Debating "Alternative" Gender Identities:
The Online Discourse Triggered by 2014 Life Ball Advertising Posters

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The article examines an online discourse induced by two advertising posters created by photographer David LaChapelle for the Life Ball, an AIDS charity event in Vienna in 2014, depicting a nude transgender model. We consulted 1,897 posts on highly frequented Austrian online forums to explore and analyze the discourse's organization, thematic and argumentative patterns, and contrary positions using the sociology-of-knowledge approach. Connected mainly to the "doing gender" perspective, the findings shed light on collective knowledge repertoires of "alternative" gender identities. We inter alia conclude that at least in Austria, transgender and gay people are framed physically rather than socially and indeed as *alternative* to the overall norm of gender duality and heterosexuality.

Keywords: social media, online forum, online discourse, gender, gender identity, transgender, gay people, sociology of knowledge, advertising, Life Ball

Introduction

Positioned as one of the biggest AIDS charity events in the world, the annual Life Ball, held in Vienna, Austria, in front of the Viennese City Hall each May since 1992, has generally gained far-reaching prominence. The event regularly hosts various VIPs, and its well-known spokespersons, such as actress Sharon Stone and former U.S. President Bill Clinton, attract extensive media attention every year (for more information, see the Life Ball official website at http://www.lifeball.org).

In 2014, however, the Life Ball event initiated a much larger, more intense and controversial public debate that became especially visible in discussions on social media platforms (but also in off-line public spaces, as Figure 2 illustrates), when Life Ball founder Gery Keszler presented the advertising

posters "Once in the Garden (1)" (see Figure 1) and "Once in the Garden (2)." The posters announced both the event and the Vienna exhibition "Once in the Garden" by photographic artist David LaChapelle, the posters' creator. The primarily disputed photo motif "Once in the Garden (1)"—which was exhibited publicly throughout Vienna—shows transgender model Carmen Carrera with a penis and female breasts on full display. The model is depicted in a fantastical nature environment accompanied by the text "Ich bin Adam. Ich bin Eva. Ich bin ich." ("I am Adam. I am Eve, I am Me."), referring to the biblical Garden of Eden and Paradise, respectively.

Figure 1. Advertising poster announcing the Life Ball 2014.
(David LaChapelle, "Once in the Garden (1)")[3]

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[3] Courtesy of David LaChapelle (see also http://prod-images.exhibit-e.com/www_lachapellestudio_com/HUFFINGTON_POST_20141.pdf)

Figure 2. Painted-over Life Ball poster in Vienna.
(Florian Kobler/ORF)[4]

According to LaChapelle, the photographic artwork was mainly inspired by the 2014 Life Ball motto "'The Garden of Earthly Delights' and Hieronymus Bosch's utopia of a diverse society, living together passionately and peacefully" (Nichols, 2014, para. 2), emphasizing that "beauty has no gender" (ibid., para. 4), citing Carrera. LaChapelle explained his intention as follows:

> Gender lines are blurred and every person is unique in how they see themselves. For me the body is more than something to be looked at as an object of sexual gratification. The body is a beautiful housing for the soul that we are celebrating in this picture. (Nichols, 2014, para. 3)

Notwithstanding the communicated intention behind the photograph, it initiated a dynamic debate, especially in online forums and social networks, which demonstrated that different people might decode visual messages differently or even contrarily, and clearly perceive different connotations in visual signs, in part due to their "contextual reference and positioning in different discursive fields of meaning and association" (Hall, 2014, p. 117). The intense debate, especially around the Life Ball visual "Once in the Garden (1)," also elucidated public understanding, opinions, and knowledge repertoires in the terms of the discussed perspectives (described below), such as gender identities, sexuality, respective societal

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[4] Courtesy of Florian Kobler (see also http://wien.orf.at/news/stories/2648237/).

norms, and tolerance, particularly in Vienna and Austria, where the photograph's exhibition in public spaces and thus the main discourse took place. Interestingly, the second version of the Life Ball poster "Once in the Garden (2)," which uses the same photo motif but with Carmen Carrera having a vagina instead of a penis, was far less disputed and seemed to cause much less societal discomfort (for both Life Ball posters see LaChapelle, 2014; "David LaChapelle," n.d.; Nichols, 2014).

Research Interest

The aforementioned circumstances made the public debate surrounding the Life Ball posters and especially the motif "Once in the Garden (1)" an obviously excellent opportunity to inform interested audiences and especially LGBT communities about public perceptions of "alternative" gender identities and respective collective knowledge repertoires and opinions. To that end, this article analyzes the dynamic social media discourse triggered by those advertising posters, presenting the results of a qualitative analysis of respective discourses traceable in newspapers' online forums. The analysis used a sociology-of-knowledge approach to discourse, by which complex and extensive (social media) discourses of interest can be structured and patterns shaping social practices can be revealed (Keller, 2005). Concretely, the following research questions were central:

- How do the individual threads in the discourse surrounding the Life Ball visuals shape and organize that discourse?
- What story lines are narrated in the discourse?
- What topics are introduced, and what are the dominant thematic aspects?
- What argumentative patterns are recognizable? What contrary actors' and speakers' subject positions (Keller, 2013) can be deduced?
- How are "alternative" gender identities legitimized and delegitimized within the discourse?[5]
- What knowledge repertoires and other discourses does the discourse surrounding the Life Ball poster refer to?

This article will present the results of our discourse analysis based on these research questions.

Literature Review and Theoretical Perspectives

In the following sections we first give an overview of relevant studies and approaches in the realm of "alternative" gender identity discourses in social media and in advertising motifs. Then we explain the sociology-of-knowledge approach to discourse.

Overview of Relevant Studies and Approaches

In analyzing public perceptions of "alternative" gender identities, fruitful approaches incorporate theories such as "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987), as well as the related concepts

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[5] This research question falls in line with Zimmermann's (2013) discourse analysis of "same-sex marriage" in U.S. news, for which she too used the sociology-of-knowledge approach to discourse.

"cisnormativity" (Bauer et al., 2009) and "cissexism" (Serano, 2007). Also relevant are advertising and its role as (distorted) mirror and manifestation of societal conventions as well as societal barometer in general (see, e.g., Schmidt & Zurstiege, 2002), and the relation between advertising and (trans)gender, for example in contexts of stereotypical or even sexist depictions or illustrations (Holtz-Bacha, 2011; Wan-Hsiu, 2010). Finally, the analysis could also consider the emergence of (digital) sociality in social media by means of advertisements and advertising messages (Anastasiadis & Thimm, 2011; Einspänner-Pflock & Reichmann, 2014), digital sociality being understood as the construction of social communities—that is, as the common relation of people to each other—on digital platforms as mediatized social worlds (Einspänner-Pflock & Reichmann, 2014). Digital sociality thereby could manifest itself in longer-term, more permanent thematic interest communities or short-term, more temporary discourse communities, of which the latter showed discursive commitment in the case discussed here, but only within a short period of time.

An in-depth discussion of all those perspectives would go far beyond the scope of this article, but the study at hand can clearly contribute to gender studies, advertising research and social media research. Regarding gender studies and, more concretely, societal perceptions of gender identities, West and Zimmerman's (1987) conceptual work initiating and clarifying a perspective of gender as a social doing "constituted through interactions" (p. 129) serves as a reference point. More concretely, the authors proposed a new understanding of gender, namely an "ethnomethodologically informed, and therefore distinctively sociological understanding of gender as a routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment" (p. 126), thereby setting off the well-established concept of doing gender. By analytically distinguishing among sex, sex category, and gender, they clarified that biological criteria (sex), such as chromosomal typing or genitalia, are connected to socially determined characteristics and are a basis for placing someone in a sex category. Sex category is then linked to certain social expectations in terms of attitudes and activities, constituting gender as a "product of social doings" (p. 129) and "emergent feature of social situations" (p. 126) (for biological criteria as gender identity precursor, also see Butler, 1993). When drawing the lines between sex, sex category, and gender, West and Zimmerman (1987) state that one's sex category might presume one's sex. However, sex and sex categorization can also vary when someone claims membership in a sex category despite lacking sex criteria.

The analytical distinction among sex, sex category, and gender both clarifies gender identity and shows its complexity as an adjustment or challenge to societal norms and expectations linked to biological criteria and respective categorization. In this sense, the doing-gender perspective can give a good indication of reflexivity and ability to distinguish and (critically) draw connections among sex, sex category, and gender, allowing conclusions to be drawn about the extent of transphobia,[6] cissexism,[7] and

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[6] "An irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against people whose gendered identities, appearances, or behaviors deviate from societal norms" (Serano, 2007, p. 11).

[7] "The belief that transsexuals' identified genders are inferior to, or less authentic than, those of cissexuals (i.e., people who are not transsexual and who have only ever experienced their subconscious and physical sexes as being aligned)" (Serano, 2007, pp. 11–12). Transsexual people are "those who live as members of the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth" (ibid., p. 25).

cisnormativity[8] within the discourse of interest. In fact, as the results of our study will show, the discourse around the Life Ball posters took a rather cisnormative and heteronormative perspective, discussing transgender and homosexuality mainly as alternatives to societal norms. The title of this article addresses this circumstance in that we critically distance ourselves from this cisnormative and heteronormative perspective by placing the term "alternative" in quotation marks.

The review of relevant literature indicated that a clear heteronormative perspective and focus on the traditional male/female gender duality are obvious in advertising research, whereas the focus on transgender constitutes a clear research gap that the present research helps to fill. In general, transgender persons and identities receive very little attention in communication and media research, though some research has been done on how transgender persons negotiate their gender identity in cyberspace. The results suggest inter alia that "transgender users employ cyberspace as preliminary, complementary, and/or alternative spheres" (Marciano, 2014, p. 824) to the off-line world. Advertising research has instead focused on homosexuality, discussing, for example, gay male images in American print advertising (Branchik, 2007), the corporate construction of gay markets emphasizing gays and lesbians as a consumer group (Ragusa, 2005), lesbian and gay male dating advertisements (Thorne & Coupland, 1998), and perceptions of "lesbian" appeals in advertising. Interestingly, a study on the latter revealed a significant correlation between tolerance of homosexuality and acceptance of lesbian content in advertising, and found advertisements containing clear lesbian interaction to be more effective than those with lower levels of homoerotic tension (Orr, Van Rheede Van Oudtshoorn, & Kotzé, 2005). However, some scholars in areas other than media research have brought together discourses around gay people and transgender people. For example, to better understand the connection between doing gender and heteronormativity, Schilt and Westbrook (2009) examined how nontransgender people interact with transgender people by conducting two case studies, one of which analyzed how non-transgender people react to their working colleagues' announcements of intent to undergo gender transition. The results showed that post-transition sexual orientation makes a clear difference to the non-transgender coworkers, reflecting for example that "heteronormativity, as becoming a presumably heterosexual man can be viewed more positively than being a lesbian" (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009, p. 451).

The Sociology-of-Knowledge Approach to Discourse

With its focus on sociological rather than linguistic or conversational interests, on the discursive construction of reality as an empirical process, on collective knowledge repertoires, and on discourses as practices of power, the discourse research approach from the sociology of knowledge as proposed and developed by Keller (2005, 2006, 2007, 2013) was identified as most appropriate to analyze the debate surrounding the Life Ball posters. Based in part on Berger and Luckmann's (1980) social constructionist perspective and inspired by Foucault's discourse theory (see, e.g., Foucault, 1988), the approach seeks to incorporate interpretive and qualitative analysis as well as discourse theory and research to analyze especially the social macrolevels of power and (everyday) knowledge relations, and the articulation of identities (Keller, 2005). The approach, first presented in the late 1990s and since then reflected and

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[8] "The expectation that all people are cissexual, that those assigned male at birth always grow up to be men and those assigned female at birth always grow up to be women" (Bauer et al., 2009, p. 356).

discussed mainly in relevant German-language literature, was conceived as grounded theory and bottom-up theory building and centers on analytical concepts from the sociology of knowledge. It refers to (a) interpretative schemes and discourse frames, (b) phenomenal and (c) narrative structures, (d) the subject positions of actors and speakers, meaning the discourse participants' standing and role in the discourse arena as social actors, and (e) both classificatory and symbolic orders as they relate to meaning production and social practice, resulting in power-knowledge regimes (Keller, 2005; Keller, 2013), among other things. Regarding the sociology of knowledge, Keller (2005) explains the concept of knowledge as referring

> to everything which is supposed to "exist" (including ideas, theories, everyday assumptions, language, incorporated routines and practices). The "social construction of knowledge" is conceived as an ongoing activity, performance and process; it is *not* the intentional outcome of any individual effort, but rather an effect of everyday action and interaction. The collective stocks of knowledge appear as institutions (like language itself), theories and other socio-cognitive devices, organisations, archives, texts and all kinds of materialities (e.g., practices, artefacts). (p. 3)

Consequently, the concept of knowledge applied in this sociology-of-knowledge discourse approach implies not only the results of cognitive learning and factual knowledge, but also social and communicative spaces of experience and (inter-)subjective perceptions, like those observed within the discourse surrounding the Life Ball visuals.

Research Design

In line with the abovementioned research questions, we designed our analysis to first identify topics shaping and furthering the discourse surrounding and triggered by the Life Ball posters regarding "alternative" gender identities and representations, and references to other discourses moving away from perspectives of "alternative" gender identities and representations (such as women's rights or the meaningfulness of the Life Ball event itself). We then assigned all detectable lines of argumentation to the identified topics, considering each posted statement/comment[9] a unit of analysis. This text-reducing and rather descriptive-analytic approach made it possible not only to structure and oversee the contents and story line of the debate, but also to detect dominant thematic aspects and argumentative patterns, deduce actors' and speakers'/subject positions, and handle the mass of relevant user comments, which formed a large corpus of material. The second, more interpretative part of this research process built upon the first, descriptive part, using the sequential listing of identified topics, arguments, and dominant thematic aspects to detect overall discourse patterns and underlying interpretative schemes and knowledge

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[9] All posted statements within the analysis corpus were written in German. In the results section, we refer to exemplary comments to illustrate our results (see annex available at http://publizistik.univie .ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/i_publizistik_komm/PDF/Wetzstein/Annex_IJoC.pdf). We translated the comments into English to give readers the best possible idea of what the comments express. However, readers should note that the comments were mainly written in colloquial language, making an exact translation (especially in terms of meaning transfer) impossible.

repertoires. The computer-assisted coding process used the qualitative research software MaxQDA as well as the word processing program Microsoft Word to organize the textual material according to the predefined research design. We conducted the descriptive analysis first independently and individually, with regular reflection talks and reciprocal review loops in between, whereas we jointly "negotiated" the second, interpretatively focused part of the study, always with reference to the analysis results for the descriptive part.

As mentioned above, social media served as an important "*dispositif*" of the analyzed discourse, meaning that they provided the material and social infrastructure of discourse production (Keller, 2005). For the analysis, we used statements posted in 2014 in the highly frequented online forums of the online editions of the two Austrian newspapers *Der Standard* and *Die Presse*, which are both positioned as quality journalistic media in Austria. We intentionally considered only online editions of quality journalistic print media and their respective online forums, as we expected the discourse there to be of higher quality than that in tabloid press forums, in terms of the clarification and exchange of diverse arguments among discourse participants. To select the research material, we first identified journalistic articles focused on the Life Ball posters and the discussion around them that had triggered lengthy discussions—that is, articles with at least 100 user postings—in the online forums. Second, considering that journalistic articles might set agendas for the users participating in the online discourse, it was important to choose articles emphasizing different perspectives, aspects, and main actors around the Life Ball posters in order to grasp existing discourse aspects as holistically as possible. These criteria resulted in the selection of three online forum threads, monitored by the respective newspapers and available free of charge to registered users, which were linked to three journalistic articles.

The first article, published on the *Der Standard* website on May 13 ("Life Ball zeigt auf Plakaten Model mit beiden Geschlechtsteilen," 2014), described inter alia the presentation of the Life Ball posters the day before as well as the contents of the photo motif "Once in the Garden (1)" and the intention behind the photographic artwork as mentioned above. When the analysis phase began in late June 2014, the article had prompted 848 user postings.

The second article appeared on May 20, again on the *Der Standard* website ("FPÖ brachte Strafanzeige," 2014). It covered a criminal complaint lodged against the Life Ball by the right-wing Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), which also accused Life Ball founder Gery Keszler of violating the pornography law by publicly exhibiting the poster "Once in the Garden (1)" throughout Vienna, an act the FPÖ saw as especially harmful to children and adolescents.[10] The article also mentioned a Europe-wide petition against this Life Ball poster. At the time of analysis, the article was followed by 936 user posts.

The final, third article—an interview with David LaChapelle, the photographic artist who created the Life Ball posters "Once in the Garden (1)" and "Once in the Garden (2)" and the respective photo motifs—was published in *Die Presse* on June 4 (Petsch, 2014). Among other things, he labeled the criminal complaint against the Life Ball and Keszler "terrifying" and rhetorically asked if the FPÖ consisted of

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[10] The Viennese prosecuting authorities concluded the relevant proceedings on June 2, 2014, arguing that the depiction of a naked person does not constitute pornography.

violent people, and why they were so angry about the Life Ball posters. The article provoked 113 posts in the respective online forum thread as well as 2,837 "likes" (at the time of analysis) for the Facebook group "Stoppt die Life Ball-Plakate" ("Stop the Life Ball Posters"). The reactions stated that their authors were not violent, but were using common sense to protect their children; moreover, they did not want to be reduced to supporters of the FPÖ.

In total, those journalistic articles triggered 1,897 user posts clearly representing different perspectives in the Life Ball poster debate. These formed the corpus of the discourse analysis. Additionally, we consulted further information and context materials to support the research process and assure the quality of the research in terms of the validity of the results and "negative checking," meaning particularly the disclosure of the limitations of the study findings and the method used. Besides the photographer's intended message behind the Life Ball posters and other reactions beyond the research material, such as those of the Facebook group opposed to the Life Ball posters, we used further journalistic articles to identify topics and aspects that were absent or only marginally addressed in our discourse corpus. For example, such articles took a feminist perspective (Hammerl, 2014; Hausbichler, 2014), let a transgender person speak for himself (Stuiber, 2014), and portrayed David LaChapelle as focused on his art (Hilpold, 2014).

Results

Based on the posed research questions, the following sections elucidate threads, thematic and argumentative patterns, actors' and speakers' positions, and discursive references within the analyzed online discourse triggered by the Life Ball posters.

Discourse Threads: Narratives, Thematic Aspects, Argumentative Positions, and the (De)Legitimization of "Alternative" Gender Identities

The study revealed four major, mostly juxtaposed discourse threads manifested in various topics discussed in the context of the Life Ball posters and especially the "Once in the Garden (1)" photo motif:

(1) We identified the question of *acceptance of nudity in public spaces* as one of the most prevalent discourse threads. As speakers, the discourse participants generally took clear opposing positions classifiable as arguments pro and con. Proponents of accepting the depiction of nude bodies in public spaces argued that nudity was something natural and that people still could look away (see exemplary comment 1[11]). They also used an argument of historicity, stating that arts and architecture have always featured nude people, so the public posting of the photograph should pose no problem (see exemplary comment 2). Moreover, they argued that violence, for example in video games, was much worse than the depiction of nude people yet much more accepted (see exemplary comment 3). Discourse participants on the con side perceived nudity in public spaces generally as a great annoyance and imposition, and the Life Ball posters in particular (especially "Once in the Garden (1)") as a provocation

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[11] For a list (and English translation) of exemplary comments, see http://publizistik.univie .ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/i_publizistik_komm/PDF/Wetzstein/Annex_IJoC.pdf.

that would never achieve its stated purpose of tolerance. They implicitly described nudity as connected to sex and sexual intercourse, and as intimate. They also stated that the exhibition of such photo motifs would never be possible in the United States, the country the motifs' creator, LaChapelle, came from (see exemplary comment 4). Opponents also diagnosed a deterioration of societal values, loss of human dignity, and lack of respect for older generations and especially children and adolescents, who were being helplessly exposed to the poster and had to be protected and kept away from such depictions. Further, critics of the posters argued, this was especially true for a photo depicting a person with both male and female sexual characteristics (see exemplary comments 5 and 6).

Opponents of the Life Ball posters commonly referred to children and adolescents to argue against the Life Ball posters, especially the "transgender version" "Once in the Garden (1)." They thereby addressed the alleged interests of children and of child protection, connecting these interests to the topic of children's education and upbringing in general and different approaches to sex education in particular, which emerged as a dominant aspect throughout the research material. Whereas the opponents of the posters (especially the transgender version) perceived children as endangered and, interestingly, repeatedly emphasized that they did not know how to explain the transgender version of the poster to their children, proponents argued that it was never too early to convey values of tolerance to children, and that an explanation could be kept simple by just saying that some people have both male and female sexual characteristics (see exemplary comment 7).

(2) Another, less prominent discourse thread dealt with *advertising* itself, more concretely the realm of arts and the limits of advertising in regard to not just the depiction of nude people but also the establishment and acceleration of (unauthentic) ideals of beauty, something the Life Ball posters were repeatedly criticized for in the analyzed material (see exemplary comment 8). Discourse participants also discussed whether the Life Ball posters were sexist, whether the depiction of nude bodies is per se sexist, and the circumstances under which an advertisement can be considered sexist, which the discourse participants largely associated with the respective advertising context and intended message (see exemplary comment 9).

(3) A third discourse thread, larger than the second, falls under the heading "gender identity and sexual orientation." It dealt mainly with the question of what is normal in this regard, thereby arguing for the (de-)legitimacy of "alternative" gender identities. Strikingly, discourse participants mostly used notions like "transgender," "intersexuality" and "hermaphrodite," and "transsexualism" in a very mingled, diffused way within this discourse thread,[12] and only some of them tried to clarify and define the

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[12] Serano (2007) provides the following clarification of the concept of transgender including transsexuality and intersexuality: "While the word originally had a more narrow definition, since the 1990s it has been used primarily as an umbrella term to describe those who defy societal expectations and assumptions regarding femaleness and maleness; this includes people who are transsexual (those who live as members of the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth), intersex (those who are born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not fit the typical definitions of female or male), and genderqueer (those who identity outside of the male/female binary), as well as those whose gender

differences (see exemplary comment 10). The most prevailing legitimating arguments were that intersexuality is natural and that its numerical presence in the population should not be underestimated (see exemplary comment 11). On the other hand, transgender and intersexuality were also, though only occasionally, called a biological defect. This discourse thread generally concerned the question of whether homosexuality was normal and legitimate. The discussion of homosexuality as a question of normality and an alternative to the heterosexual norm reflected the rather heteronormative perspective taken within the discourse. Interestingly, the discussion of whether or not homosexuality is normal was far more controversial than the question of the (non-)normality of transgender and intersexuality, with discourse participants declaring the rights of gays and lesbians to be important but also claiming homosexuality is abnormal or even caused by chemical products that confuse the human body.

(4) We identified the above-mentioned criminal complaint filed against the Life Ball and its founder by the right-wing FPÖ as another, more legally oriented discourse thread that appeared throughout the research material but especially in the reactions to the previously described *Der Standard* article of May 20 ("FPÖ brachte Strafanzeige," 2014), in which the criminal complaint is the main topic. Whereas the previously explained threads ran throughout the discourse somewhat independently of the respective journalistic articles, this journalistic article clearly set an agenda for the reactions that followed. This discourse thread was discussed far less controversially than the others, but in a more ironic tone. Most discourse participants perceived the criminal complaint as either overreactive or reactionary, or as giving the Life Ball event additional publicity, desired or undesired (see exemplary comment 12).

In terms of the construction of arguments within those four discourse threads, both pro and con arguments seldom refer to factual knowledge such as subject-relevant studies or statistics, and those that do fail to indicate a source. For example, discourse participants talked about the percentage of hermaphrodites in the Austrian population (see exemplary comment 11) or tried to establish a more conscious use of terms such as "transgender" and "intersexuality" (see exemplary comment 10). Both proponents and opponents of the posters' exhibition in public spaces tended to use observations and experiences from daily life to underline their arguments, for example regarding children understanding the depiction of a nude transgender person or not (see exemplary comment 7). In general, it seems proponents of the Life Ball posters and their public exhibition constructed their arguments more diversely, using comparisons to underpin their view (e.g., stating that nudity is not a problem in other settings such as saunas, see exemplary comment 1) or basing their opinions on more general observations (e.g., stating that nude bodies are present on historic buildings as well, see exemplary comment 2). Opponents

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expression differs from their anatomical or perceived sex (including cross-dressers, drag performers, masculine women, feminine men, and so on)" (p. 25).

Kerry (2011) refers to intersex as "a contemporary term that refers to what has historically been called hermaphroditism. While true hermaphroditism, that is the presence of both male and female sex reproductive organs in the one body, is rare, intersex is not" (p. 265).

The Intersex Society of North America refers to intersex as "a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male" (para. 1).

of the posters and their public displayed rather expressed their concerns, for example doubting that a three-year-old could understand the depiction of a nude transgender person (see exemplary comment 6).

Discourse participants' argumentations rarely distinguished transgender representations referring to the respective Life Ball poster from representations of actual transgender people. The depiction of a nude transgender person as visible on the poster "Once in the Garden (1)" instead triggered discussion of (trans)gender identity in the context of sexuality (discourse thread 3), acceptance of nudity in public spaces (discourse thread 1), and the difference between nudity and pornography in the context of the FPÖ's criminal complaint (discourse thread 4). However, discourse thread 2 involved a strong focus on the posters themselves, scrutinizing the authenticity of the poster and the transgender person as depicted, criticizing the reinforcement and reproduction of the conventional beauty ideals underlying the posters, and discussing the visuals either as artwork or (sexist or nonsexist) advertising pieces (see exemplary comments 8 and 9). Hence, the discursive role of the Life Ball posters and particularly the visual representation of a transgender person can be seen as sparking a broader debate on actual transgender representation as well as critical assessment of arts—especially visual advertising content—and their display in public spaces.

Actors' and Speakers' Positions

Though the analyzed discourse revealed salient publicly perceived attributes of transgender and homosexuality, transgender and gay people did not feature as speakers in the discourse themselves or position themselves as such. In general, discourse participants commented on the posters and journalistic articles as private individuals and civil society actors respectively within the previously explained discourse threads. However, given its criminal complaint against the Life Ball, the right-wing FPÖ was the most salient institutionalized actor against the Life Ball posters in the discourse and as such clearly seized the prerogative to dismissively contextualize the Life Ball visuals, even though some opponents stated they did not want to be reduced to FPÖ voters. Unsurprisingly, Life Ball organizers and supporters, especially the creator of the Life Ball visuals David LaChapelle and Life Ball founder Gery Keszler, were the main advocates for societal gender diversity as well as the advertising posters and the Life Ball event. Discourse participants identifying themselves as parents and thus as representing the societal values of child education generally took either of these positions but were rather skeptical of visuals (especially the transgender version) that could, as they saw it, harm their children or be difficult to explain to them.

The Austrian singer, drag artist, and winner of the 2014 Europe-wide Eurovision Song Contest Conchita Wurst, who also performed her song at the Life Ball, was mentioned in the discourse as a representative of societal (gender) tolerance. However, feminist aspects and actors were very few in the discourse; where they did surface, the context tended to be the question of whether the Life Ball advertising posters were sexist. Generally, they agreed that nudity alone was not the same as sexism and that sexism in advertising depended on the context and the intended message.

References to Other Discourses and Topics

The analyzed discourse occasionally refers to other discourses and topics, including (a) societal discrimination against women, for example in the argument that the "transgender debate" detracts attention from this problem; (b) the art exhibition *Nackte Männer* (Nude Men) at the Leopold Museum in Vienna as evidence that visual arts have always contained nudity; (c) criticism of the Life Ball itself as an expensive LGBT party rather than an AIDS charity event; (d) Austrian drag artist and singer Conchita Wurst's winning the European Song Contest as a sign of rising tolerance or not; and (e) FPÖ election posters that proponents of the Life Ball posters labeled as provocative and abnormal in response to the same argument propounded by opponents of the Life Ball visuals.

Discussion

The analyzed discourse and its particular threads, often scrutinizing the original intent of the Life Ball posters as described above, mainly discuss and question their aspects and reveal salient attributes, namely (a) the reasonableness of nudity (discussed inter alia in contexts of sexuality, sexism, and sexual intercourse) in public spaces, often in terms of parenting and child education; (b) the societal (and legal) limits of tolerance and acceptance; and (c) perceptions of (sexual) normality and social conventions in the context of the (de-)legitimization of "alternative" gender identities. The previously described context materials we consulted also revealed aspects that are lacking or only marginal in the analyzed material. They touch upon LaChapelle's work from an artistic and aesthetic perspective, but especially concern the reality of living with societal and legal discrimination against gay and transgender people with regard to the distribution of power, work, and (public) funds, as well as the reconsideration of traditional role models and broadening of perspectives in terms of societal role models and gender ascriptions. However, these aspects, though present, did not form a major narrative throughout the discourse. Instead, transgender and homosexuality, which were mostly jointly discussed within the research and context material, were strongly linked to sexuality and sexual intercourse, respectively, and to the question of (enforced or necessary) societal liberality toward transgender and gay individuals. The continuously noticeable discussion of the limits of tolerance and acceptance toward transgender and gay individuals was aligned with the results of Zimmermann's (2013) discourse analysis of "same-sex marriage" in U.S. news, where she found homosexuality framed as a right while heterosexuality was mediated as the norm. This contradistinction, which clearly shows that gay and transgender identities are indeed still regarded as "alternatives" to the heterosexual standard, was also obvious in the present research, especially in discussion of the acceptance of nudity in public spaces (discourse thread 1) and of gender identity and sexual orientation (discourse thread 3). It can therefore be assumed to be an overarching, consensual narrative in similar gender-related discourses that needs to be proved with further discourse research.

Based on only two very similar photo motifs, one of which aroused particularly controversial debate, the discourse studied here obviously entailed manifold manifestations of image-decoding processes (Hall, 2014). Although the online discourse about the advertising posters "One in the Garden (1)" and "Once in the Garden (2)" covered various aspects, the actual life situations of gay and transgender persons was not among them or was peripheral at best. Not only do today's research and discursive practice emphasize gender duality as the norm and reveal a lack of social embedding of

transgender and gay people, but from a doing-gender perspective they also, through their discursive emphasis on sex and sexual intercourse, construe transgender and homosexuality as limited to biological sex criteria and sex categories rather than linked to or even challenging socially agreed upon attitudinal and behavioral norms, expectations, and ways of expression and interaction (von Braun & Stephan, 2006, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 1987; Westbrook & Schilt, 2014). Instead, as the present study has illustrated, transgender is discussed mainly in light of a cisnormative world of two "normal" sexes—a world view that is nonetheless challenged and irritated by the display of a nude transgender person uniting breasts and a penis on one body. Drawing on Kessler and McKenna (1978), West and Zimmerman (1987) argue:

> Genitalia are conventionally hidden from public inspection in everyday life; yet we continue through our social rounds to "observe" a world of two naturally, normally sexed persons. . . . We operate with a moral certainty of a world of two sexes. We do not think, "Most persons with penises are men, but some may not be" or "Most persons who dress as men have penises." Rather, we take it for granted that sex and sex category are congruent—that knowing the latter, we can deduce the rest. (p. 132)

Thus, public display of a nude transgender person, as depicted on the Life Ball poster "Once in the Garden (1)," stirred up the "moral certainty of a world of two sexes" and the respective scheme of sex categorization.

This is in line with the broader transgender discourse in Austria, where heteronormativity, cisnormativity, and gender duality are dominant cultural patterns. For example, Austrian law is based on "male" and "female" as fixed dimensions and tends to ignore other gender identities. The respective legal discourse is instead characterized by linking transsexuality and intersexuality to a discourse of disease (Wiedlack, 2008). Alongside this deficit-oriented legal discourse is the skepticism that shapes the general attitude toward transgender people: Even though Austria has outlawed discrimination based on sexual orientation and made adoption, gender change, and civil unions possible for LGBT people, only 6 out of 10 people in Austria would feel comfortable having a gay or bisexual person appointed to high political office after elections, according to the Eurobarometer 2012 survey on discrimination in the EU. Transgender or transsexual people are even less accepted in this regard (Equaldex, 2015; Eurobarometer, 2012; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2013). The results of the present discourse analysis unambiguously align with the broader discourse that treats transgender and gay people as an alternative to the heterosexual and cissexual norm.

Conclusion

The cisnormative and heteronormative shape of the online discourse analyzed here suggests quite narrow, if not one-dimensional, perceptions of gay and transgender people and their lifeworlds. It indicates a lack of societal enlightenment and openness toward transgender and gay people and a potential to reproduce rather than challenge (trans)gender inequality, at least in the Austrian public, although neither the analyzed discourse nor any other social media discourse can ever represent a general population. Social media are known to contribute to incidents such as the spread of false rumors in crisis

situations and the acceleration of conflict dynamics, and they are well able to facilitate online firestorms. In contrast, however, they may also provide an infrastructure enabling civic participation through broad debate about societal issues, as well as the formation of thematic communities and the emergence of digital sociality (Einspänner-Pflock & Reichmann, 2014). The latter occurred in the discourse studied here: Even though users of the analyzed online forums generally used nicknames rather than their real names, they hardly ever insulted other discourse participants or committed explicit verbal abuses. Meanwhile, the exchange of arguments and positions was possible—though often controversial, as people expressed positions based on or reinforcing "conventional" gender norms and the routine direct ascription of genitalia to either the male or the female gender even though, as Butler (1993) argued, they are not inherently "male" or "female" by nature. The journalistic articles from which the discussions followed (see the research design explanation) served to trigger discourse addressing different or contrary positions on the Life Ball posters, like those in the interview with LaChapelle or in the report on the FPÖ's criminal complaint.

Limits of the Study

Regarding the research design, the selected method proved well applicable to analysis of the large corpus of material relevant to the social media discourse studied here. Nevertheless, the study faced certain limits. First, we could collect little information about discourse participants or authors of the online forum postings, especially in terms of sociodemographic data such as gender—an aspect that would surely have been interesting—because discourse participants on the *Der Standard* and *Die Presse* online forums usually used nicknames instead of their real names. Therefore we cannot rule out the use of fake accounts to stir up or make fun of the discussions. For example, discourse participants occasionally raised the question "What about our children?" even at times when child education was not part of the discussion. Similarly, we sometimes could not clearly determine from context whether a phrase was meant ironically, for example when discourse participants mentioned the infectiousness of homosexuality. However, it was clear from the context that especially proponents of the Life Ball posters used irony to respond to opponents of the posters, for example when addressing the FPÖ's attitude and its criminal complaint (see exemplary comments 3 and 12).

The study revealed manifold public perceptions of "alternative" gender identities and the respective societal status quo, particularly in Austria. Comparing these results to similar debates in other countries inside and outside Europe would certainly be an interesting endeavor. From an academic perspective, the study has shown that the doing-gender perspective is useful for identifying societal gender knowledge repertoires deduced from analysis of discourses taking place in social media. In other words, doing gender proved a fruitful basis and frame of explanation for this discourse analysis and its sociology-of-knowledge approach. The study also demonstrated that the sociology-of-knowledge approach is well suited to deconstruction and critically review of societal gender conventions and norms in light of doing gender.

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