

Queer Cultures in Digital Asia

Introduction

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What are the challenges and opportunities offered to queer communities and practices by digital media, particularly digital platforms, in the context of Asia? In earlier scholarly discussions about “Digital Asia,” voices from and about queer communities are underexplored. Bringing together communication scholarship on “Digital Asia” and the expanding critical paradigm of “Queer Asia,” this Special Section aims to renew our critical interrogation of the intersection between queerness and Asia at a time when digital media and platforms are inseparable from social lives. Through six empirical studies, covering amateur porn cultures, online intimacy, self-representation, and fandom, this Special Section captures the complexities and tensions surrounding queer cultures in “Digital Asia.”

Keywords: digital cultures, queer, LGBTQ+, Asia, lesbian, gay, transgender, platform

Digital media have transformed the cultures and practices of LGBTQ+ communities worldwide. Sexual and gender minorities explore and express their identities, look for belonging and build communities, and seek multiple types of intimate relationships on and through both established and emerging digital media (Cassidy, 2018; Chan, 2018; Fox & Ralston, 2016; Gudelunas, 2012; Haimson, Dame-Griff, Capello, & Richter, 2021; Herrera, 2018; Tan, 2023). Many researchers have examined the influences and implications of digital and social media platforms, such as Grindr, Her, Reddit, Tumblr, and more, on the social, political, and personal lives of sexual and gender minorities. Meanwhile, digital media and platforms also facilitate the flourishing of subcultures that challenge normative conceptions of gender and sexuality and promote creative forms of gender expression through online literature, video production, and other forms of fandom. While increasing attention has been paid to new and digital media in Asia (Cabañes & Uy-Tioco, 2020; Dasgupta, 2017; Yue & Zubillaga-Pow, 2012), most contemporary studies of digital queer cultures still focus on North American and European contexts.

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Centering Queerness in "Digital Asia"

Inspired by *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia* (Berry, Martin, Yue, & Spigel, 2003) and the subsequent two decades of critical scholarship on Queer Asia, this Special Section aims to renew our critical interrogation of the intersection between queerness and Asia at a time when digital media and platforms are inseparable from social lives.¹ In this Special Section, we give equal significance to the triple concepts of "digital," "Asia," and "queer." Previous conferences, such as the 2018 Digital Asia event at Queensland University of Technology and the 2019 Digital Asia conference co-organized by the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies and Lund University, have engaged with the concept of "Digital Asia." Baulch, Flew, and Li's (2019) earlier Special Section in this journal, "The Shifting Institutional Bases of Digital Asia Studies," explores the way infrastructure, political engagement, and consumerism in Asia are mediated by digital platforms. Being the continent with the most Internet users in terms of absolute numbers, Asia has a range of diverse digital platforms. While China's digital media ecology operates as an entirely closed system, in other countries like The Philippines, a wide array of Western and local digital media is available. Articles in Baulch, Flew, and Li's Special Section address infrastructures, governance, commerce, smart cities, and nationalism. By invoking the term "Digital Asia" in our title, we acknowledge that both the macro and institutional environments and our social practices are now carried out through and shaped by various established and emerging digital platforms. This concern echoes the idea of "platform capitalism" (Srnicek, 2017) or the platformization of societies (De Kloet, Poell, Zeng, & Chow, 2019).

Nonetheless, what is underexplored from this conversation on infrastructure and governance in "Digital Asia" is the voice from and about queer communities. We understand "queer" as "definitional indeterminacy" (Jagose, 1996, p. 1). As a verb, to *queer* means to reject "a fixed, essentialized notion of sexual identity" (Eguchi, 2021, p. 197). Queerness taps into a zone of possibilities regarding sex, sexuality, gender, and intimacy. In this respect, Asia provides a complicated context for the development and survival of queer communities as social norms and laws regarding same-sex relationships and gender transition vary across regions. There are regions where governments are taking measures to grant some rights to sexual minorities (e.g., Taiwan legalized same-sex marriage in 2019; Pakistan recognized "transgender" as a separate gender category in 2017). There are also places where homosexuality is still considered illegal (e.g., Iran) or is not legally protected from discrimination (e.g., Hong Kong).

As Chen (2010) advocates, "using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other's points of reference" (p. 212). This Special Section takes "Asia as method" as a foundation to provincialize Euro-American knowledge production (Chakrabarty, 2009) around queer cultures and practices. More recently, Yue (2017) has proposed the "queer Asia as method" paradigm to introduce three lines of intervention to our current queer studies and Asia studies scholarships. First, this paradigm is meant to denaturalize Asia. That is, to destabilize the homogeneity of Asia as one single region. Second, this

¹ The articles in this Special Section come from the Queer Cultures in Digital Asia symposium, hosted by the Chinese University of Hong Kong on December 9 and 10, 2021. The symposium was supported by the Improvement on Competitiveness in Hiring New Faculties Fund, the School of Journalism and Communication, the Centre for Chinese Media and Comparative Communication Research, and the Centre for Cultural Studies at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

paradigm invites scholars to produce queer studies in Asia to counter the overreliance on the West or the Global North in queer theory. Third, the paradigm places queerness at the center of Asian studies. Likewise, Chiang and Wong (2017) point out that both queer theory and Asia “share an acute sense of ambiguity, playfulness and nondetermination” (p. 122). Based on Chiang and Wong (2017) and Yue (2017), Eguchi (2021) argues that “the destination of queer Asia is a constantly shifting and ambiguous state of time, space, and geopolitics” (p. 200); therefore, queering Asia is always an ongoing project.

Building on ongoing scholarship such as the Queer Asia book series from the Hong Kong University Press started in 2008, the critical scholarship on queer Asia has already established itself as a “major academic endeavor” (McLelland, 2018, p. 1274). Echoing this critical paradigm of Queer Asia, recent years have seen an emergence of anthologies and books on Queer Korea (Henry, 2020), Queer China (Bao, 2021), and Queer Southeast Asia (Tang & Wijaya, 2022), as well as works that provide transnational and inter-Asia angles, such as the introduction of Sinophone studies to challenge China-centrism and study transgender identity in the Pacific context (Chiang, 2021), or the female same-sex intimacy among migrant laborers that move between Indonesia and Hong Kong (Lai, 2021). While more works have focused on Southeast Asia, areas such as South Asia or West Asia remain less visible when compared to the East Asian region, with notable exceptions (Al-Ali & Sayegh, 2019; Bhadury, 2018).

This critical vision of queer Asia has also been taken up in two special issues related to the intersection of queer studies and Asia studies. In their introduction to the *Sexualities* special issue, “Queer Asias: Genders and Sexualities Across Borders and Boundaries,” Ho and Blackwood (2022) emphasize the plurality of Asia, opting for the term “Asias” to “highlight contexted regions of heterogeneous cultures, languages, and populations whose shifting boundaries incorporate diasporic and transnational flows of people, images, and ideas” (p. 2). Chiang, Henry, and Leung’s (2018) special issue in *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, “Trans-in-Asia, Asia-in-Trans,” represents an explicit effort to forge a conversation between transgender studies and Asian studies.

Following the third point raised by Yue (2017) in her formulating of “Queer Asia as Method,” we would like to centralize queerness in the study of “Digital Asia.” Since the time we conceptualized this Special Section and associated symposium on Queer Cultures in Digital Asia back in 2019, numerous works have addressed different kinds of queer cultures on platformized media in Asia. These works have paid attention to issues such as livestreaming, dating app use, queer connections forged on mainstream Asian platforms, and more (see, for example, Chan, 2021; Wang, 2020; Zhao, Liu, & Li, 2022). While this article by no means offers a comprehensive review of scholarship on queer issues in a specific Asian context, we recognize the energies and synergies generated in this diverse body of scholarship. In the Special Section, we hope to centralize and accentuate queerness in the study of “Digital Asia,” specifically in the age of platform and app ubiquity.

Queering Platformized Media and Cultures in “Digital Asia”

Contributors to this Special Section come from different academic disciplines. They offer empirical analyses of queer digital cultures, platforms, practices, and communities from one or multiple Asian regions. The collection of articles highlights how contemporary queer lives are platformized, investigating an array of issues from amateur gay porn cultures, lesbian and gay dating apps, trans men’s self-representation, to

Boys' Love fandom, as well as how these are mediated through specific digital platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, QQ, Weibo, and dating apps such as Grindr and Butterfly. The first two articles explore amateur porn cultures on social media. In "Digital Sexual Publics: Understanding Do-It-Yourself Gay Porn and Lived Experiences of Sexuality in China," Runze Ding and Lin Song explore the way in which amateur porn producers and consumers navigate within and beyond China's Internet to experiment with their sexual identities and fantasies and to connect with other gay men. They argue that platforms such as Twitter (with the use of VPN) and QQ serve as digital sexual publics, despite the state suppression of queer visibility in traditional and digital media.

Regarding societal suppression, Ruerp Jiel Dionisio Cao's article, "Attention Economy, Neoliberalism, and Homonormative Masculinity in Amateur Gay Porn Circuits on Twitter: The Case of Manila and Hong Kong," draws similarities between Hong Kong and Manila. He points out that both cities were once British colonies and are still heavily influenced by Christianity. Therefore, his research participants felt their existence as gay men was not recognized by their families or the city. Being an amateur gay porn producer on Twitter offered them a potential venue for receiving attention. In order to garner views and accumulate followers, these porn producers engaged in serialization and self-branding.

Nonetheless, Cao warns against celebrating individuality and queerness in such an economy. He reveals that certain forms of masculinities—middle class, young, muscular—are still privileged in this online space. In a similar vein, in "'I Look at How They Write Their Bio and I Judge From There': Language and Class Among Middle-Class Queer Filipino Digital Socialities in Manila," Paul Michael Leonardo Atienza examines how class is played out from conversations and profiles of Grindr among Filipino gay men. Through three in-depth case studies, Atienza shows that various small cues, such as incorrect or peculiar spelling and low-resolution photos, are considered a sign of lower class, and thus of being undesirable. In contrast, photos taken during vacation and the names of certain universities appearing in profiles connote cultural capital, taste, and desirability.

While Atienza's study follows the ways Filipino users develop strategies beyond those provided by dating apps to evaluate potential partners on such services, Carman K. M. Fung's article, "Strategic, Conflicted, and Interpellated: Hong Kong and Chinese Queer Women's Use of Identity Labels on Lesbian Dating Apps," focuses on the conflicting consequences of identity labels offered by lesbian dating apps. To some users, identity labels such as *TB* and *TBG* offer shortcuts to categorize fellow users and facilitate matches. However, complications arise when these labels are interpreted differently by different community members. Drawing from Louis Althusser's (1971/2001) concept of interpellation, Fung shows that some lesbian app users are "hailed" into categorizing themselves with these labels. The labeling system then not only allows lesbian app users to express their gender identity but also shapes their identity.

Indeed, digital media affords plenty of opportunities to queer communities for self-presentations and expressions. Previous studies have shown how transgender vloggers use YouTube to tell their stories, build communities, and teach the public about various trans-related issues (Horak, 2014; Raun, 2016; Tortajada, Willem, Platero Mendez, & Araña, 2021). Adding to this growing trans media studies, Denise Tse-Shang Tang's article on "Tracing Dystopian Insta-Emotions Among Hong Kong Trans Men" focuses on self-presentation by trans men on Instagram. Built upon McKenzie and Patulny's (2021) conceptualization of dystopian emotions,

Tang interprets the hopelessness, anger, and frustration manifested on her research participants' Instagram accounts as their strategy to build up resilience to the challenges they face as trans men.

Our final article in this Special Section is from Yiming Wang and Jia Tan. In "Participatory Censorship and Digital Queer Fandom: The Commercialization of Boys' Love Culture in China," the authors develop a new model to describe how censorship operates on China's Internet. Using the Boys' Love fandom of a renowned Web series in mainland China as a case study, Wang and Tan identify the report function as the primary mechanism to regulate and moderate Boys' Love content on social media. Reporting, or *jubao*, is practiced by Boys' Love fans when they encounter comments from anti-fans or fan-generated queer content that may draw attention from the Chinese state regulatory apparatus. In response to this reporting culture, some Boys' Love fans set up alternative online spaces to share self-produced same-sex erotic stories.

Through their empirical studies, these articles capture some of the key complexities and tensions surrounding queer digital cultures in Asia. While platformed digital media undoubtedly offers new opportunities for queer communities and practices, community-based regulations and internal stratification and discrimination also close off certain forms of queer expression and queer potential. Each of these articles highlights how regional specificity has contributed to the manifestation of queer practices and cultures. With new digital phenomena emerging—live streaming, games, robots and AI, nonfungible tokens, health tracking—and social and legal environments evolving, queer cultures in Digital Asia will always be in a state of flux. While this Special Section was unable to place much-needed scholarly attention on digital queer cultures in regions such as South Asia or West Asia, we hope it can open further conversations about digital media and queerness among scholars working across a range of diverse Asian contexts.

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