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Queer Migration and Digital Media

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Summary

Migration—whether international or internal, forced or voluntary—intertwines with digital media, especially for sexual minorities and trans people who seek out platforms catering to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) people. Online networks foster transnational flows of ideas and information, which can enable international travel. The ways that queer people interact on digital media in the 21st century have emerged not only from decades of online subcultures—such as 1990s chatrooms and profile sites—but also from predigital media cultures, such as printed personal ads in gay and lesbian journals. The internet accelerated the growth of media platforms and queer international networks, both of which continued to develop with the advent of mobile phone apps and the proliferation of social media. Online media—from blogs to hashtags to “hook-up” apps—can relate to all aspects of the migration process. Before, during, and after a move, queer migrants access online media for information about LGBTQ laws and norms or for help with the logistics of migration. When in a new country, queer migrants use online media to try to connect with locals. During these interactions, migrants might encounter forms of xenophobia, racism, and exclusion. In spite or because of these experiences, queer migrants utilize digital media to build new networks, such as queer diasporic communities aimed at social or political activities.

Keywords: transnational networks, diaspora, online community, racism, dating platforms, hook-up apps, refugees, migrants, mobility, queer studies and communication

Subjects: Communication and Technology, Critical/Cultural Studies, Gender (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Studies), International/Global Communication, Media and Communication Policy

Introduction

The global movement of queer people could be studied through various lenses, such as comparative law, political culture, organizational activism, or—as this article overviews—the various ways queer migration relates to digital media. Each of three main sections in this article overviews new research related to queer transnational networks, migrations, and diasporas. The first section, “Transnational Queer Networks and Media: A Brief History,” shows that media have shaped transnational queer networks and mobility for over a century

and that developments in online communication accelerated these movements of information and people. The second section, “Decisions and Paths to Migration,” looks at how queer migrants use digital media before and during the migration process, and thus expands on the argument that online networks bolster queer identities and mobilities. The third section, “Settling In,” focuses on the role of digital media for recent queer migrants, including both the positive experiences finding friends or jobs and the negative occasions confronting xenophobia and racism.

This article uses “queer” as both an umbrella term for LGBT identities as well as a term that encompasses other identities outside of the heterosexual-cisgender norm (such as pansexual, nonbinary, agender, terms that exist outside of the English language or Western cultural norm, and terms that do not yet exist). That being said, many of the citations in this article refer to studies of cisgender people who seek same-sex contact and who have knowledge of global LGBT movements. Next, this article understands “digital media” to include a range of outputs, including text, audio, and visual platforms, from podcasts to gaming platforms to Instagram stories; that being said, many of the citations in this article focus on social media, including hook-up apps like Grindr as well as mainstream platforms like Facebook. Finally, while this article applies to internal migration—such as rural-to-urban movements, which are central to many queer people’s narratives—the focus of this article is on those who have crossed international borders for any reason. This article also pays specific attention to race, but rejects the usage of “migrant” to apply to racial minorities who are the children of migrants. Migration can be a privilege, and for many queer people, international migration is never possible due to economic position, family situation, migration laws and restrictions, or other personal constraints.

Queer studies, migration studies, and communication studies are relatively new scholarly fields when compared to those disciplines from which they emerged (sociology, history, anthropology, literature, theater arts, etc.). This article represents a portion—but certainly not all—of literature on the topic of queer migration and digital media, and the literature published thus far represents just a sliver of the possibilities for future research within this field. New communication technologies will broaden the range of online communication methods, which in turn will accelerate global movements as well as broaden the range of queer identities.

Transnational Queer Networks and Media: A Brief History

Digital media enable the transnational flows of words, images, and related people, but while the ability to chat and share information online facilitates new types of networks and media for queer people, these online communities emerged from and built upon predigital queer cultures.

Predigital Media and Transnational Flows

In the first decades of the 20th century, printed publications enabled early advocates for homosexual rights across Europe to build transnational connections. During these years, Berlin was renowned for its diverse homosexual subcultures and cutting-edge scientific research on sexuality, such as those related to Magnus Hirschfeld’s Scientific-Humanitarian

Committee (founded 1897) (Beachy, 2014). During these decades, scientific publications on homosexuality inspired international visitors to travel to Berlin, some of whom returned to their countries of origin with new ideas about homosexuality, sexual rights, and subcultures (Herzog, 2011, pp. 77–81; von Rosen, 2007). Though the Nazis destroyed key institutions and networks in Germany, homosexual groups and activists survived underground in various countries. Due partly to these early transnational networks, scientific writings on homosexuality survived across borders and empowered individuals to rethink laws and norms about sexuality across Europe in the first decade after World War II, namely, in Belgium, Denmark, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, West Germany, and the United States.

Postwar “homophile” publications (roughly 1945–1969) focused on domestic issues, but their content always included key international developments, mainly in Western Europe and North America (Jackson, 2015; sometimes writers included observations about queerness in the histories or cultural practices of other geographies, such as North Africa and East Asia). Readers learned about nascent homosexual organizations, which encouraged new patterns of international tourism, such as to Amsterdam (Schrover & Kampman, 2020), as well as internal migrations, such as to Washington, DC (Johnson, 2004). These movements even sparked the attention of government officials concerned with curbing homosexual migrants and tourists (Johnson, 2004; Schrover & Kampman, 2020; Sommerville, 2005).

The radicalization of “gay and lesbian” activism in the 1970s increased the number and visibility of printed periodicals aimed at the emancipation of queer people and loosening pornography laws enabled the production of sexually explicit visual media that translated across borders. Whereas in the 1970s many queer publications sought to raise “consciousness” about gay or lesbian identity in order to foster activist networks, periodicals in the 1980s had the additional task of disseminating reliable information on HIV and AIDS.

Predigital periodicals were already “social media” in that readers actively engaged with the media, not only by placing and responding to “contact advertisements” or writing letters to the editor, but also by sharing the media with likeminded people from other cultural backgrounds. Those who got their hands on a printed publication could interact with other readers, thus the media linked locals with potential tourists or migrants from other parts of the world (Shield, 2014, 2017, pp. 177–218). For example, in Poland in the 1980s, local publications were heavily dependent on cross-border exchanges. One key bulletin was produced in Vienna and mailed from Budapest in order to remain under the radar of Polish authorities (Szulc, 2017, pp. 139–141), whereas another publication was produced in the coastal area around Gdańsk, where the publisher had “regular contacts with homosexual sailors, mainly Poles but also foreigners, who were bringing him gay magazines from the West” (Szulc, 2017, p. 143). Early queer media facilitated new transnational networks, and in turn, these networks enabled media aimed at new queer audiences.

Transition Online

In the 1990s and early 2000s, news media aimed at LGBT people gradually transitioned online, whether in the form of online versions of legacy periodicals (e.g., the *Bay Area Reporter*, founded 1971), or as new, online-only platforms (e.g., PlanetOut, Inc. 1994–2009; or *Queerty*, founded 2005). Online content facilitated sharing across borders without the cost

and labor of printing and transferring physical material. Thus, online infrastructures accelerated communication between readers (“users”) of a platform. Discussion forums and instant messaging led to new cross-cultural and cross-border exchanges, and LGBT dating sites emerged as a popular space for online communication and offline network-building (Mowlabocus, 2010).

As individuals around the globe accessed these platforms, the Western and often Anglo-U.S.-centric LGBTQ vocabularies globalized (Provencher, 2004; Szulc, 2020a). For example, drop-down menus reified binary notions about “butch” versus “femme,” and erotic imagery favored White models adhering to Western aesthetic trends. Anamarija Horvat has argued that depictions of LGBTQ populations in U.S. and U.K. television continued to focus on White, middle-class characters until recently (Horvat, 2020). Yet, in the meantime, diverse users of queer online media adapted the platforms to new local and cultural contexts, such as among the Beirut-based users of PlanetRomeo (Gagné, 2012), the Turkish-speaking users of CamQueer (Atay, 2015), or the queer users who forged online subcultures in Hong Kong (Nip, 2004), Taiwan (Lin, 2006), and Tunis (Collins, 2012).

Around the turn of the millennium, internet-carrier advertisements and journalists propagated the “cyberutopia” myth: On the internet, ideas supposedly superseded bodies, and race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and age were fluid or irrelevant. Critical race scholarship challenged this myth by noting that the default assumption online was that a user was White, male, heterosexual, and able-bodied (Kolko et al, 2000). While it is true that some online gamers experimented with other racial or gender identities, their chosen avatars tended to reinforce (rather than deconstruct) stereotypes, such as non-Japanese people “masquerading as exotic samurais or horny geishas” in chat rooms and online gaming spaces (Nakamura, 2002). Within queer subcultures and dating platforms, sexualized stereotypes negatively affected the experiences of many racial minorities (see the section “Racism in Queer Digital Cultures”). Scholars working with LGBTQ digital cultures also debunked the myth that online cultures were bodiless: Many users swapped digital photos and sought face-to-face meetings (Mowlabocus, 2010; Shaw, 2002). Queer people were using the internet to forge new connections with strangers and neighbors, also offline.

Around 2004–2006, highly visual network-building and information-sharing platforms grabbed widespread attention, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Some writers use the phrase “Web 2.0” to differentiate between earlier text-heavy internet cultures and the social media cultures that proliferated after 2004. Yet media scholars underscore that earlier internet cultures were also user-generated and social (Baym, 2015); thus, the major development since 2004 is the change in cultural attitudes toward online participation that accompanied the boom in content creation and sharing via social media (Ellison & boyd, 2013). With the advent of smartphone technologies in the 2010s, new app platforms brought about further changes in the ways many queer people and migrants used media technologies.

The Geolocative Turn

With the proliferation of mobile smartphones in the 2010s, individuals could connect more casually to the online world—also outside the home—and geolocative technologies allowed for apps that connected people by physical proximity. For example, Grindr launched in 2009 almost immediately after the first iPhone, and gay men deployed the technology in a variety of

new ways and settings, such as while waiting for a bus or while out with heterosexual friends at a bar in order to connect with other gay men at other heterosexual bars; thus media scholars observed the revolutionary potential of geolocative apps (Mowlabocus, 2010, 183–206) as a type of queer space that could be “layered on top of a range of physical places” (Blackwell et al., 2015, p. 1126).

Alongside the boom in social media platforms, queer people with smartphones read and shared content in new ways—via news feeds, video “stories,” visual memes, etc.—and were always connected to a source of new information. Tailored ads and algorithms could facilitate some users’ exposure to new queer content, though these same technologies could have the opposite effect of narrowing one’s range of media products.

Geolocative platforms like Grindr facilitate interactions between users in close proximity; compared to the websites of the 1990s and early 2000s, geolocative apps were initially less useful for those interested in international correspondence, such as potential migrants. After several years, these apps created new features to allow for “exploration,” such as Tinder Passport, which encourages users to meet singles outside of one’s usual radius. Further, geolocative apps remain important for recent migrants looking to interact with others in a new city or country, as they enable newcomers to connect to people with more knowledge of local information. As the rest of this article shows, online media can facilitate all aspects of the queer migration process, including by connecting queer migrants to political and activist networks in a host country, which could ultimately improve the living situation for themselves and future queer migrants (Chavez, 2013).

Decisions and Paths to Migration

Having established that queer individuals have long utilized various media to build transnational networks, the remainder of this article shows how these media and networks facilitate migration and settling in a new land. For many, the first “step” into a queer space occurs online, where a longing to participate in LGBTQ subcultures might eventually become a decision to migrate. Digital platforms inspire not only new aspirations, but also practical information to assist with migration before and sometimes during the migration process.

Gathering Long-Distance Information

. . . I got to know that if I can prove my homosexuality and that my life and future was at risk in Iran, I would [be] eligible to apply for asylum and leave Iran . . . when I left in 2009 there were weblogs about this, and they were writing about their experiences, so I contacted one of the bloggers. . . . I am not sure if I would still be alive if it were not for this asylum option. (Interviewee cited in Karimi, 2020, p. 77)

Aryan Karimi’s recent interviews with gay refugees in Canada, like the man just cited, demonstrate not only how queer sexuality relates to decisions to migrate internationally, but also how digital media and transnational networks assist with the migration process.

To begin with an overview of queer migration: Sexual orientation and gender identity play a role in some individuals’ decisions to migrate, and their paths of migration (Luibhéid & Cantu, 2005). Yet even in queer asylum cases (i.e., when an asylum seeker applies for protection

based on “membership in a particular social group” due to LGBT or intersex identity), the queer migrant does not always migrate from “oppression” to “liberation”: Sexual minorities and gender nonconforming people have historically carved out positions in societies worldwide, and by immigrating, many migrants face new discriminations (Manalasan, 2003, 2005). Nevertheless, queer people have taken large risks in immigrating internationally, often based on knowledge of the host country’s more liberal laws or social attitudes about sexual orientation or gender identity. Gathering long-distance information is necessary for selecting the destination country and for gaining insight into how best to enter and remain in that country.

Without an internet connection, people living in areas with limited queer visibility could still gain information about LGBTQ subcultures through printed media, films, or word of mouth. With the internet, information exchange becomes significantly easier. Separately, the boom in scholarly attention to queer actors and to global migrations since the 1990s means more empirical documentation and analysis of queer migrations exists in the digital age than of historic queer migrations.

Potential migrants can use digital platforms to explore new cities and countries. Nicholas Boston used the term “speculators” in his research with Polish individuals who utilized queer social media in Poland to “travel” to London in order to chat with local queer people there and to weigh the benefits of a possible move to the city (Boston, 2015, p. 305); similar behaviors have been documented in other cases, such as with Middle Eastern asylum seekers who eventually fled to San Francisco (Rodrigues, 2017).

Information about LGBTQ hotspots also encourages rural-to-urban migrations within a country. In many of these instances, the speculator shares a common language and culture with the urban residents and faces fewer legal obstacles in moving. Queer online platforms have mediated internal migrations in diverse areas, for example, to Delhi, India (Katyal, 2011); however, some scholars argue that the rise in internet technologies—in tandem with increased tolerance for LGBTQ people—has made rural-to-urban movements less necessary, such as in Sweden (Wimark, 2014, p. 149).

Other Practicalities of Migrating

In addition to using the internet to gain general knowledge about LGBTQ subcultures or tolerance in a distant location, prospective migrants might use digital media to help with migration logistics. For example, prospective Chinese migrants to Australia have used online forums to ask for tips on the best airlines for travel (Cassidy & Wang, 2018, p. 9). Some in developing countries contact queers in Western Europe to request money for visas and travel to Europe, though there is a lack of empirical data on whether these requests came from real queer people or bots and whether anyone actually benefited from these online communications (Shield, 2018, pp. 98–101).

Refugees and asylum seekers have used digital media platforms to expose homophobic and transphobic violence in their countries of birth in order to bolster cases for LGBTI asylum, such as with the case of a transgender woman from Malaysia in the United Kingdom (Yue, 2012) or gay Iranians in Canada (Karimi, 2018).

Identity-Building and Belonging

Digital media can connect a prospective migrant with logistical information about another country or city, but one should not disregard another more abstract effect of digital media: Representations of LGBTQ identities and relationships online can foster identification with and feelings of belonging to an LGBTQ community. The internationalization of queer media has privileged Western and Anglo-U.S.-centric representations of LGBTQ relationships and identities, but there are also countless examples of people “not simply adopting but adapting, hybridizing, or creolizing Western concepts of queerness” (Szulc, 2020b, p. 5). Nevertheless, a feeling of connectedness to LGBTQ people in other parts of the world could be a precondition for a potential migrant’s decision to emigrate.

Feelings of belonging to a global LGBTQ community might encourage international migration, but the opposite is also true. For example, interactions between Western foreign aid workers and locals in Tacloban, Philippines after the 2013 typhoon might have fostered a spirit of “resilience and human rights” at the first Tacloban Pride 2016 parade and week, which was “not dissimilar from advocacies circulated by foreign aid workers and their various projects at the height of their operations” after the typhoon (Ong, 2017, p. 671). In any case, cross-cultural interactions via digital platforms can empower local queers to build subcultures, and knowledge of LGBTQ subcultures can indeed encourage global movement, if not migration.

During the Move

Digital media technologies can assist during the move from one country to another, such as in the case of queer refugees temporarily living in Turkey while in transit from the Arab Middle East to the European Union (Bayramoğlu & Lünenborg, 2018) or while in transit from Iran to Canada (Karimi, 2020). The information gathered in transit might affect the final destination of the migrant (Lennes, 2020). Practical information can be sent back to queer contacts in one’s country of origin, thus sparking new migrations along the same (or a different) trajectory (Karimi, 2020). In sum, digital media facilitate interpersonal networks that assist with information-gathering and other practical logistics of migration while simultaneously fostering a sense of belonging to a larger LGBTQ community.

“New in Town”: Settling In

Queer individuals’ access to digital media and transnational networks not only aids with migration, but also with an individual’s ability to settle into a new society. Recent migrants might turn to online platforms for making new friends or for finding an apartment or job, and in doing so, these online platforms might engender the migrant’s feeling of belonging to a local LGBTQ community. Yet online cultures often mirror the sociopolitical context of the geography in which they are deployed (Shield, 2019, p. 180), and foreigners and ethnic minorities face xenophobia and racism online.

Logistics and Networks in a Host Country

Upon arrival in a new country or city, LGBTQ-identified newcomers—whether immigrants, refugees, tourists, or students—are often optimistic that local LGBTQs will help them with some of the practicalities of settling in. Thus, newcomers turn to social media to build networks that can assist with finding housing or jobs, finding local information, or practicing the language (Shield, 2019, pp. 111–142). That being said, not all immigrants benefit equally from this online networking; those with more socioeconomic capital might have better luck harnessing queer networks to their advantage (McPhail & Fisher, 2015).

Indeed, immigrants often have more success connecting with other migrants—such as those from their country of origin—than they do linking with locals (Shield, 2019, pp. 137–138). Many turn to diasporic networks merely to find friends or to communicate in one’s native tongue (Cassidy & Wang, 2018; see also the section “Queer Diasporic Communities”).

Queer Identities and Coming Out

Media aimed at LGBTQ people can foster feelings of belonging to a larger community, as established in the aforementioned section about prospective migrants living in areas with little or no LGBTQ visibility; the same can be said for recent migrants who continue to live in areas with low LGBTQ visibility, whether they are living in refugee camps, in smaller towns, or with family. In connecting recent migrants to those with more knowledge of local LGBTQ information, digital media can bolster the newcomer’s identification with the LGBTQ community (Patterson & Leurs, 2019).

In some cases, those forging connections with LGBTQ individuals take pains to ensure that their new (queer) network does not overlap with their older network of family or friends from their country of origin or with (non-LGBTQ) members of their diasporic community in the host country; this relates to the digital media theory of “context collapse” wherein one’s multiple identities collide in an online environment (something that, offline, usually only happens when one hosts large parties). Thus, some queer migrants create parallel online profiles, such as on Facebook, in order to keep their LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ worlds separate (Dhoest, 2016).

Yet others take advantage of context collapse and post about LGBTQ rights in order to provoke conversations with older contacts in their network (Rodriguez, 2017) or even use these platforms to “come out” about their sexuality or gender identity to all the disparate members of their social network (Dhoest & Szulc, 2016).

Racism in Queer Digital Cultures

Literature about online LGBTQ racism has historically been written by racial minorities—though not necessarily immigrants—in White majority countries; thus, this section focuses on the experience of queer people of color. Especially recently, scholars have also considered race-based prejudice and queer racial hierarchies in non-White majority geographies, such as Singapore (Ang et al, 2021). Further, not all immigrants experience racism: White immigrants in White majority countries might feel excluded from LGBTQ networks on grounds related to

cultural differences, but a blond refugee in Sweden, for example, does not experience the same prejudices that foreign and Swedish-born racial minorities face on apps like Grindr (Shield, 2019, pp. 135–137).

Patterns of racist speech in queer digital cultures can be theorized in several ways. There are speech acts that relate to “everyday racism” (Essed, 1990, 1991), such as when locals repeatedly ask questions about the origins of people of color (e.g., “Where are you *really* from?”). There are at least two types of “sexual racism” (Callander et al., 2015): exclusions (e.g., “Sorry, no Asians”) and fetishes (e.g., “Into submissive Asian guys”). And there are incidents of “entitlement racism” when the perpetrator justifies disparaging comments as “freedom of speech” (Essed, 2013), even when spewing insults directly related to race, migration status, or religion. Not all immigrants categorize their experiences with race-based prejudice as racism, partly because of the impersonal nature of online correspondences. Stephanie Ortiz shows that even in extreme cases of entitlement racism, a person of color might excuse the behavior because it happened online, a phenomenon she refers to as “racists without racism” (Ortiz, 2020).

While popular media lament a supposed proliferation of overtly racist texts on gay male platforms, the evidence is not always obvious; thus, Jesus Smith has theorized a “two-faced racism” in which users perform as nonracist in the “front stage,” but still act with racist behaviors “back stage” (Smith, 2018). Indeed, many people of color sense that they are ignored and excluded for race-based reasons, and investigate by creating secondary White profiles in order to observe how they are treated differently: In various experiments on various gay male platforms, White profiles received more invitations to chat than non-White profiles (e.g., Gosine, 2007; Robinson, 2008; Shield, 2019, p. 160; Tsang, 1994). Shaka McGlotten argues this “state of heightened awareness” about race produces anxiety and paranoia among queer people of color online (McGlotten, 2014, pp. 66, 76).

But a digital media platform can also promote race-related thinking and communications. On many LGBTQ dating platforms, users are encouraged to identify by “ethnicity” or “origin,” and these platforms allow users to search and filter out people of particular races. Drop-down menu options reflect the dominant understandings of racial difference in the context in which the app is developed; for example, “whiteness” is bounded differently on the U.S. American platforms Grindr and Scruff, the German platform GayRomeo, and the Swedish platform Quiser (Shield, 2019, pp. 198–205).

Queer Diasporic Communities

Because online platforms are not tethered to national borders, speakers of a common language or members of a shared ethnic group can communicate easily online. These transnational communities can develop in the “homeland” and then spread to contacts abroad, or they can form abroad and empower people in the “homeland,” such as with Khush List, the first global community for LGBTQ South Asians, founded in the United States in 1993 (Roy, 2003). Queer people living in areas with less LGBTQ visibility rely on these diasporic networks for information about LGBTQ subcultures, laws, or organizations.

Online diasporic communities assist both potential and recent migrants, such as by enabling international chats about logistical information, but many diasporic communities are more explicitly political. One such example is the UndocuQueer movement, which has given

visibility to undocumented queer young people in the United States through art and personal narratives shared via YouTube videos, personal blogs, and a range of hashtagged media on various other platforms (Serrano, 2017).

Conclusion

In reflecting on the queer networks of the past, one notices a feedback loop between niche media and transnational communication. Individuals communicated across borders and connected with fellow readers through the pages of printed media, which sometimes resulted in international tourism or migration. In turn, mobile individuals propagated existing media in new settings (both when traveling and upon returning home), which inspired more individuals to produce fresh publications in different languages aimed at new, queer populations.

Just before the turn of the 21st century, this feedback loop between networks of mobile queer individuals and the media they consumed and produced accelerated tremendously with the advent of online communication technologies and personal computers. Transnational networks did not need to rely as heavily on material objects, like limited-run magazines or postage stamps. Information became available to seemingly unlimited audiences. With the “turn” toward social media and subsequent “turn” in smartphone technologies, LGBTQ individuals had even fewer obstacles to producing their own content. Via TikTok or Blued, queer people continue to harness new technologies to build networks, and these networks might ultimately connect potential migrants to diasporic communities, speculators to locals, people in transit to tourists, and more.

The relatively recent visibility of queer migration is not wholly related to online technologies. Legal developments are fundamental to this history, including the broadening of marriage laws to include same-sex, binational couples or the formalization of asylum procedures to protect LGBT and intersex people following the declaration of the Yogyakarta Principles. Other developments relate to changes in political cultures: LGBTQ activism has increased in almost every country, yet anti-LGBTQ crusades simultaneously grow fiercer and more visible. The availability of cheap airfare or the effects of chain migration must also be taken into consideration. There are endless reasons that more and more migrants identify as LGBTQ or migrate directly or partly due to personal circumstances related to sexual orientation and gender identity. A comprehensive look at queer migration must seriously consider the role of digital media in enabling transnational networks, border crossings, and prospects for new futures.

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