THE CONVERGENCE OF NICHE AND MAINSTREAM SOCIAL NETWORKING SERVICES IN GAY MEN'S DIGITAL CULTURE: HOW GENERATION Y USES FACEBOOK TO EXTEND AND ENHANCE THE GAYDAR EXPERIENCE

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Intro

In her early discussions of social networking sites (SNSs) in the context of the rise (and fall) of Friendster, danah boyd (2007) noted gay men's tendencies to use mainstream social networking services as "gay dating sites". Being amongst the earliest adopters of Friendster, during its initial growth period, gay identified users in New York perceived gay dating to be the site's purpose and invited other gay men (boyd, 2007). While Friendster itself did not last, due, among other things, to a crumbling database and large-scale user abandonment, the extension of gay men's networks into mainstream social networking sites has not abated. When Facebook began achieving popularity in Australia in 2007, for example, it was initially touted amongst some in the gay community as 'the new Gaydar' (see, E, 2007); a new addition to the raft of existing SNSs designed specifically for the gay male population.

While any user of Facebook can attest the site is not designed to facilitate gay male interaction, as it was once imagined in some quarters, empirical data has not yet been published which examines the roles mainstream social networking services, such as Facebook, now play in relation to niche networking sites like Gaydar (ww.gaydar.net), and to gay men's digital culture more broadly. Expanding on the work commenced in this general area by Cooper and Dzara (2010), who examined the possibilities of Facebook for LGBT identity and activism, this paper provides a qualitative beginning to this discussion[1].

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[1] Prior to *LGBT Identity and Online New Media* (Pullen and Cooper, 2010), in which demographic (see, for example, Mowlabocus, 2010).

Methods

This paper emerges from data gathered as part of a larger project on the extension of gay men's social networks into more mainstream SNSs and the associated implications for identity management in these spaces that focused, in particular, on the use of Gaydar and Facebook amongst 18-28 year old users of these sites in Brisbane, Australia. As part of this project 7500 Gaydar profiles and more than 40 Brisbane-based gay-oriented Facebook groups and pages were examined using participant observation techniques. Semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions about the ways that participants personally engaged with and perceived of Gaydar and Facebook; how they went about managing their identities in these spaces; and what roles, if any, they saw the services playing in the gay male community more generally were also carried out with 30 users of these sites, in effect, constructing a feedback loop to verify the accuracy of interpretations made during the participant observation phase of the project. Participants were recruited using the 'snowball' method, and while not intended in any way to be representative of the entire gay male community in Brisbane, were nonetheless from a broad range of social, economic, religious and ethnic backgrounds, of differing education levels, from every age in the 18-28 year old bracket, and at different stages of the coming out process.

Findings

Although Facebook has certainly not usurped the role of Gaydar in gay men's digital culture in Brisbane, the data from this study clearly indicates that young gay men in Brisbane are using the site for purposes that overlap with their core reasons for using Gaydar. Indeed, the data suggested that Facebook has become deeply enmeshed in this demographic's experience of gay men's digital culture, and is used in very specific ways to extend, verify, connect with, and navigate, gay men's social networks. The participants in this study, for example, routinely used Facebook as:

> - a space to shift acceptable interactions with other Gaydar users away from the Gaydar environment;
> - an important connection point for and verifier of the identities presented in Gaydar;
> - and an alternate avenue to access likeminded gay men.

By briefly examining Facebook's affordances with regards to identity management options vis-à-vis GLBT specific SNSs such as Gaydar, this paper provides a contextual analysis of how and why Facebook is now an important aspect of gay men's digital culture and why it has been taken up and embraced by young gay men in the above ways. I suggest that the main impetus for these developments is derived from Facebook's provision of a framework through which GLBT identities can be expressed in a fashion that makes homosexuality banal in ways not possible within SNSs designed specifically for gay male users.

Implications/Relevance

The positioning of Facebook as a significant part of gay men's digital culture through a range of technosocial convergences raises questions for a number of associated parties. For owners and designers of niche social networking sites aimed specifically at gay men, for example, it raises the issue of how to best provide the kind of services their target demographic is now looking for from niche social networking sites. As gay men's digital spaces have a long history of providing 'identity demarginalization' (McKenna and Bargh, 1998) to users, for GLBT community organisations and support groups convergence between sites like Gaydar and Facebook also raises questions about how to best adapt support services if this is no longer the case. For example, how might guidelines aimed at young people about 'coming out' and exploring one's sexuality (see, for example, http://www.comingout.com.au/coming- out/) be adapted to suit a generation of men for whom this process may now occur in the spaces of mainstream social networking sites?

This paper is a contribution to the body of research that will need to be done in order to adequately address such questions, and to strengthen our understandings of contemporary gay men's digital culture more broadly. Its relevance to AoIR's theme for 2014 lies in its dual focus on convergence and identity, and on the particular uses of a mainstream social networking site by a minority group.

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