditional participant observation involves either covert/overt observation in physical contexts, this binary way of thinking becomes obfuscated in conducting research on my Twitter feeds. Fans that I follow will appear on my home Twitter feed; this also includes 'retweets' of content that is reposted by fans I follow. Some fans have 'followed' back and can see my tweets and retweets. Fans (but not all fans who follow me) are thus aware of my presence on Twitter but are not necessarily aware if their tweets are being used in research. The ethical issues for this element of the research are discussed further in the next section.

3.5   Digital Research ethics

3.5.1   Ethical considerations for WhatsApp group chats

During the recruitment phase and prior to undertaking these group chats, each participant was emailed a consent form, which needed to be signed in order to take part. This also asked participants to provide their mobile phone numbers, which was essential in order to participate. As phone numbers are a sensitive and personal piece of information for my participants, it was my responsibility to safeguard this data from being shared. Given the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) that was enforced into law by the European Commission in May 2018 (European Commission, 2018), I informed participants that their mobile phone numbers would not be shared to third parties and would be deleted at their request. As part of the consent process, participants were also given the option to remain anonymous in the research. In each group chat, participants were able to view each other's mobile phone numbers and WhatsApp would automatically provide a name suggestion[25]. There was an instance where two participants, Carlo from 'Shady Lady' and Louis from 'Spirit of the Night' group chats, had shared their phone screens of the group chats they were participating in. This is shown in Figure. 3.7.

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[25] Even though participants did not know each other previously, WhatsApp associates phone numbers with names automatically. This is determined by how participants name themselves within the application.

Figure 3.7 A photo from Carlo in the 'Shady Lady' group chat showing his friend participating in another group chat called 'Spirit of the Night'.

As our conversations developed, it became clear that Carlo was friends with another group chat participant Louis. Both of them participated in parallel group chats and only discovered they were part of the research during an ESC-related event in London. Carlo shared the image in Figure 3.7 with the rest of the 'Shady Lady' group chat, even though I asked participants not to share group chat data and mobile phone numbers of the other participants and the researcher. As Carlo and Louis were friends participating in different group chats, they were likely comfortable sharing each other's phones and their associated data. Nobody in the group chat was particularly worried over this potential breach of privacy, but it does produce new ethical challenges surrounding the moralities of sharing smartphones and their associated data between participants (Holton and Harmer, 2019). Ethical issues such as this can be unforeseen and we need to be cautious of how these unfold when doing research using social media applications (De Jong, 2015).

WhatsApp offers a functionality to export the group chat messages by email as a .txt file, which provides transcripts of group chat conversations, in addition to exporting any images that were shared in the group chat separately. I needed to ensure participants did not share the group chat data externally – .txt files I had exported were saved securely, and password protected on my personal area of MMU's OneDrive. The WhatsApp group chats were also undertaken on my personal smartphone, raising issues around the security of data as it is always in my pocket and travels everywhere (S. Wilkinson, 2016); demonstrating once again how my personal and professional lives become blurred in this research. My phone is locked with a PIN code and if this is incorrect after four successive attempts in attempting to unlock my device the phone would be permanently locked. This reduces the risk of exposing the group chat data and throughout the data collection period, the data remained secure.

3.5.2   Ethical considerations for critically analysing Twitter data

Kozinets (2015) identifies some of the privacy and risk factors that should be considered while conducting a (semi) auto-netnography. There are wider questions surrounding the public and private nature of Twitter data. I take Markham's (2012:336) argument that:

> Sociologists and journalists have long considered a person's words to be freely available – if uttered publicly or with permission – to analyse and quote, as long as we anonymize the source.

Consequently, I decided to protect Twitter user data by shortening their names to a 3-letter acronym to simultaneously anonymise them, but also give them a pseudonym so they would be given agency in the research. This was necessary as participants would reference their sexual orientation and I needed to limit harm to user data. This was to not publicly 'out' participants as sexuality is a highly personal and sensitive attribute (Kozinets, 2015). ESC fans were expressive of their sexual preferences and desires on Twitter and sexuality was constructed both socio-culturally and erotically through their sexual attractions towards ESC artists, for example (Binnie, 1997).

I considered asking permission from Twitter users to use their data, which can be achieved in practice, but it would be highly time consuming and it would have to be questioned as to what data – tweet or reply to a tweet – would be cited and which user would be credited. Asking for permission would make Twitter users aware that they are being observed for research. I do not think Twitter ESC fandom is particularly vulnerable and subject to harm, with the exception of sexual orientation as previously mentioned (Bruckman, 2002). Even though I have attempted to minimise the chances of fan tweets being re-contextualised through anonymization and pseudonymising of data, there is still a concern that Twitter data can be traced back upon publication through Twitter and Google. I considered paraphrasing user tweets, however, I feel that this could take the tweets out of context (Hayano, 1979). Being on the outside in this regard would

contest my semi auto-netnography and de-privilege my position as an insider researcher within ESC fandom.

3.6   Data analysis

As my data analysis uses qualitative data, the analysis methods used have been consistent across the different forms of data that I collected (interviews, digital group chats, and Twitter tweets). The data analysis follows a poststructuralist and queer epistemology as outlined earlier in this chapter. All interviews [26] were recorded using a Dictaphone, transcribed using Microsoft Word, and imported into the qualitative data analysis (QDA) software program Nvivo. Data extracted from WhatsApp group chats was exported from within the social media application and was delivered to my university email address in a text file (.txt) format. As well as conversations, images that were sent within the group chat were delivered separately in a folder and can be cross-referenced with the image name in the text file document. These group chats were transferred into separate Word documents and imported once again into Nvivo.

For Twitter data, I made a Word document that included hyperlinks to tweets and provided a description (effectively, a code) of each tweet. I was able to use triangulation between the different sets and forms of data in order to substantiate my research findings (Leszczynski, 2018). Nvivo operates as a nexus where triangulation of data analysis takes place, allowing me to cross-reference interview extracts and WhatsApp group chat threads to develop over-arching themes within the data. A similar process took place in relation to Twitter data, linking codes and themes from within the Word document and cross-referencing tweets into Nvivo.

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[26] When presenting interviews in the analysis chapters, pseudonyms were used for some participants to give them agency, and to avoid unnecessarily 'outing' their sexual orientation, where they are closeted in other socio-cultural contexts (Kozinets, 2015).

Using WhatsApp as a digital tool to conduct focus groups, triangulation is possible and encourages participants to use smartphones to engage with the researcher's questions and the participants' responses. During the group chats, power was handed over to participants on occasions where I was absent from the group (Bergold and Thomas, 2012). This has advantages, as it allows participants to establish relationships with each other away from the immediate eye of the researcher and generate their own data, without influence from the researcher (Leyshon et al., 2013). Group chats were also challenging as certain discussions lacked context as they took place in real-time, such as watching a national selection show, which required me to follow-up conversations where required. This breaking down of the researcher/researched dichotomy helped produce rich data. However, leaving participants in control of the group encouraged them to stray off topic from my research questions.

Interviews were analysed using applied thematic analysis (ATA), an analytic method that is appropriate to interpret qualitative data. This moves beyond counting phrases and words to understand the implicit and explicit ideas within a dataset, through which codes and themes can emerge (Guest et al., 2017). Codes were developed from coding interview transcripts and WhatsApp messages in Nvivo, from which themes would emerge and were linked back to raw data for interpretation and analysis. The analytical tool of grounded theory also stems from ATA and was also an appropriate form of data analysis. Charmaz (2006:2) defines grounded theory as a portmanteau of methods that:

> Consists of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct theories "grounded" in the data themselves.

There is a distinction within grounded theory and in applied research that research output may not necessarily be a theoretical model. This is fruitful, as in my own research, I am aiming to understand ESC fan practices, their experiences and their expressions of sexuality across the online/offline divide.

There are significant overlaps in data analysis methods between grounded theory and netnography when analysing WhatsApp group chat data. WhatsApp group chats are a digital form of focus group, so it is appropriate to employ grounded theory and ATA, given the production of qualitative data. Participants also have the freedom to talk about a topic, without constraints imposed by fixed response questions. This leads to more of a conversational style form of data output, which WhatsApp is designed to produce. Given the production of different lengths of responses and data that was multidimensional, I was required to read and re-read, interpret and re-interpret and contextualise and re-contextualise the data, particularly in cases where I was absent from the group (Kozinets, 2015). Analysing WhatsApp group chat data was challenging at times as I could analyse direct responses to a question I have posed or analyse a 'thread' of responses from multiple participants. Analysing WhatsApp group chat data required careful re-contextualisation and reanalysing in order to work out responses to particular questions, or responses that were not directly answered (Guest et al., 2017). Hence, where I felt that some responses required further detail and clarification, I asked participants to expand on them.

As far as presenting data within this thesis is concerned, I disclose fan demographic information relating to sexual orientation and gender. Queer theory identifies that sexuality and gender should not be objectified given the fluid nature of both these terms. I felt that this information was important given that I am exploring both queer and non-queer readings and experiences of the ESC. Fans self-defined and disclosed their sexual orientation and gender for this research. This was not particularly the case during WhatsApp group chats and Twitter tweets; I did not explicitly ask participants to state their gender and sexuality. However, discussions around these socio-cultural identification categories occurred during the data collection period which provided clues to participant's sexual orientation. My deployment of queer theory and poststructuralism throughout this research is used to understand how sexualities are destabilised or re-inscribed spatially through ESC fan spaces.

In addition, some participants in my Skype interviews, WhatsApp group chats, and Twitter data I had met while attending ESC events, which also assisted in my data analysis as I was aware of their social and demographic profile, for example, in terms of sexual orientation and levels of engagement within the fandom. This is useful to develop a more holistic interpretation of fan identities, but I must also acknowledge fan experiences from a range of online and offline perspectives. My honesty as a researcher who is embedded within the fieldwork and who has socialised with different ESC fans from different social and cultural backgrounds enables me to generate empirically charged data.

Maintaining reflexivity throughout the data analysis is also important. This includes my position as a gay cis-male ESC fan conducting this research. The data presented is interpreted from both the fan and researcher perspective. My personal experiences of ESC fandom are inflected within the data analysis, which is supported by critical academic inquiry. It is not solely a gay male experience of the contest, but recounts experiences from multiple gender and sexual orientation backgrounds. It does not challenge individual sexual orientations, but rather raises issues regarding how different sexualities (such as homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality) are normalised, destabilised or conflicted within the context of the ESC and its respective fan spaces. It respects participant confidentiality and treats issues surrounding sexual orientation with sensitivity. Overall, this thesis raises key critical issues and questions surrounding identity that are continuously prevalent within the ESC and its fandom. Where I have explored how my fan and researcher positionalities have shaped the data analysis, I will now turn to these roles more specifically and how they have been intertwined throughout the research.

3.7   Negotiating fan and academic identities

Throughout this research, I have been confronted with issues and challenges surrounding positionality, desire, and emotion (see Cupples, 2002; De Craene, 2017; Wimark, 2017). I entered this research as an ESC fan – one who engaged

with the contest on an individual level (such as watching the contest through television and YouTube video clips online). Conducting research into a great passion of mine was a marriage made in heaven. This marriage, however, has been an anxious journey and my relationship between myself and the ESC I have defined as my ESC 'love affair' (Cupples, 2002), as I have experienced an unstable relationship between my fandom and research. This raises significant questions surrounding the negotiation of my fan and academic identities, which will be the focus for this section. Table 3.4 provides a chronological timeline of my ESC love affair and my unsettled relationship between my fandom and research.

Table 3.4 Timeline detailing my ESC 'love affair', of my ESC fan and research activities

MY EUROVISION "LOVE AFFAIR"	
2014 **Marriage?**	Fandom permeates social media as a consequence of listening to a Eurovision-theme radio show, *Wales 12 points*
2014	Attend my first Eurovision in 2014 **(DATA COLLECTION)**
2014/15	Start writing for a fan website, *Eurovoix,* in 2014/15
2015	Attend Eurovision again in 2015 for a longer stay to write for *Eurovoix* and access the 'Press Centre' under 'Press' accreditation **(DATA COLLECTION)**
2015/16	Continue writing for Eurovoix throughout 2015/16, attending London Eurovision Party to interview artists.
2016	Writing for Eurovoix at Eurovision in 2016, under a 'Fan' accreditation and not 'Press'
2016/17	Leave fan website during 2016/17 to focus more on PhD write up and further data collection
2017 onwards	**DATA COLLECTION:** Interviews with straight and bisexual male ESC fans over Skype, co-ordinating WhatsApp focus groups, and observing fan Twitter networks.

After conducting two sets of fieldwork in Copenhagen and Vienna to collect data, I felt I was losing my love for the contest, particularly as a consequence of my involvement with the *Eurovoix* fan website. It was fantastic to be involved with this initially, a dream come true in getting closer to the contest and being able to see activities backstage. From 2016 onwards, however, I felt my enjoyment of this element of fandom weakened, and I left the website to focus on my PhD and undertake further data collection.

My emotions, alongside the timeline in Table 3.4 above, demonstrate how I have had to negotiate my academic and fan roles, known in fan studies as an 'acafan' identity (Hills, 2012). This literature has argued that acafans are privileged over other academics who lack the passion or knowledge of fandom. Both academic and fan identity co-exist without tension, however, the acafan is thought of as an umbrella term to refer to the hybridisation of 'academic' and 'fan' identity, that is variously positioned (Hills, 2012); allowing the researcher to break down hierarchies between themselves and the researched. Kobayashi (2003:348) also identifies the importance of self-reflexivity in research, however, I have found it difficult in my research to not draw attention to 'a privileged and self-indulgent focus on the self'. To mitigate this, I situated myself 'differently' in under-researched aspects of my ESC fandom (Hills, 2012). To do so, I immersed myself more firmly within ESC fan networks on social media and engaging with the IFCO *Eurovoix* in order to interview participants on location in the ESC Press Centre in Vienna in 2015, activities which I did not involve myself with before starting this research. By participating in these different elements of ESC fandom, I have been able to break down boundaries between the researcher/researched which have allowed me to produce rich and detailed data.

As I have immersed myself with my fandom by using social media, it has become embedded within my daily life – it has not been possible to leave the field (Hall, 2009). Twitter and WhatsApp have always been accessible in my pocket and during data collection, it was impossible to divorce myself from these stages of my

research. Throughout, I have constantly battled with myself, particularly on Twitter, about when to stop looking at user tweets for research (Blake, 2007). It has been difficult to be separated from my PhD research as I feel that I am constantly analysing and looking out for potential data. My fan and researcher positions have become intertwined and I have been unable divorce myself from these roles (Hall, 2009). I have felt that I have had to negotiate my fan and researcher positions throughout the PhD process which has transformed my use of social media.

Conducting research on the social media platforms I use regularly have caused conflict with my own personal uses of Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. These thoughts, which are highlighted in an extract from my field diary below, were generated while carrying out critical analyses of WhatsApp group chats and tweets for this research.

> It's quite tricky sometimes, when you're trying to collect data for your PhD through these WhatsApp focus groups and monitor Twitter, I kind of feel sometimes my own personal use of these social media gets a back seat. Sometimes I feel less social and my PhD currently takes precedence in how I use social media. My personal postings on Twitter and Facebook are rather irregular, maybe because I have my PhD hat on at this moment because of these focus groups? I think I would have preferred to spread these groups out a bit, give myself time to recharge instead of jumping in week on week. Especially when I'm doing a part-time job, part-time PhD and everything in between, it can be quite intense. Although, considering my participants are also working, studying, and going about their daily lives, like me, then it works out quite well.

Extract from field diary, 1st March 2018, p. 2

These experiences demonstrate how my personal use of social media has been consumed by my research, but also how the research has transformed my own personal use. For example, I have reduced my use of Facebook as a platform for socialising, I rarely post on my timeline and participate in Facebook groups; focusing more of my socialising privately through Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. This may be as a consequence of how people viewed me online, particularly research participants, which resulted in me to be less public about my

personal life on Facebook. These perceptions also influenced the ways I collected Twitter data for research. The following field diary extract discusses some of the issues with 'liking' Twitter tweets for research as a method for collating tweets to avoid negative feedback and how I dealt with receiving follows from ESC fans during data collection.

> I've been 'liking' tweets to use for data in my thesis, which is a lot easier on my phone as they'll be stored in one place in my 'liked' tweets on my Twitter profile. On some occasions, I've been wary to do this, particularly if the tweet is something I disagree with, or something that I think may receive backlash if others in my Twitter network don't agree with me liking it. Oftentimes I've 'screen-shotted' some tweets, particularly where I thought liking it wasn't a good idea. Even by moderating the way I collect tweets, I'm still consciously aware of how I'll be viewed and perceived by others on the way I like tweets, even though people probably aren't that bothered about it! Also, sometimes if I liked someone's tweet, they've cottoned on to this and then gone ahead and followed me. Then I've thought of following them, thinking it may produce some good data and then maybe thought against it because I've got that data from that person. What purpose do I have now of following them, other than following them because they are a Eurovision fan?

Extract from field diary, 11th March 2018, p. 3-4

The field diary extract above demonstrates how conducting digital research encourages the researcher to draw attention to themselves and consider their role during data collection (Kobayashi, 2003). Hall (2009) raised ethical dilemmas in accepting friend requests from research participants on Facebook, as accepting or rejecting these can be considered unethical and can suggest to participants that researcher/researched friendships were only bound to the research. Twitter operates differently, however, as my profile was public, so anyone could follow me and view my tweets. Participants of my research who follow me may feel similarly to Hall (2009) if I do not reciprocate and follow them back.

Confidentiality is also an issue as participants may uncover and be given access to my academic, fan and social life during and outside of digital fieldwork. This also influences how I represent my fan identity online. As a researcher, I have wanted to remain neutral in my opinions and statements. My fan identity, however,

encourages me to focus on particular trails of thought, for example, my music tastes and opinions in choosing artists for the ESC. Therefore, I felt compelled in my data collection to be aware of multiple statements and opinions from other fans. However, by 'liking' a particular tweet, demonstrates my allegiance towards a particular way of thinking.

Moreover, when 'liking' a tweet, some ESC fans would automatically follow me, solely based on this haptic gesture as I agree with them on a particular issue. I have been reluctant to follow them back as I wanted alternative perspectives on different issues within the fandom and I did not want to develop a digital relationship. At this point, as a fan, I was comfortable in my pre-existing fan networks and by following more fans would destabilise these ties. To mitigate this, screen-shotting or bookmarking tweets was more appropriate as I was not acknowledging a reaction to a way of thought; screen shots would be stored on my smartphone and bookmarks were stored in a folder in Twitter to return to at a later date. My fan and academic identities are both relationally constructed and negotiated frequently throughout this research. This has caused conflict for me internally as I continuously struggle and think of the preconceived notions of how a researcher should behave within social media platforms.

From collecting data and immersing myself within the Twitter platform, I believe the way I publish tweets on my timeline has transformed. When I began to use the platform in 2013, I was primarily focused on using it as a tool for networking with other ESC fans. As I use the platform now, my fandom permeates through my tweets, but to a lesser extent. Figure 3.8 contextualises my use of Twitter between 2015 and 2018:

Figure 3.8 Examples of screenshots from tweets, extracted from my Twitter account, demonstrating my changes of use on the platform

A thread of tweets from 28th May 2015 engaging with the radio show 'Wales 12 points!' with other fans and listeners

A more detailed post from 13th September 2018 discussing my thoughts on Tel Aviv as the chosen host city for ESC 2019 in Israel

Figure 3.8 demonstrates, to a particular degree, the transformation in my use of Twitter. In 2015, I had an addictive engagement in developing dialogue with ESC fans alongside the radio show 'Wales 12 points!', which was a significant facilitator for me into the ESC fandom. Here, my tweets are instantaneous and feature ESC references such as song lyrics of ESC entries ('never forget, what I did what I said what I gave you all…!' from the Icelandic entry in 2012). In 2018, I am seen to be more critical and academic towards the ESC, considering the implications the contest will have on gay nightlife and spaces in the 2019 host city Tel Aviv. Time and temporality are also important factors here, with the ESC tweets from 2015 posted shortly after the ESC, whereas the 2018 tweet looks forward to how the contest may be staged and organised. These tweets show that even though the ESC remains a significant part of my embodied identity and everyday life, I am now more critically analytical (but sometimes cynical) over the contest and digital ESC fandom, which has transformed my use of Twitter.

3.7.1   Developing fan friendships in and beyond the field

From initially participating with the radio show 'Wales 12 points!' on Twitter in 2013, I have developed friendships (some long-term) with fans, that have continued to take place across social media platforms (such as Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp and Twitter) and in offline spaces, such as ESC events. In some cases, some of these fans have been interviewed for research. Thus, I identify with Catherine Wilkinson's (2016) definition of 'researcher as friend', who explains how her involvement in community radio allowed her to develop deep and meaningful social relationships with young people and some have turned into long-term friendships. These friendships are maintained by adding her participants as friends on Facebook and exchanging phone numbers. I developed close ESC fan friendships, where we created a private Facebook Messenger group and shared phone numbers. Some of these fan friends participated in my research through interviews or WhatsApp group chats. Developing these friendships within

and beyond these data collection sites allowed me to develop more individual, emotional and corporeal relationships (Bondi, 2005).

Throughout my interviews and WhatsApp group chats, my position as 'researcher as friend' became more active, as these data collection procedures produced closed, communal and private spaces for participants to share their fan experiences but also aspects of their personal lives, outside of their fandom (C. Wilkinson, 2016). In contexts where I shared the same sexual orientation with participants, I could understand the wider significance of gay male identity and its position within the socio-cultural context of the ESC. I also possessed 'experiential "sameness"' (Mohammad, 2001:104) with my participants because of our shared understandings of the fan knowledge we produced.

Friendship, however, is often considered a slippery concept (Monk et al., 2003) and during WhatsApp group chats where I was absent from collective viewings of national finals, I felt that I could not be like my fellow fans (Blackman, 2007). Yet in other contexts where we shared our favourite ESC songs, artists, and other aspects of the contest such as male musicians we felt attracted to, we engaged in 'shared "friendship moments"' (Blackman, 2007:703). This could also be shaped by my unsettled relationship between my fan and researcher positions, where I have felt that I needed to maintain some form of distance between myself and participants when doing research online (Hall, 2009), issues I explored in section 3.7.

After finishing my WhatsApp data collection, I would often 'follow' participants on Twitter, which feels like a 'friendly' practice and something fans would normally do to build Twitter fan networks and relationships. This action, however, does not feel constitutive of mutual friendship as it is digitally mediated and lacking in physical human interaction (Murphy and Dingwall, 2007). Nonetheless, I believe that I generated genuine fan friendships while undertaking interviews and WhatsApp group chats. However, because of my turbulent relationship between my fan and researcher positions, it is unclear if these friendships would continue

beyond the data collection phase as I have felt I have needed to distance myself from my participants and the research (Kobayashi, 2003). My wider involvement with ESC fandom on Twitter has made this impossible, as my fan, academic and personal lives all come together on the platform.

On some occasions, my position as 'researcher as friend' became stretched and challenged. This positioning also placed me in situations where emotions and desire featured in conversations between myself and research participants. Some participants placed deep trust in me and opened up about their sexual and romantic desires. Emotions in such contexts are understood as lived experiences, where erotic and sexual thoughts have previously been internalised by subjects (Bondi, 2005). I became very close friends with one participant after our Skype interview in July 2017 and we met for the first time in February 2018 to attend an ESC event. On this meeting, he shared with me very personal information about his romantic life. This is demonstrated from an excerpt from my field diary:

> We'd been chatting for a while prior to meeting […] On first time meeting, he felt very comfortable sharing with me how he hasn't had his first kiss yet […] while sitting in a very busy train! Because we built up our friendship digitally and we became closer friends through the months after our interview in July […] then I guess those intimate statements were more likely to be revealed. But, I did see it as a privilege to be let into these aspects of his life […] I did think this may have impacted on my position as researcher, but because this occurred post-interview, I didn't see it as much of an issue.

Extract from field diary, 21/2/2018, p. 1

The research participant emotionally regulates their sexuality through our Skype interview, which transfers into offline contexts (Wimark, 2017). I am privileged in my position as an ESC fan and 'researcher as friend' as this participant placed trust in me to share very sensitive and intimate information that helped to break down boundaries between the participant and myself (C. Wilkinson, 2016). This participant was open to me in relaying how he had not 'had his first kiss yet' in public on a busy train. As my fandom has become my research, the positions of fan and researcher are always attached to me and move from the digital research

context of the Skype interview, to offline social encounters and attending ESC events. The barriers between the researcher/researched can also be removed and forgotten in offline social contexts after building friendships online (Cupples, 2002).

As I am always attached to my research, participants have continued to place trust in me in discussing their sexuality and emotions personally and in relation to their ESC fandom. This is also as a consequence of my strong social and emotional qualities that have developed through the research process. Gav, a WhatsApp focus group participant, allowed me and the rest of the group access to his own emotional and social qualities, as well as his sexual relationships with other men:

> 18/2/2018 00:42 – Gav: When I was 24 and traveling Germany, I fell in love with a guy who was a fan. We bought the [ESC] contests on eBay on DVD. We downloaded songs (a new experience then)
> […]
> 20/2/2018 13:47 – Gav: Some of it's probably my fault. I'm sometimes – under confident in meeting new people out in the big wide world

Even though I developed a friendship with the previous research participant in my field diary earlier longer than Gav, these examples demonstrate how the boundaries between 'researcher friendship and friendship' become blurred (Cotterill, 1992:599) because of their openness to other intimate and personal aspects of their lives and personalities (Blackman, 2007). This was made possible because of WhatsApp and participating in a group chat through the digital screen. As the group chat progressed, Gav was able to express these intimate aspects of his life as he developed rapport between myself and participants over a week period; this may not have been possible within an in-person focus group setting. The screen encourages semi-anonymity and he found it easier to reveal these experiences to known, but also unknown others in the group. As his romantic relationship was discussed in conjunction with his ESC fandom, the group were able to collectively feel with and for him.

These quotes above identify how being embedded as an 'acafan' in this research is incredibly valuable as it has allowed me to delve into the intimate and personal aspects of some ESC fan's social lives. As an ESC fan, I was able to break down the barriers between myself as the researcher and the researched, which helped to produce immersive and rich data. This helped position me as 'researcher as friend' as we shared in our interest in the ESC and my emotional and social qualities helped to build rapport between myself and participants. Given the turbulent relationship between my fan and researcher positions, however, I have found it difficult to maintain these friendships and have distanced myself from my participants, to an extent, in order to focus my attention towards my PhD research. Issues regarding sexuality and emotions have also permeated interviews and WhatsApp group chat conversations which position my gay cis-male identity for me, but also reinforce boundaries between myself and the participants, in order to maintain ethical research. In the next section, I focus more specifically on my gay sexual orientation and how it has permeated my data collection and the research process when doing research using technology.

3.8   Regulating the research/researcher closet

As there is a strong relationship between the ESC and gay culture, this can lead to assumptions imposed by participants that the male researcher is potentially gay. I did not make my sexual orientation explicit to my participants which produces a research space that is an extension of the closet (Brown, 2005); in turn creating a 'researcher closet'. This is also amplified by being closeted about my gay sexuality to my parents up until 2017 and for me the ESC became camouflage (as I was not going to a gay specific event) for meeting other men; both online and attending ESC events. For me, conducting research into ESC fandom had a 'seductive quality' (Cupples, 2002:383). It is important to note that throughout my data collection I did not involve myself sexually with any participant and maintained sound researcher ethics. Participants in my research may have held previous knowledge about me from my Twitter activity and posts which may have suggested my sexual

orientation as gay. As my interviews and group chats featured participants of a range of different genders and sexualities, it is important that, as Cupples (2002:383) states:

> Attention to sexuality is therefore a way of understanding the multiple repositionings of self that take place during the course of fieldwork and a way of acknowledging our positionality as embodied researchers.

Cupples suggests that conducting research with different people in different environments makes us more aware of our position as researchers. This assisted with my research and because of my fan identity, our shared knowledge of the contest helped to build rapport between the researcher and the researched (see section 3.7). Cupples (2002) and Binnie (1997) emphasise paying attention to our sexual embodiment in the research process and I contribute to this research by emphasising that sexuality, emotion and desire are produced and expressed between myself and group chat participants. WhatsApp group chats provide a sense of anonymity, particularly where participants have not met each other previously. As fans began to develop relationships in the group, they were explicit regarding the ESC-related male musicians they found attractive. These discussions also incorporated my own experiences of ESC fandom in this way, which provided participants with an inclination towards my gay sexuality. The following conversation threads from the 'Shady Lady' WhatsApp group chat below demonstrate this in referring to high-energy, pop songs that resonate with gay culture.

'Shady lady' group chat

> 04/03/2018, 19:07 - Jamie: And big up to Shady lady Carlo, we have the same favourite!
> 04/03/2018, 19:07 - Carlo: Ani Lorak is Life
> [...]
> 04/03/2018, 21:44 - Iain: Remember 'Can't hurt me now'?
> 04/03/2018, 21:45 - Ewan: That's a great song
> [...]
> 04/03/2018, 22:18 - Jamie: That was a great tune. Also, I'm reminded of Mot mig I gamla Stan

04/03/2018, 22:19 - Iain: OH MY GOD I LOVE THAT SONG!
04/03/2018, 22:19 - Iain: And Magnus isn't exactly hard to look at
04/03/2018, 22:22 - Jamie: That was a good MF [Melodifestivalen] year. Oh, I was all for Robin Stjernberg back in the day
04/03/2018, 22:31 - Iain: Haha! I was all about Louise Hoffsten in 2013.

In this dialogue, I discuss my enjoyment of the song 'Shady Lady' by Ani Lorak[27], which I subsequently chose as the group chat name because myself and Carlo have the same favourite ESC song. Later in our discussion, Carlo begins to advocate his passion for Jessica Andersson's *Melodifestivalen*[28] song 'Party Voice'[29], a song that is high energy, cheesy pop that encourages her audience to 'freak on the weekend and dance like a mother'. This conversation develops to explore *Melodifestivalen* songs from men and their attractiveness and from this, I opened up to my participants about my sexual orientation allowing us to share common sexual desires towards men. The sharing of sexual emotions in this example produced feelings of commonality between me and the participants in the 'Shady Lady' group chat.

The WhatsApp group chat creates a history of sexual emotions that are materialised digitally. This constructed a temporal 'researcher closet' as my gay sexual orientation is open outside of the research site but somewhat more ambiguous and hidden within the digital group chats (Lewis, 2012). Participants were also empowered to make their sexualities in/visible in the group chats, thus positioning them inside the research closet, where they were not objective about their sexual orientation. The researcher closet for me was challenged by Louis, who private messaged me to follow up questions that he had missed within the focus group chat. He explains his desire to meet up with me at the 2018 London Eurovision Party (LEP). This is shown in Figure 3.9.

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[27] https://youtu.be/L6M300uBc7U accessed on 5/1/2021

[28] *Melodifestivalen* is an annual music television show in Sweden that is used to select Sweden's entry for the ESC.

[29] https://youtu.be/lPt0FuYqKdU accessed on 5/1/2021

Figure 3.9 Screenshot from WhatsApp private chat with Louis, where my sexual orientation is presumed as desire towards the male gender
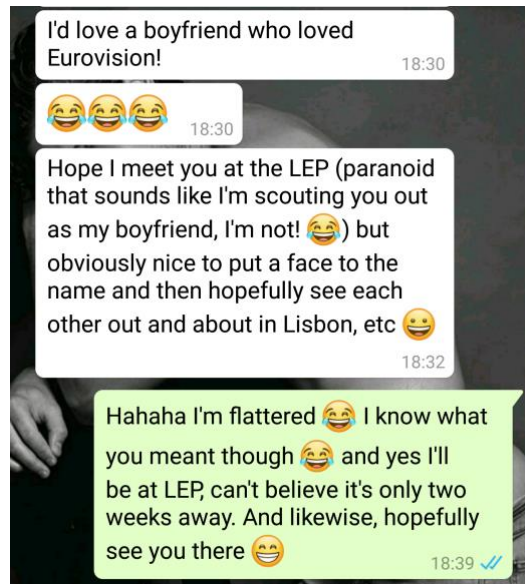
In Figure 3.9, my gay sexual orientation is positioned for me by Louis (Cupples, 2002), as I did not explicitly identify myself as gay in this element of the research. This undoubtedly made me increasingly aware of my gay identity. Louis felt anxious in his initial statement that he yearned for a 'boyfriend who loved Eurovision' and corrected himself that he was not asking me to be his 'Eurovision boyfriend'. These messages were also posted to me privately through WhatsApp which regulates sexual emotions to this private conversation, as opposed to the public nature of the group chat. Louis's emotions emerged later on in the group chat after developing a relationship with me and other participants (Wimark, 2017) and consequently felt comfortable participating in discussions with other fans regarding the ESC. Accessing WhatsApp through a digital screen can break down the boundaries between the researcher and participants. It provides semi-anonymity; me and Louis are known to each other through the research, but we are also unknown. It is this element of unknowingness that prompted Louis to express his emotions and desires in this way.

My emotional qualities coupled with my joint fan and researcher position has been beneficial to this research in forging bonds between research participants. This research raises some of the ethical challenges relating to the role of social media technologies in breaking down researcher/researched barriers. This is possible as within WhatsApp group chats, me and the participants are known, but simultaneously unknown to each other. Private messaging through WhatsApp, particularly for Louis, is more effective in directing his emotions and desires towards myself as the researcher. Where my knowledge and embedded position as an ESC fan can be useful to build rapport between participants, it can also be challenging. By doing digital research, researcher/participant boundaries can be broken down but also reinforced in social encounters where emotions and desires occur.

3.8.1 'I'm not gay at all': Interviewing heterosexual male ESC fans

My positionality as a gay cis-male researcher in undertaking research with heterosexual male ESC fans was sometimes challenging, as they would often reassert their heterosexuality when discussing their ESC fan experiences. As I argued in Chapter Two, I explored the intricate relationship between the ESC and wider gay male culture. As a consequence of this association, some heterosexual male ESC fans during Skype interviews resorted to a process of 'impression management' (Linnekin, 1998:71), as they would control how they expressed themselves and behaved towards me. This occurred when interviewing Darren via Skype who frequently stated he was 'not gay' when responding to questions surround the contest and its association with gay culture:

> Well [the contest] it's very camp! Especially for me cos I'm not gay at all so it's sort of like, it's a little bit odd because people see it as a gay event and so it was like when I told my girlfriend that I liked it, she was like "are you sure you're not gay?". So, it's certainly a bit weird that a straight person likes Eurovision, because you don't find many of them.

Darren, 22, straight male, British

Darren's asserts his heterosexuality towards me and he shares his feelings of uncertainty from his girlfriend over his heterosexuality because of his ESC fandom. Throughout the interview, I felt he held back on some responses, because he questioned his enjoyment of the contest and his level of engagement, which he felt may have led me to question his heterosexuality further. Power relations between researcher and participant are frequently negotiated, as Darren may also have preconceived notions of my sexual orientation which may have impacted on how he saw me and may have produced minimal responses (Cupples, 2002). Thus, I undertook a non-desiring position (Bain and Nash, 2006) and tried to present myself as an asexual researcher in this context (De Craene, 2017). This was difficult, however, as during the interview I was self-conscious about how I expressed myself. For example, I felt I was regulating my 'gayness' towards Darren (in my

speech, tone and questions around gay identity in the contest), which may have shaped his responses.

Darren is seen to protect his masculinity/heterosexuality as a consequence of presuming my gay identity because of our conversations around the ESC and gay culture (Vanderbeck, 2005). Darren was also known to me because of our involvement with the ESC fan website *Eurovoix*. He had recently left the website because he felt he did not contribute to it sufficiently, whereas at that time I remained involved with *Eurovoix.* This may have limited his responses to questions, because of my insider position with the fan website and our different positions within the fandom. This demonstrates the difficulties in being embedded within the research as it can cause wider conflict within the ESC fandom, but it also challenged my position as a gay male ESC fan and researcher.

The majority of Skype interviews with heterosexual male ESC fans took place within the private space of the home with no invasion from other individuals during our conversation. This helped pave the way for heartfelt and detailed responses. One participant, Alun, ensured that our interview took place while his wife was absent, ensuring he was home alone. This was made clear by him in arranging his interview through Twitter:

> Alun: Monday might be the most convenient but let me get back to you a wee bit later on that. I'll arrange it for when the wife's out.
> Alun: And that's either Mon, Thurs or both evenings. But I'll check.
> Alun: Monday evening pls [please].

Direct message from Alun through Twitter, 2nd September 2017

The decision for Alun to conduct our interview privately and alone in his house can be seen as a way of policing his masculinity and heterosexuality (Vanderbeck, 2005). Similar to Darren earlier, Alun's reasons to arrange our interview alone may also have been as a consequence of the relationship of the contest with gay culture and being a straight ESC fan is considered non-normative. Using Skype as a tool to conduct the interview is also perceived as subversive, and coupled with

possible assumptions towards my gay sexuality, can be reasoning for scheduling the interview away from third-parties. This also reasserts the idea that the ESC is a furtive practice – for straight male ESC fans – and can be considered to be a threat to heterosexuality if their fandom is made public.

Alun constructs his fandom as a private, but semi-public practice, as he has only 'come out' about it to close friends and family. Using Skype as an interview tool did bring myself and Alun close together; close enough in which he conveyed heartfelt responses that gave me insight into his desire to attend wider events relating to gay culture, such as Gay Pride (Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst, 2017). There are wider implications here to suggest that Skype produces a barrier between the researcher and informant that can be both permeable and reaffirmed. Embedding myself within the research and showing an interest in fans' experiences helps blur the boundaries between researcher and informant, which is invaluable in generating rich and empirical data.

This section has explored the role of the research and researcher closet. Participants within my WhatsApp group chats and interviews were not made aware of my gay sexuality. This was often assumed based on clues, where I would develop rapport between participants in group chats through sharing our thoughts on male musicians we felt attracted to. When doing research using WhatsApp, participants can communicate outside of the public group chat and with the researcher in a private one-to-one chat. This private form of communication is unforeseen and gives way to sexual desires from the participant to the researcher and reaffirm the non-desiring researcher position. Assumptions that the researcher is gay also determined how heterosexual male interviewees expressed and responded to questions. This also factored in to when and where the interview would take place and was usually arranged when participants were home alone. This, coupled with conducting interviews using Skype, enabled the participants to get close to the researcher, which helped produce data that was heartfelt and emotional.

3.9   Conclusion

This chapter provides a substantial contribution to knowledge by arguing that in order to understand issues regarding identity online, we need to move towards qualitative data analysis of social media platforms. To do so, I used experimental digital research methods including the co-ordination of WhatsApp group chats with ESC fans to explore their online and offline fan experiences of the contest and applying an auto-netnography to analyse ESC fan Twitter data to understand the materialisation of fan and sexual identity through everyday social media use. Using WhatsApp as new innovative research method moves beyond traditional geographic research methods of focus groups (e.g. Bedford and Burgess, 2001; Kneale, 2001; Conradson, 2005; Barbour, 2007).

I advance knowledge that has deployed WhatsApp to conduct research by experimenting with 'group chats' (e.g. Chen and Neo, 2019; Kaufmann and Peil, 2020). WhatsApp provides further modes of communication for participants: text messaging, sharing photos and video, and using emojis to express emotions. WhatsApp is encrypted, and another methodological benefit is that it is securer than other platforms. Some of the disadvantages of this method include a need to own a smartphone to participate and some participants are quicker to respond to questions, others may miss them. Like regular focus groups, group dynamics can be influential in limiting data from some participants, as others can 'take over' and dominate discussions. To mitigate these issues, keeping the research aim(s) and objectives in mind and bringing the conversation back to focus is required. Using WhatsApp as a geographic research method can break down social barriers that face-to-face research can produce; fans can delve into and share with others their personal and emotional lives. Given the ubiquity and continually transformative nature of social media platforms, a critical analysis of qualitative social media data is necessary to understand the dynamic ways individuals express their identities online.

Conducting this research also raised significant issues regarding researcher emotions and positionality. As an ESC fan and researcher, my positions have become blurred as my fandom has become my research. Conducting WhatsApp group chats and a Twitter auto-netnography were particularly challenging as data was readily accessible in my pocket and my fan, academic and social lives coalesce within these platforms. In this chapter I have contributed to knowledge regarding my unique position as an ESC fan and researcher who has found it nearly impossible to divorce myself from the research. Embracing these conflicts can benefit the research as it can generate rich qualitative data, develop trust with participants, which can provide access to dynamic aspects of their socio-cultural lives. I have been able to forge close networks with my participants during WhatsApp group chats, but also in interviews, and position myself as 'researcher as friend' (C. Wilkinson, 2016). However, given my troubled 'love affair' between my fandom and my research (Cupples, 2002), it has been difficult to maintain these friendships digitally, in order to maintain some distance and negotiation between these positions (Kobayashi, 2003). There are benefits for conducting research within a topic I have been devoted to, such as developing rapport with participants and having fan knowledge that can assist in shaping the research process. Conducting research, both within my digital fieldwork and in interviews raises significant challenges in balancing multiple positionalities; as my fandom has become my research.

Lastly, this research has addressed issues surrounding sexual embodiment in the research process. It has provided examples from my field diary, interviews and group chats where issues regarding emotions and desire have surfaced between participants and myself. Participants were keen to share with me their emotions surrounding their sexual and erotic lives, because of my position as a fan and my strong emotional qualities (C. Wilkinson, 2016; Wimark et al., 2017). My gay identity was disclosed in some research contexts to develop rapport and assert a fan identity within group chats. In interviews with straight men, I created a 'closet space' and developed the term the 'researcher closet' as I did not disclose my gay

sexuality to them (Brown, 2005; Maguire et al., 2019); even though this was often assumed and some straight men felt hostile and limited their responses to my questions. Power relations between participants and myself were often negotiated, such as participants determining the time and location when interviews would take place in order to reassert their masculinity and heterosexuality to avoid suspicion of a gay male identity. Further considerations should be taken regarding the 'outness' of one's sexual orientation in the field (Brown, 2005), and being aware that we may not be able as researchers to control assumptions placed on our sexualities, particularly where case studies such as the ESC are widely perceived and represented as queer.

The following chapters in this thesis will delve deeper into the relationships between ESC fandom, sexuality and their practices within social media platforms. In Chapter Four, I map ESC fan spaces across the online and offline divide and explore how ESC fans forge relationships with the contest and how they practice their sexualities by participating in ESC fandom. In Chapter Five, I focus more specifically on Facebook and Twitter as popular social media platforms for practicing fandom and sexuality. I argue how the associations between the contest and gay culture and the wider cultural contestation of the event encourages negotiation and 'closeting' of fan and sexual identity within and across these social media platforms. Finally, in Chapter Six, I focus more specifically on a case study of straight male ESC fans and how they 'come out' as straight male ESC fans within ESC fan spaces and social encounters. I develop the concept of 'the closet' to thinking about the 'ESC closet' as a metaphorical and material space where ESC fans, including straight men, conceal, deny, camouflage and negotiate their fan and sexual identities online and offline.

Chapter Four: Let's 'Come Together': Mapping and conceptualising spaces of ESC fandom: visibility, networking and code/spaces

'Come together' is taken from the slogan from the ESC in Stockholm 2016.
Source: Eurovision Song Contest (2016)

4.1   Introduction

This chapter addresses the aim of this research and objective one by mapping and characterising ESC fan spaces. It argues that sexual identity within ESC fandom is heterogeneous, as a consequence of the diverse range of ESC fan spaces and practices through which it can be expressed. I demonstrate in this chapter how the internet and social media are vital for the co-production of fan and sexual identity. I explore how sexuality is shaped within online/offline spaces by the associations and meanings they make with the contest. In Chapter Two, I emphasised how the ESC has often been represented as a global 'coming out' in support of gender and sexual diversity, however, the ESC amongst some cultural commentators is often dismissed as trite and not 'serious' culture (Fricker, 2015; Wellings et al., 2019). These widely held perceptions lead to shaming of ESC fans. In this chapter, I break down and challenge representations of the ESC as a 'gay event' (Rehberg, 2007; Singleton et al., 2007; Carniel, 2015; Fricker, 2015; Baker, 2017) by exploring how ESC fans practice their fan and sexual identities within online/offline fan spaces. I argue that ESC fans do continue to feel this way, but ESC fandom provides opportunities to express ambiguous sexualities. However, I emphasise how sexual identity is distributed across a range of ESC fan spaces which can cause tension, conflict and internal divisions with fan and professional identities.

This chapter is organised as follows. Firstly, I will map ESC fan spaces and conceptualise them as a digital ecosystem of ESC fandom. I proceed to analyse how ESC fans associate themselves with the contest's representations of queerness in and through these spaces. This includes the ways ESC fans associate themselves with the ESC and its associated television events, such as national ESC song selection shows. I then explore how ESC fans perform their sexualities within ESC fan spaces and in other gay consumption spaces, such as inner-city clubs and bars. This then leads to an examination of the queerness of different ESC fan spaces, such as EuroClub, the 2018 'Eurovision You Decide' UK national final event and ESC email lists. I will then focus more specifically on the ways the ESC Press Centre, as an exclusive backstage arena, operates as a code/space, as it blurs the boundaries between the online/offline and it is dependent on technology in order to operate (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011). I argue how this space also produces fan hierarchies as ESC fans differentiate themselves against other fans by defining their fan activities as 'work' and themselves as 'journalists'. I discuss how ESC fans involved with international fan community outlets (IFCOs) practice their fandom and sexualities within the ESC Press Centre. I highlight how this ESC fan space can stigmatise drag performances of identity and how fans conform to gendered identity expressions while representing an IFCO. Lastly, I will conclude this chapter by outlining my contributions to the literature and explain how I will move forward with the analysis.

4.2   Mapping ESC fan spaces

I would like to begin this chapter by considering the different spaces where ESC fans practice their fandom. These multiple spaces where ESC fandom is practiced demonstrate that identity formation happens beyond the event itself. The ESC is not limited in its spatiality to the actual event and venue, but it incorporates a dynamic range of fan spaces across the online/offline divide that provide regular and continuous engagement with the event. Hence, I conceptualise ESC fandom as a 'digital ecosystem', which I use to describe how ESC fan practices are

interconnected between internet and social media platforms and 'offline' environments that permeate each other (Van Dijck, 2013). Table 4.1 maps the digital ecosystem of ESC fandom and lists the fan spaces that will be explored within my analysis chapters.

Table 4.1 The digital ecosystem of ESC fandom

ESC Press Centre	• Accessibility is granted through the approval of accreditation, that is applied for through the *www.eurovision.tv* website. • ESC fans who contribute to International Fan Community Outlets (IFCOs) can apply for accreditation and use the Press Centre space to attend press conferences, meet and greet with ESC musicians, watch rehearsals in the arena and network with other IFCOs and official journalists. • IFCOs 'work' in the Press Centre by producing content that is published on their websites, social media accounts and blogs.
EuroClub	• An ESC fan space that operates alongside the ESC Press Centre at the ESC each year. • An exclusive space for ESC musicians, organisers and ESC fans to socialise and party through the night during ESC week. • Usually only open to ESC fans who hold accreditation (such as those IFCOs identified as press and fans who hold official ESC fan club memberships of the OGAE[30]).
'Eurovision You Decide' Afterparty	• In 2018, ESC fans could attend this afterparty after the conclusion of the UK's national final live broadcast of 'Eurovision You Decide' for their ESC entry hosted in Brighton, UK. • ESC Afterparties more broadly feature an ESC disco featuring ESC songs throughout history.
House parties	• Audiences and fans watch the contest with others in front of the television screen. • Parties can include arranging a European buffet of food and drink, dressing up as ESC contestants and scoring and ranking songs using a scoresheet. • These can also involve engaging with the contest in real-time by communicating through social media platforms (such as Facebook and Twitter).
Facebook	• A social media platform that enables users to create a profile, publish content about their social lives on a 'timeline' and connect with other 'friends'. • Incorporates other applications, such as: 'Facebook Messenger' that elicits private messaging with individual or

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[30] 'OGAE' stands for the 'Organisation Générale des Amateurs de l'Eurovision' the official ESC fan club, which consists of 42 international branches.

	multiple people, 'Groups' that are arranged around a given topic or interest such as ESC fan Facebook groups and are moderated by administrators and 'Pages' that users can follow to view updates on an event, such as the official ESC channel. • Users can post text, emojis, sharing video clips and photos and GIFs in order to engage with ESC fandom across Facebook's infrastructure.
Twitter	• A social media platform where users create a profile and publish content in the form of 'tweets' that are limited to 240 characters. • Users can engage with topics and events using 'hashtags', such as #eurovision, to increase their visibility • Users can post text, emojis, sharing video clips and photos and GIFs in order to engage with ESC fandom.
YouTube	• A video streaming service, where users can watch video clips, but also create and upload content around the ESC for others to watch, known as vlogging. • Published YouTube content can be shared across many other internet and social media platforms for increased engagement.
Tumblr	• A social media platform where users post content in the form of pictures and video clips. • Users can engage with a variety of content using hashtags.
Email lists	• ESC fans subscribe to an email list and send out and receive emails from other fans on that list. • This involves sending a message to a single email address, for which everyone on that mailing list will receive.
Podcasts	• A digital form of communication where ESC fans will discuss the contest in a spoken word format. • Once published online, they are then shared through social media platforms for maximum audience reach. • ESC related podcasts include 'ESC Insight' and 'Europhoria' which are produced all year round.

Table 4.1 highlights the digital and offline spaces that will be explored throughout my analysis. This mapping also includes the actual ESC event and its associated venue, and fans' digital practices – spaces which I analyse in further detail in section 4.5. Each different space can be characterised as a microsystem, that operates within a wider part of the digital ecosystem of ESC fandom. All these spaces interconnect and are shaped by and through technology, such as internet and social media platforms. These digital spaces are also linked with mobilities, as they are rather fluid and permeable which can shape dynamic fan and sexual identities. ESC fans move between digital spaces (internet and social media platforms, for example), but also between online and offline spaces to practice their fandom. Internet and social media platforms have different designs of software and sets of operations, rules and norms that play an integral part in shaping identity and facilitating fan engagement (Van Dijck, 2013). But, they all play a role in (re)producing and contesting fan and sexual identity in dynamic ways, issues which I will interrogate throughout these analysis chapters.

I will now consider a few examples to illustrate how the physical spaces in Table 4.1 are shaped by technology and how they shape fan and sexual identity. Social media platforms are used to share experiences and develop networks around attending ESC events which go beyond the actual events themselves, such as 'EuroClub' and the 'Eurovision You Decide afterparty' (see section 4.4). House parties (see Chapter Six section 6.5) are also linked with social media platforms; ESC fandom is practiced simultaneously with party guests and across social media networks in real-time (see Highfield et al., 2013). The 'ESC Press Centre' is one further physical, but digitally networked space that allows fans to get close to the event and undertake a 'journalistic' role by reporting on the different happenings of the event. In section 4.5, I conceptualise the ESC Press Centre in more detail and how it is a unique ESC fan space that is centred around ideas of 'work', which brings together the online/offline, fan and professional. Moreover, I provide evidence to suggest that emphases on the 'professional' limits the expression of LGBT identity within the ESC Press Centre.

Identities can also be reworked, reconfigured and manipulated when practicing ESC fandom online. ESC email lists (see section 4.4.) provide a sense of ambiguity, where socio-sexual networks are forged and sexual labels negotiated, which creates further divisions regarding the territorialisation of the ESC by gay people (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a). The social media platforms of Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr (see Chapter Five) allow fans to interact with different audiences. Twitter, for example, enables mass-self communication, but it also produces ESC fan spaces where fans delimit the 'outness' of their fan and sexual identity (Brown, 2005; O'Riordan, 2007; Castells, 2013, 2015). There are complex mobilities through which ESC fans practice their ESC fandom and establish connections and networks across the online/offline continuum. Thus, practicing ESC fandom blurs the distinctions between the online and offline.

How ESC fans want to be 'seen' by others on social media platforms also shapes how identity is reproduced and ESC fandom is practiced. Similarly, producing YouTube videos (see Chapter Five, section 5.3) and podcasts (see Chapter Six, section 6.4) enables fans to stretch the boundaries of expressing their fan and sexual identities. All these technologies produce semi-anonymity; fans engage with known, but also unknown fans and audiences which help to break down identity boundaries. I will revisit Table 4.1 throughout my analysis to delve deeper into the significance of these spaces in fan and sexual identity making.

From mapping the diverse set of microsystems that operate within the wider digital ecosystem of ESC fandom, the ESC is much more socially complicated and heterogenous than simply a 'gay event'. ESC fandom is practiced within a dynamic range of spaces that are digitally networked. These spaces provide many different expressions of fan and sexual identity, which I will explore within this thesis. I challenge existing theorisations which have argued that the ESC is a homogenous gay activity (Lemish, 2007; Singleton et al., 2007; Baker, 2017), and I emphasise that it is rather an interconnected network of socio-spatial and socio-sexual practices that is shaped by and in turn shapes the (re)production and expression

of fan and sexual identity. I will now turn to deconstructing the idea of the ESC as a homogenous 'gay event' and explore how ESC fans respond to, and forge associations with, the contest.

4.3   Contesting the ESC as a 'gay event'

In this section, I argue that ESC fans of different sexualities can resist and challenge ESC representations of gay identity that stereotype and normalise gay male behaviours and performances. I will examine how ESC fans construct their identities and forge associations in relation to the contest. I do this by exploring how ESC fans respond to some ESC media representations that normalise, inscribe meanings and shape LGBT identities. Academics have examined how the ESC advocates LGBT rights and issues through, for example, the victories of Dana International and Conchita Wurst (Lemish, 2007; Fricker, 2015). While those analyses identify the ESC as the source of positive representations of LGBT identity, I move beyond them to explore how the ESC challenges normative understandings of sexuality, but also how it can simultaneously reinforce such representations, behaviours and stereotypes. The decoding of such imagery takes on multiple meanings, which influences how ESC fans bring into being and shape their fan and sexual identities. I also discuss how ESC fans share and exchange images through Twitter by analysing firstly, how they encode and decode meanings within them, and secondly, how fans organise themselves around these images to produce transient networks both proximate and unfamiliar. I argue that these representations of the ESC (re)produce sexuality, its meanings and its practices, in surprising ways (Zebracki and Luger, 2019).

I would like to begin this analysis by considering the importance of the ESC for generating positive images of gay people internationally (Rehberg, 2007; Singleton et al., 2007; Carniel, 2015; Fricker, 2015; Baker, 2017). Dan highlights this issue below:

> It [the ESC] goes out to so many different countries [...] it allows sort of
> sexuality and expressions that people wouldn't normally see at all. There's

been a couple […] I think of people like Lithuania this year […] Krista Siegfrids in Finland 3 years ago […] I don't think in some places they would ever have seen gay people kissing on a stage.

Dan, age 18-25, gay male, British

Dan identifies the politicisation of the ESC in advocating and promoting gender and sexual diversity on an international stage. His discussion centres on the male-male, female-female and male-female kissing in the 2015 Lithuanian entry ('This Time' by Monika Linkytė and Vaidas Baumila[31]) and the 2013 Finnish entry ('Marry Me' by Krista Siegfrids[32]), which featured the lead singer Siegfrids kissing another woman on stage, with the aim of campaigning for same-sex marriage internationally. These national stage performances of LGBT identity and activism disrupt dominant heteronormativity and demonstrate a progressive Europeanness that is framed through tolerance and acceptance of LGBT people (Baker, 2017). These representations of queerness are not simply accepted but are contested by some. This opens up the various spaces of the ESC, as discussed in Table 4.1, as spaces in which sexual identity is produced, reproduced, and contested.

Social media platforms, such as Twitter, enable ESC fans to watch and comment on national ESC-related events, such as the Swedish national selection show *Melodifestivalen.* For international viewers, it is watched online through the 'SVT Play' streaming service and purchasing tickets online can allow fans to attend the show in person. This television program, like the ESC, functions as an outlet through which advocacy and legitimacy of LGBT people and rights is celebrated. *Melodifestivalen* is considered one of the most popular television programs in Sweden and is used as the national selection process in which the nation chooses its ESC artist and song annually. It is often celebrated in cities across Sweden which host street parties and events (Andersson and Niedomysl, 2010). *Melodifestivalen*

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[31] https://youtu.be/xtB_slM63JA (accessed 1/9/2020)
[32] https://youtu.be/dlBXOveVh7c (accessed 1/9/2020)

celebrates Swedish language and culture, but also gender and sexual diversity amid performances of extravagant campness.

ESC fans engage with *Melodifestivalen* by sharing and manipulating content from their broadcasts through social media platforms. Through these activities, ESC fans build associations with these representations and, in turn, they express their fan and sexual identities. This is emphasised in Figure 4.1 with a fan sharing a group of images and subtitles from the broadcast of *Melodifestivalen* that, through irony, represent the event as gender and sexually diverse. In this representation, the comic character Lynda Woodruff, an English-speaking woman from Essex living in Sweden, is parodied as the 'executive spokesperson of the EBU: The European Broadcasting Union'. In the captions in Figure 4.1 which were shared on Twitter, she speaks for and recognises the importance of LGBT people internationally.

Figure 4.1 Screenshots shared on Twitter of Lynda Woodruff advocating and normalising LGBT citizenry through *Melodifestivalen*

The captions in Figure 4.1 highlight the interrelationship between the ESC and *Melodifestivalen.* It does this by acknowledging and representing gender and sexuality within its program, which also permeates many representations of the ESC (Bohlman, 2007; Cassiday, 2014; Baker, 2017). These representations seem humorous in their intent, but the way they are represented normalises and (re)produces stereotypes of LGBT identities. It does this by using humorous metaphors to illustrate references towards fan and sexual identities, for example, Lynda refers to Austrian drag queen Conchita Wurst as 'Jesus' to identify Wurst's iconic status as a progressive European figure for LGBT human rights and tolerance (Fricker, 2015), and Lynda also describes the capital city Lisbon, Portugal (that hosted the 2018 ESC) as 'lesbians'. However, the top left image in Figure 4.1 caused hostility between fans on Twitter where Lynda wore a Trump-style red cap with the caption 'Make Eurovision great again' which also lead to the remark 'it's time to make Eurovision straight again!'. The reactions to this tweet caused hostility amongst some male ESC fans, which are shown below:

> @AMS: I get there's a cultural difference, but seeing a joke about making ESC straight again, using a modern day hate symbol that people wear when COMMITTING HATE CRIMES IN MY COUNTRY isn't a good look! It's the opposite thereof!! 9/3/2019
> @AMS: Like aside from the hat, it's already kind of a shitty joke that minimizes the contest's social capital with the queer community, but to add that? It's pretty fuckin shitty, bc [because] now this message is "we're getting rid of the queers from Eurovision!" and even as a joke, it's... eh 9/3/2019

The Swedish organisers identify the popularity of the event amongst LGBT people and focus their narratives towards these individuals. However, the symbolism of the Trump red cap here is intended to be subversive and @AMS interprets this representation as irreverent – as a symbol of hate and heteronormativity. Both the Swedish organisers and @AMS identify the social and cultural capital of the ESC and *Melodifestivalen* as central to LGBT culture. However, the inflection of heteronormative symbols (such as the Trump cap) are contradictory to the initial queerness of this representation and are not entirely positive. There is a feeling of

ambiguity within the *Melodifestivalen* representation in Figure 4.1 as it uses humour to be open about sexual difference linked to tolerance, but it is not always well received within LGBT communities. The dialogue of this Twitter thread develops further where fans discussed other ESC representations that attempted to normalise LGBT ESC fandom, such as comments that were made by Swedish host, Petra Mede, in 2013:

> @WGF: Especially after treating Dana Int's [International] significance as a trans woman pretty well this was just kinda like Oh 9/3/2019
> @WGF: Same when Petra said "you'll all get girlfriends soon enough" in 2013, it just feels a bit flattening rather than humorous 9/3/2019
> @AMS: YEAH that always felt kinda... off to me, but it implies the "it's just a phase" argument and just ugh its very clear straight people wrote this shit lol 9/3/2019

In these tweets, these fans challenge the representation of gay male stereotypes that are expressed by Swedish host Petra Mede at the contest in 2013. During the show, she exclaims 'you'll all get girlfriends soon enough' to an assumed gay male audience in the Malmö arena and to audiences watching via the television screen. However, other phrases that Mede expressed in her script were received more positively by other fans. Adam (below) begins by quoting from Mede's script during the 2013 interval act 'Swedish Smorgasbord' that demonstrated Sweden's legalisation of same-sex marriage, and then continues to recount from one further script of Mede's during the 'Eurovision Greatest Hits' event that was broadcast in 2016 to celebrate 60 years of the contest:

> Whereas 'you can now kiss the groom' during that thing was just, that needed to be said when was it the Eurovision Greatest Hits, that was a more relaxed night that could be funnier. But when it was saying about 'oh, you truly are a homo… Eurovision fan'. That was funny, and it was done with a real humour…

> **Adam, aged 26-35, gay male, British**

The quotes above demonstrate different interpretations of Mede's scripts that seek to acknowledge the popularity of the event for gay people. Within both quotes, there is an emphasis on gay men and a lack of acknowledgement of other

individuals who identify as LGBT. Mede's comments, such as "You can now kiss the groom" represents coming out of the closet on an international stage and legal acceptance of gay people in Sweden, but also advocating for same-sex marriage internationally. 'Oh, you truly are a homo… Eurovision fan' represents associations between being a gay man and ESC fan. This suggests that Mede's comments are expressed through a queer subtext; they can be used to represent gay people, who will know and understand their meanings, and to attract international heteronormative audiences and societies who are 'unknowing' about the wider appeal of the event within LGBT culture. By doing so, this language can be contradictory and be used as a tool to attract international audiences of a divergent range of genders and sexualities to the competition (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004).

However, Mede's comments can spark hostility, which is demonstrated in the tweets above. There is a consensus here that Mede's comments do not represent LGBT people particularly well or sensitively. The fans above who criticise her do understand about discrimination and are not happy with how she is representing it, which informs Mede's (but also her scriptwriters) lack of cultural knowledge about LGBT culture (Miller, 1993). These tweets in response to Mede's commentary demonstrate that although the ESC is widely represented and thought of as an event celebrating LGBT identity, the visibility of that remains contested. Twitter can often be represented as a disorderly and unpredictable social media platform (Zebracki and Luger, 2019). Yet, within the ESC fandom context, this can facilitate networks both proximate and unfamiliar and socially organise ESC fans through the manipulation of ESC media representations of LGBT identity. These issues I discuss in more detail in Chapter Five, sections 5.3-5.4.

ESC representations of gay identity also cause internal conflicts of identity for fans, as it makes them question how they should behave in terms of their gender or sexual orientation. Identity formation occurs across a range of ESC fan spaces introduced in Table 4.1, but also in others, such as work and in everyday life. This

is underlined by Alec below, who explains how representations of gay identity within the contest are reinforced in conversations with his work colleagues:

> I think there's a slight concern that the ball keeps on rolling and it's [gay identity] mentioned consistently. I think we could end up the opposite way in making Eurovision maybe feel a bit uncomfortable for people aren't gay and watching it […] But sometimes that could be detrimental to others, and their experience of it [the ESC] and also how it's projected. People have said to me at work they've said 'oh it's like a gay party isn't it?' so it kind of is, it's like Canal Street in Manchester. And there's always debate now that straight's come down to Canal Street, yeah but it's not exclusively its very, very friendly and shouldn't be exclusively for…

Alec, aged 26-35, gay male, British

Alec suggests that the consistent references to gay people within representations of the ESC can limit the popularity of the event for these individuals and potentially put other, non-gay people off. There is resistance from Alec about increasing gay visibility within the contest through these representations (Singleton et al., 2007). Gay fans, like Alec, forge connections with the contest in dynamic ways. For example, Alec hints at the multidimensional social and cultural elements that are part of the ESC fan experience, which facilitate belonging to an ESC fan and gay community. This is possible as attending the contest and engaging in ESC fandom has, to use Alec's word, an atmosphere of 'friendliness' that is inclusive of gender and sexual identities, that are accepted, rejected and broken down. Hence, the ESC is visibly and invisibly gay at the same time (Brown, 2005) as it can break down, normalise, and stereotype gay identity and behaviour.

Where Alec is illustrative of the perception of the ESC as a 'gay party', T (nickname), also discusses the popularity of the event for gay people. However, he explains how watching the contest and participating in ESC fandom causes internal conflicts for his bisexuality, as a result of queer subtexts and metaphors that he feels are targeted towards a gay male demographic:

> I think there are a larger number of gay fans in certain countries than others. Obviously, I can't say for 100% but in the UK definitely. Even the show in the terms of the national finals and 'Eurovision Greatest Hits',

> Graham Norton was saying 'you've all left your wives at home' and then Petra, the other year was like 'look at all these beautiful young men in the audience' and that's kind of, you know, they've picked up on that and I'm like, ahh really? [...] I don't personally see... the connection is there, it would be very silly of me to deny that a majority of the fans are gay. But, I don't see why it needs to be labelled as an event for gay people, it's an event for everyone. I don't see why the association is needed.

T, age 26, bisexual male, English

T explains the normalisation of gay identities within representations of the ESC which he contests; he emphasises how these representations focus on gay identity and are not representative of his bisexuality. T also highlights the language within the host's scripts, such as 'you've all left your wives at home' and the emphasis on 'beautiful young men' within the ESC audience, which he explains are used to stereotype ESC audiences as gay male dominant. T expresses his awareness of power structures that privilege gay identity and 'shut down' alternative sexualities, such as his bisexuality (Brown et al., 2011). Where these quotes from Norton and Mede are ambiguous in terms of sexual identification, T decodes them as intrinsically 'gay'. These representations of queerness make sexuality more ambiguous, but they also reinforce them, particularly where ESC fans such as T believe they neglect other sexual orientations, such as his bisexuality. I will now turn to exploring how ESC fans practice their sexualities within a range of ESC fan spaces and events.

4.4 Sexual networking and visibility in ESC fan spaces

This section argues how practicing ESC fandom can provide an ambiguous platform for the performance of sexuality. In order to do so, it analyses different ESC fan spaces that I identified in Table 4.1, such as EuroClub, the Eurovision You Decide afterparty in 2018 and practicing ESC fandom online. I contend that the boundaries of sexual identification categories become blurred when participating within these spaces, and I explore how ESC fans network and connect with each other, which can be shaped through the blurring of the online/offline dichotomy.

From their attendance at and experience of ESC events, gay men discussed the queerness of these events, how these events were more ambiguous in terms of expressing their sexuality, and how they produced feelings of community and belonging. Dan and Dimi explain these points below:

> …Eurovision is this platform to express yourself. Of the people I've met at Eurovision […] probably about 90% of the people you meet are going to be gay men at Eurovision. It's harder saying why, but Eurovision has this connection, the whole LGBT community. I think it is, because it feels really open, it's quite accepting, quite laid back. To a lot of LGBT people, that's the environment that is easier to fit in to.

> **Dan, age 18-25, Gay male, British**

> Maybe it's just my assumption, but I always have the feeling and still now when I got into Central London and I go into a gay bar, club or other gay event. I always feel I'm being watched and… people make an impression on me on the way that I look and the way that I behave and come across in that very first moment. I don't necessarily have that feeling at Eurovision because Eurovision people welcome you and embrace you because you like Eurovision. And it doesn't really matter what you look like or what kind of top you're wearing or the label. Like the normal LGBT events I kind of get that feeling very much.

> **Dimi, aged 26-35, Gay male, Belgian**

The ESC is an important platform for the expression of gay male identities. From his experiences of attending the event, Dan explains it is 'quite accepting' and 'laid back'. This suggests inclusivity of gender and sexual identities that allows ESC fans to express a more ambiguous gender and/or sexual identity. Dan's experiences highlight the queerness of ESC fandom that is not bounded by gender and sexual identity categories. From Dimi's experiences, he compares attending the ESC to attending Central London gay consumption spaces. He highlights that while attending Central London gay consumption spaces, he feels judged based on his appearance and behaviour; his experiences of being a gay man are shaped by how he navigates and negotiates difference in these spaces (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004).

In contrast, the ESC provides opportunities to meet and connect with people who enjoy and engage with the contest and to escape the stigmas and male gazes that

are often associated with gay culture. The ambiguity and celebration of queerness within the contest makes this possible. However, Dimi's position as a blogger for the fan website 'ESCKAZ' also shapes these responses. His fan blogging and writing practices are constitutive of fan 'work', which determines the connections and bonds he is likely to make while attending the contest (Baym and Burnett, 2009; Bakioğlu, 2018). For example, Dimi is not necessarily seeking love and sex while attending the contest, but it does provide nascent opportunities for gay people to participate in social and cultural experiences, where identity markers such as sexuality can be broken down. Identity markers, however, are also reinforced as 'working' on behalf of 'ESCKAZ' in the exclusive backstage area of the ESC Press Centre can produce a relational geography between fans and fan journalists. I examine these issues in closer detail in section 4.5.

Sexuality can also be reconfigured through the blurring of boundaries between the online/offline. ESC fans will often share their experiences in attending ESC-related events through social media platforms, which provide a further way through which they create fan networks regarding these events. The 'EuroClub' event is an ESC-themed club night which is organised annually in each ESC host city for ESC musicians, delegates and accredited journalists and fans and official ESC fan club members (members of OGAE), which can only be accessed through holding accreditation. Another ESC-related event and afterparty took place immediately following the 'Eurovision You Decide' UK national song selection show at Brighton LGBT venue Bar Broadway in February 2018 (Barlow, 2020). Both these events are dependent on the internet for their accessibility, and knowing about their existence requires surfing ESC websites, ESC fan Facebook groups, Twitter posts, and email lists. The experiences and observations of these two events are discussed in the following Twitter conversation thread, beginning with @MAR reciting the lyrics to one of Denmark's ESC song candidates in 2018:

> @MAR: "When the lights go down All I see is boys on girls and girls on boys girls on girls and boys on boys" Yep sounds like the #Euroclub to me! #dmgp2018 #eurovision #dmgp 11/3/2018

@EMG: You should've seen the You Decide afterparty. That was definitely more boys on boys and boys on boys and boys on boys and boys on boys tbh 🙌😂 12/3/2018

@MAR: AND THAT'S THE WAY IT SHOULD BE!! #EurovisionPride In honesty though I have never been so disinterested in a #ESC themed club night that I have paid attention to another male around me in that way. #KeyChangesNotNumberExchanges 13/3/2018

The tweets above demonstrate how ESC fandom is fluid and permeable between Twitter and ESC fan events – mobilities which I highlighted in section 4.2. Twitter allows these fans to share their experiences of ESC fan events, which in turn shapes a digital mediation of sexuality (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011). Both tweets above suggest different readings and observations of sexual relationships and intimacies at two different ESC-themed club nights. Both events provide alternative levels of fan, gender and sexual visibility, which are embodied through ESC fan knowledge. For example, the lyrics of a Danish song candidate can be decoded as queer and mapped onto the experiences of these two different ESC-themed club nights. The EuroClub [33] venue is limited in its accessibility to accredited persons and is exclusive, but the Eurovision You Decide afterparty in Brighton did not impose such barriers (except for capacity reasons). These venues produce fan hierarchies in different ways – the EuroClub which is only accessible by possessing an accreditation badge – by 'othering' ESC fans who do not have access.

ESC fans also emphasised how they negotiated their fan and sexual identities within ESC event spaces. This was the case for ESC fans who were 'working' and attending the ESC on behalf of a media organisation. Adam discusses this point, who recounts his experience of attending the ESC on behalf of a media outlet. He identifies how his sexuality is negotiated and reconfigured when attending the ESC

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[33] The EuroClub in Vienna gave priority to accredited persons but allowed some ESC fans entry who did not have accreditation, but were required to queue to gain access, as it was often full to capacity.

Press Centre and EuroClub, where his 'work' identity was more central to his ESC attendance and his sexual desires are more peripheral:

> You do feel more a part of the gay community when you're at a Eurovision event, or discussing Eurovision or anything like that. Especially when being in the EuroClub for example, when people were coming over who were working in the press that might have brought their partner or someone they work with. So, there's always an element of a gay man connected, but there would be other people there. But I would never think first 'oh, is this person their husband? Or is this person gay, or is this girl they've come with straight, lesbian or bisexual' or anything.

Adam, aged 26-35, gay male, British

Attending the ESC can produce ambiguous expression of gay identity, that can be disrupted, reworked and broken down while holding a position that involves working for a media outlet. Adam feels that he belongs more to the 'gay community' when attending the ESC and participating in its related events. Listening and dancing to ESC music and developing knowledge surrounding ESC culture can provide alternative places where gay male fans can express their sexualities. These practices can produce an imagined belonging and inclusivity with the gay community, without it being exclusively bounded by gay cultural identification labels (Casey, 2004; Ghaziani, 2011). Gay identity labels can be camouflaged at EuroClub, while also providing greater attachment to wider gay communities (Brown, 2006).

Moreover, the EuroClub reproduces fan hierarchies and power relations regarding gay identity and space. Access is primarily given to those who possess an accreditation badge to the ESC Press Centre (which in turn grants access to EuroClub) – those who 'work' for IFCOs or have obtained their accreditation through the official international OGAE fan clubs. Even though this space is less fluid and permeable in terms of who can access it, fans with accreditation are able to travel more freely between EuroClub and the ESC Press Centre (see section 4.5). The limited accessibility to EuroClub can be exlusive by determining who can use and consume this space (Binnie and Skeggs, 2004). These barriers also shape how

Adam presents himself as a gay male ESC fan in EuroClub. He is still representing his media outlet inside the venue, which suggests that this attachment influences how he may not seek sexual relations in this space (similar to Dimi earlier) and how he does not label people's sexualities.

Where gay male identity is often perceived as the 'norm' within ESC fandom, fans explained how the contest allows gay fans to escape the boundaries of gay identity, while practicing ESC fandom online. Email lists, which I conceptualised in section 4.2 and Table 4.1, are one further way through which gay fans network with other fans and connect with the contest. In the conversation below in the '1944' WhatsApp group chat, Adrian reflects on his discussions with gay men in an email list. He explains their rejection of gay identity labels:

'1944' WhatsApp Group Chat

> 24/02/2018, 09:26 – Adrian: I think it's a fun event which a lot of gay people attend and are interested in. I don't think it is a gay event as there are many straight people who attend, enjoy and love Eurovision just as much. I see it as very inclusive, much more so than most things.
> 24/02/2018, 14:03 – Jamie: Do you think it could be divisive as well?
> 24/02/2018, 14:06 – Adrian: Well, I was on a mailing list years ago that was divided by some people who hated the idea of the contest being gay. But scratch into the surface of that and what they didn't like was them being considered or "tainted" with 'gay'.

Similar to other quotes earlier, Adrian's discussion above reaffirms the view that gay identity can be contested within ESC fandom. This example suggests that fandom is more central and gay identity is more peripheral within this email list. Adrian also believes the contest is an all-inclusive event than other 'things', as some fans on the email list he participated in disliked being considered 'gay', which suggests internalised homophobia and gay shame (Munt, 2007; Bonner-Thompson, 2017). Gay identities are negotiated within this email list, but there is also contestation between the contest's association with gay people. However, the data also revealed that practicing ESC fandom online can enable fans to

network with other like-minded fans who are confused about their sexuality. Lister explains this below:

> Up until about a year ago, aside from admiring men from afar I have been completely straight. Entering the fan community at first was slightly daunting to be honest because of this, as a huge majority of Eurovision fans are gay or bisexual I believe there is an assumption that if you like Eurovision in the way I like it then you must be gay. So, entering this world, I was quite shy as I always felt a need to try and find a way to explain to people I speak to, that I am straight. However, since I've started becoming more and more confused with my sexuality, the Eurovision fan community have absolutely been so supportive of my situation. Mostly because there is a large amount of people in similar situations to me that we can all relate to each other.

Lister, 21, bisexual male, British

Lister discusses that practicing ESC fandom assumes a gay identity. Earlier in our interview, he framed the 'ESC fan community' as interactions and relationships that he has forged within ESC fan networks through social media platforms on a personal level. Lister's fan experiences have enabled him to explore alternative sexual desires by developing personal fan connections and close, but also unfamiliar bonds, which shapes his ideas of an 'ESC fan community' (Weiner and Young, 2011). These social practices of conviviality and networking help to shape his bisexual identity and fan experiences. The deeply personal connections that Lister makes within social media ESC fan spaces influences who he comes out to in expressing his sexual orientation. Developing these connections through practicing ESC fandom on social media platforms facilitates sexual and fan belonging and provides safe spaces to express bisexuality (Maliepaard, 2015, 2018). Social media spaces, such as Twitter, encourage fans to connect with unknown others on the platform to share deeply personal aspects of their lives, including coming out about their sexual orientation and ESC fandom. I will now turn to one particular ESC fan space, the ESC Press Centre in shaping and making visible fan, gender and sexual identities within an exclusive backstage area, where access can only be granted via the internet.

4.5   Blurring online/offline distinctions within The ESC Press Centre

This section builds on section 4.2 and Table 4.1 by focusing on one unique ESC fan space, the ESC Press Centre at the ESC in Vienna in 2015. It is different to other ESC fan spaces, in the sense that it is a hybrid, digitally networked and physical space that brings together the online/offline and the fan and the professional. It is also a 'work' space that blurs fan and professional distinctions. The ESC Press Centre is an exclusive environment where ESC fans who participate in international fan community organisations (IFCOs) report on the contest through internet-enabled devices. Fans are required to apply for accreditation to access the ESC Press Centre which requires filling in an online application form on the official ESC website. Fans must be affiliated with an IFCO[34] to be granted 'press accreditation', but a select number of fans can be granted 'fan accreditation'. Online and offline ESC fan activities blur, converge and work together within the ESC Press Centre, as it prompts fan networking between fans who are involved with IFCOs, and their audiences through internet-enabled objects (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008; Jenkins, 2014).

In this section, I argue that the ESC Press Centre can be theorised as a code/space as the fan activities that take place within it are produced through and by the digital. Attending and reporting on the ESC in the Press Centre is dependent on access to the internet; they cannot exist without each other (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011). Within this space, ESC fans produce their own media content which is then, for example, shared through their IFCO websites and social media accounts. Consequently, fans can disassociate themselves with other ESC fans attending the contest and produce ESC content that is grounded by fan knowledge, in comparison to mass media organisations (Williams, 2011). These digital processes transform the ESC fandom experience which contribute to the formation of fan hierarchies and the collapsing and reinforcing of ESC fan and ESC fan 'work'

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[34] IFCOs incorporate many different media activities, such as writing for fan websites, blogs and producing podcasts.

identities. I examine the multiple ways ESC fans practice their fandom within, around and outside of the ESC Press Centre and how their participation in this space helps reconfigure their fan identities and their respective spatial practices. I argue towards the end of this section how the professional expectations of ESC fans place limits on the expression of LGBT identity.

I start this section by exploring how fan identities can be constructed as ambiguous while attending the ESC Press Centre on behalf of fan websites. The ESC Press Centre transforms the meanings of what it is to be a fan, as IFCO practices and processes distribute fan ownership, but they can also produce fan hierarchies. Melissa highlights this point by explaining how her position as a member of the San Marino delegation in 2014 gave her privileged access to content surrounding the nation's chosen artist that year, Valentina Monetta, which she then shared on social media:

> As I delegate, I could do a lot more. Post photos that no one else would ever see; the official press team of that artist don't allow you to see normally stuff that goes on backstage. Stuff like what the delegates get to eat and drink… you know, don't people want to know what Valentina Monetta does like drinks before she goes and sings on stage, she doesn't have a tea or a coffee, no. No, she has like tea with ginger and honey, good for the voice. Something that has ice in it apparently is not good for the voice, and I would not have known that if it weren't for her. Stuff that people don't normally see as press, obviously I used to work as press we used to control what went out in the public as well.

Melissa, age 26-35, straight female, Australian

Melissa distinguishes her position from the mainstream fan other while holding a position on the San Marino delegation, as her role involves 'working' by posting images online of Monetta and how she knows what 'delegates get to eat and drink'. She has privileged access to content surrounding Valentina Monetta that is unique, such as what she drinks before going on stage. During her time on the San Marino delegation, she held a delegation accreditation level 'D5' – the lowest delegation accreditation pass. 'D' level accreditations are reserved for individuals who work on behalf of a country's delegation, such as artists, songwriters, music

producers, and marketers. However, during our interview and her time attending the ESC Press Centre in Vienna in 2015, she held an accreditation level 'F', which is reserved for fans and is below a 'D5' accreditation. These distinctions produce a clear hierarchy where ESC fans are placed towards the bottom.

However, Melissa was still allowed to access similar ESC fan spaces around the event, such as the presswork area, press conference room, access to watch rehearsals live in the arena, and the EuroClub. Therefore, she was still able to contribute to her IFCO's activities during her time at the ESC. When she held a 'D' accreditation, Melissa was able to bypass the artist's official press team to bring news exclusives to the wider ESC fan community. This fan knowledge circulates amongst the official press team in face-to-face encounters, but in order to generate a following and networking around this knowledge, photos of Monetta must be posted online.

Participating within the ESC Press Centre assists in reworking a fan identity, by distinguishing it from work-based practices. These are shaped by the socio-digital coding of ESC-related content, such as posting images online (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a). These activities are fundamental in developing a fan identity that is centred around ideas of working for delegations and IFCO's. These issues are highlighted by Wiv and Dimi below, who discuss how the internet collapses the distinctions between ESC fan and work identities:

> So, yeah, I mean that's [the internet] where I keep in touch with all my journalist friends, fan friends from everywhere. And of course, running a website, I'm online all the time. I check emails, inboxes, message walls, news groups… whatever constantly. And of course, that's where I do my Eurovision work; the writing and interviews and everything.

> **Wiv, age 36-45, straight female, Norwegian**

> I follow it [the ESC] as a fan mostly throughout the years, but my real Eurovision connection starts when I join ESCKAZ.com and then I'm blogging,

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reporting, following the rehearsals, Twittering, doing Instagram…really in those two weeks at the venue that's when really my role comes in.

Dimi, age 26-35, gay male, Belgian

Wiv identifies the importance of the digital in her fan practices which have become embedded within her everyday life. Dimi highlights how, through his role with the IFCO ESCKAZ, he can produce a greater sense of bonding with the contest, albeit temporarily during his attendance at the contest (Weiner and Young, 2011). This is enhanced further as he actively shares his experiences from within the ESC Press Centre with other fans online, which assists in foregrounding his fan identity and its materiality. For these fans, there are expectations to be digitally savvy and have the ability to undertake multiple tasks, such as searching for ESC-related information from different digital sources and to write-up articles. Accessing multiple websites, online platforms and contacting journalist and fan friends to seek ESC information is central to participating in an IFCO. The ESC Press Centre is open for the two weeks leading up to the ESC grand final and IFCO practices go beyond this space and take place through the digital sphere in everyday life.

Even though the ESC Press Centre is a physically barred space that requires accreditation to enter, the distinctions of 'work' that Wiv, and the 'role' that Dimi both refer to above also move with them. As these fans travel between different spaces to practice their fandom, the distinctions between everyday fandom and their IFCO practices are negotiated (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008; Jenkins, 2014). As a consequence of having access to the internet, these fans undertake their IFCO practices within and beyond the ESC fan space of the ESC Press Centre – they can be practiced anywhere. This reaffirms the points made in section 4.2 earlier that ESC fan spaces are inter-connected between the online/offline continuum, but they are also fluid, permeable spaces as fans also move between these spaces.

4.5.1   *Conflicting fan, gender and sexual identities in the ESC Press Centre*

As there is a stronger emphasis on 'work' within this space, ESC fans explained how this has caused friction between their fan, gender, sexual and professional

identities. Consequently, this internal division has shaped their activities and behaviours within the ESC Press Centre. These issues are outlined by Wiv below, who stresses how her experiences and activities inside the ESC Press Centre were determined for her by her fan audiences:

> I was much more of a fan earlier, I was more into following the singers… for instance I've completely stopped taking pictures with the artist[s] because I mean 'what do I want to do that for?' I do the interviews, I take a picture of the artist to post on our site and of course sometimes someone who reads my stuff will say 'oh can't you get a picture with this or this artist?' and I was like 'okay, sure'.
> […]
> I think my main fan year was Dusseldorf I think; that's when we [Wiv and her friends] sort of hunted down the artist to try to get pictures of all of them and now I just wanna talk to the ones I find interesting! So yeah, that's kind of interesting I've never thought of that before. My coverage and work here has changed a lot and the first couple of years I was also very eager to write reports from the delegation party and post pictures of me with artists everywhere and now I don't. I probably have turned into more of a journalist than a fan actually.

Wiv, age 36-45, straight female, Norwegian

Wiv emphasises the friction between her fan and fan journalist identity and how her professional activities are shaped by her fan audiences. This is shown by her being asked to take a photo with an artist in the ESC Press Centre, from an online audience request, and then sharing it on the ESCXTRA website. Such tensions between a fan and journalist identity are similar to that of my own experiences that I underlined in Chapter Three section 3.7, where I discussed the conflict between my academic and fan lives and how my fandom has become my research. This builds on analyses in Chapter Three as the distinctions between 'academic' and 'fan', and between 'fan' and 'journalist' are muddled and conflated when practicing them online. Digital practices (such as taking photos with ESC artists and sharing experiences in attending delegation parties) cut across both these positions which produces such ambivalences surrounding fan identity.

Online platforms and their audiences shape the socio-spatial practices of IFCOs, which in turn influences the content they create; the digital and the ESC Press

Centre inter-relate and work together to publish media content that bypasses mass media organisations (Jenkins, 2014). Where IFCO practices influence fan networking online, hierarchies are formed between Wiv and her fan audience, because of her IFCO role and proximity to the contest inside the ESC Press Centre. However, the expectations of these ESC fans place work onto Wiv which she does not necessarily want to do and reproduces ideas surrounding identity and its embodiment online (boyd, 2014; Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a). This emphasis on the professional role can challenge and impact on some fans identities and shape how they practice their fandom.

ESC fans also raised awareness of the existing power structures that prevail inside the Press Centre in terms of how they perform their gendered and sexual identity, shutting down innovative alternatives (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995; Brown, 2005). These imaginations and conceptualisations of the ESC Press Centre as a place of 'work' shape the ways that gender and sexuality is performed and negotiated. The ESC Press Centre can privilege particular expressions of gay identity, facilitate imagined belonging to wider gay communities and limit other non-gender-conforming identity expressions (Oswin, 2008; Ghaziani, 2011). This is demonstrated in the following quote by Adam, who was granted access to the ESC's Press Centre in Vienna in 2015 to report on the contest for a media outlet. He explains his decision not to dress up in the Wiener Stadthalle arena in Vienna, because he was attending the press conference in the ESC Press Centre after the live broadcast.

> I'd be really tempted [to dress up] cos I thought this is gonna be one of the last few years that I could dress up as Conchita again and be socially relevant. But, I thought against it because I was gonna be in the press centre and I thought 'oh, you're going to the press centre by yourself, it's your first year…' you don't really want to go to the arena and be dressed as Conchita and have a whale of a time and then have to go the press conference and be like 'yeah… I'm sitting here in a dress and a beard'.
>
> **Adam, aged 26-35, gay male, British**

Adam suggests how fan identities are negotiated spatially between the working environment of the ESC Press Centre, and being in the audience inside the Wiener Stadthalle Arena. He believes that the ESC Press Centre marginalises performances of drag identities, which provokes dragphobia, thus limiting expressions of queerness and privilege other socially acceptable, gender-conforming expressions of gay identity (Wright, 2010). This concern is also raised by Melissa who explains how attending the ESC encourages fans to be freely expressive, but identifies the limitations of identity expression within the ESC Press Centre:

> Something that I still love about it [attending the ESC], it allows you to be free and flamboyant and to not worry about what people think of you, even though here in the Press [Centre] it can be quite scathing.

Melissa, age 26-35, heterosexual female, Australian

Both these quotes above challenge earlier narratives of the gay male dominance of ESC fan spaces. While the ESC has been celebrated as a global event that advocates LGBT rights and asserts their existence, that embraces the 'extraordinary', the experiences above signal limitations to the queerness of the ESC Press Centre (Rehberg, 2007; Singleton et al., 2007; Baker, 2017). LGBT-identifying fans have been able to associate themselves with the contest in ways they otherwise could not. For example, gay men in Israel associated themselves with the win of Israeli transgender musician Dana International in 1998, as she was seen to represent LGBT people and advocate for their rights in the country and also globally (Lemish, 2007). Given these progressions in identity expression, the ESC Press Centre shapes how gender and sexual identities are brought into being. These quotes suggest that there are assumptions that ESC fans have to behave and conform in particular ways because of the convergence between ESC fans and media organisations who occupy the ESC Press Centre space. These assumptions that have been made by these fans may be as a result of the fear of the withdrawal of accreditation. The EBU has the right to remove accreditation from anyone if they behave inappropriately, or affect other people's working capabilities (EBU, 2016b). Moreover, the EBU determines which IFCOs are granted access to the

Press Centre, which is determined by statistical factors such as the number of visitors to fan websites.

The convergence between these media organisations in the ESC Press Centre and the privileging of fans in this way contributes to ideas around shame and the closet. For Adam, dressing up as Conchita is considered a fan practice and dressing up in drag does not conform to the Press Centre's 'work' environment. Where some fans can successfully come out about their ESC fandom, the ESC Press Centre imposes shame on such 'flamboyant' or drag performances. Consequently, this policing of behaviour imposes the closet on fans, which stimulates the regulation of gendered performances of identity and how fans come out about their fandom within the ESC Press Centre.

4.6   Conclusion

In this chapter, I have emphasised that the ESC, and its fandom is much more socially complicated and heterogenous than a homogenous 'gay event', which has been reinforced in some academic literature (Rehberg, 2007; Singleton et al., 2007; Carniel, 2015; Fricker, 2015; Baker, 2017) and the data has revealed that this still remains the case. In this chapter, I therefore develop academic understandings of the ESC by claiming that ESC fandom is not simply practiced in one space, but across a variety of different spaces, physical and digital, which move beyond the actual event itself. I have conceptualised ESC fandom as a digital ecosystem as ESC fandom is interconnected between the internet, social media platforms, and offline spaces (Van Dijck, 2013). As ESC fandom is not limited in its spatiality, fans can make themselves visible and engage themselves in networking and convivial-making practices across a variety of spaces. Thus, ESC fan spaces are not simply fixed (with the exception of the ESC Press Centre and EuroClub which require accreditation to gain access), but they are fluid and permeable as a consequence of access to the internet – ESC fandom can be accessed anywhere through internet-enabled objects.

As there is such a diverse range of spaces in which to practice ESC fandom, fans express their fan and sexual identities in dynamic ways. Fans distribute their fandom across these spaces and hierarchies, and LGBT identities are also distributed across them. ESC fans explained the importance of the ESC and its fandom as a more open arena in which to practice ambiguous sexualities, where fans come in and network with others of divergent genders and sexual orientations. ESC fans also expressed their resistance to ESC representations that reproduce stereotypes of LGBT people. This includes, for example, the ESC host's scripts that often use queer subtexts to acknowledge the popularity of the ESC with gay people, without labelling them explicitly (Sedgwick, 1990; Brown, 2005). Consequently, LGBT fans can be challenged, mocked, closeted, come out, have internal divisions and display a heterogeneity.

One space which I have also examined in this chapter is the hybrid, digitally networked, yet physical space of the ESC Press Centre. This is one further space through which sexual identity within ESC fandom becomes heterogenous and sets limits to actual practices of queerness (Lemish, 2007; Rehberg, 2007; Singleton et al., 2007; Baker, 2017). The ESC Press Centre brings together the online/offline and the fan and professional. Here, these distinctions are blurred and cause internal conflicts of identity. Even the ways sexuality is expressed within this space is also shaped by affiliations with IFCO's and the professional expectations and requirements of work. Consequently, these professional expectations that are seen to be imposed within the ESC Press Centre cause tensions, and hence regulation of, gendered and sexual performances of identity. In this chapter, I have dealt with a variety of different ESC fan spaces that form the digital ecosystem of ESC fandom. In Chapter Five, I analyse the interlinked digital spaces of two social media platforms – Facebook and Twitter. I explore here how they are technologically distinct in terms of how they make in/visible fan and sexual identities.

Chapter Five: 'Click me with your mouse'! (or tap me with your finger): Performing sexuality through Facebook and Twitter Eurovision fan practices

'Click me with your mouse'[35] is a song lyric that featured in San Marino's 2012 ESC entry 'The Social Network Song (Oh Oh-Uh-Oh Oh)' performed by Valentina Monetta. The song refers to many different digital practices, such as cybersex, the use of smartphones for daily socialisation, and issues around the augmentation and manipulation of body images online. Source: Mahia (2013)

5.1 'You're logging in…': Introduction

This chapter will address the aim of this research and objective two, which is to critically analyse the multiple ways ESC fans practice their fandom across two social media platforms, Facebook and Twitter. This chapter builds upon the analysis in Chapter Four, section 4.2, where I conceptualised ESC fandom as a digital ecosystem by exploring how Facebook and Twitter are further interlinked spaces within that ecosystem where identity is reproduced (Van Dijck, 2013). ESC fans involve themselves with strategic coding processes and negotiation of their fan and sexual identities between Facebook and Twitter. I argue that these social media platforms produce different and complex constructions of fan in/visibility (Van Dijck, 2013). Practicing ESC fandom online shapes intimate and extimate (close, but also unfamiliar) and semi-anonymous socio-sexual connections that can break down and reinforce sexual identification categories (Weiner and Young, 2011). The immediate accessibility of Facebook and Twitter through digital

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[35] 'The social network song (Oh oh – uh – oh oh)' by Valentina Monetta https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqwBh9hq9PE accessed 27/12/2020.

screens and internet-enabled devices shapes how ESC fans want to be, or not be seen online (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011). Digital objects, such as smartphones, provide access to dynamic communication tools, such as text, hashtags, images, and GIFs that contribute to processes of impression management that bring fan and sexual identity into being (Sandover et al., 2018). By using these communicative tools, ESC fans can re-invent and create hybrid fan and sexual identities that challenge dominant heteronormative constructions of digital code/space (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a; Cockayne et al., 2017; Elwood and Leszczynski, 2018).

This chapter will approach ESC fandom as a socio-digital-sexual arena in order to contribute to knowledge about the production of online LGBT spaces. Geographers have argued that the omnipresence of smartphone technologies have transformed the ways that LGBT individuals participate in sexual practices, desires, and chat (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Miles, 2017, 2018). That work focused on the role of the same-sex hook-up application Grindr that facilitates socio-sexual networking based on GPS location. Hooking-up through a smartphone device can empower users to manipulate their sexual identities, as it removes face-to-face barriers. These analyses have also explored issues of trolling[36] and harassment that take place within the app. I move beyond these analyses in this chapter by examining Facebook and Twitter ESC fan practices in relation to debates surrounding queer code/space.

The term queer code/space is used in two ways: firstly, to show how socio-sexual digital practices can challenge social norms and mainstream culture, and secondly, to challenge the heteronormative dominance of digital coding practices (Dowson, 2000; Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a; Elwood and Leszczynski, 2018). I apply the concept of queer code/space to examine how sexualities are shaped through Facebook and Twitter-expressed ESC fandom. Through a critical analysis of socio-

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[36] There are many conflicting definitions of trolling, but here I use it to describe deliberate antagonistic practices made towards online audiences, which are used to cause harm and/or emotional distress (Phillips and Milner, 2017).

sexual digital codes, I examine how everyday heteronormative social media interactions can be disrupted, reworked, and transgressed through everyday Facebook and Twitter ESC fan practices. I study the ways that these public social media platforms, through their respective software and design, shape the performance of sexuality through the communicative tools available to fans, such as images, GIFs, videos, and tweets.

This chapter is structured as follows. In section 5.2, I begin the analysis by describing Facebook and Twitter. I then take these social media platforms in turn and analyse how they both reproduce identity and how they are used to practice ESC fandom. In section 5.3, I examine the role of Facebook spaces as sites for practicing ESC fandom. I discuss how ESC fans negotiate their fan visibility within the application and through internal Facebook interfaces, such as Facebook Messenger, Facebook groups, pages, and public timelines. I examine how these digital interfaces impose general rules on how they should be used and how ESC fans can resist and contest them. I highlight how ESC fans are subject to shaming practices from others and how they live differently together within ESC fan Facebook groups. I contend that fans self-manage and perform their fan and sexual identities through Facebook; these are shaped in relation to the different publics and audiences ESC fans are attempting to reach to develop social and cultural capital. I also highlight how fans compartmentalise their fandom within Facebook and I provide evidence to suggest that these practices demonstrate digital operations of the closet, and hence the ESC closet. I argue that these practices are necessary because ESC fans can be shamed for their fandom as it is culturally contested and affiliated with gay culture.

Building on this discussion, I proceed to analyse the role of Facebook as a queer code/space. I analyse how ESC fans perform their sexuality online within Facebook's interfaces, such as ESC fan Facebook groups. I then shift towards examining the role of Twitter as a popular social media platform for engaging with ESC fandom and expressing sexuality. I suggest that Facebook and Twitter ESC fan

practices challenge existing theories of queer code/space as they transgress and break down sexuality, but at the same time, they limit sexuality expression and reproduce stereotypes and norms surrounding gay identity. Before concluding the chapter, I compare Facebook and Twitter and examine how fans negotiate their fan and sexual identities between them.

5.2   Describing Facebook and Twitter as social media platforms to practice ESC fandom

In this section, I focus more specifically on Facebook and Twitter, which I identified as key components of the digital ecosystem of ESC fandom in Chapter Four, Table 4.1. I describe Facebook and Twitter and emphasise that they provide very different functions that allow ESC fans to practice their fandom and express their identities in different ways. Both Facebook and Twitter are social media platforms where mobilities happen; they are both fluid, permeable, and dynamic spaces. ESC fans can enter, negotiate, and travel between these social media platforms to practice their fandom and sexualities. Facebook and Twitter create atmospheres through the interaction of humans and social media communication software, such as how ESC fans publicise content using text, images, video clips, GIFs, and emojis. These communication tools allow ESC fans to digitally mediate and express their fan and sexual identities in dynamic ways. These platforms also allow ESC fans to share their feelings and moods which are circulated and are strengthened and/or weakened by the ways fans network with others in those atmospheres (Ash, 2013).

Both Facebook and Twitter challenge theoretical understandings of public and private space (Warner, 2002; Taylor et al., 2014; Jenzen, 2017). Hence, I contend that these social media platforms provide very different levels of fan visibility, which continue to challenge normative understandings of the public/private divide. Facebook offers a dynamic range of different interfaces that can be used to organise social life and express an identity. Twitter, on the other hand, can be conceived as a rolling 'microblog', through which users post messages in the form

of tweets on their timelines. I will now discuss each of these in turn, starting with Facebook.

5.2.1 Facebook

Facebook incorporates many different public/private interfaces within its application through which ESC fandom can be practiced. This includes: publishing content to a public timeline which can be viewed by family, friends, and audiences, responding to posts by commenting and 'reacting' to other people's posts and comments in emoji form, participating in ESC fan Facebook groups, creating and following 'pages', such as the official ESC Facebook page, and direct messaging through Facebook Messenger with one or a group of people. The digital space of Facebook Messenger is a private environment and provides semi-anonymity, as fans can be known but also unknown to each other (Truong, 2018b, 2018a). Organised ESC fan Facebook groups, for example, also produce semi-anonymity amongst fans (see section 5.3). Some ESC fan Facebook groups include official fan clubs, such as 'OGAE UK', and other unofficial ESC fan groups organised by fans such as 'Eurovision is my BF (boyfriend)' and 'Eurovision Debate' (also see Chapter Three Table 3.2 for two visual representations of these ESC fan Facebook groups). These groups are moderated by gatekeepers who can impose guidelines and police the conversations within the group.

Public timelines, Facebook groups, pages, and direct messaging are all incorporated within the Facebook 'app', but they provide different levels of visibility and thus can be addressed to different audiences. Facebook empowers its users to make public or private different aspects of their social lives and hence identities; this can be done using Facebook's privacy settings – I discuss this in more detail in section 5.3. Facebook is used for practicing ESC fandom and maintaining social connectivity with family, friends and other fans. However, ESC fans self-regulate and determine what aspects of their fan and sexual identities they express to these different audiences. Facebook's multiple interfaces and privacy settings can be used strategically to compartmentalise fan and sexual

identity. As I argue throughout this chapter, this may be necessary because of the wider associations between the contest and gay (male) culture and its wider cultural contestation.

5.2.2   Twitter

For many ESC fans, Twitter is also a popular social media platform to practice daily ESC fandom. Twitter is often understood as a politicised public platform for sharing opinions (Kitchin et al., 2013), participating in activism (Sandover et al., 2018), and interacting with famous figures and celebrities (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). There has been limited research that has examined how ESC audiences interacted with the contest on Twitter during the grand final of 2012 broadcast from Baku, Azerbaijan (Highfield et al., 2013). This research used quantitative data to analyse tweets using ESC-related hashtags which identified that tweet volumes were influenced by entertaining stage performances, such as the Russian Grannies, and Jedward from Ireland. Practicing fandom on Twitter involves social networking through irreverence, humour, and conflict that are produced and reproduced through Twitter's digital public sphere. As I discuss in section 5.5, in comparison to Facebook, ESC fans often prefer Twitter because it has a global audience reach and provides a certain level of anonymity in generating ESC networks. This emphasis on increased exposure on Twitter and connecting with existing, but also new people, is what distinguishes Twitter from Facebook.

Twitter is a public social media platform that incorporates one primary interface, the Twitter timeline, where users publish tweets, share, 'retweet' and 'like' other user tweets and engage with communication exchanges on various topics using 'hashtags'. Tweets consist of 280 characters and incorporates different forms of communication, such as messages, images, video clips, GIFs, and web links – this digital language demonstrates the performative nature of Twitter (Sandover et al., 2018). Where ESC fans use Twitter to participate in ESC fandom, they also use it to participate in other topics and discussions. Once again, ESC fans delimit what and how they use Twitter and how they express themselves to others, and it is

also used as a structuring device that polices gender and sexual norms (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995; Brown et al., 2011). As I argue in sections 5.4-5.5, many ESC fans explain how Twitter is more flexible in moulding a fan identity, in comparison to Facebook which primarily features pre-existing social connections, such as family and friends.

Yet, I also contend that both Facebook and Twitter bleed through and into each other. For ESC fans, their fandom is interlinked between social media applications. However, ESC fans behave differently in different spaces and to different audiences. One respondent, Jane, who writes for her ESC fan blog 'Eurovision Time', emphasises the inter-connected nature of her Twitter account, which is used in co-ordination with her other social media accounts to generate multiple levels of fan visibility and connectivity with different audiences.

> Yeah, I do a bit of hashtagging; on my normal Twitter account I will look at what other people are doing Eurovision wise, and I might then do a retweet or if I do post something to myself I usually remember to put a Eurovision hashtag on it, which is a good thing. Especially with posting pictures which is kind of the main thing I think; actually, putting photos on Instagram and then sharing on to the Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr because it's just so very smooth at the moment.

Jane, heterosexual female, UK, age 56-65

Jane explains the importance of using hashtags on Twitter to connect with wider fan audiences through her fan blog account. She also explains how Twitter and her other social media accounts can be linked together to streamline her fan blog in order to connect with multiple and diverse audiences on, for example, Facebook, Tumblr, and Instagram. Sharing pictures, retweeting, and hashtagging are used for generating mass self-communication networks across multiple social media accounts (Castells, 2013, 2015). This point builds upon analyses in Chapter Four, section 4.2, by suggesting that the fans themselves are creating a new set of inter-connected, hybridized spaces within these social media platforms, within which they generate fan networks by using multiple digital communication tools (Van Dijck, 2013). However, we also need to consider the role of these social media

platforms and how they reproduce identity. Now I have described Facebook and Twitter ESC fandom, I will now return to explore Facebook in more detail and how ESC fans practice their fan and sexual identities using its social interfaces.

5.3   Practicing ESC fandom through Facebook spaces

This section examines the ways that ESC fans construct their fandom and its respective activities using Facebook on a daily basis. I argue that different Facebook interfaces provide different levels of fan visibility. I critically examine how Facebook's interfaces operate and I explore their role as queer code/spaces, in relation to the ways ESC fans perform their sexuality through ESC fan practices. I also argue that the blurring of distinctions between public and private online encourages fans to negotiate their fan and sexual identities between Facebook's interfaces. These practices are necessary as ESC fans can be shamed by, for example, family and friends on Facebook for their fandom because of the social and cultural stigmatisation of the event and its associations with gay culture. I emphasise that ESC fandom is self-managed and compartmentalised using Facebook's privacy settings and between its interfaces. Consequently, I argue that Facebook is a liberating and constraining social media platform in expressing fan and sexual identity (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a).

ESC fans strategically manage their fandom and identities on Facebook, by negotiating different Facebook spaces, such as pages, groups and their public timelines (Valentine, 2002). There exist a plethora of ESC Facebook groups that are designed for specific fans. Shaun explains how he developed a Facebook group targeted towards ESC fans who are on the autistic spectrum, but also maps out some other ESC-related Facebook groups that exist, as well as those he would not join because they conflict with his heterosexuality:

> So, the group that I created, and I run is for people with autism spectrum conditions as I have, who like Eurovision. But there's a number of groups, like the 'OGAE' group or the 'UK at Eurovision' group which is a national group and there's a 'South West UK' fan group which is a regional group and then there's… the rules vary of groups. There's one for example where

you can talk about anything you like, as long as you're not abusive to others obviously. There's another where there are strict, no politics, or anything even slightly controversial at all can be discussed, as its strictly Eurovision and general chit chat only. There is also a group for gay men called 'Eurovision is my boyfriend' and being straight myself I wouldn't join that obviously.

Shaun, straight male, British, age 31

Shaun publicises and practices his fandom within different Facebook groups, which range from national and regional ESC fan groups and groups organised for fans who identify as gay. He also emphasises some of the self-organising principles that establish rules regarding the content that is discussed within ESC Facebook groups and who they are tailored towards. This is evidenced by Shaun describing how participants in two different groups cannot be 'abusive to others' or discuss 'politics'. Yet, the rules and regulations for what and what cannot be discussed lack in definition and are arbitrary, which can be adhered to or ignored. Establishing ESC Facebook groups are popular forms of networking and public communication between fans where participants shape their norms, but also contest their rules (Van Dijck, 2013).

ESC fans reveal and conceal aspects of their identity from others to conform to and contest the group's respective ESC fan practices. ESC fans discussed their criticisms of some ESC fan Facebook groups by using homophobic code words, such as 'dramatic' and 'bitchiness'. Hence, the results reveal that ESC Facebook groups contest ideas surrounding community. Consequently, this can result in arguments and conflict between fans within ESC fan Facebook groups. Phil H illustrates these points and participates in ESC fan Facebook groups, but he explains how he avoids groups that contain 'dramatic' fans, or where ESC fans posted similar posts across multiple groups:

Some of them [Facebook groups] just seem to be people getting rather dramatic about things and they'll be having arguments about nothing. I

mean, already quite often somebody's posted the same thing in two or three groups anyway.

Phil H, straight male, British, age 51

Phil H repudiates the queerness of ESC fandom by othering and shaming fans involved in engaging in 'nothing' arguments. He does this by refraining from discussing his ESC fandom in other Facebook groups because they are 'dramatic'; whereas Shaun earlier would avoid Facebook groups for gay men. Phil H's emphasis on the 'dramatic' content of ESC fan Facebook groups is also shaped and discussed further within the context of 'bitchiness', as Carl-Ludwig and Michael illustrate from the WhatsApp group chats below:

'Rise Like a Phoenix' Group chat

25/02/2018, 15:10 - Carl-Ludwig: I'm a member of a few FB [Facebook] Eurovision groups but I agree that it can be bitchy and polarised - I often find that it's either the ultra-traditionalists that like ballads or songs like Portugal last year, or Europop and Schlager fans of things Loreen or Scooch. There often isn't room in the middle for a nuanced opinion. But I find that tends to be true on most social media topics. It's not unique to Eurovision.

'Heroes' group chat

04/02/2018, 14:04 - Michael: A weird clash of blind patriotism YOU MUST SUPPORT OUR SONG NO MATTER WHAT kind of thing and nihilistic negativity OH MY GOD UK DOESNT HAVE A CLUE AND JUST ISN'T TRYING. I find it exhausting because whatever you say you'll get someone jumping all over you. It's not exclusively UK fans like that. I've been on the business end of several Armenian and Azeri backlashes.

These comments are augmented and performed through coded language and reproduce conflicts between individual and collective opinions, through references to 'drama' and 'bitchiness' that can be seen as homophobic and sexist terms. These contestations are also shaped by ESC fandom and ESC music taste that can be a highly personal and embodied identity characteristic. Understanding the social and cultural background of ESC fans is essential in order to break down, but also reassert, power relations within ESC fan Facebook groups (Sandvoss, 2005). The vitriol evidenced in the above quotes encourages trolling behaviour

towards ESC fans due to their opinions. The digital screen is an intermediary that removes direct face-to-face communication and it provides feelings of semi-anonymity; posting content within these ESC fan Facebook groups can be targeted towards specific people that users know but also don't know. The representation of these groups as 'bitchy' is an example of internalised homophobia and the 'nihilistic negativity' that Michael has experienced in similar groups reproduces discourses around shaming culture and the pathologizing of gay men in Western societies (Munt, 2007, 2019). These coded ESC fan practices challenge the wider queerness of the ESC as they reproduce gay male stereotypes (Lemish, 2007; Singleton et al., 2007; Baker, 2017).

ESC fans explained how they decided to leave ESC fan Facebook groups because they felt unwelcome, or they were subject to criticism and/or shame for their fandom. Connor illustrates this below and explains his strategies in constructing his ESC fandom on Facebook:

> There was a time where I was in some Eurovision groups on Facebook, but over time they got increasingly harder to deal with because they'd put some really spiteful stuff on […] or just generally 'oh, so and so's terrible, they should change this, that and the other' in really negative sort of ways where if you didn't agree with their opinion you are automatically a bad person and I'm like I can't deal with this, I'm leaving. I think at this point, I delete more stuff off Facebook than I actually post because I had it since 2009 and of course that was when I was still in high school, I was posting all sorts of random, lol funny stuff and I look back on it, cringe and delete it […] If I do post something there it is something like 'oh hey, I did this thing in the real world, yay!' […] I use it more as a means of messaging other people that I have on Facebook rather than posting anything publicly.

Connor, bisexual male, English, age 20

Connor explains his difficulties in participating in Facebook groups and associates this with wider self-management identity practices across its applications. Both his ESC fan life and social life are co-produced on Facebook. Different social publics are constructed across these Facebook interfaces as Connor questions how he presents himself on the 'front stage' of Facebook, and how he wishes to be perceived by others (Taylor et al., 2014; Truong, 2018a, 2018b). Facebook enables

young people, like Connor, to present themselves on their own terms and in divergent, fluid ways (Leyshon et al., 2013; De Jong, 2015). This is emphasised by Connor erasing his digital traces and rewriting his digital history through his Facebook profile as a way of curating and shaping his socio-digital identity. Younger ESC fans demonstrate a digital savviness, but also anxieties about surveillance, which disrupt their digital ontological security as they continually question how they want to be seen, and who sees them within the Facebook platform. These issues, however, are also the case for older ESC fans who regulate their fan visibility across Facebook's interfaces. Martin P, an ESC fan blogger, outlines below how he publicises and promotes his fan blog on Facebook, but he negotiates its visibility on the platform, which is dependent on the content of his blog posts:

> If it's for my posts for my blog, I tend to only put them into the Facebook groups, but I do have a page on Facebook which is specific for the website. So, I'd put it there first, then put it in the groups. I don't tend to put it on my timeline, because I know a lot of the people who are friends… some of my Facebook friends aren't into Eurovision so therefore I don't want to blitz them with loads of stuff that they're not interested in. I will put some things in, it just depends if I think it's more of a general interest type thing. I won't bombard them with everything that's happened on the sort of, what's happened with Eurovision that day. I know that would annoy the hell out of some of the people that are my friends. My partner, she's not into Eurovision so not that it would annoy her, but she's not interested. I realised its best to keep it to the Facebook groups more than anywhere else really.

Martin P, straight male, UK, age 50

Martin P explains how he shares his blog posts to his Facebook page and with multiple Facebook groups. He posts and shares his ESC fan blog posts away from the public space of his Facebook profile[37] and from his relationship with his partner and his friends. Martin P is engaged in complex self-management practices

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[37] The Facebook profile is where users 'post' their content to their own timeline. Users control who can view these posts, by leaving their profile fully public, or only visible to specific 'friends'. These posts may pop-up within the 'home' button of the Facebook application, which summarises recent posts published by your friends.

in negotiating his fandom across different Facebook applications and between social relations on the platform. This compartmentalisation of Martin P's ESC fandom signals the digital operation of the ESC closet (see Chapter Six for a more detailed discussion), as he negotiates his fan activity between multiple Facebook interfaces. This is necessary because he is consciously aware of a 'heterosexual gaze' on Facebook, as his ESC fandom within the platform can be scrutinised by his 'friends' and others viewing his profile (Valentine, 2002). This could prompt shaming of Martin P's ESC fandom and thus he determines how far he 'comes out' about his ESC fandom on Facebook; this is informed by the ESC content that is produced within his blog posts (Brown, 2005). Martin P orientates and monitors the fan content he publishes on Facebook, as he demonstrates an awareness of an imagined audience who do not all necessarily share his interest in the ESC (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011). Thus, ESC fans of diverse ages impose limits on how they come out about their ESC fandom across Facebook's interfaces, which is also a consequence of maintaining levels of social and cultural capital (Taylor et al., 2014; Truong, 2018b, 2018a).

Facebook offers its users, and hence ESC fans, different sets of tools in order to make public and/or private aspects of their social lives. This can include using Facebook's filtering and privacy tools in order to determine who has access to their ESC content. Using these mechanisms hence shapes their visibility as an ESC fan on the platform. T (nickname) below discusses these practices:

> I've filtered my Facebook into two streams, so that I can target posts only at Eurovision people, so that way my non-Eurovision friends won't ever see any of my Eurovision posts or if I'm at a Eurovision event they won't see that. So, I have a channel on Facebook where I can just say 'ok, only show this to my Eurovision friends'. And my Eurovision friends that I know quite well I will sort of... some of them will cross over into my personal channel as well, so if I posted something personal a few of my Eurovision friends who I consider close friends will see it. But mainly, you know, there are some people I meet at Eurovision once, add them on Facebook and think

'yeah great' but I don't want you knowing my personal stuff but I'm happy to share my Eurovision life with you.

T, bisexual male, English, age 26

T explains the complex strategies he enforces in sharing his ESC content publicly; he directs this specifically to his Facebook friends that share an interest with his ESC fandom. ESC fans who he considers close friends permeate his personal life, as he has developed a strong social connection with them. However, fans he has met ephemerally at the ESC have access to his ESC fan life and not the rest of his personal life. These strategies can also be because of the associations between the contest and wider gay culture. Later in our interview, T addresses his concerns about this association that permeates representations of the ESC and ESC fandom (see Chapter Four section 4.3). These understandings permeate T's socio-digital practices of ESC fandom, where he conceals and reveals his fan identity to different audiences.

ESC fandom is self-managed in its visibility in two ways: by compartmentalising ESC fandom using Facebook's privacy settings and between Facebook's interfaces, such as Facebook groups, pages, and public profiles. Access to these technologies empower technologically savvy ESC fans to strategically determine what aspects of their fan lives are or are not made public and to which audience. These technological processes also raise the issue of the ESC closet (which I discuss in extensive detail in Chapter Six) – as ESC fans, such as T, can be in and out of the ESC closet at the same time as they negotiate their fan visibility using Facebook's filtering mechanism, which can determine the boundaries of their fan and sexual identities (Brown, 2005). Facebook can simultaneously be a liberating and constraining social media platform (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a), particularly in T's case where he is likely to be scrutinised and shamed for his ESC fandom and his sexual orientation because of the contest's associations with queer culture.

5.4 Practicing ESC fandom through Twitter spaces

This section shifts my previous discussion of ESC fan practices on Facebook towards examining how fans use Twitter to network with others, and how they construct and perform their sexuality within the platform. As I highlighted in section 5.2, Twitter operates differently to Facebook; it gives fans access to posting tweets onto a public timeline[38] and direct, private messaging. For ESC fans, there is more exposure for them in generating audiences and social networks. On Twitter, posting a tweet is instantaneous when entering the app/website; posting into Facebook groups, on the other hand, involves navigating the appropriate icons within the Facebook app/website in order to post. I also argue that ESC fan practices on Twitter produces queer code/space, as they consistently bring into being sexual and fan identity, which are performed through and by the digital (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a, 2017b). I contend that Twitter is also used by ESC fans for socio-sexual networking, through the de/coding of textual and visual representations that are associated with the ESC. I critically analyse how Twitter ESC fandom functions as a queer code/space in reshaping sexuality, but it also constrains its performances.

Firstly, this section will highlight the ways ESC fans use Twitter to practice their fandom. This includes fans using Twitter to develop fan networks and conveying their fandom to wider, imagined audiences. This can be done by 'following' other fans on the platform and/or by searching for ESC-related and national final show 'hashtags' to engage with their programs. These practices are illustrated in the quotes below:

'Euphoria' group chat

> 05/02/2018, 13:12 - Will: I am a big, big fan of social media, as it introduced me to a lot of new people, but also exposed me to a lot of the Eurovision

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[38] It is worth noting that Twitter users can make their accounts 'private' by limiting who can view their tweets to those who follow them. Users who make their account 'private' can also accept or decline 'follower requests'. Users can block and mute accounts and words in order to curate the content they see on their timelines.

"family" (national finals, particular cultural elements from certain countries etc etc.). For me, Twitter is the best source for this. It is live, up to date and has a high level of engagement. I particularly like the ability to chat with randoms, something that is much less likely on other platforms.

You know when you tweet along, and you can go on the special hashtag for it and you can have a look at what others are saying. I didn't know any other Eurovision fans on Twitter until then, and that is when I met [name anonymised] and I think he commented on something I said, and he replied and then I think we followed each other, and he followed all these other people and I met them, and followed some of them… I started my own little network right there.

Hana, bisexual female, British, age 18-25

Will and Hana discuss the possibilities for meeting new people through Twitter to develop their own fan networks. They practice mass self-communication on the platform by: using hashtags for ESC shows and events, and network with other ESC fans at different socio-spatial scales (Castells, 2013, 2015). They identify the global visibility of Twitter as a public social media platform for connecting with fans across multiple networks, but which can be filtered to a localised level. Will also emphasises the 'familial' nature of ESC fandom that is developed through iterative engagement with fan activities, such as watching ESC national final shows. This hints at an imagined community and conviviality of fans that connect with each other on the basis of fandom without necessarily knowing each other (Anderson, 1991). The permeability of Twitter is identified here as fans make new connections and maintain existing ones, and for Will in particular there is more engagement with the contest than on other platforms, such as Facebook. Twitter empowers ESC fans to create, code, and spatialise fan networks that are less bounded, yet intimate and highly visible within a public platform (Jenzen, 2017).

As well as being able to connect with a diverse range of audiences across multiple social media platforms, Twitter also encourages ESC fans to express their identities in different, yet rather complex ways. Hana explains this below:

When somebody uses Twitter, it's about trying to find an identity on Twitter, trying to find a way to use it and for something to talk about on a

regular basis, so that people will know to follow you if they want to hear out [on] a specific thing.

Hana, bisexual female, British, age 18-25

Hana identifies the possibilities for creating an identity on Twitter and suggests this is shaped by the tools available to fans within the Twitter software. This includes, as Jane emphasised earlier in section 5.2.2, using hashtags and sharing images and links within the platform to generate fan visibility. Hana explains how Twitter makes it possible to perform and reconfigure identity frequently, which suggests that the 'doing' of identity on the platform is iterative (Butler, 1990; Sandover et al., 2018). There is a queerness about Hana's discussion regarding expressing an identity on Twitter as she identified its possibility in breaking down identity categories. 'Finding an identity' suggests escapism from heteronormative society and practicing ESC fandom within Twitter provides a means of doing so. The ESC in itself embodies queerness and as I examined in Chapter Four, also embodies ambiguity in identity making and expression where socio-cultural categories can be destabilised. There are multiple ways of performing identity within Twitter and users craft an identity in unexpected ways (Zebracki and Luger, 2019). This queerness is challenged, however, as Hana hints at the need to perform an identity that conforms to Twitter's social regulations.

Building on from arguments in Chapter Four, I further develop the argument that that the ESC is not simply a homogenous gay space, it is contested and heterogenous within Twitter ESC fandom. ESC fans who participate in Twitter ESC fandom explained how they would engage themselves in practices of othering. ESC fans do this to distance themselves from particular communication exchanges in order to manage the performance of their fan and sexual identities. Corentin and Dan explain this below:

> So, Twitter, I present myself as a Eurofan who is very enthusiastic about Eurovision and national finals but who tries to stay away from drama. I

don't want to appear serious, but I don't wanna appear like a guy who takes part in drama, that kind of stuff and bitches about sort of stuff.

Corentin, straight male, French, age 21

People tend to get very, very involved. Sometimes I'll stay away, sometimes I can't be bothered to get into a debate about things […] When I was on the other day and people were talking about China in Eurovision and it's just caused this absolute uproar and I just thought I'm not getting involved with any of that. People have got their opinions, but it's just a bit too much. I will sometimes get in discussion and debates, but other times you just want to step away from it.

Dan, gay male, British, age 18-25

Corentin deploys strategies of othering while participating within Twitter ESC fandom. He does this by using language such as 'drama' and 'bitches' to repudiate queerness. The rejection of such language also suggests a reproduction of heteronormative masculinity by distancing himself from a non-masculine, bitchy queen fan identity. These experiences of ESC fandom are similar to that of ESC fan Facebook groups in section 5.3, where the queerness of the contest is challenged by the use of homophobic code words and through practices of trolling and bullying, for example, on ESC music taste. Corentin's practices of fan and sexual othering also challenge the production of queer code/space within ESC fan networking (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a); he does this by disassociating himself from the 'drama' and 'bitchiness' of ESC fandom.

Dan explains his anxieties in engaging in ESC fandom regularly as he observes fans sharing their opinions, which for him is 'a bit too much'. Dan's enthusiasm for the ESC is marred by these fan opinions and consequently regulates what conversations he engages with on Twitter (Craggs et al., 2016). This negativity that impinges on Dan and Corentin's enthusiasm for the ESC facilitates dynamic shaming practices. These two fans differentiate, impose boundaries, and produce intricate relational geographies when practicing ESC fandom on Twitter. Twitter both normalises and regulates ESC fan practices, where ESC fans determine the contexts and debates they involve themselves in. For these ESC fans, they use

Twitter to connect to global audiences to express their fandom in an individualised, intimate, but also distant, manner.

By engaging in ESC fandom online, ESC fans perform different socio-cultural characteristics of their identities that are not necessarily expressed in other socio-digital and offline contexts. ESC fans, however, have a particular audience in mind when expressing their fan and sexual identities online. Connor, who creates YouTube opinion videos about the ESC, explains how the platform, coupled with sharing his videos through his ESC fan Twitter account, allows him to express a hybridised digital identity that is more outgoing and humorous than he would be in other socio-digital contexts:

> Sort of like an excited puppy about stuff, but within reason. Fluent in the language of the internet with all these Tumblr-isms and what not… a sense of humour that's perhaps a bit more risqué, a bit more audience curated than the sort of thing I'd… I don't know… more outgoing than I would be under ordinary circumstances. It gives me a sort of place where I just can be more unabashedly whatever, rather than… its easier than talking to someone face-to-face or trying to entertain someone in person, because I suppose there's more dimension to it as well in terms of like the editing process and having a sense of humour that doesn't really work in the real world.

Connor, bisexual male, English, age 20

Connor explains how he develops an embedded online fan identity by performing a digital identity that is 'fluent in the language of the internet'. This vernacular is important in asserting his online fan presence which is intrinsic to internet culture, which he explains, struggles to be understood in offline heteronormative worlds (Jenzen, 2017; Phillips and Milner, 2017). Connor addresses the anxieties he has in communicating with others face-to-face and he continues to raise the issue that the internet breaks down these social barriers and encourages semi-anonymity – as YouTube and Twitter make it possible for ESC fans to produce alternative performances of identity to known and unknown others. The queer dimensions of ESC fandom also shape such performances outside of dominant heteronormative code/space (Elwood, 2020).

One further way in which ESC fans are able to express an identity that is not normally expressed in other socio-digital and offline contexts is to adopt and use 'handles', through which identities can be reworked and also anonymised. One particular example of this includes making ESC fan persona accounts that manipulate existing identities, which in turn create new identities. There are struggles, however, in maintaining an ESC fan persona which results in fans engaging in other aspects of culture which in turn shape their personas (Highfield, 2016). In the example below, Phil D illustrates this process in relation to 'Serhat', the Turkish musician who represented San Marino at the ESC in 2016[39] and 2019[40]. Serhat is often memorialised within the wider ESC fandom for his deep, husky voice, and 1970s-style disco songs that were performed at the contest. Phil D begins by outlining his intentions for creating this parody account of Serhat instead of using his 'personal' account as he felt it too closely resembled his work life and interest in politics:

> Initially just using the Twitter account you contacted me on, but most of the people who are following me on Twitter are following me for talking about politics and health and social care, I realised I was boring half of them to death. So, in the end I decided to… around a year ago a couple of months before Eurovision 2016, I decided to create a separate Twitter account and created a little online persona for it […] So, I decided to create a little character for myself, basically reinventing Serhat as this demented ghoul, which might not be far from the truth! Initially I did it as a parody leading up to the 2016 contest and then coming into 2017, I thought, I'd probably want to start tweeting again, so that sort of became my Twitter account, but I kept the persona […] because people still remember it. The strange, disco Uncle Fester from Turkey!

Phil D, straight male, British, age 41

Phil D discusses the creation of his Twitter, parodied persona of Serhat to assist him in developing a Twitter ESC fan identity. He identifies the creative ways that he uses Twitter to perform and manipulate a male gendered straight identity through Serhat, as a way of escaping the banality of his political opinions and work

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[39] https://youtu.be/HzPkDb2FSeg accessed 5/1/2021
[40] https://youtu.be/d_iEis_ZRoQ accessed 5/1/2021

life. His Serhat persona is also managed by camouflaging and closeting of his ESC fan identity 'behind the screen', where he can simultaneously be in and out about his fandom on Twitter (Sedgwick, 1990; Fuss, 1991; Brown, 2005). Phil D's regular performances of the 'disco Uncle Fester from Turkey' suggests an everyday queerness, where he is able to rework, and stretch the boundaries of his male gendered identity through Serhat (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a; Gieseking, 2017).

What both Connor and Phil D also suggest is that they have audiences in mind, which determine how they mould their fan identities on Twitter. For Connor, he emphasised that he performs a fan and sexual identity that is 'more audience curated', which suggests that he is constrained in how he expresses these identities. For Phil D, he explains that he was boring his non-ESC followers 'to death' and by creating his Serhat parody account, it allows him to connect with his ESC fan audience as he explains 'people still remember it'. Yet, his Serhat parody account is not limited to recirculating ESC content but it also intersects with wider popular culture and news that permeates Twitter.

The points above are rather contradictory, as curating a fan and sexual identity for a 'fan' audience is constraining and/or liberating. This builds upon evidence in Chapter Four, section 4.5, where fans who contributed to fan websites had their fan practices determined for them by their audiences, while inside the ESC Press Centre. Nonetheless, by practicing fandom across multiple social media platforms and internet sites, ESC fans seek escapism from other social aspects of their lives that often alienate their fan and sexual identities.

5.4.1 Reproducing fan and sexual identity through visual representations of the ESC in tweets

Twitter ESC fan practices also intersect with expressions of sexuality and sexual desire. I would now like to consider a series of digital vignettes – in the form of tweets – to explore how ESC fans reproduce their fan and sexual identities through

reactions to existing visual representations from the ESC and its associated national final shows. In Figure 5.1, one male ESC fan shared a GIF of two men dancing erotically against the musician Agoney during an episode of Spain's ESC song selection show 'Operacion Triunfo' in January 2018. The still image below focuses on the singer (left) up close with the dancer (right) in an erotic and sensually charged pose. As the image progresses, the singer (left) dances in a similar way but with another male dancer. The fan tweeting this interprets and imagines this dance routine as expressing his gay male identity and negotiating prospective sexual partners on the men seeking sex with men hook-up application, Grindr. This fan shares this GIF within a tweet that uses multiple hashtags, such as '#gay', '#Eurovision' and '#OTGala12' which are attempts to network with multiple users, such as ESC and Operacion Triunfo fans and audiences, and gay men. Here, fandom is interplayed with other socio-sexual networking practices, such as networking with Grindr users and gay men using Twitter. Fan identity does not exist in isolation on Twitter, but it is hybridised; it is co-produced with sexuality and stretches across multiple socio-sexual Twitter networks and publics (such as '#Grindr' and '#gay').

Figure 5.1 Using ESC media imagery through GIFs to demonstrate how one performs a gay male identity on Grindr

Me on Grindr 😅 😛

#OTGala12 #OT #Eurovision #Grindr #gay #Agoney #OperacionTriunfo #OTDirecto22E #memes

GIF

10:31 PM - 22 Jan 2018

Figure 5.2 Sexualisation of the three male ESC presenters of the 2017 contest

#CelebrateDiversity of papis with our hosts #VolodymyrOstapchuk, #OleksanderSkichko, and #TimurMirosnhnychenko AKA #MiroshnyPAPI #eurovision
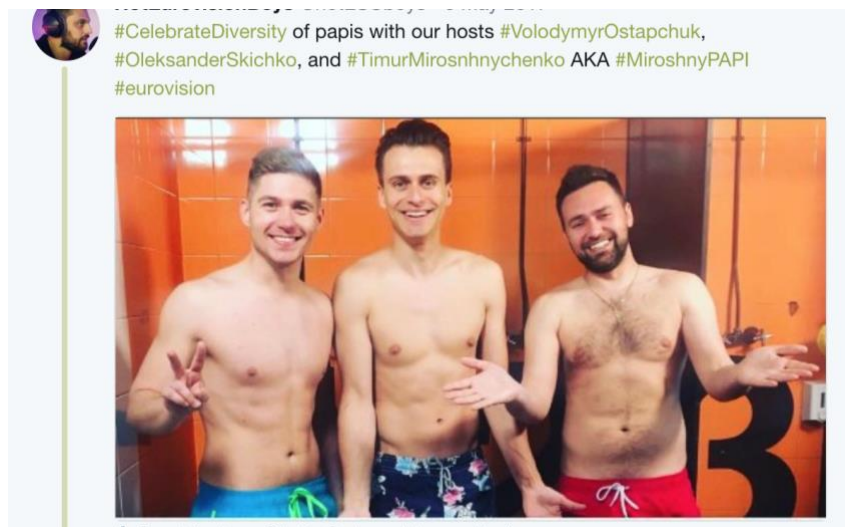
Responses to tweet:

@SSM: I pick number 3 [third from left] 12/5/2017

@ECF: I would hope he [number 3] was a better shag than he is a presenter 12/5/2017

Similarly, the sharing of images of half-naked men through ESC fan Twitter accounts is a process of networking for male fans who share common sexual desires. This is demonstrated in Figure 5.2, which shows an image of the three male ESC presenters of the contest in 2017 and its associated responses. This example demonstrates expressions of queer masculinity, where @ECF makes sexual comments about host number 3. This tweet thread connects and blurs the distinctions between ESC fandom and public Twitter networks, and shapes a social reality where ESC fan networks can be generated through shared sexual desires (Jenzen, 2017). In Twitter ESC fandom, fan and sexual identity is relationally constructed, but also with reference to national identity and culture. The tweet and its associated tweet thread in Figure 5.3 identifies the ways male ESC fans express and develop a shared sexual desire towards Azerbaijan's 2019 representative Chingiz, in reference to imaginings of Azerbaijani identity, such as the capital city Baku, its rich oil economy and its previous ESC entries.

Figure 5.3 Sexual desires and responses towards Azerbaijani artist Chingiz by male fans

He can barebaku me any day #eurovision 🇦🇿

9:37 PM - 5 Feb 2019

Source: @MKY 5/2/2019

Responses to tweet:

@CON: DRILL ME FOR OIL! 5/2/2019
@MLM: He could Azerbai-bang me 5/2/2019
@DNO: He can luna moon me up any day 5/2/2019

These tweets demonstrate practices of fetishising Chingiz with reference to aspects of Azerbaijan identity and culture, such as Baku, and the country's rich oil reserves. These practices of othering empowers these fans to digitally circulate sexualised narratives around Chingiz. The racialised and national stereotypying in Figure 5.3 is a part of the forms of sexualising taking place (Flowers and Swan, 2017). ESC fans also practice inter-textuality, as there are alternative interpretations of the image in Figure 5.3 that use ESC-related references, such as @DNO's tweet containing the lyrics 'luna moon me up', which is a direct reference to the Azerbaijan ESC song 'X My Heart', sung by female Azerbajiani musician Aisel from 2018. This tweet co-ordinates an ESC fan network that is based on shared sexual desires, but through which ESC fans produce alternative interpretations of the image to seek socio-sexual belonging. ESC fans use of Twitter shapes the digital mediation of human subjects, where male ESC fans sexually interested in other men can meet at the interface for sexual fantasies, fetishes, and fan culture (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a; Cockayne et al., 2017).

However, these socio-sexual networks in the previous examples reproduce gay male behaviours and norms that often alienate and eroticise others based on, for example, their looks and deportment. Thus, they fix boundaries and reproduce gay, racialised, and national stereotypes. The interpretation of visual and textual mediums trigger social practices that provoke shaming by ESC fans. These socio-sexual fan practices on Twitter are similar to the stigmatisation of body types that occur within the same-sex location-based hook-up smartphone application Grindr (Bonner-Thompson, 2017). These quotes demonstrate that social media platforms such as Twitter are simultaneously liberating for ESC fans, but also constraining (Gieseking, 2017).

Twitter operates as a queer code/space; it is an interface where ESC fans disrupt and rework identity categories. Practicing Twitter ESC fandom involves the decoding and encoding of ESC media representations, both textual and visual, that help fans reconfigure and manipulate their gender and sexual identities within the

daily digital public sphere. This is demonstrated further in Figure 5.4, where a male ESC fan was listening to the song 'Fuego' (Cyprus's 2018 ESC entry) on his commute to work.

Figure 5.4 Digitally mediating fan identity on Twitter through performance

Fuego came on shuffle as I made my way down the tube escalators this morning, Twitter.

Let me tell you, the urge to strut like Eleni was almost overwhelming.

🐦 #Eurovision

8:59 AM - 13 Mar 2018

Source: @EEC, 13/3/2018

Figure 5.5 Comparing the 'gay agenda' between two ESC entries in 2018

What people think the gay agenda is vs what the real gay agenda is

1:24 pm - 8 May 2018

Source: @SYO, 8/5/2018

The fan in Figure 5.4 reflects on his experience during his commute to work, while listening to the ESC song 'Fuego'[41]. 'Fuego' became a popular entry within the wider ESC fandom (particularly amongst gay male ESC fans) in 2018, with many associating themselves with the entry's fusion of ethnic folk-pop and dance-pop instrumentation, and music. These elements of the song, along with its all-female dance routine and use of pyrotechnics on stage contributes to the shaping of a queer male ESC fan identity on Twitter. Twitter also inter-penetrates other spaces, such as the daily commute to work which builds upon analyses in Chapter Four, in that ESC fandom permeates many different aspects and spaces of ESC fan lives – Twitter ESC fandom bleeds through the online and offline.

Decoding and interpreting ESC music establishes queer networking through Twitter, which also shape gay identity as ambiguous through ESC fandom. This is illustrated in Figure 5.5, where the following ESC fan identifies 'Fuego' as central to the 'gay agenda' and compares the Irish entry in 2018, named 'Together'[42] which featured two men dancing intimately and advocating same-sex relationships internationally. It signifies the popularity of 'Fuego' and singer Eleni Foureira amongst gay male ESC fans, and the importance of the song within an imagined, wider gay culture. However, there are varying degrees of gay visibility that are signified in this representation that differentiate and question ESC fan authenticity through gay identity. The tweet associates 'Fuego' with a gay identity that is more ambiguous, but is known between fans, without it explicitly being labelled as gay. Unlike the performance of 'Together', which represents gay love that is performed and narrated through dance. This builds upon arguments in Chapter Four and demonstrates how questions around gay visibility within ESC fandom are produced as ambivalent on Twitter, where identity categories are negotiated.

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[41] https://youtu.be/vyDTbJ4wenY accessed 5/1/2021
[42] https://youtu.be/QD1cQ2wZ1dk accessed 5/1/2021

This section has demonstrated that Twitter is used by ESC fans to network with others and express their fan and sexual identities. Similar to Facebook, fans are engaged in othering practices by self-managing their fan and sexual identities on Twitter. Twitter is simultaneously liberating, but also constraining for ESC fans expressing their fan and sexual identities, which challenges existing theories of queer code/space (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017b; Gieseking, 2017) and Twitter ESC fandom challenges the widely perceived queerness of the ESC. Issues regarding ambiguity in relation to the reproduction of sexuality, as I examined in Chapter Four, also permeate Twitter ESC fandom. Gay male stereotypes and behaviours are also reproduced through socio-sexual networking on Twitter and identities are simultaneously accepted and/or rejected (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017b). Now I have discussed the role of Facebook and Twitter as social media platforms to practice fan and sexual identities, I will now turn to how fans negotiate their fandom between them.

5.5   Negotiating ESC fandom between Facebook and Twitter

This section explores some of the mechanisms ESC fans deploy in negotiating their fandom between Facebook and Twitter. For many ESC fans, Facebook is seen to connect them to other social aspects of their lives, which influences the ways they self-manage and express their identity within the platform's spaces, such as groups, Messenger and their public timelines. I argue that ESC fans perceive the social media platform Twitter as more 'appropriate' to practice their fandom, as it allows them to reach global, diverse audiences. Facebook, however, is used by ESC fans for wider networking practices (such as connecting with family and friends) and is not solely used for practicing ESC fandom, which can influence its visibility. I contend that the compartmentalisation practices ESC fans undertake to negotiate their fan and sexual identities are complex and contradictory.

For ESC fans, both Facebook and Twitter have a different range of audiences which shape how they express their fan and sexual identities. Consequently, fans emphasised how they would migrate from Facebook to Twitter to practice their

ESC fandom. In the quote below, Ben explains this process and how his Facebook account became saturated with ESC-related posts, which limited the expression of his social identity on the platform:

> The Twitter is purely Eurovision. I set that up because I realised my Facebook has had too many Eurovision postings! I was like, I don't want my Facebook to just be that, but my Twitter makes sense to just be that. It makes sense to have a separate interest board, like your Facebook should be more about you as an entire person, which I hope is more than just a song contest. I moved [from Facebook to Twitter] as a conscious decision […] there's less of a community on Twitter. So, there's less people that I am reaching, but I didn't want to drown my Facebook with Eurovision, I found it inappropriate. Because only a small section of my Facebook would be wanting to hear about Eurovision. Maybe about 20% or so. Family, friends, people I know, people I know from university or from the teaching world and stuff.

> **Ben, straight male, British, age 28**

Ben identifies how Facebook and Twitter should be used. Facebook 'should be more about you as an entire person' and not just solely about his ESC fandom. Facebook allows him to maintain social relations with his family, his work colleagues, and university friends. Whereas on Twitter, he can develop further social networks and connections with ESC fans, even though he highlights that there is 'less of a community' on Twitter. Dan also identifies similar differences between Facebook and Twitter:

> Facebook tends to be more personal. I've got friends that are interested, but you can't have that level of debate and discussion as you can over Twitter. If I post a tweet, I know that anyone in the whole world can see that and can join in the discussion, whereas if I'm putting it on Facebook, I've relatively a handful of friends out of 200 people that are likely to be interested and would comment. Because I've got a lot more personal details on Facebook, it's a lot more closed, I don't really… if I put stuff on there, the stuff that you wouldn't share on Twitter but you're happy to put within your friends on Facebook.

> **Dan, gay male, British, age 18-25**

Dan discusses the differences between Facebook as a platform for disclosing more 'personal' aspects of his identity and Twitter for generating wider audiences that

are focused on his ESC fan interests. For Dan, the friends and connections he makes on each social media platform delimit which aspects of his identity he shares. Issues regarding audiences are also evidenced by Lister below, who identifies how he has frequently negotiated his ESC fan visibility through Facebook and Twitter, which began during his school years, as he felt his ESC fandom was considered anti-normative:

> I was tempted to create a Eurovision Twitter account, but I can't be bothered. I sometimes think if someone, like, that's what I want to tweet about and if you don't like it, just don't tweet me because I'm not going to alter that. Just don't follow me if you're not into it. I deactivated my Eurovision Facebook account because my Twitter account has become the replacement for that, I don't feel the need for it anymore. I suppose, I don't think embarrassed is the word, but just like in school I was a bit weary of the fact that I was so into it, so I just thought if I create this other account it would be out of the way and no-one would ever know about it. Now I'm older, I just don't really care what people think so I deactivated it.

Lister, bisexual male, British, age 21

For Lister, he migrated his ESC fandom to Twitter to escape the shame attached to his fan identity. Callum also deploys similar strategies in compartmentalising his fandom to Twitter, as his ESC fandom could provoke 'negative and mundane comments' from family and friends:

> I only tend to use Facebook to spy on other people and see what they're doing. But, I've made a conscious decision to post things more on Facebook this year. But I don't really know what to say on Facebook, because I tweet so much on Twitter and you're not really meant to post things every 10 minutes on Facebook. So I really wouldn't know what to say in relation to Eurovision. I'd like to use Facebook more for Eurovision things, but having friends who don't like the contest, as friends on Facebook and having a couple of family members, I'd imagine I would get some pretty negative and mundane comments from them all about it. I feel as though I can express myself more in the Twittersphere.

Callum, straight male, British, aged 18-25

The quotes above identify many complicated and contradictory themes of practicing ESC fan and sexual identity between Facebook and Twitter. Facebook

and Twitter are different digital public spheres that have different audiences. These fans suggest that shifting ESC fandom to Twitter is necessary to: firstly, express a more fluid and dynamic fan and sexual identity, secondly, to generate, as Ben explained, a 'separate interest board', and thirdly, to stimulate networking with new and existing social relations (Robards and Bennett, 2011).

The evidence in this section suggests that there are some unspoken norms associated with Twitter and Facebook; this includes the need to tweet frequently to assert fandom, and how Facebook should not be used to post public messages, as Callum described, 'every 10 minutes' whereas on Twitter it is normalised behaviour. The public, but also semi-anonymous nature of Twitter can shape fan and sexual identities in dynamic ways. In sections 5.3 and 5.4, however, I emphasised that some fans imposed constraints in what aspects of fandom they engage with and thus their identities. This is also similar to Facebook, where there are different 'audiences' and social networks and they can self-manage how they express their fan and sexual identities. Consequently, there is an iterative interplay between ESC fandom and its visibility between Facebook and Twitter; it is constantly negotiated.

For the ESC fans above, there are attempts to compartmentalise ESC fandom between Facebook and Twitter. Negotiating ESC fandom between Facebook and Twitter incorporates a 'process of temporal wandering' in order to find likeminded ESC fans and to express an out and proud fan identity (Robards and Bennett, 2011:314). Twitter, as a digital public sphere, provides greater autonomy in giving voice and privilege to ESC fans, but fans, such as Lister, lack self-reflexivity by acknowledging their rights to be there (Kitchin et al., 2013). For many ESC fans in my research, they demonstrated an emotional investment in their fandom. For ESC fans, Twitter produces an 'affective atmosphere' as it involves iterative tweeting about their ESC fandom, which in turn shapes their fan identities (Anderson, 2009; Ash, 2013).

Nonetheless, these compartmentalisation practices between Facebook and Twitter are contradictory and complex. ESC fans also use Twitter to 'conceal' their fandom, even though it is a public platform through which anyone, including their family and friends, can view their profiles. This can be regulated by making their profiles 'private', so they are only visible to people who 'follow' them on Twitter. Also, even though ESC fans may be shamed for their fandom on Facebook and thus regulate how it is expressed, it does not prevent them from posting such content. Issues regarding audiences on these two different platforms continue to permeate ESC fan decisions in how they use these technologies and how they want to be seen by others – not just in terms of their ESC fandom, but in other areas of their social and cultural lives. Issues about identity expression and how it can be manipulated to appeal more favourably to others, or even taking on a totally different identity continue to be problematic in digital ESC fandom. Facebook and Twitter are both liberating, and constraining in performing fan and sexual identities. Both platforms provide complex technologies of visibility that shape how ESC fans open up and come out about their fandom.

5.6   Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed how the social media platforms of Facebook and Twitter are used to practice ESC fandom and sexuality. I have explained how Facebook and Twitter are part of the wider digital ecosystem of ESC fandom; they both bleed into each other and produce their own set of spaces, rules, norms, and audiences (Van Dijck, 2013). ESC fans digitally mediate, through coding practices (e.g. tweets, images and GIFs) what aspects of their fan and sexual identities they seek to perform within Facebook and Twitter and how they want to be seen (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011; Sandover et al., 2018).

I have argued that Facebook and Twitter simultaneously liberate and constrain identity making. Hence, my analysis of Facebook and Twitter ESC fandom challenges existing theories of queer code/space (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a, 2017a; Gieseking, 2017) and the widely perceived queerness of the ESC

and its fandom (Rehberg, 2007; Singleton et al., 2007; Carniel, 2015; Fricker, 2015; Baker, 2017). I argue therefore that digital ESC fan practices across Facebook and Twitter are queer ambivalent. In Chapter Four, I argued that ESC fandom is heterogenous in terms of fan and sexual identity making. Analysing Facebook and Twitter ESC fandom develops this argument as ESC fans generate social networks and relationships based on their shared fandom or sexual identities. This chapter, however, also challenges previous analyses of social media platforms (e.g. Kitchin et al., 2013; Papacharissi, 2016; Sandover et al., 2018) by suggesting that within digital ESC fandom there is also an emphasis on the individual. This encourages, as Castells (2013, 2015) puts it, practices of mass self-communication that produce conflicts between fans on the basis of, for example, music taste or the expression of sexual orientation. Consequently, practices of othering permeate practices of ESC fandom on Facebook and Twitter through, for example, stigmatising, bullying and trolling within ESC fan Facebook groups, and the pathologizing of ESC male musicians by gay male ESC fans on Twitter.

The associations between the contest and queer culture, and the wider cultural contestation of the ESC leads to a shaming of ESC fans. Thus, strategically negotiating fan and sexual identities between Facebook and Twitter is necessary. ESC fans using Facebook, for example, conform to prescribed social activities on Facebook and conceal aspects of their identities in order to present themselves more favourably to family and friends (Truong, 2018a, 2018b). For those fans that use Facebook, there is a need to self-manage how they come out about their ESC fandom within the platform as they are aware of a surveillance gaze regarding who can see their posts upon publication (Valentine, 2002). This is done by compartmentalising fandom within Facebook's applications, such as groups, or using its filtering privacy mechanisms to determine who can see which aspects of fans' social lives. However, fans can also compartmentalise their fandom using Twitter, as there appear to be more opportunities to shape a more fluid fan and sexual identity. There are more possibilities to generate semi-anonymity on Twitter, where ESC fans can be known but also unknown to their social networks

on Twitter. By compartmentalising fandom to Twitter, for instance, it does not stop family and friends on Facebook from viewing fans' activities, yet fans still feel relatively comfortable in expressing their fan and sexual identities and do not seem very concerned if they are 'found out'.

I have emphasised in this chapter that ESC fans compartmentalise and negotiate their fandom between Facebook's internal applications and between Facebook and Twitter. I have flagged up these complex and contradictory processes in relation to ideas of the closet. In Chapter Six, I take concept of the closet further and conceptualise and deploy the 'ESC closet' to understand how heterosexual male ESC fans conceal, deny, erase and camouflage their ESC fandom within their everyday lives. I have discussed in this chapter how ESC fans are prone to shaming for their fandom because of the cultural contestation of the ESC and its association with gay culture. I take this further in the following chapter to examine how heterosexual male ESC fans negotiate their fandom and the ESC closet in online and offline ESC fan spaces and social encounters.

Chapter Six: 'Make Eurovision straight again!': Straight male experiences of coming out and staying in the 'Eurovision closet'

6.1   Introduction: Conceptualising the 'Eurovision closet'

This chapter directly addresses the aim of this research and objective three, in examining heterosexual cis-male experiences of ESC fandom and how these fans strategically regulate and negotiate how they 'come out' and 'stay in' 'the closet' about their ESC fandom. The title of this chapter 'Making Eurovision straight again!' refers back to a tweet that was analysed in Chapter Four section 4.3, where presenter Lynda Woodruff wore a Trump-style red cap during a video clip in the Swedish ESC national final show *Melodifestivalen*.

I develop the ESC literature, in this chapter, that has centred on gay male experiences of the contest (Lemish, 2007; Singleton et al., 2007; Baker, 2017), by analysing straight male experiences of ESC fandom. Furthermore, I advance understandings of 'the closet' by examining how ESC fans negotiate their fan and sexual identities in online and offline spaces. The term 'the closet' is the defining feature that has permeated gay life as a consequence of gay oppression; it has resulted in gay people concealing and denying their gay identities in heteronormative societies. The closet is inherently spatial, as gay people conceal, deny, and camouflage their sexual orientations as they move through public spaces and they regulate to whom, and where they come out as gay (Brown, 2005; Brown et al., 2011). These practices are necessary in order to 'pass' when moving through dominant heterosexual public space and to avoid shame about their gay identities (Sedgwick, 1990, 2003; Sedgwick and Frank, 1995; Munt, 2007).

This chapter builds upon arguments in Chapters Four and Five that analysed how ESC fans practice their ESC fandom online and how they negotiate their fan and sexual visibility within and between Facebook and Twitter. I concluded that the cultural contestation of the ESC and its associations with queerness shaped how fans used the two social media platforms in different ways in order to avoid feeling

ashamed. Although fans compartmentalised their fandom across Facebook and Twitter, shaming practices also took place within these platforms. This included shaming fans based on their ESC music tastes and fan interests, which intersects with malicious language that has become stereotypically associated with gay culture (such a 'bitchiness'). I argued that Facebook and Twitter ESC fandom are contested queer code/spaces, because they simultaneously break down and reinforce gay male stereotypes.

This chapter develops on these ideas and re-considers the conceptual framework of 'the closet', as the heterosexual 'ESC closet' as the basis for the negotiation of ESC fandom. This chapter focuses on the respondents in the research who are straight male ESC fans and their experiences of staying in and coming out of and negotiating the ESC closet within different socio-spatial contexts. I emphasise that ESC fans of different genders and sexualities are also subject to shaming for their ESC fandom as they move through, occupy, and navigate online and offline spaces (Sedgwick, 1990, 2003; Sedgwick and Frank, 1995; Brown, 2005; Brown et al., 2011). The contest has often been perceived as not serious and/or trite amongst cultural commentators, such as Terry Wogan (Fricker, 2013), and it is widely associated with queerness (Baker, 2017).

Consequently, I argue that ESC fans of divergent genders and sexualities can also 'closet' their ESC fandom to avoid shaming, stigma, and assumptions of a gay (male) and/or queer identity. In Chapter Five, I explored the construction of the ESC closet in relation to bisexual male experiences of ESC fandom and how they negotiate their fan and sexual visibility on Facebook. However, to advance understandings of the closet in an original way, I analyse and develop on these issues in relation to situations where straight male ESC fans conceal, camouflage and negotiate their ESC fandom in domestic spaces, and how these ESC fans come out as straight within social media platforms and at ESC events.

I advance ideas regarding understandings of the ESC and sexuality by challenging its wider perception as a 'gay event' as I explored in Chapter Four. Here I shift

towards critically analysing straight male ESC fan perspectives and how they manage their heterosexual identities within an event that has been represented as a global form of gay entertainment. I also examine how 'coming out' in ESC fandom as a straight fan can contribute to the geographies of the digital and sexuality in two ways: firstly, how participating in a perceived queer-dominant ESC fandom produces a negotiation and stretching of the boundaries of heterosexuality, and secondly, how the contest enables participation in/with LGBT culture at a 'distance' through internet-enabled devices and the television screen. Finally, I argue that heterosexual male ESC fans produce complex negotiations and productions of the ESC closet, which influences their fan and sexual in/visibility and its respective 'outness'.

This chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, I critically analyse how straight male fans practice their fandom from within the ESC closet. I concentrate on the spatial realms of the domestic as a code/space through which ESC fans connect with the contest through internet-enabled devices. I also focus on how ESC fandom is camouflaged within public space in order to 'pass' as an ESC fan in heterosexual bars and clubs (Brown, 2006). I then progress to study straight male ESC fan encounters at ESC events, how they come out about their fandom and are outed as straight in these spaces. I then shift from these offline spaces towards an exploration of how internet and social media spaces provide different levels of sexual and fan visibility for straight male ESC fans and how these digital platforms can shape a negotiation of heterosexuality. Lastly, I examine the role of the television screen and internet-enabled devices as potential embodied queer objects through which the ESC and its respective fandom can be practiced at a 'distance' by straight male ESC fans. I argue that digital mediation makes it possible for straight male fans to engage themselves with wider LGBT culture, but also how participating in LGBT-related events and consumer spaces makes them question their rights to these spaces.

6.2 Practicing ESC fandom in domestic and bar spaces: Experiences from within the ESC closet

This section analyses the spaces and practices where straight male respondents conceal, hide, and deny their ESC fandom. I argue that the ESC closet is produced and negotiated through code/space. The bounded, private space of the bedroom allows straight ESC fans to conceal their fandom from their parents. But at the same time, they can also 'come out' about their fandom to other ESC fans online via digital, internet-enabled objects and screens from within the bedroom. I then develop this to consider how these practices are made furtive because of associations between the contest's music and gay male identity. Lastly, I explore how practicing ESC fandom is camouflaged in public university campus spaces, in order to be granted access to local bars and pubs.

The private, bounded space of the bedroom is as a place through which straight male fans practice their ESC fandom. This becomes an ESC fan code/space, as it is a place for practicing ESC fandom through internet-enabled objects, such as the computer screen. This provides access to the internet and social media, which are used simultaneously to watch national final[43] shows across Europe and to network with other fans during these programs. Callum discusses how using his laptop in his bedroom provides opportunities to watch these shows across Europe:

> …If I'm interested in most of the songs in a national final, I'm more likely to go up to my room and plug into the TV and sit and watch it. But if its, for example, Latvia (I didn't watch that too much), I had it on my laptop and I kept putting my earphones in because I hadn't listened to the songs […] So, I was in and out of it, speaking to my brother and doing other things. Yeah, so if it's a national final, like Denmark or Norway or anything like that then I'll sit there and focus on it properly.
>
> **Callum, straight male, age 18-25, British**

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[43] National final shows are selection shows that take place across Europe to select a country's ESC song for the upcoming contest.

Callum explains how he practices his fandom within his bedroom through digital and internet-enabled objects. Callum also mobilises a spatial hierarchy between the national final programs he watches with Denmark and Norway at one end, and Latvia at another. The contours of this hierarchy are based on his music taste which determines how 'focused' he is on these programs. There is a spatialisation of the home here – Callum's engagement with ESC national finals and his ESC fandom is constructed as a private practice and is hidden away from shared living spaces and other family members (Silverstone, 1994).

The laptop and television screens signal alternative levels of ESC fan visibility and muting music and sound from their associated visual representations signals ambiguity in Callum's ESC fan practices to others at home. This ambiguity surrounding fan identity is necessary in order to 'pass' as a straight ESC fan within the family home. Callum makes his ESC fandom furtive from within his bedroom by using digital objects. Through these digital objects, Callum's ESC fandom is an 'open secret' within the family home; he is out about his fandom to a certain extent to his brother. This builds on analyses in Chapter Five, where ESC fandom is not simply negotiated within and between social media platforms, but digital objects can also be used to negotiate fandom between the public and private within the domestic sphere (Sedgwick, 1990; Brown, 2005). Practicing ESC fandom through multiple digital objects produces alternative layers of fan visibility, which are central to the development and operation of the ESC closet.

The ESC closet is also produced by retreating to the bedroom during teenage years to practice ESC fandom. This is necessary, as at different stages of ESC fans' lives they develop knowledge about the associations between the ESC and gay identity. These associations are identified by Ben, who discusses how he conceals his ESC fandom by using camouflaging tactics; by listening to ESC music while he plays on his games console. This was prompted by suspicions that his Spanish teacher at school was gay. These experiences from school thus impose assumptions and stereotypes that relationally construct ESC music with gay identity:

It feels bad saying this, especially the connotations with what we're doing, but our Spanish teacher at the time was somebody who we thought was gay and there was a big rumour going around the school kind of thing. But he played us this song and was really into it and we were like 'yeah, it's a good song this one'. So, I actually went upstairs, I had a TV for the first year in my bedroom and I had the sound on one volume and I had my PlayStation going underneath, so I could switch it off straight away if anybody came up the stairs. So, it was completely not a family thing at all. I think I only would've told my parents once I was involved in it and I was doing things in the community.

Ben, straight male, age 28, British

Here the ESC closet is constructed as both metaphorical and material, but spatially negotiated between school and the bedroom (Brown, 2005). The bedroom provides a furtive space to practice one's fandom, whereas fandom has to be denied within the classroom because of a fear that it will be perceived as a challenge to other young men's heterosexuality, and that of the fan himself. Ben playing on his games console within his bedroom is an attempt to conceal his interest in the ESC because he perceives it as not being heterosexual. Listening to ESC music on low volume is necessary to not arouse suspicion about his fandom to his parents because of the anxiety that it could be interpreted by them as signalling a gay identity. There is also shame attached to Ben's narrative, particularly as he believed his parents would be unsupportive of his ESC fandom; this reproduces ideas surrounding the domestic home as heteronormative (Oswin, 2010) and his fan activity as transgressive and counter-cultural. The closet ontology that 'we cannot be in the world unless we are something we are not' (Brown, 2005:1) is relevant to the strategies that Ben deploys in negotiating his fandom in different social and domestic contexts.

ESC fans also emphasised that they would organise ESC-related events which would take place inside heteronormative public venues, such as pubs. In order to 'pass' and gain access within these spaces there is a need to practice an ambiguous fan identity. Ben discusses this in relation to organising an ESC event for his

university's ESC society. He explains that they dressed-up as boyband 'Blue', the UK's ESC representatives in 2011, in order to gain access to public venues:

> At university, it was very hard to go and find something that was Eurovision friendly for, certainly going out clubbing and stuff like that, but we'd have our own fun around some of the bars and we dress up as artists and things. My favourite one, was the week after Blue was announced we had a 'Blue social' so we all had to wear blue clothing, blue face paint and stuff like that. So, we were like Smurfs going around university of Durham. That's a very different community in that sense, just people getting together. Like most of the people in the group we had at Durham, they were my football and darts playing mates, so not your typical Eurovision fans.

Ben, straight male, age 28, British

Ben identifies the struggle in finding 'Eurovision friendly' places to engage with his ESC fandom, which reproduces public space as heteronormative. There is a need to disassociate from ESC fandom to 'pass' in public spaces, such as bars and clubs to assert a heterosexual male identity and this is achieved by dressing up and pretending to be Smurfs[44]. However, dressing up in this way is not necessarily masculine and Ben and his friends are disguising their fandom to some extent, and anybody 'in the know' about Blue participating in the ESC could understand why they are dressed up as Smurfs. There is a sense of ambiguity surrounding Ben's activities in order to limit suspicion of his ESC fandom and regulate its 'outness' (Sedgwick, 1990; Sedgwick and Frank, 1995; Brown, 2005), requiring him to adapt his behaviour to 'fit in' with local heterosexual clubs and bars. Ben's ESC fandom is closeted spatially and is embodied through closet practices of 'knowing-by-not-knowing' (Brown et al., 2011:124). Ben internalises his fan identity, but attempts to limit suspicion in terms of how it is expressed publicly within domestic and public space (Brown et al., 2011).

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[44] 'The Smurfs', created by Belgian cartoonist Peyo, were a Belgian comic franchise that centred on the lives of small blue, anthropomorphic creatures that lived in mushroom shaped houses in a forest. They also featured in animated television series, films, video games and they also covered popular music hits, which appeared on their album releases.

ESC fans do not necessarily travel far to organise and attend ESC events. For Ben and his friends, they move between Durham University campus and local leisure spaces (Holton and Riley, 2013), such as heterosexual public bars, to practice their fandom – their fandom becomes part of their student experience. In contrast, ESC fans also explained how they would co-organise ESC events in inner-cities. One straight male respondent Roland explained that he co-organised an ESC event in a 'liberal', not an exclusively gay pub in Peckham, South London. This was hosted by a drag act and featured a crowd of divergent sexual orientations and he emphasised that there were '…more straight people than I [he] was expecting there to be'. There is a relational geography of the ESC closet produced here that is based on the location of these heteronormative public venues – ESC fandom is camouflaged in Durham, but in London straight fans can 'come out' about their fandom. This builds on my argument in Chapter Four in that ESC fandom is fluid and permeates many different socio-spatial contexts. ESC fans of divergent genders and sexualities practice their ESC fandom in a diverse range of heterosexual and queer (such as Bar Broadway in Chapter Four section 4.4) public venues.

The construction of the ESC closet and embodiment of shame is socially and spatially specific, ranging from the domestic and family sphere, to public heterosexual spaces. These men do not necessarily travel far to practice their ESC fandom and they negotiate it within these socio-spatial contexts. However, they can still be 'found out' about their fandom in these spaces by anyone who knows what they are doing, for example, by watching national finals or dressing up as Smurfs. These straight male fans can be simultaneously in and out of the ESC closet at the same time and they negotiate its boundaries through camouflage in two ways: by using digital objects or dressing up to 'pass' as straight male ESC fans (Sedgwick, 1990; Brown, 2005). I will now discuss this in more detail and shift the discussion towards social encounters in which straight male ESC fans come out as straight and as ESC fans by travelling to ESC events and in daily social encounters

6.3 'I'm not gay, I just enjoy Eurovision': coming out as straight in ESC event spaces and daily social encounters

So far, I have explored the ways straight male ESC fans negotiate, conceal, camouflage, and regulate their fan visibility through the ESC closet and the strategies they implement to signal a fan identity to others. This section examines how straight male ESC fans come out as ESC fans and escape the ESC closet. I highlight how straight male ESC fans manage and negotiate their straight male fan identities as they move through and occupy different public spaces, and they constantly regulate and negotiate their fan visibility. I discuss these critical points in relation to ESC events (such as official fan club nights and the annual London Eurovision Party (LEP)) and in daily social encounters in public space. Consequently, I argue that as these straight male ESC fans move through and occupy different public spaces, they constantly regulate and negotiate their fan visibility. These strategies are necessary because of the shame that is often attached to practicing ESC fandom.

Straight male ESC fan respondents explained how it was assumed that they were gay in social encounters at ESC events. The presumed queerness of the event results in these men regulating the expression of their heterosexuality in order to 'fit in' to these spaces (Brown, 2005). These points are illustrated below by Martin B, who recounts a social encounter with a 'gorgeous girl' who described him and his brother as 'adorable' at the annual LEP event:

> Me and my brother found it hilarious when some girl turned around to us at the London Eurovision party and told us we were adorable! She assumed we were a couple, but because they didn't say it, you sound too defensive to say otherwise. So, this gorgeous girl turns around and says, 'you're adorable', me and my brother just nod on and say, 'thank you' and then laugh about it afterwards. It's not unusual for people to make that assumption. I just genuinely find it quite funny. It's not an issue, but people have asked. I think my brother does anyway and he starts saying 'how are you not gay?!'
>
> **Martin B, straight male, age 31, British**

Martin B assumes that the girl was referring to him and his brother through a queer subtext, as an adorable couple and not in a way where she could arguably be flirting with him and his brother. Even more intriguing, Martin B does not correct the girl and declare his heterosexuality and there is confidence between Martin B and his brother in moving through this ESC event space by closeting their heterosexuality in this social encounter. These men, however, are also seeking to experience something different in this social encounter. They are assumed to be gay that stretches the boundaries of their heterosexuality. The ESC closet is constructed here in the following ways: these men can be out about their fandom in this event space, but their heterosexuality is concealed and its expression is regulated (Sedgwick, 1990).

However, other respondents explained how they were assumed to be gay in social encounters, which resulted in them asserting their interest in women only. This is illustrated by Martin P, who recounts his experiences of attending the OGAE[45] UK 'Eurobash' event, an exclusive event that is open to members of the official UK ESC fan club:

> I think I had somebody, sort of, well at the first Eurobash I went to assume that I was gay […] and I basically said no, no, for me I'm only interested in women. They more or less looked at me shocked and you're going 'well you must have some straight people who come to these events surely?'. I think a lot of people, especially at Eurobash, which is obviously the main thing where it's more social, I don't think anybody is really there to pry into those things or pick anybody up or anything like that

Martin P, straight male, age 50, British

This quote demonstrates that through their assumptions and practices ESC fans at 'Eurobash' can inadvertently reinforce sexual orientation. These fans do this by rendering Martin P out of place on the basis of his heterosexuality and question his attendance. ESC events are not explicitly demarcated as gay or straight space,

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[45] OGAE is the French acronym for the 'Organisation Générale des Amateurs de l'Eurovision' which is the official international ESC fan club. It is an international network of 42 ESC fan clubs, of which OGAE UK is one.

and arguably can be considered 'mixed space' as was the case of Roland's ESC event earlier, but Martin P's example demonstrates the claiming of this space by gay men (Casey, 2004). This is co-produced through essentialist assumptions that gay people attend ESC event spaces to 'hook-up' for sex.

These quotes build upon analyses in Chapter Five, as these straight male ESC fans can also be shamed for being straight, but also accepted by some. These men also fear being shamed by straight people for being ESC fans, and by association seen as potentially gay. This also inverts the concept of the closet as ESC fans challenge straight men's sexual orientation, but also they are seen to be experiencing something different as they deny their straight identity in social encounters (Sedgwick, 1990). Across these online/offline spaces, there is a complex pattern of inclusion and exclusion that goes beyond the gay/straight binary. For example, many older straight male ESC fans reflected on their struggles to be 'out and proud' straight ESC fans within dominant heterosexual public space and in everyday social interactions. These feelings are also evident while attending ESC spinoff events and when practicing ESC fandom using social media platforms.

Straight male ESC fans are not just questioned about their heterosexuality while attending ESC events, but also as they move through public spaces as ESC fans. Roland discusses these experiences and identifies his strong connection to gay culture because of his family upbringing:

> I think there is some surprise that I'm a straight man who's that into Eurovision. I grew up with, well the equivalent to my godfather was gay and I sort of grew up with him as a second dad basically and so I grew up in a fairly liberal house with that sort of lifestyle being very matter of fact. So, I'm very comfortable with that sort of, that way of life. It has led people to say like 'oh you know, but you're straight'. I'm like, yeah, yeah and just really, really like Eurovision. But, I have connection to a lot of things in sort of gay or queer culture and connect with that and feel very comfortable with those things. But all of that being said, I am straight, which is a waste, but there you go!

> **Roland, straight male, age 28, British**

As a consequence of his upbringing, Roland has developed connections with gay culture through his close relationship with his godfather (Gorman-Murray, 2013). However, where the ESC is represented as a global platform for advocating LGBT rights, queerness and their visibility, Roland's quote suggests the existence of structural inequalities. This is evidenced by him being challenged as a straight fan for enjoying the contest, which is not perceived as being associated with the ESC – this reaffirms the view that the contest is associated with queerness. Straight male ESC fans also explained how they experienced shame in social encounters, when being out about their fandom. Phil D explores this below, when discussing his ESC fandom with a woman he was working with when delivering an event:

> I was out helping out at an event and I was talking to a girl there about Eurovision and there was a guy who said, 'can we get on and do things' and I said, 'we're having a chat about Eurovision here' and the guy said 'lovely, Eurovision's shit, now can we get on'.

Phil D, straight male, age 41, British

Shame is also co-produced in relation to taste as Phil D's interest in the ESC is constructed as 'shit' and as something anti-normative and contested. From these quotes above, the ESC closet is produced for these straight men around judgements made on the complex intersection of the contest's perceived music quality and sexuality. These fans struggle to come out as straight male ESC fans, without being subject to shaming from social encounters and conversations with non-fans. Similar experiences of coming out about ESC fandom, questions around taste and class distinction, and the cultural contestation of the ESC are shared by Callum below. His ESC fandom and heterosexuality are constructed as incompatible with each other and were directly challenged while attending school, even though he tried to conceal and camouflage his fandom by listening to ESC music on his iPod:

> I've been talking with friends a little bit about it [the ESC], listening to songs together I suppose. I did have a bit of an argument with somebody about it. It was at school actually, and he sort of asked what I was listening to on my iPod and I said 'Eurovision' and then he came out with these stupid

things, that 'Eurovision's gay, it's stupid…' And me being me I just had to defend it, and I would say I won the argument in the end. Now I think people are being a bit distasteful to Eurovision, and they see that somebody likes it and then they insult it and think it's all a bit of a joke.

Callum, straight male, age 18-25, British

Callum discusses the potent 'gender policing' that is targeted towards him because of his ESC fandom and the straight male students do not hesitate to assert their homophobia by using 'gay' as a slur, and associating Callum with a gay or queer identity (McCormack, 2013). These students use homophobic language to disparage Callum's ESC fandom and to push him back into the ESC closet (Sedgwick, 1990; Brown, 2005). Like many straight male ESC fans I have discussed in this section, Callum is not gay, but he is shamed for his fandom as the male students reassert the association between the contest and gay people as anti-normative and non-heterosexual (Hubbard, 2000; Bridges, 2014). This is intensified further as Callum's ESC fandom is not perceived to 'fit in' with other established heterosexual and masculine behaviours and norms within the school environment (Brown, 2005, 2006).

ESC fandom can be practiced across a diverse range of public spaces through which the straight male ESC fans that I have analysed so far negotiate their fan and sexual identities. Callum's quote emphasises that handheld music devices, such as his iPod, can also be a part of the production of an ESC closet where these identities can be negotiated. This develops arguments in section 6.2 as fans, such as Callum, determine the degree of 'outness' of practicing their ESC fandom by using digital objects, such as iPods, PlayStations and laptops (Brown, 2005). Access to social media and the internet through internet-enabled and smartphone devices stretch and break down the boundaries of the ESC closet across space and time (Brown, 2005; Schwanen and Kwan, 2008) – issues which will be examined in further detail in the next section.

6.4   Experiences of coming out of the ESC closet as a straight male ESC fan through the internet and social media platforms

Coming out of the ESC closet is often easier on the internet and on social media platforms, as it provides semi-anonymity and removes face-to-face barriers that can cause social anxiety (O'Riordan, 2007). In Chapter Five, however, I emphasised that practicing ESC fandom on social media platforms can prompt shaming from other fans and family and friends; self-managing and compartmentalising fandom is therefore necessary. This section moves this analysis forward to examine how straight male ESC fans are exposed and come out as straight when practicing their ESC fandom in social media spaces. I explore how these respondents are able to express something different when practicing their ESC fandom online, which can produce fluid heterosexual identities.

As I have argued in the previous chapters, ESC fans are dependent on the internet and social media to practice their ESC fandom. ESC fans also use these platforms as an intermediary through which they can meet and network with other ESC fans, who in turn help them to feel comfortable about attending ESC events – practices that echo my own personal experiences, which I described in Chapter One. This is also the case for straight male ESC fan respondents, who felt able to come out as straight male ESC fans when attending ESC events. Ian explains this below in relation to an ESC email list he participated in:

> After some persuasion, through the Eurovision mailing list I was persuaded to attend the Annual UK Convention, held in Rugby in 2001. I was terrified, I walked into a room full of Eurovision fans, not knowing anyone, but left having made friends. It was great to feel part of a community. Mostly gay men, (but some straight fans as well), but our love of Eurovision connected us all. I had a wonderful time, there was a Eurovision Disco which played songs that you would normally not hear. Met some wonderful people, who did not judge and were very accepting.
>
> **Ian, straight male, age 52, Australian/British**

Ian addresses how he had to be 'persuaded' to attend and legitimise his fandom at the Annual UK Convention. His experiences of being 'accepted' at this event

suggests that he felt an embodied shame regarding his fandom in other spaces. This is also echoed by Chris, who felt very accepted by the wider LGBT community when attending the ESC and practicing his fandom online:

'Spirit of the Night' WhatsApp group

> 08/03/2018, 21:18 - Chris: The gay thing is interesting for me now living in the US where there's none of that attachment. It's especially interesting for me as a straight guy
> 08/03/2018, 21:33 - Jamie: I wonder if the gay association is a British construction?
> 08/03/2018, 21:33 - Chris: Nope. Same in Australia for sure
> 08/03/2018, 21:34 - Chris: I'm thankful for being welcomed by the LGBTQ community who loves this despite being in my own community that is different
> […]
> 08/03/2018, 21:38 - Jamie: Has anyone presumed you're gay because of the association?
> 08/03/2018, 21:39 - Chris: Like I'm straight and work in professional sport so it's unusual for Eurovision
> 08/03/2018, 21:39 - Chris: That's a good question. I was married until April, so I don't think so but maybe back when I was in Australia
> 08/03/2018, 21:40 - Chris: In the words of a MelFest entry last year "I don't give a"

Both Ian and Chris above use language that draws parallels between LGBT experiences of coming out of the closet about their sexual orientation in public space (Brown, 2005). This moves analyses forward from Chapter Four, as these straight male ESC fans interpret the ESC event as a site for transgression, anti-normativity and queerness, where (hetero)sexuality is broken down and reconfigured. For Ian, there is a feeling of ambivalence, of venturing into the unknown, without knowing what to expect in terms of the social encounters he will make. This also shapes the ESC closet, because Ian comes out about his fandom through the ESC email list and then through the connections he makes online, he then feels able to attend an ESC event. Ian and Chris are able to escape shame and share solidarities with LGBT identifying fans at the ESC who also feel shame for their ESC fandom in other spaces (Gorman-Murray, 2013; Munt, 2019).

Yet, there remains a sense of unease in case their ESC fandom is outed to others, such as Chris's co-workers in professional sport (Sedgwick, 1990; Brown, 2005).

Straight male ESC fans also discussed how they have come out as straight male ESC fans in online social encounters. Shaun emphasises this point below, by describing how a Facebook group moderator questioned his heterosexuality, when requesting his permission to post a message on the group to arrange a meet-up of fans:

> I sent him [the moderator] a message just to say I'd like to arrange a meet up of fans, I'd always get his permission first cos there may be rules and he said that's fine. (In response) 'By the way, I hope you don't mind me asking, are you straight?' I found that quite funny, but I was like 'I'm not the only one, am I?' and he was like 'oh no, there's loads of others'. I've had people ask are you gay, are you straight but some people do think, assume that people in the Eurovision community must be gay, and I'm like 'well, no I'm not, but...'. So, people shouldn't make assumptions, but they're gonna ask. It's the sort of place where sexuality is very open.

Shaun, straight male, age 31, British

This builds upon analyses in Chapter Five, section 5.3, as Facebook Messenger can be a space which is less awkward but direct questions can be asked about Shaun's straight identity. This is compared to face-to-face communication that can produce questionable 'shocked' looks, as in Martin P's experience earlier. Shaun does raise the issue that fans should not make assumptions based on their sexual orientation, which extends the critical points made in Chapter Four, that ESC fans can practice ambiguous sexualities within ESC fandom. Practicing ESC fandom within Facebook Messenger enables these fans to play with their heterosexuality (Sedgwick, 1990; Gieseking, 2017), through a fleeting social encounter that takes place through the digital screen and at a distance (Chen, 2016). Facebook Messenger shapes the ESC closet; it encourages semi-anonymous identity making as Shaun is known, but also unknown to the Facebook group moderator. Within this socio-digital encounter, Shaun shapes the boundaries through which his heterosexuality is expressed, and to what extent it can be queered or negotiated.

These issues of semi-anonymity and expressing a straight identity through digital ESC fan practices also shapes the ESC closet and shame. Roland – who, alongside his co-host Isobel, hosts an ESC podcast entitled 'Europhoria' – discusses how he negotiates multiple Twitter accounts between his professional, working life, and his ESC podcast. Roland identifies that through his podcast, he is able to come out and avoid the shame about aspects of his heterosexual relationships and his ESC fandom by performing a camp identity:

> Roland: So, the 'Europhoria' podcast one… so it's a podcast rather than myself. So, it's a combination of Isobel and me. But we try and keep it non-specific as to the person who is tweeting each time. So, I'll speak about myself in third person quite often. I spend half my time on my personal account tweeting about the retail industry, which is fairly far removed from Eurovision. So, there's definitely two different personas and not just on Twitter, but sort of the way I present myself on the podcast as well is quite different to how I would present myself through work or generally.
> Jamie: How different?
> Roland: Probably leaning towards my camper side! Only because Eurovision sort of brings that out of me. But it's quite open, both sort of personally, sexually and sort of talk about relationships and stuff like that, it's quite sort of liberal and open whereas I can sort of go into business mode in sort of other avenues.

Roland, straight male, age 28, British

Through the podcast, Roland identifies that he embodies a 'camper' identity, which is closeted in other aspects of his social and working lives. He articulates an exaggerated male performance of camp; camp can be inclusive of other sexualities, in this case, Roland's straight identity (Cleto, 1999). The podcast, like Facebook Messenger earlier, can encourage semi-anonymity: Roland is known as a podcast host within the wider ESC fandom, and he is also unknown as fans do not necessarily know him intimately. Roland can delve into and share his personal and sexual life more deeply with his wider listenership. By adopting a 'camper' performance of identity, he is able to open up about the secrets of his heterosexual relationships. Similar to the social media platforms that I analysed in the previous chapters, the podcast collapses the distinctions between the public and private; it produces intimate engagement between non-proximate humans

and non-humans (Cockayne et al., 2017). In other words, because of podcast technology, Roland can express and manipulate an alternative straight male ESC fan identity in two ways: through the digital mediation of his voice and advertising his podcast using Twitter.

Roland's podcast displays closet characteristics, as it allows him to come out and simultaneously confine his fandom and his respective camp performance (Fuss, 1991; Brown, 2005), as he would not necessarily express himself in such a way in other social contexts. The way Roland performs his heterosexuality on his podcast is negotiated through a camp performance, and never fully queered (Bergman, 1993). He appears to do so in order to capitalise on and reach a wider online gay male audience for his podcast. These analyses move forward arguments from Chapter Five, where I identified Facebook and Twitter as ambivalently queer, as sexual boundaries can be reinforced and broken down (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a, 2017b).

I argue here, however, that these straight male fans stretch the boundaries of their heterosexual identities, and they also seem to be aware of negotiating sexual difference through their ESC fan practices. As I have shown in this section, the semi-anonymous nature of social media and the internet shapes multiple performances and contradictions in how these straight men come out, stay in, and regulate the 'outness' of their ESC fandom. Similar to existing theorisations of the closet, the ESC closet is also negotiated as in and out when practicing ESC fandom online in order to avoid suspicion and shame from others. Thus, these digital practices of ESC fandom continue to challenge the 'in or out' dualism of closet thinking. The data above emphasises that the ESC closet is performed differently across different socio-digital spaces and encounters (Sedgwick, 1990; Fuss, 1991; Brown, 2005). Similar to other ESC fans in the previous analysis chapters, these straight male fans also negotiate and strategically navigate how they perform their sexualities online in a socio-sexual arena that is embodied with queerness and ambiguity.

6.5 Has 'Eurovision made me gay'? Rethinking sexual desires through the screen

Straight male ESC fan respondents discussed the power of the ESC to encourage them to think about how they define their sexualities. Given the contest's focus on unity, transcendence of social and cultural differences and celebration of the 'extraordinary' (Bohlman, 2007), it has opened these men up to alternative expressions of their sexual orientation. The perceived ambiguity in identity representation surrounding the ESC event – an argument that I demonstrated in Chapter Four – also encourages straight male fans to participate in LGBT culture, particularly where they feel they struggle to 'fit in' in wider urban gay consumer spaces and LGBT events. I discuss the digital operations of the ESC closet in relation to internet and social media platforms, the television and the laptop and how, through these technologies, these straight men engage and practice their ESC fandom at a 'distance'. I argue that by engaging in the ESC and its fandom, it allows these straight men to think more fluidly about their sexual desires, but also reassert their heterosexuality.

The results reveal that straight men thought fluidly about how they express their sexual orientation. In an interview with straight male ESC fan Corentin, he explained how he has never attended the ESC but by connecting and networking with ESC fans online through social media platforms, he has been able to meet virtually with LGBT-identifying fans:

> …I think being with some LGBT people in the fandom made me think about it, kind of maybe opened my eyes and realised you don't have to be just in a box, you can go beyond that and you don't have to assume anything. Like, I guess it made me think about it, it made me wonder who I really was… But, I guess that maybe one thing that Eurovision did to me, not Eurovision itself, but being in contact with other fans, who happen to be part of the LGBT community, which seems to be rather important even though I refuse to label Eurovision as a gay or LGBT event. I guess this questions myself and who I was, at least when it came to my attraction to genders.

> **Corentin, age 21, straight male, French**

Corentin explains how he is curious about his attraction to the male gender; he would happily date another man but does not see himself having sexual relations with men. The ambiguity of the ESC enables Corentin to think about his sexual desires, without threatening his heterosexuality. By practicing his ESC fandom online, he can self-manage and stretch the 'outness' of his heterosexuality (Brown, 2005). Making regular connections online with LGBT fans shapes a queerness of heterosexuality that allows him to think fluidly about his sexual orientation (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a, 2017b), but also a queerness about the ESC and its fandom that collapses the distinctions between gay and straight.

By practicing ESC fandom, the results show that straight male fans feel they are able to transgress their straightness further by attending 'gay friendly' clubs. Corentin highlights this point, as he has yet to attend any gay clubs prior to practicing his ESC fandom:

> I'm in an engineering school and there is this gay friendly club there and I have a friend who is gay, and I thought next year maybe just going, just to talk with people. Like, I felt about going, I haven't done it yet but probably will next year. I don't know what I expect from that, but maybe just talk with people, get even more interested in LGBT issues.

Corentin, age 21, straight male, French

Participating in online ESC fandom has opened Corentin up to LGBT issues and culture, which in itself is 'friendly', thus open to inclusivity and easily accessible through multiple digital screens. There is a construction of the ESC closet around Corentin's fan and sexual identities; they are negotiated. He expresses an anxiety about coming out and attending gay clubs and venues to experience alternative sexualities. Coming out as an ESC fan online therefore encourages escapism from the shaming culture that permeates many ESC fans lives – issues which I highlighted in Chapter Five. However, coming out as an ESC fan in physical space poses challenges. Accessing and practicing ESC fandom through social media platforms is highly influential in regulating fan in/visibility.

By watching the ESC and participating in its fandom straight male fans were able to engage in/with LGBT culture. Practicing ESC fandom through multiple digital screens provides a certain level of distance for understanding the roles of gender, sexuality and behaviour in the contest. Alun elaborates on these points below:

> Now one of the things I have long thought about doing is going to a Pride march, but I've never actually been. One of the reasons that I don't think that if I did go to such an event that it would have the same effect, would be because I don't see myself as being as bisexual or gay. I see myself as being straight, so I would feel like it's not something for me, but I think Eurovision offers an opportunity for… it has such a large degree of ambiguity about sexual identity and gender identity, that it allows people to explore different ways of being, without it necessarily being about sexuality.

Alun, age 38, straight male, Scottish

At the time of interview, Alun also explained that he had not attended an ESC event and he experiences the contest by having house parties with family and friends. He watches the contest and practices his fandom simultaneously online, as he shares his thoughts in real-time as the event unfolds using Facebook on his laptop. The television and laptop screens encourage safe distance between Alun and the contest, as he is empowered to construct his own boundaries regarding how he expresses himself during his house party and through his Facebook posts. Alun is involved in complex practices of decoding the contest through the television screen and encoding his thoughts simultaneously via Facebook and amongst his house party guests. Through ESC fan practices, he is able to express alternative ways of being; a male and masculine identity that is 'emotionally expressive' temporarily (Messner, 1993:724) that transgresses gay/straight dichotomies. Yet, these binaries are upheld when Alun discusses attending Pride events as he questions his right to participate (Browne, 2007; Browne and Bakshi, 2011). The 'liveness' and 'eventness' of the ESC enables him to perform an alternative heterosexuality that is not necessarily expressed in other aspects of his daily life, which can produce an ESC closet. Thus, his house parties and expressing

his fandom through his Facebook posts allow him to come out of the ESC closet temporarily (Sedgwick, 1990; Brown, 2005).

For these straight male ESC fans, practicing ESC fandom routinely at house parties and through social media interactions provides a certain level of control and semi-anonymity in shaping heterosexuality and its visibility. These fans routinely hide their ESC fandom in other aspects of their daily lives, which contribute to the production of the ESC closet. However, when these fans do come out of the ESC closet and practice their fandom, they emphasise that they are able to perform alternative heterosexual identities. But at the same time, they construct their own boundaries to how they express their fan and sexual identities in online and offline spaces. Hence, these straight male ESC fans consistently negotiate how they express their fan and sexual identities within online and offline spaces.

6.6   Conclusion

In this chapter, I have flipped the concept of the closet on its head and developed the term the 'ESC closet' in order to analyse the complex ways that straight male ESC fans come out, stay in, and negotiate their fandom. I have examined a mosaic of ESC fan spaces through which the operations of the ESC closet take place: including bedrooms, the internet, social media platforms, and ESC events. Straight male ESC fans travel through and occupy these different spaces and negotiate their ESC fandom and its visibility. Issues surrounding publicity, privacy and knowingness in relation to the ESC and its fandom help to shape straight male ESC fan identities and inform the operations of the ESC closet (Sedgwick, 1990; Brown, 2005; Brown et al., 2011). The ESC closet is not simply about hiding sexual preference and ESC fandom, but it is about self-managing and regulating the 'outness' of being an ESC fan. As I have emphasised, the perceived dominance of queer ESC fandom, and the ESC's cultural contestation, can lead to feelings of shame and anxieties around assumptions of a gay male identity. Thus, straight male ESC fans regulate how they come out, conceal, and camouflage their fandom in online/offline spaces.

The straight male fan experiences highlighted in this chapter are only representative of the experiences and feelings of some straight fans and there are many more different straight male experiences of the ESC. Intersectional subjectivities such as age may shape their experiences of the ESC, and hence the construction of the ESC closet. It must also be noted that many straight men enjoy the ESC and engage in it openly with family friends, such as in their homes or on social media, and for whom it may not question their sexuality. What I argue here is true for some straight male fans, in that they can attend ESC events and use the internet and social media to come out and open up about their ESC fandom.

The 'eventness' or 'liveness' of watching the ESC or practicing fandom on the internet and social media is used by some straight male respondents to escape, even temporarily, from their heterosexuality and explore and express something different. Issues around technological savviness and where these fans are in their life course also shape how they express themselves online and practice their fandom. The analysis has revealed that straight men are able to think more fluidly in expressing their sexuality than they would necessarily be able to in other aspects of their lives. This builds upon arguments in Chapter Four and Five, where I emphasised that ESC fans feel that they are able to express a more ambiguous sexual identity. In this chapter, I claim that the straight male fans analysed here do not necessarily queer their identities, but they seem to be negotiating sexual difference, and be aware of it. The ESC provides a means through which they can maintain and stretch the boundaries of their heterosexual identities when practicing their fandom online.

Practicing ESC fandom online produces new constructions and negotiations of heterosexual visibility. Digital ESC fan practices continue to challenge the 'in or out' dualism of closet thinking and these straight male ESC fans are both 'in and out' about their fandom online (Fuss, 1991; Brown, 2005). The materiality of technology (e.g. smartphones and laptops) has opened up more space for straight male ESC fans to practice ESC fandom, such as engaging with multiple televisual

texts, such as ESC national finals online and attending ESC events. These digital objects provide a means of negotiating their ESC fandom, as it is often perceived as a subversive, furtive and queer practice that must be concealed, denied or camouflaged. They facilitate proximity and belonging to the contest and ESC fandom, but which is engaged in at a safe distance (Rose, 2016). This raises further questions surrounding the role of queer theory in understanding straight identity and constructions of straightness within dominantly queer contexts, such as ESC fandom.

Chapter Seven: Coming out in a 'Beautiful Mess'[46]: Conclusions

7.1   Introduction

This thesis has critically examined the intersection of fan and sexual identities within the digital spaces of Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) fandom. This chapter will revisit the primary aim and objectives of this research and how this thesis has achieved them. I will then address the four main contributions of this research which are as follows:

First, this research has contributed to digital research methods by developing and applying WhatsApp 'group chats' and an auto-netnography of my own Twitter network. I have demonstrated that these social media platforms can be used as qualitative data analysis tools to interrogate the shaping of sexuality within digital ESC fandom. Second, my analysis of digital ESC fandom advances ESC research by challenging work that has examined the contest as a 'gay event'. Third, I contend that digital ESC fandom advances theorisations of queer code/space. I argue that ESC fan practices on Facebook and Twitter produce queer ambivalent code/spaces. Through these practices, ESC fans re-invent, liberate, and constrain their identity making and shaping within social media within their networks. Fourth, I will demonstrate how this thesis has revived discussions regarding the closet, through conceptualising the 'ESC closet'. I contribute to knowledge about the closet by flipping the concept on its head. This thesis does this by examining how straight men negotiate their straight male fan identities through ESC fandom practices in their socio-digital lives. I contend that the ESC closet is a fluid process as these ESC fans are both in or out, and in and out of the closet about their fandom in digital and physical spaces. These processes are necessary because of the wider cultural contestation of the ESC, and the contest's associations with gay identity.

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[46] 'Beautiful Mess' refers to the Bulgarian ESC song from 2017, a love song about the struggles for love amongst political and social instability, performed by Kristian Kostov, that placed 2nd in the competition in Kyiv, Ukraine. Link to performance https://youtu.be/OMmm-G078LM (Accessed 04/09/2020).

Finally, I will identify the limitations of this research and develop its wider implications for future research. I make two recommendations: first, in order to investigate the role of identity and its performance within social media spaces, mixed-method approaches that include digital research methods and traditional qualitative data analyses are required. Second, I emphasise that this research has made a strong case for understanding how digital objects, internet and social media platforms enable ESC fans to negotiate their fan and sexual identities. Thus, I provide a recommendation that we can explore these digital practices by applying and developing the concept of the closet.

To recap, the Aim and Objectives of this thesis were as follows:

Aim
To examine the construction of sexuality within spaces of Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) fandom

Objectives
1. *To map the spaces of ESC fandom*
2. *To analyse the construction of fan and sexual identities within the digital geographies of ESC fandom*
3. *To critically examine how straight male fans, engage and express their identities within spaces of ESC fandom*

In section 7.2 below, I will identify how I have addressed these aim and objectives and demonstrate my contributions to geographies of digital, sexualities and fandom research.

7.2   Contributions to geographies of digital, sexualities and fandom research

7.2.1   WhatsApp 'group chats' as a digital research method

In order to examine issues surrounding digital sexuality within the ESC fandom context, I developed and applied the social media application WhatsApp as a digital research method to study these issues. WhatsApp has become embedded

within the daily lives of many people and is socially and culturally significant. Using WhatsApp as a social media tool to conduct digital research contributes to digital geographies by advancing ethnographic focus group methods and produces new forms of qualitative data. This thesis is unique in that it establishes the possibility and validity of using WhatsApp as a digital research tool in order to conduct digital-style focus groups, which I have termed 'group chats' (see Halliwell and Wilkinson, in press; Halliwell, 2020). Conducting and organising WhatsApp group chats moves forward geographic uses of in-person focus groups (e.g. Bedford and Burgess, 2001; Kneale, 2001; Conradson, 2005; Barbour, 2007) , but I also contribute to develop existing work that has experimented with WhatsApp to conduct diary techniques and interviews (Kaufmann and Peil, 2020) and focus groups (Chen and Neo, 2019).

As I argued in Chapter Three section 3.4.1, WhatsApp group chats offer the following advantages. They can pull geographically disparate groups together (such as ESC fans), so long as people own the appropriate technology (e.g. smartphones). They provide an alternative solution to conducting focus groups where in-person methods have become increasingly difficult because of the global impact and restrictions of COVID-19. WhatsApp group chats are different from conventional focus groups as they are instantly accessible, and participants are not together for a set time period (for example, 1 to 2 hours) – they are much longer. One advantage of this is that they mirror how people behave using social media as opposed to rather artificial focus groups of people in a room at a given time and location. The boundaries between the researcher and the researched are fluid and negotiable when conducting WhatsApp group chats. The scope for (semi-)anonymity of WhatsApp group chats and participants being known but also unknown to each other also helped participants and the researcher to disclose aspects of their socio-cultural identities and fan lives, which they might not otherwise have done. These group chats also allow participants to communicate in different ways, such as having the ability to share photos, messages, and emojis.

These characteristics of WhatsApp group chats can improve data capture and understanding of social processes.

There are limitations, however, in using WhatsApp group chats as a digital research method. The instantaneous nature of WhatsApp can lead to participants missing questions or responding to them too quickly. Thus, the researcher and participants must scroll back through the chat history to reply to questions missed. This, coupled with being absent from the group as a consequence of my other commitments, required me to re-contextualise discussions during the group chat period and/or data analysis. Moreover, in order to conduct WhatsApp group chats, the researcher and participants must own a smartphone to take part. This continues to be challenging as there remain digital inequalities within society (Rose, 2016).

This thesis, in relation to digital methods, has been experimental and creative in its nature. I have argued that in order to understand the social realities of individual and collective use of social media and the internet, qualitative digital methods are fundamental in developing this knowledge. This is necessary in order to advance our understandings regarding the performance of sexuality and how these identities are consistently brought into being and produce social realities within social media platforms (Sandover et al., 2018). The ever-evolving nature of social media applications and internet spaces, their infinite updates and changes to their interfaces, and the ways individuals use them require continued attention. Consequently, I argue for experimental digital and messy methods (Law, 2004; Dadas, 2016) that can enhance our knowledge surrounding lived experiences of the digital. I emphasise that adopting a netnography and a queer epistemology can disrupt normative research practices and produce flexible methodologies, which are required when doing digital research and deploying social media as research tools to investigate issues surrounding the embodiment of sexuality online (Porter, 2009; Kozinets, 2015; Dadas, 2016). Our everyday lives permeate multiple social media platforms and using digital research methods alongside

traditional forms of data collection (such as qualitative interviews) is fruitful for a holistic examination of identity making and reworking between the online and offline. This produces embodied data that are rooted within the digital context (van Doorn, 2011) in order to understand the spatial practices of identity making online.

7.2.2 The digital ecosystem of ESC fandom

This thesis contributes to ESC research by emphasising that ESC fandom is socially complicated and heterogenous. I have moved beyond analyses of national stage performances (e.g. Vänskä, 2007; Miazhevich, 2012; Cassiday, 2014; Johnson, 2014) and geopolitics (Sieg, 2013; Kalman et al., 2019) in the contest, and I have debunked existing literature that has underscored the ESC as an homogenous 'gay event' (Lemish, 2007; Rehberg, 2007; Singleton et al., 2007; Carniel, 2015; Fricker, 2015; Baker, 2017). I have moved forward this literature in the following ways: first, by examining digital ESC fan practices of gay men and how they forge associations with the contest and second, how bisexual and heterosexual male ESC fans practice their fandom, which has added complexity to the existing conceptualisation of the 'gayness' of the ESC and ESC fandom (Singleton et al., 2007; Motschenbacher, 2013; Baker, 2017). Even though some of my respondents still feel that the contest continues to be represented as a 'gay event', I have emphasised that sexual identity is distributed across a dynamic range of interconnected ESC fan spaces and mobile digital practices which go beyond the main ESC event.

In Chapter Four, section 4.2, I provided the first comprehensive analysis of the digital ecosystem of ESC fandom that stresses how ESC fandom is interlinked between digital and offline spaces, such as internet and social media platforms, and ESC event spaces (Van Dijck, 2013). I have argued that ESC fandom is always attached to ESC fans and travels with them as they move through different online and offline spaces. Smartphone and internet-enabled devices function as digital objects through which the ESC is engaged and accessed (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011)

and consequently provide endless opportunities to practice ESC fandom socio-spatially.

My analysis of ESC fan spaces has extended our knowledge of the production, expression and negotiation of fan and sexual identities. In Chapter Five 'Just click me with your mouse! (Or tap me with your finger)', I argued that fans self-manage and regulate the visibility of their fan and sexual identities. They do this by determining who they 'come out' to as ESC fans within social media platforms (such as ESC fan Facebook groups) and across them (such as Facebook and Twitter) – they compartmentalise their fan and sexual identities within these digital interfaces. This is necessary, as the contest has often been dismissed as not 'serious' and/or as trite (Fricker, 2015; Wellings et al., 2019) and perceptions of it as a 'gay event' can lead to stigmatisation of fans. However, self-managing fandom across social media platforms is highly complicated. Fans who seek to compartmentalise their fandom to a specific social media platform (such as from Facebook to Twitter) can still be 'seen', even if they are 'concealing' their fandom from other audiences, such as family and friends. This develops Truong's (2018b, 2018a) research on young people's nightlife practices and the sharing of these experiences online as fans navigate multiple social media platforms to make visible their ESC fandom.

7.2.3   *Practicing ESC fandom within queer ambivalent code/spaces*

Digital ESC fan practices challenge existing theorisations of queer code/space and I argue that they produce queer ambivalent code/spaces. I also contribute to ESC research by highlighting that socio-sexual networking through digital ESC fandom also challenges the widely perceived queerness of ESC fandom (Lemish, 2007; Singleton et al., 2007; Baker, 2017). I argue that my research does this by emphasising that Facebook and Twitter ESC fan practices are both liberating and constraining in terms of how ESC fans express their sexualities (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017a, 2017b; Gieseking, 2017). I emphasised in Chapter Five that social media platforms shape semi-anonymous identities; ESC fans are

simultaneously known but also not known to others. Thus, fan and sexual identity is reworked and manipulated through social media platforms, which shapes how ESC fans want to be seen across digital public spaces (van Doorn, 2011; Taylor et al., 2014; Truong, 2018b, 2018a). By practicing their fandom across multiple social media platforms, ESC fans self-regulate the visibility of their fandom and their gender and sexuality and produce and shape their identities in complex ways (Zebracki and Luger, 2019).

This thesis has moved beyond research that has solely focused on same-sex hook-up applications, such as Grindr (Bonner-Thompson, 2017; Miles, 2018), towards ESC fan practices within mainstream social media platforms. Where Grindr users are shamed based on their appearance, dress and deportment, my research advances this literature by highlighting that shaming cultures take place across the digital ecosystem of ESC fandom and are not constrained to one particular fan space. There is a complex relational geography with regard to shaming that permeates ESC fandom. As I argued in Chapter Five, ESC fans reproduce gay male stereotypes in the following ways: firstly, by criticising other fans based on their ESC music taste and forms of interest in the contest, and secondly, by sexualising and racializing ESC male artists through inter-textual readings of tweets. My analysis of digital ESC fandom undertaken here has extended our knowledge of queer code/space. Sexuality – through digital ESC fandom – is reproduced as ambiguous and broken down through practice online, which contributes to my theorisation of queer ambivalent code/spaces.

7.2.4 *The closet within digital times?*

This thesis has identified how a theorising of 'the closet' can be used to help us understand how individuals position and perform their identities online and across multiple social platforms. In Chapter Six 'Make Eurovision straight again!', I flipped the concept of the closet on its head, towards thinking about how straight male ESC fans negotiate coming out and staying in the ESC closet about their ESC fandom as they move through ESC event spaces and social media platforms. The

wider perception of the ESC as a popular form of entertainment for gay people (Lemish, 2007; Singleton et al., 2007; Baker, 2017), and the social and cultural contestation of the event (Fricker, 2013; Wellings et al., 2019), leads to straight men negotiating their sexual and fan identities within many socio-spatial contexts (Sedgwick and Frank, 1995; Brown, 2005; Brown et al., 2011). I have explored a series of relational and interconnected online and offline ESC fan spaces through which the ESC closet operates, including: camouflaging fandom in the private realms of the bedroom in the family home through digital objects, coming out as a straight male ESC fan online through podcasting and on Facebook and Twitter, and watching the ESC at a 'distance' through the television screen to participate in/with LGBT culture.

I contend that the ESC closet is about self-managing the 'outness' of being an ESC fan and not always about hiding sexual preference. The analysis revealed that straight male ESC fans stretch the boundaries of and express a more fluid heterosexuality within ESC fandom. For these men, the 'eventness' of watching the ESC or participating in ESC fandom enables escapism, albeit temporarily, from their heterosexual lives and they are able to explore something different. The semi-anonymous nature of the internet and social media enables these straight men to 'come out by coming in' to digital ESC fandom. They develop intimate, but also unfamiliar social networks in order to 'pass' as ESC fans (Brown et al., 2011). The straight men in my study negotiate and stretch the boundaries of their heterosexual identities online, but they are not fully queered.

The results of this study indicate that practicing ESC fandom online continues to challenge the closet's 'in or out' dichotomy, and I emphasise that ESC fans can at various times be both 'in and out' of the ESC closet online (Fuss, 1991; Brown, 2005). This thesis advances this literature by demonstrating how internet spaces and social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter, are technologically distinct in how the closet and ESC closet operates. Individuals are more in control of shaping which aspects of their identities they conceal, hide, deny or camouflage

within these digital spaces (Brown, 2005). Examining ESC fandom, coupled with its perceptions as a gay event and its culturally contested nature, reinvigorates discussions surrounding the closet in the digital age. People are consistently thinking about how to represent themselves and perform their identities within digital public spheres.

7.2.5   *Geographies of music, fan cultures and subcultures*

This thesis has made contributions to the geographies of music, fan cultures and subcultures. I have moved beyond work in geography that has studied the spatial dimensions of science fiction fandom and cyberfiction (Kneale, 1999, 2001; Kitchin and Kneale, 2001, 2002), the expression of identity within spaces of football fandom (e.g. Brown, 1998; Lawrence, 2016), and the decoding of popular media texts such as television and film (e.g. Gilmartin, 2004; Saunders, 2017). I have focused on the spatial dimensions of ESC fandom, and I have demonstrated how social media platforms have transformed the definitions of, and what it means to be an ESC fan. In Chapter Four section 4.4, I emphasised how by participating on social media platforms and by attending ESC events, these spaces provide alternative places where gay male fans express and negotiate their sexualities. These fans do this in social encounters, through listening and dancing to music and developing knowledge around ESC culture. The results indicate that representations of ESC music affect the moving body, which is then digitally mediated through social media platforms (Gallagher, 2016). The sharing of this content online assists in the production of fan and sexual identity. In Chapter Five section 5.4.1, I stressed how ESC music (such as 'Fuego' by Eleni Foureira) and its associated ESC stage performances (e.g., through pyrotechnics and dance routines) helps to shape queer male ESC fan identities on Twitter. Hence, ESC fans hear, feel and embody music and share and produce alternative narratives of ESC music across social media platforms (Anderson et al., 2005; Wood et al., 2007).

Digital processes and access to the internet have transformed existing theorisations on subcultures (Hodkinson, 2003) and subcultural capital (Thornton,

1995). I have demonstrated in this thesis that ESC fandom is practiced across a range of online and offline spaces that inter-penetrate each other. Fans distribute their fandom across these spaces and hierarchies and LGBT identities are distributed across them. In Chapter Four section 4.5, I examined one particular fan space, the ESC Press Centre, which produces a clear hierarchy within ESC fandom where ESC fans involved with IFCOs produce their own fan knowledge and differentiate themselves from mass media organisations and other ESC fans attending the contest (Williams, 2011). I have also highlighted how digital processes contribute to the formation of fan hierarchies and the breaking down, reworking, and reinforcement of ESC fan and fan 'work' identities. By having access to the internet, fans undertake their everyday fandom and IFCO practices anywhere. Hence, by using internet and social media platforms to practice ESC fandom, there is a perpetual blurring and negotiation between these identities (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008; Jenkins, 2014).

7.3 'Ooh aah… just a little bit, ooh aah, a little bit more…'[47]: Implications for further research

This research has made a critical argument regarding the complex technological distinctions of visibility with regard to gender, sexuality, and ESC fandom. It has made a strong case in identifying how ESC fandom is practiced across social media platforms and how these applications provide different levels of visibility. In order to ask further questions regarding these strategies of visibility within social media platforms, **then we need to deploy mixed-method approaches that incorporate digital research methods and traditional qualitative forms of data collection.** These mixed-method approaches are important, as they enable researchers to investigate the motivations and practices 'behind the screen' that shape the performance of gender and sexuality online. I argue that extracting digitally produced data and conducting research through digital applications, which I have

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[47] 'Ooh… aah… Just a little bit' by Gina G https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERBagZheWkk accessed 27/12/2020.

demonstrated is possible through WhatsApp group chats and qualitative data analysis of Twitter tweets, assists in conducting research on the participants' own terms (Leyshon et al., 2013).

I have advanced knowledge within this area by developing and applying a qualitative data analysis to Twitter tweets and WhatsApp group chats to investigate digital ESC fan experiences and how ESC fans digitally mediate their gendered and sexual lives. This can be taken further by creating and implementing mixed-method approaches that incorporate these digital research methods as well as traditional qualitative data analysis techniques, in order to understand the motivations for identity making and reworking online, both through and behind the screen. Within the ESC fandom context, this should include the role of ESC fan house parties, where guests can dress up, decorate their houses, and host a 'European' buffet. Future research must also include the role of social media in documenting ESC fan experiences and in engaging in 'live' collective viewings of previous contests on Twitter, such as the regular digital ESC fan event '#EurovisionTogether'[48]. In 2020, this event has shaped emotional connectivity with the ESC through nostalgia and sadness as a consequence of the cancellation of the ESC in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In pandemic times, the mixed-method approaches that I have applied in this thesis are essential in order to work under conditions where in-person research has become increasingly difficult.

This thesis has provided a deeper insight into how multiple digital objects can help people camouflage and negotiate ESC fandom within different public/private socio-spatial contexts. I argue that **we can understand these digital practices by striving to reinvigorate discussions around the operations of the closet**. There are many internet, social media platforms, and digital objects that produce different technological distinctions, spatialities and functions of the (ESC) closet

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[48] '#EurovisionTogether' is a regular digital event that involves watching previous ESC contest's on YouTube, where ESC fans can simultaneously engage with the event by 'tweeting along' on Twitter.

(Sedgwick, 1990; Brown, 2005). The closet operates as a metaphorical and material space through which gay people conceal, deny, erase, and camouflage, but also come out about, and negotiate their sexualities. These functions of the closet, as I have demonstrated in this thesis, can also apply to the ways people of different sexualities make visible their identities and socio-cultural lives across internet and social media spaces. I have emphasised in this thesis how ESC fans can be both in and out of the ESC closet simultaneously online. This advances Brown's (2005) work on the closet, as the 'digital ESC closet' first, challenges the 'in or out' dualism in closet thinking, and second, the ESC closet can be applied to the complex production and reproduction of other forms of sexuality, here notably heterosexuality. Hence, further work is needed to fully understand the implications of the spatial practices of internet-enabled devices and digital objects and how their technological distinctions shape the closet and hence the ESC closet.

My approach to the closet and the ESC closet can also be extended to understand a whole range of identities in today's digital world. Practicing ESC fandom online can provide respite for fans who may feel marginalised in other aspects of heteronormative society. The internet itself has also been constructed as dominantly heteronormative and revisiting the closet within the digital context can contribute to the intersections of queer, black and feminist analyses of the internet and social media (Cockayne and Richardson, 2017b; Jenzen, 2017; Elwood and Leszczynski, 2018; Elwood, 2020). Where my approach has focused on ESC fan and sexual identities, further research should also explore other intersectional subjectivities, such as race, age and gender, and the processes through which these people come out, negotiate, conceal and camouflage their identities across multiple social media platforms.

7.4   'Thank you for a wonderful show!': Concluding remarks

This thesis has made contributions to knowledge by advancing work on geographies of the digital, sexualities and fandom. First, with regard to methods, I have created and implemented original digital research methods to investigate

issues regarding the performance of fan, gender and sexual identity. I have applied qualitative data analyses of social media data, such as WhatsApp group chats and Twitter tweets in order to understand how identities are practiced through these technologies. I have emphasised that these qualitative methods are invaluable in conducting research in a (post-) COVID-19 world, where in-person research has become increasingly challenging.

This thesis has contributed to ESC research by breaking down the homogenous view that the contest is a gay event, by suggesting that it is much more heterogeneous. This project is the first comprehensive investigation that has mapped the digital ecosystem of ESC fandom, which consists of a dynamic range of online and offline spaces through which fandom and sexuality are practiced. I then broke this down further by studying the role of two social media platforms – Facebook and Twitter – as contexts through which ESC fans practice their fandom and express their sexualities. ESC fandom provides an alternative avenue through which LGBT ESC fans and others who may feel marginalised break down categories of sexuality. I have argued, however, that these barriers can simultaneously be reinforced, as ESC fan Facebook groups and ESC fan Twitter networks challenge the ESC's queerness. Thus, I have contributed to analyses surrounding queer code/space by theorising social media platforms, within the ESC fandom context, as queer ambivalent. Through ESC fan networking on social media platforms, ESC fans simultaneously break down, re-work, but also constrain and reinforce gender and sexual boundaries, norms and stereotypes.

Lastly, I have reinvigorated discussions regarding the closet in the digital age by analysing it within the ESC fandom context, by developing the notion of the 'ESC closet'. I have argued that ESC fans are also involved in complex negotiations of their fandom and its visibility within social encounters on social media platforms and as they move through public space. I have examined the ESC closet within the context of straight men's experiences of ESC fandom and how they are involved

in concealing, denying, and camouflaging their ESC fandom within their daily lives, as it is widely associated with LGBT culture and queerness.

Research Project

The spatial construction of identity within Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) fandom: Online and offline perspectives

Consent to participate in research study

The following information describes the research study in which you are being asked to participate. Please read the information carefully. After reading it you will be asked to sign the consent form if you agree to participate.

Purpose of study

You are being asked to participate in a study that is being carried out by Jamie Halliwell as part of his PhD research at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. The purpose of this study is to investigate how fan identity is expressed through digital platforms (such as social media) and through attendance at the ESC and its related events. It will also explore constructions and contestations of gender and sexuality through the contest and how these are interpreted by ESC fans.

Procedure

The researcher, myself, will conduct a digital style focus group through the messaging application 'WhatsApp' with yourself, myself the researcher and four other participants. You will need to download the free WhatsApp application from your smartphone's application store (or download it to your computer) in order to participate in this research. The WhatsApp group will remain open for a week, during the week that you have chosen to participate. The researcher will prompt discussions within the WhatsApp group frequently and will ensure that all participants are included. In each focus group, four participants will take part, plus the researcher.

You are being asked to:

- Engage with the WhatsApp group and discuss your Eurovision experiences throughout the week

- This can include, but is not limited to:
    - Sharing links/screenshots with the group regarding your online interactions with the ESC and its respective activities (such as national finals) on social media and the internet;
    - Sharing photos and videos with the group of how you are engaging with the ESC and its respective activities (such as national finals) during the week

Use of your information

The WhatsApp group will be exported (including messages, photos, videos and web links, where applicable) after 7 days and shall be analysed by the researcher only. If you do not want your data to be recorded, please inform the researcher and an alternative method shall be used. Respondents will be identified by first name; however, you have the right to remain anonymous if you wish.

The use of your phone number will only be used by the researcher to contact you and to place you inside the WhatsApp group for the purpose of this study. Please inform the researcher if you would like them to delete your mobile phone number, or remove you from the group after the completion of the focus group. Any information collected shall be destroyed/deleted on request. Should you wish to discontinue this research, please contact the researcher directly.

Confidentiality

The researcher will protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants and their data in compliance with the UK Data Protection Act 1988. Your personal credentials, such as your mobile phone number and name shall not be passed on to any third parties. Please could you also not forward any of the WhatsApp chat data to any third parties; respondents in the group must also respect these wishes. Information will be kept on a password secured computer subject to MMU Data Protection policies.

Risks

A risk assessment has been carried out, and I do not anticipate that you shall experience personal risk or discomfort in taking part in this study. The WhatsApp group should create a friendly atmosphere and lively debate. If the researcher observes any threatening or abusive behaviour towards any group member, or the sharing of inappropriate and obscene material in the group, the researcher reserves the right to remove you from the study.

The risk assessment form is available on request.

Costs

There will be no costs or payments associated with your participation in this study

Right to decline or withdraw

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to refuse to participate in the study or withdraw your consent at any time during the study. Your withdrawal or lack of participation will not affect the treatment you receive by the researcher. The researcher reserves the right to remove you from the study without your consent at such time that he feels is in the best interest for you and/or the research project.

Contact information

Jamie Halliwell (principle researcher for this project) will answer any questions you have regarding the purpose, procedures and outcomes of this project.

Email: jamie.c.halliwell@stu.mmu.ac.uk

Please contact the research team in the RKE Office at MMU if you have concerns about the researcher.

Email Clare Holdcroft: c.holdcroft@mmu.ac.uk

Participant agreement

I have read and understood the information in this consent form and agree to participate in this study. I have had the chance to ask any questions about this project, which have been answered.

By signing this consent form, you authorise the researcher to use information collected during the interview for the purposes of this study.

Your signature (typed is acceptable):   **Your mobile phone number (for the purpose of this research)**   **If outside the UK, please include international dialling code):**

Researcher's signature: **J. Halliwell**

Date:

Please indicate your 1st and 2nd preferred choices for your WhatsApp focus group slot below.

	1st choice	2nd choice
Saturday 3rd February – Saturday 10th February		
Monday 19th February – Monday 26th February		
Monday 26th February – Monday 5th March		
Monday 5th March – Monday 12th March		

Organisation of groups based on participant availability, as identified in the completed consent form

1 = first preference

2 = second preference (if 1st preference can't be met)

Flexi = available any time

3rd-10th Feb	**19th-26th Feb**	**26th Feb-5th Mar**	**5th Mar-12th Mar**
Euphoria	**1944**	**Rise Like a Phoenix**	**Shady Lady**
Will 1	Becca 1	Connor 1	Carlo 1
Edwin 1	Adrian 1	Matthew 1	Paul 1
Hanna 1	Anita 2	Carl-Ludwig 1	Iain 2
Aija 1	Gavin 1	Wayne flexi	Ewan 1
Heroes	**Amar Pelos Dois**	**Only Teardrops**	**Spirit of the Night**
Jas 1	Tom 1	Greg 1	Chris H 1
Emma 1	Rachel 1	Dean 2	Thomas 1
Michael 1	Daniel 1	Chris 1	Louis 1
Lucy 1	Nick Flexi	Troy 2	

Appendix C: WhatsApp group chat questions and topics structure

WhatsApp focus groups

Topics for conversation

Introductions

1. Get participants to introduce themselves: name, where they are from, age etc

2. How did you get into Eurovision and when did you become a fan?

3. What do participants enjoy about it?

4. How big a deal is Eurovision in your life?

5. Has anyone attended the contest?

6. Has anyone attended any other Eurovision-related events, such as EIC, LEP, OGAE fan events, national finals or any house parties?

7. How involved are participants within ESC fandom? (this can then link to questions surrounding use of social media and engagement with fan websites)

Eurovision, the digital and social media

1. How do you use the internet to engage with Eurovision?

2. How do you use social media to engage with Eurovision?

3. What social media platforms do you use to interact with Eurovision?

4. Do you use multiple social media accounts?

5. Do you think your digital presence differs across social networking sites?

6. How do you think social media has transformed the Eurovision fan experience?

Identity and Eurovision fandom?

1. How do you think your family and friends view your Eurovision fandom?

2. Has anyone criticised your fandom and can you give examples?

3. How open are you about your fandom?

4. Do you think the contest is perceived as a 'gay event'?

5. Is this also prevalent within the fandom?

6. Do you think that contest could be exclusionary, if it is marketed towards a gay audience?

7. Have you been in situations where people have claimed Eurovision to be gay?

8. Has anyone had their sexuality questioned because of their Eurovision fandom?

Eurovision events at the time (i.e. national finals)

- If a national final is due to commence, then discuss how participants interact with these in real-time (if they actively watch them)
- Can get participants to discuss what is going on in the national final, useful if no-one else is watching and explore issues surrounding identity representation through that.

Other points for discussion

National perceptions of Eurovision could be useful (intersections with nationality and gender and sexuality may come to light) – given a wider range of participants from different countries such as Australia.

National finals calendar (broadcasts that coincide with group chats)

Grand Finals: Malta and Switzerland 3rd Feb, UK 7th Feb (focus on the UK's position within ESC, the BBC's approach, anxieties of fans towards BBC production etc), Denmark and Italy 10th Feb.

Heats/semi-finals: Hungary, Latvia, Sweden, 3rd and 10th Feb, Ukraine 10th Feb, Romania 4th/11th Feb.

Research Project

*The spatial construction of identity within Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) fandom:
Online and offline perspectives*

Consent to participate in research study

The following information describes the research study in which you are being asked to participate. Please read the information carefully. After reading it you will be asked to sign to copies of a consent form if you agree to participate. You will be given one copy.

Purpose of study

You are being asked to participate in a study that is being carried out by Jamie Halliwell as part of his PhD research at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK. The purpose of this study is to investigate how fan identity is expressed through digital platforms (such as social media) and through attendance at the ESC and its related events. It will also explore constructions and contestations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ+) representations through the contest and how these are interpreted by ESC fans.

Procedure

The researcher, myself, will carry out a conversational style interview, which will last approximately 45 minutes in length and will feature semi-structured questions. You will be asked about how you got into the ESC, the ways that you are involved with the contest and also how you use digital media to engage the ESC. You will also be asked how you think the contest produces and reproduces socio-cultural categories of identity and how it relates to you.

Use of your information

The interview will be recorded, and information collected from interviews shall be analysed by the researcher only. If you do not want to be recorded, please inform the researcher and an alternative method shall be used. Respondents will be identified by first name; however, you have the right to remain anonymous if you wish. You have the right to discontinue the interview or decline to answer any questions at any time. Any information collected shall be destroyed/deleted on request.

Confidentiality

The researcher will protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants and their data in compliance with the UK Data Protection Act 1988. Your personal credentials shall not be passed on to any third parties. Information will be kept on a password secured computer subject to MMU Data Protection policies. A coding system will be maintained to ensure anonymity of respondents.

Risks

A risk assessment has been carried out, and I do not anticipate that you shall experience personal risk or discomfort in taking part in this study. This risk assessment form is available on request.

Costs

There will be no costs or payments associated with your participation in this study

Right to decline or withdraw

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to refuse to participate in the study or withdraw your consent at any time during the study. Your withdrawal or lack of participation will not affect the treatment you receive by the researcher. The researcher reserves the right to remove you from the study without your consent at such time that he feels is in the best interest for you and/or the research project.

Contact information

Jamie Halliwell (principle researcher for this project) will answer any questions you have regarding the purpose, procedures and outcomes of this project.

Email: jamie.c.halliwell@stu.mmu.ac.uk

Please contact the research team in the RKE Office at MMU if you have concerns about the researcher.

Email Clare Holdcroft: c.holdcroft@mmu.ac.uk

Participant agreement

I have read and understood the information in this consent form and agree to participate in this study. I have had the chance to ask any questions about this project, which have been answered.

By signing this consent form, you confirm that you are 18 years old or over and you authorise the researcher to use information collected during the interview for the purposes of this study.

Interviewee's signature: _____

Researcher's signature: _____

Date of interview: _____

Explain the sections that will come up:

1. Ask about involvement with Eurovision

2. Explore the ways in which they associate with Eurovision (what form does their interest take and how do they practice their fandom)

3. Interactions with the contest on social media and the internet and how they interact with other fans both online and offline

Background: How did they get involved with Eurovision?

      Age (circle)   18-25   26-35   36-45   46-55   56-65   66+

Gender:

Sexuality:

Nationality:

Theme 1: Identity

1.1: Background and involvement

- Why are you interested in Eurovision?

- What form(s) does your interest take?

- In what ways are you involved?

- How do you practice your Eurovision fandom? (E.g. parties, watching, merchandise)

- What elements of Eurovision do you associate with and why? (music, countries, artists…?)

- Have people questioned or criticised your Eurovision fandom?

- Do you practice any other forms of popular culture alongside Eurovision?

1.2: Representations of identity

- In what ways do you think Eurovision projects images of gender?

- In what ways do you think Eurovision projects images of sexuality?

- How important do you think these are in Eurovision?

- Do you think that having a national and/or European identity is important in being a Eurovision fan?

Theme 2: Internet use and social media

2.1: Internet use

- How do you use the Internet to practice your Eurovision fandom?

- What Internet sites do you use?

- What can these sites offer you?

- How does the Eurovision experience differ between being online and offline?

2.2: Social media

- How do you use social media to interact with Eurovision?

- What social media sites do you use?

- What do these services offer you?

- How do you identify yourself on your social media?

- Do you use separate social media accounts?

- Do you post links to images, websites and videos on your social media?

- Do you use Hashtags?

- Do you follow Eurovision artists, news sites, and other Eurovision fans…?

2.3: Community

- Do you think you belong to a Eurovision fan community online?

- If so, how do you think you contribute to it?

- How does this differ from offline Eurovision interactions?

- How important do you think it is for Eurovision fans to become increasingly closer to Eurovision participants?

Ask respondent to sum up the Eurovision in one sentence

Is there anything you would like to add?

Appendix F: Interview schedule for bisexual and straight male ESC fans

Introduction

Explain the format first

Name, age, gender, sexuality, nationality and occupation

- Background and development

  - How did you get into Eurovision?

  - What is it about Eurovision you enjoy?

  - When did you become a Eurovision fan?

  - To what extent does your Eurovision fandom take? (i.e. watching/attending national finals)

  - How big a deal is Eurovision in your life?

  - What does Eurovision offer you, that other events may not?

  - Do you have any other hobbies outside of Eurovision?

- Attending and participating in Eurovision-related events

  - Are you a member of any fan clubs (e.g. OGAE)?

  - Do you participate in fanzines, such as fan websites, blogs, podcasts or radio?

  - Have you attended any Eurovision house parties?

  - Could you recount any experiences that you have had from attending the Eurovision Song Contest and/or its subsidiary events, such as London

Eurovision Party, OGAE fan club events, Eurovision in Concert, Amsterdam?

- Do you collect merchandise from Eurovision and/or other Eurovision national finals?

- What pieces of merchandise do you treasure and why?

- Eurovision, social media and the internet

  - When did you start using the internet and social media to engage with Eurovision?

  - What internet sites do you use?

  - What do they offer you?

  - What social media sites do you use to engage with Eurovision?

  - How do you use social media to engage with Eurovision?

  - Who do you follow on social media platforms? Why?

  - Are there particular accounts and/or people you avoid? Why?

  - Do you use separate social media accounts?

  - How do you present yourself on your social media accounts?

  - Do you think your digital presence/persona differs between social media accounts?

  - Can you recount any experiences that you've had with fans in engaging with Eurovision online?

  - How is the online Eurovision experience different to being offline?

- Community

  - Do you think you belong to a Eurovision fan community online?

  - Do you think you belong to a Eurovision fan community offline?

  - Do you think there is a difference between the two?

  - How do you think you contribute to the Eurovision fan community?

- Identity and Eurovision fandom

  - How do you think your family and friends view your Eurovision fandom?

  - Has anyone criticised your Eurovision fandom? Can you give examples of times when people have criticised you for it?

  - Do you think that Eurovision is perceived as a gay event?

  - Have you been involved in situation where people have claimed Eurovision to be gay? If so, how did you respond to that?

  - Has anyone questioned your sexuality because of your Eurovision fandom?

  - Has Eurovision helped you come to terms with your sexuality? (if applicable)

Appendix G: Journal article – '"All kinds of Everything" Queer visibility in online and offline Eurovision fandom'

Halliwell, J. (2018) '"All Kinds of Everything"? Queer Visibility in Online and Offline Eurovision Fandom.' *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 13(2) pp. 113–120. DOI: http://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.289

COMMENTARY

'All Kinds of Everything'? Queer Visibility in Online and Offline Eurovision Fandom

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The annual televisual spectacle, the Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) is an international media event that is a nexus around which questions surrounding identity surface. This paper focuses specifically on the contest's active promotion of queer visibility, that intersects through national stage performances and its international fan base. It untangles the relationship between the contest and its problematic construction as a 'gay event' and how fans are increasingly using social media platforms to legitimise their fan and queer identities. Mainstream social media platforms, such as Twitter are an important site where issues surrounding queer visibility may be expressed and constructed. These ESC fan practices are contextualised in relation to literature surrounding male same-sex hook-up apps which can inform our ideas surrounding queer code/space. It also suggests that fans self-regulate who or how they 'come out' as ESC fans which establishes an ESC closet because the ESC is prone to stigmatisation in some national contexts.

Keywords: Social media; sexuality; Eurovision Song Contest; fandom; geography

Introduction

The Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) has been used as a platform for celebrating the diverse cultures and languages that exist around Europe (Sieg, 2012; Skey, et al., 2016); a diversity which can also be seen in the ESC's international fan base. The contest has also frequently become a platform of queer visibility, actively encouraging the promotion of non-heterosexuality as normative on an international scale (Bohlman, 2007; Mitrovic, 2009; Vänskä, 2007). Thus, the contest is highly popular amongst LGBT individuals and groups, but it is not explicitly a 'gay event'. This paper argues that ESC fandom is a nexus through which issues surrounding queer visibility are expressed and constructed. This occurs within national stage performances and the contest's production, but also within its international fandom. This paper also explores the way in which the ESC is kept alive through digital and social media platforms and how these technical mediators are used by fans to access ESC-related information and to forge like-minded transnational networks. This allows the contest to further promote inclusivity since it becomes accessible beyond the television screen and does not necessarily need to be attended in person. The ESC also intersects with wider issues surrounding how we express and situate our fan identities and sexualities within the landscape of the digital realm. It further problematises

<u>Appendix H: Journal article – 'Applying Social Media Research Methods in Geography Teaching: Benefits and Emerging Challenges?'</u>

Halliwell, J. (2020) 'Applying Social Media Research Methods in Geography Teaching: Benefits and Emerging Challenges?' Journal of Geography, April, pp. 1–6. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/00221341.2020.1755717

Applying Social Media Research Methods in Geography Teaching: Benefits and Emerging Challenges?

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ABSTRACT

Students embody themselves within social media platforms and (re)craft their identities within social media platforms. These interfaces enable students to think critically regarding human geographic issues online and raise awareness of their positionalities in using ever-changing technology. This paper analyses how social media research can be developed into pedagogy, in relation to research that uses WhatsApp and Twitter as research methods to explore issues around identity within Eurovision Song Contest fandom. It argues that higher education institutions need to be continuously aware of the increasing need for digital integration into undergraduate geography teaching, fieldwork and pedagogy.

KEYWORDS
Social media; digital ethics; teaching; digital learning

Introduction: Digital transformations

Academics and researchers are encouraged to engage with new creative ways to engage students within undergraduate teaching. Digital methods are one such way to connect with students, which can include using virtual learning environments, conducting 'Kahoot' quizzes; and also facilitating 'mobile learning' techniques that use tablet devices to stimulate collaborative learning in unprecedented ways (Ally 2009; Melhuish and Falloon 2010). Social media[1] platforms, such as Instagram and Twitter can also be deployed as mobile methods in the classroom. These applications can encourage students to think critically about the deeper held meanings of the digital in our daily lives and the spatiality of information and communication. This can shape their self-awareness and self-reflexivity of how they use technology in their social interactions within their socio-cultural lives.

For academics, we are increasingly reliant upon using the internet and social media to disseminate our findings to a range of audiences, as well as to network with others. For geographers engaging within the digital realm, there is a need to examine its power within everyday socio-spatial relations (Ash, Kitchin, and Leszczynski 2018). This includes understanding the mechanical infrastructures that influence socio-spatial and economic processes, but also their contribution to human connectivity (Rose 2016). Digital embodiment is increasingly common through the influence of the internet and social media. As Haraway (2006) famously noted, cyborgs (and digital interfaces) have encouraged us to think about how our bodies go 'beyond the skin'. Haraway's 'cyborg politics' suggests how the digital influences subversion of the structures of language, desire, identity and social relations and how they can be recrafted by humans within

digital platforms (Maliepaard 2015; Rose 2016; Jenzen 2017; Truong 2018a, 2018b).

Given these approaches toward digital geographic thinking, we also need to be informing students of the importance of the digital in daily life. Access to smartphone technologies and social media usage amongst young people is ubiquitous and are popular methods for communication and sharing information. Where students are increasingly digital savvy and become intrinsically reliant on digital communication to practice student identities (Holton 2019; Holton and Harmer 2019), digital methods are increasingly permeating their research projects. Academics have examined how students deploy social technologies to facilitate communication during fieldwork between group members and within public networks (Welsh et al. 2013; France et al. 2015). Where this research has been fruitful, social media offers more dynamic possibilities in shaping student research design. We are increasingly dependent on the digital in shaping our social, cultural, economic and political worlds; that also provide multiple media interpretations of these issues. I argue that academics and university ethics boards continually need to keep up-to-date regarding the potentials of using digital research methods within teaching and research as they are ever-evolving. Academics should also develop knowledge from students regarding how they use technology and social media to engage and practice their social and cultural lives. To do this, similar to other geographers (see Hall 2009; De Jong 2015; Wilkinson 2016), I use auto-ethnography to reflect firstly on the application of social media in my own research that used the social media applications WhatsApp and Twitter to explore issues around the geography of fan and sexual identity within Eurovision Song Contest (ESC) fandom. From identifying this digital

Appendix J: Book chapter – 'Mobile phones, text messaging and social media' (with Samantha Wilkinson)

Halliwell, J. and Wilkinson, S. (in press) 'Mobile phones, text messaging and social media.' In von Benzon, N., Holton, M., Wilkinson, C., and Wilkinson, S. (eds) Creative methods for human geographers. London: SAGE.

1   **Chapter 22: Mobile Phones, Text Messaging and Social Media**

2   Jamie Halliwell, Manchester Metropolitan University

3   Samantha Wilkinson, Manchester Metropolitan University
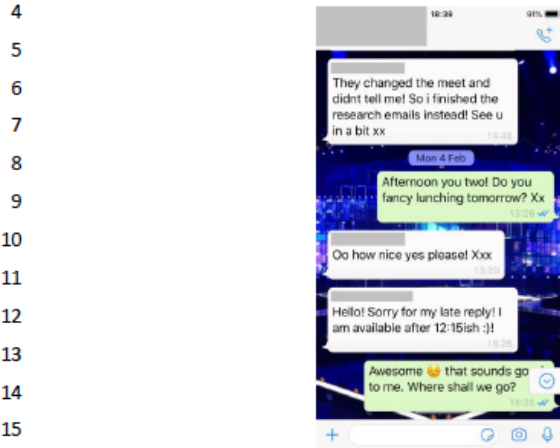
16 **Figure 22.1: Screenshot of a WhatsApp group chat featuring three participants.**
17 **Source Halliwell (2019)**

Summary

Mobile phone methods, specifically social media and text messaging, offer novel means of researching with participants. They are beneficial for engaging with the everyday lives of participants in ways that are culturally credible for them. This chapter introduces you to mobile phones and social media as research methods, and encourages you to:

1- Critically engage with academic literature that discusses mobile phones and social media as research tools.
2- Explore different means through which mobile phones and social media can be enrolled as research methods.
3- Engage with researchers' own reflections of using social media in practice to conduct geographical research.
4- Reflect on how identities may be performed differently between, and within, different social media platforms.

21 **22.1 Introduction**

22 In this chapter, we discuss how access to mobile phones and social media, through

23 smartphone technologies, has revolutionised the ways individuals organise their social and

24 cultural lives. The increasing ubiquity of mobile phones, and their continual technological

1

Appendix K: Thesis ESC soundtrack

The following list of songs are referred to in this thesis, which can be watched and listened to by clicking on the following YouTube links:

- 'It's my life' by Cezar https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgHWFiavqjA, accessed 27/12/2020.

- 'Minn hinsti dans' ('My final dance') by Paul Oscar https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyt3nv3eCik, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'Screens' by Sander Sanchez https://youtu.be/zvbZwPr9zYQ, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'Waterloo' by Dana International and Conchita Wurst https://youtu.be/8Z6_RXwRTa8, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'Arcade' by Duncan Laurence https://youtu.be/R3D-r4ogr7s, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'Toy' by Netta https://youtu.be/84LBjXaeKk4, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'Wild Dances' by Ruslana https://youtu.be/10XR67NQcAc accessed 03/06/2020.

- '1944' by Jamala https://youtu.be/B-rnM-MwRHY accessed 03/06/2020.

- 'Party for Everybody' by Buranovskiye Babushki https://youtu.be/BgUstrmJzyc accessed 03/07/2020

- 'Dancing Lasha Tumbai' by Verka Seduchka https://youtu.be/hfjHJneVonE accessed 03/07/2020

- 'Molitva' by Marija Šerifović https://youtu.be/FSueQN1QvV4 accessed 03/07/2020

- 'Never Let You Go' by Dima Blian https://youtu.be/waYpnAexrUA accessed 03/07/2020

- 'Believe' by Dima Bilan https://youtu.be/-72s4WzUcKI accessed 03/07/2020

- 'Diva' by Dana International https://youtu.be/fZ5B6w-Baxs accessed 03/07/2020

- 'Rise Like A Phoenix' by Conchita Wurst https://youtu.be/QRUIava4WRM accessed 03/07/2020

- 'Making your mind up' by Bucks Fizz https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iua3QxRoj1I accessed 27/12/2020.

- 'Heroes' by Måns Zelmerlöw https://youtu.be/5sGOwFVUU0I accessed 5/1/2021

- 'Shady lady' by Ani Lorak https://youtu.be/L6M300uBc7U, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'Spirit of the night' by Valentina Monetta and Jimmie Wilson https://youtu.be/UC7QzXPnt6k, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'Amar Pelos Dois' by Salvador Sobral https://youtu.be/Qotooj7ODCM, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'Euphoria' by Loreen https://youtu.be/Pfo-8z86x80, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'Only teardrops' by Emmelie de Forest https://youtu.be/p3f9v8ebuD4, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'Party voice' by Jessica Andersson https://youtu.be/lPt0FuYqKdU, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'This time' by Monika Linkytė and Vaidas Baumila https://youtu.be/xtB_slM63JA, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'Marry me' by Krista Siegfrids https://youtu.be/dlBXOveVh7c, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'The social network song (oh oh – uh – oh oh)' by Valentina Monetta https://youtu.be/PqwBh9hq9PE, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'I didn't know' by Serhat https://youtu.be/HzPkDb2FSeg, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'Say na na na' by Serhat https://youtu.be/d_iEis_ZRoQ, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'Truth' by Chingiz https://youtu.be/D6vvuCiHwSs, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'X my heart' by Aisel https://youtu.be/1CUwIpqUuvA, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'Fuego' by Eleni Foureira https://youtu.be/vyDTbJ4wenY, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'Together' by Ryan O'Shaughnessy https://youtu.be/QD1cQ2wZ1dk, accessed 5/1/2021

- 'Beautiful mess' by Kristian Kostov https://youtu.be/OMmm-G078LM, accessed 04/09/2020

- 'Ooh… aah… Just a little bit' by Gina G https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERBagZheWkk, accessed 27/12/2020.

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