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Sexuality and digital Space

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Abstract

Since the Internet's inception, sociologists have sought to understand the role digital spaces play in mediating communication, interaction, and its impact on the broader social world. Sociological literature at the intersection of sexuality and digital space presents a key area of inquiry, charting the generative, and sometimes utopian, aspects of sexuality's insertion into the virtual sphere, as well as the problems and drawbacks of this relationship. By drawing on select empirical studies, this article charts three dominant research strands on sexuality and digital space: (a) the influence of digital platforms in sexual selfhood projects; (b) macro-level trends and micro-level practices of desire, attraction, and dating online; and (c) the role of digital platforms in sustaining sexual subcultures. I propose additional approaches and lines of inquiry to further develop research in these areas.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Cybersex in virtual reality websites. Straight men on Craigslist seeking sex with other men. Online communities of zoosexuals[1] and white evangelical Christian men who like to be pegged by their wives. These social phenomena represent only a handful of the studies at the emerging intersection of sexuality and digital space. Since the Internet's inception, sociologists have sought to understand the role digital spaces play in mediating communication and interaction and its impact on the larger social world (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001). In particular, sexualities scholars in sociology and related fields have charted the generative and problematic aspects of sexuality's insertion into the virtual sphere.

Waskul's (2014) term, *techno-sexuality*, captures the relationship between sexuality and digital space: "the increasingly ubiquitous use of technology to gather sexual information, express sexual desires, view or expose sexual bodies, experience sexual pleasure, and explore sexual fantasies" (p. 94). Though debates on the definition of sexuality persist within sociology (see Gamson & Moon, 2004) and across disciplines, Jackson's (2006) definition of sexuality aligns with how scholars referenced in this article use the term, where "sex" and "sexual" refer to the erotic and sexuality refers to "to all erotically significant aspects of social life and social being, such as desires, practices,

relationships and identities" (p. 106; see Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Therefore, sexuality and digital space literature move us closer to answering a sociologically important question: What happens to sexuality when it materializes on the Internet?

I outline common empirical approaches to how sexualities are expressed, constructed, and negotiated in digital contexts, focusing on three recurring strands of this literature: (a) sexual selfhood projects; (b) intimacy and online dating; and (c) sexual communities.[2] Scholars highlight, to differing degrees, the importance of online and offline contexts in the construction of sexual selfhood projects. Literature on intimacy and online dating interrogate how macro-level trends (i.e., racial preferences) and micro-level practices perpetuate inequalities and sexual hierarchies. Much of the scholarship on sexual communities examines digital platforms as sites of refuge for sexual minorities and "backspaces"[3] for individuals whom society largely considers sexually deviant. Collectively, these studies illuminate the generative and problematic aspects that emerge at the intersection of sexuality and digital space. While much has been gained by extant investigations, I propose additional approaches and lines of inquiry to develop further the study of sexual identity, intimacy, and community in the digital era.

2 | SEXUAL SELFHOOD PROJECTS

Questions of self and identity in the virtual sphere animated early Internet research in various disciplines: inquiries probing whether and how identity functioned consistently or differently from what had long been observed in offline contexts. Early postmodernist perspectives (see Haraway, 1990; Turkle, 1995) extolled digital spaces as utopian environments in which identities—sexual and otherwise—were free to develop beyond the constraints of social structural inequalities and hierarchies. More contemporary works acknowledge that digital sexual selfhood projects are nevertheless tethered to and shaped by the social forces of their offline counterparts (Nakamura & Chow-White, 2013). In practice, a useful tension in empirical studies on digital sexualities has emerged. These empirical studies often fall into one of two camps: (a) studies that view digital platforms as playing a relatively minor role in sexual identity work, and (b) studies that view offline contexts as playing a relatively minor role in shaping digital sexual selfhood projects. I examine this tension further, exploring what can be learned from each of these approaches in how individuals craft and articulate their sexualities.

2.1 | The role of digital platforms in sexual identity work

The first set of literature on this topic draws on data from digital platforms to demonstrate how individuals craft and articulate their sexualities. Ward's (2008, 2015) text and image analysis reveals how white, heterosexual men who have sex with men (MSM) construct white masculinities and "authentic" heterosexuality in the "casual encounters" section of Craigslist-Los Angeles. Ward finds that Craigslist users engage in "dude-speak," wherein they textually perform localized (i.e., southern Californian) heteronormative masculinity as they seek same-sex sexual encounters. The author illuminates the racialized implications of this phenomenon, arguing that whiteness and heterosexuality concomitantly position white MSM as "the 'really, really normal, nothing out of the ordinary' subject" (2008, p. 430).

Building on Ward's study, Carrillo and Hoffman (2018) examine how straight-identified men who seek sex with men via Craigslist make sense of their heterosexual identities. The authors demonstrate the persistence and flexibility of heterosexuality and, like Ward, elucidate the tension between claiming a normative sexual identity and enacting non-normative sexual behaviors. Extending the study of straight MSM on Craigslist, Silva (2017) focuses on how straight, white MSM who live in rural America construct and make sense of their heterosexual identities. Silva finds that respondents view same-sex sexual encounters with other white, rural, straight men as preserving their heterosexuality and masculinity.

The works mentioned above offer the opportunity to further research digital selfhood projects by examining the technological affordances (e.g., anonymity, privacy, geolocation, and hashtags) individuals navigate as they construct and perform their sexualities.[4] The structural dimensions of digital spaces help to shape sexual selfhood projects. For example, Ward's study could be extended by examining whether Craigslist's infrastructure facilitates straight white MSM's claims to normativity. For example, the ability to post content anonymously likely factors into why white men openly draw on explicitly racist and misogynist discourses in crafting their sexualities (Suler, 2004). Importantly, Carrillo and Hoffman (2018), and Silva (2017) acknowledge that the Internet, and Craigslist, in particular, is the "preferred venue for hooking up with other men, but do not parse why this is the case or why this might matter for their analyzes" (Carrillo & Hoffman, 2018, p. 95). Scholars have argued the anonymity and minimalist structure afforded by Craigslist largely contributes to the popularity of the site among MSM (Robinson & Vidal-Ortiz, 2013; Rosenbaum, Daunt, & Jiang, 2013; Ross, Rosser, McCurdy, & Feldman, 2007). However, structural factors alone cannot account for all of what transpires on Craigslist, including the raunchy tenor that characterizes MSM personal ads on the site (Robinson & Vidal-Ortiz, 2013). Instead, these works take for granted how, prior to the 2018 ban of personal ads, Craigslist was a cultural mainstay for men seeking sex with other men.[5] Scholars can understand the significance of digital spaces in the construction of sexual selfhood projects better if they consider structural and cultural dimensions of platforms like Craigslist.

2.2 | Offline contexts' minor role in shaping digital sexualities

The second branch of this literature focuses on structural and cultural mechanisms that enable sexual selfhood projects, illuminating how digital platforms function as novel pathways for individuals to construct and articulate their sexualities. Using cyber-cartography, or "the systematic observation, exploration, description and categorization of internet sites," Dowsett, Williams, Ventuneac, and Carballo-Diéguez (2008) investigate six popular barebacking sites gay men use to seek condomless sex with other men. By focusing on discursive and performative aspects of barebacking sites, their analysis captures how gay men construct their sexualities through "words and phrases, terms and slang, images and ideas, pejoratives and comparatives, similes and metaphors, pleasures and dangers" (p. 132). Dowsett et al. (2008) find that the "evolving technological capacity of [barebacking] sites" allows men to "engage in a process of *endless renovation* [emphasis added] of their sexuality" (p. 135). Indeed, the authors argue the "reflexive and inventive production of the erotic(ized) self, pursued among others, helps constitute an ethical project in which new sexual cultures are reconstructing the social and its relations, practices and meanings" (p. 137).

Echoing Dowsett et al.'s (2008) description of endless renovation, Hightower's (2015) analysis of a lesbian niche dating site explores the myriad ways women use technological affordances like free private messaging, video chat, forum boards, and chat rooms to craft their sexualities. Hightower's interactional approach reveals that women "construct their identities through a continuous, self-proving process of collective contestation and boundary work" (2015, p. 21). Butch, femme, and queer-identified women's interactions with other members of the site actively affirm and contest the meanings attached to their respective identity categories. For example, queer-identified women, identifying neither as butch nor femme, often felt compelled to discursively justify their same-sex desires to other site members (p. 30). Such pressures were also prominent for women whose bodily representations did not conform to butch and femme categories.

By focusing on the technological affordances of digital platforms, Dowsett et al. (2008) and Hightower (2015) show the creative ways individuals produce and articulate their sexualities. Future inquiries can build on this work by exploring how offline social and cultural contexts in which actors are embedded influence these processes. Hightower's findings suggest questions such as: Why do women adopt and disavow certain lesbian sexualities? How do boundary-making practices on the lesbian dating site map onto lesbian sexual identity practices writ large? Equally as intriguing, scholars can examine the impact of digital sexualities on offline practices, addressing questions such as:

How does the "process of endless renovation" on barebacking sites mediate gay men's offline sexualities? Is the "process of endless renovation" unique to digital spaces or characteristic of gay culture more broadly?

Scholarship that focuses on or obscures structural and cultural dimensions of digital platforms offers incomplete analyzes of sexual selfhood projects. Incorporating both approaches moves us closer to understanding (a) how digital sexualities are shaped by the platforms in which they emerge; (b) how broader socio-historical contexts influence digital sexualities; and (c) how digital sexualities impact sexual cultures more broadly.

2.3 | Mapping the relationship between online and offline contexts

In order to address these tensions about the influence of digital platforms on sexualities, future research can map how online and offline contexts concomitantly shape sexual selfhood projects. Scholars can employ a digital ethnographic approach as one methodological approach to tackle this empirical puzzle. As outlined by Ardèvol and Gómez-Cruz (2013), digital ethnographic methods typically include (a) the ethnography of online communities, (b) the ethnography of online and offline field settings, and (c) the ethnography of everyday digital media practices. Rather than excerpting and analyzing images and texts from digital platforms, digital ethnographic methods "aim to produce holistic and situated studies out of the Internet in people's lived reality" (Dong, 2017, p. 224). Furthermore, as Postill and Pink (2012) remind us, multiple offline and online contexts structure individuals' lives and identities, and digital ethnography attends to "the shifting and more transient encounters and co-routes through the internet and offline" (p. 127). Dong (2017) expounds on this further:

> [W]ith the growing use of mobile technology such as smartphones and tablets, people are no longer "confined" to their desk, but are mobile and are able to produce online texts and images from various offline environments (e.g., from bathroom, classroom, concert, restaurant). Therefore, online activities have to be carefully contextualized and understood in multiple, polycentric and often collaboratively constructed environments which sometimes are beyond what can be observed on the screen. (p. 224)

Toward this end, digital ethnographic methods are uniquely primed to contextualize sexual selfhood projects within the online and offline contexts in which they emerge. Burke's (2014, 2016) study of Christian sexuality websites offers an instructive model for operationalizing digital ethnography. Using data from online interviews, surveys, and discussion forums, Burke examines how white, evangelical Christian men reconcile their heterosexual identities with their non-normative sexual acts (i.e., pegging and cross-dressing). Burke finds that Christians rely on logics of "godly sex" to "dance between senses of permissiveness and restrictiveness related to sexuality" (2016, p. 49). Indeed, "The very act of talking about subjects that are marginalized and taboo within broader evangelical culture (like male anal play, for example) is a way to gain hold over those subjects and imbue them with alternate meanings" (2014, p. 17). Moreover, the technological affordances of Christian websites, including the anonymity of participants and the ability of website creators to monitor forum discussions, allow participants to affirm, contest, and reinterpret dominant sexuality discourses.

Other ethnographic scholars blend in-person and virtual participant observations to more fully contextualize modern sexualities within online and offline environments (McGlotten, 2013; Naezer, 2018). For example, McGlotten (2013) investigates how queer subjectivities and intimacies manifest online. Pairing ethnography with an analysis of media texts, McGlotten provides rich accounts of how queer subjects perform identity work and experience intimacy in digital and offline spaces, such as online DIY porn sites and the gay cruising scene in Austin, Texas. In another example, Naezer (2018) draws on online and offline observations, as well as individual and focus-group interviews, to understand the meaning-making practices and strategies shaping Dutch teenage girls' "sexy selfie" practices.[6] By mapping Dutch teen girls' online and offline experiences, Naezer demonstrates how "sexy selfie"

practices allow subjects to perform their intersectional identities. In sum, scholarship using digital ethnographic methods better captures the dual role that online and offline contexts play in shaping modern sexualities.

3 | INTIMACY AND ONLINE DATING

In addition to sexual selfhood projects, scholars examine the influence of digital technologies on intimacy practices. Sociological studies on intimacy and online dating capture macro-level trends and micro-level practices of desire, attraction, and dating that take place on digital platforms. Large-scale, quantitative research highlight general trends in racialized desirability and attraction by focusing on *racial preferences* in online dating. In these works, scholars demonstrate how online dating patterns reinforce racialized and gendered sexual hierarchies. In linking these trends to historical and contemporary white supremacist and heterosexist discourses can augment this extant research. By contrast, scholars focusing on micro-level analyzes detail the strategies individuals adopt on digital dating platforms to both attract and select potential sexual and romantic partners, but often overlook opportunities to consider how social categories like race and class influence these practices. Recent scholarship on sexual racism within online dating represents a fruitful path of inquiry that addresses gaps in both approaches. However, given the pervasiveness of online dating and mobile dating applications, I posit that future studies can offer more nuanced analyzes by capturing the pitfalls *and* pleasures of digital intimacies. This approach illuminates how digital intimacy practices, like intimacy practices more broadly, have the potential to reproduce and challenge the sexual status quo, existing as sites of both inequality and empowerment.

3.1 | Racial preferences in online dating

Scholars who conduct macro-level analyzes of online dating data are often interested in racial preference trends among online daters. With the ability to bypass immediate social networks in search of prospective mates, digital-dating platforms and mobile applications allow individuals—at least in theory—to meet potential partners from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Tsunokai, Kposowa, & Adams, 2009). Of great interest, then, is whether racialized dating patterns in online contexts differ from those in offline contexts. One area of research assesses the degree of *racial homophily*[7] among heterosexual online daters. Using survey data from an online dating site, Yancey (2009) conducted one of the earliest studies on the racial preferences of online daters and found that individuals across all groups are significantly more likely to date within, rather than outside, their racial/ethnic group (2009, p. 130). Similarly, Hitsch, Hortaçsu, and Ariely (2010) analyzed survey and activity data from 22,000 users of an online dating service, finding that both men and women across racial and ethnic groups exhibit same-race preferences (p. 419).

These studies also illuminate the racialized and gendered contours of heterosexual desirability, revealing, for example, that Black women are the least-desired dating partners compared to women of other racial backgrounds (Clarke, 2011). Furthermore, Robnett and Feliciano's (2011) study on racial exclusion in online dating found that "Black women are the only female minority group who are more excluded than their male counterparts" (2011, p. 819). Lin and Lundquist (2013) uncovered similar patterns of racial homophily and exclusion but did so by examining the initiating and reciprocating behaviors of online daters (i.e., the likelihood of sending and responding to an initial message). Lin and Lundquist found that even when controlling for the education of online daters (i.e., college vs. non-college), college-educated Black women received fewer messages than other women, regardless of their level of education (2013, p. 209). Similar to Black women, Asian American men are posited as the least-desired dating partners compared to men of other racial and ethnic backgrounds, which scholars attribute to media portrayals of Asian American men as "de-masculinized" (Hwang, 2013; Robnett & Feliciano, 2011).

More than a story of racial homophily and exclusion in online dating, these studies point to the persistence of racialized and gendered sexual hierarchies in shaping desirability. These works offer insight into sexual exclusion in

online dating by documenting, for example, how Black women and Asian American men are disproportionately rendered undesirable compared to other groups. Scholars can build on this research by theoretically unpacking why white, heterosexual men and women are viewed as the most desirable partners on digital-dating platforms. The dynamics of exclusion and desirability are further evidenced by scholarly and colloquial uses of dating *preferences*, which has been critiqued as a neoliberal logic used to neutralize accusations of racism in the context of intimacy (Robinson, 2015). Thus, the use of *preference* implies that individual intimacy and dating choices are made in a socio-cultural vacuum separate from hierarchies of the broader social, political, cultural, and economic world.

3.2 | Attracting and selecting intimate partners

One branch of the literature on attracting and selecting intimate partners focuses on people's self-presentational strategies to attract potential sexual and romantic partners (Blackwell, Birnholtz, & Abbott, 2015; Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Hobbs, Owen, & Gerber, 2017). The second branch of this literature analyzes how the technological affordances of digital dating platforms structure online intimacies, including dating websites and mobile dating applications (Chan, 2018; Davis, Hart, Bolding, Sherr, & Elford, 2006; Lynch, 2010; Race, 2015; Robinson & Moskowitz, 2013).

Micro-level approaches to the study of online dating examine how actors enact self-presentational strategies to attract potential sexual and romantic partners. Indeed, online daters arguably have "greater control over self-presentational behavior," as the lack of face-to-face encounters allows them to manage their interactions "more strategically" (Ellison et al., 2006, p. 418; see also Walther, 1996). For example, in their interviews with users of an online dating site, Ellison et al. (2006) found that daters employed self-presentational strategies to portray themselves in both a desirable and accurate light (p. 423). Such strategies included attending to small cues like spelling and grammar, carefully constructing one's profile, and making slight adjustments to personal information to mediate between "the pressures to present an enhanced or desired self" (p. 429). Focusing on gay men's use of mobile dating apps, Blackwell et al. (2015) found that users on Grindr, a hook-up app for men who have sex with men, modify their profile pictures to signal their desires and expectations to prospective mates. For example, profile pictures featuring headless torsos are often "taken as looking for sex" (2015, p. 14).

In addition to self-presentational strategies, scholars often explore actors' strategies in selecting intimate partners on digital dating platforms. The technological affordances of online dating sites and mobile dating applications, which Race (2015) terms *intimate infrastructures*, allow users to assess and sort through potential sexual and romantic partners. Here, digital dating platforms are seen as "intermediaries through which individuals engage in strategic performances in pursuit of love, sex and intimacy" (Hobbs et al., 2017, p. 271). For example, Couch and Liamputtong (2008) found that online daters use *filtering* processes to determine whether and how to proceed with face-to-face interactions with potential partners, functioning as "a kind of 'hyper' sorting of interactional life" (Davis et al., 2006, p. 465). Importantly, Race (2015) draws attention to how dating apps' intimate infrastructures allow gay men to mitigate sexual health risks. In particular, the messaging function of online hook-up platforms gives users a medium to gage risk (e.g., ascertaining whether a potential partner is HIV-positive) prior to engaging in offline erotic encounters. This example poignantly captures the offline implications (e.g., sexual health) of online strategies as actors navigate digital and offline sexual terrains.

Micro-level approaches to the study of intimacy and online dating detail the strategies that individuals use to attract and select partners on digital dating platforms. Less obvious, however, are how those quotidian actions relate to previously explicated racialized and gendered sexual hierarchies. Scholars in this tradition have the opportunity to examine how social categories like sexual orientation and gender—the main categories in their observations—interact with race and class to render some individuals more or less desirable than others. That is, we know little about how the social positionalities of online daters, both as desiring and desired subjects, influence micro-level processes and macro-level patterns.

3.3 | The pitfalls and pleasures of digital intimacies

The above approaches to the study of intimacy and online dating can be strengthened by a sustained focus on the pitfalls *and* pleasures of digital intimacies. In tackling the former issue, scholars have focused recently on sexual racism as a way to meaningfully interrogate how micro-level online dating practices reinforce racialized and gendered sexual hierarchies (Bedi, 2015; Buggs, 2017; Rafalow, Feliciano, & Robnett, 2017; Robinson, 2015). Bedi (2015) argues online dating sites allow users to prioritize "an individual as a possible romantic, intimate partner on account of their race in a way that reinforces extant racial hierarchy or stereotypes" (p. 998). Robinson (2015) examines this phenomenon empirically among gay users on a popular online gay personals website by asking, "How is the structure of Adam4Adam.com shaping people's racial preferences? And what larger cultural assumptions underlie this individualized discourse about racial desire?" (p. 318). These inquiries reveal how structural dimensions of dating platforms, such as the "quick search" feature on Adam4Adam.com, work in tandem with "personal preference" discourse to perpetuate and obscure sexual racism. That is, digital-dating platform users are encouraged to sort and filter potential dating partners by racial and ethnic categories. While these platform functions often cement racialized sexual hierarchies, racialized subjects, like the "browner skinned multiracial women" in Buggs's (2017) study, also employ vetting strategies to weed out potentially racist dating partners (p. 549). Importantly, studies on dating and sexual racism illuminate how digital-dating platforms and online daters reinforce *and* resist racialized, gendered, and class-based inequalities.

The previously discussed sexual racism studies demonstrate how digital technologies reproduce, and perhaps even exacerbate, the "racial discrimination [and other forms of discrimination] that takes place in the intimate sphere" (Bedi, 2015, p. 998). Given the abundant research on inequality, scholars have the opportunity to explore the pleasures and desires—along with the pitfalls and dangers—that accompany digital intimacies. Scholars working in the areas of sex work and pornography have also called for more nuanced approaches to the study of digital intimacy practices (Attwood, 2011; Jones, 2015; Sanders et al., 2017). In a review of pornography studies, Attwood (2011) reminds us that concerns and anxieties about sexuality and technology are anything but new. Rather, conservative arguments about "the effects and danger" of sexuality in the digital era "suggest something of a backlash against the development of a sexualized culture" (p. 16). Unlike pornography studies, Jones (2015) argues that scholars researching sex work overemphasize the "affordances of Internet-based sex work" to the extent they "neglect the dangers that emerge online" (p. 559). However, Jones does not advocate for a danger-centered approach. In her study of adult webcam models, Jones (2016) demonstrates how models negotiate pleasure and danger in selling "a variety of erotic services (e.g., exotic dance and masturbation shows) and commodities (e.g., pornographic videos of themselves) to online customers" (p. 228). The author finds that adult webcam models experience more pleasure (i.e., erotic and affectual pleasure) when they can manage the dangers of their work. Jones challenges longstanding reductionist arguments that frame sex work as either dangerous and exploitative or pleasurable and empowering.

While retaining a focus on the pitfalls of digital intimacies, future scholarship would benefit from an equally sustained focus on the pleasures that arguably drive these social phenomena. Therefore, building on Jones's (2016) work, future studies should continue to explore how variations of pleasure and danger figure into digital intimacy practices. The sexual fields approach forwarded by Green (2008a, 2008b), provides a practical framework for capturing the embodied experiences and interactional dynamics that emerge in intimate practices. The concept of sexual fields considers the interplay between the interactional and structural dimensions that shape sexual sociality by incorporating Goffman's (1959) focus on situational negotiation and Bourdieusian field theory. Expounding on this approach, Green (2015) writes:

> The sexual fields approach entails an analysis of the ways in which partnership preferences, including preferences for partner characteristics around sexual, economic and social attributes, are forged in

the context of sexual fields whereby the field organizes both what we desire in another and how we understand ourselves within the sexual status order. (2015, p. 24)

Importantly, Green recognizes that sexual fields are "simultaneously arenas of sexual exploration and systematic stratification" that are "constituted by eroticized schemas related to race, class, gender, age, and nationality, among others" (2008b, p. 25). Employing concepts like *erotic habitus* and *erotic capital*, Green accounts for the roles that social structure and individual agency play in mediating desire (2008a, p. 622). As such, utilizing a sexual fields approach represents a promising avenue to map the pitfalls and pleasures that emerge in and through digital intimacies.

4 | DIGITAL SEXUAL COMMUNITIES

Along with research on sexual selfhood projects and intimacy and online dating, digital sexualities research captures the sense of "we-ness" that sexual subjects, especially "sexual others," collectively construct in digital environments (Fernback, 2007; Rheingold, 1993; Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). Two empirical foci dominate research on digital sexual communities: LGB online communities and online communities of individuals whose identities, desires, and practices position them as sexually deviant. The former positions online communities as spaces of refuge for sexual minorities, especially for queer youth. The second set of literature explores how individuals use online spaces to collectively affirm sexual identities and practices located outside of the boundaries of Rubin's (1984) "charmed circle" of acceptable sexualities. Collectively, both sets of literature focus on the role of digital platforms in sustaining sexual subcultures. Following the critiques of sexualities research more broadly, I propose that scholars extend research in this area by applying a sexualities lens to digital communities that are less explicitly organized around sexuality, such as online gaming groups, virtual reality sites, vlogging communities, and social media networks.

4.1 | LGB online communities

Much of the digital sexual communities literature concentrates on the social utility of online communities for individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB). Early research demonstrates that online communities help to mitigate the stigmatization and isolation that individuals face in relation to their non-heterosexual sexualities (Hegna, 2007; Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Mustanski, Newcomb, & Garofalo, 2011). This is especially true for queer and trans youth who confront structural and symbolic barriers connected to their sexual minority status, youth status, and social isolation. Because LGB community life has been historically situated in urban centers, the accessibility of digital sexual communities mitigates structural barriers faced by individuals who live outside those centers (Gray, 2009; Hall, 2018).

In addition to an emphasis on accessibility, social utility perspectives highlight the resources gained by queer youth who participate in online communities. Specifically, online communities offer support and affirmation that counteract stigma and isolation queer youth frequently experience (Hegna, 2007). Such communities serve as important venues through which lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth share information with one another (DeHaan, Kuper, Magee, Bigelow, & Mustanski, 2013; Fraser, 2010; Hillier, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2012). For example, Hillier and Harrison's (2007) survey data from same-sex attracted youth, revealed that respondents use online communities to (a) explore their sexual identities, (b) create friendships with other same-sex attracted youth, (c) navigate their coming-out processes, (d) practice same-sex intimacy, (e) engage in homoerotic encounters, and (f) learn how to be a part of the gay community. Such resources are especially invaluable given the observed lack of opportunities that queer youth have to "learn about and live 'the lifestyle'" from queer adult mentors (Hillier & Harrison, 2007, p. 94).

In light of these social utility arguments, scholars have begun to theorize the implications of online communities, and digital spaces more broadly, in the lives of individuals who inhabit non-normative sexualities. For example, in her study of a lesbian dating website, Fraser (2010) argues the website "acts as a *closet* [emphasis added] in the formation of queer subjectivities" (p. 30). Explicating this further, Fraser frames the closet as "a space occupied by queerness, a site where queerness might know itself as queer and, as such, mobilize and be mobilized within the confines of queer subjectivities" (p. 32). This definition counters dominant characterizations of the closet as a repressive, "negative positioning enforced on queer people through the construction and maintenance of heteronormativity" (2010, p. 31). Other scholars liken online communities to "a *welcome panacea* [emphasis added]" (Hillier et al., 2012, p. 242) and as sites of "refuge" that ameliorate the struggles experienced by individuals in their offline lives (De Koster, 2010, p. 552). Consequently, this literature altogether frames LGB online communities in utopic terms. While online communities can be supportive spaces for sexually marginalized groups, framing online communities in utopic terms can overlook the intragroup tensions and forms of boundary work endemic to most communities.

4.2 | Sexual deviancy and online communities

Departing from an empirical focus on LGB online communities, a subset of literature on digital sexual communities examines the experiences of individuals whose identities, desires, and practices position them as sexually deviant. As Rubin (1984) reminds us in the groundbreaking essay, "Thinking Sex," what is understood as sexually deviant is always culturally and politically defined, and therefore always subject to change. While political and cultural discourses on LGB sexualities have arguably progressed in the last few decades, other sexualities continue to be regarded as morally reprehensible.

Sexually deviant online communities live in the proverbial shadows of the Internet, due to the widespread cultural disdain and threats of legal repercussions leveled against members who convene in more open forums. Poignantly captured by Hall (2018), "Contested and marginalized offline identities may be more easily claimed online because there is an absence of face-to-face interaction and there is also the provision of support for, and from, geographically dispersed members of the same community" (p. 381). While some scholars examine the benefits to members who participate in these communities (Bailey & Harvey, 2019; Kavanaugh & Maratea, 2016; Maratea, 2011; Maratea & Kavanaugh, 2012), others highlight the potential dangers, and ensuing moral panics, that emerge in response to sexually deviant communities (Durkin, 1997; Durkin & Bryant, 1995; Durkin, Forsyth, & Quinn, 2006; Holt, Blevins, & Burkert, 2010; Jenkins, 2001; Jenkins & Thomas, 2004).

In echoing the scholarship on LGB online communities, social utility arguments have also been made about digital sexual communities that cater to individuals whose identities, desires, and practices position them as sexually deviant. For example, Kavanaugh and Maratea's (2016) examination of an online zoosexual community elucidates how digital sexual communities sometimes mitigate the stigma attached to occupying "a universally deviant caste" (p. 4). Zoosexuals deviate strongly from normative sexual standards, subjecting them to "ridicule, shame, restricted social mobility, clinical intervention, or criminal sanction" (2016, p. 3–4). As such, the authors explicate how individuals whose sexual desires relegate them to a deviant status are unlikely to find or build communities in offline contexts: zoosexuals have historically "lacked a clear mechanism for establishing social support, instead reconciling their sexuality in solitude or the company of small, intimate groups" (2016, p. 5). Indeed, this example illustrates the community-building capacity of digital spaces among sexually disenfranchised groups for whom offline spaces are likely absent and impractical.

Discussion of the negative implications of digital sexual communities abounds in scholarship centered on sexual deviance, countering and complicating claims to the social utility perspective (Durkin et al., 2006; Durkin & Bryant, 1995). According to Durkin et al. (2006), digital spaces function as "back places" that allow individuals with similar sexual desires to "feel no need to conceal their pathology" (p. 600; Goffman, 1963). For example, Durkin and Bryant's (1995) study of an online community of pedophiles found that participation in these "back places" affirmed,

validated, and sometimes proselytized pedophilic desires and practices. The benefits of these communities extend beyond the symbolic front to the sharing of knowledge and resources, some of which, like child pornography, are illicit in nature. Other interactions are arguably less harmful, like "age play" between members, which involves "one adopting the role of a child in cybersex" (Durkin et al., 2006, p. 601). Yet, irrespective of any harm to children or the wider public, the mere existence of such communities is enough to incite moral panic, perpetuating the idea that digital spaces are inherently dangerous (Sandywell, 2006; Weeks, 2017).

The scholarship on digital sexual communities explicates the benefits and social utility of digital spaces for sexual minorities and also highlights the negative societal implications of online sexual deviant communities. Together, these studies highlight how online communities can be both sites of refuge for lesbians, gays, and bisexuals and backspaces for members of sexually deviant and stigmatized groups (De Koster, 2010; Durkin et al., 2006; Lovelock, 2019).

4.3 | Applying a sexualities lens to research on digital communities

Dominant interpretations of digital sexual communities, as sites of refuge and digital backspaces, illuminate the ever-growing bifurcation between acceptable and unacceptable queers and acceptable and unacceptable queer spaces.[8] Digital communities are not unique to queer populations, however. As previously discussed, heterosexuals who engage in non-normative sexual practices participate in and shape digital community life (Burke, 2014, 2016; Carrillo & Hoffman, 2018; Silva, 2017; Ward, 2008). These studies share a focus on digital communities organized explicitly around sexual identities, practices, and behaviors. Extending an empirical scope beyond the explicitly sexual, scholars apply a sexualities lens to the study of a wide variety of digital communities, including online gaming groups (Fox & Tang, 2014; Gray, 2017; Gray, Buyukozturk, & Hill, 2017; Potts, 2015), virtual reality sites (Karim, 2014; Kendall, 2000), vlogging communities (Jones, 2019), and social media networks (Pitcan, Marwick, & Boyd, 2018).

Research on digital communities demonstrates the saliency of sexual performativity to group belonging (Jones, 2019; Kendall, 2000; Pitcan et al., 2018). For example, Kendall's (2000) early study of BlueSky, an interactive, text-based forum, used data from online observations and interviews to understand how heterosexual and non-heterosexual men reconcile their claims to masculinity with their "nerd" identities. By participating in a "social meeting space," Kendall found that BlueSky users were expected via shared norms to perform a "nerd" identity commensurate with their offline lives as white, middle-class, heterosexual, and non-heterosexual men (p. 257). Through gendered and sexualized performances, such as sexually objectifying women and demonstrating technological competence, BlueSky participants crafted hegemonic, albeit nerdy, masculinities. Interestingly, non-heterosexual users partook in these same performances, crafting masculine "nerd" identities indistinguishable from their straight counterparts. Such findings point to the ways in which whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality converge and materialize in digital communities.

In a more recent study, media studies scholars Pitcan et al. (2018) examined how upwardly mobile young people of low socio-economic status manage their impressions on social media platforms. Rather than focus on a digitally based community, their study examines how racial and ethnic community expectations, in the form of respectability politics, influence respondents' self-presentational strategies. The authors find that sexuality, and the female body, in particular, functions as "the primary site of regulation and norm maintenance for [their] participants, who valued sexual propriety and desexualized self-presentation" (2018, p. 170). In addition to managing their own impressions online, respondents (a) sexually shamed women who failed to perform female respectability and (b) regulated their peers' behavior through narratives about acceptable sexuality. By enacting these strategies, respondents believed they could support their goals toward upward mobility by distancing themselves from stereotypes that position racial, ethnic, and class minorities as hypersexual and promiscuous.

These studies demonstrate how sexual performativity functions as an organizing mechanism in digital spaces: community membership and belonging are contingent on performing the right kind of sexuality (i.e., a hypersexual

and desexualized self). Indeed, the regulation of sexuality, especially the *self*-regulation of one's sexuality on digital platforms, suggests that digital communities can also operate as "digital panopticons" (Tsuria, 2016). In applying a sexualities lens to "non-sexual" digital communities, scholars are better attuned to the quotidian role that sexuality plays in structuring our digitally mediated lives.

5 | CONCLUSION

In my discussion, I draw on select empirical studies to outline the dominant approaches in three common strands of research at the emerging intersection of sexuality and digital space: sexual selfhood projects, intimacy and online dating, and sexual communities. Taken together, research on sexual identity, intimacy, and community points to how social actors—at the individual and collective level—reproduce, negotiate, and subvert sexual norms and hierarchies. Indeed, these works illuminate the capacity of digital technologies and platforms to both challenge and reinscribe the sexual status quo.

Literature on sexual selfhood projects often views (a) digital platforms as playing a relatively minor role in sexual identity work and (b) offline contexts as playing a relatively minor role in shaping digital sexual selfhood projects. I argue that, on their own, each approach offers an incomplete analysis of digital sexual selfhood projects. Instead, I propose that scholars map how digital platforms and offline contexts concomitantly shape sexual selfhood projects. To that end, adopting a digital ethnographic approach can attune scholars to how individuals' sexualities are influenced by the myriad social forces stemming from online and offline contexts. In employing a digital ethnographic approach to the study of sexual selfhood projects, scholars can answer these critical questions:

1 To what extent do individuals feel compelled to construct and articulate their sexualities on the Internet? How do race, class, gender, and other axes of identity/identities mediate these expectations?
2 How do the structural and cultural affordances of urban, suburban, and rural contexts enable and constrain digital sexual selfhood projects?
3 Given the precarity and ephemerality of online (and arguably offline) spaces, how do individuals' sexual selfhood projects change over time?

Dominant approaches to the study of intimacy and online dating focus on (a) the racial preferences of online daters and (b) the micro-level strategies that individuals use to seek and attract partners. Building on the literature on sexual racism and online dating, I argue that research in this area can be further strengthened by a sustained focus on the pitfalls *and* pleasures of digital intimacies. The sexual fields approach, forwarded by Green (2008a, 2008b), is well suited to capture the intersectional dimensions of online dating, including how race, gender, class, and other social categories shape inequality, pleasure, and desire in digital sexual contexts. In adopting a sexual fields approach to digital intimacies, future studies can explore the following lines of inquiry:

1 Through an analysis of online dating websites and mobile dating apps as sexual fields, what forms of erotic capital are most valued across these platforms? To what extent are individuals able to amass erotic capital? How do race, class, gender, and other axes of identity/identities mediate one's ability to do so?
2 What forms of agency do racialized subjects have within digital sexual fields to counteract sexual racism? To what extent do alternative digital sexual fields (e.g., dating apps for people of color) mitigate or reproduce sexual racism?
3 What are the specific affordances within digital sexual fields that facilitate or hinder intimacy and pleasure?

Scholarship at the intersection of sexuality and digital communities emphasizes the social utility of digital spaces for sexual subcultures, including their role as sites of refuge for LGB individuals (especially youth) and as backspaces

for sexual deviants. Scholars have the opportunity to expand their empirical scope beyond the explicitly sexual to capture better how sexuality, as a structural, cultural, and discursive force, shapes norms, expectations, and behavior within digital communities. In applying a sexualities lens to a wide variety of digital communities, scholars can ask:

1 What role do digital communities play in regulating individuals' sexualities? What are the strategies that individuals enact to resist such regulatory pressures?
2 How does sexuality, as a system of oppression, interact with race, class, and gender to shape the norms, expectations, and behaviors within mainstream digital communities (i.e., social media platforms)?

Just as digital technologies and platforms function as novel pathways and infrastructures for political, cultural, and economic life, they play a critical role in shaping modern sexualities. Indeed, the literature reviewed in this paper illuminate the interconnected and increasingly normative relationship between the digital and the sexual, made all the more evident by the continued proliferation of digital platforms and mobile apps that mediate our sexual lives. Crucially, if the above approaches and lines of inquiry are taken up, the findings will clarify and strengthen our understanding of the place of sexuality within digitally mediated societies and extrapolate the larger implications of this relationship.

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ENDNOTES

[1]Zoosexuals are people who express a "sexual desire for, emotional attachment to, and love for animals" (Kavanaugh & Maratea, 2016, p. 3–4).

[2]This paper reviews empirical studies published within the last twenty years that use social scientific methods to study the relationship between sexuality and digital technologies, specifically as it relates to sexual identity, intimacy, and community.

[3]Backspaces are areas where individuals can "stand exposed and find they need not try to conceal their stigma, nor be overly concerned with cooperatively trying to disattend it" (Goffman, 1963, p. 81).

[4]Explicated by Hutchby (2001), technological affordances are "the constraining, as well as enabling, materiality of the technology" (p. 444).

[5]The personals section of Craigslist was banned after the U.S. Congress passed the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA), "a law holding [digital] platforms responsible for activity tied to human trafficking" (Lingel, 2019, p. 22).

[6]Selfie refers to "a self-portrait taken by a person themselves at arm's length or in a mirror" (Naezer, 2018, p. 5).

[7]Racial homophily refers to the tendency of individuals to form romantic and sexual partnerships with members of the same racial group (McClintock & Murry, 2010).

[8]Explicated by Lovelock (2019), lesbians, gays, and bisexuals are being increasingly seen as "normalised yet beyond the norm" (p. 83).

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