Hidden in Plain View: An Exploratory Study on Twitter (X)'s Alter Community*

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ABSTRACT

The study is an attempt to explore the alter community, a group of predominantly gay members, who produce and consume pornographic content on Twitter (now called "X). The aim of the study is to identify the key features of the community and its members, characterize existing relations within it, and place them in the larger context of the Philippine society. To achieve this, virtual ethnography was used as a methodology. Snowball sampling was utilized to determine which users would be observed in the study. The results of the study suggest that the alter community allows its members to maintain their anonymity which emboldens

them to post pornographic photos and videos of themselves and others and interact with other members without fear of discrimination. It was also found that the alter community may be characterized as diverse and hierarchical in the sense that members assume various roles and some have more influence than others. Alter members also use Filipino gay lingo but have evolved some terminologies that are unique to the community. Finally, the study indicates that alter does not operate in a vacuum; members participate in political activities and are affected by economic forces as seen in their response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The interplay of sex and the world wide web is nothing new. With the advancements in information and communication technology (ICT), particularly online communications channels, sex has been redefined and transformed in more ways than one. The internet has had a profound impact on human sexuality, most notably on how people behave and interact with others, be it in the online sphere or the offline world (Daneback, 2012). This is because internet users have at their disposal a wide array of tools to interact with others and these can be used for various forms of encounters, including the establishment of sexual relations (Beneito-Montagut, 2015).

Internet-mediated social spaces are created in various mediums for sexual reasons. From discussion groups to dating apps, to social networking sites, to websites that broker sexual encounters between homosexuals, these online spaces have been instrumental in the remote interactions of like-minded people on matters of sex (Cunningham, 2018; Atkinson & De Palma, 2008). One peculiar example of these online spaces is Twitter's alter community.

The alter community is a collection of individuals, composed of predominantly gay members, who are distinguished through their alternate online accounts in interacting with other members of the community (Cao, 2021). The community interacts on a popular social media platform called Twitter, known for its short-form posts called "tweets" with a limited number of text characters which can be standalone posts or captions to photos and videos. In 2023, the platform was renamed to "X" (Mac & Hsu, 2023). According to Cao (2021), one of Twitter's distinct affordances is its relatively liberal approach to sexually explicit content as compared to other social media applications, a feature that allows users to post pornographic materials with lesser risk of deletion or censorship.

The alter community portrays some members engaging in various forms of sexual activity on Twitter while being anonymous and posting mostly sexual tweets on the platform. The members' alter accounts, which are usually distinct from their real accounts, are regarded by them as "lust accounts," with libido as the primary motivation of the members for participating in the community (Piamonte, et. al, 2020). Meanwhile, Cao (2021) characterizes the

community as one composed of anonymous Filipino Twitter users producing and consuming amateur porn videos.

While the alter community is growing in popularity, it is generally understudied (Cao, 2021). To add to the available literature on the subject matter, this paper aims to explore the community by identifying the key features of the alter community as a whole and characterizing the individuals comprising it, investigating the relations that exist within the community, and situating it in the bigger context of the Philippine society. The paper features a Methodology section where the procedures and techniques for gathering data are discussed. It also has a Results and Discussion section which is composed of six subtopics that cover six key themes discussed in the study. Finally, a Conclusion and Recommendation section wraps up the discussions and summarizes the important lessons derived from the paper.

METHODOLOGY

As earlier stated, the purpose of this paper is to explore Twitter's alter community, an online community, through an ethnographic study. In studying these online communities and in the social sciences in general, virtual ethnography is a methodology of growing use. According to Hine (2008), this form of ethnography "was influential in establishing the idea of an online community, a new kind of social formation enabled through Internet interactions and existing independent of physical space" (p.257). Virtual ethnography allows for passive data collection, permitting experiential learning of the community being studied without sacrificing the requirement of in-depth engagement with the "field" (Hine, 2008). Considering that the "field" to be studied is virtual, it requires an in-depth online engagement.

Virtual ethnography includes a broad range of methodological approaches aimed at answering the complexities of the object of research and the different ways in which this object has been constructed (Dominguez et al., 2007: 1). For this research, participant observation and content analysis were employed as data collection methods. Considering that in virtual ethnography one needs to be a member of the community being studied to

fully understand its intricacies (Hine, 2008), I used my own alter account for ease of access to the post within the community for data collection. I have had an alter account since its early years and have seen how the community grew and transformed over the years. As an observer and, to some extent, a participant, I have gained a working understanding of the context under which it operates. However, as will be discussed in succeeding sections, the community is not private; it is accessible to the public, hence, there is no breach of privacy was committed in the conduct of the study.

This paper used as its primary data tweets and retweets on the social media site Twitter which can be considered as belonging to the alter community. Various tweets and retweets were recorded and studied for a period of one year and the inferences made in this paper were mostly derived from my experience for the same duration. It may be a short observation period for traditional ethnography but due to the nature of the Internet as a 'site,' i.e. characterized by temporality, greater flexibility is afforded to virtual ethnography (Steinmetz, 2012).

A common issue in virtual ethnography is locating the boundary of the study's subjects. Ethnographic boundaries are usually unclear in this type of ethnographic study given that the Internet is oftentimes global in scope and not located in a single defined territorial space. However, in the case of the alter community, the Filipino language as a cultural marker makes delimitation of the ins and outs of the community easy since members often use Filipino as the language of choice in their tweets. Another characteristic that aids in pinning down the community is the fact that its members' accounts are characterized by anonymous or fictitious profile names and Twitter handles, and several tweets and retweets of sexual content. These characteristics, taken together with my initial exposure to the community, form the basis for the determination of the study subjects.

Snowball sampling was used to determine the sample posts and profiles presented in the research. I followed a few alter accounts and upon checking their tweets and retweets, some other accounts have shown as suggestions, adding to the pool of potential study samples. From a small

number of initial profiles checked, I have encountered a sizeable number of users and tweets, sufficient to proceed with the research. These profiles and tweets were observed and recorded through screenshots, as previously mentioned.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Alternate Universe, Alternative Identities

The alter community is a virtual space where individuals, notably gays, perform their gender, often using alternative identities that they created for themselves, and interact with other members mostly for the consumption of pornographic materials and solicitation of sexual favors. It is a social group, a subculture of the gay community, the members of which assume alternate personas separate and distinct from their real-life identities. Twitter users, even those not belonging to the community, can have a glimpse of the community through various means, the most common of which is the use of the hashtag #alterph in the site's search engine. But this hashtag, although initially exclusively for the gay community, has since been used even by heterosexual individuals to solicit sexual and/or financial favors. Hashtags work like web links to other posts using the same hashtags of all users sharing their tweets publicly. Users can see virtually all public tweets on the platform by clicking the assigned hashtag to a certain idea or concept. These hashtags are also often counted and ranked to determine which topics are trending on the site. Variations of these hashtags with geographical indicators like #altercebu or #alterpasay are used to facilitate the search for sexual partners who are proximate to the one who tweeted it.

The alter community is not confined to a specific physical location but is spread throughout the social media site Twitter. Access to and "membership" in the community is easy; it merely requires the creation of an account on Twitter and some sort of participation in sex-related posts. There is no discernible exclusivity in the community in the sense that there are no barriers to entry, unlike other web-based groups of a similar theme.

From the outsider's gaze, an alter member on Twitter can only be identified as one using two major criteria: anonymity and sharing of pornographic or sexually-charged content.

Anonymity is an integral aspect of the alter community. Because of the fear of being "outed" and being judged for their arguably deviant sexual behavior, members conceal their identities through various means in their pornographic content. These means include using generic usernames, blurring faces, or superimposing virtual stickers on their faces in photos and videos. Members usually communicate and connect through tweets with their identities concealed but they may extend their interaction on other platforms or even in the real world. Members who have chosen to connect with individuals on a deeper level may reveal more information to each other and meet on other ICT platforms such as Facebook or Viber, or even in person, opening the possibility of establishing sexual or even romantic relationships. It is worth noting that online to offline interactions such as that of the alter members are nothing new; these are common observations, especially among the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth as shown in DeHaan et al.'s (2013) study of Internet users in the United States. However, except when alter members bridge the online-offline gap or choose to reveal their identities, the members of the community remain largely anonymous.

Meanwhile, the sharing of pornographic content is another indispensable feature of alter. The members of the community often tweet content containing sexual activity, ranging from naked photos to masturbation videos to live links to orgies. Videos posted on Twitter cannot exceed two minutes and twenty seconds, hence, video tweets are cut to the same length or are posted as a thread or series of videos of such intervals. Tweets posted are usually either captured by the members themselves or downloaded from porn sites. Meanwhile, photographs shared on the platform are often blurred by the members who post them to prevent anonymity breaches. These contents are possible because Twitter does not actively censor them.

Alter as an Avenue for Sexual Freedom

More than just a space for posting lewd content, alter also becomes an avenue for members to express their gender, albeit anonymously, explore their sexuality freely, and look for potential sexual partners, be it for a one-night stand or a dating relationship. In most cases, the sexual activities of the members remain entirely online. For example, some members post links or invite other members to online meeting platforms like Zoom, Facebook Messenger, Viber, and Grindr where they can perform cybersex activities. Recordings of these meetings are sometimes posted by the hosts or the participants in the meeting and they usually contain videos of one or more persons masturbating, often with blurred faces or the faces are not shown at all. This activity is known as *vidjakol* in the community, an Internet-mediated masturbation (colloquially termed *jakol* in Filipino) video conference.

However, while these activities are done online, some arrangements within the community transcend the online sphere and expand to the offline as mentioned earlier. Members solicit sexual partners online and meet up in a designated physical location, often based on proximity. This can happen in various ways. Some post their locations in their tweets in attempts to lure other members who are nearby. Some others post their phone numbers in their profiles or in their tweets to be called by anyone interested in sex. Another common way is through what is referred to as DM (direct message), a private messaging feature of Twitter where only the two members chatting with each other can see the conversation. In these DMs, the members negotiate the terms of the sexual activity they are about to engage in. Finally, another common mode of soliciting sexual partners is through what is called a GC (group chat) where a subgroup of alter members communicate with each other privately, as a DM, and the conversation is only between and among the members of the same GC. This phenomenon of soliciting sexual intercourse online and meeting up with the potential partner in the real world blurs the distinction between the online and the offline.
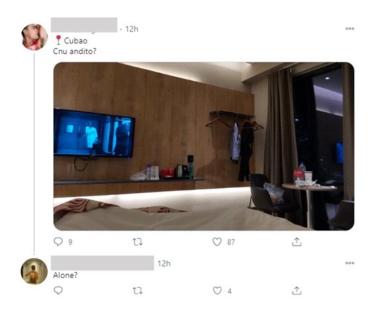
Photo 1: A member posted a photo of the hotel room in Cubao and asked who was nearby. Another member responded, asking if he was alone in the said hotel room. Tweets like these are used as signals to signify one's availability to engage in sexual activity.

This phenomenon is explained by the concept of hybrid spaces, popularized by Adriana de Souza e Silva. In her paper, de Souza de Silva (2006) said that hybrid spaces arise when virtual communities such as the alter community migrate to physical spaces because of the use of mobile technologies as interfaces. These mobile interfaces, such as cell phones, allow users to be constantly connected to the internet, hence, capable of accessing their correspondences even while mobile or in transit. Twitter affords the user this feature, making this digital-to-physical arrangement possible.

Another way by which the blurring of the divide between the online and the offline is shown is when members share their in-person sexual encounters online. The common format of these posts is that they usually portray their sexual encounters that are risky, unexpected, or illicit which they filmed in real life with people they met online. Some members, even

those who are in romantic relationships, share their sexual activities in their tweets. What encourages this behavior? Theory suggests that this may be due to deindividualization caused by their membership in the community and the anonymity afforded by the platform to the individual.

According to Festinger, Pepitone, and Newcomb (as cited in Chang, 2008), deindividualization refers to the effect of a crowd or group on the behavior of an individual, and in the deindividualization theory, "the individual becomes able to indulge in forms of behavior in which, when alone, they would not indulge" (p. 2). Otherwise stated, the individual is emboldened to do something s/he would not otherwise do when s/he is on his own. Moreover, Chang (2008) argues that anonymity facilitates deindividualization; it diminishes concern for self-evaluation, which enables individuals to act with disregard for following societal norms of behavior. As applied in the alter community, this means that placing the alter members in a loop with other members and affording them anonymity encourages them to engage in what are arguably deviant sexual arrangements.

Alter is also a space where members' sexual preferences are bared. In terms of sexual partners, the community appears to have a fascination for certain types of individuals and activities. For example, content featuring certain types of occupations is preferred as embodied in the terms *constru* (construction worker) and *sekyu* (security guard). Sexual relation with relatives is also a favorite topic as manifested in the keywords *bayaw* (brother-in-law) and *daddy* (sometimes referring to biological or adoptive father, sometimes used generally to refer to an older person with a bigger physique). Meanwhile, categories like basketball player, *borta* (muscular man), and *bagets* (young man) show some members' fascination for masculine, young, and physically fit individuals. There are also trends related to the manner in which members prefer their sexual encounters. These include public *jakol* (masturbation in public comfort rooms and other public places), orgies, car fun, outdoor, and *boso* (voyeurism).

There is also a heavily-criticized trend in the alter community referred to as *"masc4masc"* (masculine for masculine) where masculine gays

look for other masculine gays as sexual partners. Some members filter out their sexual partners by indicating in their tweets or their profiles the phrases "strictly no effem" or "no to effem" referring to effeminate gays. To some members of the community, this is discrimination within an already estranged group that exists in the first place due to discrimination. But this phenomenon is not new. In the gender discourse, this is commonly referred to as internalized homophobia.

Internalized homophobia is that form of homophobia directed towards one's self; that feeling of self-loathing that homosexuals themselves manifest or feel. It involves negative feelings about one's own homosexuality (Weinberg, 1972). But sometimes, this initially internal feeling is manifested in how the individual interacts with other homosexuals which, in the case of gay men, leads to the disgust of more effeminate ones. Davies and Neal (1996) explain: "The 'bull dyke' or 'camp queen' image evokes public scorn and condemnation that some more 'normal-looking' lesbians and gay men feel they don't deserve." Masculine gay men think that they do not deserve to be lumped together with effeminate gay men for fear of public condemnation, hence, the repulsion toward the latter.

Another growing concern in the community is the health risk that comes with sexual promiscuity tied to the group's identity. One popular member of the alter community recently shared his experience with gonorrhea and genital warts, both sexually transmitted diseases, from his job as a for-pay alter who meets clients regularly as a sex worker. In his tweet, he announced his retirement from escorting; he said that he is no longer accepting bookings. A portion of the tweet reads: *"Balak ko sana at least 1 week after the last dose of antibiotics, tatanggap na ulit ako ng clients. Kaso ayoko na. Takot na ako."* He appeals, in the same tweet, for his followers to practice safe sex. His is not the only story where members acquired sexually transmitted diseases from interactions with people they met in the community.
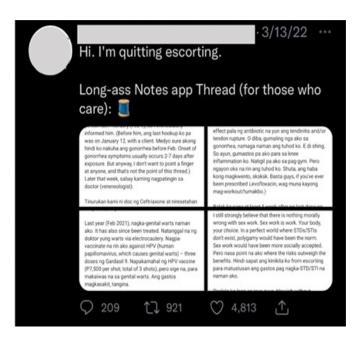
Photo 2: Screenshot of a tweet where a famous alter member shared his experience with sexually transmitted diseases from his sexual encounters with clients. The post garnered 4,813 likes and was retweeted 921 times as of writing.

The post garnered numerous responses and retweets from the community. Most of the responses were empathetic to the author's plight, sending messages of support, and adding to the call for safer sexual practices within the community. In recent years, other persons living with HIV have come out to share their stories within the community, and this has been one of the major topics of discussion within the community. Meanwhile, others commented on the point that escorting is not morally wrong and not to be ashamed of and that sex work is a legitimate source of livelihood.

Alter as a Hierarchical Social Group

Alter members are a diverse set of individuals and they may be categorized as exhibitionist alters, wholesome alters, retweeting alters, lurkers, and for-pay alters (Piamonte et al., 2020). I will add 'alter famous' and

'scavenger alters' to Piamonte et.al., categorization. Exhibitionist alters are those who post original sexual content in photo and video forms while wholesome alters are similar to a normal Twitter account but follow accounts of pornographic websites and other alters. Retweeting alters are those whose primary behavior is retweeting pornographic media from other Twitter accounts. Lurkers are the silent type; they seldom post any content or retweet anything. There are also for-pay alters or those who commodify their content for monetary exchange. They are usually famous members with a significant following. However, not all famous alters post for a fee. Finally, scavenger alters refer to those who scour for great content in the community and sell them for a cheaper price than that of for-pay alters. They are usually posers. It is worth noting that while this framework typifies the members of the community, this classification is fluid and may change depending on the circumstances (Piamonte et al., 2020). In other words, a member can shift from one kind of alter to another.

A key premise of this work is that not all alter members are created equal. There appears to be a hierarchy in the community; some members are more significant than others. However, unlike in traditional societies where leaders are usually determined by wealth or political power, fame in terms of the number of followers is the basis of hierarchy in the community. These members are loosely referred to as alter famous. Because the basis of status is fame, social mobility is possible and movement can happen instantaneously. Members may climb up the strata by gaining more followers which is an expected situation when they tweet quality or viral content or when they choose to reveal their identities. Similarly, members usually lose followers and ultimately their account when they tweet contents that are considered unacceptable to the community or violate Twitter's policy.

I hypothesize that these alter famous members somehow dictate the preferences of the community and shape how individual members view sex. Because a person essentially loses his identity in the platform as explained by the deindividualization theory earlier discussed and is exposed to the community, such a person changes and imbibes the community's preferences. Given that famous members are afforded preferential treatment in the

community, their tweets dominate the platform. This is how alter famous members influence others. Proceeding from this premise, I argue that these famous individuals shape the community's norms and beliefs. For example, if an alter famous member posts his face or reveals his/her identity, his/her influence may entail the loosening of the community's aversion to revealing the identity of its members. Similarly, if s/he posts a video of two individuals engaging in unprotected sex, it may translate to being the community's preference, essentially changing the mindset of the community from a risk-averse to a risky collective. Thus, this social influence that alter famous members have over the other members of the community imposes or must ideally impose a certain sense of duty to them much like in traditional social groups.

A Community of Rules and Symbols

Like every social group, the alter community has, over time, developed a set of social norms. These social norms, according to Chinoy (1973), refer to the range of rules governing social behavior and are often the products of long-standing usage or enacted by political units for compliance by the members of a certain culture. Consequently, disobedience to these rules is often met with sanctions the purpose of which is to exact obedience from its members (Benedict, 2009). In the case of alter, the norms may be characterized as loose; there is no showing of permanence with rules governing the community and they have in fact been subjected to various changes.

Perhaps the first, most basic rule of the alter community upon which its entire existence rests is summarized in this adage: What happens in alter, stays in alter. The community's code of silence is predicated on the requirement of anonymity, a value that is necessary to sustain its existence and hide the community in plain view. This code of silence means that if one gained knowledge of someone else's identity and/or sexual activity, s/he must not disclose such knowledge to the public. Violating this norm is usually met with backlash such as fuming tweets from the community and reporting the user for his expulsion from the platform. However, in recent times, there are increasingly more and more users who are revealing their or others' identities,

mostly for economic reasons. This is discussed in the succeeding sections on the COVID-19 pandemic.

Apart from anonymity, consent is likewise valued in the community. Tweets showing, partially or fully, the face or identifying marks of a person in photos or videos need the consent of the said person before they are posted, and desecrating this rule is called out and frowned upon. But recently, the community has not been actively calling out problematic posts concerning consent and has in fact encouraged it in some instances raising alarms among some members. Finally, the community loathes deceitful activities, especially those involving members scamming other members financially or members revealing the identities of their sexual partners against their will. The usual sanctions include calling out such a user, reporting the user to deletion, or castigating and exposing the deceitful acts on the same platform, similar to a shame campaign. However, this issue has since been ignored or not given attention.

These departures from the rules may be due to the existence of what are called 'trendsetters' or influential figures in a community. According to Bicchieri and Fukui (1999), trendsetters who question the existing norm and behave differently from such norms have the ability to effect major changes. This appears to be the case in the alter community as discussed in the previous sections. Alter famous members are the community's trendsetters and their preferences and actions somehow affect how other members' behavior in the community.

Also, as a subculture of the broader gay and internet communities, alter has adopted various terminologies from these communities. There is hardly any demarcation between what is Filipino gay lingo and what is alter slang. Terms like *juts* (small penis), *daks* (large penis), booking (an appointment, reservation, or a scheduled meeting, usually for sex and with monetary consideration), and AFAM (an acronym for a foreigner assigned in Manila but is often used to refer to any foreigner) are also used in alter. Alter also features terms from internet slang like *fubu* (short for fuckbuddy, a person who engages in sexual intercourse with another regularly but with whom s/

he maintains no emotional attachment) and *kalat* (undesirable or indecent content usually of sexual nature).

However, some terms appear to belong exclusively to or are given a different conception or signification in the alter community. For example, the word car fun, referring to any sexual activity ranging from masturbation to anal sex conducted in cars, is a common and highly preferred category in the alter community. Collab, which is usually a shortcut for any form of collaboration, is given a similar meaning but is limited only to the sexual context and the parties often involved are alter famous accounts. In this arrangement, two or more famous alter members agree to have sex and have it documented for the viewing members' pleasure. Tripper, a term closely related to collab, refers to a sexually active individual who ventures into sexual escapades with strangers. There was a time when this term was taken to mean a straight or bi-curious man having sex with gay men for fun but such signification has since died out. I argue that the conception of these terminologies in a loosely-knit social group like alter can be explained by the theory of social interactionism.

Symbolic interactionism theory posits that the creation of shared meanings is the result of individuals' face-to-face interactions in a shared space (Longmore, 1998). Guided by the symbolic interactionist theory, it can be said that this creation of a widely accepted roster of terminologies and conceptions within the bounds of the alter community is a product of the interactions of individual members of the society, albeit virtually. The creation of symbols and meanings and their redefinition is brought about by the members' constant exchanges on the platform over the years. With the increasing popularity of alter on Twitter and its continued existence for a significant number of years, it has developed its own language of sorts. Based on these premises, it can be inferred that indeed, like any social group, alter is a community of rules and symbols.

Alter as a Political Space

While the alter community is mainly a virtual space for sexual gratification and a platform established to escape the harsh conditions of the

real world on the matter of gender, it is not entirely devoid of issues in the actual world. After all, it is a subsection of a larger Philippine society. As such, political issues appear in alter and members exchange ideas around these issues. There are times when members tweet their displeasure towards the government and its agents in various instances covering a wide range of topics. For example, some members of the community have been very vocal in calling out the Philippine government for its several failures concerning the COVID-19 pandemic. In one instance, a member called out the current health secretary Francisco Duque III for his perceived incompetence in responding to the pandemic. The tweet read: *"Dont know bakit until now nka upo pa din to. Sobrang incompetent. Hindi na natuto. Lahat sablay.* 😡☹️😩*"* (I don't know why he (referring to Duque) is still in his position. He is super incompetent. He never learned. Everything is amiss.)

Some others slammed Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte for allegedly being a single-issue politician, using the illegal drugs issue as an excuse for every other issue. He was likewise called out for allowing his security personnel to be inoculated with the COVID-19 vaccine covertly at a time when the same is not yet widely available. In another post, an alter member tweeted a video of a local chief (barangay captain) physically assaulting a COVID protocol violator and wrote a scathing caption condemning the said local chief. The community rallied behind the said alter member in denouncing the act.

Meanwhile, in light of the upcoming 2022 Philippine Presidential Elections, alter members have shown their support for their chosen presidential candidates. Consistent with the general trend of increased political conversations and displays of support, alter members have, in varying degrees, thrown their support to their candidates of choice and defended them on certain issues. For instance, the hashtag #alterforleni has consistently appeared since Leni Robredo, the incumbent vice president of the Philippines, signified her intention to run for president. One of the tweets with the said hashtag read: *"#alterforleni po☐ warning: may 4adults content minsan 😄 follow at your own risk, I'll follow u back mga kakampinks ☐"* (#alterforleni. Warning: there may be for-adults content sometimes. Follow at your own risk, I'll follow you back, Kakampinks). In the said tweet, the alter member is alluding to the

Kakampinks, a term denoting membership to the overall support base of Robredo.

Alter for Leni placards and visuals were also shown and read during her campaign rallies, indicative of the vocal support of the LGBTQIA+ community for her candidacy. Also, in one of her campaign videos produced by a group called LGBTQIA+ for Leni-Kiko, the alter community is mentioned as one of the active campaigners. This is not to say however that Robredo has a monopoly on the community's support. Other members have shown their support for other candidates but of a lesser magnitude.

Photo 3: A placard with the words "Alter for Leni" is displayed in one of Leni Robredo's campaign rallies. The said placard is prepared as an entry to the traditional placard reading in Robredo's rallies.

The Alter Community and the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the entire landscape of the alter community. It has changed how members interact with each other and their reasons for staying in the community. Perhaps the most obvious change is the members' physical interaction with potential sexual partners. The country-wide lockdown imposed by the country prevented the members from physically seeing each other for sexual congress. It also halted some members' 'sexcapades', diminishing those kinds of content in the virtual community.

Post-lockdown, members who are already engaging in sexual activity are seen to have been very cautious about contracting the disease. It can be seen in some tweets that they have been using facemasks partly as protection from the disease and partly to conceal their identities.

Also, with the COVID-19 pandemic, alter became a source of income for some of its members. Employment had been adversely affected by the pandemic and several individuals resorted to selling pornographic materials online. This is done in various ways. Some content creators ask for money through money transfer channels like GCash or Paymaya and allow the paying members access to their private Twitter accounts or exclusive GCs. Meanwhile, some ask for money through the same channels and give access to a collection of videos stored in password-protected cloud storage facilities like Google Drive or Dropbox. Still, others use the same payment schemes but instead of free access to an account or cloud storage facilities, members are given access to live links to real-time sexual activities broadcasted through Zoom and other platforms. Finally, some use online members-only access sites like OnlyFans and JustForFans which use credit or debit card-enabled programs for payment to access exclusive videos of the content creators. This is not to say however that for-pay alters have not existed before the COVID-19 pandemic. There were a few for-pay alters before the pandemic but the number rapidly increased during the lockdown periods. The improbability of physical sexual contact and the increased use of the internet during the quarantine period gave alter a suitable business climate for pornography. However, this did not last for long.

Because of the prospects of income from doing online sex work in alter, creators started flooding the community with exclusive-access videos. This increase in the number of creators, coupled with the proliferation of stolen content being uploaded to the community for free made it increasingly difficult for creators to earn. To cope, creators started creating engaging content through collaboration with other alter famous members and offering discounts to patrons. As of writing, the practice continues to exist.

This arrangement is problematic. These income-generating transactions usually come at a cost 6 the revelation of the identities of persons subject of the videos. While some members willfully reveal their identities in exchange for monetary gains, usually those who are considered alter famous such as the creator featured above, some are merely victims of enterprising members who charge money for contents that are not their own. Scavenger alters scour the community for videos, subscribe to exclusive-access platforms, and sell the videos they obtain from their subscription for a reduced rate, depriving the original creators of the income from their venture and unnecessarily exposing their identities to a wider audience. Arguably, the community's rejection of this change has been lukewarm and I argue that this is baffling. Not only are these human rights violations, but they also threaten the very existence of the community as an anonymous whole.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The alter community has cemented its reputation in cyberspace and beyond as a haven for anonymous gay members who share pornographic material and explore their sexuality. It is quite fascinating how an entire community of online sharers and consumers of pornography has remained largely anonymous despite being in plain view, a social networking site no less. It was shown in the study that this anonymity is achieved in various ways and maintained in varying degrees depending on the member. The alter community serves as an avenue for members to express their gender and sexual fantasies without fear of discrimination or unfair treatment from outsiders. It also serves as a meeting place for like-minded members looking for various types of interactions and relations—be it purely sexual, friendly, or romantic in nature. Members may confine these relations in the online world or bridge the online-offline gap and meet physically. The fact that they can engage in this behavior is explained by the theory of deindividualization; individuals become able to indulge in such an unrestrained manner because they are not on their own and their concern for self-evaluation is diminished which then enables them to act with disregard of social norms.

Alter members are diverse and some are more famous than others. Because fame is the primary basis of standing within the community, famous members get to influence or dictate the community's preferences. Also, alter has, over the years, developed its own set of symbols that guide its members in navigating the platform. Some of these symbols, mostly in the form of language, are merely derivative of Filipino gay slang while some are unique to the community. Alter members also developed some sense of order through the set of rules which were developed not by a conscious effort to establish some but because of exchanges within the community. But these rules are loose and have changed constantly.

Just like any social group, the alter community and its members have been changed and transformed due to social, political, and economic changes in society. For instance, some political forces such as the ineptitude of public officials and the upcoming elections have forced some members to go beyond sex and discuss these important issues. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the community from being predominantly concerned with sexual exchanges and fulfillment of sexual fantasies to being an alternative source of income with its benefits and dangers. Like any other group, the alter community is shaped by its surrounding conditions and contexts, hence, transformations are to be expected in the years to come because, after all, communities are dynamic, virtual communities, even more so.

Perhaps, one might think: does researching the alter community expose it to a wider audience? Chances are, it does. However, considering that the members are mostly shrouded in mystery and the contents shared are explicit and rely heavily on sexual preference, the community's exposure is likely limited to its target audience—potential gay members who also wish to be hidden in plain view on Twitter. I argue, therefore, that researching it does not amplify any risk that is already currently present.

Meanwhile, studying the alter community has its benefits beyond enriching the existing knowledge on the subject. Identifying the community's potential and vulnerabilities opens valuable avenues for discourses concerning

policy reforms, societal acceptance and understanding, empowerment, and human rights protection. For instance, understanding the behavior of alter members can provide crucial insights in the crafting of public health policies to curb the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and inform various organizations on how to tap the community towards advocating for sexual health. This is possible because as seen in the study, the alter community is not solely concerned with consuming sexual content. It also serves as a site where important issues faced by the gay community are discussed and put forth on a bigger platform.

With this, it is recommended that further studies must be done on the community, especially from other disciplines. Several areas of concern need to be studied and it is only through research that we can begin to understand why alter members behave the way they do on the platform and what this means not just for the alter community but for the entire queer community.

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