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# Queering the ‘resourcing’ of LGBTQ+ young people in the Asia Pacific

Niki Cheong <sup>a</sup>, Amelia Johns <sup>b</sup> and Paul Byron <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Department of Digital Humanities, King’s College London, London, UK; <sup>b</sup>School of Communication, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia

## ABSTRACT

Scholars have long been critical of development agendas where Global North organisations develop aid programmes and resources to address inequalities in the Global South, which tend to reflect Western values, frameworks, and identity. Critical response can be seen in current calls for decolonising the ‘resourcing’ of LGBTQ+ young people in the Global South. Drawing from the postcolonial lenses of ‘Asia as Method’ and a reorienting of that paradigm through ‘queer Asia as method’, we argue for ‘queering’ approaches to digitally resourcing LGBTQ+ young people in the region by centring the knowledge of local communities. This paper is informed by findings from two research projects involving digital resources on young people’s digital citizenship, safety, literacy and participation, and the lived experiences of respondents from 10 countries across the Asia Pacific.

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## Introduction

Scholars have long been critical of development agendas where Global North organisations develop aid programmes and resources to address inequalities in the Global South, which tend to reflect Western values, frameworks, and understandings of identity (Joshi, 2018; Kapoor, 2008; Yue et al., 2019). Critical response can be seen in calls for decolonising the ‘resourcing’ of LGBTQ+ young people in the Global South (Gosine, 2018; Weerawardhana, 2018). This paper adds to this scholarship by arguing for a ‘queering’ of the logics of ‘resourcing’. In doing so, we mean to centre the resourcefulness of LGBTQ+ stakeholders and activists in the Asia Pacific. Our focus is inspired by Gosine’s (2018) argument that there is a growing interest in resourcing LGBTQ+ communities – through aid and programme development – as part of a Western ‘imperative to rescue’ (p. 194). For Gosine, resourcing is viewed by development communities as an expression of unconditional help to achieve development goals, but scholars have argued this comes with

**CONTACT** Niki Cheong  niki.cheong@kcl.ac.uk  Department of Digital Humanities, King’s College London, London, UK

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‘conditionalities’ – economic, ideological, or political – which bind communities to the Western donor in ways that can reduce the agency of LGBTQ+ activists (p. 197).

For this paper, we focus on two types of ‘resourcing’ that emerge from the corpus of data we collected. The first are digital ‘resources’ developed to guide young people’s digital literacy, safety, rights and participation in contexts where expressions of gender identity and sexuality are often met with intolerance, and where information regarding digital health and safety is difficult to access. The second considers the role of social media platforms in providing infrastructure, content moderation tools and community guidelines aimed at addressing the digital rights and safety of networked LGBTQ+ communities.

Our discussion highlights three stress points that are common to critiques of ‘resourcing’ initiatives for digital literacy, safety, rights, and participation, which we refer to using the umbrella concept ‘digital citizenship’. Though contested in the scholarship, (Livingstone & Bulger, 2014; McCosker et al., 2016; Third et al., 2019), we use this concept to acknowledge its adoption by Western humanitarian organisations and researchers when referring to young people’s digital access, inclusion, literacy and safety. Our discussion is informed by critiques of the presumed ‘universal’, normative, and liberal conceptions of ‘citizenship’, including by LGBTQ+ activists in the Asia Pacific (Wijaya, 2020). Firstly, we draw attention to how research informing the development of digital citizenship resources is often limited by tendencies to use English as the *lingua franca*, reinforcing a colonial violence of exclusion. Secondly, human rights discourse tends to universalise Western-centred concepts of ‘safety’, ‘rights’ and ‘citizenship’, while collapsing diverse expressions, practices, and understandings of sex, gender, and sexualities into an ‘LGBTQ+’ framing.<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, partnerships between development organisations, governments, researchers, and big tech companies that focus on ‘closing the digital divide’ and increasing digital literacy and safety in the Global South, are often guided by commercial benefits that flow back to big tech, contributing to commercial expansion and ‘data colonialism’ (Couldry & Mejas, 2019; Milan & Treré, 2019).

We inquire into these stress points and test the boundaries of decolonial critiques of resourcing initiatives by drawing upon postcolonial and queer scholarship to consider flows of power and resources that are more complex and arterial than a simplistic account of the Global North ‘working on’ the Global South may suggest. Responding to Gosine’s (2018) provocation, ‘that the most critical demand one can make of development actors engaged in pursuits of sexual rights at this juncture is for more complexity’ (p. 205), we see an opportunity for ‘queering’ approaches to digitally resourcing LGBTQ+ young people in the region by arguing for resourcing strategies that centre the knowledge of local communities. We engage with the postcolonial lenses of *Asia as Method* (Chen, 2010) and Yue’s (2017) queer reorienting of that paradigm through *queer Asia as method* to argue that power relations are more fluid and negotiated than a binary and reductionist logic of ‘East versus West’ (or Global North resourcing Global South) suggests. But this is not to suggest that colonial violence, Western imperialism and (neo)-liberalism do not underpin many of these more complex negotiations.

Our argument is informed by empirical findings from two research projects – first, a study on digital citizenship practices among Malaysian-Chinese youth (Johns & Cheong, 2019), and secondly, a review of digital citizenship-related online resources for young LGBTQ+ people in the Asia Pacific, followed by community consultation (Johns et al., 2022).<sup>2</sup> From Project 1, we present findings on how LGBTQ+ young Malaysians navigate

digital spaces to express themselves – through the lens of digital citizenship – as rights-bearing digital citizens. From Project 2, we consider findings from an analysis of online resources for young people’s digital citizenship, and subsequent consultations with young people and stakeholders from 10 countries. Both projects found differences between development organisations’, researchers’ and participants’ framings and understandings of young people’s digital media priorities and needs. These differences were also marked by the varied cultural contexts that participants came from.

By incorporating data from these projects, we acknowledge that, as researchers, we are implicated in the neo-colonial practices we discuss, and we are mindful of our positionality: author 1 is Malaysian but works in the United Kingdom, while authors 2 and 3 are from and work in Australia, have developed networks in the Asia Pacific, and been funded to carry out research with queer youth there. Reflections on our positionality also informs this paper.

## Review of literature

### *‘Resourcing’ as a neo-colonial logic*

Resourcing has been identified as a key expression of Western development organisations’ and researchers’ desire to rescue communities deemed to be ‘at-risk’ (Gosine, 2018; Tuck & Yang, 2021). Gosine argues that development work with LGBTQ+ communities in the Global South is framed in terms that imagine the ‘rescue of non-heterosexual people from homophobia in Global South countries’ (p. 194), but the desire to ‘rescue’ is not innocent. ‘Resourcing’, in this context, conceals conditionalities – be they economic (tied aid), ideological (neoliberalism), or political (foreign policy objectives)’ – even though it is ‘constructed as a non-reciprocated gift’ (Kapoor, 2008, p. 78). As it is difficult to disentangle these conditionalities, we begin by highlighting a common critique – that resourcing performs ideological work, framing Western donor countries as benevolent and altruistic, while the recipient country is framed as ‘haplessly dependent on the benevolence and altruism of the Western donor (to which gratitude is owed)’ (p. 79). In addition, Rahman (2014) theorises the ‘homocolonialism’ of introducing Western notions of LGBTQ+ rights, highlighting motivations beyond benevolence within a wider project of ‘Western exceptionalism’.

This echoes critiques of Global Citizenship Education initiatives funded by a combination of national and global government, not-for-profit and private sector organisations working to deliver educational programmes intended for human rights awareness and protections of young people in the Global South. Andreotti (2016) argues this framing presumes ‘Western’ knowledge, freedoms, and development to be a gift to communities perceived (or thought of, as homocolonialism suggests) to be bereft of the tools to liberate or help themselves. Drawing on a rich field of decolonial, postcolonial and Indigenous scholarship (de Sousa Santos, 2007; Kapoor, 2008), Andreotti claims ‘resourcing’ produces a type of subjectivity where the moral goodness of Western actors is reinforced, and the colonial histories of violence and exploitation that North/South economic and political discrepancies are built upon are disavowed. This situates development as a process of ‘historical amnesia’ (Kapoor, 2008) that covers over and conceals more ‘vested interests’ (Andreotti, 2016, p. 104).

Moreau and Currier (2018, pp. 223–224) extend this critique to highlight what they describe as the ‘queer dilemma’, where resources are seen as essential to the work and needs of LGBTQ+ activists in the Global South, yet ‘accepting funding renders LGBT groups vulnerable to both heteronormative and homonormative pressures that buttress neo-colonial power relations’ (p. 223–224). Wijaya (2020) highlights that, for queer activists in Indonesia, dissemination of knowledge and resources that affirm non-normative sexualities and genders (or SOGIE<sup>3</sup>) are vital to their mission. This leads activists to create ‘new kinds of cultural and political spaces’ where collaborations with NGOs, academics and other ‘global’ or ‘transnational’ actors allow for the unsettling of heteronormative social and epistemic orders. But while these collaborations have been productive, questions have also been raised about the legal constraints these organisations operate under, which often means that resources reinforce heteronormative ideals of gender, sexuality, rights and protection (p. 127–128). At times this has been countered by activists’ claims to ‘sexual citizenship’ (p. 113) and the centring of queer theory and praxis in ‘resourcing’ dynamics (p. 8). Yue and Lim (2022) also note that ‘digital sexual citizenship’ has emerged from LGBTQ+ young people’s platform use, as we explore later.

### ***LGBTQ+ communities: included but at what cost?***

Historically, LGBTQ+ issues have been generally excluded from global development discourse (Ongsupankul, 2019). This omission, Logie (2023) argues, reflects an ‘inequitable knowledge production rooted in patriarchy and compulsory heterosexuality ...’ (p. 6). Jolly (2011) previously asked why development efforts are ‘so straight’, arguing that heteronormativity be used as a lens to understand the reinforcements and challenges related to sexuality and gender. Despite increased focus on LGBTQ+ issues since then, the industry remains heteronormative, with limited impact and funding for ‘LGBTI’ communities (Jolly, 2022). Moreau and Currier (2018) warn against the potential for ‘new forms of normativity among LGBT movements in the Global South’ (p. 223). This includes expectations that local organisations will replicate the structure and processes of Northern LGBTQ+ organisations funding their development. Similarly, Ellawala (2019) theorises the ‘neo-colonial dynamic’ of donor/NGO relations in Sri Lanka, where local ‘LGBT’ organisations are expected to ‘internalize and produce the image of the Western queer figure in order to gain legitimacy as an authentic LGBT advocacy organization’ (p. 88), which encompasses ethnic and class-based discrimination. Studying Malawi and South African communities, Moreau and Currier (2018) found local concerns that ‘LGBT’ organisations may prioritise the needs of funders ahead of local community needs, potentially diminishing grassroots activism. Ellawala (2019) takes this further, discussing the colonial violence produced by the dynamics of local LGBTQ+ organisations’ dependencies on Northern funders.

### ***‘It’s complicated’: platforms, data colonialism, digital safety***

Though under-recognised in the literature, a major partner of development organisations’ efforts to resource LGBTQ+ communities in the Global South are big tech companies. Some have been involved for many years in projects addressing issues of digital inequality, access, and safety, framed within development and human rights discourses

(Bucher, 2021; Nothias, 2020). But while infrastructure projects like ‘Free Basics’<sup>4</sup> have aimed to develop the backbone for digital access in Africa, Asia, Latin America and other underdeveloped regions, civil society and human rights organisations have claimed that such programmes often cynically adopt the language of human rights and digital inclusion, while pursuing commercial objectives that lock users into a ‘walled garden’ of content (Nothias, 2020) governed by a small number of powerful companies, described as a form of ‘digital colonialism’ (Bucher, 2021; Solon, 2017).

This type of ‘resourcing’ has been extended by Meta and other platforms to include the development of digital literacy and safety resources, including for LGBTQ+ young people. While these address humanitarian concerns, they likewise also fulfil commercial ambitions to on-board users. While the production of moderation tools and platform features point to company recognition of the harm caused by platforms’ algorithms and business models in the first place,<sup>5</sup> the creation of digital citizenship resources centring these tools also provides further opportunities for enlisting Global South users to extract and exploit their data, as a process of ‘data colonialism’ (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). From a political economy perspective, this supports arguments that, ‘development interventions in the Global South are becoming the mere “by-product of larger scale processes of information capitalism”’ (Milan & Treré, 2019, p. 320).

In 2014, governments, not-for-profit organisations, and the tech industry marked the 25th Anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) by investing in digital citizenship programmes for young people (Third et al., 2019). This led to the development of online and classroom educational resources for safe participation in online environments. The application of ‘digital citizenship’ – often framed as a universal concern – has been found to be limited in its usefulness to local populations because it presumes young people, including LGBTQ+ young people, are ‘at-risk’ and in need of protection, or ‘saving’, rather than recognising and empowering their skills and agencies in navigating online safety and risk (Harris & Johns, 2021). Further evidence of the limits of the platforms’ genuine desire to increase digital ‘safety’ for marginalised groups in the Global South has recently been revealed in leaked documents by whistle-blower Frances Haugen (Zakrzewski et al., 2021), revealing that Facebook’s internal testing of hate speech detection tools in India and other countries found them to be inadequate since they were trained on largely English-speaking populations. This has been supported by research conducted with the Facebook page administrators of LGBTQ+ organisations in The Philippines (Sinpeng et al., 2021). As a result, the tools were seen as ‘ineffective and disempowering’ for local activists (p. 28)

Notwithstanding these well-founded criticisms, there is also an abundance of scholarship that gives pause to arguments that resourcing by actors from the Global North, including platforms, is wholly disempowering. For Yue and Lim (2022, p. 332), an examination of Singaporean young LGBTQ+ users revealed that their platform use enabled them to evade state-sanctioned surveillance of homosexuality, to ‘negotiate their sexualities and stake their claims to digital sexual citizenship’. They offer a more hopeful conceptualisation of digital citizenship as a ‘key arena’ for expression of rights pertaining to gender and sexuality in the Asia Pacific. These are made not through legal claims, but through ‘allied algorithmic mediation’ which works against platform and community norms by allowing users to ‘self-narrate gender affirmation’ and ‘organise collective resources’ (p. 333).

Moreover, Jerome (2023) highlights how the availability of information and resources through social media platforms has been emancipatory for Malaysian 'LGBTQ' young people, whose 'online-ness' is itself 'a community-building strategy to create a solid network providing LGBTQ+ -related information and support, while spreading awareness among members and the general public' (p.150). Another study from Malaysia explored the benefits of Twitter for 'LGBTQ' youths, specifically self-disclosure (Tuah & Mazlan, 2020). Gaining and sharing knowledge that assists learning about and acceptance of 'LGBTQ' communities was seen as a primary motivator – encompassing parallel practices of learning for oneself, and educating others, including non-LGBTQ+ people.

### ***LGBTQ+ as an inclusive/exclusive term***

While platforms and their digital resources can address real community needs, tensions arise through the universalising of knowledge and identity framings, which privilege Western understandings. 'LGBTQ+ rights' reflects US-based interest group politics, according to Budhiraja et al. (2010, p. 132), who argues that while identity-based organising strategies can effectively reveal social inequalities, they do not adequately address power structures that 'stratify people into categories of privilege and oppression'. Klappeer (2018, p.180) in arguing that "globalisation" of LGBTI' identities minimise "local" sex/gender systems and identifications', calls for 'taking account of the "travelling" implications and transnational flows of sexual identifications and categories'. Khanna (2013, p. 125) notes these identities are articulated through 'individualist frames of selves', and centres on 'personhood' and liberal framings of sexuality, instead of 'sexualness'.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, Wijaya (2020) highlights how the term 'LGBTQ+' has been appropriated by queer activists to gain visibility in public discourse and to leverage international and global rights movements to pressure governments for 'recognition and protection', drawing on Western liberal discourses. At the same time, Wijaya recognises that entanglements of Western and local vernacular identities and rights claims are 'always in tension' (p. 4). To diffuse tensions and counteract arguments of Western cultural imperialism, Wijaya claims activists 'tailor' LGBTQ+ discourses to local needs and concerns and 'consistently connect modern LGBT identities with local homosexual and transgender practices that are found in particular ethno-linguistic groups in Indonesia' (p. 6). These strategies are seen to unmoor these discourses from Western, colonial origins and to 'disrupt simplistic distinctions between global and local, West and non-West'. Recognising these tensions, Yue (2017, p. 21) offers queer Asia as method as a paradigm to describe these strategic adoptions and disruptions, that not only decentres Western and heteronormative frameworks, but 'universalizes differences' through the 'queering' of the concept of geographical localities to reorient 'the flows, boundaries, and hierarchy of global queer knowledge production'.

### ***Queer Asia as method***

At the heart of the above discussions is recognition of the complexity and ambivalence of resourcing practices, which, alongside cultural blind spots and neo-colonial frameworks, may support local agendas and help deliver justice, awareness, and even safety. To further explore this, we turn to Chen and Yue's postcolonial and queer frameworks to consider

the power dynamics beyond the perspective of the Global North resourcing the Global South. Chen (2010), for example, considers ‘reverse orientalism’, whereby Asian governments and power elites can essentialise the West as ‘represent[ing] materialism, individualism and neglect of tradition’, counterposed against an Eastern ‘spiritualism, community solidarity and respect for tradition’ (p. 228). This framing is likely to ‘otherise’ and persecute minorities who do not fit this model (2010), for example, sex workers and LGBTQ+ youth (Yue, 2017). Chen argues that to break from these binary framings which are sometimes found in decolonial and postcolonial discourse, researchers should engage in a critical intellectual dialogue drawing on inter-Asian knowledges, acknowledging where trans-local flows of knowledge blend with local knowledge and practices. He argues for the potential of Asia as Method to disrupt orientalist (and arguably ‘developmentalist’) discourse:

using the idea of Asia as an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other’s points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt. (p. 212)

While Chen does not centre dynamics of gender or sexuality, this is offered by Yue (2017, p. 21), who provides a queer reorienting of Chen’s work, proposing a critical paradigm useful for decentring ‘the globalised formation of “queer”’, by bringing further attention to ‘intra-regional cultural flows that are “local” and “international”’, with a specific focus on queer culture. One core tenant of Yue’s ‘queer Asia as method’ is the types of ‘inter-referencing’ that queer activists and community members engage in, which strategically mobilise a range of perspectives – global, local, Western, liberal, consumerist – to assert an embodied and lived queer experience which cannot be reduced to binary logics. This approach queers and re-orientes Anglo American queer culture as ostensibly local, specific, and non-universal, offering a means to dismantle narratives that position related knowledge and discourse as universal and coherent to the rest of the world. It also ensures that ‘queer Asia’ is not imagined as a static area or region-bound culture to be defined by or against Western knowledge systems, but as emerging in reference to inter-regional histories, identities, and knowledge.

## **Methods**

This paper is based on two research studies: Project 1 was conducted in Malaysia by Johns and Cheong (2019), while Project 2 involved Johns, Byron, Cheong and other colleagues who were funded by UNESCO Bangkok to conduct a desk review and consultations with LGBTQ+ young people across the Asia Pacific concerning availability and usefulness of digital citizenship and safety resources (Johns et al., 2022).

### ***Review of online resources (Project 2)***

We compiled a list of regionally-focused digital citizenship and online safety resources that were open access and published in English. The review was intended to survey what resources were available that addressed LGBTQ+ youth populations and their concerns using the keywords: digital citizenship, digital literacy, digital safety, data privacy, disinformation and hate speech, cyber-bullying, digital resilience and digital



participation. Resources were excluded where they had: a focus on digital media use with little attention to online safety and information literacy; a more specific safety focus on mainstream reproductive and health advocacy; or, a focus on bullying and violence in school settings rather than online. A final list of 20 online resources (see Johns et al., 2022, pp. 48–52) were analysed. To ensure appropriate inclusion of young LGBTQ+ and YKP (young key populations<sup>6</sup>), research reports on digital sexuality education directed at LGBTQ+ youth were also included (see p. 44–47). These reports provided background context for the review. We created a codebook to conduct a content analysis of the selected online resources, addressing how organisations framed the digital safety and citizenship needs of mainstream and LGBTQ+ young people in the Asia Pacific region.

### **Interviews and focus groups**

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were undertaken with 29 LGBTQ+ young people or stakeholders from 10 countries, spanning two field trips to Malaysia in 2016 and 2018 (Project 1), and online interviews and focus groups with respondents from Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, India, Cambodia, The Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Samoa and Fiji, in 2021 (Project 2). Both projects used an iterative thematic analysis approach to qualitatively analyse the data. While the coding schemes differed between projects, there were clear overlaps among key themes discussed by participants, which inform the ‘stress points’ shaping this paper.

## **Findings and discussion**

### **Review of digital resources**

We first turn to our analysis of digital resources to discuss key limitations identified in the production and distribution of resources for LGBTQ+ young people and stakeholders in Asia Pacific countries.

Of the resources selected, we used a diversity measure to guarantee a broad cross section of countries where English is spoken as a second or third language were included. But the funder’s decision to include only resources in English highlights a primary limitation, reflective of criticisms of development organisations (Andreotti, 2016) and which also implicates our own positionalities and limitations as researchers.<sup>7</sup> Even if a pragmatic decision, given the large number of young people who speak/read English across the region, this is an example of ‘epistemic blindness’ (p. 104), which follows Andreotti’s complaint regarding global citizenship resources which assume Western knowledge and vocabularies to be ‘universal’ in application, even where the processes leading to English becoming a *lingua franca* are colonial dispossession and violence, and erasure or marginalisation of local languages and dialects. The absence of engaging in a more decolonial process is twofold, in that it reinforces older colonial logics and excludes the ability of organisations and researchers to incorporate and learn from knowledge from excluded countries. For example, resources in other languages from Hong Kong, China, South Korea, Thailand, and Vietnam were found in our literature search but not reviewed. This may also account for the absence

of resources produced by local activists communities, where resources are presumably in local languages.

Another limitation was the lack of resourcing focused on the needs of LGBTQ+ young people in the digital citizenship space. As digital citizenship and online safety resources often omit LGBTQ+ youth, we included reports where sexuality and health were the primary focus. Of these, none were produced by LGBTQ+ or SOGIE NGOs, as they were not identified in our search, perhaps because of the aforementioned language limitation. All reports were produced by United Nation agencies (UNESCO, Unicef and UNAIDS). These reports, like the self-directed online resources that were the main focus of the review, carried an imperative to ‘save’ – being focused on access to sexuality education and sexual health resources to prevent HIV transmission, rather than on more sex positive messages, where young people’s digital safety, rights and wellbeing practices are regarded as important assets. Of the review of self-directed, online resources, only one addressed LGBTQ+ youth specifically,<sup>8</sup> but it was from a Global North country and as such, excluded from analysis. The remaining resources universalised young people’s digital citizenship concerns and framed them within a ‘risk’ and ‘protection’ framework with almost 70% of available resources speaking of digital risks and needs without acknowledging different concerns of LGBTQ+ young people.

Finally, we also identified who was involved in the production of online resources in the region. The largest funding source and provider of resources were NGOs and human rights agencies (30%), followed by government departments and ministries (22%), and, thirdly, tech and telecommunication companies and social media platform operators (21%).<sup>9</sup> The remaining actors included media regulators, private education providers, privacy advocacy groups and LGBTQ+ stakeholder organisations. We undertook a summary analysis of the types of resources the main actors produced, with a particular focus on what the content tells us about how the organisations view the needs and priorities of LGBTQ+ young people in the region.

### ***Non-Governmental organisations***

Most of the resources selected were produced by UN agencies such as UNESCO and UNICEF, and NGOs/civil society groups such as Save the Children and Arambh India, often in partnership with governments. The NGOs involved are predominantly human and children’s rights focused. UN agencies and country-specific NGOs work within frameworks like the CRC but are often limited by national regulations and laws which may prove counter-indicative of human rights, i.e., criminalising homosexuality and sex work. Negotiating this can result in child protection frameworks taking priority over LGBTQ+ rights-based approaches, as conveyed by Wijaya (2020). As previously discussed, many of these organisations are framed by a concern to lift young people in emerging economies and contexts out of poverty and to address health and educational inequalities between Global North and South. However, assuming certain needs and concerns advanced by largely Western-based knowledge and rights frameworks can risk alienating communities targeted by such initiatives (Jolly, 2022; Moreau & Currier, 2018).

### ***Governments***

In the sample, digital citizenship resources for young people were produced by partnerships between NGOs and the Australian, Malaysian, British and Solomon Islands

governments. While some of these partnerships are driven by wealthy, foreign governments seeking to enhance protection of young people in countries with less resources to regulate the internet, and where concerns of online grooming and child sexual exploitation drive such actions, these gestures reflect ongoing processes of colonisation (Kapoor, 2008) that render emerging economies and their local populations as being without law or hope, and incapable of protecting young people from harm online. While resource-producing partnerships between national governments, NGOs and other researchers can be viewed cynically as likely undertaken to meet a country's obligations to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, these can also offer welcome alternatives to resources developed by local government ministries responsible for maintaining laws discriminating against LGBTQ+ communities, as suggested by queer scholars and activists in the region (Wijaya, 2020; Yue & Lim, 2022).

### ***Telecommunications industry and platforms***

The tech industry, including telecommunications providers and social media platforms, have also partnered with NGOs and governments to promote digital safety. Among resources analysed, an interactive, educational game developed by Google called Interland teaches young people about risks of the digital world (including phishing, hacking, and misinformation), and has been used in Malaysia and across the region. While providing digital safety toolkits for young people and educators, tech companies like Byte-dance (TikTok) also took the opportunity to promote their educational products and safety record, explicitly serving their own commercial agendas. Its #thinkb4youdo resource from Singapore is a colourful resource that promotes themes of internet safety and data protection. Nonetheless, its privacy and safety tips uncritically promote TikTok as safe by design.

Rather than being driven by corporate responsibility or humanitarian objectives, producing these resources can, as previously discussed, on-board marginalised communities and young people while framing the platform (and the safety tools they offer) as offering digital safety, despite research suggesting otherwise (Sinpeng et al., 2021).

### ***Interview and focus group findings***

Our analysis of interview and focus group data identified three key concerns among participants: (1) universal framings and language of resources, (2) nuances in digital safety and security issues, and (3) complex relationships with platforms. Exploring each of these, we reflect on the limitations of resources discussed above, speaking to our three stress points. We also consider how some of the responses speak to queer Asia as method as an approach as well as how in some cases the paradigm may be a useful intervention for future research related to resourcing needs in the Asia Pacific.

### ***Universal framings and language***

Participants highlighted how digital citizenship 'resourcing' often overlooked culture and literacies that are not always evident to researchers and educators coming from outside a local context (i.e., the Global North). One respondent highlighted Samoan culture in which diverse gender and sexuality identities are not represented by, nor translatable to, an 'LGBT framework'.

Growing up here in Samoa, I wasn't aware of what being gay or bi [was], but for us, we are not usually referred to as that term here. So here in Samoa, as you're aware, we referred to Fa'afafine and Fa'afatama which are the only culturally accepted terms here. The LGBT framework or the preferred pronouns that are globally known is actually something very new but it's actually trying to make its way in or it's already in. [...] the way I learned who I am is actually through my community. (Hye Jin,<sup>10</sup> Samoa)

This statement mirrors existing literature on how 'LGBT(Q+)' is an acronym imported from Western conceptual frameworks that does not have a local vernacular equivalent and does not always map onto local practices and identities (Khanna, 2013; Klapeer, 2018) This is also captured in Jerome's (2023) reference to local terms used in Malaysia, which point to language specificities around diverse genders and sexualities. For Project 1, our recruitment criteria addressed young Malaysian Chinese people who spoke English fluently, which meant that we did not engage with terminology from other common languages.

Above, Hye Jin points to how a global 'LGBT' framework, and all that comes with that (including identity labels and pronoun use and discussion) is 'trying to make its way in or it's already in' local cultures. This acknowledges Yue (2017) and Wijaya's (2020) arguments that use of Western discourses to refer to sexuality and gender identities in the Asia Pacific region is often strategic and should not be limited or reduced to a binary framing opposing West to East, or global to local. Instead, local activists 'queer' these logics, adopting an approach of 'inter-referencing' by appropriating global (Western) and local discourses to gain visibility for their rights claims, and also to address 'reverse orientalism' from homo/transphobic actors in local contexts.

This does not mean that discourses regarding the intrusion of Global North concepts are not deeply felt. Another focus group respondent, Charli, notes that training workshops in Indonesia tend to be conducted in English, stating that 'Indonesians are not native English users, so it will be hard for them to follow training in another language'. This is a resonant issue for our respondents, highlighting the labour required of activist and advocacy communities in translating generic resources to local contexts and pushing this out to community through social media posts in a style, format and language that suits local information cultures, and specific community concerns. Our qualitative work found clear indication that digital safety resources and information produced in local dialects, that acknowledge local identities, genders, sexualities, and forms of agency, are often more trusted than 'neutral language' LGBTQ+ -focused resources from the Global North. Queer Asia as method discussions on inter-Asia alliances are useful here to consider how resources translated from Western development organisations into local dialects and activist frameworks can also be shared and utilised across some parts of the region, particularly those that share similar language or cultural specificities, as we will further discuss.

### ***Digital safety and security***

A significant issue raised in discussions from Project 2 were concerns regarding online safety and security. In some cases, these aligned with Global North framings, particularly regarding misinformation and hate speech. However, it is worth us being cautious in our interpretation of this alignment, lest we return to the complications of engaging with universal framings. Queer Asia as method calls for the provincialisation of Western

knowledge production as ‘local’ in its ‘specificity and non-universality’ (Yue, 2017, p. 21). That is to say that while these Global North framings may address issues similar to those encountered by LGBTQ+ young people in the Asia Pacific, local (or regional) specificities may require different approaches or solutions. Indeed, this was clear from Project 2 discussions where some resources were considered less useful due to socio-political aspects of a particular country, and the actors involved in resource development and distribution. For example, digital safety resources may be endorsed or rolled out by authorities, such as police, known for their hostility towards LGBTQ+ people. Police targeting and violence was mentioned by several respondents, along with a broader concern for and distrust of government and authority figures.

But when you are queer, you just hide yourself, you even use a fake account yourself, so how would you go forward? And if you go to the police, they wouldn’t do anything. (Bat-Erdene, Mongolia)

Unsurprisingly, we found that in the region, LGBTQ+ youth are less likely to listen to and trust authoritative concerns about digital safety. Further, hostility from state actors means that understandings of other safety issues including doxing and online harassment are more pronounced in some countries. For some participants, there is an ever-present risk of being online, which highlights how digital media was felt to be unsafe by default, requiring careful use. A shared risk awareness informed a sense that digital safety was precarious.

I think most dangerous is doxing for queer youth who are still closeted. It really affects their safety real bad. I have friends who are sent to religious institutions for conversion therapy and basically forced to be locked up in their home for years. (Aulia, Indonesia)

Indeed, several participants shared stories of themselves or peers being hacked, including the targeting of LGBTQ+ -affiliated activists, so this was a key discussion, and was related less to generalised risks from digital and social media (the focus of many of the resources reviewed), and more so to institutional surveillance (from authorities) or arising from poor platform governance (Tuah & Mazlan, 2020; Zakrzewski et al., 2021).

The nuances of these discussions – that indicate some alignment with safety and privacy concerns in the Global North, but also depart from these to centre risks associated with being LGBTQ+ in countries where legal frameworks counter these expressions – illustrate why ‘critical conversations on intra-regional cultural flows that are local and international’ (Yue, 2017, p. 21) are necessary.

### ***Complex relationship with platforms***

To deal with a lack of specific digital safety resources available and accessible to LGBTQ+ young people in the Asia Pacific, and unlikely support from authorities, some participants look to social media to connect to groups that are local or from neighbouring countries. A participant from Project 1 shared that Facebook groups in Malaysia and Singapore were his only resource in a country where colonial-era laws against homosexuality still exist.

Let’s say the government post anything to ban the LGBT community, or anything really harmful ... [it’s] really from that [I] really learn on how it would affect me. (Steven, Malaysia)

This anecdote speaks to how ‘flows, boundaries, and hierarchy of global queer knowledge production’ need to be reoriented (Yue, 2017, p. 21). It also supports Yue and Lim’s (2022) argument that platforms enable queer youth to connect and counter state-sanctioned surveillance and violence toward LGBTQ+ communities.

Respondents from Project 2 similarly discussed their use of social media platforms as central to sharing and seeking information relating to personal and community safety. However, some also described platforms as unsafe environments, not believing that harassment and hate speech would be regulated by platforms, particularly due to local contexts that fall under a platform’s radar. While criticisms of platform moderation policies are increasingly ubiquitous in academic literature (Bucher, 2021; Byron, 2021), there are other layers to be considered in the Asia Pacific, including the use of language that has very specific meanings, likely unnoticed by universal moderation efforts trained on narrow examples of hate speech (Sinpeng et al., 2021), a reminder of queer Asia as method’s call for the need to universalise differences instead. As one focus group participant noted:

There are no policies on Instagram or Facebook when you report anything. They are just like “it is not going against our community guidelines”. But these comments are transphobic or something because they are putting it in Hindi, the local language here or some other languages. (Vivek, India)

Vivek adds platforms cannot provide safety when algorithms used to detect hate speech and other harmful language do not pick up harmful content in local languages and slang, and where there is a lack of investment in local content moderators, as revealed by whistle-blower Frances Haugen (Zakrzewski et al., 2021), and discussed by Sinpeng et al. (2021). This also needs to be viewed through the lens of platforms’ own digital literacy and digital safety resource guides, which tend to direct users to their platform tools as the only resource needed to address digital harms. This lack of trust of platforms was a common thread in discussions with participants, guided by shared local knowledge that platforms, while promising that they are upholding community safety, and providing resources in line with this goal, are driven more by commercial values and data colonialism (Couldry & Mejias, 2019) rather than making their products safer.

Yet, in a nod to the complexity that comes with ‘queering’ resources, participants commonly suggested that platforms also afforded safe activist work due to tools which provided an ability to limit or withhold personal information.

Most of my activism I share on [my] Facebook page, and also we have the platform in Instagram. But for me, I did not really show my [personal] information on the Facebook page. (Chea, Cambodia)

Indeed, withholding and limiting personal information on social media is common, and in this discussion, safety is positioned as only ever managed by platform users (and their communities), through strategies for private and careful communication. Key to this were platforms’ flexible privacy settings, where content could be restricted to certain audiences.

I’m sharing only activism, especially in transgender rights and transgender experiences in Facebook but, of course, I will limit it with my friends only ... In Facebook, there are settings that we can say to protect us especially in our advocacy. (Geena, The Philippines)

It was not just activists who turned to these strategies. In Malaysia, LGBTQ+ young people use these strategies to safely to express themselves in digital spaces due to colonial laws like the Sedition Act (Cheong, 2021; Johns & Cheong, 2019). One respondent explains making their Instagram account private (Johns, 2020):

I think I was shy or hesitant to want to go public with a lot of things ... because I was very aware of what happens when you speak against the government at that point in time. I had to be very cautious (...) the Sedition Act, it's real, so it's scary. (Clare, Malaysia)

This is despite the Malaysian government being deeply invested in partnering with local telecommunication companies such as Digi and not-for-profit organisations to deliver digital citizenship resources which are focused on making young people's online experiences safer.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we bring together analysis of digital resources produced for the Asia Pacific and data from interviews and focus groups with 29 LGBTQ+ young people and stakeholders to consider the relationships and asymmetries of 'resourcing' efforts in the Global South. As discussed, much of the funded work of resourcing LGBTQ+ young people come from the Global North, and is couched in projects of development, aid, education, and global health initiatives. Our findings offer empirical grounding to the complexities that arise from the practice of resourcing, and research of – and contributing to – said practices and engagement. Along with scholars cited, we argue for the use of postcolonial, decolonial, and queer theories to unpack resourcing and research practices, particularly how and where these can uphold and extend a colonising agenda.

To reorient our research toward projects and politics of decolonisation, we have turned to Chen's Asia as Method (2010) and Yue's queer Asia as method (2017). These theories foreground the need to consider 'resourcing needs' beyond universal notions that reiterate colonial models of saving, protecting, and potentially exploiting (see also Gosine, 2018). These theories also lead us to acknowledge that the solutions or efforts at decolonising resourcing in the Asia Pacific is not just about resisting the aforementioned Global North and South power asymmetries, but to centre local knowledge and reconsider how to resource local communities intra-regionally. In other words, we acknowledge a need for theories and methods to align with cultural knowledge practices, and resources that already exist and flow between and through LGBTQ+ networks in the region.

Paying attention to intra-regional and grassroots community knowledge (and local resourcing efforts), can help us respond to Gosine's (2018) call for more complexity, and allows us to consider a 'queering' of how resourcing may be approached – in this case, from a local and intra-regional context, in local languages, and beyond the view and control of state-sanctioned initiatives, funding agencies, and platforms. This is particularly significant considering how LGBTQ+ young people at times turn towards platforms and resources from beyond their borders – inter-regionally and beyond – in the absence of local support systems and funding. Further, as our participants highlight, activists in the Asia Pacific are resourcing their communities through social media, practices unseen by researchers – like us – who consider only English-language resources from public websites.

As added reflection, the research projects discussed were funded by Global North institutions (our universities) and international aid/humanitarian organisations. And while this, and our positionalities as researchers working in the Global North, implicate us in the very neo-colonial logic we critique, there are elements of fluidity – and cultural flows – at play, which (queer) Asia as method reminds us. From author 1's Malaysian heritage and acquired knowledge of the productive and limiting role of Western 'resourcing', to the insights gained by Global North scholars adapting their own frameworks by learning from participants, to learning from scholars who 'queer' and disrupt straightforward understandings of aid, development, and resourcing – this has influenced the positions of these projects, and helped us acknowledge how the recommendations we're proposing can also help us become better researchers.

At the core of our recommendations is the centring of LGBTQ+ young people, and their local and intra-regional experience in resourcing work. They should not be seen as just informants who share their needs with development organisations and researchers, but as experts of their own digital cultures and practices. To our first stress point on language, we argue for the use of local (and regional) languages and slangs to reflect and be more accessible to the communities the resources are directed at more accurately. Centring LGBTQ+ young people in the process also addresses the second stress point related to global framing of rights and universalisation of identities commonly shaped from the Global North experience. This includes recognising the complexity of using acronyms such as LGBTQ+, particularly in such a diverse region as the Asia Pacific. In practice, this would involve LGBTQ+ young people being key decision makers in the development and distribution of resources. It is hence important that local and regional organisations and activists are supported by funding and business models that will allow them to build and maintain resources for their own communities, whether from funding organisations, NGOs, or corporations. This is where the third stress point – where tech companies' interests are concerned – could factor in by well-resourced funders appropriately investing in the very communities they claim to be protecting. This could occur through direct resourcing of LGBTQ+ communities and expanding upon Global North experiences of digital safety.

## Notes

1. We acknowledge even our use of the acronym 'LGBTQ+' is problematic. We use it with discomfort, for practical purposes, and later in this paper discuss the complexities that come with its use.
2. In both cases, our engagement with a digital citizenship framework was guided by funding organisations.
3. SOGIE is used by NGOs and activists in the Asia Pacific. It refers to rights pertaining to sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.
4. A Meta initiative enabling a text-based version of Facebook to be bundled with other website and 'zero-rated', where data charges were subsidised through deals with network operators. This made use of these products free in contexts where mobile data was unaffordable to many users.
5. <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/13/1111113396/glaad-social-media-report-lgbtq-online-harassment>



6. Developmental organisations have used the term key populations to refer to men who have sex with men, sex workers, people who inject drugs, and other groups particularly vulnerable to HIV.
7. While we had other team members on this project from Southeast Asia, English was the primary language used.
8. <https://www.acon.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/ACON-Facebook-Instagram-LGBTQ-Guide.pdf>
9. This data and the breakdown of resource by organisation type wasn't included in the final report for UNESCO, but formed part of the raw data analysis.
10. All names are pseudonymised.

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## Notes on contributors

**Niki Cheong** is a lecturer in Digital Culture and Society at King's College London. His research focuses on state-linked online political propaganda and disinformation practices such as cyber-trooping and how internet users navigate everyday (problematic) information on social media and chat apps, with a focus on misinformation. He was formerly a journalist in Malaysia and is the author of *Growing Up in KL* (2017).

**Amelia Johns** is a senior lecturer in Digital and Social Media at the University of Technology Sydney. Her work spans digital media and citizenship studies, with a focus on young people's digital media literacy, political participation, activism and safety across networked and closed platforms and the publics. She is the author of *Battle for the Flag* (2015) and co-editor of *Negotiating Digital Citizenship: Control, Contest, Culture* (2016). Her upcoming book with Polity Press will examine WhatsApp's shift from a one-to-one messaging app to a global communication platform.

**Paul Byron** is a senior lecturer in Digital and Social Media at the School of Communication, University of Technology Sydney. His current research focuses on LGBTQ+ young people's digital peer support practices concerning mental health. He is the author of *Digital Media, Friendship and Cultures of Care* (Routledge 2021).

## ORCID

Niki Cheong  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4402-0738>

Amelia Johns  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3946-7869>

Paul Byron  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6591-3060>

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