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User-generated online queer media and the politics of queer visibility

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Abstract

In this article, we review sociological research on the politics of queer self-presentation and visibility in user-generated online media, such as personal homepages, blogs, YouTube vlogs, and queer-specific social networking sites. Using an intersectional lens to attend to multiple axes of identity, the review offers a deeper understanding of how online queer media impact self-presentation and visibility, while also privileging certain racial, sexual, and gender identities and practices over others. Online platforms can serve as spaces of resistance wherein queer people not only make themselves visible but also redefine dominant conceptions of identity, as well as the boundaries between public and private life. However, our review also finds that online spaces of queer self-presentation often become another space for the reinforcement of dominant norms pertaining to various axes of one's identity. Given that the advent of user-generated media and the Internet has facilitated the mobilization of queer people worldwide, an understanding of queer self-presentation in online media demonstrates how new iterations of sex, gender, and sexuality are constructed in a technological era by queer-identified people themselves, and how people can both resist and reify dominant social hierarchies across boundaries of space and time.

1 | INTRODUCTION

How do people with non-normative sexual and gender identities represent themselves in online spaces? And how might online technologies and platforms enable or constrain queer visibility projects - and to what extent? Through a

review of sociological research, this article examines the politics of queer self-presentation and visibility in user-generated online media, including personal homepages, blogs, YouTube vlogs, and queer-specific social networking sites. Although research has focused on how third parties can mediate queer representation in magazines or commercial websites (Rodriguez, 2019), in this article, we focus on self-generated online media, in which users represent themselves. Attending to the intersections of sex, gender, race, and class, the review offers a deeper understanding of how queer online media can impact self-presentation and visibility, while also privileging certain sexual and gender identities and practices over others. An intersectional approach demonstrates how multiple axes of identity and power converge across groups, and can offer insights into how differences and inequalities persist. Moreover, applying an intersectional perspective to online media platforms can help to explain how sex, gender, and sexuality are constructed within online spaces, and how people can both resist and reify dominant social hierarchies across boundaries of space and time.

We use the term "queer" as an umbrella category to refer to non-normative sexualities and genders, acknowledging the intersections, specificities, and complexities of both queer sexualities and queer genders1 (Halperin, 2003, p. 341). We employ the term "queer media" to refer to media targeted specifically at queer people and/or produced and distributed by queer-identified individuals themselves. Queer media can assume different forms, both offline and online, including but not limited to queer presses, webzines, personal homepages, commercial queer-targeted websites, social networking sites, blogs, chat rooms, discussion lists, electronic mailing lists, and YouTube videos.

The article focuses on the ways queer people present themselves in online queer media platforms amidst various axes of identity, demonstrating the political and personal gains, as well as costs, from queer visibility. For queer individuals, as with other marginalized groups, gaining visibility is high stakes, and often fraught with complexities. Foucault (1978) illustrates how visibility is heavily informed by relations of power. In the Victorian era, sexuality came to be carefully confined to the home and related to the purpose of reproduction. Repressive mechanisms governed what was said or known about sex, whereas penal law enforced prohibitions on those who transgressed established norms of sexual conduct. As Kohnen (2010, p. 25) summarizes: "[T]he process of who and what becomes visible, in which ways, and to whom involves a multi-faceted negotiation with and within established regimes of power-knowledge." The project of queer online visibility embodies the contradictions, politics, and tensions of queer self-presentation.

The necessity for queer-specific media stems primarily from the fact that mainstream media outlets often do not grant adequate visibility to people in the queer community, and may perpetuate images that are stereotypical or inaccurate. For instance, mainstream media in the United States have historically portrayed trans people as freaks or curiosities, contributing to their objectification and alienation (Namaste, 2005; Serano, 2007). Under such circumstances, online queer media, by providing individuals the opportunity for self-presentation, can not only counteract such issues and omissions, but also give voice to the unique experiences of people who are marginalized and disenfranchised. For instance, the 2010 *It Gets Better Project*, a YouTube-based mass-mediated campaign, responded to teenage suicides in the United States by offering moral support to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. The project allowed people to upload their own videos on a designated YouTube channel and website and has raised awareness about forms of violence that are often difficult to discern and document. In doing so, *It Gets Better* has been able to "emerge as an archive of testimonies that mediate personal conflicts as social conflicts," thereby "reframing individual suffering as political" (Michaelsen, 2017, p. 149). In this manner, self-presentational projects such as these can "grant the mundane complexity of homophobic violence publicity" and, in the process, help queer users combat social violence by showing them "how to survive and to change this situation" (Michaelsen, 2017, p. 149).

Consequently, queer people's self-presentation becomes a crucial aspect of queer media (Robinson, 2007), as it can help in addressing discriminatory attitudes and policies towards sexual minorities. No wonder then that "gay movements often saw as one of their first priorities the creation of a gay magazine or paper" (Altman, 1982, p. 164), and "the emergence of gay and lesbian newspapers has been integral to the success of the gay and lesbian liberation movement" (Robinson, 2007, p. 60). Therefore, queer self-presentation in online spaces suggests new ways that people may empower themselves individually, and possibly galvanize collective social change.

Much like how sex, gender, and sexuality are constructed through institutions and interactions (Butler, 1990), online media also have the potential to reshape identities and communities (Connell, 2013; Friedman, 2013). Given that queer people worldwide have mobilized through the advent of print media (Jackson, 2000) and the Internet (Valentine, 2007), an understanding of queer self-presentation in online media demonstrates how new iterations of sex, gender, and sexuality are constructed in a highly globalized world that is increasingly mediated by the internet. An intersectional critical sexuality perspective can be used to examine various forms of media representation, addressing questions of political economy and sexual and gender justice in both online and in-person terrains. Furthermore, applying an intersectional approach also shows how one can challenge dominant representations of multiple identities on user-generated virtual platforms (Johnson & Boylorn, 2015). As we discuss in the conclusion, the review also has implications for social policies related to queer inclusion and social rights.

Our article begins with an analysis of how people can and do indeed subvert hegemonic norms related to identity and the dichotomies of public/private life on online platforms. This is followed by a discussion of some of the cultural and structural constraints existent within these platforms, which can contribute to the reinforcement of dominant conceptions of sex, gender, and sexuality. The research presented is by no means exhaustive, but offers a critical perspective on the role of queer media in the project of queer visibility, and the challenges of such endeavors. The article concludes with implications and suggestions for future research.

2 | SUBVERTING HEGEMONIC CONCEPTIONS OF QUEERNESS

Online platforms, such as personal blogs and YouTube, can serve as spaces of resistance wherein queer people make themselves visible, redefine dominant conceptions of identity, and subvert fixed boundaries between public and private life. Hence, those who are "outside the boundaries of heterosexual norms and gender conventions," and who have been "either unwelcome, written by somebody else, or heavily edited" within mainstream media spaces can gain "visibility and media accreditation" in online spaces (Gamson, 1998, p. 5). Consequently, it becomes possible to redefine traditional categories of sex, gender, and sexualities, as well as subvert conventionally agreed-upon boundaries regarding what is considered normal and what is not.

Queerness is not invisible by default, but instead made so by the promotion of heterosexuality as "normal" and "natural," especially through the labeling of non-normative sexualities as "deviant" (Kohnen, 2010). This reflects aspects of heteronormativity, or a "set of norms that make heterosexuality seem natural or right and that organize homosexuality as its binary opposite" (Valocchi, 2005, p. 756). Mainstream media platforms that function within a broader heteronormative framework "are part of a more general system of oppression of non-heterosexuals, operating most commonly to justify continued prejudice, violence, and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered [sic] people" (Gamson, 1998, p. 19). This, in turn, results in the "systematic exclusion and stereotyping" of queer-identified individuals, as "aspects of gay and lesbian identity, sexuality, and community that are not compatible or that too directly challenge the heterosexual regime are excluded" (Gamson, 1998, p. 21).

However, turning our attention to the Internet elucidates how people can facilitate novel ways of self-presentation that offer an alternative account about queer life, and one which defies established boundaries of gender and sexuality. In fact, self-generated queer media can enable "crossing boundaries, questioning identities, and exploring the queer as it permeates, but does not *center*, one's life" (Alexander, 2002, p. 96). This in turn integrates and celebrates a multitude of selves that are fluid, fractured, and ever-changing, versus one static or monolithic idea of self.

Additionally, online media spaces can help people combat the attempts of traditional media platforms, such as corporate television networks, to limit the access and representation of people in marginalized groups. Instead, they can and do enable queer people to express their non-normative sexual ideologies and narrate their own stories, using a range of genres that can foreground intersecting identity axes within online spaces (Day & Christian, 2017). This, in turn, can enhance the potential for media institutions that have long served "as mechanisms to perpetuate hetero/

sexism" (Gamson, 1998, p. 21) to transform into "sites at which oppression can be combated" (Gamson, 1998, p. 19), and where an online queer community can be formed (Day & Christian, 2017).

The issues of identity representation and reach may be more prominent for blogging than for any other media form (Rak, 2005; Williams, 2007). Bloggers use personal experience as a category of knowledge (Rak, 2005), expanding on topics such as coming out or living in the closet; being homosexual in school or college, in urban spaces, and in the diaspora; experiences of being in a heterosexual marriage as a non-heterosexual person; participation in queer rights activism; and homosexuality and old age. As blogs are largely centered around the opinions and experiences of a single person, they result in a privileging of the individual (Mitra & Gajjala, 2008), and center the notion of individual rights and values (Rak, 2005). Bloggers make use of photographs, real first and last names, places of residence, as well as narrations of real-life experiences as markers to affirm their identities in the non-virtual world. This imperative is fueled by the "artificiality of the internet," where "online people do not have verifiable identities" (Rak, 2005). For instance, Williams's (2007, p. 37) analysis of the content of three blogs run by three gay American college-age males shows that users could articulate a public queer identity by discussing sexual orientation, same-sex relationships, or referencing queer culture and/or LGBT and queer (LGBTQ) community affiliations. These techniques were also found by Mitra and Gajjala (2008) in their study of Indian queer blogs. Thus, within the blogosphere, there is a tendency among users to authenticate their individual identities as "real." That is, they "assert their representations of themselves online as 'real' and 'true' by incorporating markers such as 'signatures, photographs, proper first and last names for people and places, and the reportage of experience' as a way to validate more abstract ideas about the world" (Rak, 2005, p. 175). These strategies of self-identification can universalize a dominant concept of identity that is framed in a white, Western, individualized context, thus eliding other practices and ways of identifying beyond such unitary markers (Mitra & Gajjala, 2008, p. 409). As a result, as Dutta (2008) argues, "the narratives of access therefore become simultaneous narratives of exclusion," particularly as individualized and Western-based identity markers take precedence and can flatten other cultural particularities and lived experiences.

Additionally, YouTube can serve as a "valuable performative and discursive space" that enables individuals to make meaning of their gender identities (O'Neill, 2014). Queer youth have used this platform to create coming-out videos covering a wide range of topics, such as being out, or asking for or offering support (Alexander & Losh, 2010; Wuest, 2014). In self-presentational videos by trans youth on YouTube, five narrative structures have been found to emerge: transitional videos (documenting the changes associated with transitioning to, and living life full time, in accordance with one's gender identity); D.I.Y. gender (in which bloggers demonstrate how to present their preferred genders); trans video blogging; trans anti-bullying videos; and celebrity trans video blogging (O'Neill, 2014). Wuest (2014) notes how coming-out videos by queer youth on YouTube can facilitate the development of identity by making queer subjectivities visible, and equipping queer youth with skills to interact with people in the queer community and negotiate the pressures of mainstream culture.

Although videos use moving images to convey messages, media forms such as commercial social networking websites, personal homepages, and blogs provide users with textual and visual tools as identity markers to articulate a queer public identity. On some personal websites, sexual orientation is not always regarded as a central component of the author's identity, but instead involves "more experimental narrations of queer lives" that are "often less linear, less revelatory of a 'truth' about one's sexuality" (Alexander, 2002, p. 92). This type of narrative focuses on aspects of authors' identities beyond sexuality, such as hobbies and interests, and implies that online self-presentations can, in fact, "problematize traditional assimilationist (and heteronormative) figurings of sexuality and sexual orientation as part of one's private, as opposed to public, life" (Alexander, 2002).

However, online technologies are often contradictory: although they can equip ordinary people with the tools to present themselves and challenge hegemonic norms, they can also reinforce dominant ideals of gender and sexuality. As multiple axes of identity and power intersect across groups, various differences and inequalities emerge based on converging identities. In the next section, we discuss how self-presentation on online queer media is constrained by hegemonic norms of sex, gender, race, and class.

3 | REINFORCING HEGEMONIC NORMS

Although the Internet can function as a place of transcendence and freedom, it also imposes numerous restrictions on the degree of control that users can exercise in articulating their subjectivities. These constraints are largely reflective of the influence of a wider heteronormative culture. The resultant sexual politics is what Lisa Duggan (2003) terms homonormativity, or "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption" (Duggan, 2003, p. 50).

Within the framework of homonormativity, political activism involves not broad-based mobilization, but instead corporate-style decision making. Such decision making supports the idea of "a narrowly constrained public life cordoned off from the 'private' control" (Duggan, 2003, p. 49), with little concern for economic inequalities. As a result, the vast array of political, cultural, and economic issues that had long provided the impetus for the queer movement in the United States are replaced by a narrow focus on issues such as gay marriage and the inclusion of gay individuals in military service. Consequently, sexual identity comes to be treated as an independent category, detached from its intersections with race, ethnicity, class, gender, and religion (Chasin, 2000).

Even queer media spaces are not immune to these tendencies. By failing to challenge dominant norms, they have continued to reproduce and reinforce existing hierarchies of class, sexuality, gender, and race, while also upholding a neoliberal narrative that views success as strictly an individual phenomenon, with happiness linked to financial success (Grzanka & Mann, 2014; Meyer, 2017). For instance, in the *It Gets Better Project*, there is an emphasis on class-based markers of success – such as attending college, finding employment, attaining financial success, traveling, and moving to a big city. Additionally, there is a tendency to uphold heteronormative values involving aspirations for family life, children, and gaining widespread acceptance from society at large (Meyer, 2017). Such attempts at challenging homophobic violence demonstrate inequalities in who is invited to represent themselves in such initiatives and who is not. For instance, the *It Gets Better Project*'s assimilative narrative is contrasted by a "relatively hegemonic participation structure," in which the project's representatives "are articulate, Caucasian, Christian, able-bodied, American young men who deviate from the hegemonic model solely in their sexual orientation" (Gal, Shifman, & Kampf, 2016, p. 1704). This representation upholds dominant ideals of education, race, class, sex, gender, religion, and ability, reinforcing neoliberal ideologies and reifying the position of those with access to resources. Rather than create greater inclusivity for people across identity categories, the imperative is placed on "LGBT people to adapt to their social marginalization rather than on heterosexual, cisgender people to alter their practices and beliefs" (Meyer, 2017, p. 122). Overall, the emphasis of such campaigns is on individual agency, with an aim towards individualistic solutions to socio-political problems, instead of focusing on the institutional dynamics that shape queer youth subjectivities or on structural reforms (Grzanka & Mann, 2014; Michaelsen, 2017).

In the sections that follow, we examine the homonormative tendencies evinced by online queer media, focusing on themes related to identity and diversity, class and consumption, and the structural constraints of online media.

3.1 | Identity and diversity

Online queer media can legitimize dominant norms and representations of class, race, and ethnicity, and normative standards of gender expression (Farber, 2017; Fraser, 2009; Gagné, 2012; Mitra & Gajjala, 2008), while also promoting the need to assimilate into heteronormative ideologies as well as social structures (Grzanka & Mann, 2014). In fact, the Internet often constrains the formation of queer subjectivities by endorsing "specific, recognizable, set queer subjectivities that are both enabling and disabling" (Fraser, 2010, p. 30). This, in turn, solidifies ideas regarding what it means to be a "real" or "authentic" queer young person (Hickey-Moody, Rasmussen, & Harwood, 2008).

The mainstream understanding of sexual orientation as the core component of one's identity is often reinforced by the layout of queer people's personal homepages comprising of a main menu page that contains "a series of links

that circle around the presentation of a core gay identity, narrated mono-vocally" (Alexander, 2002, p. 86). That is, all of the links connect back to narrating the author's gay identity, representing the centrality of sexuality to identity formation and expression. For instance, the welcome or entrance page directs the visitor to a main menu page hyperlinked to sites that underscore different aspects of the author's sexual orientation. These sites include information about the author and picture galleries, coupled with accounts of coming out, as well as resources for safer sex and for making personal contacts. The idea is to create "a commonality of experience - and community" through "the repetition of the stories" (Alexander, 2002, p. 87). The centrality of sexuality on personal homepages reflects an essentialist understanding of gay identity, in which "gayness" is presumed as "the core and relatively unchanging component of selfhood around which all of the other 'plots' of one's life are organized and come (*contextually*) into meaning" (Alexander, 2002, p. 86).

In addition to centralizing sexuality as a core element of one's identity, homepages may also reinforce fixed boundaries between categories such as gay, straight, male, and female. For instance, alternative sexual practices and identities are positioned in strict categorizations through the use of Webrings that highlight contents catering to specific interests, such as the Gay S/M Ring, the Gay Bowlers Ring, or the Lesbian Feminist Ring. In addition, bisexuality remains at the margins on these websites: it is only occasionally mentioned, almost never explored in-depth, nor is it treated as a unique category of its own.

Within the blogosphere, the articulation and representation of complex, intersectional queer identifications (such as "fat lesbian living in the sticks," "queer'n'Asian," "dis/abled leatherdyke") involve narratives that adhere to performative standards aligned with the audience expectations. This is because, as Butler (2005) notes, the "truth" of being necessitates the witnessing and recognition by others. Hence, the online audience's participation in the blogging process constructs and limits self-presentation on blogs. Consequently, a "politically problematic politics of recognition" based on normativity is perpetuated, which ends up reinstating social hierarchies (Bryson, MacIntosh, Jordan, & Lin, 2006, p. 808).

Furthermore, media such as queer blogging can result in the "separation of sexual practice (which takes place in private spaces invisible to mainstream society) and queer performativity (which becomes acceptable as signaling participation in a neoliberal and modern transnational economy)" (Mitra & Gajjala, 2008, p. 410). In addition to reinforcing the primacy of the individual, this can lead to concretization of the largely dominant binaries of the private and the public. Additionally, the articulation of a queer public identity can also be achieved by labeling the page as "gay-friendly," and through use of symbols generally associated with gays and lesbians, such as rainbow flags or pink pyramids (triangles), along with explicit and implicit homoerotic imageries and statements. Although these tactics could also be understood as a deliberate strategy to develop a "personal identity while also achieving a smaller, unique collective identity within a larger sexual minority community" (Sells, 2013, p. 903), the use of such symbols and demarcations contributes to the reification of boundaries between lesbian and gay, and also gay and straight, and underscores the limitations to articulating one's queerness online (Alexander, 2002).

Likewise, although online social media communities dedicated to the genderqueer identity provide non-binary individuals with the means to support each other and cultivate a sense of collective identity, they may also give rise to discriminatory practices such as misgendering, or using an incorrect gender pronoun (Darwin, 2017; Fraser, 2010). For those proclaiming a non-binary identity, for instance, this often entails their mis-identification by others as either "masculine girls" or "feminine boys." Such practices not only point to the deeply entrenched binary understanding of gender, but also place the onus of "educating the public about the fact that there are more than two genders" on non-binary persons (Darwin, 2017, p. 328). This, in turn, often acts as a prohibitive barrier to non-binary people's efforts to achieve their desired gender recognition or coming out process, as they find themselves needing to "directly confront their accountability to the gender binary" in their interactions. Similarly, transgender men's use of online message boards about fitness can, on the one hand, facilitate support and knowledge-sharing that can inspire a rethinking of the "linear associations between cisgender men, masculinity and muscularity," but simultaneously reify binary ideals of maleness and masculinity by "upholding the 'traditional' linkage between male bodies, masculinity, strength and muscularity" (Farber, 2017, p. 265). Although genderqueer and non-binary people can find support

and community by representing themselves in online platforms, they also interact with hegemonic cultural and institutional norms of sex and gender, which manifest in both online and non-virtual spaces.

In addition, transitioning videos may reinforce mainstream ideas regarding the sex and gender binary, as well as the need for medical interventions to legitimize the gender identities of trans people (Horak, 2014; O'Neill, 2014). Therefore, although queer-specific videos do pose a challenge to mainstream representations of queers as the "other," and can enable queer youth to shape themselves and their world (Wuest, 2014), they can simultaneously perpetuate dominant identity norms.

Similarly, despite the potential for online queer media to allow for greater representation of people from marginalized groups, it often remains steeped in racial hierarchies. For instance, queer content on YouTube is marked by an underrepresentation of vloggers of color, female vloggers, transgender/genderqueer vloggers, and older vloggers. The salience of race in the visibility of queer identities is evidenced by the case of queer vlogs on YouTube, wherein whiteness emerges as "inherent in recognisable queer sexuality" (Fraser, 2009, p. 1). Likewise, in the *It Gets Better Project*, "[w]hite, middle-class, gay, cisgender male youth suicides are implicitly considered the most horrific deaths, and therefore the ones that most warrant intervention" (Grzanka & Mann, 2014, p. 386).

Race and ethnicity also play a role in influencing which trans vlogs get watched (Horak, 2014; Raun, 2012; Wuest, 2014). Horak (2014, p. 576) attributes this to the fact that "dependence on the visible body means that attractiveness and race/ethnicity invariably structure viewers' encounters with the videos." Consequently, the top results for video searches yield vlogs of white people, unless racialized search terms are specified (Horak, 2014; Raun, 2012). Therefore, despite the significant presence of trans people of color, their videos remain largely invisible to those who do not specifically seek them out using search terms such as "black mtf" or "latino ftm" (Horak, 2014).

Further, trans vloggers of color are often subjected to ridicule and discrimination, pointing to the prevalence of racism within a participatory media culture that is often hailed for its democratic and emancipatory potentials. As Raun (2012) notes, white emerges as the default racial category and a referent for trans subjectivity on YouTube. In the process, queers of marginalized ethnicities are labeled as peripheral, and framed as objects to be desired and possessed, rather than as agentic and desiring queer subjects. All of these factors contribute to the systematic marginalization of non-white queer experiences in online media.

3.2 | Class and consumption

User-generated online queer media can also give rise to a consumption-oriented queer politics. In cultures mediated by capitalism, self-presentation is inextricably linked to commodification. In this context, individuals participate in a conscious display of signs, symbols, and brands (Mauss, 1973, p. 73). For instance, transitioning videos on YouTube often suggest the achievement of particular gender expressions through consumption practices such as wearing appropriate clothing (Horak, 2014; O'Neill, 2014). In this manner, as consumption comes to be portrayed as intrinsic to survival, and as a crucial component of one's identity, queer identity is projected as something to have, rather than to be or become (Lacy, 2014). Therefore, as Barnhurst (2007, p. 8) rightly notes, "queer media put homosexuals in control of the means of cultural production, but the dangers include the pursuit of mainstream production values, the superficial polish that serves up celebrity and sensationalism but excludes unglamorous queers leading ordinary lives."

Moreover, as maintaining an online presence through a personal webpage can involve economic costs, creating a cyber presence necessitates turning one's identity into a marketable commodity that can generate revenue which then can be used to meet the financial costs in maintaining a website. (Snyder, 2002). This also implies that one's social location mediates access to media production (Brighenti, 2007). Thus, although web technologies do enable queer Internet users to project their desired images of themselves, it is often only to the extent they are either willing to pay for the image, or market it into a profitable commodity. This makes visible only certain people and practices while leaving others on the margins.

Many of these features can be found in the *It Gets Better Project* which, despite embodying the promise of egalitarian peer participation, ends up directing attention to celebrity participation (Michaelsen, 2017). The campaign is partially motivated by commercial interests, along with the desire for publicity and popularity, bolstered by celebrities who are able to attract a large following and advertiser sponsorship. The result is that the project has not only failed to "promote the watching of a wide variety of videos," but has also deviated from "the participatory ideal of community building and peer connectedness to accommodate commercial exploitation" (Michaelsen, 2017, p. 147). Additionally, celebrities can incorporate professionally produced videos whose superior video and sound quality often direct attention away from amateur videos uploaded by peer participants. In this manner, "commercial interests and infrastructures precondition, not who participates in the *It Gets Better Project* but who is seen and heard" (Michaelsen, 2017, p. 147). As we now discuss, the structural elements and design of online media can foreclose the possibility of diversity in representation.

3.3 | Structural constraints

On online social networking sites, the constitution of identities is mediated by the structural features of the websites. The lack of a wide range of identity markers restricts the ways in which people can articulate their non-normative identities online. For example, on social networking websites, the construction of queer subjectivities is facilitated by user profiles, through which individual users interact with each other (Gagné, 2012). These profiles are built using a menu of pre-existing identity and personality categories (Bivens, 2017; O'Riordan, 2017), in addition to a space for self-description.

The pre-assigned list of choices on such websites is determined largely by dominant norms of sex, gender and sexuality. As a result, queer individuals may not always be able to accurately articulate and present their identities online (Sells, 2013). For instance, GayRomeo.com, a popular global gay male networking and dating website, offers no way to mention one's gender identity. Consequently, "sexual identity is intelligible only in accordance with the lexicon of gay, bisexual, and transgender" (Gagné, 2012, p. 118), therefore limiting users' options for self-identification. Likewise, on *Gaydar* (www.gaydar.com) and *Gaydar Girls* (www.gaydargirls.com), two websites commonly used by queer youth, individuals can only represent themselves in relation to sexuality, foreclosing other aspects of themselves (Fraser, 2009). In this manner, online categories circumscribe the expression of identities within virtual spaces (Nakamura, 2002). The result is that dominant offline discourses of sex, race, and gender are reproduced within the virtual world. This then legitimizes certain subjectivities while excluding others (Fraser, 2009).

Further, these platforms are designed in ways that encourage users to reveal their racial, ethnic, gender, or national identity. For example, on GayRomeo.com, "interface design features, such as identity categories and profile pictures, force users to define their racial, gender, or national identity" (Gagné, 2012, p. 128). As a result of such a "menu-driven" interface, despite the availability of "opportunities to unfix and reconstitute meanings of identities and social markers" (Gosine, 2007, p. 140), local identities and identity politics, reframed by the structural organization of the websites, manifest within virtual spaces (Nakamura, 2002). This results in "mimicking dominant socioeconomic relations rather than challenging them" (Gosine, 2007, p. 141), and "narrowing the choices of subject positions available to the user, an outcome that seems to fly in the face of claims that the Internet allows for a fluid, free, unbounded sense of identity than had been available in other media—or, indeed, in the world—before" (Nakamura, 2002, p. 104). Hence, online identity is not distinct from local space, time, or politics. Rather, structural components of online media define and constrain queer self-presentation and visibility in virtual spaces.

The temporality of identity is also complicated on YouTube vlogs, wherein creators' offline experiences appear fixed in time and space. Horak (2014, p. 580) complicates the effects of YouTube transitioning videos, which manipulate the notion of time. She argues that a majority of these videos, with a few exceptions, operate according to a "progressive temporality" that she refers to as "hormone time," where time is measured against the first shot of testosterone or use of HRT (hormone replacement therapy) pills. Based on a Christian temporal structure, hormone time

is depicted as something "linear and teleological," in which there is a progression towards an individual "living full time in the desired gender" (Horak, 2014, p. 580). In reality, however, transitioning can be a highly complicated process that involves complex temporal movements in all directions. As a result, queer vlogging does not typically result in the projection of a fluid subjectivity, and instead perpetuates the notion of identity as linear, or temporally and spatially fixed.

4 | CONCLUSION

Self-presentation in online spaces can both empower and limit users (O'Neill, 2014). With the advent of mass media and the Internet, online platforms have particular implications for queer people. This article demonstrates how queer people's attempts at self-presentation are both enabled and constrained on online platforms, as dominant mainstream categorizations of sex, gender, sexuality, race, and class are both challenged and upheld in the process.

Online platforms, such as personal blogs and YouTube, can serve as spaces of resistance wherein queer people not only make themselves visible but also redefine dominant conceptions of identity, as well as the boundaries between public and private life. In this manner, the Internet can facilitate novel ways of self-presentation that can subvert mainstream understandings of queerness as the singular central aspect of one's life, consequently enabling users to articulate the multiplicity and diversity of selves (Alexander, 2002). However, within queer media spaces, the question of self-presentation is not entirely unproblematic. Our review also finds that online spaces of queer self-presentation often become another space for the reinforcement of dominant norms pertaining to various axes of one's identity, as well as any and all of their intersections. This makes visible only certain people and practices while leaving others on the margins. Hegemonic norms are often also imposed by the structural elements of online media.

Thus, although, on the one hand, online queer media have the political potential to challenge norms of heterosexuality and the binary sex and gender categories, their emancipatory potential for all queer people can be questioned (Sircar, 2008). In fact, those who enjoy more privileged social class positions are more likely to benefit more from the kind of visibility accorded by online queer media. Blogs can perpetuate a static conception of identity that privileges the individual, promoting a politics of recognition based on normativity. Queer content on YouTube is marked by an underrepresentation of vloggers of color, female vloggers, transgender/genderqueer vloggers, and older vloggers. Furthermore, search results yield vlogs of white people unless racialized search terms are specified (Horak, 2014; Raun, 2012). Queer online visibility therefore operates as a "double-edged sword" (Brighenti, 2007). As Alexander (2002, p. 98) notes, "as some representations are put forward, others are left behind and critical silences are created – silences that reveal assumptions, values, and omissions that call for interrogation."

Future research can address how individuals navigate the cis-heterosexist nature of online media spaces, furthering our understandings of resistances and counter discourses to hegemonic norms. It is also important that future research focus on how queer space on the Internet does not just exist on queer-identified sites. Dasgupta (2017) has shown how queer individuals also encounter and interact with each other on mainstream websites, and future research might explore these additional domains.

Reviewing the literature on queer media also reveals a pressing need to focus on how the politics of self-presentation and visibility takes place in non-Western contexts. With few exceptions (Gagné, 2012; Heinz, Gu, Inuzuka, & Zender, 2002; Mitra & Gajjala, 2008), the overwhelming majority of research is focused on media in the Western context, eliding how different political, economic, and social contexts worldwide intersect in online queer media. Given the vastly different conditions across places, it is very likely that the politics of representation and visibility would operate differently throughout the world. Additionally, although queer-targeted websites exist in several languages, they have not always been able to bypass the dominance of the English language on the Internet. The privileging of English to communicate the aims of gay rights movements globally, including those taking place within non-Anglophonic contexts, has remained largely unquestioned (Heinz et al., 2002). Extant research also

demonstrates an absence of engagement with how media forms that actively seek to challenge the capitalist order (such as *Gay Left*, the socialist journal published by a collective of gay men in London UK in the 1970s), handle the issue of representation, and future research can further explore these areas.

Online queer self-presentation also has implications for inclusive social policy related to LGBTQ people. This is because the invisibility of queer people often serves as a reason for their exclusion from rights (Sircar, 2008). This is exemplified by the now overturned 2013 *Suresh Kumar Koushal* vs. *Naz Foundation* judgment of the Supreme Court of India, which criminalized all non-heterosexual articulations of sexuality as "a miniscule fraction of the country's population constitute lesbians, gays, bisexuals or transgenders [sic]…." Hence, "being visible has often been understood as the cornerstone of GLBT identity" (Kohnen, 2010, p. 27). By examining the facets of queer people's self-presentation on online media, we gain new insights about how queer people may mobilize and gain legal rights in various settings. Future research can seek to analyze the effects of queer visibility online on political recognition for queer communities, or on queer politics and activism.

As the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic makes its impact felt on queer media, mainly through loss of advertising revenue (Stiffler, 2020), new forms of media and self-presentation are likely to emerge across online platforms. It is therefore increasingly crucial for research to analyze how queer people worldwide engage with such shifts. Especially as queer media and queer communities undergo short- and long-term changes amidst the pandemic, scholarship can continue to assess the opportunities and costs for users to represent themselves, as well as assess who is left on the margins and why that is. Using an intersectional framework, research can focus on the complexities, tensions, and power relations imbued in queer online visibility and self-representation, highlighting how identities collide and become legible in ever-changing online spaces. This type of lens affords us deeper understandings of how sex, gender, and sexuality are constructed in online settings amidst broader hegemonic structures, with great implications for queer people's social rights and lived experiences in a technologically mediated world.

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ENDNOTE

[1] Although there is no consensus on the definition of "queer," the category problematizes seemingly "stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender, and sexual desire" (Jagose, 1996, p. 3), opposing what are assumed to be "natural" norms of sex, gender and sexuality, extending to identity, community, and politics (Jagose, 1996). According to Warner (1991, p. 16), "queer" offers a comprehensive way of characterizing those whose sexuality places them in opposition to the current "normalizing regime." As explained by Gabriel Rotello, former editor of the now-defunct New York City queer magazine *Outweek* (Duggan, 1992, p. 224): "When you're trying to describe the community, and you have to list gays, lesbians, bisexuals, drag queens, transsexuals (post-op and pre), it gets unwieldy. Queer says it all" [sic].

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