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QUEER MEDIA PRODUCTIONS IN SOCIAL VR: SELF-EXPRESSION, DOCUMENTATION AND RESISTANCE THROUGH VRCHAT

Sérgio de Arriaga e Cunha Galvão Roxo
University of Bergen, Center for Digital Narrative

Social Virtual Reality (Social VR) has emerged as a crucial online space for LGBTQIA+ individuals, providing opportunities for self-expression, representation, community-building, intimacy and entertainment (Acena & Freeman, 2021; Freeman & Acena, 2022; Freeman et al., 2024; Freeman & Maloney, 2021; Li et al., 2023). In this study, LGBTQIA+ and Queer are used interchangeably, with Queer also serving as an umbrella term for non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality (Human Rights Campaign, 2023).

Social VR platforms such as VRChat, RecRoom, AltspaceVR, and Meta Horizon enable immersive, real-time interactions through customizable 3D avatars (Freeman et al., 2024). These platforms provide a digital refuge for marginalized communities, fostering identity exploration and social connection for those who face discrimination in physical spaces (Waligórski, 2024; Acena & Freeman, 2021). VRChat has become a significant hub for LGBTQIA+ individuals because of its user-generated content, extensive avatar customization, and anonymity, allowing users to experiment with different identities and expressions without real-world constraints (Zhang & Juvrud, 2024; Poetker, 2019).

While existing research on Social VR has largely focused on virtual embodiment and community dynamics (Freeman et al., 2024; Li et al., 2023), there remains a gap in studies analyzing the digital media productions created by LGBTQIA+ users within Social VR.

This digital and media ethnographic study addresses the gap by examining how queer social VR media creators, particularly in VRChat, engage in self-representation and community documentation through various formats—including non-fiction content, documentaries, performances, music videos, tutorials, and erotic role-playing content. Through a documental analysis (Marconi & Lakatos, 2017; Fachin, 2008) and a content analysis (Ardévol & Gómez-Cruz, 2013) of these media products, interviews with the creators, along with related social media discourses, this research explores the pivotal question: "What role do queer media creators in VRChat play in documenting

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LGBTQIA+ experiences, and how do their productions contribute to the processes of queer worldmaking and visibility?

VRChat as an LGBTQIA+ Digital Refuge

Despite growing conversations around gender diversity and sexual orientation, LGBTQIA+ rights remain contested and endangered. Queer individuals face persistent discrimination, harassment, and violence, often compounded by institutional policies. The EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (2024) notes that LGBTQIA+ people are frequent targets of bullying, public harassment, and online hate campaigns. Political actions, such as Trump's \$215 million anti-trans initiative (Dobbs, 2024), further reinforce systemic discrimination. These challenges underscore the importance of Social VR spaces as a digital refuge, particularly for the Trans community who may lack such resources offline (Acena & Freeman, 2022). VRChat presents itself as a vital support system, offering network support, emotional backing, guidance, and affirming opportunities for queer individuals (Li et al., 2023), facilitating personalized identity expression and exploration (Kundu et al., 2024; McKenna et al., 2024) across geographic boundaries (Freeman & Maloney, 2021).

VRChat has emerged as the most prolific Social VR platform, connecting users worldwide (Davenport, 2024). Its popularity stems from features such as anonymity—contrasting with platforms that require real-world social media accounts—and extensive avatar and world customization (VRChat, 2025). With full-body tracking, users are encouraged to experiment with diverse avatars, identities, and gender expressions that might not be possible in other social contexts (Zhang & Juvrud, 2024). Additionally, VRChat is accessible via VR headsets and desktop/mobile devices, broadening community participation. This has made it stand out as a popular medium for social interaction and self-expression by allowing users to construct unique environments that cater to their communities (Poetker, 2019), gaining exceptional popularity among LGBTQIA+ individuals (Freeman & Acena, 2022).

[VRChat is] “a digital projection of humanity. All these pixels are just representative of the real souls that we are in real life, and that's what makes this place real. It's what makes it meaningful and beautiful, cause in this place, we can be anything that we want... and for trans people that is everything!” (Madame Kana, 2024).

Virtual Embodiment and Embodied Visibility

The process of “Embodied Visibility” (Freeman & Acena, 2022) in Social VR allows queer users to express and disclose their identities as they choose in VRChat, creating a new form of visibility, expression and understanding of their identities that no other platform can provide. With robust avatar customization and full-body tracking, VRChat users experience a transformation in their self-perception. This transformation is made possible through the experience of “embodiment,” or the experience of one's representation in a virtual body (Freeman et al., 2024). The “Proteus Effect” (Yee et al., 2009) illustrates how one's virtual body can influence behavior and attitudes in digital spaces, a phenomenon that contributes to users' representation (Freeman & Maloney,

2021), self-expression (Fu et al., 2024), and the "embodiment illusion" by enabling them to perceive the body as their own (Gonzalez-Franco & Peck, 2018).

Queer Worldmaking through Media Content Creation

Many queer users actively document their experiences in VRChat through various media forms. These include non-fiction videos, documentaries, performances, and even erotica-roleplaying content. Projects range from promoting social spaces and resource centers for trans people (Trans Academy, n.d.) to documenting the lived experiences of queer individuals within the "Furries" communities in VRChat (Madame Kana, 2023). Many creators assume the role of Virtual YouTubers (VTubers), directors, content creators, and performers, using these digital platforms for self-representation, visibility, and Informational/educational outreach. Yet, research on these productions and their role in enhancing queer representation remains limited.

These media productions have been categorized as "Machinima" (Lowood, 2011) or "Metaverse Films" (Martínez-Cano, 2024), referring to films created within a video game or VR environment. Here, a creator directs the camera, selects virtual sets, and arranges the composition, while users perform within the space (Danilovic, 2013; Lowood, 2011; Martínez-Cano, 2024). As cultural artifacts, these productions document how individuals shape their identities in virtual worlds. They function not only as fictional and non-fictional creative expressions but also as archival records of queer life, highlighting the social and cultural importance of these digital interactions (Lowood, 2011).

Moreover, these works can be viewed as acts of "Queer Worldmaking", as they construct affirming queer life worlds within normative and anti-queer societies. By documenting, archiving, and preserving both individual and collective queer experiences, creators resist and disrupt dominant oppressive narratives and systemic erasure, creating spaces where LGBTQIA+ identities can flourish and be documented (Otis & Dunn, 2021).

Methods

This digital and media ethnography employs qualitative content analysis of selected queer media productions in Social VR (Ardévol & Gómez-Cruz, 2014; Boellstorff, 2008; Ceuterick & Ingraham, 2020). The study examines works such as "Dollhouse for Queer Imaginaries" (2024) by Queer.Space, documentaries by Madame Kana (2023–2024), and other productions, including erotic filmmaking, showcased at VR festivals (e.g., Raindance Immersive) and on platforms like YouTube, Twitch and Pornhub. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with content creators provide context for these productions within broader queer digital practices. This approach seeks to illuminate how queer individuals use VRChat to document and express their identities through digital storytelling and media production.

Conclusions

Amid the increasing fragility of LGBTQIA+ rights, these queer content creators have been documenting and preserving LGBTQIA+ experiences in digital spaces/SocialVR, disrupting dominant narratives and expanding our understanding of queer identity. This positions these media productions as vital cultural and digital artifacts for queer worldmaking and resistance.

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