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Original Article

Transnational queer cultures and digital media: an introduction

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Abstract

Queer cultures have long been transnational and in times of rapid technological advancements, large migration flows, and intense cross-cultural exchanges, queer connections are evolving in new forms and meanings. These developments occur at the intersection of various intertwined geopolitical scales: urban, regional, national, continental, and global, as well as physical and digital. This introduction synthesizes various theoretical and methodological discussions to highlight the ambivalences of contemporary queer cultures, focusing on their intrinsic transnational and digital conditions. The authors contributing to this issue demonstrate that understanding queer cultures in the digital age requires examining the roles of various actors, including big tech employees, online platform volunteers, queer influencers, audiences, and migrants. They also highlight how queer digital cultures transcend national borders and challenge oppositional binaries, such as local vs. global and the West vs. the Rest, all while maintaining a critical perspective on the ambivalences of digitality.

Keywords: digital media, globalization, LGBTIQ, migrants, social media, queer, transnationalism

Scholars studying digital media emphasize their transnational nature. Transnationalism, however, is an ambivalent concept. While it helps us shift attention to the cross-border movement of ideas, people, cultures, and media technologies, it is also often celebrated in a neoliberal fashion, for example by big tech companies that exploit their transnational reach to circumvent national regulations. Despite its contemporary neoliberal associations, the roots of the concept of transnationalism lie in anticolonial thought, cross-border deployment of labor, and migration history as well as in subaltern studies (Briggs et al., 2008). This lineage of the concept of transnationalism challenges Euro-American centrism and multinational corporate exploitations, redirecting attention to lifeworlds and cultures along with their cross-border movements.

In the same vein, we observe an exciting "transnational turn" in studies exploring queer cultures, which align with queer of color critique, queer diaspora studies, and postcolonial queer scholarship (Atshan, 2020; Gopinath, 2018; Jaleel & Savci, 2024; Khubchandani, 2023; Luibhéid & Chávez, 2020). This body of work opens new horizons for conceptualizing the transnational as not only challenging the fixed categories of national belonging but also transcending the categories of gender and sexuality. For instance, Tudor (2017) invites us to think together "transing" the nation and transing gender for a simultaneous deconstruction of gendered and national belongings. Moreover, these works question the taken-for-granted understanding of transnationalism as a process in which Western queer cultures unquestionably expand elsewhere (Savci, 2020), and explore what novel queer media cultures emerge through cross-border connections within non-Western regions (Chiang & Wong, 2016).

This special issue aims to contribute to the ongoing discussions on transnational queer cultures by shifting the focus to their digital dimension. It is crucial to recognize that queer cultures have long been transnational, predating the advent of digital technologies. Historically, individuals who did not conform to traditional gender and sexual roles exchanged letters, magazines, or films across borders and traveled to different places for self-fulfillment or to meet others (Loist, 2018; Szulc, 2018). In an era of rapid technological advancements, large migration flows, and intense cross-cultural exchanges, queer connections are evolving in new forms and meanings. These developments occur at the intersection of various intertwined geopolitical scales: urban, regional, national, continental, and global, as well as physical and digital (Bayramoğlu, 2022; Friedman, 2017; Pain, 2022; Ramos & Mowlabocus, 2020; Szulc, 2020).

This special issue brings together seven empirical articles that illuminate different facets of digital queer cultures as well as five forum pieces that consist of timely commentaries at the intersection of transnational queer cultures and digital media. Taken together, they highlight how queer digital cultures transcend national borders and challenge oppositional binaries, such as local vs. global and the West vs. the Rest, all while maintaining a critical perspective on the ambivalences of digitality. In this introduction, we summarize the empirical articles and forum pieces by making thematic connections between them, instead of discussing them in the strict order of appearing in the special issue, to establish connections between them and highlight their cumulative contribution to thinking about and researching transnational queer cultures and digital media in novel ways.

Queer content beyond national borders

While exciting new research into digital queer cultures has been growing exponentially in the last three decades—including

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works that go beyond the dominant Anglo-American and Eurocentric perspectives—most academic studies on the topic fall within the confines of national case studies. Theories and methods that predominantly focus on the nation as the only analytical unit—which some scholars denounce as "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer & Schiller, 2002)—become particularly questionable when the focus is on digital media. Nations have not faded into oblivion in the 21st century as they continue to shape the legislative, political, and social conditions, and provide meaningful cultural contexts for queer lives. However, other geopolitical scales—as well as their imbrication—remain equally important; especially now when, arguably, digital technologies accelerate the transnational interactions and transformations of culture (Brunton, 2022; Szulc, 2023). Thinking along the lines of mediascapes, to use Appadurai's (1996) terminology, national categories become difficult to uphold as default analytical units when media cultures emerge intensely interconnected. One, for example, can consider diasporic digital culture, which is not necessarily confined to the diaspora but includes users and online content that can be traced back to various origins, including the "homeland" (Gajjala, 2019).

The unruliness of digital culture with its difficulties to fix it within national categories can provide some rich grounds for queer scholarship but can also pose some methodological challenges. Given the cross-national character of audiences, media texts, and institutions, media and communication scholars turn to comparative research to understand media trends across countries. And yet, as Livingstone (2003) argues, there is a danger in conducting international comparative research, as interpreting similarities and differences between countries can easily essentialize them and reproduce national banalities and stereotypes. Moreover, international comparisons often run the risk of universalizing Western epistemologies as they look at commonalities and divergencies through the lens of Western theoretical and methodological concepts, typically comparing peripheral or semi-peripheral contexts to the hegemonic ones, usually the US (Goggin & McLelland, 2009; Sender, 2013; Thussu, 2009).

The authors of this special issue overcome the problematic aspects of comparative research by emphasizing connections, flows, and interactions between national or cultural contexts, a common practice in queer transnational studies (Binnie & Klesse, 2018), rather than merely focusing on similarities or differences. The special issue begins with the contribution by Qiao and Hu (this issue) who demonstrate that comparative digital methods can focus on non-Western knowledge and cultural repertoires to challenge the assumed universality of Western concepts. By examining reaction videos to the Chinese Boys' Love web series uploaded on Bilibili, the Chinese video streaming platform, the authors illustrate how coded meanings of queerness in non-Western cultural products become transnational. While some English-language reaction video creators struggled to interpret the coded queer meanings, Chinese and Thai creators could effectively unpack the nuanced messages between the lines. By focusing on opacity rather than visibility in digital queer culture, the authors challenge the notion that queerness can only be lived, experienced, and perceived when it is out and loud. In other words, the shift in focus to transnational digital queer cultures might necessitate posing new questions and adopting new epistemological lenses to detect queer ephemerality and opacity in diverse cultural contexts.

In the second article of this issue, Kanchan additionally challenges the imagination of the transnational flow of queer cultures as a one-way street from the Global North to the Global South, where queer lives are conceptualized merely along their national and cultural boundaries. Kanchan's work on queer and trans use of Instagram in Kerala—a south Indian state—overcomes such simplistic understanding: Kanchan's participants use Instagram to learn from other queer struggles in places such as Taiwan and Sri Lanka and get inspired by strategies and narratives of Indigenous movements in North America. This signals the important ways in which tactics from counterpublics worldwide speak to each other. Similarly, in her forum piece, Zhao (this issue) traces how Girls' Love webtoons emerged as a new genre shaped by the transnational flow of ideas, images, and discourses within East Asia. Zhao reflects on the ambivalence of the transnational flow of digital culture within the region: although digital media offer strategies for Japanese and Thai lesbian representations to overcome online censorship in China, stories circulated on Chinese online platforms still tend to draw on normative views of chastity, monogamy, and misogyny.

The authors contributing to this special issue show that an exploration of transnational queer cultures in digital times needs to implement methodological and theoretical strategies that would rethink and even push back on the dominant modes of scholarship. In this regard, the recent critique by Ng et al. (2020) that highlights the predominance of Whiteness in media and communication scholarship is particularly relevant to this special issue, while the field is also characterized by dominant heteronormative and cisnormative perspectives (Yep, 2017). Against this backdrop, the authors included in this issue offer queer critical interventions in White centrism in digital cultures. The issue continues with an article by Willard and Dubrofsky (this issue) who question the universalization of Westernness and Whiteness in the reality show *RuPaul's Drag Race: UK vs The World*. They argue that the seemingly international character of the show is exploited to re-center national identity, in which racial inequalities are flattened. Moreover, the show positions Whiteness and Westernness as unmarked central categories, while it fantasizes about a post-racial world. Problematically, as the authors discuss, this places Whiteness at the forefront, implying that racism is an already resolved issue. The article also demonstrates how in certain examples of digital queer cultures transnationalism becomes a problematic neoliberal concept that hinders an engagement with racial inequalities.

The following article by Chojnicka's (this issue) shifts attention to the dominance of Western terms and concepts in trans digital cultures. Her work explores how young Polish trans YouTubers translate and localize concepts of gender diversity from English to Polish. As Chojnicka argues, the arrival of the Internet has not only undermined the highly medicalized Polish discourse on trans identities but also helped form new trans visibility that includes practical information about how to transition, which was difficult to access through Polish traditional media. Although in such cases the digital localization of transnational queer cultures draws on a translation of English concepts to other languages, therefore following the routes that resemble a one-way flow from the West to the Rest, digital media can still facilitate the resistance against Western narratives. In the case of Chojnicka's article, Polish trans YouTubers privileged community

building over individualized and commodified aspects of queer and trans content creator cultures such as product reviews.

Chojnicka's article speaks to Camminga's (this issue) forum piece that highlights online content created by trans refugees from various African countries now living in the Global North. Exploring similarities and linkages between cultural contexts can reveal the transnational formation of queer and trans digital cultures across continents. As Camminga shows, digital media foster the formation of an African trans diaspora, transcending national backgrounds and migration statuses, and creating unique narratives that connect the African continent with the trans migration experience. By focusing on trans lives, the online content produced by African trans refugees not only challenges the misreadings that conflate sexual orientation with gender identity but also enhances the visibility of being African and trans. Within this framework, digital media facilitate the emergence of a living archive of African trans migration and diaspora, which has been underdocumented.

Migrating queers and digital technologies

Rethinking digital queer cultures from the vantage point of the transnational inevitably foregrounds the modes of becoming beyond gender and sexuality. The transnational perspective does not only bring questions of how queerness is imagined, experienced, and practiced through digital media across time and space but also how it is entangled with postcoloniality and digital border regimes (Bayramoğlu, 2022; Bayramoğlu & Lünenborg, 2018; Boston, 2016; Shield, 2019). Moreover, using transnationality as an analytical vantage point can reveal how issues related to gender and sexuality intersect with and become complicit in other power dynamics. For instance, the figure of the homophobic Muslim "Other" in Euro-American media is a specifically potent trope that is closely tied to sociopolitical processes that use sexual and gender rights to justify racist anti-immigration policies (Haritaworn, 2015). Haritaworn's (this issue) forum piece examines the German media spectacle surrounding young Muslim migrants' social media use regarding the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. As Haritaworn highlights, policymakers and educators in Germany tend to depict social media activity of young people with Middle Eastern background as a threat to social order, alleging they are more susceptible to antisemitic and homophobic content as well as "fake news." Such a perspective on digital culture not only reinforces homonationalism (Puar, 2018) but also erases the possibility of being queer and Muslim. Haritaworn's piece additionally reminds researchers to stay attentive to the shifting signifiers of Otherness, in this case from homophobic Muslims to Muslims who "use the wrong kind of media, and they use them in the wrong way," as Haritaworn (this issue) puts it.

In mainstream media in the West, non-Western societies are often depicted as impossible places for queer individuals to exist and thrive, accompanied by the trope of "saving" non-Western queers (Bracke, 2012). Similarly, queer migration is portrayed as a one-way journey from repression to liberation, with digital technologies celebrated as tools enabling migrants to become connected transnational subjects. However, recent studies (Lunau & Andreassen, 2023) demonstrate that digital media are increasingly integrated into larger migration surveillance mechanisms, significantly impacting how queer migrants engage with and use these technologies. This issue continues with Rachdi's (this issue) article that explores how the promise of frictionless transnational connections offered by digital technologies often falls short in the everyday lives of refugees and asylum seekers. For instance, some queer and trans asylum seekers, lacking bank accounts or credit cards, cannot use certain social media apps to send or receive money. Additionally, the need to prove their trans identity through their openly trans social media presence for the European asylum system, while simultaneously keeping this identity discreet from their families, creates fragmented and complex ways of using digital media. Therefore, Rachdi argues that state surveillance, migration policies, and familial restrictions create "glitches" in the digital connectivity of queer and trans asylum seekers.

While migration is often understood as a transnational movement, Lupindo (this issue), in the following article, zooms in on the internal migration from rural to urban locations within South Africa. Despite the existence of relatively progressive LGBTIQ-related laws in South Africa, BlackQueers (as the author prefers to refer to them) transcend spatial boundaries moving from small towns to big cities, and from public spaces to digital spaces with the hope of escaping violence and finding safety. For Lupindo's interlocutors, urban spaces as well as transnational digital platforms only offer fragile safety and limited potential for self-fulfillment. Particularly concerning dating apps, Lupindo observes a lack of intergenerational knowledge exchange among Black queers in South Africa. Due to the absence of knowledge transfer, practical online safety strategies in dating apps are not passed from the older generation to the younger one.

Also focusing on internal migration, but this time within New York City, Nicholas Boston's (this issue) forum piece discusses the use of dating apps to trace racialized desires as intertwined with the decisions about where to settle in the global city. Boston observes that in particular neighborhoods with predominantly Black residents, White men tend to indicate in their dating app profiles that their sexual preference is for Black people. Although in the mainstream media discussions the move to these neighborhoods is explained mostly by the wish to find more affordable housing, Boston's piece underlines the possible "libidinal" factors at play. Not only White Americans' but also White European immigrants' decisions to move neighborhoods in the city can be, at least partially, explained by racial-sexual relations as indicated in their dating app use. Lupindo's and Boston's pieces serve as important reminders that the transnational does not equal the global. Rather, the transnational approach we subscribe to acknowledges the importance of diverse geopolitical scales while remaining attentive to their combination and imbrication (Szulc, 2018).

Queer cultures in times of big tech and big data

As worrying developments over the past decade have shown, digital media can facilitate transnational mobilizations fueled by anti-queer and anti-trans ideologies, racism, and hate speech (Nash & Browne, 2020; Righetti, 2021). Moreover, digital media technologies turn queer lifeworlds into data (Bivens, 2017; Guyan, 2022), ready to be exploited by state institutions, international organizations, and multinational

corporations. Although some platforms like Wikimedia still embody the early Internet's ideals of free, community-based knowledge creation, most digital technologies have been co-opted by big tech companies for surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). This transnational expansion of datafication and algorithmic technologies reproduces heteronormativity, cis-normativity, and patriarchy through coding practices that fail to reflect gender and sexual diversity. And yet, big tech companies that rely on algorithmic technologies often use LGBTIQ issues for their own marketing campaigns. Using Rao's (2020) concept of homocapitalism, Mowlabocus' (this issue) forum piece examines how LGBTIQ employees in multinational tech companies perceive their employers' investment in LGBTIQ issues, not much dissimilar from a narrative of "saving" non-Western gays (Bracke, 2012). However, while big tech supports LGBTIQ-related campaigns, their commitment to human rights is limited to what is profitable. As Mowlabocus points out, these companies often do not intervene in anti-LGBTIQ issues in certain regions, instead adjusting their products and content to align with local censorship and restrictions.

In the final empirical article in this issue, Beatrice Melis, Chiara Paolini, Marta Fioravanti, and Daniele Metilli shift their attention to practices within digital platforms that intervene in the reproduction of hetero- and cis-normativities through datafication. They focus on Wikidata, a community-based, collaborative platform that structures vast amounts of Wikimedia data. They discuss how this not-for-profit community negotiates the classification of gender and sexuality of people in their databases, struggling for more inclusive practices that work across languages and cultures. They show, for example, how the use of bots to automate the labeling of gender can lead to mistakes and inconsistencies, as this method often leads to misinterpreting given names as indicators of gender. This not only causes errors but also reinforces hetero- and cis-normativities, which are then challenged and corrected by users through bottom-up efforts but may also result in "edit wars."

Conclusion

This special issue addresses contemporary digital queer cultures by focusing on their intrinsic transnational and digital conditions. Cumulatively, the authors demonstrate that the understanding of how queer cultures become digital and are appropriated by transnational tech companies requires examining the roles of various actors, including big tech employees and online platforms' volunteer editors as well as queer influencers, audiences, and migrants. Moreover, as the authors show, it necessitates acknowledging diverse and multidirectional flows—not just those from the West to the East, or from the North to the South, but also from the East and South to the West and North as well as within and across non-Western regions. Similarly, while migration is often viewed as part of transcending national borders, and queer migration tends to be discussed in terms of the movement from the allegedly less progressive to more progressive countries, the authors invite us to challenge such simple dichotomies and consider, for example, internal migration from rural to urban areas and even within urban contexts, which are linked to racial inequalities and facilitated by digital media. The authors also show how digital media create new opportunities for queer migrants while increasingly becoming tools for migration control and surveillance.

We would like to conclude this introduction with a brief self-reflection while also thanking Debipreeta Rahut and Muhammad Taufiq Al Makmun (who were Ph.D. students at Bowling Green State University during the production stage of this special issue), for their help with the editorial work. Our interest in transnationalism, queerness, and digital media is not only a matter of theories, methodologies, or research projects, but also the essential aspects of our personal lives shaped by our own social, cultural, and political backgrounds. As migrant scholars who are engaged with queer lives either through our own queer experiences or as allies, our transnational and queer trajectories do not always reflect a linear and smooth movement from one nation to another or from cis-gendered hetero cultures to queer communities. Coming from Turkish, Polish, and Indian backgrounds with lifelong histories of travel and now working in academia in the US and UK comes with unique entanglements of power and privilege. Yet this also provides us with a sensitivity in seeing, reading, and understanding various perspectives. While putting together this special issue, we aimed to open a space for underrepresented perspectives instead of repeating the old narratives. Many contributing authors share similar sensitivities, evident, for example, in their citation practices, where they reference authors from outside Anglo-American contexts and write in multiple languages. Returning to our initial point in this introductory piece, our interest in digital media is inevitably linked to our own transnational positionality, as we rely on the transnational nature of digital media to stay connected with the places we have left behind in our own journeys. And yet, it also helps us to have multiple visions that reveal not only transnational digital cultures' exciting and empowering potentials but also their ambivalent meanings and problematic functions.

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