



¡Quédate (informada) en casa! Análisis foucaultiano de las respuestas digitales LGTBIQA+ frente a la COVID-19 y la memoria cultural del activismo contra la pandemia del VIH-SIDA

Stay (Informed) at Home! A Foucauldian Analysis of the Digital LGBTQIA+ Responses to COVID-19 and the Cultural Memory of the HIV-AIDS Pandemic Activism

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Resumen: Siguiendo un enfoque foucaultiano, este artículo analiza el modo en que las aplicaciones de citas LGTBIQA+ implementaron medidas de cuidado e información colectivas durante los primeros días de la crisis sanitaria de la COVID-19 de forma similar a las aprendidas durante la lucha conjunta en la emergencia del VIH-SIDA. Sin olvidar que su principal preocupación era mantener a sus usuarios en las aplicaciones el mayor tiempo posible por razones económicas, las aplicaciones de ligue Grindr, Scruff, Wapx y MachoBB proporcionaron a la comunidad LGTBIQA+ toda una serie de servicios de apoyo y protección contra la COVID-19: facilitando socialización digital para compartir preocupaciones y estados de ánimo; ofreciendo asistencia psicológica profesional gratuita; recomendando fuentes de ayuda para las personas LGTBIQA+ mayores que quedaron aisladas; proporcionando información sobre la COVID-19 y medidas especiales de protección para personas seropositivas; organizando eventos digitales y fiestas de baile virtuales; y brindando apoyo emocional y asesoramiento a personas usuarias de chemsex. A mayor escala, cuando el VIH-SIDA irrumpió a principios de los ochenta, les activistas respondieron rápidamente creando centros de atención y educación, y emprendiendo iniciativas

que daban apoyo y combatían el estigma. Utilizando como eje vertebrador y metodológico la conceptualización de Foucault de la biovigilancia, la ética y la política de resistencia, este artículo analiza cómo las aplicaciones de citas LGBTIQ+ respondieron a la COVID-19 a través de lecciones aprendidas de la lucha inicial contra el VIH-SIDA.

Palabras clave: aplicaciones de citas LGTBIQA+; respuestas digitales a la COVID-19; análisis foucaultiano; activismo contra el VIH-SIDA; vigilancia y resistencia.

Abstract: Following a Foucauldian approach, this paper analyses how LGTBQIA+ dating apps carried out measures of collective care and information during the early days of the COVID-19 crisis in similar ways to those learned from the joint fight during the emergence of HIV-AIDS. Not forgetting that their main concern was keeping their users on the apps as long as possible for economic reasons, hook-up apps such as Grindr, Scruff, Wapx, and MachoBB provided the LGTBQIA+ community with a series of supporting and protecting services against COVID-19: enabling digital socialization to share worries and feelings; offering free professional psychological assistance; recommending sources of help to isolated LGTBQIA+ elders; providing information about COVID-19 and special protective measures for HIV+ people; organizing digital events and virtual dance parties; and giving emotional support and advice to chemsex users. At a greater scale, when HIV-AIDS first appeared in the early 1980s, activists rapidly responded by creating care and education centres, and undertaking initiatives that gave support and combated the stigma. Drawing on Foucault's conceptualization of biosurveillance, ethics, and the politics of resistance as backbone and methodological frame, this paper analyses how the LGTBQIA+ dating apps responded to COVID-19 through lessons learned from the early fight against HIV-AIDS.

Keywords: LGTBQIA+ dating apps; digital responses to COVID-19; Foucauldian analysis; HIV-AIDS activism; surveillance and resistance.

INTRODUCTION

It is essentially a psycho-media pandemic, the first epidemic born in the days of new media, and its most widespread effect has been the communication of fear. Few events have impacted a community as directly. Disinformation, rumours, politization, and stigma are fundamental to the configuration of a myth that has devastated an entire generation and that has changed the ways of relating affectively. (Lebovici, 2020, p. 11)

It is almost undistinguishable whether this quote refers to the HIV-AIDS epidemic or to COVID-19. It was written to introduce the book *SIDA* about the role of arts and AIDS activism at the end of the 20th century, and the “new medium” that the citation mentions was no other than television. In “Truth and Power,” Foucault asserted that any subject has to be analysed “within a historical framework [...] a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of knowledge [...] in their empty sameness throughout the course of history” (1980, p. 129). In his methodologically typical fashion, Foucault

avoids abstract questions that try to define universal truths, and rather explores how these concepts have functioned at a particular historical moment. This paper's backbone and methodological approach makes use of Foucault's thought and work to analyse how some of these so-called "knowledges" that the LGBTQIA+ community acquired in their fight against the HIV-AIDS pandemic in the '80s were adapted to the 21st century digital era and proved to be incredibly useful in the community's responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As social activist and manager of an HIV-AIDS support centre in Toronto Gerardo Betancourt assures, "precisely because we have learned as marginalized communities that reacted at the beginning of the AIDS early days, that HIV-AIDS educators – and hookup apps – adapted very fast interventions, programs and counselling to alleviate societal effect pandemic against COVID-19 new infections" (Betancourt, 2020, p. 188).

As Preciado and Esposito point out, the terms "community" and "immunity" have the same root, *munus*, which in Latin means the tax that citizens had to pay to be part of a community, understood as an offering, a gift (Preciado, 2020, p. 2; Esposito, 2013, p. 84). As such, this paper explores how a lot of effective LGBTQIA+ responses to COVID-19 were community-based initiatives grounded in collective responsibility and indebted lessons learned in the fight against HIV-AIDS in the '80s. Indeed, when facing COVID-19, "communities have repeatedly proved themselves able to react swiftly and decisively, to come together and quickly assess how to respond, and to act without the shackles of bureaucracy" (Ellis et al, 2022, p. 5).

Although this paper begins with an analysis of their similarities, it also explores some of the significant differences between the pandemics of the HIV-AIDS and the COVID-19: the former impacted the LGBTQIA+ community unequally from the outset, generating stigma but also for years a great lack of visibility and political inaction, against which associations had to confront (silence = death). On the contrary, the COVID-19 crisis was characterized by affecting an entire population equally – the main differentiating variable was age, not aspects of sexuality or gender –, by its high visibility, and the more or less rapid and resolute reaction of political authorities. The world came to a standstill, and scientists from most countries dedicated funds and resources to research until the vaccine was eventually created and distributed. Another quintessential difference is the crucial role that social media has now in the 21st century. Virtual spaces that were principally created to share and exchange personal

information have increased their uses over time, and social mobilization has become one of them. Social networks are now the fastest channel of dissemination of news, calls for action and demonstrations. Indeed, the main body of this article focuses on the rapid digital responses to COVID-19 by LGBTQIA+ dating apps that offered their users a series of fast intervention programs including information, support, advice, and direct help, by paying special attention to self-empower vulnerable collectives such as elders, migrants, sex workers, HIV positives and chemsex users.

In “Act, Expenditure, Death,” Foucault analysed Plato’s *Symposium*, also known as *The Banquet*, and stated that “sexual activity was located within the broad parameters of life and death, of time, becoming, and eternity. It became necessary because the individual was fated to die, and in order that he might in a sense escape death” (1985, p. 135). During the first peak period of the deadly COVID-19 pandemic, some people broke coronavirus quarantine for casual sex and continued hooking up with strangers who they had met through dating apps. This article, however, demonstrates that LGBTQIA+ dating apps also provided alternatives, information, digital socialization, psychological support, and non-judgemental sexual health programs about safer sex and safer drugs use for those who broke quarantine during the pandemic.

On the other side of the spectrum, the dangers of big data and surveillance are currently overwhelming, with alarming consequences, such as the illegal selling of users’ personal data for political or discriminatory purposes. The second section of this paper begins by acknowledging the disadvantages of this surveillance on the Internet and social media era as a 21st century digital version of Foucault’s Panopticism in the form of Poster’s Super Cyber Panopticon (Foucault, 1975a; Poster, 1995). As in the early days of HIV-AIDS, during COVID-19 our sexual activity and daily life was again regulated and restricted by health institutions and government policies. This situation is analysed in the light of Foucault’s “We ‘Other Victorians,’” where he explored the way in which “sex is put into discourse” and confirmed how power – such as governments in both the 80s and in 2020 – channels it “in order to reach the most tenuous and individual modes of behaviour, the paths that give access to the rare or scarcely perceivable forms of desire, how it penetrates and controls everyday pleasure” (1978, p. 11). Thus, it will also be taken into account the biosurveillance culture these apps are part of, and the fact that their interests are based on the number of connected users, since their profits come from the companies that post the adds that appear within the

apps as well as users' premium subscriptions to them, meaning that keeping their users connected as long as possible was also an economic strategy.

1. PANDEMIC SIMILARITIES: CONCEPTUALIZATION, REPRESENTATION, AND RESPONSES

1. 1. Pre-Pandemic Sexual Liberation Times: the 1970s and the 2010s

Although it has been proved that different viral sequences of HIV were found in humans in 1959 and already in 1908 (Worobey et al, 2008, p. 661-664; Quammen, 2020, p. 466), it was not until March 1981 when HIV virus woke up from decades of lethargy, emerged in the form of AIDS in New York and California, and spread worldwide. As Patton asserts, "It was almost immediately clear that AIDS hysteria endangered civil liberties and the quest for sexual liberation, whatever that might come to mean" (1988, p. 105). The sexual freedom enjoyed in the US in the late '60s and '70s was suddenly questioned, attacked, and regulated by ignorance, the fear to be infected, and by government authorities. In 1985 the San Francisco city council proposed to close down all bathhouses, as in the AIDS early days it was thought that poppers might be responsible for the spread of the epidemic. As Crimp affirms, AIDS was politically and medically conceptualised as a gay disease, and "precious time was wasted giving megadoses of poppers to mice... allowing HIV to be injected into the veins of vast numbers of drugs users, as well as of haemophiliacs and other people requiring blood transfusions" (1988, p. 6).

Similarly to the sexual freedom enjoyed in the 1970s before the HIV-AIDS pandemic exploded in June 1981, there was also a climate of sexual liberation in the 2010s before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, due to the possibilities opened by the new hookup apps (Grindr was launched in 2009), the availability of PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis)¹, the effectiveness of anti-retroviral therapies, and the recognition that "undetectable = untransmittable". In the global North, HIV was eventually conceptualised as a chronic but non-lethal disease

¹ PrEP was approved by the FDA in 2012, and by the European Medicines Agency in 2016. From 2014 to 2017, PrEP use among gay and bisexual men shot from 6% to 35% in twenty major U.S. cities (Arana, 2020). In November 1, 2019, PrEP was approved and funded in Spain by the National Health System (Mascort, 2020).

(Preciado, 2020), as “it now concerns ways of living rather than certain death” (Dean, 2015, p. 227).

Betancourt uses the term “state of emergency” to refer to the situation in the early ‘80s when nobody knew exactly what the virus was that was killing people (2020). Due to COVID-19, by April 2020, more than half of the world’s population, 3.9 billion people, were similarly living under some sort of state of emergency and/or lockdown, and our sexual and civil freedoms were again likewise regulated by fear of contagion and by political institutions. In “The Great Confinement,” Foucault approached the locking up of people “designated” as mad/idle in the 17th century, and described confinement as a “police matter” claiming that “what made it necessary was an imperative of labour [...] it is in this context that the obligation to work assumes its meaning [...] it will serve as *askesis*, as punishment” (1965, p. 46, 55). The COVID-19 lockdowns’ link to consumption and production are the 21st century version of that use of confinement as a captive force. During the lockdowns, teleworking and online buying were imposed as a prevention measure, thus maintaining the *status quo* of capitalism and consumerism by obliging overworked cyclists to ride through the empty streets to deliver food orders and Amazon packages. In “The Body of the Condemned,” Foucault also approaches this topic of “political economy,” claiming that if the system does not make “use of violence or bloody punishment, even when they use ‘lenient’ methods of confinement and correction, it is always the body that is at issue – the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission” (1975b, p. 25).

1.2. Media, AIDS, and COVID-19: Panic, Homophobia, and Xenophobia

In 1985, Altman stated that for most people the reality of AIDS had meant fear of contagion rather experience of loss, and accused media of creating panic and spreading ignorance. Crimp asserted that “there were, on the one hand, the scientific facts about AIDS and, on the other hand, ignorance or misrepresentation of those facts” (1988, p. 3). According to Sturken, the media in the US associated AIDS “with practices regarded as deviant (homosexuality, drug use, promiscuity),” and portrayed photographs of signs of the disease such as grotesque lesions and emaciated bodies which not only created categories of deviance but also spread panic (1997, p. 145, 152). Reflecting on how the mainstream media

informed the general population about AIDS in the '80s, Sontag exposed the military metaphors they used (1988, p. 11), which were similarly omnipresent in 2020 in the “war” to “combat” and “defeat” COVID-19. Lebovici also condemned how the media stigmatised populations with AIDS – the so-called five H’s: homosexuals, heroin addicts, haemophiliacs, Haitians, and hookers (sex workers) – and wondered how to make visible a crisis that hit politically invisible communities (2020, p. 24). Television is a paradoxical place that is contemplated in private but whose duty and responsibility are public. Lebovici criticised that in the '80s, people with AIDS were watching TV programs that talked about AIDS but without addressing them (2020, p. 33).

Similarly, during the COVID-19 crisis, the initial television reaction was to report how the disease was annihilating an entire generation of elders but without talking “to” those still alive COVID-19 infected ones at hospitals. Lebovici claimed that “the politics of AIDS and COVID-19 draw attention to the dispersion of flows of power through all the cracks and fissures of the social system” (2020, p. 30), which Foucault called “the microphysics of power” (Epstein, 1996, p. 4). According to Patton, AIDS was another phenomenon understandable “through the existing analysis of government neglect, of poverty, and of lack of access to health care” (1990, p. 11). If AIDS brought about fear, stigma, and homophobia, the initial social response to COVID-19 that also broke the social fabric, besides fear and stigma, was xenophobia. Žižek talks about “explosions of racism” (2020a, p. 21), and Butler refers to it as “panicked xenophobia” (2020, p. 62). The fact that COVID-19 was sometimes called “the Chinese Virus” did not help but increased the animosity towards an entire population, a xenophobic phenomenon very easy to ignite in times of crisis as history proves.

The mechanisms of social response to perceived threats usually include attacks on minorities, and it is quite revealing to explore how COVID-19 specifically affected the LGBTQIA+ community: firstly, many LGBTQIA+ people were forced to remain in or move back to unsafe situations in family environments with relatives who may be LGBTI-phobic; the closure of LGBTQIA+ bars and clubs did not only involve not socializing or dating, but these places have traditionally been safe spaces where LGBTQIA+ people can be free from judgement; LGBTQIA+ elders were at a higher risk of having no offspring who could get them supplies or medications in lockdown or emergency situations. Butler argues that “the virus alone does not discriminate, but we humans surely do: radical

inequality, xenophobia, violence against women, queer, and trans people, and the capitalist exploitation find ways to reproduce and strengthen themselves within the pandemic zones” (2020).

A particularly noteworthy example concerns the surveillance and stigmatisation of a young South Korean gay man who, in May 2020, visited a series of bars in Seoul, and the following day he tested positive for COVID-19. South Korean authorities tracked his movements, the media reports specifically identified the bars as gay places, and queer Koreans and their lifestyle were blamed for new cases of COVID-19 (Gitzen, 2020). Being gay is not illegal in Korea, but sexual minorities face widespread social stigma and discrimination. Many keep their identities and orientations in secret, as being outed can cost them their jobs. In this case, the media guided national anger and fear of COVID-19 towards LGBTQIA+ people and made them “a target of hatred” (Hyun-Ju, 2020). In times of crisis, minorities are always blamed and attacked, and this time was no different. In fact, in countries such as South Korea there were calls in the mainstream media to close down LGBTQIA+ dating apps to stop the clientele from “spreading” the disease (Gitzen, 2020) – echoing the closing down of bathhouses in the 80s –, when no similar demand was made to close down heterosexual dating apps.

2. DIGITAL SOLUTIONS: INTERVENTIONS ON/BY LGBTQIA+ DATING APPS IN COVID-19 TIMES

2. 1. Digital Cooperation vs. Big Data & Surveillance

In “Panopticism,” Foucault acknowledged the potential of collective resistance as the only form able to defeat power. According to him, “Discipline fixes (...) it dissipates compact groupings of individuals (...) it must neutralise the effects of counterpower that spring from them and which form a resistance to the power” (1975a: 219-220). Crimp, in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, documented how LGBTQIA+ communities and activists rapidly combined forces and joined the struggle in order to provide an organised response to AIDS (1988). Sturken identified in both LGBTQIA+ and AIDS activism the legacy of the civil rights movement strategies (1997, p. 147). It is a fact that the AIDS epidemic required powerful alliances to intervene in the public domain and demand different political, medical, and media policies. Similarly, regarding COVID-19, cooperation and organised local interventions also

proved to be efficient responses to the disease and its stigmatization. An example of these local interventions is that which emerged against the rise of homophobia in South Korea in May 2020. Queer Action Against COVID-19 was a coalition of 23 groups to protect and respect the privacy of Korea's queer communities. "What we need now is not hatred and discrimination, but realizing that our safety is tied together, and we should all come in solidarity for that," the association of groups declared (Wright, 2020).

In 2001, the digital revolution had just started, but in the third decade of the 21st century, as Crooks asserts, "many of our online interactions do not occur *through* internet platforms but are *created* by the platform design" (2013, p. 1). In 2024 people who use hook-up apps negotiate the nature of their relations online, after which they may become materialised, or not. Žizek asserts that, since the emergence of COVID-19, we are returning to the literal meaning of the term "viral," as now a "viral infection" works in both directions: the real and the virtual (2020, p. 26). Indeed, the digital era has brought along new forms of surveillance by technological devices and social media that provide big data about our personal lives to database companies, which most people consider the price to pay for staying connected. Regarding this biosurveillance and digital control, Preciado affirms that COVID-19 has legitimised and extended these state practices "normalising" them and making them necessary to maintain the idea of immunity (2020, p. 8).

It was during the COVID-19 lockdown that Bentham's panopticon prison model analysed by Foucault in "Panopticism" (1975a, p. 195-228) became more materialised than ever. On the occasions when people went out to the empty streets to buy supplies or medications, they were watched from windows and balconies by neighbours, who adopted the role of vigilantes and shouted at them or called the authorities if they thought that those on the street were breaking the quarantine for no reason. Thus, during the COVID-19 lockdown, prisoners became also jailers in a physical sense, in addition to the fact that we were all already digital prisoners and vigilantes in line with the super-/cyber-panopticism proposed by Poster, whereby databases and social media produce subjects who are willing participants in their own surveillance (1995, p. 78-94). It is significant that, with respect to curtailment of liberties, COVID-19 mortality and morbidity rates were initially higher in countries where governments were reluctant to infringe on people's freedom of movement, such as in the US and the UK. Han points out that, in Asia, epidemics are not so much combatted by

virologists and epidemiologists but more specifically by internalised obedience, computer technicians, and experts in macrodata. Nevertheless, he also advocates for human solidarity and cooperation: “COVID-19 isolates, makes individuals worry about their own survival, but we cannot leave the revolution in the hands of the virus. We must have faith that after the virus a human revolution comes” (2020), and we should not forget that all revolutions in history have been the result of group consciousness, cooperation, and collective action.

2. 2. Support Services that LGBTQIA+ Hookup Apps Offered during the COVID-19 Lockdown: Analysis and Interpretations

Although the four most popular LGBTQIA+ hookup apps (Grindr, Scruff, Macho BB and Wapx) offered different kinds of support services, which will be addressed in this section, “stay safe and informed at home” was the common thread that unified them all during the COVID-19 lockdown. However, “keep connected” was also another motto encouraged by these four apps, which can be interpreted in multiple ways: either for altruistic reasons such as concerns about isolated queer individuals’ vulnerability, or on the contrary, following capitalist interests or even as a way of biosurveillance. It is not beside the question the fact that only people who are into apps or drugs are called “users” rather than “customers.”

Firstly, regarding Grindr, since its launch in 2009, it has become the largest dating social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people. It has 13.5 million monthly active users from nearly every country in the world, who, only in 2023, collectively sent 100 billion chats and shared 1 billion private albums (Grindr, 2023a). As Crooks explains: “Grindr is a state of mind, a way of life... locative media form an embodied space that is not separated from physical space but fundamentally blended to it” (2013, p. 2).

Despite being the most popular LGBTQIA+ hook-up app, Grindr’s responses to COVID-19 were less than favourable: Grindr’s initiatives were limited to asking their users to participate in a survey and hosting a live event in June as part of Pride Month celebrations. The survey in question’s results showed that participants reported an increase of 2.3 sex partners during the COVID-19 lockdown (Stephenson et al, 2020, p. 12-13), and according to Khan, many Grindr users treated COVID-19 as it were just another sexually transmitted infection (2020). These data provide

evidence that Grindr users did not precisely “stay home.” Regarding the live event hosted by Grindr on Instagram on June 22, 2020, speakers discussed sexual health and advocated for staying safe (Grindr, 2020). However, overall, Grindr’s initiatives to protect its users from COVID-19 were minimal. Besides, let us not forget that in April 2018 Grindr sold the serological status of all its users and their last test date to two companies, arguing that it was to optimise the app. Monetising these data was such a despicable act that legal actions should have been taken at that moment, but there was a buzz on Twitter (now X) for a week and everything ended there. Foucault already warned about the regulation and disclosure of private data in “Illegalities and Delinquency,” where he denounced that free inmates “leave prison with a passport that they must show everywhere they go and which mentions the sentence that they have served” (1975, p. 267). Indeed, both instances of private data regulation are not very different from the COVID-19 vaccine passports, which proves how similarly people who test positive in HIV or COVID-19 are vulnerable to biosurveillance and travelling restrictions.

Secondly, the claim to fame of Scruff, founded in 2010, is that it was the first app to include options for members of the transgender community (Tracer, 2013). During the COVID-19 lockdown, it offered two kinds of free digital services, both related to entertainment to cheer up their housebound users: an interactive “live queer quiz shows” in which all users could participate (Scruff, 2020), and virtual dance parties featuring famous DJs, in which users could dance in their own homes while interacting with one another. Both Scruff’s initiatives encouraged their users to keep in high spirits while staying at home, something necessary when the news from outside regarding the expansion of COVID-19 was so distressing. However, once again, not only were users prompted to keep connected to one another for entertainment but also to the app for economic reasons. If Scruff users wanted to see video messages from other users, they needed to update their subscriptions to Scruff Pro, available for purchase at 19.99 dollars per month (Scruff, 2020).

Thirdly, a more niche app, MachoBB, founded in 2018, defines itself as “the gay dating website for barebackers” (MachoBB, 2023). It is one of the few hook-up apps that does not have any restrictions regarding the content of the photos that can be publicly uploaded by its users. Although it was strongly criticised from its very launching due to its clear encouragement of unprotected sex, it was one of the few apps that during the COVID-19 lockdown straightforwardly recommended its users “not to

hung up and stay at home until this crisis passes. We hope you are well during these difficult times” (MachoBB, 2020a). The app also temporarily cancelled two of its sections: “Chills” and “Looking for now,” and suggested its users that “even though we can’t meet, it’s time to chat and make new friends” (MachoBB, 2020). Although the app offered the purchase of their own merchandise products such as T-shirts with MachoBB’s logo on them, it also encouraged its users to donate money to different NGOs, including local food banks, in order to provide immediate help to counteract the economic consequences of COVID-19 (MachoBB, 2020a). Initiatives like this represent another specific example of the kind of resistance referred to earlier based on cooperation and local interventions, echoing what Foucault also described in “Illegalities and Delinquency” as the organisation of a milieu of teamworking individuals, loyal to one another, ready to aid (1975, p. 267).

Finally, the type of support provided by apps Wapo and Wapa was also in the same collaborative resistance line. Both founded in 2012 under the names of Bender and Brenda, respectively, Wapo is, according to their website, the gay dating app that has the highest number of users in Spain – 3,100,000 users –while Wapa is the most popular lesbian dating app in the world (Wapx, 2023). During the early days of COVID-19, Wapx, the parent company, developed the most useful and complete initiative provided by a dating app by designing an LGBTQIA+ mental health program in coalition with more than 30 well-known Spanish LGBTQIA+ associations including COGAM, Lambda, Fundación Triángulo, Imagina Más, and Apoyo Positivo, among others. The program consisted in providing information, advice, and support on a series of topics: the impact of COVID-19 on LGBTQIA+ people; physical and psychological exercises to help users keep a healthy routine during lockdown and stay calm in stressing circumstances; wise advice on a correct use of social media and apps given that they can enable users to stay in touch with friends but also induce anxiety if they are exposed to constant news regarding the pandemic; providing alternatives to sex during lockdown, such as practising virtual sex, activating the travel mode to virtually meet people from all around the world, and facilitating real-time audio and video calls; and Wapx also launched a 24/7 help line and provided the links to LGBTQIA+ associations in various cities in case of users needed immediate help or support. Following the trail of the spirit of cooperation inherited from the early fight against AIDS, Wapx assured its users that “LGBTQIA+ mental health matters. This is not just a viral pandemic, it’s

a mental health pandemic. We are all in this together and together we will beat this” (Wapx, 2023). Wapx’s initiative can suffice as another example of resistance based on fast organised cooperative digital programs indebted to the lessons learned in the early days of AIDS.

In summary, it is undeniable that these apps’ main interest remained keeping their users connected to them at all costs as long as possible, since they make money not from people hooking up, but from advertising and premium subscriptions. Like other social media platforms, when they offer a free service and there is not product, it means that users and their data are the product. However, some of these assistance and support campaigns earlier referred to implied arduous work carried out by hookup apps at difficult times, contacting and gathering LGTBQIA+ associations, and were genuinely addressed to help and protect their users from COVID-19 and its economic and mental health consequences.

2. 3. COVID-19 and HIV: Hookup Apps as Vehicle for Information and Prevention

During the early months of COVID-19 pandemic, there were several community-based initiatives and programs from different HIV-AIDS organisations that made use of LGBTQIA+ dating apps to reach their people and offer them information, support, advice, and help. For instance, in April 2020, AIDS organisation StopSida launched a campaign that focused on providing clear information on possible interactions between COVID-19 and HIV, as well as giving support and advice regarding going to health centres for follow-ups or getting antiretroviral medications. (StopSida, 2020). While StopSida used its own website to disseminate this information, it was also made far more widely available by circulating it through LGBTQIA+ dating apps such as Grindr, Macho BB, Wapo, Wapa, Scruff, Hornet, Growler, U4BEAR, Trans4Men and KinkySafe. This coalition of forces between StopSida and most LGBTQIA+ hookup apps to protect their users is another example of collaboration and Foucauldian resistance that echoes what Gregg Bordowitz described in “Picture a Coalition” in the early days of AIDS (Crimp 1988, pp. 182-196).

Following this same line, another campaign aimed at HIV-positive people during the COVID-19 pandemic that made use of hookup apps to spread its scope is that of the HIV Prevention Program in the Centre for Spanish-Speaking Peoples in Toronto, which implemented a COVID-19 emergency intervention called “Communities Without Borders” (CWB)

focused on providing information and support to gay, bisexual, MSM, lesbian, and trans individuals who usually attended the Centre (Betancourt, 2020, p. 189). This intervention was developed through digital and social media as their face-to-face groups were cancelled due to lockdown and quarantine measures. As the group's community-based intervention director argues, HIV-AIDS educators and social workers adapted very quickly to organising initiatives against COVID-19 because of the lessons they have learned in the early days of the AIDS since "the goal with COVID-19 prevention is the same: to increase health prevention knowledge and awareness, and to avoid or reduce risk behaviours" (Betancourt, 2020, p. 189).

When HIV/AIDS first struck in the 80s, there was real, deplorable government inaction, while when COVID-19 spread worldwide in 2020, there were many governments taking many, sometimes opposite, forms of action, enacting an equally "everyone for themselves" despicable spectacle. However, during both health crisis, LGBTIQIA+ communities formed coalitions to provide information, psychological support, and prevent contagion, and as this article shows, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, these coalitions rapidly made use of digital media including LGBTIQIA+ hookup apps to quickly spread and implement support campaigns indebted to the fast strategies that were adopted as minorities in the early days of HIV-AIDS. Indeed, these *impromptu* coalitions operated as resistance and confronted the regulatory "dividing practices" exposed by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) that included isolation and confinement, two situations humankind was forced to familiarise itself with in 2020.

2. 4. Chemsex During COVID-19 and LGBTIQIA+ Hookup Apps: Controversy and Non-Judgmental Prevention Campaigns

There is no internationally agreed definition of chemsex. In the Spanish medical literature, chemsex is the practice of sex under the influence of certain drugs that enhance physical sensations increasing pleasure, and removing inhibitions in sessions that can last for many hours, even for days, often with multiple sexual partners, and most commonly among gay men but not exclusively (Fernández-Dávila, 2018). The three most popular drugs that are used during chemsex are gammahydroxybutyrate (GHB or G), mephedrone (meph), and crystal methamphetamine (crystal meth or Tina) (Stuart, 2019; Soria, 2020).

Stuart contextualises this phenomenon as the consequence of cultural and religious attitudes to homosexuality and rigid body homonormative models within the gay community that leads to some community members seeking the disinhibition experienced under the effects of the drugs that are used in these sex sessions (Stuart, 2019). Garrido asserts that what lies beneath chemsex is the way our capitalised model of leisure has been configured and the complicated relation to loneliness experienced by many in the LGBTQIA+ community (Garrido, 2020, p. 208).

In London, a gay man dies approximately every month in chemsex contexts, and chemsex-related crimes are also increasing there, while Lyon reported 20 chemsex-related deaths in 2018 (Stuart, 2019). Stuart asserts that “if authorities are not listening or prioritising chemsex as a public health concern, it echoes the earlier years of AIDS epidemic, when cultural awareness of gay deaths outweighed any research or formal public health outcry” (Stuart, 2019).

The role of LGBTQIA+ hookup apps regarding chemsex is indeed highly controversial, since chemsex sessions are precisely organised inside them, including the search for the people that participate and the drugs that are consumed. Although all these apps categorically forbid drugs sale and any form of prostitution arranged inside them, it is common knowledge among these apps’ users that emojis such as those of the diamond or the pill mean sex for money and sex with drugs, respectively. However, in spite of this undeniable, intrinsic relationship between chemsex and LGBTQIA+ hookup apps, during the COVID-19 health crisis, these apps collaborated with anti-drug associations by spreading campaigns to ensure that if done, chemsex should not multiply the number of COVID-19 infections.

The organization which contributed most with regards to prevention measures and chemsex during the pandemic was Energy Control, which designed and launched three different campaigns addressed to users of sex-related drugs during the COVID-19 quarantine. These three campaigns were disseminated through Grindr, Scruff, Macho BB, and Wapx. Energy control has over twenty years’ experience in reducing the damage of drugs use by working to ensure that in case it is done, it should be under the safest conditions as possible (Energy Control, 1997).

The first Energy Control campaign was carried out together with Mar Institute of Medical Research Foundation in Barcelona and Jaume I University in Castellón, and it was focused on informing and advising on the combination of sex and drugs from a COVID-19 risk reduction

perspective. The second digital intervention by Energy Control recommended that going out and practicing chemsex in the pandemic situation was risky, so “take this opportunity to give yourself a break, and when everything relaxes, we will celebrate” (Chem-Safe, 2020a). That said, this initiative followed the non-judgemental protocol of professionals in the field, and provided suitable advice in case chemsex users were not able to quit their practices, such as: “if you snort, crush the substance well and wash your nostrils when you are done. You could create wounds that make it easier for the COVID-19 to enter your system,” or “avoid using your mobile to do lines on it. Telephones are in permanent contact with our hands and can be a good place for the COVID-19 virus to be.” The program also warned that “adherence to retroviral treatment is essential to make HIV undetectable. So if you are HIV-positive, do not forget your medications if you go to a chemsex party” (Chem-safe, 2020a). Such understanding advice that does not condemn nor judge the lifestyle of chemsex users is key to ensure health professionals’ messages be listened to in an effective way that prevents new COVID-19 infections, as well as increases in viral load of those who are HIV-positive. Finally, the third of chem-safe.org’s digital initiatives, designed in collaboration with Carlos III Institute of Health in Madrid, was a survey called “Méthysos Study: Drugs, Sex, Health, How Do You Live It?,” which was also carried out through Grindr, Scruff, Macho BB, and Wapx (Chem-Safe, 2020b; Guerras et al., 2021).

In summary, not forgetting that LGBTQIA+ apps provide the virtual place where chemsex parties are negotiated, during the COVID-19 quarantine, these apps cooperated with anti-drugs associations and focused on preventing lockdown from potentially pushing their users to chemsex as a way of dealing with frustration and stress. As Stuart recommended in his analysis of chemsex in COVID-19 times, “be vigilantly kind and mindful when hooking up for chemsex because some of our partners are less resilient to COVID-19” (2020). And he added that those who do not practice chemsex within the gay community should “please feel compassion, not shame, for those who cannot or will not distance” (Stuart, 2020).

CONCLUSIONS: FOUCAULDIAN “SUBJUGATED KNOWLEDGES”

In *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault described what he called subjugated knowledges as “a whole series of knowledges that have

traditionally been disqualified... the knowledge of the psychiatrised, the patient” (1976/2003, p. 7-8). The queer knowledges that have been approached and referred to in this article, the knowledges of people with AIDS, HIV-positive individuals, chemsex and other drugs users, sex workers, migrants, risk groups, infected people, trans and queer persons, stigmatised communities, along with the current digital responses to COVID-19 on/by LGBTQIA+ hookup apps in 2020, all of them are indeed part of these subjugated knowledges that Foucault alluded to. In fact, in *Queer Terror*, Schotten detailed how Foucault was “unearthing knowledges from below in an attempt of disrupting hegemonic totalitarian theories” (2018, p. 74) that today configure the common *doxa* imposed by the dictates of mainstream media and demagogical and despotic politicians.

The first part of this article aimed to establish a parallel between COVID-19 and AIDS-HIV, and how both pandemics have been handled by exposing, as Preciado claims, the management of life and death of vulnerable communities in a determined period (2020). The second part explored how the organisations of citizens that emerged in the fight against AIDS in the ‘80s taught us to form coalitions to prevent COVID-19 infections within our LGBTQIA+ community, this time through the digital devices and apps that we make use of daily in the 21st century. However, it was also considered that the same technologies used to keep the queer community informed and protected are also used to surveil it. The battle between resistance and regulation takes place in the same virtual territory.

Referring to those who have died of COVID-19, Butler re-inscribed the distinction between “grievable and ungrievable lives,” evidencing “those whose lives should be protected against death at all costs and those whose lives are considered not worth safeguarding against illness and death” (2020). Indeed, the same words can be said about HIV-AIDS in the ‘80s. In “Politics and Ethics,” Foucault defended collective resistance by asserting that

Ethics is a practice; ethos is a manner of being [...] it does not consist in saying merely “I protest,” but in making of that attitude a political phenomenon that is as substantial as possible, and one which those who govern, here or there, will sooner or later be obliged to taken into account. (1984, p. 377)

In 2020, screens became the only medium allowed to keep us connected. Social organizations united under a pink triangle joined forces to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on the LGBTQIA+ community through the hookup apps they used. These coalitions emulated in the digital age the way yesterday similar coalitions combatted the HIV-AIDS pandemic. In viral times, the boundaries between times and spaces blurred, and those queer struggles of the past were revived to take action in the present.

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