

Virtual Masquerade: Understanding the Role of Twitter's Alter Community in the Social and Sexual Engagements of Men Who Have Sex with Men

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Abstract

Little is known about how Twitter is used for sexual engagements. This study aimed to explore the online community of anonymous accounts in Twitter called "Alter" in terms of users' process of initial exposure and eventual involvement into the online community, the users' typical online behavior within the virtual community, and their reasons for engaging in it. A sample of 11 men who have sex with men (MSM) who actively engage with other Alter accounts were the participants of the study's online ethnography of the Alter community. Data were collected by means of interviews and observations. Through thematic analysis, results indicated that sexual satiation runs the online community, yet Alter has been augmented by more complex social benefits including network formation, advocacy sharing, and provision of emotional support and safe space. In sum, Alter Twitter is a tool of Filipino MSMs not just to express and search for sexual gratification but also make meaningful interactions. The Alter community affords these individuals a venue to express themselves sans the consequences to their social life should these accounts become known to people who know them outside of the Internet.

Keywords: Alter • men-who-have-sex-with-men (MSM) • online behavior • social networking sites • Twitter

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Introduction

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES (SNSs) are defined as services which “allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd and Ellison 2007, 211). With the advent of SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter, communication has advanced enough to blur traditional conceptualizations of time and space (Baym and boyd 2012).

The growing proportion of the population of people who have access to the World Wide Web in daily life has consequently made researchers investigate the Internet as a social phenomenon. Some scholars studied the relationship between SNS use among the youth and its relationship with issues such as academic performance (e.g., Paul, Baker, and Cochran 2012; Al-Yafi, El-Masri, and Tsai 2018; Azizi, Soroush, and Khatony 2019) and self-esteem (e.g., Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten 2006; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007; Steinfield, Ellison, and Lampe 2008). There are also studies about youth sexuality within the context of online dating sites. Many of these explored dating and romance (e.g., Finkel et al. 2012; Hall 2014; Van Ouytsel et al. 2016), how dating can lead to cyber dating abuse (e.g., Zweig et al. 2013; Borrajo, Gámez-Guadix, and Calvete

2015; Ouytsel, Ponnet, and Walrave 2016), and behavioral risk factors (e.g., Young, Szekeres, and Coates 2013; Holloway et al. 2014; Chiu and Young 2015). As social networking sites are used for mate selection, sexual health awareness is also propagated online. A systematic review by Taggart et al. (2015), for instance, revealed that social media is a tool to engage individuals in issues about human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) prevention and treatment.

Prior to the advancement of the Internet, MSMs formed connections, romantic and sexual relationships in closed and physical spaces ranging from bathhouses to public toilets which became the focus of the famous tearoom sex study by Humphreys (1970). However, in these public spaces, anonymity is difficult for closeted men to maintain and the risk of being “outed” is high (Groves et al. 2014). The pressure to conform in heteronormative societies and stigmatization of sexual minorities made MSMs turn to a less-threatening space, the Internet, as a venue to form bonds and networks (Gudelunas 2012). As Castañeda (2015) puts it, SNSs and geo-social networking applications for MSMs are “emergent technologies [utilized] as a means of overcoming the barriers of traditional spaces” (p. 31).

Twitter is one of the most popular social networking sites used by Filipinos. In fact, the number of Twitter users rose from 5.5 million in 2014 to 10.4 in 2019 (Statista 2019). In 2014, Labucay recorded that it is more popular in Metro Manila especially among the 18-34 age group. Within Twitter is a subculture called Alter community. It is a loose connection of Twitter users who access the online platform using accounts distinct from the accounts known to their friends, colleagues, and relatives. The accounts involved in this community feature the alternate persona of Twitter users anonymous to everyone. These users can exhibit behaviors and thoughts considered by those who know them outside of the Internet to be deviant in nature.

The researchers are interested in exploring Alter use among Filipino MSMs to provide understanding of this online subculture. Particularly, their initial exposure to it, their reasons and motivations for continued usage, and their online behaviors were investigated. The

study serves as pioneer research about the Alter community. Thus, this research aims to serve as ground for other researchers who would like to study other aspects of online community. For this paper, the term *Alter* refers to the anonymous Filipino MSMs utilizing Twitter for their social and specifically sexual engagements in which anonymity is highly preserved.

Research Methods

The approach of the study was inspired by the principles of grounded theory wherein the questions given to the participants did not follow a predetermined conceptual framework (Moreira and Dupas 2003 as cited in Dantas et al. 2009). In ground theory approach, the questions emanated from generally unstructured conversations with the participants. As inspiration, the researchers decided to develop questions while on the field as the exploration ensued instead of limiting to predetermined questions.

The researchers made use of observations of Twitter's Alter community and face-to-face interviews of Alters as a form of an online ethnographic study. Ethnography was used because it allows for in-depth explorations of shared meanings and practices of a community where little prior information is known. Moreover, it was the most appropriate method because the unit of analysis is characterized as a culture-sharing group (Cresswell 2012).

Potential interviewees were invited to participate in the study by being contacted through Twitter's direct messaging [DM] function. A total of 11 MSMs with ages ranging from 18 to 29 years and had actively using Alter Twitter for the past one year (i.e., liking, retweeting, using the direct messaging function, or tweeting, etc.) prior to the conduct of the study became the study participants. The participants were from the National Capital Region and CALABARZON in Northern Philippines. To protect the identity of the study's participants, the researchers assigned codes for each of the participant's name and alternate account name during the analysis of the qualitative data. Thematic analysis was performed to analyze verbatim transcripts.

Data were gathered through a semi-structured face-to-face audio-recorded interviews. Interviews were transcribed to give verbatim data. Substantial care was made to observe the triad principles of autonomy, beneficence, and equity in accordance with the ethical norms of sociological research. In accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012, participant identities were treated with utmost confidentiality and data were anonymized. All forms of data were stored in the cloud. Audio recordings were deleted after transcriptions. After publication, the transcriptions were also deleted. Prior to the interview, full details of the goals of study were explained to the potential participants. All participants were given the option to participate after both the intentions of the study and the potential risks were explained in accordance with the principle of informed consent. After giving oral consent to participate in the study, a written informed consent form (in duplicate copies) was handed over to the participant for their respective signatures. All participants gave their informed consent and were personally met by one of the researchers.

Findings

Motivation and Initial Exposure to Twitter's Alter Community

Many of the participants revealed that their creation of Alter accounts was motivated by libido. Hence, these Alter accounts are also regarded as *libog* (lust) accounts. In the case of some of the participants, their exposure to the Alter community came as an unintended consequence after making dummy accounts for the purposes of "following" the Twitter accounts of porn websites and individuals. From there, they learned more about the group of anonymous MSMs in Twitter. Meanwhile, some of the participants of the study were introduced to Twitter's Alter community by peers who were already knowledgeable about the matter. For others, it was because of accidental exposure while browsing Twitter.

Online Behavior of Alter Account Users

The prominent features of Twitter include tweeting, retweeting, and posting replies and

mentions, and using hashtags. These functions were observed to be used not just for sexual purposes but also for non-sexual ones too.

Posting a tweet. Tweets are categorized by the researchers according to the following - text tweets, photo tweets, and video tweets.

Non-sexual text tweets consist of Alter account holders telling their followers about their whereabouts, school events and other academic-related matters, political opinions, daily greetings, love-life updates, and their daily zodiac forecasts. Sexual text tweets consist of invites for a meet-up and consequent sexual intercourse.

There are also two advocacies observed to be supported in Alter. One is HIV/AIDS awareness where users remind others to always use protection and get tested to know one's status. Many Alters also follow and retweet posts of the LoveYourself Inc., a community-based organization promoting safe sex and HIV testing. The other advocacy is the call to stop posting sexual photos and videos involving minors.

Non-sexual photo tweets include selfies and photos of meet-ups where faces are covered with emojis. Photos of places where one is currently at are also evident in Alter. Sexual photos on the other hand include photos of genitalia and screen captures of one's sexual videos.

Contents of sexual videos uploaded include own oral, anal, and masturbation videos. Some sex videos have faces blurred or covered with "emojis" while some videos are taken in an angle that do not risk identification. Other pornographic materials from around the world and scandals or leaked private videos are also uploaded. Video tweets that are non-sexual are rare.

Retweeting. Retweeted sex videos are very common in the Alter community. Compliments to the user and photos in which the retweeter is part of whenever there was a meet-up are retweeted. This function is also used to ask followers to retweet one's teaser of a sex video (be it a screen capture or a short video teaser) in order for him to upload the full video in exchange. However, this behavior is usually frowned upon as "pa-peymus" (famous wannabee).

Posting replies and mentions. Replies posted by Alter account holders include replies to their own tweets in order to bump or make their old posts reappear again in the feed. Another common use of the mention feature is to signify meet-up with another user. Alters post pictures of themselves with other account holders on it and mention whom they were with—for example, "I'm with @another_account_holder." There are also cases when a personal sex video or photo is uploaded by the Alter and the other party (or parties for group sex) are tagged in the post.

Using hashtags. Alters in Twitter are also fond of using hashtags for sexual purposes. One notable hashtag in Alter is #SarapNgPinoy (delicious Pinoy) which is used by several Alter users to promote Pinoy sex videos. Sex videos with the said hashtag indicate that it is a Filipino sex video or a video having Filipinos as key players. However, there are also account holders that utilize the said hashtag in order to bait others into viewing a video even though the men on the sex clips are non-Filipinos. Doing so increases its number of views. #NinjaMoves is also a popular hashtag attached to a tweeted photo of a perceived attractive guy subtly taken without consent.

Alter Categories

Different categories of Alters became salient throughout the observations and interviews with the participants. It must be noted that an Alter user may manifest the characteristics of different categories in different times depending on the circumstances.

Exhibitionist Alters. They engage in the practice of producing and sharing their original sexual contents which come in the form of sexual images and videos of themselves. The degree of exhibitionism that is manifested by these Alters varies. Some of them limit their exhibitions to sexually suggestive poses of themselves. Some of them post images of their genitalia; while some Alters upload images and videos of themselves mid-masturbation or coitus. Some Exhibitionist Alters showcase their bodies through other platforms such as Skype or Zoom. They also meet

(or in Alter's term, "collab" from "collaboration") to have a recorded sexual intercourse that will later be uploaded

Wholesome Alters. These are Alters whose accounts follow the Twitter accounts of porn Websites and other Alters without creating or posting their own sex photos or videos. They tweet their daily activities and opinions making their account content similar to a normal Twitter account.

Retweeting Alters. Alters whose primary behavior in Twitter is to retweet pornographic media from other Twitter accounts are Retweeting Alters. Many of these profiles do not contain personal tweets, replies, mentions, and personal sexual media. Many Retweeting Alters engage in the act of retweeting other Alters' posts because of promises by some Alters that they will provide rewards if their posts reach a certain number of retweets. These rewards usually come in the form of more titillating images or videos that appeal to Alters.

Lurkers. The Lurker Alters are the silent type of Alters. They seldom post any original content nor retweet anything. Most Lurker Alters have generic profiles devoid of any effort to personalize. The sole function of their accounts is to follow pornographic and Alter accounts on Twitter.

Posers. Frowned-upon category of Alters in Twitter are the Posers. These are users who present as someone else. This is done by using the pictures of other people that posers claim to be of themselves.

For Pay Alter. They can be characterized by their engagement in monetary transactions. The "commodity" being exchanged for money varies. It may range from pictures in various states of undress, self-gratification videos, and personal sex videos where such contents are offered via different means such as Onlyfans.com or Google Drive. Others also offer massages—it being either purely massage or massages with a sexual activity involved. The phrases "For hire" or "Not for free" indicate that the person exchange sex services with money. Upon checking the profile page of Alters who sell their bodies, many of which are observed

to be high school students since their profile bios indicate "SHS or "senior high school." It bears noting that information about this final category is limited because the researchers were only able to observe them online and were not probed during the interviews.

Self-presentation and Partner Selection

The study also ventured into the dynamics of partner selection among Alters who engage in the practice of meeting-up with fellow Alters offline. Unlike the tearoom sex dynamics studied by Humphreys (1970) wherein participants have little control on who will be their partners upon entering the public toilets for anonymous sexual intercourse, the dynamics in Twitter's Alter community provides some opportunity for Alters to evaluate their potential partners beforehand. This increases the necessity of making an effective strategic self-presentation to attract potential partners.

When it comes to their self-presentation, many Alter accounts put personal information on their profile bio including age, location, clue about his school or alma mater (e.g., "Archer" for the De La Salle University, "Maroon" for the University of the Philippines, "Eagle" for Ateneo de Manila University, etc.), preferred sex role, body type, and penis size.

In terms of partner selection, some Alters would put primacy on physical appearances. This emphasis on physical appearance is mirrored in concepts utilized by the Alter community such as "borta" referring to MSMs who are physically buffed, "twink" referring to those slim physique typical of young MSM, and "daddy" (referring to MSMs who are already in their thirties or forties and whose physical appearance is akin to the typical middle-aged man of limited musculature and a belly).

Beyond physical appearances, Alters also give importance to geographic distance, interests, school affiliation, and the perceived quality of interaction that their partners can offer. The geographic distance is not surprising. Alters would prefer partners whose locations are similar or near their own. Interest as a filtering element is also not surprising. Alters attract Alters of

similar interests. Small factions have reportedly started to form in the Alter community, and the common denominator of the members is their shared interest. One participant mentioned, “Well, *may groups na mahilig mag-orgy. May groups na mahilig mag-inuman.*” (Well, there are groups who like engaging in orgy. Others like to engage in drinking sessions.)

The importance of school affiliation, on the other hand, is two-fold. On one hand, Alters prefer to interact with Alters of the same school because of the higher chances that the two of them would be similar in geographic location by virtue of the same school they frequent. On the other hand, Alters make use of school affiliation as a potential indicator of the possible quality of interaction that their fellow Alters can provide. For this reason, some of the participants who are college students during the conduct of the study prefer to meet fellow Alters who are students or graduates of the top universities in the Philippines. Beyond school affiliation, Alters also derive their perception on the quality of interaction that a potential partner can give by browsing the potential partner’s private messages and public posts. As one participant recalled, “*Basta meron doong isa, nakikita ko sa mga posts n’ya may sense. Kaya kapag nag-d-DM s’ya sa akin, nirereplyan ko. Pero kung . . . kunwari sinasabi nila, ‘Fuck mo ko,’ magre-reply ako, ‘hehe’ o kaya ‘hi,’ ‘hello’ ganun lang.*” (There is one Alter whose tweets are senseful. Thus, when he sends me a message, I respond. However, when a person asks me to have sex with him, I will only reply “hehe” or “hi” or “hello,” that’s it.)

This valuation of quality of interaction as a factor in the choice of Alter partners is noteworthy because it suggests that instead of the usual appreciation of Alter Twitter accounts functioning simply as *libog* accounts designed for casual sexual satiation, the importance ascribed to a sensible interaction by most participants of the study suggests that the participants might be looking for more meaning connections even with their short-term partners.

Alter as Gateway to Other Forms of Communication

Twitter is utilized by many Alters as a venue to initiate contact with other Alters. Trust

formation with other users is an integral issue in the community because users are anonymous. One participant said that trust can be established in private conversations. As one respondent shared, it is fine with him that he gives his Facebook account without receiving the other party’s Facebook to test if the latter can be trusted. Moreover, one Alter filters who he believes can be trusted by knowing the school or alma mater of other Alters which is commonly indicated in one’s profile bio. He said that trust is given to those from the same university because they basically came from the same community.

Communication in Alter is initially housed within Twitter until such time that the Alters decide to reveal more information about themselves. When trust has been earned, personal accounts and/or mobile phone numbers are retrieved; and these become new means of communication between or among Alters. Exchange of phone numbers is also an indication that individuals are ready to meet in person. One shared that giving one’s number means he is ready for a meet-up and share a part of his private life (“Willing *siyang ibigay ’yung* part of his private life to you”). This indicates that online communication can be transformed into offline. Clique formation and personal meet-up of members are examples of this. In fact, one participant shared that there are Alter contacts who became real life friends because they are fun and are even funnier in person than online; thus, they get along well and match each other (“. . . funny *sila. Mas funnier sila* in person than in Alter *kaya vibes kami . . . kwela rin akong tao at kwela rin silang tao, kaya nagma-match*”). Finally, as Twitter is not designed for sexual activities, many Alters move the communication outside Alter to other means when other forms of sexual transactions cannot be performed in Twitter. For instance, cybersex can be performed through Skype or Zoom while trading scandal videos can be facilitated by Google Drive.

Reasons for Engagements in Twitter

Various sexual and nonsexual reasons have been posited by the participants to explain their continuous participation in the Alter community.

The participants emphasized the capability of their Alter accounts to alleviate their loneliness

and boredom. One participant who started an Alter account in 2011, for example, mentioned that engaging with other Alter accounts reduced the loneliness he felt during a particularly painful break-up since having other Alters who can empathize was able to ease the pain. Other participants also opined that social engagements using their Alter accounts enabled them to have a reciprocal give-and-take of comfort with fellow Alters.

It was also learned from the study that Alter accounts are not utilized strictly in pursuit of casual sexual encounters with fellow MSMs. The participants explained that by talking to people, one is able to know more about that person. Familiarity can later develop into friendships, then intimate relationships. Indeed, some of the participants told the researchers of some Alters who have become group of friends beyond Twitter, with some of the members within those group of friends establishing romantic ties following their acquaintance through Twitter's Alter community.

The Twitter Alter community has also served as a source of information for Alters on matters which they may either be too embarrassed to ask others outside of the Alter world or simply has no other source of information. According to one participant, he learns a lot from different people within Alter by simply chatting with them. He explained that when those chatting with him shares their issues or problems, and shares how they resolved such issues, or when he has problems, they offer him advice. The information can range from matters on how to negotiate one's homosexual identity, be it when one is openly gay or closeted, to information about sex and health such as HIV and AIDS.

Participants of the study also affirmed that engaging with other account holders benefits them since it builds their networks of friends and contacts. One even mentioned that talking to people within Alter allowed him to create networks within the university he is studying. He added that this is beneficial since it became easier for him to talk to people can "get it" and who has similar "vibes" (slang for "vibration"). Another added that social engagements within Alter allows people to create circle of friends or clicks, thus boosting their networks. However, he disclaimed

that though it is easy for Alter account holders to create "cliques," it is also easy to break such ties because of the predominantly anonymous nature of Alters and the limited basis of commonality of the parties involved.

In terms of sexual functions, according to some participants of the study, Twitter's accessibility is beneficial for the efficient satiation of their sexual desires, be it by one's self or in partnership with a partner or more. One participant explained, "*Punta ka lang doon* [Twitter], search, browse *ka lang ng mga* videos, *ng mga* posts *ng mga tao*, and then satisfy yourself, satisfy the pleasure . . ." (Just go to Twitter and search videos. You can satisfy yourself and get pleased.) Furthermore, the method of some Alters to post a public tweet in the vein of "I'm here at [place], who wants to meet up?" allows for an easy hook-up to available and interested Alters in the vicinity should the Alter feel the need to have sexual release.

It is interesting to note, however, that this ease is mediated by the tendency of the Alter participants to filter their pool of potential partners beforehand. As one participant explained: "*Kasi 'pag Grindr kapag libog na libog ka na . . . kasi mabilis sa Grindr . . .* for Alter *kasi*, you can know the person . . . *magkakaroon ka ng* background . . ." (You can easily get sex partners in Grindr [an online dating application]. In Alter, you can check his background deeper.) Another participant added that as opposed to other applications, he is able to judge if the person is "decent" enough before he hooks-up with him in Twitter. Another participant stated that Twitter enables him to review the profile of other users, thus giving an opportunity to know about Alter users before hooking-up with them, unlike other Web sites or applications that offers limited information of its users. Hence, it can be said that they are not utilizing Twitter's Alter community's promise of easy sexual gratification to the fullest by their own choice. Supplementary to the previous reason, Alters take to Twitter to anonymously search for potential mates, a feat made difficult in real life because of the challenges in negotiating a homosexual identity in public. This is made even more difficult if the Alter in need of sexual release has a particular fetish. Hence, the existence of an

Alter community in an accessible SNS like Twitter allows Alters to be connected with fellow Alters who share, or are complementary, to their sexual interest.

Alters also gain social gratification through their sexual engagements. The participants explained that posting anything that is sexual on Twitter can attract followers, which, in turn, increases an account holder's popularity. This is gauged through the number of retweets that one's tweets receive and, more importantly, on the number of followers that one's Alter account accumulates. Alters gain popularity in Twitter through various ways. According to one participant, he observed that those "ugly" account holders but had sexual experiences with the handsome and popular account holders tend to flaunt the said sexual engagements in Twitter to gain followers since others within Alter would think "*Ay gwapo din to kasi 'di ba pinatulan siya ni pogi.*" (He must be handsome because he had sex with another handsome guy.) All of these panders to the Alter's ego.

Discussion

This study revealed that the users derive different functions from their participation in the Alter community. Twitter serves as a platform for Alters to meet other Alters while anonymous similar to a masquerade ball. It also gives opportunity to check the backgrounds and quality of their potential partners with greater ease due to the greater functionality that Twitter affords them as compared to online dating applications like Grindr and Tinder. These inter-Alter communications can be confined to the anonymous virtual spaces of Twitter. Twitter can also serve as a gateway for these individuals to move their further engagements offline especially for those who are finding partners; thus, a case of modality switching where dating transitions from online to offline (Ramirez et al. 2014; Hallam, De Backer, and Walrave 2019). The unearthed nonsexual benefits of Alter are noteworthy because it suggests that the Alter community is not a unidimensional virtual place dedicated to sexual gratification. It is possible that the purpose of the community was

purely sexual in its conception, but as Alters reside in and continue to participate in the community, they have become active players in the molding of the community into the more complex entity.

The observed practices within this virtual community corroborate with the elements of an online community of Baym (2015). The first element pertains to having a sense of space. Although Alters have their own appreciation of the Alter community, Twitter serves as the platform of where Alter operates. Their concept of a shared space is further manifested in their collective use of hashtags (#AlterPH, #SarapNgPinoy) to connect their online content with others who are also part of the community. In a sense, these hashtags serve the same function as banners or flags—a rallying point of similar-minded individuals. The second element, shared practices, is observed in the Alters' exploitation of the functions of Twitter to engage in both sexual and nonsexual behaviors. There are also shared standards of behavior in the Alter community where violation of these norms can result in the collective effort of Alter users to condemn and report the perceived norm violators. Third, there is shared resources and support which can be exemplified by collaborations between and among Alters in recording sexual activities and trading scandals. Sexual videos and photos uploaded in public also indicate shared resources among Alters as they engage in media consumption evident in every Twitter activity. Perhaps more importantly, shared resources and support is observable in the Alter community when it comes to advocacies such as information sharing on HIV and AIDS. Meanwhile, shared identities also characterize an online community. There are many categories of Alter users where each category corresponds to a shared identity depending on what usual activities they conduct and how they present themselves. Despite their variations in their use of the Alter space, they use the same labels, vernaculars, and hashtags to integrate themselves into the community. Finally, Twitter paved way for interpersonal relationships among Alters through emergence of cliques and romantic relationships. It has been noted in the previous discussion of results how Alters made use of Twitter as a gateway to other forms of communication. Some made use of Twitter's

Alter community to establish relations that was maintained in other online platforms, whereas there are also those who met in physical space and succeeded in transforming what was once just a virtual engagement into physical and long-lasting relations.

Alters negotiate with each other to meet their individual interests. Every negotiation between two or more parties will require a degree of trust. Trust in an online community comprised of individuals who are hiding under anonymity was shown to be earned through self-disclosure. Theories in face-to-face communication demonstrated how self-disclosure drives interpersonal relationships (Taylor 1968; Altman and Taylor 1973; Derlega et al. 1993). It is often done by one party to another when the latter is perceived by the former to be trustworthy. This trustworthiness is predicated on various factors such as length of relationship, consistency of confidant's behavior, just to name a few. To trust a person and disclose information to him or her means that the confider is taking a risk—the consequence being potential damage to the confider's social reputation, among others, especially if the disclosed information can be perceived to be deviant by societal standards. However, how these operate in a virtual space is an interesting phenomenon due to the different context of online communities. In this study, interpersonal relationships still emerged and was brought offline despite users being initially anonymous. The practical insight of Ramirez et al. (2014) suggests that online daters may undergo personal meetups if indicators like trust and intimacy have been earned.

How Alter is being sustained can be explained by the online disinhibition effect (Suler 2004) which suggests people act differently online as they would outside of the World Wide Web partly because of decreased inhibition and increased anonymity. The openness in virtual communities like Alter becomes more open to discussions that are otherwise regarded as potentially deviant like topics pertaining to sexual activities. As Suler (2004) puts it, the Internet is “designed with no centralized control, and as it grows, with seemingly no end to its potential for creating new environments, many of its inhabitants see themselves as innovative, independent minded

explorers and pioneers” (p. 324). Thus, Alter functions as a liberating venue where an Alter can explore his identity and interests without succumbing to the usual constraints of life.

Concluding Comments

This study revealed that Twitter is used as a platform for a new method of expressing sexuality among MSMs. The functions that Twitter offer are used by Alters not just for social engagements but also for sexual ones. The sexual aspect of Alter is the core of Alter, but it has been enriched by more complex social benefits to users such as including formation of new friendships, sharing of information and advocacies, reciprocations of emotional support, and provision of a “safe space” for those who wish to express their sexuality but find that doing so outside of the Alter community could be met with stigma from their peers and family. The very existence of Alter points to the stigmatization of MSMs and open expression of sexuality in general. Hence, there was a perceived need to make an anonymous user account in Twitter to manage the stigmatized identity in a way that sexual expression is achieved without necessarily endangering the social reputation of the person.

Four directions are suggested by the authors of this study. First, this study only looked into Twitter as the platform from which the Alter community resides. This does not mean that other SNSs, especially the giant social networking platform of Facebook, is devoid of an Alter community. Future studies should try to look into the dynamics of Alter communities as mediated by Facebook as its home SNS. Second, given that this study only dwelled on the MSM Alter community, future studies should help complete the picture of this study's understanding of the Alter phenomenon by looking into the Alter communities of other sexual orientations, with an emphasis on seeing how these Alter communities are similar and different. Third, given the continued prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases among MSMs, studies into Alter communities in its capacity as a venue for sexual engagements should also look further into the prevalence and process of negotiating safe sex

measures within the community. Finally, this study emphasizes the need to do more trust-formation studies online, particularly when the virtual space is anonymous and possibly deviant.

This study only looked into the Alter community of young Filipino MSMs in Twitter. There are heterosexual and lesbian users who also hold Alter accounts; thus, the findings of the study cannot be generalized to all individuals with Alter accounts. The patterns of interaction the authors unearthed from the interviews with MSM Alters and observations with these accounts might be different from non-MSMs. None of the interviewees mentioned about heterosexual and lesbian Alter accounts, which could be explained by being surrounded by fellow MSMs in terms of the accounts they follow, their followers who are MSMs as well, and the MSM content on their feed; thus, such accounts might be invisible to the MSM Alter community.

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