Review

Digital sexual identities: Between empowerment and disempowerment

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Abstract

In the digital age, people increasingly explore and express their sexual identities online. The management and development of digital sexual identities can provide opportunities of empowerment on the individual, interpersonal, and societal level. At the same time, social media users are confronted with risks of sexual disempowerment in terms of identity de-validation, social exclusion, discrimination or even criminalization. The review article summarizes the current state of research on six selected sexual identities: (1) heterosexual, (2) LGBTIQ+, (3) asexual, (4) kink and fetish, (5) polyamory, and (6) sex worker identities in digital contexts. Covering a variety of social media platforms and cultural backgrounds, the review demonstrates that digital sexual identities are best understood as multifaceted socio-technical phenomena with ambivalent outcomes.

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Introduction

Sexual identity is a person's understanding of the important aspects of their sexual self [1]. It is the answer to the question "Who am I sexually?" Sexual identity develops over the lifespan and can be characterized as a configuration of different sexual subidentities (e.g., a person might identify as lesbian, monogamous, and kinky, or as heterosexual, polyamorous, and vanilla) [2]. Expressions and explorations of sexual identity occur in analog and digital contexts (e.g., a person can put a rainbow flag in their front yard and/or on their Facebook profile) and are related with experiences of empowerment and disempowerment.

Digital sexual identities

The current review article focuses specifically on sexual identities in digital contexts or digital sexual identities [3–5]. *Digital sexual identity* is a platform-specific sexuality-related identity representation of the respective user in machine-readable digital data [6]. If, for example, a gay man registers on Grindr, the world's largest social networking app for gay, bi, trans, and queer people, a digital sexual identity is created. The Grindr identity entails the self-created user profile with photos and announced sexual preferences, the online chats with other users as well as the formal registration on the platform with login, password, name, phone number, and possibly also billing information.

Managing such digital sexual identities is relevant on a psycho-social level as the Grindr identity helps the user to express and explore his sexual identity through online and offline encounters with other Grindr members [7]. At the same time, the management of such digital sexual identities is relevant on a techno-political level [6]. What if, for example, Grindr is monitored or hacked and sensitive personal information is accessed and misused by third parties? Being involuntarily outed as a Grindr user may be irrelevant for a gay activist in Canada, but can be life-threatening to a closeted gay man in Nigeria [8]. Hence, issues of platform security and digital data protection are—among other platform-related factors such as pricing, content regulation or algorithm design—relevant in the context of digital identities [9,10]. The Grindr example illustrates that digital identities—including digital sexual identities—are *multifaceted socio-technical phenomena* investigated by the social and technological sciences alike.

Digital sexual empowerment and disempowerment

In this review article, digital sexual identities are analyzed with regard to empowerment and disempowerment. *Sexual empowerment* is a situated process of personal growth and increasing control over one's sexual

life and circumstances including collective action and political activism [11**]. Digital contexts provide new opportunities for sexual identity expression and exploration including sexual self-validation, community and support, as well as involvement in and solidarity for sexual rights activism. Research regarding digital sexual empowerment, builds on theories of sexual agency [11**] in combination with theories of online self-presentation, online identity management and development, online relationship and community building, and online activism.

While many previous studies have supported the assumption that digital contexts foster the empowerment of people with marginalized sexual identities [12], it has also become apparent that sexual disempowerment can occur [3–5]. Some people with marginalized sexual identities, for example, are targeted by online hate speech and experience identity de-validation, suffer from isolation and stigmatization or sexual victimization within their own online communities, are at risk of involuntary digital outing, or are confronted with algorithmic discrimination and platform censorship.

It is also important to note that digital empowerment effects related to marginalized sexual identities are only welcomed in academia and society at large if respective identities are linked with benign ideologies and consensual behaviors (e.g., asexual identity), while the digital empowerment of marginalized sexual identities that are associated with hostile or harmful ideologies and non-consensual behaviors is seen as a danger (e.g., incel identity) [12].

For a nuanced analysis of the management, development and outcomes of digital sexual identities it is important to consider different sexual identity configurations, as well as different digital platforms, and different societal backgrounds.

Current state of research on digital sexual identities

Our summary of the current state of research on digital sexual identities is organized according to six selected main sexual identities and includes a variety of digital platforms and cultural backgrounds.

Heterosexual identities in digital contexts

Statistically, heteronormativity remains dominant across the globe. Nonetheless, expressions and explorations of heterosexual identities are not always conflict-free. For girls and women, for example, openly expressing heterosexual desires and identities can conflict with norms of traditional womanhood and femininity. Sexual double standards allow boys and men to be openly sexual, while expecting sexual modesty or even abstinence from girls and women outside of

heterosexual marriage. Heteronormative sexual double standards are persistent but also culture dependent [13].

Against this background, digital contexts are adopted by some girls and women to explore and express their heterosexual desires and identities. Online pornographies and self-created erotic fan fiction are means for adolescent girls and young women in South Africa, Japan, Germany and the U.S. to explore their heterosexual identities and build communities with like-minded peers [14,15]. Digital culture incorporates sex-positive female expressions of sexuality through Instagram or Twitter discourses on body positivity, sex toys, female masturbation, feminist pornography, and self-determined lifestyles in general [16*].

However, female digital empowerment often goes hand in hand with disempowerment as evidenced by online and offline body shaming and slut shaming (e.g., experienced by teenage girls from South Africa on Facebook) [17], sexual harassment and rape threats as well as the rise of anti-feminist movements and a digital manosphere that aims at restricting agentic female (hetero-) sexualities (e.g., online representations of far-right sexual politics in Europe) [18].

Furthermore, different sub-groups of heterosexual-identified men have become visible in digital contexts through their online communities. Among those groups are so-called Johns (male clients of female sex workers, example UK platform: Punternet.com), Doll Lovers (owners of female love or sex dolls; example platform: Dollforum.com), and Incels (heterosexual-identified men who are involuntarily celibates; example forum: now deleted subreddit r/incels). Within a framework of hegemonic masculinity [19] all three aforementioned male heterosexual sub-identities could be seen as marginalized because hegemonic masculinity implies easy access to female sex partners. Johns who pay money for sexual services from women [22], doll owners who have sex with artificial women [20**] and Incels whose identities are claimed in response to perceived or actual sexual rejection from women [21*] can struggle to develop positive heterosexual male identities. Their respective online communities provide social support and identity validation. At the same time, there is concern about the sexual and gender ideologies disseminated in those online communities of marginalized heterosexual men, for example, in terms of objectification of women and misogyny.

Another issue of concern are digital representations of mainstream heterosexual identities that reaffirm stereotypical gender roles. Examples are highly stereotyped expressions of heterosexual identities by social media influencers, in selfies, in the recommendations of dating coaches who propagate hyper-femininity and hyper-

masculinity as the sole key to heterosexual dating success, and on dating apps such as Tinder [23]. The representation of heterosexual identities in digital contexts reveals both empowering variety and disempowering streamlining as well as misogyny, anti-feminism, and also racism [24].

LGBTIQ + identities in digital contexts

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex,[1] queer, and other non-heterosexual and non-cisgender/non-binary identities (summarized under the umbrella acronym LGBTIQ+) challenge both heteronormativity and binarynormativity. Overwhelmingly, digital expressions and explorations of LGBTIQ + identities have been acknowledged as empowering, particularly for young people without access to queer urban offline communities [12, 25**].

Contemporary empirical studies demonstrating empowering effects of digital contexts for diverse LGBTIQ+ identified people are proliferating and cover, for example, Twitter representations of LGBTIQ+ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples [24], MyKalimag.com, the first LGBTIQ+ webzine/platform for/from the Middle East and North Africa, founded in Jordan [26], TikTok accounts of Spanish and Latin American trans women and men [27] and coming-out stories on queer Nigerian Twitter [28].

Disempowerment is observed in the form of ongoing offline and online pressures towards heteronormativity (e.g., through homophobia among family members, online hate groups, algorithmic discrimination), for example where Chinese lesbians are conflicted in their (dis)engagement with queer online spaces [29]. Researchers also criticize de-politicized queer online identities that focus mainly on the presentation of attractive bodies, for example in a recent study of Instagram profiles hashtagged #gaySpain [30]. Platform affordances on dating apps have been criticized for fostering sexism, racism, ageism, classism, ableism and other types of discrimination within queer communities—with users sometimes harshly rejecting whole groups with terms like "no Asians" or "no fatties" [31*]. Grindr (and other apps) have responded with calls for "kindness" [32], and changes to profile-building affordances. However, researchers have raised concerns that changes to the ways that race and ethnicity are represented can have unintended consequences for marginalized app users, reducing opportunities to both self-identify, and connect with others [33].

Queer platforms users learn to navigate, profit from, and refuse selected platform norms, complicating notions of empowerment and disempowerment. For example,

young queer people from Singapore report consciously selecting social media platforms that require "real-names" (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Grindr, Tinder) in some instances, and social media platforms that allow for more anonymity and fluid identity exploration (e.g., Tumblr, Reddit, Discord) in others [34]. Trans and non-binary users of social media and dating apps have expressed ambivalence in relation to expectations to present "coherent" and externally legible gender identities via profile pictures and texts. While trans visibility is essential for community-building and intimate connection, it can also present a target for transphobic hate speech and unwanted fetishization [35]. Some young queer social media users have referred to platform algorithms as "allies" because they provide with queer content on YouTube or TikTok [34]. However, LGBTIQ + content creators also struggle with *algorithmic oppression* and so-called *shadow bans* that hinder their content from being broadly disseminated [36*].

Asexual identities in digital contexts

Asexual (ace) and aromantic (aro) spectrum identities (umbrella term: aro/ace) challenge the norm that all adults must experience sexual attraction to others and have interest in partnered sexuality as well as in romantic relationships. The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN; Asexuality.org) was founded in 2001 and has since played a crucial role for aro/ace spectrum people to come to terms with their asexual selves, find community and fight for visibility and acceptance to avoid erasure, stigmatization and pathologizing [37**]. AVEN forums exist in more than 15 languages and many more ace spectrum resources and communities have been built on different social media platforms and are linked on the AVEN platform.

Most empirical studies, so far, have used AVEN or Reddit forums to recruit participants and hence, reflecting platform and forum demographics, often operate with samples of predominantly White women [37**,38]. Altogether, there seems to be a consensus in the academic literature that the expression and exploration of asexual identities in digital contexts has been very empowering on the individual, interpersonal, and societal level [37**].

Recent studies and reviews also look into digital asexual identities of people of color such as asexual male identified Filipinx on Tumblr [39] or asexual Latinx in the aro/ace community journal AZE (https://azejournal.com/). Asexual Latinas, for example, struggle with the sexualized cultural cliché of the "spicy Latina" and, hence, cherish online spaces such as the AZE journal that affirm their ace identity [40]. Mass media also play a role in digital sexual identity expression and exploration. For example, fictional media personas such as the nerdy White physicist Sheldon Cooper from the popular

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[1] While some intersex people identify as intersex, others adopt different gender identities and regard intersex not as their identity but purely as a bodily variation.

U.S. TV series "The Big Bang Theory" might support the ace community by providing popular asexual role models. Those mass media role models can be hyped and/or de-validated on social media. Instead of accepting Sheldon's asexual identity, fans often enforce his romantic and sexual engagement by creating and posting compilation videos on YouTube entitled "Sheldon Cooper being romantic" or "Sheldon and Amy all kisses". Not only the fans but also the writers of the TV series seem to be active in erasing Sheldon's ace identity and eager to present him as ultimately "cured" from his asexuality through heterosexual marriage with Amy Farrah Fowler [41]. The example illustrates that and how visibility of non-normative sexual identities in online and offline contexts is almost always a double-edged sword by fostering empowerment and allowing disempowerment at the same time.

Kink and fetish identities in digital contexts

Kink and fetish identities challenge compulsory normophilia in erotizing activities and objects beyond usual sexual interests and activities, often in the spectrum of BDSM (bondage/discipline, dominance/submission, sadism/masochism). Kink and fetish identities are explored and expressed on platforms such as FetLife or in Reddit forums (for a list of kink and fetish related subreddits see r/NSFW411/wiki/index) [42]. Such public conversations are de-stigmatizing and de-pathologizing, as BDSM activities are often identified with violence, perversion, and sexism [43,44].

Research shows that exposure to BDSM representations in digital contexts can help young people to come to terms with their kink and fetish identities [45, 46**]. The acceptance and (online and/or offline) disclosure of BDSM identity reduces suicidal ideation in young queer people [47]. Recent research from the Czech Republic found that younger kinksters are more flexible and fluid regarding their kink identity expressions in online and offline contexts, in comparison to earlier generations of BDSM practitioners [48].

Polyamorous identities in digital contexts

In many cultures it's considered normative to live in monogamous couple relationships (mononormativity). However, there is a growing number of mainly younger people in the Western world who express interest in or identify as polyamorous (polyam[2]) and endorse consensual non-monogamy (CNM) in different forms such as swinging, open relationships or polyamorous networks [49]. The online exploration and expression of polyamorous identities takes place on different types of digital platforms such as dating apps, online discussion forums and social media video platforms.

Several of the leading online dating platforms and apps (e.g., OKCupid) have re-designed their profile options to allow people to self-identify as non-monogamous or polyamorous, to create couple profiles or link their individual profile with that of their partners to help couples search for sexual partners together [50]. In online forums—such as the SubReddit r/polyamorous—polyam-identified people exchange their experiences and support each other. Social media video platforms such as YouTube and TikTok are used for peer-education of the polyam community with people practicing CNM serving as roles models, answering questions and offering online consultations [51]. However, not all polyam identities and lifestyles are equally accepted. For example, the so-called "unicorn" identity (a bisexual or pansexual single woman who sexually and romantically engages with established heterosexual couples) is both fetishized and stigmatized even within the online polyam community [52]. A social media comment analysis from Portugal revealed that a positive media story on polyam identified people elicited very polarized reactions on Facebook including online hate speech [53*].

Sex worker identities in digital contexts

Commercial sex is marginalized, stigmatized and even criminalized in several countries. Culturally, commercial sex violates the norm that sex should always be an expression of love and desire. Sex workers have engaged with social media to enhance peer-support and strengthen professional identities, as well as providing new opportunities to generate income [54−56]. However, social media moderation practices can restrict their access to such spaces [57]. Where sex workers have sought to develop alternative digital platforms and forums (such as Switter.at and Tryst.link) these, too, have been subjected to regulatory restrictions as part of global moves to enhance online safety according to media reporting [58].

Sex workers worldwide used the Twitter hashtag #FacesofProstitution to present themselves and their complex realities in protesting the erasure of their own voices and identities in public discourses about prostitution [59**]. At the same time, some people involved in sex work do not always develop sex worker identities such as Caribbean male immigrants in the UK who see their involvement as transient and want to avoid stigmatization in both their online and offline identity expressions [60].

Recommendations for future research

Future research on digital sexual identities needs to address more complex identity configurations [2], focus on recent social media platform trends as well as on interactions between online and offline identity management. In terms of recruitment it is required to include more diverse non-WEIRD (White, educated,

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[2] Polyam is increasingly replacing poly among non-monogamous communities, as the term "poly" is a self-identification used by Polynesian people.

industrialized, rich, democratic) populations [37*]. For quantitative surveys it would be helpful to develop standardized measures of digital sexual empowerment and disempowerment. Inter- and transdisciplinary research projects that bridge social and technological disciplines seem to be fruitful, e.g., to better disentangle the impact of platform algorithms or to collect big data and apply computational methods of data analysis. More work is also necessary to clarify if and how online contexts can (dis)empower people prone to sexual offending to develop sexual identities that support an offense-free life (e.g., in the context of paraphilic disorders and pedophilic or voyeuristic identities [61−63]. Opportunities of digital sexual empowerment for marginalized sexual identities most at risk of human rights violations (e.g., LGBTIQ + identities in homophobic social or societal contexts) should keep a priority spot in the research agenda.

Conclusion

With the domestication of the internet and social media platforms, digital sexual identities have become ubiquitous. While the exploration and expression of sexual identities in digital contexts is linked with multiple opportunities of empowerment, particularly for marginalized sexual identities, they also come with multiple risks of disempowerment. As digital sexual identities are multifaceted socio-technical phenomena, those risks need to be addressed by both the social and technical sciences. Appropriate practical counter-measures need to be implemented that might entail technical re-design, legal regulation, media and sexual education.

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Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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** of outstanding interest

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