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Finding community and contesting heteronormativity: queer young people's engagement in an Australian online community

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This study examines how queer young people in Australia are engaging in an online community to address their marginalisation and oppression. Drawing on an analysis of online forums and in-depth interviews with 14 participants, we use Durkheim's concept of egoism and the social model of disability to analyse the role and impact of the online community. The findings indicate that the community not only provides a sense of belonging for the participants and reduces their experiences of isolation, but also connects them to resources and networking opportunities that foster political participation. In this way, the online community operates as a space for young people to understand and potentially overcome their experiences of egoism and marginality. It helps them to reach the realisation that it is not them but the heteronormative 'society' that is the problem. In doing so, the online community provides young people with the emotional resources and social capital to do something to address their marginalisation.

Keywords: queer; sexuality; internet; political participation; civic engagement

Queer[1] young people who are coming to terms with, and starting to self-identify with a queer identity, are the focus of this study. We explore the role of the internet and, more specifically, the role of online communities within their everyday lives. In most advanced economies, including Australia, over the last two decades, there have been major shifts in the way queer people are constructed in popular discourse. The discourse has shifted from total exclusion to one of an '… ever-increasing inclusion' (Hammack and Cohler 2011, 162). However, narratives that position same-sex attraction and desire as negative continue to persist within a culture that privileges heterosexuality (Herek 2007; Hammack, Thompson, and Pilecki 2009). In Australia, queer young people continue to report experiences of homophobia, heterosexism and discrimination (Hillier et al. 2010). This homophobia and heterosexism must be negotiated when they start to come to terms with a non-heterosexual identity and/or desire.

For queer young people, exclusion and discrimination are most likely to occur within the geographies of the 'local' (Hillier et al. 2010). It is in these local spaces where their social experiences, their networks and their sense of identity are forged – within the family, school, peer group and neighbourhood – and where queer young people fear

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rejection from those close to them (Hillier, Kurdas, and Horsley 2001; Harris and Wyn 2009).

Though recent research (McCormack and Anderson 2010; McCormack 2012) documents declines in overt homophobia in UK schools, queer young people in Australia continue to report experiences of both verbal and physical abuses within schools (Pratt and Buzzwell 2006; Hillier et al. 2010). They also report that non-heterosexual identities are the subject of derogation and disapproval within school and familial spaces (Willis 2012). Exclusion and abuse within these spaces can have a range of negative implications:

> low self-esteem, alienation from friends and family, depression, despair and a desire to escape from an unbearable situation. This escape may be achieved through using drugs and alcohol, leaving home, becoming sexually active at an early age (often with multiple partners), dropping out of school, self-harming (cutting, burning, etc), self-destructive behaviours or attempting suicide. (Dyson et al. 2003, 38)

To alleviate these concerns, many queer young people turn to the Internet as it gives them the opportunity to access support and resources in safe and anonymous online spaces where they can explore and express their identity (Hillier, Kurdas, and Horsley 2001; Thomas 2002; Pascoe 2011; Hillier, Mitchell, and Ybarra 2012). These spaces present opportunities to negotiate a queer sense of self that is developed within the contexts of the local-spatial realities in which these young people live (Gray 2009). In Australia, the role of specific queer online communities in queer young people's lives has not been examined. Using a case study of one online community in Australia, we explore the ways in which young queer people use the site, the role that this online community plays in their lives and the ways in which it gives them the capacity to respond to the challenging and oppressive life circumstances they find themselves in.

Network technologies: finding community and contesting marginality

The Internet has '… afforded greater involvement in communities of shared interests' (Wellman 2001, 247) through providing spaces for people to come together to create and sustain ties. Wellman (2001, 229) argues that this has transformed 'cyber*space* into cyber*places*'. Boyd (2011) refers to these cyberplaces as 'networked publics' that provide distinct affordances for people to gather and connect with others. These cyberplaces, or 'networked publics', can be conceptualised as 'liberated cyber communities'. They are based on supportive social relations, but there is no need for a physical locality or propinquity (Wellman 1979, 2001). Wellman argues that these communities can be defined as the '… networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity' and are discursive online spaces, that allow people to '… connect online with kindred spirits, engage in supportive and sociable relationships with them, and imbue their activity online with meaning, belonging and identity' (Wellman 2001, 228–229).

The internet affords opportunities for participating and belonging to a queer community, where young people have access to peers who are in similar situations, whom they form friendships with and gain support and resources from (Bond 2009; Sulfridge 2012; Downing 2013). Queer online communities have also been found to have a mentoring function whereby the more 'self-aware' or experienced community participants

provide support to young people who are exploring their identities (Marciano 2011; Thomas 2002). They play an important role in helping reduce their feelings of distress and refuting stereotypes and negative perceptions of the queer community. These 'self-aware' individuals, argue Munt, Bassett, and O'Riordan (2002), possess a 'subcultural knowledge', that is shared in the form of support and resources within the community. In this way, the online community operates as a '… forum for the transfer of (sub)cultural capital' (130). Through the transfer of this (sub)cultural capital, these online spaces function as spaces that allow for the expression, exploration and acceptance of their queer identities (Paradis Forthcoming).

A theoretical framing – Durkheim's concept of 'egoism' and the social model of disability

For Durkheim, social solidarity is a constant challenge in the diverse, autonomous and increasingly secular contexts that characterise modernity. Unlike traditional societies where sameness and tradition facilitate solidarity and social integration (mechanical solidarity), in industrialised societies, the splintering of the collective has the potential to lead to a weakening of the bond between society members and the dissipating of social solidarity and integration (organic solidarity). Within the context of modernity individuals are far more prone to be isolated, especially if they are seen as different. Durkheim suggests that individuals who are members of a marginal or small grouping are more prone to 'egoism', i.e. a sense of not being connected:

> Where collective sentiments are strong, it is because the force with which they affect each individual conscience is echoed with all the others, and reciprocally. The intensity they attain therefore depends on the number of consciences which react to them in common … In a sufficiently dense society, this circulation is uninterrupted; for some social units are always in contact, whereas if they are few their relations can only be intermittent and there will be moments when the common life is suspended. (Durkheim 2005, 159–160)

The marginality and hostility that many young queer people endure, especially in areas where there exists limited visibility of queer people, certainly is fertile ground for the development of what Durkheim in his discussion of suicide calls an 'egoistic state'. For queer young people, when they realise they have, or might have a queer identity, there is a strong possibility of isolation due to the structures and institutions around them positioning their queer identity and attractions against a prevailing norm of heterosexuality. Queer young people still experience discourses that problematise their same-sex desires (Hammack, Thompson, and Pilecki 2009; Hammack and Cohler 2011; Willis 2012).

What we argue in this paper is that queer young people's engagement in these online communities enables them to develop solidarity and connect to others like themselves through the interpersonal ties created. As Gray (2009) and Harper et al. (2009) conclude, online spaces can offer queer young people routes to queer community inclusion and recognition. In doing so, they are able to refute negative stereotypes and prejudice, thereby dissipating egoism and recreating community.

To understand the potential power of the resources and support that participants find within the online community, we examine the lived experiences of these young people by drawing on the social model of disability. The central tenets of the social model of disability were developed by British disability activists active in the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (UPIAS) and the Disability Alliance. Their

seminal publication, the *Fundamental Principles of Disability*, published in 1976, argued that 'disability is a situation, caused by social conditions' (UPIAS and Disability Alliance 1976, 1). This position rejects the prescriptions of the 'normalising' society that positions 'disability' as a problem. It challenges '… disabled people's own internalised oppression by enabling them to make sense of their experience in a way which explains that it is not "their own fault" that they face discrimination and social exclusion' (Tregaskis 2002, 457).

Whilst recognising that the social circumstances differ in unique ways between people with a disability and queer people, the framework provides for an opportunity to explore their similar experiences of marginalisation. For queer young people, they are coming to understand their same-sex desires and attractions within spaces where the '… presumption of heterosexuality … is encoded in language, in institutional practices and the encounters of everyday life' (Epstein and Johnson 1994, 198). This operates to privilege heterosexuality and stigmatise homosexuality (Herek 2007).

In this context, queer online communities afford queer young people the space and opportunity to negotiate identity labels and construct their own narratives through the acquisition of support and resources in these online communities. In turn, this allows them to reframe their experiences and locate the 'problem' of having a non-heterosexual identity within society. In this way, the online space operates as an opportunity to refute stereotypes about queer people and connect them to similar others to do something about the negative and isolated situations they find themselves in.

The research site

Queeryouth.com (pseudonym) is a queer online site in Australia. Established in 1998, it is run by a volunteer committee of queer young people and receives administrative support from a state-based queer organization. Its original aim was to provide drug- and alcohol-free events to queer young people. In 2005, it established an internet site to provide young people with the opportunity to get support and meet others on the site's online discussion forums.

The primary target group is queer young people (aged 21 and under). The significance of the site is indicated by the substantial usage; in 2010, the *Queeryouth.com* site was accessed by 65,000 individuals and received 4.1 million hits, of which 87 percent were state-based and 90 percent were from users who were under the age of 24. Users can access the online forums as guests, without the ability to post content, or as members (in 2012, there were 6570 members), who can post content on the forums. The average time spent on the website by users is 16 minutes.

Methodology

Good research on the Internet, Baym (2006) argues, is grounded in theory and data and uses multiple strategies to collect data. It takes into consideration the '… interconnections between the Internet and the life world in which it is situated' (82). This study used a mixed methods, multi-staged approach to data collection. This included face-to-face and email interviews of participants within the *Queeryouth.com* online community and content and thematic analysis of the forum data. The research project was proposed to the volunteer committee of *Queeryouth.com* in early 2011. Upon approval, the volunteer committee (which is composed of forum users) gave us access to the online forums and

permitted recruitment for the interviews to be undertaken in the forums and on the homepage. To ensure the confidentiality and safety of all participants who used this space, concerns raised previously in undertaking Internet research (Markham and Buchanan 2012; Sharkey et al. 2011), we have de-identified the site in this article and given interviewees and forum users pseudonyms.

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews were conducted with 14 participants who were recruited through a poster displayed on the *Queeryouth.com* homepage and in the online discussion forums, where we answered questions young people in the community had about the research. The recruitment poster and responses to questions asked in the forums sought to be inclusive and invited all users of *Queeryouth.com* to participate in the research without closing it off to only those who self-identified with a gay, lesbian, bisexual or queer identity label (see Savin-Willams 2001, 2005). The following themes were covered – how and why they participate in the community; their experiences of participating in the community; and what issues were important to them that were addressed by the community. Five interviews were conducted face-to-face at the *Queeryouth.com* office, and the remaining interviews were conducted via email. Interviewing by email was used in the case of interviewees who did not feel comfortable being interviewed face-to-face or on the phone or via Skype. Email interviews have limitations, but they also have strengths. They allow interviewees to think carefully about their responses and also there is no possibility of feeling intimidated by the interviewer. Researchers have found that interviews by email can be more effective than face-to-face or telephone interviews (Meho 2006). The interview schedule was sent to participants, filled in and sent back to the researchers.

Participants who were interviewed were given a consent form to fill out indicating that any identifying information about them would be kept confidential. Participants under 16 were required to get a parent/guardian to provide consent to let them undertake this research. To ensure these young people did not have to unnecessarily disclose their sexuality and/or gender identity, the consent form did not disclose that this was a study about queer young people but only indicated that the participants were selected as they were part of an 'online community'.

The interviewees included six males and eight females who ranged in age from 15 to 21 years. Four of the participants identified as gay, five as lesbian and one as bisexual. Four of the participants identified with more than one sexuality, either because they were still exploring their sexuality, or because they felt more than one label was appropriate to describe their sexual identity. Most participants were students and they all indicated that they had access to the internet at home, but also accessed it from work, school and via their mobile phones. Five participants resided in a capital city, and the remainder lived in regional towns.[2]

Analysis of the forums

The analysis of the forums[3] draws on Byrne's (2007) methodology that explored how participants on *Blackplanet.com* engaged in issues that concerned the African-American community. This three-step procedure is outlined in Table 1. A 3-month period was designated to undertake this research from June 30th 2011 to September 30th 2011.[4]

Firstly we determined the centre of public life by calculating the number of discussion threads, the number of responses to these threads and the number of views each

Table 1. Multi-step, multi-method process designed to examine the public discussion and engagement within the *Queeryouth.com* community.

Step	Method
1	Calculation of participation rate (discussion thread, replies and views)
	• Calculation to determine the centre of public life on the forums
	• Calculation to determine the focus of the content (Analysis of the discussion thread titles and first posts)
	• Calculation of queer content, identified as either queer-specific or queer-neutral
2	Keyword search of the discussion forums based on thematic analysis of interview data
	• Calculation of the prevalence of certain keywords and data capture for step three
3	Issue Analysis (thematic analysis of the discussion forum content identified in step two)
	• Analysed how queer young people are framing the issues, why they are important and what these young people are doing about them

discussion thread received.[5] The most popular discussion threads within each category[6] were then analysed to determine whether the contents of these posts were queer-specific or not. These were coded as queer-neutral or queer-specific.

We then conducted a thematic analysis of the interview data to identify issues that were important to young people's lived experience. This generated 21 keywords (see Table 2). Using the search feature on the *Queeryouth.com* forums, a search was conducted for all the discussion threads that included these keywords. In the final step, a thematic analysis was undertaken of all those discussion threads where a keyword appeared to explore how queer young people were discussing and engaging in issues that were important to their lived experience.

The focus of forum life

Between June 30th 2011 and September 30th 2011, the centre of public life took place within the forum topic 'General Chat' where 76 percent of the discussion occurred. Within 'General Chat', 402 new discussion threads were started, there were 6716 responses to those threads and the threads were viewed 110 240 times. The other forum topics generated much less discussion and views, which included the topics 'Events' (6%), 'Introductions and Newbies' (5%), 'Support and Advice' (5%), 'Coming Out' (4%), 'Health and Wellbeing' (3%) and 'Queeryouth.com Help and Feedback' (1%).

The discussion threads focused primarily on queer-specific content, which made up 76 percent of all threads. The most popular threads were those where young people were looking to make friendships and establish networks with other queer young people on the forums (25%) and for those who were seeking advice specifically related to their sexuality (23%).

The most popular queer-neutral topic discussion threads were those that sought advice and opinions from other young people about their everyday experiences outside of their queer identity (33%), which included topics about body piercings, underage drinking and graffiti.

Table 2. Keywords searched for on the discussion forums based on a thematic analysis of the interview data.

Keywords	Number of Posts on the forums during June 30th–Sept 30th
Coming out	222
Marriage	143
Gay marriage	63
Discrimination	56
Homophobia	55
Religion	54
Rights	48
Bullying	41
Equal love rally	34
Donating Blood	30
Boat people	18
Equality	17
Sexual Consent	13
Refugees	12
Equal Rights	10
Religious views	8
Same-Sex marriage	8

The impact of the online community

Overcoming 'egoism'

Many of the queer young people in this community struggled with their sexuality and initially framed their feelings as problems to do with themselves that they had to change. There was a clear indication that many young people experienced a sense of egoism when first realising they might be same-sex attracted or identify with a diverse gender identity. They recalled feelings of intense isolation and loneliness before meeting others like themselves:

> I've made a lot of friends through [Queeryouth.com] … when I first started … I'll just be honest I was like pretty depressed and … I just wasn't very happy … it just made me feel a lot more happier that [Queeryouth.com] could have people who wouldn't judge me because I just got judged at school for no reason … I didn't really have many friends … I have lots of friends here … its just a good place. (Lara, 18, female, face-to-face interviewee)

> I got involved because I'd just come out and felt 100% isolated at school, [Queeryouth.com] was a place to feel accepted, on the forum and the events. (Mary, 15, female, email interviewee)

> I felt alone, and needed to be able to talk to someone who knew how I felt. (Sam, 18, male, email interviewee)

As Lara, Mary and Sam indicate, the *Queeryouth.com* community connected them to resources and similar others which helped them to explore their identities and reframe their own egoistic experiences. This led to reduced feelings of marginalisation and isolation.

The online community affords young people the opportunity to come together, and discuss concerns which has the effect of working in a similar way to the social model of disability, which reframes the problem of disability to that of a problem within society and not an internal 'fault'. For these queer young people, *Queeryouth.com* is a safe space to connect to similar others, where they can learn more about their experiences and reframe the 'problem' of having a diverse sexuality and/or gender as a problem constructed by society and not of their own making. For these young people then, the *Queeryouth.com* site engenders a sense of belonging and inclusiveness where they can meet similar others, refute queer stereotypes and feel 'normal'. It also functions as a safe space to understand themselves, learn about queer community and rehearse their identities. As Elena indicates:

> Queeryouth.com is an amazing place for gay, lesbian transgender youth its somewhere, were[7] we can be ourselves online and have others to talk to across [the state] and even now Australia. (Elena, 16, female, email interviewee)

These young people get resources and support from other community members. There is a transfer of 'subcultural knowledge', that helps young people understand their everyday experiences, reduces their feelings of isolation and gives them a sense of belonging to the greater queer community, as suggested in findings from previous studies of queer online communities (Thomas 2001; Marciano 2011; Sulfridge 2012). The 'social solidarity' created is potentially enormously empowering as Matt (17) indicates in his reflection of the community:

> [Queeryouth.com] provides a community with love and support. It is a fantastic source of happiness everyday for many teens who otherwise would perhaps feel alone and unsure of themselves. (Matt, male, email interviewee)

'*Coming Out*' *and seeking acceptance*

The prospect of disclosing one's sexual identity creates much anxiety for young (and older) people. As Dyson et al. (2003) indicate, disclosure carries the threat of becoming a target of rejection and/or homophobic bullying and is linked to self-harm and suicidal behaviours. Queer young people use the *Queeryouth.com* online forums for support and advice when considering disclosing their sexual identity to peers, family and friends.

The excerpt below represents a typical discussion thread on the forums; a young person is seeking advice about disclosing his identity to those close to him:

> **Topic: 'VommIng whIlst comIng out Is not a good look' Purple Angel, male forum user:** *Friends I so badly want to come out, however, being surrounded in an extremely uptight, right wing, conservative household it pains me to even start to comprehend how everyone would react. Brothers, are not homophobic but i dont think they could handel me after I come out, mother would support it, father would half heartedly, but what about all the jocks at school? So much to worry about, so stressful, I sometimes feel nauseated just thinking about it …*

> **Enaneee, 17, male forum user:** *firstly … breathe secondly … don't feel as if everyone has to know … and dont force yourself to come out, you may be wanting to come out but if you arent ready for it … then don't …*

Coming out is clearly an enormous concern for Purple Angel. Like other participants who seek assistance when formulating their coming out strategy, Purple Angel's post was followed by posts that provide support, advice and suggested tactics for coming out from other users. This benefits both the person seeking advice, and the other young people who have access to this discussion thread. This advice and support is an example of the transfer of 'subcultural knowledge', which helps these young people formulate strategies and have the necessary information to discuss their identity with family, friends and peers. This feedback and advice goes some way to reducing the isolation young people feel, by providing a space for them to share stories and strategies to reduce and deal with the loneliness they feel within their everyday lives.

Help in dealing with homophobia and bullying in schools

Many of the young people in the *Queeryouth.com* community faced homophobia and bullying as part of their everyday lived experiences. The school space was the most prominent place for this to occur, as RedOnions recalls:

> [School Name] was the shittiest years of my life and at some points, almost the last too. Just saying, getting harassed, bashed, verbally abused, contemplating suicide and missing almost a term's worth of school, makes me kinda wary of [School students from his previous school]. (RedOnions, 19, male forum user)

Young people sought out assistance on the forums to deal with the homophobic bullying they were experiencing. In the following excerpt, a male speaks about his experiences of being bullied in a change room at school:

> **Topic: THE CHANGE ROOM**
>
> **Restless Guard, 16, male forum user:** *Ok so i am doing sport at school this term and i have been getting to the change room as quickly as possible to get out asap but now the teacher as made us wait and all go in together and i didnt think any of the other guys in my year level knew i was gay but all of them lately have been saying in front of like 20–25 half naked guys ' look out everyone Shanes here hide' 'hes gonna look at you wile your getting changed' etc. I later found out that it got out. I have spoken to the teacher and im trying to organise something to get out of the class. It feels shit. I like sport class but i cant do it any more because of this shit. Has anyone had problems like this?*
>
> **Nathz, 19, male forum user:** *Dude, I hate to be the asshole who doesn't sound sympathetic; but if you let people influence what you do in day to day life you are going to find that sports class won't be the only thing that is shit. Tough it out and come end of the year you will be honestly proud of yourself.*
>
> **ZecelE, forum user:** *I had the same situation … If you feel sexually harassed, the target of homophobia, the target of bullying (emotional, verbal, physical - they're all equally terrible) then speak up! Don't be afraid to consult your teacher, year coordinator, counselor, or the relevant authorities. For future reference, feel free to talk to the GLLOs (Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officers) [contact details provided]*

In response to this homophobia, young people on *Queeryouth.com* provide Restless Guard with support; they share their experiences with him and suggest ways of dealing with the homophobia he is enduring. Their strategies are varied and diverse, from suggesting he 'tough it out' to suggesting he engage decision-makers to intervene. In this way, the peer-based nature of the forums connects young people to others who help them

strategise and network. Through the forum, these young people are able to overcome their egoistic situation. They feel part of a collectivity.

There was also advice that sought to address the heteronormative structures within schools that fuel and create this egoism. As Gruszczynska (2006, 17) argues, queer online spaces also have the potential to be a springboard for queer activism. This was evident in this study as there was much discussion on the forums about the different strategies and tactics used to address homophobia within their schools, which was attributed to a lack of awareness and understanding of what it means to be 'queer'. When discussing these issues, these young people, in a similar way to disability activists who utilise the social model of disability, have been able to reframe their experiences of homophobia as society's problem rather than their own. This reframing was certainly empowering and contributed to a range of activities to address this homophobia.

The activities participants engage in to address homophobia within schools are dependent on the resources they have available; how open they are about their sexuality at school and how these activities fit into other life projects, such as study and friendships. These users are engaging in what Giddens' (1996) has termed 'Life Politics', the notion that in late modernity, people seek more autonomy and consider the reflexivity of their actions in a bid to take an active stance towards the conditions of their existence. These actions are political and personal at once and intrinsically tied to their identities and experiences within their local communities:

> people make their impact in their own ways some of them really get out there and get political like they will cover themselves in badges and signs and be like 'oh my god you must look at this' but other people are just … they'll just quietly spread it around and they'll just do it in their own way and their own pace. (Laura, 19, female, face-to-face Interviewee)

As Laura observes the actions these queer young people take are varied. For some young people, the action took the form of addressing homophobic slang, such as verbalising their frustration when peers used the word 'gay' to mean a negative or derogatory thing. For others, it meant addressing explicit homophobia within the school when they saw it occur. Thoughfulpanda had one such experience:

> The only actual direct homophobia i've ever seen at my school was last year.

> I was walking to my locker during lunch and I walked past this kid at my school who everyone thinks is gay … anyway he was just chillin there eating his hotdog and these two kids in his year level was like 'You enjoying that wiener Sam? I bet you love eating that wiener.' etc etc.

> I just walked past cause i was late for class. Then i got pissed off and turned around and told them to fuck off. (Thoughtfulpanda, 16, female, forum user)

For some, this meant taking small assertive actions to let others know about their sexuality even when it is not accepted by the school system. As Uniquebutterfly indicates:

> I go to a private Catholic girls school. There is no hope…I'm out to my friends and parade around with my Rainbow Delegation wristband but that's as much tolerance as I can get. I've already been warned by the Director of Student Welfare that it's a 'matter of discretion' and I'm not to parade around behaving in a lesbian manner. We are a normal, faithful, heterosexual society and (while I'm fairly sure no one actually minds that much) we are forbidden by the Catholic Education Office to accept anything else. (Uniquebutterfly, female, forum user).

For others, action involved creating a more inclusive environment at their school through engaging decision-makers. With the school counsellors' support, they spoke about putting up posters and stickers around the school that encouraged diversity and acceptance. Some young people requested that their teachers increase the diversity of sexual health education taught in the classroom and assist them in starting Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs).

Facilitating the fight for equal rights

The *Queeryouth.com* community not only operates as a space for young people to get support, but is also a place to connect to networks of others to initiate political actions. This engagement in the online community gives these young people the opportunity to network and strategise to do something about their lived experiences of marginalization. The lack of equal rights was often brought up on the forums when young people sought clarity on legislation that they had read or heard about. The forums were used to discuss rights-based injustices towards queer people, which included the issues of same-sex marriage, the legal age of sexual consent, adoption rights for queer people and the issue of gay men donating blood.

An example of this is the following discussion thread excerpt that focused on the same-sex marriage debate within Australia:

> **Title** 'Gillard[8] stops aussies getting married in NYC'
>
> **Funnymonkey, male forum user:** [Link to news article] '*When New York state's new equal marriage law takes effect on July 27th same-sex couples from other countries will be able to marry there if they provide a Certificate of Non-Impediment to Marriage (CNI) to show they are not already married in their home country. But the Australian Government refuses to give such certificates to same-sex couples intending to marry overseas, a policy defended by Julia Gillard as recently as the 14th of June, 2011.'*
> *Now that's not very nice at all!*
> *Why is Ms Gillard particularly being so conservative about same-sex marriage?*
>
> **Alvin11, 18, male forum user**: *Damn it, Julia./*[9]*throws arms up*
>
> **Monique, 17, female forum user**: *… I don't understand how she could say that marriage is a sacred blah blah when she's an atheist. Oh this world.*
>
> **Benny, 15, male forum user**: *… we could just go to the protest, or write some verry deep emails to her?*
>
> **Steph6, 16, female forum user:** *I hate these Stupid evil politicians!!!!! Why can't they get that theyr being so discriminating and ahhhhhh! So angry just thinking about it.*

These young people are passionate about same-sex marriage and feel intensely frustrated about the denial of this right. Using the social model of disability perspective, it can be argued that the forum is used to position society as at fault and to attack the notion that queer people are somehow 'underserving' because they are 'deviant'.

In the discussion threads about equal rights, there are many examples of where participants try to identify ways to challenge the arguments put forward by policy-makers. The forum discussions contain many examples of young people trying to change the focus of the discussion thread from one of frustration to positive affirming action. When discussing rights-based issues, forum users connected fellow forum users to

existing campaign resources and activities that they could get involved in, in online and offline spaces.

The *Queeryouth.com* committee, cognisant of young people's frustration with the same-sex marriage debate, has provided users with opportunities to meet at protests dedicated to same-sex marriage equality. In doing so, the forum acts as a pre-planning tool and an opportunity to reconnect after the event. What is clear from these discussions is that whilst young people are engaged in these issues, their engagement is also motivated by the opportunity to socialise with similar others. In this way, these events are an opportunity to 'have fun', socialise and overcome their isolation whilst fighting injustice and discrimination.

Conclusion

This study has found that a substantial number of queer young people are actively engaging in *Queeryouth.com* to reduce their experiences of isolation and marginalisation that stem from living as queer young people in a heteronormative world. As has been identified in previous studies (Thomas 2002; Hillier and Harrison 2007; Marciano 2011), the internet affords connections to similar others, and provides queer young people with access to interpersonal networks of support and sociability in safe and anonymous online spaces. This study sought to investigate how this takes place in one online queer community in Australia. Using Durkheim's concept of egoism and the social model of disability, our findings indicate that the social connectedness that occurs within the online community reduces the isolation of queer young people. It does this not only by connecting young queer people, but also by helping them to reframe their understanding of their sexuality as not a problem to do with themselves but as one that is located within society, a finding that is supported by previous studies (Thomas 2002; Hillier, Kurdas, and Horsley 2001; Hillier et al. 2010). This research has furthered our understanding of the contemporary concerns queer young people are facing, and how the online community operates to dissipate these concerns and empowers young people to address the heteronormative structures that perpetuate their marginality.

Queeryouth.com's online forum is an interesting example of a symbiosis between the online and offline worlds (Marletta 2009). The offline experiences of the users clearly shape their underlying motivation for connecting to this online community and also shape the online discussion. In turn, their experiences online often reduce the loneliness they face in their everyday lives and the advice they receive provides them with strategies to deal with the marginalisation they face.

Within these online discussions, there were two major concerns queer young people articulated – coming out to friends and family, and being bullied by peers due to their sexuality. They come to *Queeryouth.com* looking to not only address their experiences of isolation/egoism but to also find answers as to what is the best way to address these concerns. The (sub)cultural knowledge shared by the interpersonal links on the forums provides them with a sense they are not alone. Others within the community connect them to resources and strategies for dealing with these issues. This support is not necessarily consistent and can be confusing. However, young people use the space to develop strategies to deal with the problem within the context in which they live.

As previous studies (Shaw 1997; Alexander 2004; Hillier et al. 2010) have shown, online queer spaces not only provide support but also provide information about social and political issues and opportunities for engagement in identity politics. In a similar way

to the social model of disability, *Queeryouth.com* acts as an empowering space to reframe homophobia for young people by providing them with the resources to understand the 'problem' as not of their own making. In doing so, this allows the young people to actively discuss tactics and strategies to deal with the institutional structures of heteronormativity that marginalise them. This empowerment manifests within the online forums on *Queeryouth.com*. Users share strategies and suggest ways to take political action to deal with existing structures of heteronormativity at both the local and national levels. The activities they discuss include both online and offline actions. This sharing of a variety of tactics, tools and stories is an exchange of (sub)cultural knowledge. By engaging in 'life politics', these young people are able to locate the problem of homophobia within society and begin addressing it.

There is little doubt that for many users, *Queeryouth.com* plays an important role and enhances the quality of their lives. The study illustrates how the internet affords queer young people opportunities to mobilise, break down isolation and construct an alternative and liberating narrative.

Notes

1. The use of the term 'queer' here is used as an inclusive term to include young people who identify with a same-sex identity and/or desire and also includes those who identify with or may be questioning a gender identity other than their biological sex and/or assigned gender. As this research explores young people's experiences, the term 'queer' takes into account young people who may have same-sex attractions and/or be gender-questioning but do not identify with a specific same-sex identity and/or gender identity.
2. Three participants did not specify their location.
3. The online forum consists of eight forum topics within three categories, these include: Queeryouth.com (General Chat; Introductions and Newbies!; Events; Beyond [State]), Support (Support and Advice; Health and Wellbeing; Coming Out) and Technical (Queeryouth.com.org Help and Feedbck). Each topic has a number of asynchronous discussion threads posted under it related to that topic that any member of the *Queeryouth.com* community has access to and can contribute to.
4. During the research period, some discussion threads were initiated in the months prior to the study period but were continuing to receive posts by young people. Where this occurred, the earlier portions of the thread have been included in the study.
5. The forum technology calculates the number of times each discussion thread is clicked on. This includes both people who post within the thread and 'lurkers' (those participants who read posts but do not post messages (Watson 1997). Whilst this means we cannot get an accurate count of how many people view each discussion thread, we can get an indication of how popular each discussion thread is.
6. This included the most popular 10 percent of threads from each forum category (excluding '*Queeryouth.com* help and feedback'). Where there were fewer than 5 threads, all discussion threads were counted. In total, 75 discussion threads were included in this stage of the analysis.
7. The quotes from the email interviews and online forum have not been edited. We wanted to maintain the authenticity of the quotes.
8. Julia Gillard was the Prime Minister and leader of the Australian Labor Party at the time.
9. '/' this is used to indicate what the users' actions are.

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