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Main Article

MEDIA CULTURE &SOCIETY

Living with media: Rethinking mediatization through the queer life course

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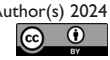
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Abstract

Over the last three decades, mediatization has been heralded as the new grand theory to explain how social transformations have increasingly become intertwined with media technologies. However, like other grand narratives about historical transformations, it risks failing to take into account the reality of lives in peripheries, not least because they rarely leave their traces in archives. In this article, I explore how media are linked to transformations in queer life course in order to shed light on the significance of evolving media technologies for persons whose lives are shaped by inequalities. Drawing on 60 non-media-centric interviews conducted with LGBTIQ+ people in Germany and the UK, I argue that media images, narratives, and technologies hold the potential to spark crucial turning points in the life course of persons whose needs are not fulfilled by social institutions. While the evolution of media technologies over time has led to increased agency for people to access queer content and engage in interpersonal connection, it simultaneously exacerbates a generational inequality. The results presented here invite us to rethink mediatization from a queer life course perspective, and emphasize the crucial role played by media technologies in shaping the social contexts in which lifeworlds unfold.

Keywords

digital media, generation, inequality, intersectionality, LGBTQ, life course, media, mediatization, queer, temporality

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Introduction

> I happened to find a gay novel in a bookshop and I bought and read it. You have to imagine, back then you couldn't buy porn in public anywhere, could you? It didn't exist yet; there were no video stores where you could rent something like that openly, everything was still under the counter, so to speak. And this novel, which had pornographic features, I found it in a normal bookshop. And there was also the story of a coming out in it, and then I, I had very close friends, a married couple, and I met them for coffee and told them that I was gay, because now I had read about it, and it helped me unbelievably. . . (Manny, 64)

When I interviewed Manny in a café in Schöneberg, Berlin's "gay neighborhood," he kept returning to a specific moment in his life when he had discovered a novel in a bookstore. Retrospectively, finding that book had been a turning point for him: until then, he hadn't encountered any positive media representations of queer sexuality. He discovered the book in 1985: a very different era to 2019, when the interview was recorded. In 1985 saw the peak of the AIDS crisis and moral panic over homosexuality. Despite having undergone multiple reforms, paragraph 175 of the German penal code, which criminalized sexual relations between men, was still in effect. At that time, it was far more difficult than it is now to find images, narratives, or information about non-heteronormative ways of life. In a context so devoid of information, reading a gay novel allowed Manny not only to acknowledge his desires but also gave him the vocabulary to imagine a life that went on to unfold in a completely different direction than it had taken hitherto.

Manny's story invites us to think about the impact of media and culture on social groups whose lives are shaped by inequalities, such as LGBTIQ+ people. In this article, I embark upon the complex task of intertwining the theoretical perspectives of mediatization and life course – approaches that have sparked significant discussions, particularly within sociology, media, and communication studies – through a queer critical lens, aiming to expose the blind spots of those research paradigms. Over the last three decades, mediatization has crystalized as a theoretical concept that facilitates study of how, over time, media have been increasingly shaping the ways the social world is organized and structured (Couldry and Hepp, 2013; Hjarvard, 2013). The concept is productive as it invites us to think about media in relation to temporality, and it demonstrates how the entanglement of media and social life has intensified over decades and centuries. This emphasis on temporality resonates with the focus on time in life course theory, which explores age-related decisions in life (Elder Jr, 1994; Elder Jr and George, 2016; Kemple, 2022). However, as I argue in the following, both mediatization and life course need to be theorized in relation to social inequalities, marginalization, and oppression. As I will show, exploring queer life course can demonstrate how different media formats shape identification processes, age-related decisions, and life transitions, particularly when such lives are marginalized, oppressed, and rendered invisible by society. Directing attention to queer lives also shows the weakness of assumptions made about universally shared experiences. Studies of life course teem with generalizations whereby people's lives are categorized into supposedly ubiquitous phases, such as entering the labor market, marriage, or child rearing; phases deemed to be "shared experience" (Bolin, 2017: 35) across generations. While such categorizations might adequately describe some lives in some societies, this article will make an intervention by looking at the significance of

media for queer lives that are shaped by intersectional discriminations, unexpected trajectories, and exclusion from institutions: messing up the chrononormative expectations of a life course.

Based on interviews conducted with 60 participants who self-identified as LGBTIQ+ and were living in Germany and the UK, this article demonstrates that, particularly for those whose needs are often not met by social institutions, empowering discourses encountered in media often become one of the most influential forces to shape their life course. My second argument concerns agency in relation to media use during different phases of life. Many older queers who participated in my research had experienced significant transformations over the course of their lives: not just of the policies regulating sexual and gender diversity but also of media technologies. Their early life stages, lived with analog media, were shaped by the invisibility and silencing of queerness in such media, as well as by the limits upon their own agency to consume and encounter queer content at will. This stands in stark contrast to the younger generations' experiences of early life phases. These differing media experiences made by generations, so my third argument, contributes to a different pace of identification. As I will show in the following, while today's younger generations are able to actively seek and find queer content and networks via digital media, thus accelerating their identification process, older generation queers spent their youth alone, with just scraps, if any, of queer content offered by older media technologies.

Mediatization of life course

The concept of mediatization has typically been deployed to argue that media constitute, like other institutions such as family, school, politics etc., an essential fabric of the social and cultural spheres; hence they can serve as an interpretive framework for understanding society (Hjarvard, 2013: 3). Unlike earlier theories on media, mediatization does not conceptualize media as something external to social institutions. Instead, it shows how technological developments over the course of decades have created societies that are deeply entangled with media technologies, which largely function as "invisible" infrastructures – not only due to the physics of technologies such as radio waves and WiFi signals, but also due to their everyday banality.

Mediatization theory's interest in social institutions could be useful for a reconceptualization of mediatization from a queer perspective. To date, mediatization scholars have generally conceived social institutions as contexts that offer protection and support for individuals in their struggles to become full members of society, guide them from one life stage to the next, teach them about their past, present, and future, or give them a direction to follow in their life course (Silverblatt, 2004: 26). Within this framework, Silverblatt (2004) saw the increasing impact of media upon social life as a danger, and warned that media had started functioning as a social institution – and were threatening to undermine the values of traditional social institutions. While it is important not to deny the possible disruptive impacts of media on individuals, such generalizations are based upon an assumption that social institutions such as family or school do indeed provide protection and support to all members of society. And yet, as the ever increasing body of literature on everyday discrimination has shown, social institutions often reproduce

violence and/or prevent certain individuals, especially those from minority groups, from thriving (Bayrakdar and King, 2023; Castro Varela and Bayramoğlu, 2023). When social institutions such as schools, family, religion, and the like fail to offer the orientation that people seek, radio shows, newspapers, TV channels, movies, or smartphones might be able to communicate hitherto unthinkable, unseen, or unheard possibilities that can have a lasting impact on individuals' biographies. In such cases, as Cavalcante's (2018) work on transgender people's use of media in everyday life demonstrates, media can be appropriated as tools for coping with inequalities such as transphobia, homophobia, and their intersection with other dynamics of power.

On the other hand, since mediatization focuses on how social transformations are linked to the evolution of media technologies over decades and centuries, it risks becoming a new grand theory that is difficult to engage with empirically. Historical comparisons are especially challenging, as media technologies can change radically even within a single generation, making it difficult to determine which technologies were linked to specific social transformations (Ekström et al., 2016). Moreover, as Livingstone (2019) argues, since mediatization aims to tell a grand story spanning decades and centuries, the lived media experiences of people whose lives are seen as peripheral are all too often excluded, not least because they rarely leave traces in archives (Livingstone 2019: p. 175). Instead of seeking to explain media's relationships to social transformation by means of universalizing and monolithic understandings of how power works, Livingstone proposes shifting the focus to the everyday lived human condition of media (p. 171). Several scholars have indeed already turned their attention to individual lifeworlds in order to examine the effects of media in life course transformations over generations (Bolin, 2017; Damkjaer 2024; Givskov and Deuze, 2018, Vincent, 2023). This growing body of literature is particularly exciting as it brings the lifeworlds and media practices of persons and groups that are often seen as marginal into the picture.

The life course perspective views human life as a journey from a helpless organism to a full member of society; a journey marked by a series of social, cultural, political, and biographical events; and it explores how socio-political events shape age-related decisions and perceptions (Binnie and Klesse, 2012; Castro Varela and Bayramoğlu, 2021; Di Feliciantonio, 2022; Lawrence and Taylor, 2020; Santos, 2021). In this article, my aim is to widen the perspective of life course to include media and communication technologies as significant contexts within which age- and time-related decisions are made. For my participants, as I will show in the following pages, encounters with media functioned as reference points in their own individual queer histories that helped them to structure the narratives of their lives. This indicates that the mediated images, stories, and information that the participants engaged with during their lives had a lasting impact. Moreover, as scholars working on mediatization have discussed, media and information infrastructures always register the passing of time; as such, they systematize and regulate the social world (Couldry and Hepp, 2018: p. 105). Indeed, people's memories of socio-historical events are strongly entangled with media technologies (Bolin, 2016: p. 5257). When people think about past phases or moments in their own lives, they often remember their own photographed memories, and/or mediated experiences of socio-political or cultural events that they followed in media.

The passing of time within an individual life is marked by important transitions from one phase to another, and, as Damkjaer (2024) argues, such turning points are also increasingly becoming intertwined with media practices. An analysis of the ways that media are significant for specific life transitions can serve to shed light on social inequalities. A person's capacity to utilize the affordances offered by media when seeking support at a critical juncture in their life is often shaped by past experiences, which in turn have been influenced by social inequalities and privileges. However, as Givskov and Deuz (2018) point out, studies to date that have brought together social inequality and mediatization have tended to take social class as the only analytical dimension in their attempts to account for inequalities such as differing resources to deal with the increasing digitalization of everyday life. They suggest that age should also be taken into account as a further dimension of inequality (Givskov and Deuze, 2018). While people's differing extent of access to digital media can create inequalities, digital media infrastructures can also help vulnerable groups such as older single women to gain autonomy in later life (Givskov, 2017).

There is a well-developed body of literature that explores the impacts of social media on LGBTIQ+ identity development, including dimensions such as age and life stage, which also play a prominent role in life course perspective (Bond et al., 2009; Craig and McInroy, 2014; Kuper and Mustanski, 2014) – but these studies do not consider the entire life course as a dimension of analysis. Studies have shown, for instance, that social media serve as an informal learning environment for LGBTIQ+ people, where they can seek LGBTIQ+ related information, find social role models, and experiment with intimacy (Fox and Ralston, 2016). The internet continues to provide an important realm for connecting, seeking information, and developing intimacy for younger generations in particular, even after their coming out (Szulc and Dhoest, 2013: p. 355). With their proposed concept "queer media generations," Dhoest and Van Ouytsel (2022) trace the significance of media in the identification processes of non-heterosexual men. Whereas for older generations, print media played a crucial role as they explored their queerness, for younger generations the most important resource seems to be the internet. Audio-visual media, by contrast, are cited as significant across generations (Dhoest and Van Ouytsel, 2022: p. 675). Although these studies have increased our understanding of how, over time, media have been increasingly shaping identification processes, they all focus on a single identity, a single life stage, or a single medium. And yet, to better understand how media are linked to transformations in queer life course, a methodological approach that can embrace the full diversity of technologies, identities, and trajectories is needed. If we take time as a dimension of analysis, which mediatization and life course theory aim to do, it is not enough to focus on any single medium or identity. Over the course of time, people use different technologies, identify themselves differently, and experience different forms of inequalities; even the social institutions and policies in which their lives are embedded undergo transformation.

Conducting non-media-centric interviews

The main arguments I make in this article are based on fieldwork conducted in Germany and the UK from 2018 to 2021 and 2022 to 2023. I combine empirical data gathered from

two research projects on intersectional inequalities in LGBTIQ+ biographies. Both studies implemented the same methodology, which consisted of qualitative in-depth interviews with people identifying as LGBTIQ+ at different stages of their lives (aged between 18 and 70 years). The 60 participants were recruited by means of announcements on social media, in queer magazines, in booklets disseminated by LGBTIQ+ organizations, and via the social media channels of LGBTIQ+ organizations in Germany and the UK. Potential participants were asked to fill in anonymized online questionnaires that gathered demographic data on age, class, sexuality, gender identity, ethnicity, disability, and further markers of diversity. This data was collected in order to ensure that the study would include life trajectories underrepresented in academic literature. The questionnaire was followed by an invitation to take part in an interview. Participants were invited to choose where the interview would take place; usually in a café or an NGO's office. The participants had diverse self-identifications including 13 non-binary, 21 female, 26 male, 20 transgender, 2 intersex, 17 lesbian, 19 gay, 4 bisexual, 8 pansexual, and 27 participants who had experienced racism and/or migration. 35 of the participants were aged 18–40, 17 were 41–59, and 8 were 60+ years. A total of 44 were living in Germany, 16 in the UK.

Influenced by the non-media-centric approach in media studies (Krajina et al., 2014), the interviews aimed to explore the entanglement of media and everyday experiences. While the non-media-centric approach is most well-known in relation to the ethnographic observation of everyday media use (Pink and Leder Mackley, 2013), I utilized what I call "non-media-centric interviews" in order to analyze how the research participants referred to different media and communication technologies when they talked about everyday situations – without the interviewer having explicitly asked them about media. Vulnerable groups such as LGBTIQ+ people who experience intersectional inequalities due to racism, migration, disability, or political persecution etc. are particularly inclined to feel a more urgent wish to talk about their experiences of discrimination than to discuss their media use. Discussing media technologies, like smartphones, can sometimes seem too mundane or abstract when compared to addressing the deeper struggles rooted in social inequalities. Nonetheless, due to the deep mediatization of everyday life, people often end up talking about media without being specifically asked to. Non-media-centric interviews aim to take account of such unprompted conversations about media while allowing interviews to address topics related to structural and everyday discrimination across the life course.

The interviews were analyzed by implementing qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2004) with the help of the software MAXQDA. This allowed patterns of similarities and differences across the interview data to be discerned and documented. One of the major observations to emerge was that people were particularly likely to mention media in relation to identification, coming out, and making decisions about their lives. With this article, I wish to open up space for participants' individual stories. When discussing macro paradigms such as life course or mediatization, research often renders individual lives invisible. Here, by contrast, each interview excerpt is contextualized in relation to the interviewee's own biography and the wider socio-political and technological context in which they have lived. Participants are referred to by pseudonyms of their own choice.

Failing social institutions

I would like to begin with the story of Mensch. Mensch, in his 50s, lives in a provincial German town. He spent his adolescent years under the scrutiny and impacts of the German penal code 175 that illegalized sexual intercourse between men (Kaczorowski, 2015; Lautmann, 2014). He wanted to be named Mensch, which literally translates to human, because he had spent most of his life not feeling like a full human. Access to being and feeling like a human was denied to him by multiple intersecting circumstances that were all caused by social institutions' undertakings to erase his queerness. The government sought to regulate his sexuality by policies; the expectations of his immediate social circle such as his family influenced his decision, at a certain age, to marry a woman and have a child. Not only did the homophobia of the society he was born into hinder him from fulfilling his desires, class inequality also had a negative impact on his life. His formal education ended when he left primary school to work as a dock worker, which made it difficult for him to reach contexts that could have allowed him to thrive as a queer man.

With such a lack of opportunities for queerness to unfold, images circulated in media were what gave Mensch his first inkling of the potential for a way of life unlike that which was propagated in his immediate social institutions such as schools. In the interview, he mentioned how seeing drag queen shows on the German regional public TV channel NDR3, as well as queer images in magazines such as *Stern* and *Pardon* had functioned for him as "a small door opener":

> And actually *Schmidt's Theater* was shown earlier on NDR3; many years ago. . . And that was also a small door opener when you see these, yes, partly sassy, fake people; [when you see] the men, who put on . . . these huge dresses, the drag queens. So in school education, there were only men and women. There was nothing in between. So, and well, in the *Stern* one read something. At that time, I always read *Pardon*, which was a satirical magazine, and you also read something there and yes, looked at pictures, full of curiosity (Mensch, 55)

When talking about his childhood, Mensch had vivid memories of the drag queen shows and other representations in German media. He referred to them as "fake" and not necessarily as a good form of representation because they were presented to be laughed at in satirical magazines. Media and communication scholars have been invested in providing a rightful critique of inauthentic and stereotypical representations of queerness as well as of the commodification of queer visibility in neoliberal societies (Avila-Saavedra, 2009; Bayramoğlu, 2018; McDermott, 2021), whereby only certain visibilities that are deemed profitable in a given space and time are allowed to circulate. And yet, for Mensch, even derogatory representations functioned as a door opener by showing him the possibility of a world different to the one that was taught about in schools. Hence, even negatively-connoted media portrayals of queerness leave their traces in queers' sense of self and life course because of the complete lack of representation in other spheres of life.

The hunger for images, words, and stories, as well as their long-lasting impact on life course, can only be fully grasped by including the shortcomings of established social institutions into the picture. Silverblatt (2004) conceives of social institutions such as the

church, family, and schools as non-profit institutions that protect individuals and provide them with support networks in their trajectories of becoming members of a larger social network. He underlines the importance of social institutions that are bound to tradition (here we can add *heteronormativity*) that help individuals to adjust to the changes and transitions from one life phase to another (Silverblatt, 2004: p. 36). Like several other scholars, he has expressed concern that media are increasingly taking on the functions of a social institution. He argues that the deep mediatization of society leads to media messing up with the "healthy" life course development that is bound to traditions and chrononormative transitions in life. Others have asserted similarly critical views on the impacts of digital media and the new "platform society" (van Dijck, 2013) that intensifies the entanglement of media and social life, or have warned that the datafication of human lives (Couldry and Mejias, 2019) can have negative consequences for social institutions and life course. But such assertions fail to acknowledge that many individuals are neither protected nor supported by established institutions – on the contrary, they are more likely to experience discrimination from them. For such individuals, the increased potency of media within society associated with deep mediatization can be empowering in the face of social institutions' attempts to erase them. Many participants mentioned that encountering media images and utilizing social media's affordances for interpersonal connection did indeed accelerate their personal trajectories toward understanding their own queerness, as well as helping them to join and/or build communities that empower gender and sexual minorities.

> When I was 33 I found a support group on the internet and on their site I read about intersexuality for the first time, I googled it a bit more and that's why 33 is such a . . . then I had a term for it for the first time. Before I was always just a fake woman and now I was finally an intersex person. And found people who were like me, because before I had been alone. Because the doctor . . . oh, that . . . what the doctor had told me: You won't find others. Yes. He was wrong: Now I know 500! (Markus, 50)

Markus spent their entire childhood and youth up to the age of 18 years without knowing about their intersexuality. When their peers at school were going through puberty, Markus *"didn't reach puberty"* and their mother said, *"let's go to a doctor now."* Their body felt odd because it didn't seem to be following the expected chrononormative and heteronormative time schedule of biological events. Had they not gone to the doctor, Markus said, they *"would have found out about it much later."* The doctor checked their chromosomes and told Markus they had *"XY chromosome"* – without explaining what exactly XY chromosome meant. The doctor did not tell Markus anything about intersexuality. As the spokesperson of the medical institution, the doctor constructed Markus' body, which did not fit within heteronormativity, as a unique medical condition: a medical anomaly ("*the doctor told me: You won't find others*"). But the internet provided Markus not only with the necessary vocabulary ("*then I had a term for it for the first time*") that helped them toward emancipatory identity development, but also with the possibility to connect with other intersex people and belong to a community ("*Now I know 500!*").

The life stories of Markus and Mensch show how queers remember their encounters with different images and information discovered in media as significant turning points

in their life course that opened new doors and provided them with important new terminology. Digital media can also make services and substances available that were formerly the preserve of social institutions. For example, Lucy (21), a young trans woman living in Germany, explained how being able to buy hormones via the internet had shaped her life by accelerating her transition, saving her from having to go through long bureaucratic processes involving mandatory therapies, which she just *"cancelled, because you could not get an appointment anyway."* Throughout the interviews, my participants repeatedly emphasized the impact of media on their life course in relation to the failings of social institutions and the pressing impact of inequalities in their lives. Media stepped in when doctors, teachers, and therapists made queer life impossible.

Growing up: Gaining agency

When Toby Kind, a DJ in a queer migrant performance collective in London, was talking about 1990s Turkish pop music, he remembered his own childhood. The significance of Turkish pop music in his queer migrant life course sheds light on how the meanings and impact of media change over the course of time, and how people have different degrees of agency during different periods of their lives. The passage of time is not only significant in relation to longer timespans such as inter-generational comparisons (Bolin, 2017) but also within an individual life course, from one life phase to another:

> I always remember the Turkish music I listened to in my childhood and adolescence. Those cassettes that my family listened to are very clear in my mind. For example, I used to listen to my family's cassette collection again and again. Now, when I'm DJing, I mostly play '90s music. We couldn't experience that queer thing then because we didn't have independence in those teenage years. We couldn't go to a party and have fun with those songs. Being able to have fun with those songs now makes us live the lost time of our youth. (Toby Kind, 28)

Toby Kind was born and grew up in Turkey. He spent his teenage years in the closet; he didn't have a queer network around him when he was listening to his family's cassette collection. Although Turkish newspapers reported on the first queer demonstration in Istanbul, which was organized mostly by trans women to protest against police violence (Bayramoğlu, 2021), and some magazines were beginning to address formerly taboo topics such as bisexuality and gay sex (Çeler, 2011), queer visibility in the media and public sphere was still very rare. In the early 1990s, there were no established LGBTIQ+ organizations and no openly queer bars or clubs in Turkey – the few queer spaces that did exist were hidden and difficult for outsiders to access. In other words, Toby Kind's teenage years, a life stage where music and fandom play a central role, were spent in a time and space of societal repression in the nuclear family and in public life. It was also a life phase within which Toby Kind did not have much agency concerning which media content he could access and consume; all he could do was to listen to the family's cassette collection again and again. This situation was not unique to Turkey; studies in other contexts, such as in the US, show that many queers in those decades spent their adolescence in a media ecology in which queers were underrepresented, lacking possibilities for identification with role models or idols (Bond, 2016; Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011).

Years later, at the time of the interview, Toby Kind was living in very different circumstances: as a queer migrant DJ in London. While his early teenage years had been spent in the closet, listening to cassettes by himself and feeling lonely, his adulthood was shaped by intersectional inequalities, but also by a lively queer network, with whom he experienced music in a context that resignified the media of his youth. The songs did not just evoke nostalgia; hearing them together with people who had experienced more or less similar inequalities and injuries in their lives offered a form of social healing as a communal experience. Listening and dancing to the familiar heteronormative songs, but together in their own chosen settings, Toby Kind and his companions shifted the meanings of those songs. This practice is similar to what José Esteban Muñoz terms "disidentification": a form of coping strategy that allows queers who grew up with intersectional inequalities to appropriate and shift the meanings of heteronormative media and cultural content (Muñoz, 2013). While Toby Kind's adolescence was overshadowed by the impossibility of reaching out to queer content, leaving him (dis-)identification with heteronormative media content (such as Turkish pop music) as his only option, his choice to revisit those heteronormative songs in a later life stage after his migration and coming out exerts his agency to reappropriate his cultural heritage on his own terms, while at the same time contributing toward embedding 1990s Turkish pop music in a queer migrant subculture.

Toby Kind's story of different experiences of listening to the same music during different periods of his life invites us to think about how media usage changes across life stages due to changing intersectional inequalities, coping mechanisms, and life events such as migration. Much media and communication research on media usage across different life stages tends to determine the respective life stages in accordance with heteronormative conceptions. For instance, in order to explain how gendered inequalities influence internet usage, Helsper (2010) defines life stages as shifts in a person's life oriented toward adopting "typical" male or female roles in employment and relationships (Helsper, 2010: p. 355); this resonates with earlier life course models that divided lives into stages such as education, bread-winning, getting married, raising children, and being left with an empty nest (Neugarten et al., 1961). In contrast, queers' changing usage of media across different life stages does not necessarily lead toward them adopting specific (re-)productive roles in society. Moreover, when my participants described how they had engaged with media and communication technologies over the years, they themselves often divided their life course into phases according to events that were related to discrimination – or ways of coping with it and embracing their identity, such as coming out or migrating to another country.

When participants, particularly those who grew up in pre-digital times, remembered their early life stages, they often recalled random instances of discovering queer content. I want to return here to Manny, who, as I mentioned at the beginning of this article, discovered a gay novel by chance in a bookshop in 1985. Since then, like other participants who used the internet to search for information, stream queer movies, or connect with other queers through apps, Manny's media use in later life was not characterized by chance encounters but by his deliberate wish to encounter queer material. And yet, no matter how much agency he now had to connect with others or consume queer media

content, life course inequalities still lurked in his mediatized world. This is evident in the following excerpt:

> Nobody writes to you on GayRomeo when you're over sixty. I was already there, on GayRomeo, when I wasn't yet fifty. Turning fifty was already a change; sixty was a total change, really. Maybe five percent of people whom you could write before. (Manny, 64)

Manny's experience of ageing included the dwindling possibility of connecting with other gays via the dating platform GayRomeo. If we juxtapose the stories of Toby Kind and Manny, the picture that emerges not only shows how agency in relation to media usage alters from one life stage to another, but also how these transformations take wayward trajectories that do not always lead to the fulfilment of a reproductive and/or desirable goal in life, as heteronormative scholarship often assumes. The mediatization of queer life course is shaped by ups and downs that sometimes fulfil desires, but often meet new inequalities.

Catching up with time

Benno, who lived in a rural town in Germany and was 63 years old at the time of our interview, said that his entire life had been pervaded by *"a complete emptiness"* due to the non-existence of spaces, information, or networks that would have allowed him to thrive as a gay man. He had never imagined it could be possible for him to have sex with other men or not need to hide his desires from others. With his deep sense of being ashamed of his desires, he repressed his feelings and did not meet anyone romantically/sexually until he was 59. That was also when he first got an internet connection. He used online search engines to look for a *"Gay Radio."* He didn't even know whether such a radio existed. But he found that one did indeed exist, and the website also offered the option of chatting with others. When Benno started chatting with another man, he was asked: *"Tell me, do you actually have a smartphone?"* Benno said no, as he *"always said no to such questions as it was all far too expensive."* He still did not have a smartphone at the time of the interview. But this did not prevent the two men from communicating; they decided to hold phone calls every day at a certain time. For the first time in his life, he was regularly talking to another gay man. This was an important turning point in Benno's life, which led to his coming out:

> If I compare what I've experienced in the last four years with what I experienced in the years before. . . I see that there was a yawning emptiness. And what I have experienced in the last four years. . . it has all been compressed. (. . .) The last four years have been the happiest of my life. (Benno, 63)

One might ask, had Benno had an internet connection at a younger age, would his life have been different? Whereas leaflets, magazines, and broadcast media often play an important role in enabling people of all generations to discover queerness and connect with others (Bond et al., 2009; Dhoest and Van Ouytsel, 2022), engagement with digital technologies differs across generations. The difference is at least partly caused by the

lack of queer media content and difficulty of accessing it that characterized the age of analog media. After discovering queerness and finding other queers through digital media, participants like Benno expressed feeling a need to "catch up." The time they had spent with no access to queer media content that could have helped them through their process of self-discovery is viewed as "lost time."

The incorporation of the internet into everyday life is perceived by such participants to accelerate the process of identification – a perception that is accompanied by a sense of regret: that, had they had access to such technology when they were younger, they would have made peace with their queer feelings and desires earlier in their lives:

> Today I go on the internet; back then in the '70s, there was no internet and such, then also not the information flow that we have today, right? And there was also no telephone number [*hotline*], so [*one could not call and say*] 'Help, I'm somehow different to others and I don't know what's wrong with me,' right? (Mensch, 55)

This bitter sense of having lost time due to having being born in an era marked by absent queer visibility and without communication technologies that could have enabled interaction with other queers is an expression of a generational inequality. The impact of this inequality is not limited to the realm of feelings; life decisions and events are also affected. My younger participants did indeed come out much earlier than members of previous generations. For instance, Fisch (22), a trans male refugee from Russia living in Germany, answered the question about when he knew he was trans as follows:

> Maybe since I was 13 years old, when I had the internet for the first time. Just because of that. I might have known about it [*being trans*] before, but I didn't have the internet. I couldn't do that. Yes, then I got some information, or, I don't know, I researched it specifically, or maybe someone sent me something. But then, I could read a lot, write with people. Yes, I had a lot of people on the internet I could chat with. But . . . and but I didn't have so many friends, real friends, because yeah, I don't know. They – they kind of didn't suit me, but other people on the internet, they were always interesting, and they had similar music preferences and stuff. Or they were also queer and that was always better on the internet. (Fisch, 22)

In the above excerpt, Fisch attaches so much significance to the event of gaining an internet connection that he speculates whether he might have realized he was trans at a younger age if he had had it earlier. Even though he was born into a different cohort than that of Benno and Mensch, for whom it was not possible to connect with other queers via the internet at the age of 13 years, he nonetheless describes his life before the internet connection as a period of unintelligibility. This indicates that the access to information and media content afforded by the internet is so significant for identity processes that it even often leads to individuals coming out earlier than people who lack such access. This is not only evidenced in the statements of Fisch, who was born in Russia, but also in those of participants from Germany and the UK. One such participant, Thomas, who was 23 at the time of interview, reported that he had made queer friends by playing computer games. As it turned out, members of the first online group of fans of the computer games *World of Warcraft* and *League of Legends* that he joined were predominately queers; for him the platform became *"more or less [. . .] an LGBTIQ+ self-help group."* The

ongoing evolution of media technologies across (queer) generations means that whereas some people grown up in contexts in which there was not even a hotline or minimal information available, later generations found themselves connecting with other queers simply by playing computer games online. This produces a generational inequality, with older generations expressing a sense of regret for "lost times" while younger generations reflect on how mediated experiences contributed to and even accelerated their identification processes.

Conclusion

The stories of the people I have gathered here repeatedly show that whether it is a sentence or two read between the lines of a newspaper article, a short scene on television, or the output of search engines and algorithms: media have always offered the possibility of opening the doors to completely unknown worlds. Small, fleeting, or seemingly ordinary media moments hold the potential to give a person's life a new direction and to inspire them to organize it in new ways. It is precisely by focusing on such seemingly banal moments that the theory of mediatization can be transformed from an abstract, universalizing grand narrative about societies at large, to one that is meaningful at a human level. By twisting it in a similar way, life course perspective, despite its initial overemphasis on (re-)productive citizens' temporalities, can open new horizons for the study of mediatization's impact on societies. Here again, the key is not to repeat familiar heteronormative stories about the majority, but to look into how media are linked to social transformations from the peripheries.

The life stories I have discussed here demonstrate that more advanced, and, particularly, digital, media technologies are able to speed up non-heteronormative identification processes. Younger participants in this study had the privilege of internet access at an early age, which helped them to accept and embrace their own feelings, desires, and imaginations much earlier than their older counterparts, who spent their earlier life stages in the age of analog media. For older generations, first encounters with queer media content were often a matter of "being in the right place in the right moment" – or not, as some participants regretted; younger generations had more agency to access the specific information they sought. The generational inequality caused by living through different waves of mediatization as media technologies evolve is experienced by some as having lost time.

And yet, the media-linked transformation of queer life course cannot be explained by technological advancement alone. A clearer picture can emerge when research takes a truly interdisciplinary approach, taking into account, for example, the history of policies that have determined not only rights but also media visibility – which is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article. Although some of the participants who had experienced migration were able to reflect upon their memories of growing up in places such as Turkey or Russia, where media censorship had limited the availability of content, the study was conducted in Germany and the UK. Future research would do well to explore how queer life course unfolds in places where there are still policies restricting gender and sexual rights, as well as censorship of queer content in mainstream media, including the internet. This would enable study of how queer life course is shaped in contexts

where it is above all politics, not technological advancement per se, that prevent queer content from being circulated digitally.

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