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LGBTQ Youth Cultures and Social Media

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Summary

Research has established that access to the Internet and social media is vital for many lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer + (LGBTQ+) young people (Hillier and Harrison, 2007; Selkie et al., 2020). LGBTQ+ social media youth cultures form across platforms and are shaped by a range of media affordances and vernaculars. LGBTQ+ youth use social media for self-expression, connecting with other LGBTQ+ young people, entertainment, activism, as well as for collecting and curating information. Through a digital cultural studies approach, the essay discusses themes of LGBTQ+ youth identity work, communities and networked publics, and youth voice, to explore how digital and social media imaginaries and practices produce new forms of socialites. It situates LGBTQ+ youth social media practices in relation to the affective economy and algorithmic exclusion of platforms, as well as in relation to neoliberal paradigms of gender and sexuality and homotolerance.

Keywords

Social media; LGBTQ+ youth; sexuality; gender; digital culture

Introduction

Social media use is almost ubiquitous among young people (Pew Research Center, 2021) and the current younger generation is often referred to as “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001) or the “net generation”, which designates that they have grown up in a predominantly digital world. This is not to say that all young people are immersed in digital and social media. Young

people continue to make up the highest proportion of social media users, but how they use social media and what platforms they prefer is far from static. The use of Facebook, for example, continues to drop among teenagers. Furthermore, ownership of smartphones among adolescents and emerging adults has increased and this has brought changes in their social media use; for example, app-based social media such as Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat, have become more popular. Research has established that access to the Internet and social media is vital for many lesbian, gay, bi, trans, queer + (LGBTQ+) young people (Hillier and Harrison, 2007; Selkie et al., 2020). This has manifested in even more acute ways during the COVID-19 pandemic (Paceley et al., 2021) when many LGBTQ+ young people were impacted by social isolation, and in some cases confined to hostile housing environments (Melvin et al., 2021). Social media offer opportunities for self-expression, and for connecting with other LGBTQ+ young people, as well as support services for LGBTQ+ youth (Jenzen and Karl, 2014). Social media platforms also function as repositories of information and provide entertainment. LGBTQ+ social media youth cultures form around and through all these functions. Oftentimes these are enmeshed, meaning that the separate "social modalities of individualism and community" (Macintosh and Bryson, 2008) concur. Fu and Cook (2021) note that research about young people's social media use predominantly focuses on two categories: the use of social media in relation to political engagement and the use of social media for "social interaction, self-expression, and identity formation" (1236). These are relatively broad categories and in the case of LGBTQ+ youth, the focus of this essay, these domains are not separable. For LGBTQ+ youth, self-expression, identity formation and social interaction often mesh with activism and other forms of political discourse. This essay seeks to explore LGBTQ+ youth social media cultures to nuance our understanding of how young people make use of social media in different ways. It thus makes an important contribution to the literature on adolescents' social media use and social media youth cultures, which is

predominantly produced through hetero-cisgender perspectives. Theorising the digital and social media cultures of LGBTQ+ youth, this essay draws on three main bodies of literature: scholarship on young people's social media use, on LGBTQ+ digital cultures, and the less researched field of LGBTQ+ youth media cultures, which have been exemplified by projects such as Scrolling Beyond Binaries, led by Robards and Churchill or Mary L. Gray's (2009a) work on media and rural LGBTQ youth, see also Berliner, 2018; Pullen 2014; Pullen and Cooper, 2010). Through a digital cultural studies approach – which centres on how digital media technologies form part of our everyday life (Hjorth, 2018), recognises the materiality of digital practices (van Doorn, 2011), and seeks to understand how our digital and social media imaginaries and practices produce new forms of socialites – the essay explores the key themes of identities, affinities, communities and youth voices. The following sections will introduce key debates around young people's social media use as framed by discourses of risk, and moral panics, followed by a discussion about how young LGBTQ+ people use social media for self-expression and community formation. The essay then looks at some of the differences between social media platforms to illustrate how LGBTQ+ youth use different platforms for different purposes. Further, some of the important contextual aspects relating to LGBTQ+ youth cultures and social media are dealt with, such as the hidden pressures brought by the pervasive image that our society is open and tolerant to diversity in terms of sexual identity, and that being lesbian, gay or bisexual in this "post homophobic" world should be completely unproblematic. This, I suggest, is reinforced across social media discourse and interaction, where the imperative is not to be "normal" as in straight but to be "normal" as in happy. Against this background, further sections look at identity work and self-representation on social media, including a discussion of YouTube and TikTok subgenres such as the coming out video and gender transitioning vlogs. The essay also looks at digital trans youth cultures specifically, noting the particular importance of online

communities and resources for trans and gender-diverse young people to mitigate the lack of support and recognition in education, healthcare, leisure, and so on and to build community resilience in the face of rampant transphobia, frequently targeting youth specifically. Relatedly, the essay ends with a discussion of how young LGBTQ+ people operationalise "affinity spaces" (Wargo, 2017b) across social media that form the basis for social change, such as transforming genders and sexualities as well as the basis for digital and social media activism around global LGBTQ+ rights.

LGBTQ+ Youth and Rethinking Risk

The fact that young people carve out their online worlds and form their own social media cultures has, for as long as social media have existed, caused concern in adult society. This takes several different expressions: increased screen time among youth is widely debated as a health concern (Festl, 2021); social media have been charged with causing mental health problems in young people (Keles et al., 2020; Rideout et al., 2018); concerns for adolescents' exposure to explicit material are frequently voiced (Cameron et al., 2005; Livingstone et al., 2012); youth and children's use of the Internet is associated with "stranger danger", often with homophobic overtones (Robinson and Davies, 2018) and various online platforms have been associated with negative influences. These anxieties about youth social media use and cultures variably intersect with public feelings about children and young people's sexuality and LGBTQ+ youth social media cultures present us with public manifestations of sexuality. "Youthful sexuality", Talburt (2018, xiii) notes, "confounds and upsets the comfortable binary of youth and adult", and these feelings are intimately linked with "fantasies and fears of the future, the nation, class mobility and security and, always, race" (2018, xiv). As scholars like Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009) have demonstrated, societal anxieties around LGBTQ+ youth sexualities and the "queer child" are pervasive and heightened. Such fears

reverberate in contemporary neoconservative discourse (Robinson and Davies, 2018) in ways that put LGBTQ+ youth at the sharp end of debates about gender and gender and sexuality minority rights and affect their life situation, for example through the impact on policies in education environments. Alleged risks of young people's use of social media are frequently evoked in media panics. A case in point is the media attention given to the concept of "rapid onset gender dysphoria", a (discredited) theory that claims "social contagion" causes children to become transgender (Serano, 2019). In media debates, social media youth cultures are often implicated in such "social contagion", as exemplified in tabloid newspapers running stories with claims such as "Teenage YouTube stars who enthuse about changing sex are making being transgender 'cool'" (*The Mail Online,* 29 October 2017).[1]

While concerns about both youth sexualities and youth social media cultures continue to cause debate in popular media, scholars have demonstrated that youth navigate online spaces and content in complex ways that undermine any simplistic models for risk and so on (Livingstone, 2008). Further breaking away from the overwhelming focus on online risk, youth studies scholars have also given attention to positives, such as how social media use provides opportunities for social connection and interaction with other young people (Pascoe, 2011). Further recent research has also demonstrated that making generalising assumptions about the effects of social media on adolescents is problematic because any link between social media use and "affective well-being" differs significantly between individuals (Beyens et al., 2020; Valkenburg et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, mass media continue to portray young people's relationship with social media in negative terms, emphasising risks over benefits. Online bullying is a risk factor for LGBTQ+ youth, but the Internet also offers opportunities for help-seeking, not always

present in their lives otherwise. Hillier et al. (2012) suggest that LGBTQ+ youth may take greater risks online than non-LGBTQ+ youth, but also recognise that many LGBTQ+ young people live in hostile or unsafe environments offline. In other words, to LGBTQ+ young people, the online context is not experienced as a higher risk than their offline world. What we also need to consider here is that any categorical distinction between online and offline is of course increasingly meaningless as in lived reality these worlds mesh, and for LGBTQ+ youth, risk is a factor to negotiate across these environments. In the case of LGBTQ+ youth, discourses of risk thus need to be understood in the context of their overall lived experience. By focusing on mainstream and adult-centric debates about online risk, often limited to discussing sexual content or bullying, we may overlook less apparent, yet commanding aspects of risk for this group. For example, we also need to consider the risk of lack of access to online content. Due to issues of sexual politics and LGBTQ+ rights "increasingly materialising within technical functions of Internet governance and architecture rather than at the surface level of content" (DeNardis and Hackl, 2016, 753) relevant content may be difficult to find. As Rodriguez (2022) has highlighted, LGBTQ+ content on YouTube is often subject to age restriction, which means viewers must be signed in and 18 years of age or older to view, in effect excluding many young people from accessing community-based educational content. The impact of such technological policies and tools on young people, in particular, is illustrated across examples of "net safety software" used by parents or schools (e.g. the much-criticised Kiddle) or platform policies that routinely categorise LGBTQ+ topics as "unsafe"[2], or TikTok's "shadowbanning" (i.e., hiding) of LGBTQ hashtags in some regions (Fox, 2020) and similar moderation techniques used by Instagram affecting queer and feminist activists (Are, 2021; Duguay et al., 2020), and search engines and social media platforms' opaque algorithms that work to reproduce biases about gender, race and sexuality (Bridges, 2021; Fosch Villaronga et al., 2021; Nakamura 2013).

Self -Expression and Community Formation

Despite cultural and technological constraints, there are many examples of how young LGBTQ+ people "resist prescribed user protocols of mainstream social networking sites (SNS) as well as employ pragmatic strategies for navigating a binary gendered online world, staking out their own methods and aesthetics for self expression and community formation" (Jenzen, 2017, 1627). Herein lies one of the key potentials of social media for LGBTQ+ youth; the expansion of a possibility for self-representation, both at an individual and a collective level. Online participation can be enabling of self-expression and community building in significant ways (see Duguay, 2022). These opportunities are prised open to produce corrective narratives that seek to offer alternatives to mainstream media representations of queer life or indeed make up for a lack of relevant media content about LGBTQ+ young people's lives. The impetus to this creative impulse can be traced back to LGBTQ+ subcultures that predate social and digital media but the combined platform features of ease of uploading user-generated content and connectivity are stimulating and supporting LGBTQ+ youth cultures. The self-publishing mechanisms of social media platforms like YouTube, Tumblr, or TikTok enable stories of diverse queer lives to be told, and the platforms' searchability and algorithms along with the use of hashtags (Duguay, 2022) facilitate audiences to find content that resonates with them. Such self-publishing bypasses the gatekeepers of mainstream media and in some cases works to amplify LGBTQ+ youth voices. Examples include YouTube web series produced around the world, representing local LGBTQ+ lives and experiences; queer documentary films distributed via social media to circumvent censorship in China (Shaw and Zhang, 2018); several queer-inclusive sex education channels on YouTube, produced by influencers like Stevie Boebi or medical doctors like @thatgaydoctor and @doctorcarlton on TikTok along with many young

people who seek to mitigate the lack of LGBTQ+ perspectives in school curricula (Sill, 2022); and a vast amount of fan fiction and fan art queering mainstream popular culture, across online "participatory, networked communities of interpretation" (Duggan, 2022, 148).

On the other hand, it is important not to overstate the emancipatory potential of digital and social media for marginalised youth. As Berliner (2018, 4) warns, assumptions about young people and the "self-actualizing, self-empowered youth that is precipitated through empowerment discourse" are far from the full reality for most marginalised LGBTQ+ young people. Similarly, Wei (2021, 6) challenges the notion of LGBTQ+ youth globally being served by the Internet and social media has created a "borderless world where gay culture flows freely without restrictions, resistance, and transnational power hierarchies and asymmetries". In their study of Spanish gay male subjectivity on Instagram, Gras-Velázquez and Maestre-Brotons (2021) found that the production of gay subjectivities was dominated by neoliberal understandings of identity with a heavy emphasis on individual and commodifiable attributes, and "self-engineering" with limited scope for the formation of collective identity and civic mobilisation. They argue that "as a technology of subjectivity, Instagram may threaten the activists' efforts to seek equality by strongly individualising gay men" (5). As this illustrates and as this essay goes on to discuss, mechanisms of visibility and information management online are ideologically constituted. It is not only the case that digital and social media are not inherently empowering, but empowerment also means different things for different young people in different contexts (Berliner, 2018).

LGBTQ+ youth use the Internet and social media differently from non-LGBTQ youth (Hillier et al., 2012), and there are differences across different LGBT sexual and gender identities too (Pew Research Centre, 2013). In their study with trans youth (15-18 years),

Selkie et al. (2020) found that YouTube was the most used site for seeking out trans-specific content (80%), but also that the relatively small platform Tumblr is really important to this group with 44% accessing it for trans specific content. LGBTQ+ youth's extensive use of online resources and social media platforms shows how these meet LGBTQ+ young people's needs in ways that schools and health services fail to do (including but not limited to sex education, mental health support etc). This situation is indicative of how far we still have to go in terms of equity for LGBTQ+ youth who are clearly not having their needs met by education providers or health services, and at the same time demonstrates the central place of social media in their everyday lives. More broadly, we see that LGBTQ+ youth's social media activities are often orientated towards social interactions they are less likely to access in their offline lives, due to stigma and marginalisation, including self-expression and affirmation, building community, finding information and support (Adkins et al., 2018, Lucassen et al., 2018) as well as relationships and romance (Hillier et al., 2012).

Research also suggests that common everyday social media practices, such as taking and posting selfies, take on different, and often political, meanings for LGBTQ+ youth. Again, this needs to be understood in the context of lacking mainstream media representation (Vivienne, 2017), which makes social media opportunities for self-representation critical, both as a tool of community building and as a corrective to often sensationalising or dramatized mainstream media representation, particularly of gender non-conforming youth. But the division is not as clear cut, as Susan Driver argues in her book *Queer Youth Cultures* LGBTQ+ youth's "cultural practices are not classifiable as either mainstream or marginal, they are neither inside nor outside dominant cultural institutions; rather, they criss-cross commercial mass media, grassroots subcultural, and activist realms" (2008, 1).

The Plurality of Social Media

The social media sphere is growing and diversifying, and there is an increasing flow of content and interaction between traditional broadcast, lifestyle and news media and social media. Lindgren's (2022) definition of social media as "large-scale, Internet-based, environments for making connections and sharing content, either by linking or self-creation, as well as responding to that content" highlights how social media are frameworks for participation and community building. Social media platform characteristics vary to a great degree. Different platforms have different functionalities, affordances, purposes, modalities of self-expression, user uptake, and levels of privacy. Social networking sites (SNS) like Facebook emphasize connectivity by foregrounding features like friends, encouraging frequent mundane social interactions via 'likes', emoji expressions, and /or written messages; and by offering the option of joining different groups. SNS are thus distinct from other forms of social media where the relationship between users is more indirect, perhaps clustered around a thematic hashtag (#), or formed around exchanges in the comments box relating to a YouTube video, for example. The plurality of social media offers different modes of engagement, and LGBTQ+ youth use different platforms for different purposes and with different expectations. This can perhaps be illustrated by looking at the different styles of images and register of language typically used on Instagram in contrast to Snapchat. Instagram is often associated with a highly curated and idealised or aspirational mediation of the self, where conformity to dominant notions of taste, beauty, attractiveness, and so on is prevalent. But neoliberal ideological imperatives like 'individualism' and self-entrepreneurialism also shape the style and content of what users post. Snapchat on the other hand is associated with the ugly, silly, insignificant and sometimes profane. Such differences are partly due to the distinct affordances of the platforms. The aesthetic filters of Instagram and associated apps, allow users to edit and improve the look of their images and thus

encourage attractive stylisations. On the other hand, the Snapchat function that allows users' content to be automatically deleted after a set amount of time, encourages spontaneity and, some would argue, realism in expression. The ephemeral nature of Snapchat content and interaction in turn produces its own norms and culture – protocols that are not just effects of platform affordances. Similarly, we see different platform vernacular and cultures emerging, for example, around different styles of selfies on Instagram, or around playful skits on TikTok. Many examples from TikTok illustrate how LGBTQ+ youth make full use of the creative potentials of the platform's affordances and vernacular to index and communicate identities. A working example of such "circumscribed creativities" (Zeng and Abidin, 2021, 4) would be TikToks where the creator illustrates how they have experienced moving between 'straight', 'confused', 'bi' and 'gay' by jumping across the floor, while making it appear they move back and forth between these 'identities' over time.[3] The performativity of sexuality is captured in this playful meme, while also authentically expressing how the unstable and layered nature of identity is experienced from the young person's perspective.

LGBTQ+ youth cultures on social media have a precursor in early Internet culture (O'Riordan and Phillips, 2007; Robards et al., 2019), including the LGBTQ+ blogosphere, numerous listservs and LGBTQ+ online forums, some specifically for LGBTQ+ youth (Cserni and Talmud, 2015; Gray, 2009a). These sites serve community needs, often as hubs of information and knowledge exchange. However, they lacked the fluency and more lively interaction of social media. LGBTQ+ communities are among the early adopters of online networked digital media, including earlier versions of social media such as MySpace (launched 2003), to mention one (Macintoch and Bryson, 2008). A trans YouTube community emerged around 2006 (Raun, 2016) and at around the same time (2007), LGB

coming-out videos, where individuals disclose their sexual identity, also appeared on the platform (Wuest, 2014).

Having reviewed platform affordances that shape youth engagement and use of social media as well as looking at the trajectory of the development of LGBTQ+ social media cultures, we can note four particular elements of social media affordances have been instrumental to the formation of LGBTQ+ social media youth cultures: first, peer networking and community building as facilitated by platform-specific opportunities for social connections; second, how social media offer the space for visual self-expression and storying of the self; third, how semi-anonymous user profiles enable youth to explore gender and sexual identities; and fourthly the possibility to participate in counterpublics and civic discourse (Jenzen, 2017). We may think of these as key categories in a broader "typology of uses" (Hanckel et al., 2019) informed by platform affordances as well as the needs of LGBTQ+ youth. The next section contextualises LGBTQ+ youth cultures and experiences in contemporary society, after which we return to the key concepts outlined here and explore them more in detail by situating them in relation to different social media.

Growing Up Queer in a Post-Homophobic World

Today's LGBTQ+ young people are growing up in a world that is presupposed as post-homophobic (see Boulila, 2019). Recent advancements in legal rights, particularly centred around same-sex marriage, have accumulated a wide-ranging symbolic meaning of "equality" in Western liberal public discourse. Combined with greater visibility of some LGBTQ+ identities and/or experiences in mass media and popular culture, a discourse of a post-homophobic society is emerging, purporting that coming out as lesbian, gay or bisexual is unproblematic and no longer associated with the risk of harassment, discrimination, or

shaming. This assimilation does not pose a challenge to heteronormativity. Rather, degrees of homotolerance are incorporated into the ideological status quo where heterosexuality is a taken-for-granted good and 'natural', but explicit acceptance of LGB identities is also seen as a majority position (Svendsen et al., 2018). The notion of a modern society being characterised by an open and tolerant attitude to diversity in terms of sexual identity is increasingly mobilised across both commercial and political spheres. This is also integrated into the commercial profile of some of the major social media platforms, such as YouTube, a company that "selectively incorporates [...] LGBTQ stories and producers useful for its business purposes" (Rodriguez, 2022,11). For young people, homotolerance brings the expectation that being LGBTQ+ is no longer an issue. Young people are interpellated, in the Althusserian sense, to think of themselves as equal and unproblematically socially accepted. A stunning example is how this message is implied even in Stonewall's (the United Kingdom's leading LGBTQ+ rights organisation) statement slogan: "Some people are gay. Get over it!" [4] The campaign – we are meant to understand – addresses homophobia by calling out those who have 'issues' with gay people. However, at the same time, the slogan interpellates LGBTQ+ people to get over themselves; to act up to the assimilation on offer. There are several issues at stake here. Firstly, young LGBTQ+ people who do experience stigmatisation because of their gender or sexual identity are implicitly discouraged to address this as an external, institutional or societal issue, and therefore more likely to think the problem lies with them as individuals. Secondly, young LGBTQ+ people are increasingly faced with "performative progressiveness" (Brodyn and Ghaziani, 2018), a concept that identifies the gap between generally accepting attitudes of LGBTQ+ progressiveness that "lack behavioural backing" and LGBTQ+ youth's individual struggle or negative experiences in everyday life. This landscape where overt and 'old-fashioned' condemnations of homosexuality have been replaced by subtle and often covert forms of prejudice and

microaggression (Clarke, 2019) is complex and can be difficult for youth to navigate. Contradictions abound and it can be difficult to raise concerns about homophobia and transphobia in an environment that disavows the existence of such intolerance (O'Riordan et al., 2022). As Svendsen et al. (2018, 276) conclude, "becoming queer after homotolerance involves negotiating old stigmas that have been severed from common-sense understandings of homophobia". Both Berliner (2018) and Gras-Velázquez and Maestre-Brotons (2021) direct our attention to how across social media produced by LGBTQ+ youth the desire to be included in the narrative of the happy and affirmed queer youth is vocalised. Drawing on Ahmed (2010), Gras-Velázquez and Maestre-Brotons (2021) suggest that for LGBTQ+ youth today the normativizing imperative is not to be normal as in straight but to be normal as in happy. Thus, it is the spectre of unhappiness rather than non-heterosexuality that causes shame.

A similar message of how to achieve a 'successful' LGBTQ+ identity is repeated in the prolific online video campaign It Gets Better, started in 2010 by Dan Savage and Terry Miller[5] in response to reports about queer youth suicides, related to bullying. The original YouTube video by Savage and Miller describes their struggles as gay youth and how they overcame hardships such as harassment in college and pressure from their religiously conservative families. The video campaign has had a phenomenal global response and its narrative format replicated thousands of times by individuals recording and uploading their own personal videos in the same testimonial style, repeating the core message of the original video. Today a dedicated web portal hosts over 60 000 videos, including many by celebrities. Undeniably such a vast repository of life testimonials and messages to LGBTQ+ youth reflects a wide range of diverse voices. However, as many critics have pointed out (see Goltz, 2013, for a summary), the rhetoric of not only Savage and Miller's video message, but a

sizable proportion of the campaign as a whole, is one steeped in neoliberal ideologies (Meyer, 2017), its essential message prescribing assimilation (Gal et al., 2016), and homonormativity (Grzanka and Mann, 2014) through upward mobility. Simplified, the dominant narrative equates a successful future life with White middle-class aspirations and respectable coupledom. This is also reflected in the visual language of the videos. Brandon-Friedman and Kinney (2021, 421) found that minorities were excluded in imagery, as were those who do not "fit social standards of physical attractiveness, and those who challenge heteronormativity and adherence to gender norms".

More problematic, however, is perhaps the implied message of the campaign that it is the responsibility of the individual to overcome homophobia and that it is the (brave and positive) attitude of the young person that is going to bring success. As Gal et al. (2016, 1705) note, the key themes of the videos, such as experiencing bullying and loneliness, are "vastly attributed to the personal realm", and "most participants mention these phenomena without any direct criticism or demands for social change". This illustrates how in an overwhelming amount of rhetoric addressing young people, by young people themselves or others, there is a very strong tendency to individualise or privatise negative experiences.

Relatedly, the It Gets Better narratives also illustrate the prevailing expectation to live up to the post-homophobic subject position; you should embrace your right to express who you are – your individualism. Freedom in the post-homophobic world is defined predominantly by an increase in individualism. The campaign is not unique in mobilising both the individualising frame and the universalising notion of progress, the "getting better", these frames are found also in policy language (Lawrence and Taylor, 2020). The pervasiveness of the progressive narrative is problematic in contemporary society because collective

mobilisation in response to “developing and galvanizing” resistance to LGBTQ+ rights and citizen equalities (Browne and Nash, 2014, 327) is still necessary. This is particularly crucial for trans youth who experience constant threats to legal and state-level recognition and protection. The risk of such systemic failures reaches far beyond celebrating and expressing one’s individualism.

Identity Work on Social Media

Identity development is a central process for all youth. For LGBTQ+ youth it typically involves a more active construction of identity than their straight and/or cisgender peers, which requires them to seek out points of reference beyond their immediate environment. The formal institutions in a young person’s life, such as the family or school, do not offer LGBTQ+ enculturation (Goodwin, 1989 in Wuest, 2014). Despite the increased social acceptance of LGBTQ+ people in many parts of the world, exploring gender and sexual identities outside the heterosexual cisgender norms is still an uncertain and sometimes lonely journey for many young people and opportunities for LGBTQ+ youth to openly express or live their gender and sexual identity remain restricted (Hillier and Harrison, 2007). To overcome these limiting factors LGBTQ+ youth construct their own social media cultures. Social media offer spaces to explore and express aspects of LGBTQ+ identities and lives, and young people utilise social media for informal learning and teaching as part of their identity development (Fox and Ralston, 2016). Engaging in everyday creative practices associated with social media, such as taking and posting selfies or other images and using mobile phones, is connected to processes of forming individual subjectivities, that are laminated or sedimented rather than fixed and singular (Wargo, 2017b). These activities understood as performative elements of identity, are social in nature and the self is in part constructed through mediatised interactions with other people on social media, and therefore also

conditioned by the commercial logic of the social media platform (Simpson and Semaan, 2021).

Ok and Kang's (2021) research shows how gender diverse children and young people use social media to explore and learn about their gender identity. This includes sharing experiences around not just gender dysphoria, but also experiences of social acceptance (or lack of) as well as discussing a wide range of aspects of gender as embodied and culturally produced. This may revolve around questions such as 'Am I trans?' or a more diffuse sense of feeling out of place. Many use social media to seek out a vocabulary to be able to describe what they feel or experience, as well as a sense of belonging to a community.

Particular social media contexts may offer the opportunity for young people to be known in ways that feels more authentic to them. In Wargo's (2017b, 576) case study, exploring identity work across three young queer or trans identifying young persons' social media posts, this sense of authenticity or realness came from how in the online production of their selves, their "sexuality and gender, alongside their youth status, were not peripheral to their everyday lives, but central". Others have highlighted how the tagging function on Tumblr offers trans users "the unique possibility to both unobtrusively make their transness relevant in personal, quotidian moments while also rendering their self-narratives more Complex" (Dame, 2016, 30) and constitutes as Oakley (2016, 6) suggests an "excellent example of affordances shaping usage". However, a contrasting scenario is suggested by Simpson and Semaan (2021) who highlight how TikTok's algorithm which regulates what content users see is privileging homonormative (Duggan, 2002) intersections of LGBTQ+ identities (e.g. body size, ability, race) as well as stereotypes, thus via a mechanism of "algorithmic exclusion" (Simpson and Semaan, 2021; also see Duguay 2022, and for a study

about YouTube, see Rodriguez 2022) contributing to further normalisation of some identities while excluding others. Such exclusion, Cover (2019,603) argues is "implicated in the production of certain kinds of unliveabilities" affecting youth, and as Erlick (2018) shows, disproportionally impacts the lives of trans youth of colour.

These practices also offer opportunities for identity validation. Marston (2019, 283) highlights how comments on images posted by LGBTQ+ youth can "foster feelings of affirmation" while the polysemic nature of images offers ways to avoid "labels" thus retaining the possibility of fluidity in terms of sexual or gender identities. We also see how social media play a part in collective or shared identities being articulated. An example of this is how on Instagram, specific cultures of femininity have become visible, including queer femme cultures, characterised by aesthetics of hyper-femininity, softness and vulnerability (Schwartz, 2020). Rob Cover's (2018, 2019) work on emerging sexualities offers an exploration into how social media spaces are used by youth to expand and challenge rather than seek affirmation and validation of established LGBT identities and representations. Social media spaces have been utilised by youth to produce new diverse gender and sexuality categories (Cover, 2019). This emerging new taxonomy of gender and sexuality is acknowledged in Facebook's expanding its range of profile gender options (thus further finetuning their collection of demographic data (Burgess et al., 2016)), and increasingly incorporated in related commercial digital spheres such as dating apps (ibid), and this is framed as a departure from binary understandings gender and sexuality, as in, for example, #OkBoomer TikTok, where young people confront the efforts of the parental generation to dictate and police restricting gender norms (Zeng and Abidin, 2021). Thus, as Cover (2019, 603) points out, this identity work "contests both homophobic and liberal LGBT-affirmative discourses", while retaining an attachment to identity language (e.g., pansexual, asexual, non-

binary, agender etc), and despite being mobilised through a “less deliberate cultural shift” (Cover, 2018, 285) than queer politics of sexual liberation, they are deeply felt by the youth producing and embodying such new identities.

Fox and Ralston (2016, 636) note several further aspects of how social media intersect with identity work, including constructing, expressing, and managing one’s identity. Different platforms provide different opportunities and challenges in this respect, due to their different affordances and structures. Platforms that require very little personal information for creating a user profile, like Tumblr, offer opportunities to be visible as a self that may be difficult to embody in other spheres of a young LGBTQ+ person’s life, and enable them to express individual subjectivity (Wargo, 2017b) to others and themselves predominantly via an open-ended style of text, images, and quotes/ re-posts. Such “lifestreaming” brings the self into being as an “ontological act of being and composing the self” (Wargo, 2017b, 572) that is fragmented, fluid and multi-layered, and also in dialogue with others. As Wargo (2017b, 575) describes, “through selfies, artefactual literacies, and video, LGBTQ+ youth are creating new spaces not only to express their thought and identities but also to be known differently”. These opportunities to produce selves where one’s sexual identity and gender identity can be expressed iteratively and in queer ways appeal to LGBTQ+ youth. School and college environments, like some home environments, often work to enforce heteronormative norms and can be oppressive and curtailing for LGBTQ+ youth and their online sociality may offer alternatives and buffer the impact of enforced normativity. In contrast to Tumblr, platforms that tend to have close links to off-line worlds, like Facebook, may not offer the same freedom to explore and articulate gendered and sexual selves, but can in different ways be useful for LGBTQ+ youth to communicate about their identity to established social circles, such as friends and family, in a relatively controllable way. This may include performative

acts like changing one's profile's pronouns or gender (Jenzen, 2017), altering relationship status, adding an LGBTQ-themed filter to one's profile picture, or a rainbow emoji next to one's name, or posting a more considered announcement, such as a 'coming out' statement or video (Alexander and Losh, 2010; De Ridder and Dhaenens, 2019; Wuest, 2014). Duguay (2022) summarises these processes under the concept of "identity modulation", and emphasises how "people, *together with* platforms negotiate the gray area between being private and public with personal information" (13, emphasis added), like sexual identity. Youth also use social networking sites for everyday learning through social interaction with LGBTQ+ interest groups they may have joined or pages they are following. A key aspect here is the extent to which young people feel they can define and express their identity on their terms (Fox and Ralston, 2016). Negotiating visibility on SNS is a part of managing one's identity that can be both useful and challenging for LGBTQ+ youth. As described above, to some young people, SNS provide a relatively safe and nonconfrontational space to 'come out' to friends and family. However, self-disclosure can still generate negative reactions, and this can be difficult to handle in a semi-public environment like SNS. There is also the challenge of context collapse (boyd 2011), which signifies the lack of control we may have over how information about ourselves travels across social media networks. As suggested above, young people typically use different social media platforms and SNS for different purposes, engaging with different social circles, on different terms. The following analogy, expressed by some young LGBTQ+ people discussing social media, illustrates this:

> Facebook is a pub where Tumblr is more like a chi chi bar …
>
> What does that make Reddit?
>
> Reddit is a club. Everyone is there, nobody knows each other, they all just sort of exist. (cited in Jenzen, 2017)

Here the young people express how they see Facebook as more of an everyday 'familiar' type of public space that is also cross-generational and, to an extent, 'local' to them. The quotation also indicates how they associate different platforms with different types of social relationships and different social protocols, expressed as the cultural difference between respectively a pub, a more 'select' and stylised bar and a nightclub with a big anonymous crowd. For some young people, sharing is one of the primary modes of participating (Marwick and boyd, 2014), and merging contexts, may be relatively unproblematic, while for others, it may be very important to keep different online social environments separate. Context collapse is also linked to how, across different social media, there are different affordances for managing privacy settings, and information control. Marwick and boyd (2014, 1052) argue that "engagement with social media has shifted conceptions of privacy from an individualistic frame to one that is networked" but challenge the idea that teenagers do not care about privacy online. Consequently, negotiating online privacy is a central part of identity management for LGBTQ+ youth and when privacy is violated online it may force situations of self-disclosure at a point in time when they were not quite ready. Privacy violation in other cases has resulted in youth being outed by others, which may have severe consequences, such as harassment or bullying. It is also an issue that is exasperated by intersectionality. Multiple marginalisations mean that some groups and individuals are less in control of their privacy than others, and ultimately put at higher risk than others. In sum, the anonymity offered by some social media sites, by using a pseudonym or avatar, may be advantageous for LGBTQ+ youth exploring different aspects of their identity or accessing community resources and seeking friendship. However, in some circumstances, it may be more important to feel validated and 'known' as a whole person by others, in which case anonymity is not prioritised (Jenzen and Karl, 2014). Similarly, the reactions young people

receive when they ‘come out’ on social media, or they observe others receiving, impact their identity development.

Coming Out

As mentioned in the above section, social media technologies may be helpful for youth across their coming out processes. ‘Coming out’ is a multiple, ongoing and variable process for young people who may identify as lesbian, gay, bi, trans, or queer, or seeking to express a non-belonging or discomfort with genderism and compulsory heterosexuality. There is a host of literature on the conditions and implications of coming out for LGBTQ+ youth (e.g., D’Amico et al., 2015; Klein et al., 2015; Kosciw et al., 2015; Mayeza, 2021; Orne, 2011), including critiques of associated linear identity development models (i.e., Cass, 1979) as well as of pressures to come out that the normative dichotomy of being out or being ‘in the closet’, to use the popular phrase, may create alongside the notion of individuals coming out to a “coherent final subject” (Klein et al., 2015, 300). These critiques are relevant for youth experiences and understandings of coming out. Social media platforms are one of the social worlds where youth perform coming out processes. This includes the process of coming out to oneself, which may involve a range of activities, including observing online reactions to other young people’s openness, gravitating towards LGBTQ+ representations and online affiliations (Gray 2009a, Marston 2019), and finding likeness with other LGBTQ+ people’s mediated presences and experiences (Craig and McInroy, 2014). Giano (2019, 872) argues that for gay men such online experiences “catalysed” and “expedited” their coming out, and that “early milestones about the realization of homosexuality came largely from online experiences”. Gray (2009b) finds in her work on rural LGBTQ+ youth identities in the US, that increasingly young people “weave media-generated source materials into their identity work, particularly as they master the politics of visibility’s master narrative event: ‘coming

out'". Similarly, participants in Craig and McInroy's (2014) study reported that they became more comfortable with their own identities, through watching or reading the stories of other LGBTQ+ youth online, which also supports the argument that online resources are particularly important to LGBTQ+ people around the coming out process. Social media are thus a resource for young people in various aspects of identity work and may also offer reassurance in terms of the liveability of LGBTQ+ lives. However, as De Ridder and Dhaenens (2019, 43) argue, we should be careful not "to take the emancipatory potentials of an online coming out for granted". Furthermore, there are differences between LGB experience and trans experience in terms of coming out on YouTube. Intersectional systems of oppression and privilege in society produce different opportunities and risks online. Trans women are targeted with online sexist, gender-based harassment to a higher degree than cisgender women, and to a higher degree than others in the LGBTQ+ community (Powell et al., 2018; also see Hines, 2019). Trans-misogyny is prevalent in discourse across social media platforms and may impact negatively on young people, even when the focus is on a public figure like an artist, an athlete or a celebrity coming out as trans, rather than targeting the young person themselves because it normalizes dehumanizing and derogatory language when talking about trans women. Trans vloggers on YouTube have also been subjected to targeted actions by anti-trans campaigners, seeking to have their videos removed by flagging them as violating Community Guidelines (Rodriguez, 2022). I will return to the topic of anti-trans discourse on social media in the section on Trans Youth Social Media Cultures.

To some young people, coming out on social media simply offers a practical mechanism for informing most of their social relations in one moment, about their sexual identity, or chosen gender. Some may find that coming out via a written or recorded message on social media is less emotionally charged than in a face-to-face situation and can alleviate stress. The time delay implicit in such asynchronous communication also offers opportunities to reflect before

one responds, which may somewhat neutralise affective reactions. Beyond these pragmatic aspects of managing the affective dimensions of coming out, the act of visualising oneself as queer or trans may more fundamentally contribute to the sense of being "real" (Wuest, 2014). Young people also look to social media for examples of the actual coming out speech act (Craig and McInroy, 2014) and parental reactions (Wei 2021). The YouTube sub-genre of coming out videos responds to this need (Alexander and Losh, 2010). As Wei (2021, 1) argues, "the process of 'coming out on video' has been acknowledged and celebrated as empowerment and emancipation for queer people, and as highly public and political spectacles that often draw a large crowd for democratic participation where the 'YouTubers' are seen as role models who encourage and support other queer youths to come out". This form of "participatory storytelling" (2021, 2) accumulatively affords a collective archive of LGBTQ+ youth's experience, that holds a tension of representing diverse and personal experiences while also contributing to a rhetorical trope of a formulaic coming out, combining a revelation of a true (assumed inner) self with normative predictive notions of a successful outcome. Wei (2021, 5) notes two constitutional parts of the mediated coming out narrative: first, the confession of difference, which has caused hurt and made the young person hide parts of themselves, and second, the "imagining" of a "better future". This mediated "effort of queer youths to transform a shameful identity into one of pride in order to gain value from a coming out story", De Ridder and Dhaenens (2019, 56) underline is a form of emotional labour, and we need to consider this to better understand the complexities of how young LGBTQ+ youth make productive use of social media within a wider framework of affective capitalism.

Some YouTube coming-out videos have reached wide circulation and received over a million views and this is one way in which LGBTQ+ youth have become more visible (Wuest, 2014).

However, due to cultural and algorithmic factors particular coming out narratives are more visible or readily available than others, leading Wei (2021, 6) to conclude that the YouTube genre is “stunningly and overwhelmingly white and male dominated”. It is therefore important that researchers in this area do not conflate high rates of views or popularity with what is meaningful to different youth in different contexts (Jenzen, 2017). The searchable tagging system used on social media platforms such as YouTube nevertheless helps direct audiences to the coming out videos by YouTubers tagging their videos with widely recognisable terms such as “coming out”, “coming out gay” and so on (Wuest, 2014), while also being used to narrow down the content of specific relevance or interest, that also functions to “locate the video’s story in a particular situation” (Wuest, 2014, 24), by adding tags that are more descriptive or localized. Tagging is here used by producers and audiences as a tool to overcome the algorithmic biases, as well as a mechanism for producing identity (Wargo, 2017b) and publics (Dame, 2016).

At a more detailed level of the structural organisation of YouTube coming out videos, there are further constituting factors that shape the narrative, including incentives to present as a likeable personality (Wei, 2021, 7), projecting entrepreneurial positivity and creating possibilities for viewer positions that are agreeable to non-LGBTQ viewers. These aspects are linked to how coming-out videos have become media spectacles but also speak to how the specific media context of YouTube structures the style and meanings of young people’s coming out stories (De Ridder and Dhaenens, 2019; Lovelock, 2017). However, adopting a personal address and encouraging viewers to interact with the video, both significant features of the coming out video, are at once connected to the marketplace model of YouTube as a platform, and signal a profound desire to connect with other LGBTQ+ youth. Many vloggers use the coming out video to both connect with others for support and to offer support (Wuest,

2014). Their videos thus not only function to achieve visibility but also tell other young people 'I see you' and encourage community building through connection and dialogue. Such connections also happen at an aesthetic level; for example, on TikTok, we see young people performing their coming out using memetic remixes (Zeng and Abidin, 2021) of lyrics of a particular song to put the message across, and the layering of the song and their performance become a meme format that other youths replicate in their videos. On the one hand, the much shorter coming-out TikToks are a further stylisation of the dramatized coming-out moment, but on the other hand, because of how they are shot casually on a mobile phone, while bopping about with a friend, or in an everyday setting like sitting down for tea, they come closer to the messiness of everyday life.

With the emergence of social media influencers and the semi-professionalism of some LGBTQ+ vloggers, we also see the more practised take on the coming-out video. These, as Wuest (2014) notes, tend to be more didactic in style, offering advice and role modelling rather than asking for help from others while retaining a personal address and narrating the 'authentic' self. De Ridder and Dhaenens (2019) point to a range of stylistic strategies in YouTuber influencers or celebrities' coming out videos that aim to draw audiences in and increase data traffic on their channel. Influencers are an increasingly important part of LGBTQ+ social media culture (Chen and Kanai, 2021; Duguay, 2019), amplifying queer culture and fostering community (Abidin and Cover, 2019) while operating at the intersection of political visibility and publicity (Berliner, 2018). Two instructive case studies are presented by John Wei (2021) in their comparison of two sets of popular YouTubers, the Rhodes brothers from the United States and the Huang brothers in Taiwan. Both have incorporated their coming out into their already established channels, and the analysis shows how the centring of the emotional register and the narrative structure featuring the suspense

of the ‘reveal’ and the reaction from their parents effectively dramatizes social relations in the everyday in line with other forms of social media and reality TV entertainment. This may be perceived as a spectacle, but an enduring appeal of such coming-out archetypes to many LGBTQ+ audiences may be because of how they manifest a collective ritual.

Wei’s case study also offers an interesting illustration of how central the parental reaction is. For youth coming out during their teens, the quest for autonomy overlaps with the process of coming out, and due to having both emotional and financial ties to their parents or caregivers, their partial dependence is a major factor in how they feel able to express their sexual or gender identities. There is therefore also a major interest in this group to gain insight into how other people’s parents have reacted, which these YouTube and TikTok videos, rehearsing the thick texture of the emotional process, including body language, tone of voice, emotive expressions, and so on, provide. Again, mirroring key themes of many coming out videos, the parental reaction videos exclaim some of the same desires of the youth – as they revolve around being supportive of their children realise themselves, articulating acceptance and “unconditional love” and seeking to reassure by playing down the child’s difference (Wei, 2021, 12-13). Ultimately, Wei (2021, 14) argues, both types of videos “are still trapped in the normative rhetoric for social integration and assimilation rather than the more fundamental change of underlying social structures”. The coming-out videos and the parental reaction videos arguably perform important work – for the individuals who record and share them and for audiences who feel seen, feel less lonely, and experience community belonging. But despite their public nature, in their narrative, they persistently orientate the process of coming out toward the private sphere. Personal relations are foregrounded over systemic marginalisation. The (heroic) individual’s overcoming of internalised fears is foregrounded

over more messy negotiations with parents and family over the disclosure of non-normative sexualities and genders, that many teenagers live.

For a marginalised group, self-representation is a powerful political act, and the YouTube genre of LGBTQ+ youth coming-out stories forms part of this. Despite its "simplifying, essentializing discursive strategy, identity is important in practice", argues Wuest (2014, 22), and to LGBTQ+ youth these videos not only offer necessary and important alternatives to mainstream media's representation of them from which they are shut out, but they also represent the political act of taking charge of the means of media production to challenge the prevailing narrative by telling their own story firsthand. This has become important to trans and gender-diverse youth, who are experiencing more intense forms of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007, 1), in which they are wronged "specifically in their capacity as a knower". On an individual level, trans and gender diverse youth are routinely questioned about their ability to "know" their gender (Jenzen, 2017). On a wider systemic level, trans people's existence is often put into question as 'debatable', mainstream media representations of trans youth (McInroy and Craig, 2015; Trans Media Watch, 2010) are rife with stereotypes, sensationalising and are dominated by cisgender perspectives, and knowledge about trans and gender-diverse lives from within the community is completely underrepresented in the mainstream domain. The way trans youth are underserved by mainstream media, but also by school curricula, makes it especially important for them to produce and share their own media. The next section furthers the discussion on trans youth social media as information activism, responding to epistemic injustice by centring trans knowledge.

Trans Youth Social Media Cultures

Both YouTube and Tumblr have been identified as particularly important social media spaces for trans youth's cultural production (Fink and Miller, 2014; Miller, 2017; Raun, 2016). However, without subcultural knowledge about how to navigate online information about transgender people, gender dysphoria, gender transitioning, and so on, young people are first and foremost directed to ciscentric content because of how search engines and 'digital gatekeepers' (Baker and Potts, 2013, 188) work. A participant in Jenzen's (2017) research with trans youth noted about other young trans or gender-questioning people that:

> [the] people who really need positive support are those not yet part of the community and they are not helped by mainstream media. They just see all the crap, the negative stuff that the [mainstream] media show.

From this, is it clear to see the motivation of trans youth to make full use of social media platforms to ensure that when other trans and gender-questioning youth go online to seek information and explore gender, they can find helpful and relevant information (Erlick, 2018). Telling their own stories, and representing their realities visually, also helps to counter misinformation and misrepresentation. For example, in contrast to mainstream media representations of trans lives, which overwhelmingly emphasise passing as the main ambition, user-generated trans vlogs instead typically centre on feeling comfortable in oneself as an aim.

Scholarship considering user-generated content on YouTube, such as trans vlogs, (Horak, 2014; Jenzen, 2017; Raun, 2016) emphasise how 'these videos are enormously productive for the trans youth who make and watch them' (Raun, 2016, np). Trans youth vloggers address a wide range of topics, in a variety of styles. Recurring topics include relationships, using public toilets, school, family, mental health, gender dysphoria, clothes, make-up, exercise and other forms of self-care. Kosenko et al. (2018) note how visual representations are

particularly important, and Jenzen's (2017) study noted how trans youth garnered a lot of practical life knowledge from other trans vloggers, like how to get hold of a binder if you are too young to make online purchases. Taken together, these YouTube videos can be seen as a collective effort to problem solve situations that trans and gender-diverse youth face in their everyday lives and harbour a valuable educational capacity (Miller, 2017).

Raun's (2016) comprehensive research on trans vlogs made some important inroads into this underresearched area but is mainly concerned with autobiographical vlogging focusing on individuals' encounters with transitioning processes. This is an established YouTube genre, with many vlogs adopting the format of personal video diaries documenting gender transitioning over time. As such, these videos can function in different ways for different audiences. To some audiences, YouTube videos by trans vloggers provide them with vital "how-to" information (Raun, 2015), about hormone treatments, navigating gender affirming healthcare, using a binder, "masculinizing" workout exercises, "femininizing" make-up techniques, and so on, but as Raun (2015) points out, others come to these videos because of what they offer as a living archive of trans experiences and broader trans knowledge. By now, there is a multitude and diversity in experiences and perspectives represented across a sizable volume of videos, and it is important to note that there are both competing positions as well as normative pressures emerging (Miller, 2019; Tortajada et al., 2021). There are also differences between trans masculine and trans feminine vlogging, in terms of how the audio-visual affordances of the video format are used to mediate bodies and the interaction with audiences. For example, Raun (2015, 705) notes how many "trans male vloggers use the camera to construct what testosterone does" by visually privileging the upper body, muscle, and facial hair. Studying the #GirlsLike Us network, Jackson (2018, 1870) highlights how the "technological affordances of Twitter simultaneously served as a conduit through which trans women connected and supported one another and a channel for broadcasting their messages

to broad audiences", pointing to how trans women use social media to support each other in a community facing 'internal' communication mode as well as to speak to wider audiences. Discussing watching YouTube vlogs, some of the trans youth participants in Jenzen's (2017) ethnographic research, commented that they found that the subgenre of transitioning vlogging tended to emphasise a particular transnormative narrative of a 'successful' gender transitioning they did not necessarily subscribe to themselves, but they still highly valued the visual 'evidence' of other trans young people these videos provided and the community conveyed through and forming around these videos. This is also evident from the numerous comments on trans youth's videos by other young people, often commenting that they can relate as a trans person and that they find the video inspiring and a source of hope. More artful and playful approaches to the transitioning vlog also exist, such as vlogger Jamie Rainer's video "FTM Transgender: Photo a day transition timelapse" where he has created a fast montage of thousands of selfies to document his transition in a hypercompressed temporality, but also 'evidencing' or marking his existence every day, day by day.[6] This daily evidencing takes on a particular meaning for trans youth who are routinely challenged at an ontological level. So, where many may primarily see a focus on body transition in these videos, how trans youth audiences' engage is more complex, and we currently do not have a very good understanding of what these audiences actually take away from them.

There are differences in how vloggers address audiences. Some vloggers mainly address peer audiences, for example, Alex Bertie's "Transman problems!" video, where he revisits, through anecdotes, cringeworthy social situations assuming an "in the know" audience who may recognise themselves while using humour to deconstruct stereotypes and gain a critical distance to issues such as misgendering or deadnaming. Other videos primarily serve to educate non-trans audiences (Jenzen, 2017; Miller, 2017), for example, Chase Ross's 'Trans

101' playlist or other 'explainer' videos using a Q&A format. Both types of videos engage in awareness-raising, pedagogy and the articulation of critical consciousness while the peer-to-peer videos also work to produce a sense of community belonging. These videos exist on a continuum of user-generated media by trans youth, which also includes comics (Jenzen, 2017), infographics (Erlick, 2018), memes, and fan art circulated across social media platforms.

An additional aspect of trans youth's digital lives is to be confronted with anti-trans campaigning on social media platforms. Attacks on trans rights come from politically differently positioned quarters, including socially conservative voices, right-wing populist movements and trans-exclusionary feminists and are sometimes referred to as the "gender wars". As Finn Mackay (2021,1) notes about the so-called gender wars: "If you have been anywhere near social media recently, you are likely to have encountered them; high-profile celebrities and public figures have joined in and also furthered mainstream awareness of debate and disagreement around gender identities and trans rights." The conflict between trans-inclusive and trans-exclusionary feminism is fuelled by a circular flow of content between traditional media and social media. Discourse across these spheres divides those who advocate for trans rights, and those who claim these rights will limit their own (See Halberstam, 2018; Hines, 2019, 2020; Mackay, 2021; Pearce et al., 2020). These dynamics are further amplified by social media echo chambers (Hines 2019), and online content from blogs and social media is recirculated and reframed in a range of other online political discourse, often to make an ideological stance against liberalisation. Anti-trans sentiment on social media (and beyond) is associated with the broader contemporary political developments as described above but is also typically clustered around particular flashpoints, such as the debates around the proposed reform of the Gender Recognition Act 2004 (GRA) in the United Kingdom, which has been met with significant backlash (Pearce, 2020), or the

Trump administration's reversal of policy that allowed transgender students in public schools to use toilets that correspond with their gender, in the United States. As the latter example illustrates, these debates frequently centre on trans youth and have a direct impact on trans youth's liveability. Trans youth are portrayed as both victims without agency (see earlier section on "social contagion") and as a threat to other young people, such as in debates about schools and toilets, or trans inclusion in sports. The media are perpetuating the idea that trans inclusion means the presence of (dangerous) boys in the girls' toilets or the eradication of girls' safe spaces. The rhetoric is deeply gendered in that it is overwhelmingly concerned with the figure of the "deceptive" trans girl as a potential perpetrator and the figure of the cis girl as the innocent victim, and such emotive and dramatized narratives resonate with the attention economy of social media. The voices of trans youth are conspicuously absent from mainstream media debates on trans rights (Jenzen et al., 2022). For young trans people, as I discuss below, social media are the main sphere for countering campaigns to curtail trans rights, voice their demands that trans rights are human rights, and build community resilience in the face of anti-trans sentiment.

Youth Communities and Youth Voices

LGBTQ+ youth rely extensively on social media for connecting with the community, both locally and globally. Wikke Jansen notes in a blog:

> If it weren't for social media, I probably wouldn't have had half the queer network I do now. I might never have met any of my Indonesian friends from the LGBTQ community there, who started out as WhatsApp friends of Facebook friends of people I knew personally […]. Without Bumble BFF, a dating app function for meeting new friends, I wouldn't have had any place to advertise my little rainbow flag emoji,

signalling that I was ready to meet other queers in my new hometown of Berlin back in 2018. (Jansen, 2022)

This quote illustrates not just how different networks across platforms are sometimes interconnected, but how LGBTQ+ community making is intertwined with social media. LGBTQ+ youth are "operationalizing affinity spaces" on social media (Wargo, 2017b, 574) in ways that they have fewer opportunities to do in school or other everyday spaces. But, as Jansen (2022) goes on to note, there are multiple differences too, in terms of how individuals find themselves 'at home' in different LGBTQ+ online spaces and in terms of "the limitations imposed by our material environment and our embodied selves" that manifest also in virtual, social media environments.

The use of social media for social support is very important to LGBTQ+ youth. This includes aspects such as gaining validation of their experiences, emotional support from peers and access to information produced from within the community (Selkie et al., 2020). However, what constitutes emotional support on social media platforms, in the form of comments, emoticons and likes, is also bound up with what generates value in the platform economy. Expressions of support build the status of the online persona, on YouTube or Instagram or may generate more followers on Twitter, for example. Relatedly, the more users emote and express their support, the higher the value to the platform as both users' reputation and emotional bonds are valorised and ultimately monetised through the affective economy of social media (Murphy, 2018).

Informational support may range from providing information on young people's citizens and human rights around gender and sexual identity to lifestyle topics (dress, makeup, consumer ethics), health (sexual health, mental health, exercise and well-being) and culture (TV,

movies, books, comics, games, music etc). Information on such topics as they pertain to LGBTQ+ youth and youth cultures may not be readily available in the mainstream, may not be part of school curricula, and may be pathologizing or ostensibly hetero- and cisnormative in nature. This is partly why informational support from peers and community sources is very important to LGBTQ+ youth. Mitchell et al.'s study (2014) noted that 78% of gay, lesbian and queer youth compared to 19% of heterosexual youth, reported relying on online sources for sexual health information, which indicates a clear need and preference for LGBTQ+ youth.

The term *online community* is somewhat diffuse, and perhaps utopian in that it does not recognise the geographical, cultural, and linguistic delimitations of people's social media experiences. Nevertheless, researchers have demonstrated via different *situated* studies the emancipatory power and social value of LGBTQ+ community formations across different platforms. Andrews (2021, 84) notes that for LGBTQ+ people, YouTube offers a "space to share, reflect on and demonstrate support for the experiences of others" which he argues functions as a heterotopia, where heterocentric mainstream ideals and oppressive power structures can be challenged. Relatedly, platforms such as Tumblr, while remaining one of the 'smaller' social media sites with mainstream audiences, have played a significant role for LGBTQ+ youth and their creation of counterpublics (Jenzen, 2017). Online counterpublics are discursive spaces that enable marginalized groups' articulations and "interpretations of its members' identities, interests, and needs" (Warner, 2002, 119) in opposition to a dominant public. Cavalcante (2016, 109) and others have emphasised the importance of such spaces for "organized care and concern, that facilitate transgender identity work and everyday survival".

Young LGBTQ+ people's commitment to social change can be found across all social media platforms, including participating in Facebook campaigns, or posting about LGBTQ+ human rights issues on Twitter, and having creative outputs on Tumblr, Instagram, and YouTube. The degree of political awareness and activist intention varies significantly across the multitude of LGBTQ+ YouTubers (Tortajada et al., 2021) and other social media, but the extent to which LGBTQ+ youth participate in civic discourse across social media and beyond arguably challenges the "hegemony of the pessimistic disaffected citizen perspective" (Caron et al., 2019, 697), a view that contends that there is a decline in civic participation among today's younger generations, because of lower levels of voting and engagement with formal politics. Robinson and Schmitz (2021, 1) point to how "understanding how LGBTQ youth resist and challenge dominant relations in society–such as heteronormativity, the gender binary, white supremacy, and capitalism–promotes a more dynamic and complicated look at how marginalized groups navigate their social worlds and exert power in shaping these worlds".

Today, the use of social media for civic engagement is an important political sphere and as suggested earlier, for LGBTQ+ youth, to make oneself visible is often not just a personal but a political act. Across the world, LGBTQ+ youth activates the audio/visual affordances of social media to document, depict and bear witness to their existence, against their invisibility or misrepresentation in mainstream media (Lewin and Jenzen, in press) and more broadly against a society that dehumanises or pathologizes them. Wargo (2017a) relatedly foregrounds the activities of collecting and curating visual and textual content on Tumblr as a primary form of LGBTQ+ youth activism, which creates community and is engaged with "public discourse surrounding equity and injustice" (28). However, as Lewin and Jenzen point out, "increased visibility of a marginalised group is not […] the same as increased

rights or end of discrimination, is often compromised, and can even bring increased victimisation".

A particular vein of online LGBTQ+ youth activism is tackling hate, by responding to hateful comments on social media. The category of 'haters' is a part of social media nomenclature, a general term for those posting hypercritical or hurtful comments on Facebook and Instagram posts or spreading hate speech across comment fields on YouTube. It is often the case that the term encompasses homo- and transphobic, racist or sexist attacks or bullying. As Elsa, a trans vlogger in Tortajada et al.'s (2021, 1003) study, comments about the online attacks she routinely is the target of: "I would rather call my haters 'hater', in singular. There are different people attacking me, but in the end, they reproduce the same old rusty stereotypes about trans people". What is interesting about the term *hater* is how it offers a rhetorical purchase on a fluctuating neoconservative ideological position that can otherwise be elusive. The hater, once given a label, in the context of social media platforms, can be signified using a hashtag (#haters), meaning it can be understood and addressed as a specific phenomenon, rather than operating as a diffuse intolerance masking as the common-sense position of hegemonic whiteness/ masculinity and so on. Having this new category also opens new forms of alliances amongst those targeted by hate speech and encourages new strategies for dealing with racism, sexism, and homo- and transphobia. One creative strategy is in the emerging practice of vloggers addressing haters, which is evolving as a social media subgenre. Examples would include Fox Fisher and Lewis Hancox's "Response to Haters" video where they read out and respond to a small portion of the transphobic comments they receive on social media, or the Gay Beards' "How to Respond to Haters" video where they similarly "model" responses to effemiphobic and homophobic remarks about their appearance by

drawing on LGBTQ+ subcultural tropes of ironic and self-deprecating humour while confidently reasserting the value of their queer masculinities.[7]

Concluding Remarks

Fu and Cook (2021, 1248) argue that research needs to push beyond the limited "utility view" of social media use, by which they mean that social media cannot simply be understood as a tool that young people use for various purposes and that we need to consider how young people's whole "social ontology" changes with changes in media technologies. Mapping social, cultural, and political aspects of LGBTQ+ youth social media cultures this essay has sought to nuance the "utility view" by illustrating how identity work and media technologies enmesh and how youth form both pragmatic and affective relationships to social media when moving between individual concerns and collective affinities, as well as across subcultural and mainstream platform economics.

Several aspects of LGBTQ+ youth social media cultures are yet to be fully interrogated. The most obvious limitation of this essay is, that despite a critical articulation of whiteness, its focus is on English-language Western contexts. Further studies of LGBTQ+ youth social media cultures located beyond this limited context are needed alongside theoretical work situated at the nexus of decolonial, queer and digital studies. While Black digital feminist scholarship is emerging as a key field (Sobande, 2020; Steele, 2021) the project of decolonising our understanding of digital and social media cultures should be further prioritised. We also see emerging work at the intersection of disability and sexuality studies that will further our understanding of the digital cultures and media production of LGBTQ+ disabled and neurodiverse youth (Allsopp, forthcoming). Furthermore, the discussion here has given priority to platforms for social and affective and activist connections. LGBTQ+

youth online cultures also encompass dating apps and participation in online gaming communities for example, which are further areas of sociality and digital intimacy for consideration.

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[1] See https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5027927/NHS-pressured-kids-change-sex.html (accessed 27.6.2022)

[2] See for example the issue of queer art and Instagram censorship (Haynes 2021)

[3] See https://www.tiktok.com/@juanagustin__/video/6777825486501399813
Or https://www.tiktok.com/@cristiandennis/video/6777893272661658886
(accessed 3.1.2022)

[4] See https://www.stonewall.org.uk/our-work/campaigns/2007-some-people-are-gay-get-over-it-campaign-breaks-new-ground (accessed 3.1.2022)

[5] https://itgetsbetter.org

[6] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9ZXvmwQxGE or similar from Chase Ross:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPz4R68V-KY&list=PL7SgbxvTR7N6gpGXdTdSL9HKNzUZMtcnw

[7] https://youtu.be/27am280AFKI
https://youtu.be/agsoZeZHQxc