Revisiting Queer Counterpublics: A Critical Conceptual Review of Theoretical Evolution and Limitations in Authoritarian Digital Space

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Abstract
This article takes a critical look at the queer counterpublics paradigm by questioning its theoretical assumptions and how well it works in authoritarian digital contexts. Counterpublic discourse has been crucial to queer theory and studies of the public sphere. However, its central ideas—autonomy, circulation, and recognition—are typically based on how state power, platform governance, and infrastructure restrictions change the meaning of publicness. This paper uses a conceptual synthesis to show how queer expression works under authoritarian regimes: not as openly oppositional, but as contextually adaptable, semi-legible, and deliberately muted. In theory, it calls for a more self-aware use of counterpublic theory that considers structural and geopolitical imbalances. In this way, it adds to the field of digital media studies by showing how authoritarian institutions change the ways queer people may express themselves and the strategies they use to establish groups. The paper makes a case for a post-universalist view of queer counterpublics, one that is based on the messy, unequal, and politically dependent reality of LGBT existence online.
Keywords: Revisiting, Counterpublics, Critical Conceptual Review, Theoretical Evolution, Authoritarian Digital Space

Introduction
Over the past decades, the concept of queer counterpublics has evolved as a critical tool for understanding how minority sexual identities negotiate visibility, build opposing discourses, and cultivate affective networks to challenge dominant norms through alternative discursive practices. This theory is rooted in broader critiques of Jürgen Habermas's (1962, translated in 1989)liberal public sphere model, which aims to explain the systemic exclusion of marginalized people from mainstream publics in Western contexts. Nancy Fraser (1990) initially described subaltern counterpublics as parallel discursive arenas where marginalized people develop opposing interpretations of their identities and interests. This concept has now been expanded within queer theory, especially by Michael Warner (2002), who

emphasized the emotional, embodied, and performative aspects of queer world-making. More recently, researchers such as Squires (2002) have provided typological improvements to the counterpublic notion, offering distinctions such as enclave, satellite, and counterpublics to capture various techniques of involvement and retreat.

As these theories have evolved, the rise of digital platforms has enabled queer communities to disseminate different narratives, promote intimacy, and open up alternative publics online(Duguay,2016; McGlotten,2013).In these contexts, 'queer counterpublics'— marginalised groups forming oppositional discourses online—increasingly emerge in traditionally non-public domains such as internet platforms or particular cultural events, allowing for the expression of marginalised identities and discourses in mainstream society (Bryan,2021; Kim,2024; Lo,2021). These counterpublics give a platform to challenge heteronormative and patriarchal systems, which enabled a space for the cultivation and expression of new identities and discourses (Kjaran,2016; Schudson&Van Anders,2019). In other words, the theory has been deployed to explain how digital infrastructures can amplify marginalized voices and facilitate new forms of queer publicity. Sexual minorities can question traditional notions of identification and public-private boundaries through online platforms (Das & Farber, 2020). As Kjaran(2016) states, queer counterpublics are spaces where new identities and alternative discourses can be created.

However, this optimistic perspective has progressively faced challenges in several regions globally, such as China, Russia, Turkey, and Southeast Asia, queer expression in digital environments encounters escalating governmental oppression, surveillance, and algorithmic regulation(Bayramoglu, 2021a; Karizat et al., 2021; Tuah & Mazlan, 2020; S. Wang & Zhou, 2022). In these circumstances, the factors that facilitate queer counterpublics—namely, circulation, visibility, and oppositional engagement— remain critically underexplored. As a result, it is crucial to rethink the counterpublics framework's theoretical assumptions and contextual relevance in authoritarian digital situations. Therefore, this article contributes to these tensions by offering a critical conceptual review of queer counterpublic theory in the digital age of authoritarian conditions. Rather than providing a new framework or presenting empirical evidence, it aims to clarify and assess the theory's key principles, internal typologies, and applicability limits in politically restricted digital situations. Its primary goal is to explore the theoretical growth of queer counterpublics and investigate if and how the term remains a viable lens for understanding mediated queer discourse under authoritarian government.

The Genealogy of Counterpublics: From Habermas to Warner
As articulated by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962, English trans. 1989), the concept of the public sphere provides a foundational framework for understanding the historical evolution of communicative spaces in democratic societies. Habermas defines the public sphere as a realm where "private people come together as a public … against public authorities themselves" to engage them with authorities in rational-critical debate over the "general rules governing relations" in the "basically private[s]ed but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labo[u]r" (Habermas, 1989, p. 27). The physical spaces, such as coffeehouses, salons, and table societies (Habermas, 1989, p. 30), flourished in Europe throughout the 17th and 18th centuries. They were predicated on principles of equality and universal access, serving as an intermediary system between state and society in a democratic society (Charles & Rohwer, 2015).

However, Habermas's framework posits a singular, consensus-driven public sphere grounded in rational-critical discourse. This ideal has sparked extensive debate over recent decades for its failure to account for cultural, technological, economic, and political pluralism (Wang, 2020). Critics contend that this is built on three questionable assumptions: the presumption of a unitary public sphere within a homogenous society, the feasibility of equality and universal inclusion, and the prioritization of rational debate as a unifying mechanism (Wang, 2020). Feminist scholars, in particular, have emphasized how Habermas's focus on universal rationality—historically associated with masculinity—has marginalized women by confining their concerns to the private sphere, thereby overlooking the gendered aspects of public participation(Landes, 1988; Baker, 1992). This exclusionary tendency underscores a broader limitation: the model's inability to accommodate the multiplicity of identities and intersectional issues that characterize modern societies.

It is argued that these critiques reveal the bourgeois public sphere's historical exclusivity and neglect of "nonliberal, nonbourgeois, competing public spheres" (Loehwing & Motter, 2009, p. 220). Therefore, Habermas's idealized bourgeois public sphere has consistently faced scholarly critique for its exclusions and underlying assumptions, prompting the development of alternative theories, such as the concept of counterpublics. This theoretical framework addresses the limitations of Habermas's original model and highlights marginalized groups' experiences and voices. In response, the theory of counterpublics has emerged as a robust alternative, positing that marginalized groups create parallel discursive spaces to produce knowledge and communicate lived realities outside dominant frameworks (Felski, 1989; Squire, 2002). For example, Nancy Fraser's seminal critique addresses these shortcomings by challenging Habermas's "bracketing" of social inequalities, which assumes that participants in the public sphere can set aside status differences to deliberate as equals (Fraser, 1990). Fraser argues that access to the bourgeois public sphere of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was predominantly restricted to propertied white males, rendering Habermas's ideal unattainable for subordinated groups. In response, she introduces the concept of "subaltern counterpublics," which she defines as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). Fraser emphasizes that groups such as women, workers, people of color, and sexual minorities have historically benefited from constituting these alternative publics to assert their perspectives against dominant discourses. This reconceptualization implies that a genuinely democratic public sphere must embrace diverse voices and recognize the political significance of issues traditionally dismissed as private, thereby rectifying the exclusions embedded in Habermas's framework.

Fraser (1990) generally delineates two primary functions of counterpublics: an inward-oriented role as "safe spaces" for withdrawal, reorganization, and the formation of alternative identities, and an outward-oriented role aimed at challenging dominant discourses, building alliances, and engaging broader audiences. The inward function aligns with interpretive communities of resistance, where participants cultivate oppositional identities and needs (Rauch, 2021), while the outward function seeks to expand discursive space and influence mainstream perceptions (Kaiser & Puschmann, 2017). This dual functionality underscores counterpublics' dynamic role within stratified societies. As Squire (2002) notes, counterpublics leverage distribution channels to extend their messages beyond enclave

spaces, challenging dominant narratives and fostering solidarity among marginal groups. Similarly, Jackson and Walles (2015) argue that counterpublics "create and maintain their alternative publics with the express goals of legitimizing and communicating their lived realities and pushing the mainstream public sphere to acknowledge and respond to these realities." Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) further assert that counterpublic discourse aims to deconstruct hegemonic narratives while reinforcing collective identity among participants, highlighting its transformative potential.

However, while Fraser's intervention broadens the theoretical scope of the public sphere, her analysis has limitations, particularly regarding gender and sexuality. Specifically, although she briefly acknowledges the presence of gay and lesbian counterpublics, her focus remains predominantly on binary gender categories—male and female—rooted in traditional sexism (Fraser, 1990). This binary framing, echoed in Landes's (1988) conceptualization of gender as oscillating between masculinity and femininity, overlooks non-binary and third-gender identities, thus constraining the inclusivity of her critique. Consequently, Fraser's model, while advancing the discourse on counterpublics, does not fully grapple with the complexities of queer counterpublics, whose experiences challenge both heteronormative and binary assumptions.

Building on Fraser's critique, voices marginalized within the liberal, bourgeois public sphere acquire the capacity to shape public opinion by establishing counterpublics that contest the delineations of public and private established within the bourgeois public sphere. For example, Michael Warner (2002) offered a queer inflection to counterpublic theory in his influential work *Publics and Counterpublics*. Michael Warner (2002) defines counterpublics as discursive arenas that allow groups aware of their subordinate status to express and cultivate their identities, interests, and needs in contrast to the dominant group and norms. He further points out the queerness of the public as a ubiquitous reference point for contemporary political life.

> *Publics are queer creatures. You cannot point to them, count them, or look them in the eye. You also cannot easily avoid them. They have become an almost natural feature of the social landscape, like pavement (Warner, 2002, p. 7)*

He also proposed that the political success of the LGBT movement, which started in the 1990s and continues to the present, has relied on the reconfiguration of gay culture as public, achieved by destigmatizing the intimacies of same-sex couples and establishing queer social spaces in public domains. For instance, queer activism has consistently deviated from conventional norms, as it challenges the traditional modes of argument that underlie the public sphere's self-perception: measured, polite, and rational-critical communication (Warner,2002). Warner's approach differs from Fraser's in two main respects: first, by stressing performance and aesthetics as means of political articulation; second, by theorizing counterpublics less as institutionalized spheres of debate and more as ephemeral, affective collectives linked by practices of risky visibility.

This shift in perspective has made queer theory become the political centre of cultural production, expression, and the articulation of discourse, particularly when it comes to sexual dissidence. However, it has also introduced a normative emphasis on visibility,

oppositionality, and discursive freedom—qualities increasingly under pressure in platformised and authoritarian media environments. While Warner's conception is based on the liberal conditions of queer life in the United States at the turn of the millennium, the global spread of digital infrastructure and the rise of national platform alliances have complicated the assumed universality of this model.

Digital Media and the Shifting Terrain of Publicness

The advent of digital media has fundamentally transformed the structure of public communication, significantly affecting the formation, circulation, and endurance of both publics and counterpublics. Unlike early cyber-utopian narratives that regard the internet as a space of democratized expression, contemporary scholarship has emphasized the platformization of public discourse. For instance, van and Poell(2019) revealed how digital commercial imperatives, algorithmic governance, and opaque moderation mechanisms influence infrastructures. These dynamics make traditional notions of counterpublics complicated in the current digital age, particularly those based on unmediated visibility and expressive agency.

"Platform governance" refers to the laws, regulations, and methods platforms employ to control and coordinate their extensive user ecosystems based on their technological, economic, and social infrastructures. In other words, platform governance - defined as regulating speech and user behaviour on digital platforms through technological, institutional, and discursive mechanisms (Gillespie, 2018)- has become a central force in shaping the boundaries of publicness. Whereas platform power describes the asymmetric relationships between platform owners and other stakeholders, and platform politics describes the various ways of platforms become arenas for sociopolitical contestation, platform governance provides insight into the codified and often opaque rules underpinning these interactions. The notion explains how platforms, as quasi-public places, exert influence over user behaviour, content distribution, and data management, so effectively altering billions of people's digital experiences (van Dijck et al., 2021; Tiidenberg, 2021).

While platform studies have traditionally focused on uncovering the underlying logics of algorithms and platform designs, the emergence of platform governance necessitates a more comprehensive examination, combining technical elements with larger sociocultural and political ramifications. In other words, platform governance is often used as a catch-all term to describe many interconnected processes that create the internal and external regulatory dynamics, the effects of platform interfaces and their features, and the changing relationship between platforms, users, and society as a whole (Tiidenberg, 2021). For example, Gillespie's (2010) study of how platforms like YouTube are governed shows how their "public" nature is shaped by rules that affect what is uploaded, viewed, and monetized. This shows that platform governance is not only about managing technology but also about creating culture and power. Van Dijck (2013) also looks at how technology, business models, and user behavior interact on social media platforms. He suggests that platform governance is influenced by and shapes social, economic, and political factors. These observations show that platform governance is not only about rules for how things work; it also encompasses the moral ideals built into algorithms and data practices.

In these circumstances, visibility becomes a double-edged sword. On the one hand, digital platforms allow LGBT people to connect with networks and services that might increase visibility(Ai et al., 2023). On the other hand, hypervisibility might result in repression, surveillance, or stereotypes. While social media has allowed for greater visibility and expression for the LGBT community, it has also led to the commodification of their identity and culture (Hu et al.,2022). For example, Wang et al.(2020)explore how LGBT individuals in China use self-media platforms to participate in networked news production and consumption. However, the use of self-media platforms by LGBT individuals in China also poses risks, including the potential for censorship and surveillance by the Chinese government. It is argued that in authoritarian circumstances, this logic combines with state repression to generate what MacKinnon (2011) refers to as "networked authoritarianism," in which the reality of widespread use of the internet by its citizens and turned this to the state's advantage by using the internet to survival, filter, block, and disseminate information that serves the interests of the state.

A number of fundamental propositions in queer counterpublic theory are undermined by recent changes in media ecologies. The argument that oppressed discourse will be appropriated by powerful publics relies on a certain level of permeability in media systems, which can be closed down by the censorship of platforms that has become so widespread. Similarly, the notion that counterpublics have the potential to drive cultural or political change via the exchange of ideas is weakened when that exchange is algorithmically blocked or systematically hindered. Additionally, Warner's focus on performative visibility assumes the existence of expressive spaces that are no longer subject to coercive monitoring, but a state of affairs undermined by the current digital authoritarian infrastructures(Repnikova, 2017; Su & Meng, 2016).

Given these shifts, the next section will critically examine how authoritarian contexts require a reassessment of counterpublic theory's analytic scope, especially regarding queer expression and its strategic navigation of visibility and silence.

Authoritarian Contexts: Reassessing Counterpublics' Assumptions
It is argued that the theory of queer counterpublics has largely been grounded in Western liberal-democratic contexts, where notions of visibility, recognition, and public discourse are shaped by relatively open media systems and rights-based frameworks (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002). Within this paradigm, visibility is often combined with inherently empowerment, mutual recognition is presumed to be freely expressed, and publicness is conceptualized as a space for contestation without existential threat. However, these assumptions become significantly destabilized when placed in authoritarian digital environments.

Recent scholarship suggests that visibility in such authoritarian contexts is far from straightforward. While queer visibility on platforms like Douyin can generate fleeting moments of affirmation, it often exists under conditions of algorithmic suppression, content takedown, or shadow banning (Shen & Haimson, 2025). In contrast to the Western assumption that increased visibility equates to progress, users in China frequently engage in calculated self-presentation, carefully navigating ambiguous platform boundaries. As Lo (2022) notes in her ethnographic work with Chinese lesbian communities, digital visibility is experienced ambivalently—as both a potential for connection and a source of surveillance-

induced anxiety. Rather than a transparent act of expression, visibility becomes a strategic exposure: contingent, conditional, and constantly adjusted.

Recent research indicates that visibility in authoritarian contexts is complex. For example, queer visibility on platforms such as Douyin may produce temporary instances of affirmation; however, this visibility frequently operates within a framework of algorithmic suppression, content removal, or shadow banning (Shen & Haimson, 2025). For example, contrary to Western facts that heightened visibility signifies advancement, individuals in China often participate in strategic self-presentation, skillfully maneuvering through unclear platform boundaries. Lo's (2022) interview-based study of Chinese "lalas" demonstrates that queer visibility is entwined with fear and ambivalence: participants described cyberspace as both "opening" and "restrictive," with digital expression construed as a double-edged phenomenon. Similarly, through interviews with content creators and audiences, and by analyzing keyword search algorithms associated with "同性恋 (gay)" on "Douyin, Zhao(2024)identified a covert "de-gaying" discourse. This discourse is characterized by elements of dehumanization de-emotionalization and dramatization shaped by algorithms on Chinese digital platforms amidst disingenuous algorithmic shadowbans.In other words, digital platforms are a double-edged sword that can either make sexual minorities visible because of affordance or damage visibility and create stereotypes due to algorithmic shadow bans, platform management(Tang et al., 2021). These findings suggest that visibility in authoritarian digital spaces cannot be recognized merely as a right of freedom; it can be understood as a negotiated strategy within a authoritarian contexts.

Moreover, while counterpublics theory emphasizes recognition through affective solidarity and discursive interaction, the forms of recognition found in authoritarian settings often rely on semiotic indirection. For instance, according to queer identity is rarely articulated explicitly on Chinese platforms. Instead, recognition emerges through coded expressions, intertextual memes, or subtle comment interactions—a phenomenon also observed in comparative contexts like Turkey where (Bayramoglu, 2021)describes the mediated circulation of queer hope through ambiguity and inference. In such spaces, affective alignment operates beneath the surface of censorship, building networks of partial visibility and inferred belonging.

In addition, the assumption that counterpublics necessarily rely on oppositional or subversive discourse must be reconsidered. Many users adopt ambiguity not only as a response to censorship, but as an intentional tactic of resilience. Euphemism, irony, and aesthetic abstraction serve as communicative strategies that signal dissent while maintaining plausible deniability (Zheng et al., 2023). As such, ambiguity should not be read merely as a limitation or symptom of repression, but as a critical mode of political agency. It allows queer users to maintain community, voice, and continuity within an environment of constraint.

In light of these considerations, it becomes evident that the foundational assumptions of queer counterpublics theory must be revisited and revised when applied to authoritarian digital platforms. Visibility cannot be presumed empowering, recognition is mediated through codes and constraints, and ambiguity constitutes not a failure of expression but a strategy of survival. These contextual adaptations are not marginal or exceptional—they are central to understanding how queer publics emerge and endure in the contemporary global digital order.

Theoretical Clarifications and Conceptual Boundaries

As discussed above, the analysis shows that although the queer counterpublic framework is conceptually rich and politically inspiring, it is not infinitely flexible. Its applicability depends on specific structural and political conditions—especially dissemination capacity, tolerance of dissent, and the permeability of the mainstream public sphere. In this sense, it is necessary to clarify the theoretical boundaries of this concept and explain under what conditions it remains explanatory, especially when it is applied to authoritarian digital environments.

In terms of its core aspects, queer counterpublic theory relies on three interrelated assumptions:

Discursive autonomy: marginalised groups possess at least some autonomy to generate and disseminate counter-discourses.

Visibility as resistance: making queer lives, influences, or identities publicly visible can constitute a form of political subversion by making queer lives, influences, or identities publicly.

Public circulation and contestation: these discourses enter a broader media field where they can challenge, negotiate, or dislocate the dominant public.

These assumptions have historical context. Warner's (2002) model assumes the existence of a certain degree of pluralistic public sphere, where counterpublic spheres may be marginalised but not preemptively erased. However, these three assumptions are systematically challenged under authoritarian regimes. In these contexts, discourse autonomy is constrained by legal suppression and infrastructure control; visibility is often not functional but punished; and circulation is preemptively blocked by algorithms or administrative measures.

Finally, this analysis suggests a more flexible and sensitive application of counterpublic theory in geopolitical regimes. In liberal democracies, the challenge may be to avoid cooperation and assimilation; in authoritarian regimes, it may be to discover subtle forms of dissent that operate below the threshold of confrontation. What binds these different cases together is not a fixed definition of 'public' or 'resistance', but a shared investment in understanding how marginal voices navigate power structures that affect expression, accessibility and survival.

Theoretical and Contextual Contribution

This article contributes to existing scholarship in two primary ways. Theoretically, this paper enhances queer theory and public sphere studies by critically reevaluating the scopes and constraints of counterpublic discourse. It emphasizes the necessity of implementing the framework with structural and geopolitical awareness, cautioning against expanding its applicability to contexts where fundamental prerequisites for counterpublicity—autonomy, circulation, recognition—are systematically obstructed. Contextually, the paper maps how queer expression functions inside authoritarian frameworks of control, therefore adding complexity to digital media study. It emphasizes how the interaction of governmental authority, platform governance, and infrastructure censorship changes the basic definition of publicness. By doing so, this helps to redefine queer expression as contextually adaptable, semi-legible, and occasionally strategically muted rather than as uniformly oppositional or liberatory. In other words, this article ultimately supports a more reflexive application of

queer counterpublics theory—one that opposes theoretical universalism and instead attends to the chaotic, unequal, and politically dependent reality of queer living in the digital era.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper has conducted a critical conceptual review of queer counterpublic theory, tracking its intellectual growth, essential contributions and limits when it is applied to authoritarian digital environments. Starting with Fraser's (1990) basic concept of subaltern counterpublics and expanding into queer theory by Warner (2002), This article addressed how counterpublics provide a framework for understanding the discursive and cultural practices of marginalised sexual communities, Through this theoretical perspective, queer counterpublics are identified as arenas for oppositional dialogue, identity exploration, and emotional world-building, particularly in liberal-democratic and digitally mediated contexts.

However, as this review has shown, the core assumptions of queer counterpublic theory—namely, access to the discursive circulation, the political utility of visibility, and the capacity for oppositional engagement—are significantly destabilised under conditions of state censorship and platform governance. In authoritarian digital environments, the structural prerequisites for counterpublic formation often do not exist. Visibility becomes a risk rather than a resource; circulation is algorithmically and legally constrained, and oppositional discourse may be ineffective or dangerous. In such contexts, queer publics may resemble enclaves or satellite formations (Squires, 2002) or may never fully cohere as publics at all.

This article contributes to existing scholarship in two primary ways. Theoretically, it provides a consistent and critical synthesis of queer counterpublics theory in order to clarify its conceptual development and analytic limits. Contextually, it broadens the discussion by examining the theory's relevance in authoritarian digital environments—settings that have been slightly ignored in previous research. Although most research on queer counterpublics have concentrated on liberal-democratic or Western digital worlds, this paper draws attention to structurally repressive media ecologies, where both state and platform systems specifically limit dissident visibility and disturb public formation.

Overall, this paper tackles a central blind spot in public sphere theory and queer media studies by questioning the preconditions and assumptions deeply embedded in counterpublic theory—especially those on visibility, circulation, and oppositionality. It shows that without conceptual recalibration, ideologies created in fairly liberal cultures cannot be naively transferred into oppressive circumstances. Therefore, this study not only corrects overgeneralised uses of counterpublics but also lays the groundwork for more politically sensitive, empirically based research on mediated gay expression under authoritarian regimes. By connecting the fields of queer theory, media control, and digital authoritarianism, this paper enables academics to more accurately theorise the conflicts between identity, resistance, and structural power in the worldwide digital era. It repositions counterpublic theory as a critical lens whose relevance has to be constantly re-evaluated against changing political and technical limits rather than as a fixed category.

Furthermore, this paper suggests empirical research placing counterpublic theory into particular authoritarian contexts, investigating how queer people and communities negotiate

censorship, surveillance, and platform control. It also encourages more theoretical discussion within several fields—bringing queer theory, media studies, and political communication into closer conversation—to give a new understanding of resistance, marginality, and collective expression in the digital era. We argue that the conceptual tools need to be rethought as global circumstances for queer living change. Counterpublic theory can only stay a crucial framework for examining queer publicness in the twenty-first century by anchoring it in the reality of power, repression, and mediated negotiation.

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