UTS UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY

A Netnography of the Starlight Children's Foundation's Online Community Livewire.org.au: Exploring Youth and Condition Based Selves

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under the supervision of Jim Macnamara, Fiona Brooks and Hilary Yerbury

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Certificate of Original Authorship

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Michelle Platcher declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctoral of Philosophy in the School of Communication/ Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

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Abstract

Online communities are promising avenues for young people living with an illness or disability to access developmental, psychosocial support in addition to their clinical care. While studies have explored the impact of these communities on young people's condition-based needs, less is known about how these platforms support young people's development in relation to youth culture and being a young person beyond their condition.

The purpose of this study is to explore how the Starlight Children's Foundation (SCF) online community, Livewire.org.au (LW.org.au), functions as a developmental, psychosocial intervention for young people living with a condition with a focus on examining the developmental task of identity formation in the context of peer relationships online. The study employs a netnographic methodology to understand how the concept of 'developmental appropriateness' is operationalised and implemented within the online community from the organisational, chat-hosts' and young person perspective. It also considers the identity practices, help-seeking and engagement behaviour of young people online. Analytical techniques include a priori and emergent coding, and positioning theory data analysis.

Findings illuminate identity tensions between the young person self and the facet of the self associated with their condition. They highlight how young people negotiate these challenges through moderated conversations with peers and chat-hosts in a medical-free setting. They also demonstrate how developmental appropriateness can be operationalised and implemented through integrating preventive and promotive strategies, while still working from a medical-free ontological position.

The study contributes new insights into how peer-driven online communities can foster identity development, and demonstrates how accepted categorisations of identity may not be appropriate to the experiences of young people living with a condition. A key contribution is explicating how LW.org.au establishes legitimacy in its field of practice, while noting tensions that arise in relation to the implementation of the LW.org.au program through the role of the chat-hosts. The positioning of prevention and promotion as tactics, rather than conceptual approaches, shows how a community-based approach can incorporate aspects generally associated with the biomedical model without adopting the core values of that model. Methodologically, the study is innovative in its use of netnography, an approach not frequently found in the literature. Positioning theory, an analytical tool usually used in organisational studies, is used here to explore how identity and the local moral order are created at the micro-level.

A key area for future research is exploring young people's help-seeking and engagement practices through their interactions with community-based initiatives such as LW.org.au.