Feeling (Dis)Connected: Diasporic LGBTQs and Digital Media

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ABSTRACT

While most research on the e-diaspora focuses on connections within heterosexual families and communities, this paper explores the transnational connections and digital media uses of LGBTQ migrants. Based on semi-structured interviews with 23 LGBTQs living in Belgium, two groups are distinguished: voluntary migrants, who chose to move, and forced migrants, who (felt they) had to leave their country because of their sexual orientation. Comparing their familial and ethno-cultural connections, it becomes clear that both groups – for varying reasons and to varying degrees – feel disconnected from their countries of origin, families, and ethno-cultural communities in Belgium. For all participants, digital media are a key tool to maintain some connections, but particularly for the forced migrants ‘context collapse’ on social media leads to a sense of insecurity. Overall, this research illustrates the importance of intersecting variables in research on the e-diaspora, as well as the impact of ‘offline’ legal and material conditions on online media uses.

KEYWORDS

Context Collapse, Digital Media, Intersectionality, LGBTQ, Migrant, Queer Diaspora, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Migration, while hardly a new phenomenon, seems to become of ever-growing importance in contemporary society across the globe. Vast amounts of people temporarily or permanently relocate outside their country of birth for a variety of reasons. These physical movements are accompanied by ever growing possibilities for virtual border-crossing, in particular through digital media. The latter evolution is seen to support and modify the former, to the degree that current diasporic networks of transnationally connected individuals are increasingly conceived as ‘e-diasporas.’

The current article aims to contribute to the emergent literature on e-diasporas by zooming in on a particular group of migrants, LGBTQs (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer). In doing so, it endeavours to further explore the diversity of diasporic experiences, by highlighting the importance of intersecting variables such as sexual orientation. This focus on LGBTQs discloses the inherent heteronormativity in much of the literature on e-diasporas, which is strongly preoccupied with heterosexual familial bonds. However, rather than merely adding sexual orientation as just another element to take into account, drawing on the theoretical concept of intersectionality this article suggests that sexuality interacts with migration processes in such a way that ethnic-cultural and sexual identifications are mutually constitutive among LGBTQ migrants. These intersectional identifications, in turn, have an impact on the uses of digital media to establish and maintain transnational connections.

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MEDIA AND DIASPORA: AND SEXUALITY?

Over the past decades, one of the key paradigms in social sciences has been that of globalisation. Moving away from a world of clearly delineated nation-states, increasingly borders are crossed by people, money, products and technologies, including media, which leads to processes of deterritorialisation and cultural hybridity (Sinclair, 2004). In this context, the notion of the diaspora has gained currency, questioning the idea of fixed national and ethnic groups, focusing instead on the transnational movement of people (Brah, 1996). Many have studied media in diasporic contexts, highlighting their role in establishing and maintaining connections with the country of origin, particularly among first-generation migrants (e.g. Hargreaves and Mahdjoub, 1997; Elias and Lemish, 2008).

While early work on media and diasporas investigated mass media, in particular television, more recent work tends to focus on digital media which also allow for interpersonal connections with relatives and friends. According to Oiarzabal and Reips (2012), ‘the personal computer, the cell phone and access to the Internet have become quotidian resources among migrants who use them to develop, maintain and recreate informal and formal transnational networks in both the physical and the digital worlds, while reinforcing and shaping their sense of individual and collective identity.’ (p. 1334). One key dimension in this literature concerns the ability for migrants to maintain close social ties across borders by using digital media, which leads to transnational ‘co-presence’ (Nedelcu, 2012) among ‘connected migrants’ (Diminescu and Loveluck, 2014). Research in this field focuses in particular on the maintenance of familial bonds by the use of digital media, which offer unprecedented low-threshold and high-quality means for geographically dispersed families to stay in touch (Georgiou, 2010; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Nedelcu, 2014).

The transnational family is the focal point of research on the e-diaspora. However, as Fortier (2002) states, there is a need to ‘queer the diaspora’, reconsidering the ‘heterosexist norms supporting definitions of ethnic diasporas’ (p. 183). As opposed to the heterosexual patriarchal family as the preferred institution and building block in diasporic culture, queer migrants generally operate outside this idea of homogeneous national culture, as they are often ‘forced to get out in order to get out’ (ibid., p. 190). In a similar vein, Manalansan (2006) points out that sexuality may be a pivotal factor for migration, and he pleads for the inclusion of (queer) sexuality in migration studies. However, he cautions against the uncritical application of labels such as ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’ and ‘homosexual’ to asylum seekers and other migrants, drawing attention to the culturally specific inflections of such labels and the need to explore how migration is important in the creation of sexual identity categories which may not depend on Western conceptions of selfhood and identity. To him, media such as film and the internet are a forum on which sexuality is scrutinized as part of globalisation and transnationalism (ibid., p. 229).

Manalansan (2006) also warns against a treatment of sexuality as all-compassing, instead seeing it as intersecting with other social, economic and cultural practices and identities. Reviewing the field of queer migration scholarship, Luibhéid (2008) equally states that it is supported by an understanding of sexuality ‘as constructed within multiple, intersecting relations of power, including race, ethnicity, gender, class, citizenship status, and geopolitical location’ (p. 170). Indeed, a recurring notion in this literature is that of intersectionality, first developed in the context of Black feminist studies by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and referring to the interaction between multiple forms of discrimination. Rather than adding up forms of discrimination, intersectionality refers to the transformative interactivity between different forms of social subordination (Choo and Ferree, 2010). The exploration of such intersections, in particular between sexuality and ethnic-cultural identity, is one of the key objectives of this paper. While intersectionality has been criticized, among others as a problematic form of identity politics, it does help to explore the ‘multiple vectors of power that create privilege and oppression’ (Chávez, 2013a).

Although the literature on the queer diaspora is slowly extending (see http://queermigration.com), increasingly also including a discussion of queer immigrant rights (e.g. Chávez, 2013b), it
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