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Queer and trans influential peers: Negotiating platforms for community care

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Abstract

Many LGBTQ+ people offer community support on social media, including for young people facing mental health challenges. We interviewed five Australian queer and trans digital content creators known for this support and explore their motivations, community affiliations and negotiations of platform affordances. These creators described their practices as 'community-building' and negotiate platform affordances to prioritise community safety. Through their strong awareness of community need, and embracing the social responsibilities of having young queer and trans audiences, participants were adept at enhancing digital safeties for their communities. We offer the term *influential peers* to describe those who have influence in social media networks but whose work is imagined in tandem with their community membership and an ethics of care. Our findings are useful for acknowledging the role of LGBTQ+ influential peers and their skills in offering valuable community support for young people on social media.

Keywords

Community, influencer, LGBT, mental health, peer support, platforms, queer, social media, transgender

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Introduction

Australian primary health care provides limited and often unsatisfactory mental health care to LGBTQ+ young people, ranging from overt discrimination to lack of professional knowledge on the needs of LGBTQ+ people (Strauss et al., 2022). LGBTQ+ young people's experiences of health services have been mixed, but include experiencing homophobia and transphobia, inappropriate questions related to identity, and a lack of professional knowledge and training relating to LGBTQ+ health needs (Chaiton et al., 2023), particularly for trans and gender diverse people (Kattari et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2022). LGBTQ+ community members therefore play a vital role in sharing peer information and resources. A culture of lateral care and support for LGBTQ+ peers can be understood as a key infrastructure of queer and trans communities (Malatino, 2020), and social media provides key access points to these digital cultures of care (Byron, 2021). However, specific details of the practices and personal impacts of providing digital care within queer and trans communities remains understudied.

Research highlights the ongoing importance of LGBTQ+ young people's use of social media for peer-based mental health support (Berger et al., 2022; Craig and McInroy, 2014). The provision of community-specific mental health information fills an important gap that community service providers and health professionals cannot easily address. Peer-led resources are thoughtful in their provision of information, with creators skilfully navigating the affordances of digital platforms to create and widely circulate this information. Yet little research exists on the motivations and practices of these content creators. We address this gap through our focus on influential LGBTQ+ content creators – community members who are neither mental health professionals nor part of LGBTQ+ young people's personal support networks.

We draw on semi-structured interviews with five queer and trans social media creators from Australia to obtain in-depth information about LGBTQ+ creators' motivations and practices regarding digital peer support. Reflecting on findings around creator motivations, community participation and engagement with platform affordances, we argue that the role and practices of these 'influential peers' are distinct yet related to the concept of 'influencers'. While there are similarities in the labour practices, platform navigation and profile management, community-centred influential peers emphasise that visibility and content circulation practices are anchored in an ethics of care.

LGBTQ+ digital cultures of care

Queer and trans people have long embraced the affordances of digital communication technologies for building communities and extending long-running practices of peer support (Dame-Griff, 2019; Haimson et al., 2021; Pullen and Cooper, 2010). Digital communities create and circulate information, resources and care tailored to the needs and experiences of LGBTQ+ peers (Byron and McDaid, 2025; Craig and McInroy, 2014). 'Digital cultures of care' refers to informal systems of friendship and peer support that align with and contour everyday digital media use (Byron, 2021), as seen across studies of LGBTQ+ young people's well-being in relation to social media use (Berger et al., 2022). Literature on LGBTQ+ community practices of digital support is often

platform-specific, with particular attention to queer and trans communities on YouTube, Tumblr and TikTok, often conceptualised as digital counterpublics (Byron et al., 2019; Cavalcante, 2016).

Queer digital counterpublics can provide a sense of safety, and LGBTQ+ young people have long discussed their need for online 'safe spaces' due to their limited access to offline queer and trans communities (Hillier et al., 2012; Lucero, 2017). While 'community' can be a vexed term for understanding digital and LGBTQ+ networks alike (Are, 2024; Formby, 2022; Joseph, 2002), many LGBTQ+ young people use this term to discuss their digital networks, affiliations and a sense of belonging (Byron et al., 2019; Pym et al., 2021). In doing so, narratives of community intercept with narratives of informal, everyday care (Byron and McDaid, 2025; Cavalcante, 2016; Jenzen and Karl, 2014). Yet, currently, there is limited research evidence of how digital cultures of care can support the mental health of LGBTQ+ communities.

Research has highlighted how trans content creators perform intimate disclosures with their audiences – often imagined as younger and trans or questioning – to share insights about engagements with medical professionals, families and partners, along with detailed accounts of many aspects of transitioning (Horak, 2014; Raun, 2018). Creators offer insight into trans and queer lives, merging practical and emotional support to offer well-rounded accounts of negotiating gender and sexual identities. Much of this content creation and audience-building now takes place on Instagram and TikTok (Duguay, 2019; Hiebert and Kortes-Miller, 2021) – key sites used by our participants.

Researchers have deeply explored digital peer support on Tumblr for queer and trans young people (Byron et al., 2019; Dame, 2016; Haimson, 2019). Hawkins and Haimson (2018: 2) highlight the positive mental health benefits of Tumblr use for trans people, with the platform offering 'a place to observe others' transition-related content'. Similarly, TikTok is an important platform for LGBTQ+ young people seeking community and support (Hiebert and Kortes-Miller, 2021; Rochford and Palmer, 2022), and generative of 'queer culture' and peer-led mental health education (Byron, 2024). To date, there has been less research on Instagram-based mental health support, reflecting the perception that Instagram is less conducive to mental health discussion (Budenz et al., 2022).

Much literature on LGBTQ+ young people's mental health support on social media focuses on personal experiences of seeking information and support. Researchers have increasingly explored the motivations and practices of LGBTQ+ content creators, from everyday users to commercial creators, and reflect on creator tensions between authentic self-representation and political advocacy responsibilities (Hokkanen, 2023). This article contributes to these discussions and proposes a need to focus on the practices, motivations and strategies of influential social media content creators who offer mental health support to LGBTQ+ young people.

Queer and trans influencer politics on commercial platforms

Queer and trans influencers play an important role in the development of LGBTQ+ digital cultures of care (Abidin and Cover, 2018; Chen and Kanai, 2022; Duguay, 2019). However, the motivations and practices of the LGBTQ+ content creators we interviewed

do not align neatly with existing theorisations of influencers, queer and otherwise, and reveal how the boundaries of what constitutes an 'influencer' are sprawling and porous and must be negotiated in a shifting social media landscape.

The term 'influencer' was originally used to distinguish online celebrities who explicitly focussed on monetising their following through self-promotion (Abidin, 2016a, 2016b, Marwick, 2015). The commercialism of influencers is also indicated by the industry that has formalised the management, production and brand relationships of influencers (Abidin, 2018; Arriagada and Bishop, 2021). However, it is worth noting that the commercial 'influencersphere' entrenches deep structural asymmetries of power between users and platforms (Cotter, 2019; Duffy, 2017; Duffy and Meisner, 2023), and reproduces normative gender and racial scripts (Dejmanee, 2023; Pham, 2015). Marginalised content creators can therefore struggle to achieve comparable levels of visibility to hegemonic creators due to structures of platform governance and commercial sponsorship (Daniels, 2012; Duffy and Meisner, 2023).

Studies of queer influencers often centre the complexities of performing queer activism within commercial, heteronormative influencer ecologies. Discussing Troye Sivan, Abidin and Cover (2018: 218) argue that 'queer networks of microcelebrity . . . simultaneously . . . work for both a rights-based activism and for his career'. Other studies have argued that gay vloggers in the highly commercialised beauty vlogosphere, such as Jeffree Star, position queerness as '"novel" and "fun" – disarticulating the continuing oppression associated with living queer lives' (Chen and Kanai, 2022: 113), and their work may have ambiguous political implications for LGBTQ+ communities (Taylor, 2024). These ambiguities are explored by Duguay (2019: 9), who writes that lesbian and queer hashtags and emojis may seem benign 'without delivering any particular activist discourses', while simultaneously, the visibility of queer women represents an ongoing threat to heteronormativity, 'evidenced in user and platform responses to their content, including homophobic and misogynistic harassment'.

This inherent tension between commercial content and queer activism is elaborated by Raun's (2018) research on trans vlogger Julie Van Vu. Raun (2018: 103) notes that while the broader trans vlogging community has expressed discomfort with commercialising their political content, Vu 'explicitly embraces and uses capitalist logics and structures' and becomes a 'subcultural' microcelebrity who intentionally politicises her identity as an influencer by labelling herself as an advocate for the LGBT community. Vu realises both advocacy and self-commodification through her use of intimacy, which 'works as an important currency within social media . . . [and] can be capitalized in manifold and intersecting ways' (Raun, 2018: 101). Raun's findings have been developed through further research on the ways that social justice content may appear in and through influencer content (e.g. Cunningham and Craig, 2019; Hutchinson, 2017), and demonstrates that the commercial entanglements of influencer practices and platforms do not preclude these platforms being used for activism or politicisation.

The above studies focus on celebrity influencers whose levels of commercial engagement have allowed them to professionalise their work. In contrast, we situate discussions of these entanglements in the context of relatively small-scale LGBTQ+ content creators to note the trickle-down effects of influencer logics and to challenge the understanding of how influencer capacities are practised or rejected in different

community contexts. This focus recognises that while few people are professional influencers, *all* social media users exist in a platform ecology that 'increasingly encodes marketplace logics' (Hund and McGuigan, 2019: 20), and that there is widespread uptake of influencer practices and performances such as self-branding and authenticity.

In addition, we focus on queer and trans people who provide peer support relating to mental health, recognising this community-centred content creation as distinct from – if nevertheless embedded in – primarily commercial sites of interaction. This approach follows other researchers' use of the term 'influencer' to connote social media opinion leadership oriented towards civic purposes, such as 'political influencers' who promote political causes through social media (Goodwin et al., 2023; Riedl et al., 2023), and networked microcelebrity activism (Tufekci, 2013). Specific to public health, researchers have explored 'mental health influencers' – referring to mental health professionals active on TikTok and Instagram (Pretorius et al., 2022), 'sexual health influencers' who 'actively circulate sexual health content within attention economies' by drawing on 'relatable and authentic performances' (Albury and Hendry, 2023: 636) and YouTube sex edutainment celebrities (Johnston, 2017).

We elaborate on this research by exploring the goals, motivations and practices of Australian LGBTQ+ content creators known for supporting the mental health of young queer and trans people. These creators are embedded within relatively small local queer communities which confers responsibilities for crafting appropriate content, strategically navigating platforms to ensure considered visibility, and relationships of care with their imagined audiences.

Methods

From a previous survey of Australian LGBTQ+ young people (aged 16–25 years) (Byron, 2023), we compiled a list of LGBTQ+ creators nominated as hosting valuable peer support content on social media. Nominated creators were predominantly from the United States or the United Kingdom, but we extracted names of Australian creators and contacted this relatively small list via their most prominent social media channels. We initially secured three participants for interviews and then used snowball sampling to recruit two additional participants, conducting a total of five semi-structured interviews. We did not offer financial reward for participation, which limited participation. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Technology Sydney Ethics Committee (Reference: ETH21-6035).

While a small sample, this was a niche category because the number of influential Australian LGBTQ+ creators is small, especially those specifically seen to be supporting LGBTQ+ mental health. Participants were given the choice to have their names or pseudonyms used for research outputs, and two participants (Lacey and Mohammad) asked for their names to be used. Pseudonyms are used for those who requested this or those who did not elect a preference. All participants live in capital cities. Participants were given the option to review this article ahead of publication, and most did so:

Lacey: Mid-30s queer/lesbian cis woman who is white and neurodivergent. She runs accounts on TikTok (100K+ followers) and Instagram (19K+ followers).

Dee: Late-20s, non-binary, queer, Ashkenazi Jew who is neurodivergent and has engaged with trans advocacy since being a teenager and continues this work through community events and programs. They have published work about their trans experience and mostly use Instagram (20-25K followers) and Facebook (2-5K followers) to connect with community.

Charlie: Late-20s queer trans masculine artist who is white and shares his art on Instagram (10-15K followers).

Mohammad: Mid-20s queer Lebanese Muslim who runs a Queer Muslim organisation that uses Instagram to connect with community. They are also an artist for which they run a separate (yet more popular) account (3K+ followers) that also focuses on queer Muslim experiences.

Rae: Late-30s non-binary queer, white, and runs a business selling gender affirming goods. They predominantly use Instagram (10-15K followers) and TikTok (2-5K followers) to connect with community.

Participants were informed about the focus of the *Digital Peer Support* study that engaged LGBTQ+ young people across Australia through survey and interviews (Byron, 2023) and, where applicable, that they were named by participants as someone who supports LGBTQ+ mental health. Interviews lasted for up to 1 hour. Participants were first asked about their digital presence, including platforms used and why, and to reflect on why LGBTQ+ young people would have nominated them. Following this, our semi-structured interviews sought more details of the supportive social media content and interactions of participants over time. Finally, participants were invited to reflect on their own experiences of peer support in their early use of social media, which generated further insights into social media support within queer and trans communities.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. Transcriptions were cleaned and de-identified then uploaded to NVivo for thematic coding using inductive analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Codes were developed over several intervals and discussed and refined in research team meetings, resulting in the agreement of three overarching themes to explore in this article. These themes relate to participants' *motivations* for offering peer support, their discussions of *community* and their *negotiation of platform affordances* relating to community-based peer support.

Motivations: becoming an influential peer

Mostly, participants did not set out to be influential LGBTQ+ community members through their social media use, and their digital *and* community profiles developed together, over time. Participants spoke of being motivated to engage with LGBTQ+ audiences on social media due to the lack of thoughtful and appropriate content reflecting community needs. Mohammad, for example, sought to create social media content to educate their peers because 'there's a scarcity [of] mental [health] professionals who are

queer and Muslim, or queer and really culturally competent'. While participants did not always intend to build an audience of LGBTQ+ young people they understood that, through what they share on social media and other public spaces, they have acquired community visibility and influence:

Lacey: it was already my personal Instagram, but then I decided to change it to more body positivity because I was going on my own body positive journey . . . since then I have become far more politically inclined and queer in a political sense . . . [so] that's just become a huge part of my platform.

Mohammad: I think queer Muslims are looking for themselves in media and looking for themselves in these spaces, and if you're a queer Muslim . . . and wanna give back to your community, you can see yourself in the work that I do.

Despite this recognition and acceptance of their influence, participants largely rejected the labels 'activist' and 'influencer'. While all participants appeared to engage in advocacy work, only Lacey explicitly referred to her content as such. She explained how this role conferred social responsibilities in content creation:

Lacey: People do similar things that I do in the plus-size fashion space but don't claim to be advocates or activists, and that's great for them because then they don't have to worry about posting about controversial things or taking ownership when they get things wrong and doing the whole community support thing. But . . . I got into this because I wanted to help change things, not just because I wanted to advertise cute clothes, which I also do, and that's fine if that's what other people do. But there is a social responsibility that goes with it. And most of the people that I know that do play in this space take that really seriously, which is great.

Participants expressed ambivalence in categorising their social media practice, their audiences and their relationships with followers, largely rejecting the concept of influencers and its connotations. This categorisation of their role was further complicated by the intersecting goals and networks of their social media accounts. Dee states: 'I'm not an influencer. I don't want to be an influencer. Even "activist" is kind of fraught or complex and feels hard to claim for myself'. Charlie is an artist who describes himself as such. He is perhaps the most reluctant to position his work as advocacy, despite recent creative partnerships with LGBTQ+ community organisations. Meanwhile, Rae frames their business as 'heavily tied to the community', being more community-focused than sales-focused and integrating personal content in their social media, offering insight into the queer and trans experiences of team members.

These content creators appeared to be guided by intuitive and experiential understandings of digital peer support. Participants provided recollections of their own queer and/or trans journeys through social media, noting the value of digital role models and

resources they had encountered when they were younger, but also their scarcity. From these experiences, participants understood the importance of sharing their everyday experiences as queer and trans people to support the goals of 'representation and . . . telling our stories' (Mohammad). Participants embraced being able to offer support to young people as a way of being there for community. Rae states that many queer and trans young people 'need to see that there's a future there' and later adds: 'back when I was early teens, if I had seen myself on TV, represented on mainstream TV, that would have saved me years of figuring out who I was'.

At the same time, participants recounted struggles to negotiate their desire to share authentic personal information for queer and trans audiences with their need for privacy. Dee states, 'posting and being public about my life has been really important'. However, they also concede that:

> it's only now, in my older stage of my life that I'm revisiting what it means to be witnessed and what my compulsion around being so public around my life is and where it comes from, what trauma is interrelated with that, how much it serves me, how much it serves others, whether that is reciprocal, and all of the negative ways that it's impacted my life as well and my sense of self.

Lacey talks about setting intentional boundaries around what aspects of her private life she is willing to share on her public social media accounts, as well as with how much she can engage with private messages she receives. Rae notes the struggle of personal disclosures, stating that 'when you have a business that's so heavily tied to the community but also your own identity, it's really tiring to . . . you're putting so much into your business, of yourself'.

Overall, these creators are reluctant role models who embraced their visibility and influential status due to their belief in the value of visibility that offers vital support for queer and trans young people. Participants were cognisant of a responsibility to craft meaningful, educational content that required them to educate themselves on contemporary social issues and debates within their communities. This reflects existing research findings that queer and trans social media users can feel responsible to their community for their online content and participation (Hokkanen, 2023). Our participants' considerations of how they felt and negotiated such responsibility took place alongside other intertwined motivations including advocacy, commerce and art practice.

Community

All participants reflect on community – and their roles within communities – at length. They centred themselves and their practice within various imagined communities that tend to be more specific than a general 'LGBTQ+ community' and traversed online and offline spaces. Charlie and Rae specifically discussed trans communities as those who engaged with Charlie's art, or Rae's business. Rae's trans community were also referred to as customers. Mohammad describes themself as integrated within the Muslim community through their role as a peer worker but also artist, suggesting two distinct yet porous public personas since they understood their imagined audience to know them across these roles. Lacey situates herself as part of the Melbourne queer community, as

well as fat activism communities. The importance of community to influential peer practices meant that rather than simply working to grow an audience, participants expressed interests in building community (Lacey), growing community (Mohammad) and giving back to community (Mohammad).

Being situated within community seemed to align with participants' rejection of the terms *audience* and *followers*. As participants identify, being a social media content creator *within* community comes with challenges. Lacey discusses how audiences are also peers, and her social media activities are influenced by who she follows and learns from. Describing Melbourne as a 'small town', regarding its queer community, she points to the discomfort in being recognised at public events at times when she is not wanting attention.

While participants spoke of their imagined audiences as communities, their content creation was marked by the need to manage its circulation and visibility for intersecting, exclusive and different communities. In their interview, Mohammad switches between referring to the wider Muslim community and the Queer Muslim community, highlighting different intersections or layers of belonging to each. They also refer to an LGBTQ+ community that is experienced as predominantly white, whose negotiations of gender and sexuality largely differ to those of LGBTQ+ Muslims.

A common source of apprehension for participants was that they were prone to receiving negative comments and hate speech due to their public visibility and the ease with which digital content could be circulated to unintended, hateful audiences – those discursively situated as beyond community. This included actors wilfully instigating trolling by sharing participant details or content to other sites. Lacey mentions trolls directing people to her content saying: 'There are YouTube videos about me. There are Reddit threads about me. People were like coming into my DM'. Dee recalls receiving hate speech and being trolled on YouTube:

> I imagine it was maybe posted on some sort of Reddit thread or something, but there was a whole kind of faction of anti-Semitic trolls that came out of the woodwork and had fake profiles that were like rabbis and stuff. And the sort of stuff they were saying . . . it was very threatening and violent language that I have not experienced in a really long time.

However, Dee reflects that: 'mostly, it didn't really affect me very much, I felt pretty supported'. This was echoed in other participant accounts of being trolled. Given their volume of followers, supportive comments and private messages, and holding a recognised role in various communities, participants indicated being largely impervious to hate speech and attempts to discredit and attack them. Accordingly, dealing with trolls and hate speech was often contextualised in terms of protecting imagined communities, rather than a participants' personal safety. Several participants indicated that hate speech and trolling they encountered potentially shielded other community members from these things:

Mohammad: I was reflecting recently on the last episode of death threats, I was like despite this, I feel the love and support, and we actually protect our young people from it, they don't see it. We'll turn off our comments so

> that anyone who wants to send us hate has to go through DMs, so we protect our young people from it as well.

Participants indicated developing strategies for handling hateful comments, as per Mohammad's statement above. Disallowing Instagram comments ensured that any hateful messages were received and dealt with privately, unseen by community members. Dee suggests that over time they learned not to engage in social media debates, as this was not time well spent. Lacey was accustomed to dealing with hateful comments, saying these did not affect her, and she mostly found them amusing. She sometimes offered public responses, which she described as 'teachable moments' modelling how her followers might also respond to hateful comments.

At times, hate speech was the catalyst for communities of support to form around influential peers, offering *them* mental health support. Dee recalls an experience where 'people reported the comments. A friend of mine sent me a bouquet of flowers. It was a really – you know, I felt really loved and rallied behind'. More broadly, creators' visibility supported the construction of lateral networks of care among other well-known LGBTQ+ creators. Dee describes this network as a resource, saying 'I feel like I have such access to resources. Like I have – if I need anything, really, I can find it'. For Charlie, comments on his Instagram posts have hosted a lot of community discussion and connection – what he refers to as 'little chains of support'. These communities of support are imagined as transcending physical and geographical barriers. Rae says that young people need to see that even if geographically they're feeling isolated, there are still these opportunities for connection. Dee describes the intergenerational connections forged through their work: 'I was just sort of doing it on my own. Now I have more intergenerational relationships that I can turn to and be like, what would you do in my position?'

In summary, community roles and belongings are central to the social media practices of these LGBTQ+ creators. Participants indicated that they thoughtfully considered the communities they belonged to when sharing content, while also navigating wider communities beyond social media, and developing strategies (often collectively) to deal with anticipated hate speech and trolling. Overall, participants largely described their communities as a resource that provides motivation for their social media practices and their participation in community-building.

Negotiating platform affordances for community safety and personal responsibility

Participants discuss engaging with platform affordances to craft appropriate messages that build and protect their communities. They predominantly used Instagram and TikTok, with Instagram viewed as having affordances for LGBTQ+ reach, and for being associated with empowerment and visibility, according to Mohammad – as also reflected in research with content creators and their negotiation of Instagram's 'visibility mandate' (Duffy and Hund, 2019). Some participants also used Facebook, though less so in recent years. Rae's business had used Twitter until it was procured by Elon Musk, after which they left that platform out of concern for the safety of trans communities there.

Platform choice related to where participants' communities were. For Rae, many customers post about their purchases on TikTok and tag their business, so having a TikTok account is important for reposting customer experiences:

Rae: a lot of our content is actually reposting other people's videos, so customers of ours who will do an unboxing or unveiling of their order or they're trying on their binder for the first time, things like that. So it's really positive interactions.

Platform use required many negotiations, but a key concern was around safety. In light of pervasive hate speech and trolling, participants sought to manage community safety through strategic decisions about platform use settings. This required participants to weigh up the risks of receiving hateful messages with the support they were able to provide through having a public social media account. For Dee, a key safeguard for their Instagram account was that only followers were able to comment on posts. They had also flagged certain words that, if used, would prevent a comment from being visible to followers. For Mohammad, Instagram was the best platform for safe community engagement, which they particularly discussed in relation to their peer work. Their Instagram account allowed non-followers to send direct messages which, while enabling direct hate speech and death threats, was a deliberate strategy to allow private connection from community members for whom it may be unsafe to publicly comment, or to even follow their account:

Mohammad: we have a lot of queer Muslims who don't follow us for their safety because if they're following us, it would be too explicit, and . . . if you just look at our [community group] name and our Instagram photo, it's not queer-coded in any way. Well, it's queer-coded but it's not specifically queer. We do that as one of our safety assessments.

Lacey's social media accounts were more open, as she managed community needs with engaging sponsorship. While this allowed hateful comments, TikTok was considered far worse than Instagram due to the lack of control over where and how content was circulated through the 'virality of hate' she experienced when a sponsored TikTok post circulated beyond her networks:

Lacey: because of the algorithm on TikTok, you get strangers fed to your feed . . . Unlike Instagram where most of the content that you see is people that you already follow or through hashtags that you've gone through . . . So, if one hater has posted a hate comment on that [TikTok video], then it's gonna get shown to other people that are in that person's network. And so, I think the virality of the hate can get quite far.

For this TikTok post, Lacey asked its sponsor to turn off the commenting feature which they did. This experience, and the anecdote she offers, indicates the risks of content reaching unintended audiences – in this case queerphobic and fatphobic audiences.

Similarly, Mohammad felt that unlike Instagram, TikTok was not a good platform for their work due to being less of a community space and having limited content management control. They spoke of an art animation that was shared to their community group's TikTok but was met with significant backlash:

> **Mohammad:** the longer it stayed up, the more it went viral, the more people screen recorded it on TikTok. In the day, it had 40,000 views on TikTok and it was on the wrong side of TikTok, and then other influencers were reacting to it and it's on another person's page and we can't take it down . . . we weren't able to control it and manage that the way we could've in our own page.

Rae recalled a particularly negative experience, but on their personal TikTok account:

> I did have a public profile on TikTok where I had reposted something that we had posted on [business account] and for some reason, my post ended up with 85 really awful transphobic comments . . . I was very happy that it was on my profile and not our public-facing [business] one, because for me, it's not like it's water off duck's back but I'm in a position where in my life, I'm very comfortable and confident and supported, whereas, if that stuff had shown up on a [business] post, that could be quite damaging to young people.

All participants discuss comment sections on social media as offering valuable sites of peer support, yet needing to monitor and sometimes moderate these for community safety. While Charlie found comments to be mostly generative of community support, he spoke of sometimes deleting comments when concerned about how they would be read by imagined audiences.

All participants had received direct messages from community members that enabled them to offer support privately and directly. Direct messaging affordances of platforms offered important community and follower engagement yet could also be a heavy reminder of participants' responsibilities to their communities. According to participants, their lived experience of being queer and/or trans made them feel reasonably confident in knowing how to respond when young people privately reached out to them. They also reported feeling honoured to be contacted in this way, accepting that this may be a young person's first step to finding necessary mental health support. Rae noted that they would prioritise responding to these messages ahead of others. Commonly, participants provided space for listening, along with encouragement and affirmation. In addition, some participants said they would refer people to support services, recognising the limits of their ability to help community members, alongside not knowing these people and their mental health needs. This was relatively easy for Lacey, as a former nurse, and for Mohammad who worked for a peer support organisation and could refer people there. For Charlie, he appreciated people sharing their experiences over direct messages, yet states: 'but it's also a lot on my part as well because I'm just Charlie. I'm not a trained *anything* except an artist'. This reflects the common discomfort in feeling sometimes 'more responsible' to LGBTQ+ communities due to one's public profile and community engagement. Charlie spoke of more recently partnering with LGBTQ+ and mental

health organisations and gaining more confidence in responding to messages from community members. Lacey spoke of the privilege and potential burdens of the DMs she attracts:

> **Lacey:** every so often, I would get someone who's in their early 20s or in their teens message me and they think that they're queer. And I think that's a real privilege to be someone's safe space like that. But also, it's taken me a few years to put up some emotional boundaries so that I don't take on that burden myself 'cause it's a really quick way to burn yourself out.

In summary, decisions about which platforms to use and how to strategically navigate their affordances were directed by community safety considerations, and a responsibility for shielding audiences from hateful content. Often, participants were required to work against the affordances of spreadability that are built into the logic of platforms, as per documented tactics of invisibility that are often necessary for marginalised content creators (Talvitie-Lamberg et al., 2024). Avoiding unintended and hostile audiences required effort and forethought, as did responding to private messages that ranged from young people seeking support, to hate speech, trolling, and even death threats. However, participants also recognised that through platform affordances of visibility, they gained the opportunity to reach LGBTQ+ young people and interact with them in meaningful and supportive ways.

Influential peers and community-centred care

In this article, we consider the role and influence of LGBTQ+ content creators in Australia who offer mental health support to queer and trans young people. These creators are not mental health professionals but became influential community figures through different paths. While some had participated in advocacy work prior to their current social media practices, or adopted social media for advocacy or community-focused enterprises, others used social media to primarily showcase creative work or personal interests.

Participants indicate that, over time, they increasingly understood that their community engagement on social media confers certain privileges alongside additional social responsibilities. These responsibilities, driven by an ethics of care, include researching and crafting appropriate content and responses that reflect the mental health needs of queer and trans audiences. Furthermore, participants invested in community safety, simultaneously negotiating and balancing a range of safeties – personal, community-level, and those associated with imagined LGBTQ+ young audiences perceived as more vulnerable to hateful content. As participants state, there was privilege in being someone that young LGBTQ+ people reached out to. Alongside this feeling, and perhaps exacerbating this, was a firsthand knowledge of the power of digital peer support for queer, trans and questioning young people, as participants themselves had experienced. Within queer and trans communities, participants enacted responsibilities around care, support and community-building in ways afforded by social media platforms. This includes offering protection to community through their social media account settings and their processes of moderating and responding to comments.

The extent of these responsibilities is underlined by the fact that our participants had no formal training in providing mental health care and were driven to generate appropriate responses to followers seeking support. These social responsibilities relate to invisible emotional labours – including aspirational labour (Duffy, 2017) and relational labour (Baym, 2015) – that are pervasive to generating social media influence and not captured in traditional influencer metrics such as views and sponsorship income (Raun, 2018). Notably, however, none of these creators framed their engagement with LGBTQ+ peers and followers as labour, despite the efforts they discuss, and the time spent on this 'work'. We suggest that this reflects Malatino's theorisation of trans and queer 'care webs' that are largely communal, where care is often reciprocal, and rather than perceived as an individual burden, care responsibilities are embraced as a shared aspect of queer and trans culture (Malatino, 2020).

Participants' sense of social responsibility to their communities drives what we see as core differences between 'influencers' and 'influential peers'. In the context of digital peer support, we define influential peers as those who have influence in social media networks but whose work is imagined in tandem with their community membership that confers personal responsibility for ethical content practices and platform use. Drawing on and disclosing personal experiences in the context of influential peers is likely to be influenced by queer cultural practices of digital support (Byron, 2023), which can contrast with brand-driven content creation, including among high-profile LGBTQ+ creators.

While a discourse of 'community' is wielded by many influencers and creators to harness and build audiences, our data demonstrate how these creators referenced community in more specific, embedded and lateral ways. Throughout discussions of community, and their support of LGBTQ+ young people, participants recognised their influence with some discomfort. This discomfort may be informed by their own queer and trans journeys, and reciprocal systems of care that disrupt a linear model of the influencer and the influenced. As with influencers, however, a discourse of community can also work to conceal existing hierarchies that certainly exist in terms of who has an audience and subsequent influence, and who does not. And it is perhaps these hierarchies that generate feelings of both discomfort and responsibility, as expressed throughout interviews and elsewhere (Hokkanen, 2023), in relation to peer support practices that have been adopted with both reluctance and pride.

While influential peers likely attract followers due to intimate disclosures and content understood by audiences as authentic to their brands (Raun, 2018), and their content may be monetised, our data show that their overriding ethics of care, and the care webs they are part of (Malatino, 2020), contrasts with typical influencer goals and practices. For instance, there were times when participants had to actively work towards limiting visibility, and against forms of spreadability that would be deemed successful in the context of influencer goals. In addition, many influential peers take on key advocacy roles within specific communities, potentially limiting their reach, as well as their marketability for brand sponsorship, reinforcing the noted asymmetries that suppress the content of marginalised content creators (Duffy and Meisner, 2023).

Conclusion

We argue that the concept of 'influential peers' is useful and generative for exploring LGBTQ+ digital support practices. This concept could also encompass other community-embedded creators for whom peer support and solidarity commitments are culturally embedded. As our participants discuss, becoming an influential peer often emerges through creators' attunements to community needs, alongside creators' own experiences of community support. This can also be true of social media activism, though our participants were reluctant to frame their practices as such.

Turning to existing research on content creators – as influencers, activists, educators and more – it is tempting to apply these frameworks to our participants. However, our data suggest a need to expand these conceptualisations to accommodate the social media influence of community-embedded creators committed to care responsibilities for queer and trans young people. Taken together, our participants' motivations, community engagements and platform negotiations present a narrative of influence that is lateral and informed by digital cultures of care that are developed through community participation. These insights are useful for acknowledging and supporting LGBTQ+ influential peers and the important role they play in offering appropriate mental health support and fostering lateral networks of care for their communities.

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