



# Queer Spatiality: Information Practices and Homebuilding in U.S. Rural Contexts

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## Abstract

This qualitative study analyzes interview data with 12 Queer adults living in rural communities in one New England state in the United States. The paper determines how, if at all, participants implement resistant tactics, as defined by de Certeau, to navigate digital and physical spaces. Previous research on Queer rural spaces challenges metronormativity by showing that many Queer people make happy homes in rural communities (Gray, 2009; Schweighofer, 2016). Research into Queer rural communities challenges the established parallels between the metaphorical move from in-the-closet to coming out and the physical move from rural community to urban space. This study goes a step further by intertwining information practice with Queer rural space. The findings indicate that participants did use a range of resistant tactics, including 1) using digital space to resist gentrification, 2) engaging in rural communities as communities of care, and 3) leveraging digital space to build Queer communities amid disappearing queer spaces.

**Keywords:** community building; information practices; LGBTQ+; queer; rural communities

**Publication Type:** research article

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## Introduction

Despite stereotypes of Queer people clustering in U.S. East Coast cities, most LGBTQ+ people live in smaller communities nationwide, with a majority living in the Southeast (Hasenbush et al., 2014). Indeed, 36% of the American Queer population live in the Southeast, while 27% live in the West, 21% in the Northeast, and 19% reside in the Midwest (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). Ninety-three percent of LGBTQ+ people in the Southeast region live in states with negative or low equality laws (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). One possible reason for this clustering in the Southeast could be access to more affordable housing in a community facing economic precarity overall. Because of how LGBTQ+ support organizations offer resources, the information provided to Queer communities tend only to be relevant to those in large cities. U.S. LGBTQ+ organizations tend to promote resources only for major cities, maybe because they have limited resources and are not able to offer resources more broadly, or maybe because it's believed a majority of LGBTQ+ people live in these cities. Gray (2009) addresses the perception that most LGBTQ+ people live in major metropolitan areas. This metronormative approach to providing information resources to city dwellers leaves people living in rural communities without essential knowledge and information.

This disparity of relevant information excludes the majority of the Queer population living in rural communities. Research often considers the health information needs of the Queer



community (Albert et al., 2022; Augustaitis et al., 2021; Chuanromanee et al., 2021; Wong et al., 2022), but other information needs exist, such as access to safe and affordable housing and access to the community. If LGBTQ+ support organizations fail to provide essential information equitably across geographies, it becomes up to the Queer community to source information internally. Social media is a key way to exchange information peer-to-peer (Fast et al., 2005).

Researchers need to understand this process since many Queer people who live in rural areas face a lack of support and rely on each other for information (Hardy, 2021). Understanding social media's role in information sharing for rural Queer people would shed light on how an underserved community fights against institutionalized oppression by finding ways to support each other's survival in everyday life. While a rural Queer community may lack information resources, this study considers how Queer people use grassroots methods, specifically the Facebook group *Queer Exchange*, to source information within their communities. Additionally, this research considers how Queer people tactically employ social media information to help them thrive in rural environments. Drawing from de Certeau's (1988) theory of everyday life, I frame this queer information within a rural context as tactical and inherently resistant. Queer information use in this study was tactical and inherently resistant because participants creatively leveraged *Queer Exchange* to push back against the oppression they faced and navigated in their physical and digital spaces in ways unanticipated by the authorities who designed those spaces. To that end, this research asks the question: How, if at all, does a rural Queer community leverage tactics in navigating the Facebook group *Queer Exchange*?

This study fills a research gap by combining information science with the study of "queer spaces" (Furman & Mardell, 2022) to understand better how information-seeking impacts the ability of Queer people to survive and thrive in rural environments.

## Theoretical Framework

This research is framed around the concepts of critical geography and de Certeau's (1988) theory of everyday life practice and tactics. These theories help to understand the connection between place and space as contextual locations where rural Queer communities navigate their daily information lives. Critical geography is a turn in the study of place that considers social justice and liberation ideology (de Leeuw & Hawkins, 2017; Giesecking, 2017; Hawkins, 2011). De Certeau considers ways in which everyday life-affirming tactics are used intentionally to resist power. I take a synthesized view of both theories to explore how information in physical and digital spaces is critically used to gather and share knowledge to enhance and advance physical living and spatial survival.

### Critical geographies

Feminist scholars de Leeuw and Hawkins (2017) criticize traditional critical geography for replicating masculinist norms about space and place. Critical discourse unpacking evolving ideas about space and place is part of the creative turn in critical geography, which intertwines the arts and humanities with the field of geography, considering how visual and literary art can be leveraged in the study of place. The creative turn asks us to question the presence and absence of marginalized voices, such as Queer people and people of color. It is a way to "attune to" natural space (de Leeuw & Hawkins, 2017, p. 307). The marriage between art and geography forces a consideration of how we engage with the body and how the body becomes a site through which

research is conducted. Hawkins asks us to consider how to employ the body as a methodological tool (Hawkins, 2011).

Giesecking (2017) confirms that in the field of geography, the concept of “geographic imagination” is a lens through which to study how identity and oppression, intersected with power and knowledge, can be deployed in space to strive for social justice. One would think geography would focus on the physical, but geographical imagination opens the study of place to what is “abstract, creative, and possible” (Giesecking, 2017, p. 2). Geographic imagination is a “conscious and reflective construction” (Giesecking, 2017, p. 1) rather than a subconscious construct. In rural spaces, geographic imagination could be used to understand how people construct relationships with their natural environments. Geographic imagination is tied to a person's identity, which can be nuanced to include varying aspects of race, class, gender, sexuality, and “sense of embodiment and privilege” (Giesecking, 2013, p. 714). Related to queerness, feminist theorists (Johnston, 2018; Knopp, 2007; Wright, 2010) have employed geographic imagination to break down binaries and queer the geography by reimagining what is expected and possible.

### Everyday practice and tactics

Although de Certeau (1988) talks about ways to manage and navigate institutional control and power, he is not concerned with overthrowing power but with resisting the “grid of discipline” (p. 159). De Certeau theorizes how the physical space of cities can be navigated by marginalized people in resistant ways that were not anticipated by the authorities who created the space. This theory is illustrated by describing tactics that are “individual, playful, mischievous and bear little resemblance to the planned, official discourses (or strategies) for organizing cities” (de Certeau, 1988, p. 93).

De Certeau contrasts strategies as tools of the powerful with tactics, the tools of the marginalized and powerless. Rather than existing as a subset of strategy, de Certeau posits that tactics are a resistant transformation by the masses to adapt to their environment. For example, a government may decide how the streets are laid out, but citizens can navigate those streets, using the space in a way not predicted or intended by institutions of power. The masses can manipulate mechanisms of power or disciplines and “conform to them only to evade them” (de Certeau, 1988, p. xiv).

Tactics are part of de Certeau's more extensive concept of everyday practice. For de Certeau, everyday practice is logical and follows specific rules. While everyday practice may seem apolitical, it is by nature always politicized. De Certeau says that “[t]he tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, ... lend a political dimension to everyday practices” (1988, p. xvii). The idea of everyday practice has formed an understanding of information practices in the library and information science (LIS) field. Information practice is distinct from information behavior in that information behavior is concerned with individual cognition, while information practice centers on the social aspects of information use (Savolainen, 2007). For de Certeau (1988) and Savolainen (2007), everyday practice is informal and embedded in daily life. Savolainen differentiates information practice from more formal information needs traditionally tied to one's employment or work functioning. According to de Certeau, the “consumption” of media, or within a LIS context, information, is a creative process as individuals interpret an image or text differently depending on their experience and social positioning. De Certeau calls this interpretation resistant. Information practice can be viewed as resistant to the creative ways information is interpreted and used.

There has been some application of de Certeau's theory in the field of LIS. Lingel (2015) uses tactics and everyday practice to write about how new immigrants navigate the physical space of cities in resistant ways. Pawley (1998) used de Certeau to consider ideological resistance to hegemony within LIS. Rothbauer (2010) used de Certeau's concept of spatial tactics to theorize the public library's role in information seeking. De Certeau allows for positing the library as a "site and source of information" and the "creation of an ideological space" that Rothbauer argues can support LGBTQ+ people (2010, p. 59).

## Literature Review

This literature review explores the concept of rural queer space, the role of social media in community building, and how queer individuals seek information. Contrary to popular belief, rural areas can be fulfilling homes for queer individuals. The literature resists the metronormative idea that queer people must relocate to cities to be happy and out in their queerness. Queer people use social media to build community. As physical spaces decline, queer people largely move online to meet their information needs. Rural queer space Queer people also regularly use social media to meet their information needs and seek information online due to a lack of reliable resources offline.

Gray's seminal text *Out in the Country* (2009) recounts the lives of young people in rural Kentucky, living lives far removed from queer metropolises. Gray finds that young people can push against the boundaries of their small towns and conditions of economic precarity to carve a physical space for themselves. Young people also employed online spaces to connect with other Queer people and come into their identities. This internet use by marginalized people can be framed through de Certeau (1988) as tactical, as online discourse is a creative repurposing of space. In Gray (2009), Queer rural youth spoke of being simultaneously public and invisibilized because everyone in the town knew they were gay. However, they were still expected not to demonstrate queer behavior (like expressing a crush). Despite neighbors knowing they were gay, this pressure to remain hidden made Queer rural youth "functionally invisible" (Gray, 2009, p. 96).

Schweighofer (2016) advises that we should rethink constructing the rural as a closeted space and the urban as a space of pride. Weston (1995) supports Schweighofer's view with his position that Queer people make homes in the city which offer safety and comfort not found in heteronormative rural settings. Schweighofer argues that this construction "renders rural queer life impossible" (2016, p. 223). The journey of being in the closet and coming out is tied to a movement from rural to urban space, moving from the hidden and oppressed to a joyful embodiment of queerness. Gray (2009) and Schweighofer (2016) illustrate how Queer people in rural spaces are simultaneously invisible and hypervisible: many feel they cannot be out and yet live in communities where their neighbors intimately know them. Rural queer space is thus simultaneously incredibly private but also public. Coming out is tied not only to a metronormative narrative but also to the sense of relocation to the city. Also, it is tied to a homonormative narrative because of its link to the idea of building a nuclear family. Queer people choosing to stay and build lives in their rural homes can be framed as a tactical repurposing of heteronormative space for queer purposes. Schweighofer (2016) states:

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If the closet is a major structuring element in identifying LGBT communities, and it cannot conceive of queer geographies, then it also cannot imagine the queer identities and communities that circulate in those spaces. (p. 231)

Thanks to the ubiquity of queer media and social media, rural queer life no longer faces the information desert it once did. Before the internet, Queer people had access to information resources in the form of newsletters, newspapers, and information exchanged within communities. Before the advent of the internet, Queer people were mainly the receptors of media in the form of reading and viewing (Cavalcante, 2016). Livingstone (2003) calls this way of interacting with media “the reception of media-as-texts” (p. 24). However, as Dame-Griff (2023) explores, the ascent of the internet marked a revolution in Queer people’s ability to exchange information and connect. Specifically in a rural context, Gray (2009) discusses the important role the internet played in the access to information for queer youth. One affordance of the internet is the privacy it fosters. Especially for youth living at home, there are risks to possessing physical queer information such as a newsletter or book (Gray, 2009). Schweighofer (2016) posits that the idea of the closet does not apply to rural queer life as many people did not feel the need to come out at all, and while they felt same-sex attraction, they did not feel the need to define their identities around that attraction.

Picking up the idea of the invisible/public tension of queerness, geographer Gavin Brown (2008) considers the gay bar as a space rendered both invisible and public. Gay bars once did not advertise themselves and often occupied unassuming buildings. “This Is It,” the oldest continually operating gay bar in Wisconsin, opened its doors as a queer establishment in 1968. Above the entry of the bar is written, “If you’re looking for a sign, this is it,” playing with the bar’s name and hinting to Queer people that they are in the right place. Brown’s work illustrates how gay male clubs push against the binary by being both unadvertised and simultaneously frequented regularly by an identifiable group of people. They are both hidden and visible to those who are in the know. Gay clubs are both closeted and out, which problematizes the idea of the closet.

### **Social media for community building**

Physical queer spaces, such as gay bars, are rapidly disappearing across the country, leaving Queer people to turn, in many cases, to social media or other online spaces (Burton, 2023). In her book *Moby Dyke: An Obsessive Quest to Track Down the Last Remaining Lesbian Bars in America*, Burton (2023) attempts to find the few remaining lesbian bars in the United States after an epidemic of bar closures. Her book demonstrates the need for queer-specific spaces for Queer people to gather and be in community. This paper turns the importance of queer space into a digital realm to interrogate how social media spaces are used to foster community. Byron et al. (2019) used a mixed-method study to investigate how young people use Tumblr to build community. The authors argue that Facebook’s “default publicness” can be problematic for queer youth, especially youth of color. Blogs such as Tumblr, on the other hand, are often private and offer anonymity. A difference between Tumblr and other social media platforms is that young people mostly do not use the platform to connect to their offline communities but rather to build connections with online strangers. Only 3% of survey participants in Byron et al.’s study used Tumblr to connect with offline friends.

Dehaan et al. (2013) found that young people used social media to build social connections, including online relationships and relationships that transitioned into offline, platonic, romantic spaces. Even when community building was not the explicit goal, Green et al. (2012) found that

aspects of social media posts, like sharing demographic information, helped foster feelings of community. Craig and McInroy (2014) interrogate how queer youth use social media to build resilience, seek support, connect with others, and build community. Adkins et al. (2018) interviewed 18 adolescents and found that a primary function of social media was finding supportive online communities. Freeman et al. (2022) found that virtual reality gaming was used by participants to connect with other non-cis people and find community. The participants in Selkie et al. (2020) felt that a key function of social media was finding support and connecting with other trans people. Participants felt that their offline friends and families would not understand what they were going through, so they sought out online connections with other trans people. Social media helped with feelings of isolation common among trans youth. Interacting with trans people online gave participants feelings of hope and helped them cope with the frustrations of transitioning. In Jenzen's 2017 ethnography of trans young people, they describe Tumblr as a "virtual counter public" (Jenzen, 2017, p. 1631). Participants preferred Tumblr for the visual element on the site and used it to connect to other trans people. There was a feeling of being in conversation with a broader network of trans people than participants had access to offline. While the literature considers how social media can be used in community building, a study is absent that explores the role of social media in community building when a physical location bounds online users, as they are with the Facebook group, *Queer Exchange*.

### Queer information seeking

Research by many scholars indicates that queer information needs include resources to help Queer people come into their identities, come out, care for their bodies and minds, and, for trans people, specifically, legal, social, and medical transition (Augustaitis et al., 2021; Fox & Ralston, 2016; McInroy et al., 2019; Pedrana et al., 2013). LGBTQ+ people turn online for information seeking due to isolation and lack of information offline. In their interviews with 18-22-year-olds in Toronto, Craig, and McInroy (2014) argue that the internet, because of its anonymity and because one is not always using the internet to engage with offline friends, is a safe place to explore one's identity and avoid barriers offline, such as a lack of safety and stigma around queerness. Pedrana et al. (2013) consider how social media can be used to help gay men with their health information seeking. The internet is a key venue for health information seeking (Delmonaco et al., 2020), and distrust between providers and patients is one main reason Queer people turn their searches for health information online (Rose & Friedman, 2019).

Scholars also identify significant barriers to queer information seeking. Stewart and Kendrick (2019) found that LGBTQ+ college students face barriers from the institutions themselves as well as from social stigma. Jardine (2013) identified information barriers for trans people when using the library. Barriers included self-censorship by librarians that made information unavailable, lack of resources in the collection, policy bias, and staff prejudices. Bryson and MacIntosh (2010) found barriers in health information seeking, including the fact that turning information seeking to online platforms erodes previous distinctions between public and private and constitutes a risk to privacy. Also, in health information seeking, Kitzie (2020) found that discursive power within and outside the LGBTQ+ community impeded information seeking. Some of these barriers included condensing LGBTQ+ people into a monolith, erasing differences, and the frequent reception of unwanted information.

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## Methods

The data presented here is from a larger study examining how rural Queer people use the Facebook group *Queer Exchange* in information seeking and community building. *Queer Exchange* is a closed, members-only Facebook group launched in New York City in the mid-2000s and has spread to communities across the United States. It is a cross between a message board, Craigslist (a U.S.-based classified advertisement site), and personals where people can exchange information, trade goods, and meet one another. The current study data did not draw from *Queer Exchange* as it is a closed group, and it would not be ethical to extract data without the consent of each user. The group was used to recruit for the current study, and the group was made aware of this contribution.

This study was conducted across three rural counties in one state in the New England region of the United States. The sample was people over 18 who identified as LGBTQ+ and lived in a rural community in the region. Participants completed a pre-interview screening to ensure they met the study's parameters. Data collection occurred between April and June of 2023 by conducting semi-structured interviews with 12 participants that lasted an average of 50 minutes. Interviews were conducted in person and over Zoom, based on the participants' preferences. The meetings were recorded with an audio recorder using the Zoom record function and transcribed using Otter.ai. The participants all describe themselves as white, which is not surprising given the overwhelmingly white makeup of the region (US Census, 2023). Participants spoke about other intersecting identities, such as being Jewish, fat, working class, and disabled. Participants used the language of identity to describe their social positioning.

The IRB (Pro00125835) deemed this research ethical. Participants were recruited by posting flyers at community centers, businesses, and libraries, advertising on social media, and using network sampling. The researcher compensated participants with a \$15 gift card for their participation. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and their home region was not disclosed to protect confidentiality.

Interview questions included:

- Have you ever found out about a service or provider from *Queer Exchange*?
- Have you ever met a friend or made a social connection on *Queer Exchange*?
- Have you found any information on *Queer Exchange* that you do not think you could have found anywhere else? Can you say more about that?
- When you find out something from *Queer Exchange*, what makes you feel you can trust that information?
- How long have you lived in a rural community?
- What drew you to live in your community?
- Does living in a rural community impact your daily life? How?
- Have you ever lived in a city or a bigger town? What difference did you notice?

- What, if anything, do you like about living in a rural community? What, if anything, do you dislike about living in a rural community?

Data was coded inductively using NVivo software. There were three stages of coding, with preliminary codes assigned in the first coding round. The coding followed Saldaña's (2021) dramaturgical coding, dividing codes into attitudes, conflicts, emotions, subtext, and tactics. The 77 emerged codes all fit within the five categories identified by Saldaña. This article considers 27 codes within the broader tactics category as these codes best align with the research question posed for this study. Of the 27 codes used in the study, 6 are shown in Table 1. The codes draw from everyday information practice in that information needs were informal and unrelated for the most part to work settings. Information seeking on Facebook's *Queer Exchange* group became social, or an information practice, as participants were sourcing information from a broader social network made available through the group. Each of the five coding categories was a top-level code, with codes falling under each of the following categories: **attitudes, conflicts, emotions, subtext, and tactics**. The tactics coding category is tied to the theoretical framework and de Certeau's theory of everyday practice. Below is a table showing examples of codes and data underneath the broader tactics category.

Table 1. Codes and Data for Tactics Category

Tactics	
Code	Data
Asking for help	It's also like the shit people ask for, like, Can I have a ride to the airport? And I have 20 bucks...that sounds so real. That's such a queer story I've heard before. (Andy)
Building community	We started talking on, you know, on Facebook after they responded to my message and found out that we, you know, we're both artists, we're actually both from the (city) area before this. Interested in a lot of the

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same things. So, we're like, Hey, do you want to get tea and, you know, hang out a little bit and then go to this thing? So yeah, we met up and we just really hit it off. And we went to the the first event actually, it was a it was pre Rosh HaShana, it was the they were having like a song circle to kind of learn songs that we were going to thing. So we went to that I think I met a couple other people there. And then yeah, we just were involved in similar things since then. (Isaac)

#### Finding distance

I was also a little bit sick of living in (town). I lived in (town) for a couple of years. And I was just sort of sick of seeing students in the grocery store all the time. And sort of being on call for work constantly, where...it was like, oh, Melissa can just run to campus really quick. Where now if it's like, it's going to take me a half an hour, so it better be a really good reason, if you're gonna call me to campus. Yeah, so just to get a little bit of distance from work, I think. (Melissa)

#### Finding resources

I found that it was useful for finding out about resources, events, and important information such as cost of housing in different areas, where to get my car fixed, etc. I found both a good mechanic and a room in an apartment. (Claire)

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Finding medical providers	Yes, that's been really great. I switched primary cares, like and got a new one per recommendation of the group. Like, we're basically all seeing the same doctor at this point, which is really funny. And yeah, like everyone has so many recommendations about specialists to see specialists not to see, that's been really helpful. (April)
Using <i>Queer Exchange</i> to promote	Now I'm a local business owner, so I promote my business on there. (Jessica)

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## Positionality

I, the researcher of this study, am a white, middle-class, nonbinary, queer person with an advanced university degree. In some ways, my queerness and transness may have facilitated my conversations with my participants in that they may have been more comfortable opening up to someone of similar identities. However, my class, educational privilege, and my power as a researcher distance me from my participants. Our shared identities cannot compensate for the power dynamic inherent in a researcher/participant dynamic. Conversations about race may be limited in an all-white interview space.

## Findings

Three themes were identified: 1) using digital resources to resist gentrification, 2) communities of care, and 3) using digital space to build Queer community amid disappearing queer spaces. These three themes address the research question as they enumerate participants' different tactics to navigate their physical and information spaces. Participants' information use was an everyday practice in that their seeking was tied to questions of their everyday lives. The findings apply the theoretical framework by examining tactics as resistant queer acts and how Queer rural space is impacted by power and knowledge.

### Using digital resources to resist gentrification

The findings indicate that participants did use de Certeau's (1988) definition of tactics in that they navigated physical and digital spaces in resistant ways. The region where the participants of this study are located is experiencing rapidly rising housing prices and a housing shortage. White Queer people, who often lack the financial resources of their cisgender and heterosexual peers, are often drawn to communities in the early stages of gentrification, where cities have

attractive qualities but are still relatively inexpensive (Vivian-Byrne, 2019). While white queers can mark a phase of gentrification, they are often eventually pushed out of spaces by rising rent. Sharing information on Facebook's *Queer Exchange* became a way for participants to find out about affordable housing and stay in a region that would otherwise be prohibitively expensive. Participants recounted that one reason why they chose to move to rural communities was that they were in search of more affordable rent. Participant Melissa<sup>1</sup> said: "I think my initial wanting to move to (County), if I'm being totally honest, was that the rent was way cheaper. And so that was sort of reason number one." Melissa's comment reveals that queer citizens move to rural areas as a way to remain in the region and resist the pushout of gentrification.

Jessica explained that they use *Queer Exchange* consistently to find housing: "I've used it to, like, find all of my housing...every time I've looked for housing since moving here, I haven't looked anywhere else." Sharing housing resources with other Queer people became a form of queer solidarity and a way to help Queer people stay in their communities despite skyrocketing rents. By sharing affordable housing on *Queer Exchange*, being queer opens avenues to resources unavailable to people outside the Queer community. The entire region is facing a housing crisis. With *Queer Exchange*, Queer people are at an advantage over cisgender and heterosexual residents who do not have access to the group. In this way, Queer people have access to information that could lead to direct financial benefits to queerness, a fact rarely acknowledged in a scholarship that tends to define Queer communities by their deficits. Attempts to provide resources to the Queer community tend to collate resources at a national level, which may be useful to Queer people living in major cities but excludes people living in smaller communities. Kitzie et al. (2021) found that when asked what kind of resources would be more helpful, community leaders indicated local resources specific to their communities. *Queer Exchange* provided what national organizations could not: local, relevant resources that helped rural Queer people in their daily lives, in this case, with finding housing. Lacking informational resources from outside their community, participants relied on and contributed to maintaining a grassroots information exchange. Queer people moving to rural space is a de Certeaudian tactical move. Rural spaces were not designed with Queer people in mind, thus lacking many resources Queer people might need. Nevertheless, by using community-sourced information, participants could make (albeit unexpectedly) happy homes in rural areas.

Participants subverted expectations around which spaces and communities are valuable through their tactical housing choices. Participants noted that the two college towns in the region are seen as cultural hubs. This desirability is reflected by these communities' housing and rental prices compared with the region at large. Rather than seeking to live in these more desirable neighborhoods, participants leveraged information on *Queer Exchange* to find housing in rural areas. Participants specifically noted wanting to be farther away from college towns when discussing their decision to move to rural communities.

And I think also we're at the point with (town) where like, we were kind of having been five years out of college, I think we were feeling the pull of like, oh, we want to move to somewhere that isn't a college town and...doesn't feel so comprised of students. (Elise)

In the literature (King et al., 2009; Sundstrand, 2013), rural communities are described, for the most part, as places where Queer people are stuck. Even the literature that pushes back against the metronormative narratives that Queer people must move to cities to thrive still describes rural spaces as places of circumstance or birth, not intentionally chosen ones (Gray, 2009; Schweighofer, 2016). One exception is the lesbian land movement of the 1960s, discussed by

Schweighofer (2016). However, Schweighofer does not offer contemporary examples of rural spaces as places of choice. The literature counters the idea that Queer people cannot live full, happy lives in rural spaces but still assumes that rural Queer people were more likely to have been born into their communities rather than moving to these rural communities as adults (Gray, 2009; Schweighofer, 2016). In this study, no participants moved to rural communities to be closer to family, a traditional rural value (Little & Austin, 1996).

The literature (Scourfield et al., 2008; Woodell, 2013) describes rural spaces where Queer people are “making do” but not places where Queer people, with the means to live elsewhere, choose to relocate. While some participants chose to move to rural areas for financial reasons, the cost of housing was not the motivating factor for all participants. One of the college towns in the region is described as a lesbian mecca. Purposefully making a home in rural communities away from this queer hub is a way to challenge expectations about the most valuable spaces. College towns, often known for lectures and readings, art, theater, and liberal politics, are often described as the most desirable places to live in their regions. In this study, participants refused the narrative that these larger towns are more valuable by intentionally choosing their homes based on distance from college communities, using information sourced from *Queer Exchange*. While participants moved away from larger towns with a reputation for being gay, they stressed the importance of staying in the Queer community and maintaining queer friendships. Describing their friend group, Isaac says, “I am really not close with people who are not simply both queer [and] trans honestly...That’s not like, I turn away straight people. It’s just...that’s who I’m in community with. That’s who I’m drawn to.” Moving from college towns to rural spaces did not mark a turn away from the Queer community.

River was raised in a working-class family and continues to describe themselves as working-class. They were the only participant to relocate to a predominately blue-collar community. They reflect, “[Town] is like a working-class town. And that’s where I feel like more at home.” Other participants moved to more middle-class communities. Hertel-Fernández, a local community leader in one of the towns, reflects on the benefit this relocation of Queer people to rural areas has had. Hertel-Fernández describes her community as aging, with residents concerned about who will carry on the culture and community traditions. Newcomers are engaged in community organizations, such as joining the library board and opening the town’s only coffee shop and one of only two eateries. This region is a popular destination for summer tourists. Queer newcomers offered meaningful year-round participation in the network of communities. Participants living and working in rural communities benefited the local economy. Buying homes where they lived full-time or paying rent to local landlords was distinct from the phenomenon of people from larger cities buying property to be used only a few months a year or to be converted into Airbnbs (an online home rental application). Queer people learn crafts from lifelong residents and carry on traditions of American crafting (S. Hertel-Fernández, personal communication, June 11, 2024). Jessica started a farming business upon relocating to their new rural home. Hailey is highly invested in her rural community. She is civically engaged in her town’s government and volunteers at cultural institutions.

My participants’ whiteness facilitated their relocation to rural areas. Participants were able to blend in in their new homes because of their shared whiteness. Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) residents in the region do not have the same recourse to accessing more affordable housing by relocating to rural areas (Gray, 2009). Conceivably, a BIPOC person or family may not have felt the same warm welcome in the rural white communities that my participants experienced.

## Communities of care

Gray (2009) and Halberstam (2005) describe how rural spaces are positioned as places where Queer people face hostility. Schweighofer (2016) argues that Queer people can lead full, happy lives in rural spaces but still acknowledges the homophobia that Queer people can face at the hands of their neighbors. It can be hypothesized that rural spaces might be more supportive of Queer people than more prominent towns and cities. Case in point, Melissa described a culture of care in rural communities:

Yeah, I think just in terms of like community and folks caring about each other...here I know my neighbors a lot more than I have in other places that I've lived. In (town) I knew like none of my neighbors in (city), and then I also lived in a city just outside of (city) called (city). I also really didn't know my neighbors that much. Whereas here, it's sort of these like small-town vibes are sort of everyone knows everyone in some way, or I'll be at someone's house for some sort of gathering and someone else will be there that I didn't even know had a connection to this other person. So I think that's...one of the biggest differences.

Isaac (they/them) recounts a story where they were scared to find a stranger standing at their door late at night, but when they investigated, it was a middle school boy afraid to be home alone. Isaac reflects:

He was so polite. He was like...is it okay if I sit on your porch because my parents aren't home, and I thought I heard someone in my house. And we were like, holy shit...so we brought him in, and you know, when his parents came, it turned out that it was nothing...they had a tenant who had come home early from something. But it was very much like, oh, the response here is to go to your neighbor. You know, even if you don't know them...And, you know, we became friendly with that family that way.

Isaac was moved that the boy's first thought was to ask for help from a neighbor he did not know. They contrasted this trust with the suspicion and distrust people often feel for each other in cities. The fact that Isaac and their partner were a queer couple did not make them seem any less safe to the boy.

Melissa talks about having a conservative neighbor. Melissa responded that she found their political lawn signs funny and that they did not bother her. Living with conservative neighbors who likely held anti-queer beliefs did not detract from the feelings of safety and ease participants felt in rural communities. Rural spaces are often described as spaces where Queer people thrive despite the odds. However, participants in this study valued and were drawn to rural communities because of feelings of safety and being in a close community as a feature of the community. Gray (2009) also found that Queer people made homes in rural communities because of the feeling of close community. These findings counter much of the previous literature that discusses rural space as unsafe for Queer people. None of the participants discussed feeling unsafe in their rural homes.

Melissa reflects on how her gender and whiteness protect her from her visibly conservative neighbors. Melissa described the signs her neighbors posted in their yard:

They might just be like, Trump people. Because they have like Trump signs in their windows and stuff like that. They have like, back the blue. We love the police signs. They have like Honk if you love the Constitution signs there. I mean, it's ridiculous, but that kind of stuff.

When asked what it is like living next to a politically conservative neighbor, Melissa reflected, "As like a cis person as a white person. I don't feel unsafe at all." Access to communities of care hinged on participants' shared white identity with their new communities.

### Using digital space to build queer community

This theme extends Gray's (2009) argument that the boundaries between online and offline spaces are blurry. Many participants use Facebook's *Queer Exchange* group to build community with Queer people in their geographical area. These groups specifically form around intersecting identities such as Jewish, disabled, and femme. Participant Elise recounts that she posted on *Queer Exchange* asking: "...to see if anyone knew of like any anti-Zionist Shabbat service, which made a whole cool discussion, and then people started actually doing one...there is now like, a pretty active that I think stemmed from that post, like anti-Zionist Shabaab group."

April discusses joining an online weekly support group for local queers with chronic illnesses and finding a community to support her at a time when she felt extremely isolated. She feels solace in being in a relationship with other people who share her intersecting identities and can relate to the challenges she was experiencing. April shared:

I haven't been working for like the past year, and I've just been pretty isolated. And just didn't really know anyone else who had...unexplained or explained illness going on and was out of work. And especially like, at the early stages of that, like big life change...figuring out everything, and like, meeting people through the support group. We're also queer which is just like, so amazing, like, emotionally, like logistically, like everyone has tips and without just like, how to live a life with all this stuff going on. And I just...kind of felt like, I was the only one like, even though I knew that wasn't really true. And so I just feel a lot better.

Isaac speaks of *Queer Exchange* as a hub where other avenues of information and community can be accessed.

Although, ever since the disability group, kind of fractioned off of *Queer Exchange*, that's been a much more specific place to get that information. But that's another thing. I mean, it's, you know, from *Queer Exchange*, I've gotten the Access Club group, I've gotten to the Western Mass Queer Jews Group, you know, various, it's like, it's kind of the central hub where you find your route to another place.

River fills a gap in the community by launching a support group of femme-of-center queers in the region. Their original post on *Queer Exchange* elicited dozens of responses, and four years later, River continues to lead a thriving group with monthly in-person meetings. Describing the need for femme community, River recounts,

it feels good to, like, come into a space where you just have this sort of, like, automatic understanding with other people. And shared experiences of like, how you're treated, like, in the world at large, but also like, your own community, of Queer

people, like, you know, most of the friends that I've talked to, that identify as femme or like, you know, we have some shared experiences...Like, I think people I don't know, just like the more people that I've met through this group, the more important it seems because it just like, the feedback that I get from everyone is like, how much they needed this and maybe like, they didn't even really know how beneficial it would be. To have community in this way, just like a really chill space...literally just having fun together... it just feels safer and like, you can just kind of settle into being them...no one questions like your femmeness no one questions, your queerness...if you're there, you belong there.

River's femme space addressed a need in a Queer community in which queer femmes are often invisibilized and sometimes excluded (Burton, 2023). All participants shared that having queer friends is important to them, and all feel that they are part of a strong network of queer friends. But despite these friendships with people who share their queer identities, participants still crave connections with people reflecting their other identities and experiences. All participants feel that *Queer Exchange* facilitated the formation of their group. April, Isaac, and Elise all shared that they could not have found their communities without the help of *Queer Exchange*.

Community building through *Queer Exchange* fills a necessary gap in a landscape of disappearing queer spaces. One of the college towns in the region was home to a popular lesbian bar for 15 years; however, it closed its doors in 2016. No bar or restaurant in either college town is specifically a queer bar. In a gay-friendly region, one could argue that, specifically, queer spaces are no longer necessary when Queer people are welcome everywhere. However, participants desire to be more than tolerated in cisheteronormative space. They want to feel at home. All participants thought it was crucial that they have access to closed spaces for Queer people. In the face of disappearing physical space, digital space becomes a place for community building. Both the virtual and physical spaces created on *Queer Exchange* surpass what is possible in a traditional gay bar. *Queer Exchange* helps create sober queer spaces and brings queer gatherings out of bars, where they have historically found a home. Decentering bar life in queer culture creates a safer environment for people struggling with addiction and those who do not drink. Research indicates that Queer people face higher rates of addiction and substance misuse (Mereish et al., 2014). These higher rates of substance misuse make it even more critical that Queer people have spaces to gather where alcohol is not a primary feature. These spaces also allow for intergenerational spaces, as young people not yet old enough to patronize bars can participate in these events. The inaugural Queer and Disabled Pride was hosted in the summer of 2023 with the help of advertising on *Queer Exchange*. The gathering was attended by children up through adults in their 50s, offering an intergenerational queer space.

Gatherings outside of bars have other accessibility features. Virtual gatherings are more accessible for disabled people who cannot leave the house, and when events are held outside, there is less risk of COVID-19 exposure, given the way the virus is spread. and provide a less stimulating environment that can be more accessible. April recounts that she felt that the expected way to make queer friends was through bars. However, due to her illness, this avenue was closed to her. *Queer Exchange* offers April an accessible way to participate in queer life that was previously unavailable.

Unlike bars where a purchase is required to be in the space, the events that form on *Queer Exchange* are open to all without cost, removing a financial barrier to gathering in Queer community. These financial barriers to being in queer space could be prohibitive for some, as

Queer people are more likely to live under conditions of poverty (Badgett et al., 2019; DeFilippis, 2016). Unlike what was found in the previous literature, participants used digital information seeking to build community offline. While some spaces, like April's chronic illness group, are virtual, others prioritized in-person meetings when it was safe. Previous research into Queer community building online focused more on building individual friendships rather than support and community groups by marginalized identity.

## Discussion

Jurgenson coined "digital dualism" to critique the idea that online space is virtual while physical space is real (Jurgenson, 2011). Jurgenson critiques the "second self," which argues that people have an authentic, internal self and another self that they put on when they engage online; rather, "people are enmeshing their physical and digital selves to the point where the distinction is becoming increasingly irrelevant" (Jurgenson, 2011, para. 5). Following this argument, groups forming from *Queer Exchange* are no less valuable because they formed online. April's virtual chronic illness group is just as "real" as River's offline femme group. Participants describe no distinction between the virtual friends and in-person connections they built through *Queer Exchange*. They are all viewed as friends. Additionally, the idea that virtual connection is less valid or real than offline connection is ableist. An online group was accessible for April. She could attend from home, whereas in-person events were prohibitive to her. A virtual event allowed April to participate in the community in previously unavailable ways.

An argument can be made that the move from traditional spaces like gay bars could represent pushing Queer people out of the public and back into the closet. However, as boyd (2010) argues, the internet collapses the public and private, and while one often accesses the internet from the privacy of their home, the internet is a public space. Cavalcante (2016) conceives of the internet as a counter-public, a form of discourse public where marginalized people find belonging. Further, considering the internet as a private space assumes a digital dualism, that what happens in real life is somehow more accurate than what happens in cyberspace. Scholars such as Schultze (2014) and Daniels (2009) argue that people engage online in embodied ways. Rather than leaving their body behind when they appear in virtual space, people are rooted in themselves when interacting and building community online.

## Limitations

Perhaps because of the limits of my own social networks, no participants joined the study from the most geographically remote county in the region. This lack of participants overlooks a community that might face additional geographical information barriers and have more complicated relationships with their physical space.

Because of the area's demographic makeup, all participants are white. Having participants of color would shed light on identities with multiple marginalization and offer an important critique of what is often described as a queer utopia but is an almost exclusively white community with an undercurrent of segregation and racial tension. Ideas of preserving nature in rural space can have a troubling subtext of racial exclusion that I could not explore, given the participants' whiteness.

Except for one participant who identified strongly as working class and another who worked as a farmer, most had college degrees and would more likely be described as middle class. A lack of class diversity ignores these communities' precarity, which might lead to different information-seeking methods and a different relationship with tactics.

## Implications

These findings indicate that scholars should reconsider how Queer rural life is framed and consider rural communities, in some cases, to be communities of choice and care rather than communities of necessity. The findings indicate that for some Queer people, the reasons for choosing a rural community do not align with traditional rural family values. Based on the conclusions of this study, more research is needed into digital information seeking and how it can be used tactically to resist oppressive forces. De Certeau has been used by some information science scholars (Lingel, 2015; Pawley, 1998; Rothbauer, 2010). This study indicates the value of viewing data through de Certeau's theoretical framework and offers the possibility for future research to employ this framing. This study was conducted in New England, where rural communities are likely less conservative than rural communities in the Southeast and Midwest. Additional research is needed to conclude whether these findings hold true for Queer people in more conservative rural communities. These findings subvert ideas about which places Queer people find valuable. While previous research has challenged metronormative ideas around queer space, this study goes a step further by indicating that even outside of queer havens like New York and San Francisco, Queer people are choosing rural spaces over larger towns with more resources for Queer people. Participants then use digital information seeking to find resources and build Queer communities to allow them to thrive in their rural homes.

## Conclusion

This study investigates a new area regarding the intersection of information practice and space. Combining de Certeau with ideas of queer space allows an understanding of navigating space in resistant ways. Queer people taking up space in rural communities is a resistant act. The ways that participants engage with both information and space are tactical in that their actions are intentional and challenge institutional constructions. Considering de Certeau and critical geography together provides a new framework that describes how space is used and by whom. Previous studies on online community building have tried distinguishing between online and in-person relationships.

These findings indicate that there is no difference between the two and that both offer support, connection, and friendship. This study examines how online community is more accessible to disabled people. In that way, building community online becomes resistant because people who society designates to live in isolation can unite and build solidarity. Building social connections and forming groups online rather than through the more traditional venue of gay bars was more accessible for disabled people, people in recovery, low-income people, and young people.

Through this study, rural space is a place that is consciously and intentionally inhabited rather than where Queer people are forced due to their circumstances or place of birth. One participant, Jessica, has lived in rural communities their entire life. Still, all the other

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participants had lived in cities, suburbs, or larger towns at some point and chose to move to the countryside, which this study reveals to be a *critical move*.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Participants' names are pseudonyms.

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