

**A Healthy Alternative; How Queer Identities are Formed in a Virtual Space.**

by

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## Table Of Contents

<b>Abstract</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
What is a virtual space?	4
Identity and Avatars	6
Identity Formation in Virtual Communities	10
<b>Methods</b>	<b>12</b>
Survey	13
Social Media	20
Guide	24
HTML	28
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Works Cited</b>	<b>31</b>

## Abstract

Queer identities have spent decades being formed and analyzed in the physical world, however, the growth of virtual spaces has begun to modify these concepts. In the modern technological age a new “world”, virtual space, transcends the physical restrictions of time and space and brings with it new languages, cultures, and identities. This cyberspace is a highly accessible and largely used extension of, or, alternative to the physical world. Within these digital spaces, queer individuals have found certain “escapes”, a place where they often form unique or influenced identities based on the communities they interact with. Healthy Alternative demonstrates how queer identities are uniquely formed within virtual space thus opening a dialogue about what that means for the development of these spaces in the future. Through a thorough process of survey and analysis this study will create a guide to virtual spaces whose main ideals focus on Accessibility, Anonymity, and Moderation. The survey connects with queer members of various virtual communities in order to gather a general consensus of the state of these spaces at present. The guide itself is situated within its own virtual space, an HTML website. This website connects users to not only the guide but to supplementary materials such as a Discord forum, social media feeds for updates, and a quick overview of the topic at large. The guide, Virtual Space Queer Community Guidelines, outlines 3 major sections: Accessibility, Anonymity, and Moderation. It’s main ideological focus is adaptability and communication and, as such, is just the beginning of a major speculative shift in the understanding of coding with community in mind.

## **Introduction**

### **What is a virtual space?**

Virtual Spaces, Virtual Environments, Digital Spaces, or (occasionally) Cyberspace and Virtual Reality can all be used to refer to the “Digital World” that has come about in the era of technology. Further defined by N. Burgess and J.A. King “The terms ‘Virtual Reality,’ ‘Virtual Space,’ and ‘Virtual Environment’ (VE) are used interchangeably to describe a computer-simulated place or environment with which users can interact via an interface” (10417). This paper will be focusing its analysis through the terms Digital World as the broader online/technological environment and Virtual Space as the smaller individual interactive softwares. “The dimension is the “virtual world”, space which exists beyond the three dimensions of the physical space” (Yousufi 1-2). Today, most, if not all individuals have some way of accessing the Digital World. Computers are in every school, every library, and just about every home while smartphones are in almost every pocket. These tools have allowed us to access this new Digital World at the touch of a button and enhanced our ability to communicate by an outstanding amount. This study seeks to recontextualize these spaces into what they mean to the communities that interact with them, specifically the queer community.

The most popular understanding of virtual space are the 3D virtual environments accessed by a virtual reality headset. This study, however, focuses on Virtual Spaces in the form of online communities including social media and public chat rooms. Notable examples can be seen in some of the major social media platforms like Twitter and Tumblr as well as public chat rooms like Discord. These spaces are useful as, through the use of a screen, we are able to communicate with others and, for the sake of the analysis, they also contain recognizably large queer communities. These spaces offer a variety of advantages and disadvantages, some of which

will be identified and resolved throughout the course of this study. One important brooding topic that will be discussed in an effort to equalize and exemplify the differences between physical and virtual spaces is the presence of “trolls.” These individuals point out a major flaw on the internet as individuals can often anonymously harass communities. These trolls are harassers who typically spam a spectrum of controversial arguments in an effort to elicit an emotional response from individuals on the internet. They find the response comical in a truly callous way as they often misunderstand the severity of their comments and simply enjoy putting others in distress. There are some obvious harmless actions done in the name of trolling however these few undermine the impact of alt-right harassers that are seen far too often each day. These trolls really bring into question the “safeness” of Virtual Space, however, they are not an exclusively virtual issue. While the term itself originated as internet slang to describe these virtual agitators they are seen in physical space in the same exact ways. In a study done by three active researchers on digital harassment, “Unsurprisingly the findings of our study suggest that patterns of digital harassment and abuse reflect those in society more broadly” (Powell 217). While it may not enforce the safeness of a space to discuss how its issues are shared with others it does help to equalize these two leading subjects, the “real” and “virtual” worlds. While a more negative aspect of these spaces, these trolls begin to exemplify the interesting status of virtual spaces as a real place.

Before discussing this topic more broadly the Virtual Spaces that will be analyzed throughout the course of this project must be identified. Discord and other social media platforms like Tumblr and Twitter will be used as vessels through which to analyze, interact, and understand the topic at hand. First, Discord, is a modern online chat room/forum space that allows for the amateur development of online communities. Through Discord you can provide

yourself a general username, an individual nickname, and a visual icon/profile picture all to publicly introduce yourself. Next, by connecting to individuals or larger servers, users can communicate individually with friends as a messaging software or communally within forum-like chat rooms through text and voice based interactions. In addition to Discord, this study will be using social media like Tumblr, a public multi-media blogging site, and Twitter, a blogging space with a focus on text based interactions. A leading feature that connects these three forms is their accessibility as free online public websites. They are each very prominent popular virtual spaces that have solidified themselves as permanent facets in the lives of queer communities.

Through our phones and our computers Virtual Spaces make up a major portion of our interaction with the world around us. At the risk of dating this study, the impact of covid-19 on the world around us has really emphasized the focus on our connection to virtual space. They have become an extension of our physical worlds more and more each day. Through remote learning, zoom meetings, and social media we have redefined what it means to be social. As these virtual spaces grow and develop their influence upon us will do so in return. As such, this project seeks to understand the importance this influence has upon individual's identities through studying and interacting with queer communities. This hyperfocus on a specific community hopes to extend this ideological shift of what it truly means to develop virtual spaces. By using this dialogue to create a set of community guidelines placed by the communities who interact with them we may begin to mutualistically develop these spaces moving forward. While virtual identity formation is the leading concept through which these ideas become realized, it must first be understood how we form our identities in a general sense.

## Identity and Avatars

Identity is a complex term, as David Buckingham states, “On the one hand, identity is something unique to each of us that we assume is more or less consistent (and hence the same) over time. [...] Yet on the other hand, identity also implies a relationship with a broader collective or social group of some kind.” He proceeds to discuss how our identity stems from a synthesis of these two concepts. In a physical sense this refers to ourselves and our communities, who we are as individuals and our relationship to the world/people around us. Next, instead of defining this in a virtual way this study will show how it connects, or fails to connect, to queer identities and how virtual spaces tend to fill these gaps. To separate this definition into its most important analytical elements, identity refers to the conversation between Individualism, Uniquity, and Consistency and Collectivism, Similarity, and Differences. In a study done by three modern identity theorists context is given on how “identity theory falls short for understanding the adoption of nonnormative identities,” (Miller 444) emphasizing how queer identities are uniquely formed. Queerness, however, is a term that must be defined due to its important socio-political history.

There is a notable historical use of Queer as a hate-fueled slur and for that reason many LGBT+ folks prefer not to use it. This stance is one deserving of respect as the intricacies of the violence, hate, and pain directed towards LGBT+ individuals affects everyone in different ways. The term, however, is not exclusively used in a derogatory way, as a plethora of queer individuals have reclaimed this identifier for their own purposes. For the purposes of this analysis, “Queer” is an easier term to read and is more encapsulating of the very large community than LGBT+. The term queer, as defined by Miller, has three main parts. For the sake of simplicity in defining it, two of these concepts will be combined to define queer as “both an

individual identity and umbrella term that encompasses the rejection of heteronormativity.” The final part that was not used for this study was a focus on the term queer as one with ties to a political movement as this study seeks to encapsulate more individuals than those who specifically choose the identifier. This does however begin the next discussion of the focus on community.

The same theorists to define this term go on to discuss the importance of a collective identity in terms of group salience and commitment, “in either case, these concepts emphasize the importance of a person’s ties to a group identity in relation to other identities and roles and to the social basis of identity.” To expand, this refers us back to our general definition of personal identity as being inherently tied to one’s community. “Group salience” and “Commitment” as they relate to the broader queer community are formed through the collective identity of queer individuals committing to Buckingham’s idea of the “same.” This refers to the previous definition of identity and directly to the analytical elements of Consistency and Collectivism, there is an emphasis amongst queer communities to be connected and supportive. Queer folks often find themselves in a heteronormative society that, by nature, fails to understand and respect their identity, the very core of their being. Forming communities around this connection of shared experiences, commitment to one another, and respecting each other in a welcoming and queer-normative spaces this group salient identity is formed in a powerful way while exemplifying the analytical element sameness. “Individuals’ person identities reflect meanings in terms of how they see themselves as distinct from others, but these meanings are also rooted in culture” (Miller 446). So, while we form a collective identity based within our communities, the final analytical elements of individualism, uniqueness, and differences mold themselves into the queer culture we know today. Tying together these somewhat opposing factors signifies the



conversation that inevitably becomes identity. As mentioned prior, virtual spaces have their own culture and so the subsequent conclusion is that it has a leading impact on the identities of the communities within.

With a few connections made between what virtual spaces are and how we have formed our identities, one leading idea of self-identification based on our relationship to our community seems to enforce these connections even more. “A mutual verification context, in which each member believes others view him or her correctly, leads to solidarity and a sense of “we”” (Miller 446). This is specifically in reference to how Queer peoples find solace in a community where they can self identify, find verification, and enhance their sense of togetherness. Self-identification through community and the support that is built through that truly harmonizes what Virtual Space really is, a community of connection. This trend continues in the form of Avatars and the virtual self. “This virtual self is typified by visual depictions of emotions [...], verbal and nonverbal communications [...], and/or avatar actions [...] Collectively, these characteristics of the avatar have shifted virtual experience away from traditional human–computer interaction to interaction within the space” (McCreery 976). This definition helps to clarify the virtual self as any way we depict ourselves in these virtual spaces while connecting it to the very real and important submersion users have with virtual space. “VE users’ creative incarnation of the virtual self is closely linked to the concept of identity. Identity construction, in turn, is essential to communication and the evaluation of interactions in VEs (Donath, 1999).” Jin’s research on the Virtual Malleable Self continues on to say “VE users undergo multiple metamorphoses by transforming various attributes of their avatars such as gender, ethnicity, body shape, face, hair color, and attire.” This puts into perspective how the choice of an avatar relates general identity theory but once again connects us back to queer

identity. As discussed before there are two major aspects at play here in regards to the theories behind queer identity formation, specifically, the struggle for identity theory to capture the needs of non-normative identities and the formation of an identity aligned with community support. It seems however that Virtual Identity theory helps to bridge that gap. Providing individuals the ability to self-identify by way metamorphose, fluctuating one's non-nomrative identity, which in turn allows them to connect with a community and further promotes the ability for queer individuals to define their unquity, claim their individuality, and seek collectivism, a clear conceptualization of identity.

Queer identities are uniquely formed in virtual spaces as they help queer individuals form their identities in unique and interesting ways. Now, with all major factors of this study defined they must be understood in their proper context, Virtual Space. While it has been defined in its rawest sense virtual space must be understood as more than just a vessel for communication. As it has been mentioned in the conversation thus far, individuals allow for the influence of Virtual Space on their identity due to a full surrender of self-presence. "Self-presence is a psychological state in which media users experience their virtual self as if it were their actual self" (Lee, 2004). This is due to the nature of virtual space as a real and distinct place, the final introductory element of this study.

### **Identity Formation in Virtual Communities**

The vital aspect of virtual spaces that places them at the center of this hypothesis is their unique existence as a "real place." According to Mary Aiken, a "Pioneering Cyberpsychologist",

Yes, it is. Cyberspace is a distinct place. [...A]s soon as you go online, you have traveled to a different location in terms of your awareness or consciousness, your emotions, your responses, and your behavior-which will vary depending on your

age, your physical and mental development, and your distinct set of personality traits.

Here she is effectively describing how people interact with virtual spaces by way of complete self-presence and how our identities, in turn, influence this interaction. In each new space, you are met with a plethora of new experiences. These can range from topics as large as new languages, rules, and ideas to those as small as new people or sights. This connects back to identity theory as, according to Jin, a large factor in analyzing interactions within VE's is focusing on identity constructions. Similarly, as mentioned before, peoples' interactions with their community are what help shape and form their identity so, as the world becomes more digital and our interactions become more virtual, our identities will fluctuate alongside.

“This virtual world is important for new generation[...] Under its influence they form their own virtual behavior rules, norms and values[...] This influences the personal identity formation.” (Targamadze 39) Here Targamadze discusses how, specifically for a younger generation, the virtual world has a strong influence on personal identity. While not to shy away from discussing older generations and their interactions with virtual space, this helps to clarify what Aiken seeks to accomplish in giving virtual space it's own set of identifiers: rules, norms, and values. Where Aiken begins to state that our own distinct set of personality traits influence how we interact with virtual space, Targamadze argues that our virtual behaviors and personal identities are influenced back. These ideas are not mutually exclusive and, if one is to connect these concepts in a meaningful way, their combination parallels the conversation that is identity. These unique identifiers tie back to queer communities in their journey to build a space that is accepting, understanding, and representative of this idea of “sameness.” Through forming a virtual space that best understands and respects the rules, norms, and values queer culture seeks

to uphold these virtual places become a healthy alternative to the physical places that are subject to the rules and regulations of the modern heteronormative physical world. “The establishment of queer places and queer space has to be understood in terms of collective action, a 'community', operating to subvert the dominant paradigm[...]" (Greyling, 2)

Identities are formed within virtual space influenced by the use of the avatars, the community found, and how the individuals interact with it. Queer identities emphasize the focus on community and culture and, the malleable self that is presented in a digital space, bridges the gap present in heteronormative identity theory. As queer spaces are designed by queer communities to uphold their values, rules, and norms, virtual queer spaces transcend the issues of the physical world and its dominant paradigms. When coding these spaces moving forward, by understanding the impact their development has on the communities involved, we can work mutualistically with the individuals who frequent these spaces, reduce user fatigue, minimize the room for controversy, and, hopefully, build a brighter future.

### **Methods**

In order to steer the discussions surrounding the development of virtual spaces towards community building and adaptability, Healthy Alternative formulates a guide to coding virtual spaces that understands their importance as they relate to the queer community laying a groundwork for this cognitive shift. The guide will layout how to best accommodate for queer bodies within virtual space based on community outreach and analysis. It will be situated within its own virtual space in the form of an HTML website and use three supplementary virtual spaces (Discord, Tumblr, and Twitter) as community outreach centers and samples of queer virtual spaces that have already been formed. The intention for this material is to publicize the research at large and attempt to utilize the guide to set an example of its practices. As this project is

focused on coding and community simultaneously it will focus on the elements that allow us to work mutualistically with the communities that interact with them and formulate a guide to developing these spaces moving forward. By developing a community based set of accessibility guidelines this document will open the conversation for other communities and really begin to question the impact developers have on the spaces they invent.

To conduct community outreach, a survey of various queer communities was organized. This data will be a leading factor in the creation of the guide as it is designed for collaboration and community feedback. The outreach will then continue onto the social media sites Tumblr, Discord, and Twitter to increase interaction with the site and survey while contributing to and aiding in the development of the conversation at large. The goal here is to create and collaborate so as to increase the integrity of the project and solidify it as the voice of the people. There is a significant margin of error here that should be taken into account when considering this community outreach in that, with too little interaction or even simply the nature of speaking for a community, it may not be truly representative of the community in question. While there are many attempts to minimize this issue, it does not see itself as an objective portrayal of the queer community. However, by using direct stories and input from the community, the dialogue surrounding the development of virtual spaces in the future will be put into perspective.

### **Survey**

In order to begin developing this guide a survey was conducted in order to gain a consensus of how queer communities feel about virtual spaces currently (a link to which can be found on [QueerThesis.space](https://queerthesis.space)). This method substantially increases the integrity of the guide as the ideas presented within will mostly be provided by the community directly. Additional content will be provided via a thorough analysis of the virtual spaces in question, specifically

surrounding what is consistent between each of them and the values they uphold. Surveys as a medium, however, have a large threshold for error. Therefore, before discussing the results gathered from this survey, the errors and their justifications will be identified and understood. The initial issue here confronts the importance of anonymity and deals directly with the formation of the survey.

Anonymity, as it will be seen in the guide, is a leading factor in respecting and supporting queer communities. When deciding what level of anonymity to provide the respondents, the initial step was to understand what personal information was needed to maintain the integrity of the survey and guide. Personal information originally included a name, to ensure no user would complete the survey twice, age range, to ensure no underaged users would complete the survey, and personal identity, as it could be used to determine if any connections could be had between individual identities as well as aiding in visualizing diversity. The inclusion of a name started as an integral question as it would prevent spam and provide queer respondents the potentially affirming choice of self-identifying. As the survey developed, however, it was noted that this inclusion failed to represent true anonymity especially in tandem with the inclusion of gender/sexual identity. If the question of naming the participants remained and the data was in any way leaked, hacked, or simply misdirected, there would be potential for outings and embarrassment. When considering spam issues the major rebuttal is that the survey is to be studied by a human analyst and so the distinction between real, fake, and identical submissions would be simple to recognize. Therefore, out of respect for the community and their anonymity this question was removed. Age and Personal Identity, however, remain as they provide more advantages than disadvantages maintaining the moral and academic integrity of the study. Ensuring no child is being questioned without parent approval is a moral obligation of academic

studies and personal identity follows as it allows for interesting identity based research to be conducted while supporting the potential loss of affirming self-identification. With the concern for anonymity regarded, the next prominent issue is survey bias.

The leading forms of bias present in the survey are nonresponse bias, undercoverage, and response bias. The only bias to not make the list is voluntary response bias as there is a great importance to volunteers self-selecting as it pertains to this study in particular. The nature of the survey is to collaborate and seek change, if members of the community are volunteering their time and energy it stands to reason that they feel confident and strong in their beliefs. This is beneficial to the study as it means the individuals involved are placing a great deal of care into their submissions and are interested in the outcome of the project. Nonresponse bias and undercoverage, however, serve similar issues and tend to work in tandem to decrease integrity as a lack of responses is often the reason communities go underrepresented. A mere 16 individuals have responded to the survey as of the writing of this paper. This is an issue that comes with any voluntary survey and, as such, will be supported through the analysis of the virtual spaces mentioned prior. Although, to relate back to the introductory sections, it was noted that queer culture is directly related to group salience and the queer identity. This points out how queer communities are formed off of collective beliefs, norms, and values that are then emphasized, respected, and often shared by the community as a unit. This indicates that the members of queer groups are typically subject to similar or like ideologies, therefore, even if there is a distinct lack of interaction with the survey or community outreach, it may be okay to assume that unanimous results found throughout the survey can be, at the very least, respected and studied. Outliers will be identified and given reasonable discussion when considering this bias, however, as outliers, they will not hold the same weight in discussion.

Response bias is the third major bias faced by the survey in that there are significant issues in how users choose to represent themselves and in how the survey is written. For the first part of this bias there is very little one surveyist can do in order to prevent this other than increasing the sample size. Considering this survey only received less than 20 responses it is safe to assume this may be a leading issue, although, it doesn't seem to reduce the integrity of the project as the responses are typically users' feelings on a subject as opposed to their view of themselves. The second aspect of survey formatting is a large issue as everything from how the questions are asked to how the responses are presented all have a major impact on the integrity of a project. A leading way this project attempts to minimize this issue is by removing the option of multiple choice and allowing users to respond exactly how they feel. In this scenario the project can study user's experiences and their stories as opposed to simple data on a spreadsheet. Now, with biases identified and understood, it is now proper to begin discussing the results of the survey.

While the general online queer community is the focus for the study the first result that stands out is who it was that truly participated in the survey. It was presented to users on Twitter, Tumblr, and Discord, the last-mentioned, save for a few outliers, receiving the most traction. A large amount of responses came from notable queer communities surrounding online personalities situated primarily on discord. These are interesting case studies for this project as, while the gathering of these individuals originates around a sole personality, it connects back with the idea of group salience and the formation of an identity based on the community one interacts with. Finding an entertainer or creator (or more often a group of them) that shares your ideals, values, and norms and consequently forming a community around them as a "symbol" is a great way for individuals to understand themselves through the lens of queer community.



Continuing on, some additional information about the “who” that took the survey comes in the question of “How do you identify?” This question was intentionally left vague and open ended so as to welcome a wide array of responses and to present an open understanding of the fluidity and complexity of queer identities. The responses to this came overwhelmingly from trans individuals. Those who identified as Trans or Nonbinary made up 12 out of 16 participants. The other four identified as Bisexual or Pansexual, both of which are understood as an attraction to more than one gender. These are notable statistics in understanding the primary community that gave direct feedback to the project, however, by diving deeper into the topic of virtual space as it relates to these communities really emphasizes why this study is so important.

Before discussing the next few questions, however, something really interesting happened that helped minimize the nonresponse bias faced by this optional public survey. When forming this questionnaire it was more important to understand the stories of the individuals involved rather than analyzing their general statistics. In order to accomplish this questions were left in the form of short, open ended responses. The added level of care that came about in the lengthy format of some answers has made it so that, more important than just the statistics alone, quotes and ideas of some participants will be shared as well. They will be attributed to numbers as opposed to names as those have been removed from the study however the integrity of their responses shall remain. Continuing on it is clear to see, not only through the effort placed in the responses of the survey, but in the responses to the following questions, just how important this topic truly is to queer communities.

When asked about how long each individual has been using the internet, once again, roughly 12 of 16 respondents stated they have been accessing this world for roughly 10+ years. This makes it unsurprising that the next question, “How has the internet impacted you

personally?”, garnered a slew of lengthy responses. Notable quotes here focus on both the healthier and more frightening aspects of the internet’s effects. Candidate 4 notes that “Through the internet, I discovered myself. Through the internet, I became a kinder, happier, and better person. I did have some bad experiences. I got into something I shouldn’t have. I had to stop feeling like I needed to label myself[...] But the experiences I had are invaluable to becoming the person I am today.” Candidate 5, however, notes “i usually dont feel safe or comfortable sharing the... less straight aspects of my life with people i dont trust a LOT. so having places on discord where i could be honest about myself and feel safe about it gave me a real sense of connection to a community that i hadnt experienced in a long time.” Candidate 12 then really digs into the harsher aspects of this topic discussing how “I have received anon hate calling me a straight (cis) woman and, when I didn't mention my transness or sexuality in my bio, a cis dude putting his nose where it doesn't belong.” These submissions all emphasize the idea of community that is situated at the center of this study. What the guide seeks to do is uplift the more affirming facets of virtual communities, to promote their more powerful positive elements, and, at the very least, discuss how we can minimize the harmful parts that seem to have a lasting impact on queer individuals.

Considering the title of the study “Healthy Alternative” it’s important to discuss the specific responses that seem to insist otherwise. When asked, “Do you consider the internet an escape from your daily life?” only 4 candidates responded with a clear and concise “yes,” the rest insist that it is (especially considering the Covid-19 pandemic) more an extension of daily life than an escape. Then, when asked if it is a safe and welcoming place, only one candidate responded directly that “yes” it is. This begs the question, if users are so extensively impacted by the internet they interact with, how does it remain so clearly unsafe for its users? This seems to

be answered by the next few submissions that respond to “Do you find you can be your authentic self more in virtual space or physical space?” 12 out of 16 answered with an outstanding “virtual space,” and so, it seems that the answer of why these spaces remain unsafe is a question of power. When spaces have users that are so intrinsically, down to their very identity, reliant on them to develop and form communities there seems to be little worry about the impact had on them. If users find that this unsafe, developmentally dangerous, yet incessantly influential location allows them to be wholly and truly themselves then perhaps they will stick around. What doesn't seem to be considered here is how minority communities will sooner seek new spaces to frequent rather than staying in a space that is unsafe. Seeing, however, the power behind these spaces and the potential for what they could become, if these developers really support these communities there's no question as to whether or not user bases will stay and grow. This point focuses its attention at asking “If not us then who?” If spaces are remaining unsafe for a community and that community then leaves, which community will become unsafe next.

The solution here relates to the final questions of the survey and leads directly into the formation of the guide. First, “What aspects of virtual space are most enticing to you?” Candidate 5 came directly forward to state “the anonymity is a big draw- i can be honest about myself if i want to, but if i dont feel safe doing so, people are way less likely to make assumptions about who i am by looking at me.” The sentiment here which resembles the submission from Candidate 4 who shares that “The option to pick and choose what people see of you and presenting yourself in a desirable way is what makes me happiest online[.]” This echoes back to what Miller posits as a sort of identity verification process. A few others go on to discuss that meeting new people and forming a community is the most enticing aspect of virtual spaces. These responses seem to work in tandem with one another to prove just how a community is

developed in these locations which, in a way, are similar to that of our physical spaces. When entering new places with which we are unfamiliar, we initiate contact reservedly, we are more private or “anonymous.” As we get to know the others in our community we share and present more of ourselves until we build and grow a community through which we feel safe and comfortable. For queer community and identity, this is more easily achieved online.

For the final question, “What aspects of virtual space are intimidating or least enticing? (What are it's biggest issues?)” The response to this brings back the discussion of trolls and internet harassment. Candidate 3 states, “No inhibitions. People will say whatever they want just because they know they can get away with it and that people can't find them that easily.” Similar to the pattern seen in the previous question, Candidate 2 discusses “With massive spaces, it's definitely the fear of interacting with bigotry, especially when bigotry goes unchallenged and allowed to fester in online spaces.” To round out this idea, Candidate 9 brings up the sharp point “People can be horribly cruel and it's purely because they feel like there isn't any consequences to what they say.” This idea is one seen too often in queer spaces as targets for violence and harassment. A simple quick online search on the statistics and history of this uncovers a great deal of research but as this is not a focus of the study, a brief article written by Christina Nunez from the popular magazine National Geographic shows how this is all too common in a modern age (Nunez 1). The main understanding gathered from these responses is how this act of targeted harassment is continuing online. These harassers then go on to form a community of bigotry, share misinformation, perpetuate stereotypes, and, way too often, incite violence. Seeing as how communities often form by mutual verification, it would be wrong to insist that not everyone should share the same right to collaborate and form a community based solely on political or cultural beliefs. There is, however, a very important ideological principle at play here. The

communities are forming based on the collective belief in bigotry, harassment, and violence. Allowing these communities to form within a space, especially when their members are often going out of their way to antagonize and attack specific communities, is akin to supporting and respecting them. If the developers of a space continue to let these “trolls” disrupt communities, torment individuals, and then return back to an incubatory space that shares these ideals they are then allowing this ideology to fester within the spaces they develop. “[T]he virtual world cannot be devoid of the rules that govern the physical space because any attempt to do so would ‘paint a picture too ambiguous’” (Yousufi 4).

A final thought shared by 5 participants out of 15 was most powerfully surmised by Candidate 5, “Being able to interact with people from all over the world, learning and seeing things I never could otherwise.” A testament to the true meaning of what a virtual space is, a location for individuals to communicate virtually regardless of the boundaries of physical time and space. A few of these points are further exemplified in queer virtual spaces and the congregation of queer communities to social media. These two aspects of Healthy Alternative’s study work alongside the introductory textual analysis to formulate the guide to developing virtual spaces. The survey here shares the stories and experiences of the individuals while the social media analysis will exemplify how they've come to defend and support one another in these virtual spaces. If coders listen to the voices of the people and respond to them in a collaborative and communal way it only stands to reason the communities within the spaces would further support the needs of the space itself. The communities would continue to grow, populations would increase, and virtual space can serve its intended purpose to share thoughts, ideas, and creations, a modern Agora.

## Social Media

Before discussing the specifics of the guide in its final forms, the community analysis of virtual spaces must first take place. The spaces studied were Tumblr, Twitter, and Discord as they have notable queer communities and are easily accessible. The most notable results from this analysis regard what the spaces have in common with one another as far as guidelines, norms, and values. The main notes to be analyzed are the use of pronouns, community moderation, and avatar based identification. These notes will work in tandem with the grievances, or lack thereof, conveyed through the survey to exemplify how they are combatted or promoted within these communities.

When beginning to analyze these spaces it was important to remove myself from what I have understood to be commonplace amongst the communities I frequent. Certain unspoken normalities have been completely integrated into the community and, as such, tend to go unseen by the members within. This is important to note as it may explain why certain topics so close and personal to the queer community went undiscussed in the survey. Leading directly into analysis, the use of pronouns seems to support this claim. In every community analyzed there was an emphasis on the importance of pronouns while, in the survey, it was not mentioned once. Discord has a functionality that supports this in an interesting way as the inclusion of the “roles” feature is often used to display pronouns publicly and prominently. Roles function as a sort of “tag” placed on each member of a server (a communal space made up of text and voice based channels) that identifies them. These tags may also set their “permissions” (what they are allowed to do, see, and say in each channel) and as such begin to hint at the power of community moderation. The permissions will be discussed more prominently later on, however, each role is named, permissioned, and even colored separately from one another and so it becomes simple to

use these in a customizable and interesting way. Making pronouns into roles such as “She/Her/Hers” or “They/Them/Theirs” allows them to be easily (even remotely) tacked on to any user in a space who may desire that identification. This is then seen by every member of the community and is a clear representation of the positive identity feedback loop. This idea of “Pronouns as Roles” was seen in each and every queer focused Discord server I interacted with. Adding to this idea, on Twitter and Tumblr, users are given a profile in the form of a public blog. It was extremely common for queer individuals to place their pronouns in the description or bio. This more points to the importance of avatar identification in virtual space as the use of pronouns are a quick and easy way to kickstart the self-identification verification process. Seeing how these ideas work in tandem with one another to create online spaces queer folks are interested in becoming a part of points to them being important accessibility traits that allow spaces to be more welcoming to the queer community.

What was noted next, on Discord specifically, was the presence of community guidelines and moderation. These facets link back to anonymity and moderation as discussed throughout the survey. Each server had a set of rules or guidelines for the community to follow. These guidelines are important as allowing spaces to defend themselves is an important aspect to forming healthy communities. To point back to Powell’s work once again they discuss how queer folks are treated online often mimics how they are treated in every day life, and that, “[o]verall, the findings highlight the importance of actively promoting safe and inclusive online spaces” (218). Continuing on, the themes that are shared from community to community are that of promoting respect and demoting harassment. Tying together hand in hand they often relate directly to respecting one another on the grounds of mutual respect while opposing targeted harassment or bigotry. What Discord does to assist these issues is placing the ability to moderate

these servers directly in the hands of the community, this is done through “roles.” Similar to Twitter and Tumblr, users can block individuals that harass or target them in any way, however, Discord allows those who run the server to block these individuals from their space. The issue that is still present here is the existence of hate groups forming their own communities on these platforms. Often these communities will fester and promote harassment, violence, and bigotry and those within them will post private information about queer individuals publicly and target others with threats. These spaces and individuals will often be reported, blocked, banned, or however else the platform chooses to moderate, and these individuals and communities remain out of interest in equality. This once again relates back to supporting the ideas presented by the groups and effectively promoting their existence. However, much of this discussion relates to the next ideal of anonymity, specifically in reference to accountability.

Anonymity is an important ideal as it is a reassuring feature of the internet allowing young queer folks to self-identify in safe and healthy ways. What these communities do to promote this is the use of an avatar. Avatars can be anything used to represent an individual in virtual space such as an icon, a profile picture, or a username. Having this virtual representation of yourself is crucial to a social platform and, as such, is seen in every space mentioned prior. Each space provides the user the ability to carefully curate how the others in that space see them which is often a rather validating experience. The disadvantageous side of this, however, relates back to the idea of moderation through the dismissal of accountability. Often users who take to this targeted harassment do so because they find there to be no repercussions for their actions. One can't see their face, know their name, or do anything but block and report them. When these users face no repercussions for making these spaces hostile or blatantly ignoring/breaking community guidelines it becomes clear that the developers of the space care more about



increasing/keeping these harmful communities than listening to and respecting minority communities. What this creates is unsafe and uncomfortable platforms that swiftly lose respect and integrity like 4Chan, an alt-right dominated platform that allows users to threaten, harass, and target whomever they please.

The common threads connecting these ideas seem to be the focus of Accessibility, Anonymity, and Moderation. Accessibility, by way of self-identification through Pronouns and Avatars and through connecting with people globally, Anonymity, once again by way of avatars but also simultaneously a line of defense for queer individuals and against trolls of various degrees, and finally in Moderation, as how these spaces can offer a safe-haven for underprivileged and often targeted communities but without proper attention can become spaces that allow users to discuss and promote illegal/violent actions. The guide seeks to offer solutions, or, ways to support, the communities that have grown to appreciate, and in some cases build their lives around, these spaces in important and powerful ways.

### **Guide**

The Virtual Space Queer Community Guidelines, VSQCG for short, is a three section set of guidelines to keep in mind when developing virtual spaces. Pulling directly from the previous sections there is great importance to keeping communities in mind while developing a space, even if only for the reputation it sets for the developers and their platforms. This section seeks to discuss the reasoning for and desired outcome of each section of the guide rather than identifying the contents within, to read and comment on the guide it can be found at [QueerThesis.space](https://queerthesis.space) (to be further discussed in the next section.) The primary sections of the VSQCG are Accessibility, Anonymity, and Moderation, all containing specific subsections with guidelines as to how they may be accomplished, what they may mean, and identifications or clarifications of certain

rebuttals/ideas. Pulling from the previous acknowledgements and analyses, following this guide should allow for a mutualistic, professional, and respectful relationship to form between the spaces themselves and the communities contained within.

Accessibility initiates this guide and presents the topics of Pronouns, Global Connection, and Avatar identification. Pronouns insists that, when including public profiles and nameplates on softwares designed to communicate, allowing users to select pronouns or create their own set of identifiers would make the space more accessible to queer individuals. By placing users' pronouns in a visible and accessible place, conversations are able to begin respectfully and appropriately. This is something that would support nonqueer communities as well, as, if a user is choosing to remain more anonymous they can still identify themselves and provide the conversation with a positive and collaborative flow. This then leads into the promotion of Global Connection as, if users can connect with anyone around the world they may find individuals that see them and understand them in ways they may not have felt that before. Limiting interactions to local servers may seem tempting for massive online spaces as it would minimize latency and load times, but, as technology grows and evolves it may be more important to support the communities than stifle their growth. Lastly, the final accessibility point regards Avatar Identification. Allowing users to identify with a profile, icon, username, or any other form of virtual identification may help with the idea of self-presence introduced on page 10. Allowing users even the simplest ability of self identification may be a key element in the formation of any community, and, if not, remains a fun and appreciated addition to any virtual space. This connects to the next section as the use of an avatar can promote anonymity within a space.

Anonymity continues on to discuss privacy, accountability and trust. Privacy initiates this discussion by positing that, if a user's information is kept private, or, if the user is given the

ability to privatize their information, they won't fear being outed or misidentified. This could exist as a tiered system allowing mutual friends the ability to reach more information about one another (much like that of Facebook friends) while preventing strangers you may have just met from seeing too much. This ability to gently move through communities without feeling targeted is a leading way privacy supports queer communities by making them feel safer and more confident. This presents the counter-argument of allowing trolls to feel as though they are able to displace accountability by hiding their personal information. Having profiles that require multi-factor identification, tracking cookies on browsers, or even using IP identification could be great starts to limiting this shirking of responsibility. Accountability is a leading aspect that if followed would deny trolls and targeted harassers from continuously harming communities. In many spaces users are able to create infinitely many accounts to avoid a block/ban or, even after repeated blocks by numerous communities, the users are maintaining their access to other spaces. This then calls into question who is responsible for their repeated actions? Are the developers that allow this behavior not to be held responsible for the actions that take place within the spaces they create and moderate? By holding users accountable for repeated harmful actions spaces grow a heightened sense of integrity and respect and the user base grows for more altruistic and collaborative reasons. A final element that may support the benefits of anonymity is a system that presents users who have shown consistent activity and respect for a virtual location the ability to access heightened levels of anonymity. Seen in the public online chat room VRChat, this prevention of new users from being able to perform certain actions limits the creation of new accounts to avoid block/ban walls. The feature then presents users the ability to self moderate how more (or less) trusted individuals may interact with them combining the ideal of community moderation with anonymity. This is not to support the avoidance of holding users

accountable but, instead, may allow users to feel more comfortable exploring and communicating without worrying about trolls or harassers. If users are able to stay private and earn anonymity while their harassers are being held accountable, trust, and attendance, grows for the space as well. Lastly, by way of effective moderation this ideal of anonymity is supported in an impactful way.

The third and final topic presented by the guide is that of Moderation. This, the most finicky topic, identifies Community, Violence, Trolls, and Misinformation/Disinformation as its leading points of discussion. Community insinuates that, first and foremost, providing communities the ability to moderate themselves is essential when spaces seek to allow these communities to grow and develop. Communities should be given the ability to set their own rules, norms, and values for the community to follow and, if not followed, they should also be able to mute, block, or ban users from their space. This, however, should not be the only form of moderation. The group or individual that develops and maintains these spaces should have community guidelines in place for every patron to follow. What the guide posits however is that these rules and regulations should adapt to the communities in return, allowing the communities to define terms and set limits. What this means is that if a regulation is set by the platform disallowing any form of harassment, the communities themselves should be able to define the harassment and set the boundaries on how serious the occurrence was. This then leads into the discussion of violence as community moderation could be weaponized against minority communities. Violence discusses a no tolerance policy for hate speech and bigotry. All too often communities form around the collective hatred towards a group of people and, within, they discuss violence towards this group and often perpetuate stereotypes while promoting harassment. This type of community places a space in danger of losing its dignity and its user

base once again pointing to 4Chan, a space that allows for doxing, violent threats, and in the worst scenarios, hate crimes. Trolls seem to echo this kind of danger, perhaps less intensely, but dangerous all the same. In order to understand how serious Trolls are, look to the communities being targeted. By following the ideal of Community Moderation, allowing trolls to be defined as a force of harassment may avoid the trend set by violent communities and minimize the promotion of harmful attitudes within virtual space. Trolls, while often seen as an indifferent force that simply seeks a negative reaction as validation for their comedy, may still be an aggressive or upsetting group disturbing communities with hate speech. Allowing the communities to decide how serious the nature of the troll's harassment is and responding to the issue appropriately and respectfully shows integrity and support, encouraging community growth. As a final concept connected to the topic of moderation, Misinformation and Disinformation should be monitored and identified. The spread of intentionally or unintentionally false statements perpetuates stereotypes and adds to harmful ideologies regarding minority communities. Preventing these could minimize the formation of hate groups and user fatigue.

Accessibility, Anonymity, and Moderation are major ideals that, when followed, support communities and encourage interaction with a space designed for communities. The perfect veil that covers social virtual spaces has been falling. With the rise of social media as a platform for revolution and socio-political movements the users of these spaces are seeing the cracks in how they're treated. Users are growing tired and angry with these spaces and are seeking alternatives every day. By following this guide developers may be able to form unique and interesting spaces that support more communities than just the one studied today. The use of avatars could help individuals with visual impairments or poor technological skills like the elderly, by properly

upkeep and moderating spaces people of color may experience less targeted and consistent racism on social media, and through the promotion of anonymity individuals who struggle with anxiety or other social impairments may more comfortably find a place they belong. With the guide finished and the analyses complete the final step is placing the materials within an accessible and public virtual space.

## **HTML**

With the guide formulated the next step was to situate it within its own virtual space. The objective of this study was to open up a discussion, share the grievances of a community, and present a selection of guidelines for the developers of virtual spaces to follow moving forward. To relate this section back to the survey, a great deal of responses included the free and easy access to online information. This is, for the participants of the study, a leading reason queer people use the internet. Being able to access information on things like special interests and specific identities provides queer folks the ability to meet like minded individuals and form these communities. Therefore, with the added advantage of providing developers easy access to the information studied here, it became imperative to situate this thesis and all supplementary material in an accessible public space. When looking at the spaces identified and accessed over the course of the project, the clearest solution became an HTML website.

Twitter, Discord, and Tumblr, all stood out as leading virtual spaces used to study the topics at large. These spaces were analyzed and the first note of similarity is that they were all accessible via an html website. A public site is a great way of connecting and sharing information as anyone who has access to virtual spaces and the communities within will have access to a web browser. Once this was decided it was important to understand what this site actually looks like. The main facets of the project, the guide and this paper, were necessary

additions and considering their length it was decided they were to receive separate pages. Additionally a landing page was needed along with some sort of connection to the community social media. Considering the standard of separating contact and home pages it seemed proper to separate the community page from the landing page. One final page that was needed was the author page as a study on the queer community is often more respected by the community when it is being done by a member of the community. As it stands then, the pages include Home, Community Links, Guide, Thesis, and About the Author.

When designing the style of the page the goal was to keep it modern and, following Morville's UX honeycomb, it was to be accessible, desirable, and usable. By using a minimalist design it was quite easy to keep the site accessible. Providing links to the document's on Google Drive was a great way of allowing the mobile design to still be usable and desirable while supporting screen readers that may have trouble reading embedded information. Using the color schemes of various pride flags made for an interesting modern look while branding the space as one that is clearly queer. Keeping the UI towards the bottom half of the page made for a unique structure filling in the empty space that may have otherwise had no purpose. The font and text design was based on how appealing they were to the eye while giving off a digital feel. This space was hosted using a paid service as it seemed simpler and cheaper to upload predesigned files than hosting the space on my own server. The site can be found at [QueerThesis.space](https://QueerThesis.space) and will be live-hosted for as long as the service is affordable and accessible.

### **Conclusion**

The internet is a complex web of communication. Humans have invented a way to ignore the confines of time and space in amazing and unique ways. Queer communities have traveled to this strange digital world for refuge and are demanding their spaces to respect that. What Healthy

Alternative posits is this, if virtual spaces are so integral to the formation of identity, the purest definition of who someone is, they should be treated like the real identifiable places they are and listen to the communities who frequent them adapting accordingly. One study can only begin to bring to light all the problems these spaces face and their solutions moving forward, however, more important than that is opening up the conversation.

Communities and their virtual spaces have a symbiotic relationship. They necessitate one another. The question we as developers/inventors have to ask ourselves is do we make this relationship mutualistic or parasitic? Will we leach off the necessities of underprivileged communities or will we work with them to create something more collaborative, something better? The harsh truth here is that, while a parasitic relationship may place the developers in a better position, the communities are not unaware enough not to notice this. Users will understand their mistreatment and will vacate the space reducing interaction and losing a finite resource. By collaborating, by listening, and by opening up this discussion the communities will grow and become an infinite resource of feedback, ideas, and support. By collaborating we make something we all enjoy. The internet is a permanent part of human life and must be understood as more than just some tech in our phones. This new world we created is at a crossroads, do we continue on this parasitic route leading the internet to become a dangerous and undesirable place, or, do we collaborate, create, and form a brighter future for this healthy alternative to physical space? “Although the Internet has been presented as a democratic virtual space where physical boundaries are blurred, [there is] evidence that professional real-life characteristics such as position, university ranking and country level of development affect the way users build and interact in their professional virtual life” (Mascler 61). How do we develop accordingly?



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