



SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS
FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

Fostering Community in COVID-19:

How Individuals and Groups that Work
With and For Queer Youth Have
Adapted to a Virtual World

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shift from in-person support networks to online education and community programming has changed the way that some queer youth access the LGBTQ+ community¹. In light of the shift to online platforms for creating community amongst queer youth, it is important to understand how online spaces have been, and can be, adapted to cater to the evolving needs and circumstances of queer youth. In these spaces, the organization of the platform has a significant role in the user experience². Existing research discusses how online programming can be adapted to support queer youth amidst pandemic-related restrictions³. However, little research looks at which online programming modifications have or have not been effective, creating a research gap. As such, the aims of this report are threefold:

- 1) Identify how some individuals and groups who work with and for LGBTQ+ youth have adapted their programming to support queer youth in COVID-19;
- 2) Identify initiatives that have been effective in fostering community amongst queer youth, especially those with intersecting identities;
- 3) Inform the development of future programs for LGBTQ+ youth.

A literature review of online queer pedagogical systems, and interviews with 5 individuals that work with/for queer youth inform the findings of the report. Three major outcomes were identified: (1) social isolation; (2) resilience, and; (3) accessibility issues. Three recommendations are made to existing and future initiatives aimed at engaging queer youth in virtual spaces:

- 1) Utilize online social media platforms to connect with queer youth, particularly those in rural communities;
- 2) Run events in an unscheduled format allowing for greater flexibility;
- 3) Create programs that cater to queer youth of intersecting identities.

¹ Keshet. "Supporting LGBTQ Youth During Covid-19," *Keshet*, June 2, 2020. <https://www.keshetonline.org/resources/supporting-lgbtq-youth-during-covid-19/>

² Xeturah M. Woodley and Mary F. Rice, *Designing Intersectional Online Education: Critical Teaching and Learning Practices*, (Routledge February 14, 2022).

³ Keshet, "Supporting."

TERMINOLOGY

- **‘Social connectedness’** refers to a feeling of belonging and connection to others. The Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness (SCSC) describes it as social circumstances where ‘everyone – no matter their age, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, or political affiliation – has the opportunity to belong.’⁴
- **Social isolation** refers to the lack of a sense of belonging, the inability to connect with others, and the lack of or deterioration of meaningful social relationships.⁵
- **‘Youth’** and **‘young person’** refers to individuals who are between the ages of 15 and 24 years old in accordance with the definition put forth by the United Nations.⁶
- The terms **‘queer’** and **‘LGBTQ+’** are used interchangeably to encapsulate gender and sexual minorities, broadly understood. The authors of the report are cognizant that ‘queer’ has historically been used to oppress and marginalize members of the LGBTQ+ community. ‘Queer’ is used in this report to reclaim the term as one of pride and empowerment.⁷
- **‘Two-spirit’** is the English translation of the Anishinaabemowin term *niizh manidoowag*. While the English translation cannot fully encapsulate Anishinaabe understandings of the term, it is understood in English as a person “who embodies both a masculine and feminine spirit” and is often used broadly to refer to Indigenous people who are also a member of the queer community. Some two-spirit people use the term to describe their gender, sexual and spiritual identities.⁸ The term **‘Indigiqueer’** is used in Jonny Appleseed⁹ by Joshua Whitehead and refers to some LGBTQ+ Indigenous people who do not self-identify as Two-Spirit.¹⁰
- **‘Homophobia’** and **‘queerphobia’** are used broadly to refer to prejudice against members of the LGBTQ+ community. **‘Transphobia’** refers to

⁴ Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness, “Who We Are.” *Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness*, 2021. <https://www.socialconnectedness.org/about-us/>

⁵ Jonathan Garcia et al, “Social isolation and connectedness as determinants of well-being: Global evidence mapping focused on LGBTQ youth.” *Global Public Health* 15 no. 4 (2020): 498.

⁶ United Nations General Assembly. “International Youth Year: Participation, Development, Peace.” *United Nations General Assembly*. June 19, 1981. <https://undocs.org/en/A/36/215>

⁷ Merrill Perlman. “How the word ‘queer’ was adopted by the LGBTQ community.” *Columbia Journalism Review*, January 22, 2019. https://www.cjr.org/language_corner/queer.php

⁸ Michelle Felice. ‘Two-Spirit.’ *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, October 29, 2015, last edited July 3, 2020, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/two-spirit>

⁹ Joshua Whitehead, *Jonny Appleseed* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018).

¹⁰ University of Alberta, “Equity, Diversity, & Inclusivity: Library Resources,” *University of Alberta*, August 17, 2022.

<https://guides.library.ualberta.ca/edi/2s#:~:text=Indigiqueer%20is%20another%20term%20sometimes.those%20who%20identify%20with%20both.>

prejudice against members of the trans, non-binary, and gender minority population.

RECOGNITION OF INDIGENOUS LANDS

Though the research and writing of this report were conducted remotely, the authors were, at the time of the study, predominantly located in Ottawa, Montreal/Tiohtià:ke, and Winnipeg, on the customary lands of the Anishinaabe Algonquin people, Kanien'kehà:ka people, and on Treaty One Territory, respectively. We remain committed to learning and respecting the history of the land and communities who first inhabited them. We encourage readers to reflect on the land upon which they reside, and their relationship to it, as well as to educate themselves on colonial legacies which have and continue to commit violence against Indigenous people, including Indigiqueer and two-spirit peoples.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Marginalization of LGBTQ+ Members in Canada

Members of the LGBTQ+ community have historically, and continue to, experience marginalization in Canada. Prejudice towards the queer community is rooted in exclusive conceptions of gender and sexuality. Judith Butler argues that gender is performative because it is the repetition of gendered activity including acts, gestures, and desires which construct the body as male or female. These repeated acts of gender then become naturalized in mainstream society. However, these gender norms cannot be fully embodied because they are constrained by hegemonic cultural discourse that create a binary between the genders, and consequently cannot adequately express an individual's inner essence.¹¹ For gender queer, questioning and non-conforming individuals, strict gender binaries restrict access to community by alienating them from hegemonic cultural understandings of gender identity.

Therriault uses work by Rubin to explain how social value is ascribed to different sexual acts.¹² In this hierarchical system of value, married, reproductive, heterosexual sex is at the top, and unmarried, non-monogamous, and homosexual sex is at the bottom. Though homosexual activity has become more legally, politically, and socially acceptable within contemporary Canadian society,

¹¹Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York, Routledge, 1990). http://lauragonalez.com/TC/BUTLER_gender_trouble.pdf.

¹² Daniel Therriault, "Organized leisure experiences of LGBTQ youth: Resistance and oppression," *Journal of Leisure Research* 46, no. 4 (2014): 448-461

biases and stigmatization continue to marginalize members of the queer community. At the same time, structural forms of oppression against the queer community categorize gender and sexual minorities as subpar to cisgender, heterosexual individuals.¹³ For example, in 2005, same-sex marriage became legal across Canada under the Civil Marriage Act.¹⁴ Prior to 2005, restrictions on same-sex legal marriage implied that heterosexuality was the socially desirable position, legitimizing the marginalization of queer individuals.¹⁵ In a similar manner, in 1969, the Canadian *Criminal Code* was amended to decriminalize anal intercourse between married persons of the opposite sex, and between consenting adults of all sexes aged 21 years and above, provided that the activity took place in private and was consensual. In 1988, the age of consent for anal intercourse was lowered to 18 years.¹⁶ While this has been a significant marker of progress for the queer community, especially the gay male community, it's important to recognize that the same standards do not apply to people engaging in heterosexual intercourse. The age of consent for heterosexual sex was 14 prior to 2008 and 16 after 2008.¹⁷ In 2016, the uniform age of consent for all kinds of sex, including anal sex, was set to 18.¹⁸ This legislation had long-lasting

¹³ Daniel Theriault, "Organized," 450.

¹⁴ Margarit Eichler, "Same Sex Marriage in Canada," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, September 21, 2016.

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/same-sex-marriage-in-canada#:~:text=The%20ofederal%20Civil%20Marriage%20Act.have%20recognized%20same%2Dsex%20marriages.>

¹⁵ Daniel Theriault, "Organized," 450.

¹⁶ Government of Canada, "Questions and Answers - An Act related to the repeal of section 159 of the *Criminal Code*," *Government of Canada*, September 1, 2021.

https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/pl/s159/qa_s159-qr_s159.html

¹⁷ Miriam Smith, "Homophobia and Homonationalism: LGBTQ Law Reform in Canada," *Social & Legal Studies* 29, no. 1, (February 2020): 79-80. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663918822150>.

¹⁸ CBC News. "What is Canada's 'age of consent' and what are the Liberals changing?" *CBC News*, November 15, 2016.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/faq-age-of-consent-law-canada-1.3851507#:~:text=The%20age%20of%20consent%20to.sexual%20orientation%20%E2%80%94%20is%20currently%202018.>

impacts on members of the queer community by stigmatizing anal sex, which has a disproportionate impact on the queer community.

Queerness at the Intersections

These restrictive conceptions of gender and sexuality have a significant impact on members of the queer community who are at the intersection of other marginalized identities. For example, two-spirit and Indigiqueer individuals may experience transphobia and homophobia from within their communities due to the colonial imposition of Christianity on their people, which has sought to destroy traditional ideas of gender fluidity and sexual diversity. At the same time, they may experience similar forms transphobia and homophobia outside their community, while also experiencing racism within broader Canadian society resulting in unique experiences of marginalization due to their queer and/or two-spirit identities.¹⁹ In May 2018, the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations (FSIN) released its suicide prevention strategy, which found that suicide is four times more likely to occur in the two-spirit Indigenous population than in Saskatchewan's general population.²⁰ This stark reality is a reminder to pay attention to whose interests and needs are being accounted for, and whose are not.²¹ While intersecting identities can create unique, and often, buried experiences of oppression for two-spirit Indigenous people, the social exclusion of queer people is unable to dismantle the underlying principles that give rise to

¹⁹ Omayra Issa, "A place in the circle: 2-spirit people seek visibility and support," CBC News, June 16, 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatoon/two-spirit-people-marginalized-1.5172812>

²⁰ Issa, "2-spirit."

²¹ Garrett Hinchey. "Indigenous LGBTQ people face visibility issues, major service gaps, MMIWG inquiry hears," CBC News, September 12, 2018. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/mmiwg-igaluit-day-3-wrap-1.4821123>

the practices and legalities of Indigenous communities²² who have historically been accepting to gender and sexual diversity.²³ In other words, though colonialism has, in many cases, altered the way that Indigenous livelihood is practiced and experienced, the foundational cultural norms within Indigenous communities which at one time embraced multiple genders and sexualities, continue to exist.

In a case study on the experiences of gay and gender non-conforming Black queer students at a highschool in California, the researcher found that they were marginalized in extracurricular activities. Of the extracurricular activities that they were a part of, there was often a lack of representation, and their peers, who were heterosexual, often targetted them for being openly queer. This study raises our awareness to the need to consider the specific experiences of queer youth who are members of the Black community.²⁴

In another study, queer youth with disabilities had a diverse range of cultural, linguistic and sexual needs depending on their abilities, disabilities and service needs, which suggests unique forms of discrimination and marginalization when these needs are not met. For example, queerphobia and ableism can be found within the health and social services which results in the marginalization of queer disabled individuals. In a 2020 national report by TransPulse on the health and health care experiences of trans and non-binary

²² Brian Joseph Gilley, "Native Sexual Inequalities: American Indian Cultural Conservative Homophobia and the Problem of Tradition," *Sexualities* 13, no. 1 (February 2010): 49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460709346114>

²³ Issa, "2-spirit"

²⁴ Lance T. McCready, "Understanding the Marginalization of Gay and Gender Non-Conforming Black Male Students," *Theory into Practice* 43, no. 2 (2004):136-143 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3701549>.

individuals in Canada, they found that between 2014 and 2019, most participants had experienced verbal harassment related to being trans or non-binary, an additional 16 percent experienced physical assault, and 26 per cent had experienced sexual assault.²⁵ In other cases, while health care providers may not be explicitly queerphobic, physicians may not know that they can prescribe gender-affirming hormones, or do not feel that they are equipped with the knowledge or skill to provide health services to queer individuals; this points to structural forms of discrimination in the health care services.²⁶ At the same time, spaces that advocate for disability rights and/or provide services to people with disabilities may be transphobic and homophobic. A 2017 article finds that trans and gender non-conforming individuals with disabilities experience higher levels of transphobic discrimination in mental health centres, sexual assault crisis centres, and domestic violence shelters.²⁷ All the while, ableism within the queer community has marginalized LGBTQ+ people with disability, which has in some cases rendered them invisible.²⁸ As the Co-Chair of the Capital Pride Youth Committee noted, ableism in the queer community can manifest in practice as

²⁵ TransPulse Canada, "Report - Health and health care access for trans and non-binary people in Canada," *TransPulse Canada*, March 10, 2020. <https://transpulsecanada.ca/results/report-1/>

²⁶ Brooke Taylor, "Trans health care in Canada needs major improvements, advocates say," *CTV News*, May 22, 2021. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/trans-health-care-in-canada-needs-major-improvements-advocate-s-say-1.5439295?cache=yes%231.2727898>

²⁷ William Leonard and Dr. Rosemary Mann, "The everyday experience of lesbian, gay bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people living with disability," *La Trobe University*, no. 111 (July 2018): 28. <https://www.rainbowhealthvic.org.au/media/pages/research-resources/the-everyday-experiences-of-lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-and-intersex-lgbti-people-living-with-disability/1242611313-1605661766/the-everyday-experiences-of-lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender-and-intersex-lgbti-people-living-with-disability.pdf>

²⁸ Thomas Scott Duke, "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth with Disabilities: A Meta-Synthesis," *Journal of LGBT Youth*, no. 8 (2011):2. <https://canfasd.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/LGBT-Youth-with-Disabilities-A-Meta-Synthesis.pdf>

the failure for queer spaces to consider the accessibility of the physical space and particular needs and abilities of attendees.

Furthermore, ageism can negatively impact the lives of queer people at many stages of life. Age-based marginalization amongst older adults can manifest as being afraid to disclose their sexual and gender identity, and subsequently living without having their true identities understood and accounted for, fear of potential queerphobia from personal support workers in old age homes, and the lack of adequate healthcare because health professionals lack knowledge about their physiology and/or long-term effects of certain gender affirming resources amongst other impacts.²⁹ On the flipside, age-bias against youth can include negative stereotypes suggesting that youth are naive and inexperienced, which may result in parents refusing to believe that their child is queer because they are ‘too young’ and inexperienced to truly understand their gender and sexual identity.³⁰ This is because, as Rich notes in a piece by Theriault, compulsive heterosexuality, which is “a network of forces that compel individuals to be heterosexual”, positions heterosexuality as the normal and desirable sexuality.³¹ Legal mandates that ban homosexual marriage, and religious doctrine that reject LGBTQ+ relationships, are examples of systems that

²⁹ McMaster University, “Are we equal in the face of aging? Challenges faced by LGBTQ@ older adults,” *McMaster Optimal Aging Portal*, April 11, 2018. <https://www.mcmasteroptimalaging.org/blog/detail/blog/2018/04/11/are-we-equal-in-the-face-of-aging-challenges-faced-by-lgbtq2-older-adults>

³⁰ Harvey A. Friedman, “‘Kids these days’: Why youth-directed ageism is an issue,” *Washington University in St. Louis*, October 26, 2021. <https://publichealth.wustl.edu/kids-these-days-why-youth-directed-ageism-is-an-issue-for-everyone/#:~:text=As%20pointed%20out%20by%20researchers,outnumbered%20by%20their%20older%20counterparts.>

³¹ Daniel Theriault, “Organized,” 450.

compel heterosexuality and posit it as the default sexuality.³² In some cases, this informs how a parent regards their child's expression of identity where heterosexuality is the default sexuality and deviations from this must be equated to youthful naïvety.

While LGBTQ+ identities are becoming more acceptable within contemporary society, social biases against those who do not fit within the strict gender binary, as well as sexually diverse individuals, especially those with intersecting identities, continue to be marginalized in Canadian society.³³ During a public health crisis, such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, experiences of marginalization are exacerbated for already oppressed groups.³⁴

The COVID-19 Pandemic in Canada

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, queer youth were able to access the LGBTQ+ community through in-person Gender and Sexualities Alliances (GSAs) and community groups, amongst other resources in schools and in the broader community. These spaces provided queer youth and allies with safe environments to socialize and receive support from trusted adults and supportive peers. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shift to online support networks has changed the way that some LGBTQ+ youth experience social belonging, because peer relationships, a primary source of social support

³² Daniel Theriault, "Organized," 450.

³³ Gilley, "Native."

³⁴ University of Illinois Chicago, "COVID-19: The Disproportionate Impact on Marginalized Populations," *University of Illinois Chicago*, April 29, 2020.

<https://socialwork.uic.edu/news-stories/covid-19-disproportionate-impact-marginalized-population-s/>

for queer youth, have been negatively impacted by the pandemic.³⁵ This section will discuss some Canadian public health measures that have had important impacts on how queer youth experience social connection.

In December 2019, COVID-19, an acute respiratory syndrome was detected. In March 2020 the World Health Organization (WHO) formally declared a state of global pandemic. Following this, many countries, including Canada, invoked specific measures to limit the spread of the novel virus. The Canadian federal government imposed emergency measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 using the *Quarantine Act*, the *Aeronautics Act*, and other pieces of legislation. Canadian provinces declared states of emergencies and enacted province-specific legislation to slow the spread of COVID-19. Many of which invoked stringent lockdown measures, such as school shutdowns, stay-at-home orders, quarantines, physical distancing measures, and shutdown of non-essential businesses and organizations.³⁶ The following is an overview of some emergency measures taken in Ontario, which may have significantly constrained the ability for queer youth to experience meaningful social engagements.

In March 2020, the Ontario provincial government declared a state of emergency resulting in the closure of many services including indoor recreational facilities, public libraries, private schools, movie cinemas, and theatres until

³⁵ Henrique Pereira et al., "Psychosocial Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual People Living in Portugal and Brazil—A Qualitative Study," *Journal of Psychosexual Health* 3, no. 2 (2021):146-159.

³⁶ Kelly Geraldine Malone. "Not in the clear yer': Most provinces stick with gradual COVID-19 Reopening Plans," *CTV News*, February 9, 2022. <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/not-in-the-clear-yet-most-provinces-stick-with-gradual-covid-19-reopening-plans-1.5774910>

March 31, 2020. Shortly thereafter, closures were extended and enlarged to include outdoor recreational amenities, gatherings were restricted to no more than 5 people, and public schools were closed to students until May 4, 2020.³⁷ Various educational models were implemented during this time, including fully remote learning during closures or by choice of parental guardian; hybrid in-person and remote learning; and fully in-person learning.³⁸ Ontario students returned to full in-person learning in January 2022 after years of changing regulations.³⁹ Many provinces, including Ontario, began implementing pandemic reopening strategies in Spring of 2022, which have lifted or reduced certain COVID-19 related restrictions.⁴⁰ Ontario lifted all emergency measures at the end of April 2022.⁴¹ Noteworthy is that other provinces invoked similar emergency measures and later, reopening measures, to greater and lesser extents depending on province-specific considerations.⁴²

Research Framework & Key Questions

Although in-person support networks have been disrupted due to COVID-19 related restrictions, queer youth have been known to access the LGBTQ+ community through online mediums, even before the pandemic pushed

³⁷ Trevor Lawson et al., "COVID-19: Emergency Measures Tracker," Tetrault McCarthy, May 26, 2022. <https://www.mccarthy.ca/en/insights/articles/covid-19-emergency-measures-tracker>

³⁸ Science Table. "COVID-19 and Education Disruption in Ontario: Emerging Evidence on Impacts," *Science Table*, June 4, 2021. <https://covid19-sciencetable.ca/sciencebrief/covid-19-and-education-disruption-in-ontario-emerging-evidence-on-impacts/>

³⁹ Lucas Casaletto, "Ontario students will return to class next Monday," *CityNews*, January 10, 2022. <https://toronto.citynews.ca/2022/01/10/ontario-schools-covid19-in-person/>

⁴⁰ Malone, "Provinces."

⁴¹ Paul E. Broad et al. "Ontario Lifting Remaining COVID-19-Related Measures: What Employers Need to Know," *Hicks Morley*, March 11 2022. <https://hicksmorley.com/2022/03/11/ontario-lifting-remaining-covid-19-related-measures-what-employers-need-to-know/>

⁴² Malone, "Provinces."

community programming online. Queer youth aged 14 to 29 are significantly more likely to engage with, and be more active in, online LGBTQ+ communities in contrast to in-person queer communities. Further, they are more likely to seek out online information, support, and resources pertaining to the queer community, suggesting that online programming and education for LGBTQ+ youth are an important source of information, community, and exploration for queer youth.⁴³

Existing research has discussed ways in which online programming can be adapted to support queer youth amidst pandemic-related restrictions.⁴⁴ These sources provide community workers with information on *how* they may go about adapting programming for queer youth. However, a research gap exists regarding the tangible steps that community workers and groups who work with/for the queer youth community have taken to foster community amidst the shift towards virtual programming. This project reframes the analysis to ask *how* and *why* certain programming decisions were made, what led them to do so, and what learnings can be applied to the future. The research question guiding this project asks the following: *how are individuals and groups that work with and for queer youth adapting existing and new programming to foster social inclusion amongst queer youth in light of the COVID-19 pandemic?*

Research Methodology

The study uses qualitative research methods including individual interviews with people who work with/for queer youth. It also involves a literature review on

⁴³ Lauren B. McInroy et al., "LGBTQ+ Youths' Community Engagement and Resource Seeking Online versus Offline," *Journal of Technology in Human Services* 37, no. 4 (2019): 315-333

⁴⁴ Keshet, "Supporting."

existing pedagogical resources on engagement with the queer youth community, how COVID-19 has impacted queer youth, and queer youth oriented community programming.

Five semi-structured interviews with people that work with/for queer youth from varying regions across Canada were conducted. Participants were given the option of disclosing their job title and organization. Participants include the following:

1. Intervention Coordinator at **Jeunesse Lambda**, a youth-led, Montreal-based, queer-youth oriented community organization catering to the French community in Montreal. It is available to youth aged 14 to 30. The organization does a variety of programming including weekly drop-ins, active listening and provides gender-affirming resources.
2. Member of an organization (hereto referred to as Organization 1) which caters to youth aged 14 to 18, and is available to youth in select counties in Ontario. The group participates in a variety of programming such as art-based activities, guest speakers, and weekly discussions on topics related to queer identities, coming out, safer sex and healthy relationships amongst other topics.
3. Co-Founder and Executive member of the **Rural Ontario Community of Queer Youth (ROCQY)** which was developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The organization is volunteer-run by rural LGBTQ+ youth in Ontario and assists queer youth in rural

and Northern regions in Ontario in getting access to mental health care. ROCQY meets bi-weekly and meets in-person annually.

4. Co-Chair of the **Capital Pride Youth Committee** based out of Ottawa, Ontario and catering to queer youth in Ottawa and surrounding regions. The organization does a variety of programming both individually and within the larger Capital Pride organization.
5. Founder of the **Pride/Swell** art, activism and archiving project. Pride/Swell is a social distance art and activism project with queer youth (12-25) in Atlantic Canada. The first generation of the project began in July 2020 and ended in July 2021. Participants created art in response to monthly prompts that sought to understand the experiences of queer and trans youth amidst the COVID-19 pandemic through practices including: postcards, zines and stickers amongst others. Monthly virtual meetings were held to discuss and reflect on the art prompts and practices.

Participants were selected based on a convenient sampling method where subjects are chosen because they can easily be connected to the researcher.⁴⁵ Interview questions were used as a starting point and were provided to participants in advance of the interview, however the participants were invited to speak to them broadly, and in a manner that they saw relevant. Additionally,

⁴⁵ Explorable, "Convenience Sampling," *Explorable*, September 16, 2009, <https://explorable.com/convenience-sampling>

follow up questions were asked to further explore subject matters. The following questions were asked:

1. *In what ways has your programming for queer youth been affected by COVID-19? Including funding, program-specific modification, attendance etc.*
2. *What challenges and surprises have emerged in the modification and implementation of programming?*
3. *What social programming initiatives were effective and how did you judge the effectiveness of programming?*
4. *What challenges do you anticipate that queer youth are experiencing in the pandemic?*

Interview transcripts were gathered and manually coded for major themes according to the prevalence of certain outcomes, the interviewers' subjective interpretation on important and interesting outcomes, outcomes that could more closely be associated with COVID-19, and recurring themes that came up in the existing literature on the topic.

Ethics and Limitations

As a part of this study, participants who worked with/for queer youth and also identified as being racialized, transgender, Indigenous, a member of a linguistic minority, and from rural areas, were prioritized. Even so, there were significant barriers to conducting research with marginalized groups, especially in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, their existing identities as members of racialized communities, resource limitations, the lack of compensation, and time

constraints on the duration of the project.⁴⁶ While efforts were made to interview individuals and groups that work with/for a diverse group of queer youth, the majority of participants noted that their programs were predominantly attended by white queer youth.

Marginalized Communities

There are significant barriers to conducting research with marginalized groups, especially in light of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Minority groups may experience research fatigue because as research subjects they are burnt-out due to continual questioning without a clear understanding of how participating in the research benefits their community. Seeing that the participants were actively involved in their respective organizations for queer youth, I assume that the issue is limited. However, research fatigue is more likely where the volume of research is high and number of participants is low. It is foreseeable that the participants may have experienced research fatigue due to the burden of time and energy, with interviews lasting anywhere from 30 minutes to 1 hour. This is a significant issue because fatigued participants are less likely to provide meaningful input on projects, which prevents future research, and also prevents future research from considering these positions, which reproduces inequalities. For example, with limited input in research, Indigenous participants have often been unable to be meaningfully integrated in study, and to direct studies towards responding to their needs.⁴⁷ In order to limit these issues, it is recommended that future studies in

⁴⁶ Jae M. Sevelius et al., "Research with Marginalized Communities: Challenges to Continuity During the COVID-19 Pandemic," *National Library of Medicine*, May 16, 2020.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7228861/>

⁴⁷ Grace Huckins, "For Marginalized Groups, Being Studied can be a Burden," *Wired*, January 6, 2021.
<https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.wired.com/story/for-marginalized-groups-being-studied>

this area consider the interests of the participants, alternative research methods, such as participatory research where participants are trained to take part in the research process as researchers themselves, and having shorter but more interviews.⁴⁸

Additionally, when working with marginalized groups, it's important to adequately compensate research participants to remove barriers to participation in research studies. Compensation can be understood as an "investment in people and communities," which can provide opportunities for capacity-building, advancement of wellness, and combats economic marginalization. Furthermore, compensation helps to build social equity and reduce stigma, because it recognizes and values their humanity, their contribution to the project, and highlights their equal status to other workers and research participants.⁴⁹

Age of Majority

We only interviewed individuals who work with/for queer youth above the age of majority, which is the age that an individual will be a legal adult in their province, due to time constraints regarding the length of the project, capacity, and ethics clearance, which is more stringent when working with those under the age of majority. In doing so, it is possible that some potential participants were restricted from participating in the research project.

[-can-be-a-burden/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1660188581230367&usg=AOvVaw2TrY6hi-3_nm0tA1Tei9QV](#)

⁴⁸ Huckins, "Marginalized."

⁴⁹ Sarah Feige and Melisa Choubak, "Best Practices for Engaging People with Lived Experience," *Community Engaged Scholarship Institute*, September 2019. https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10214/17653/Feige_Choubak_PeerEngagementProject_LiteratureReview_%202019.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Interview Process

This project employed semi-structured, scheduled interviews.⁵⁰ As with other qualitative research projects, there may be uneven power distribution between myself, as the interviewer, and the interviewee. This is because during the data analysis stage, we, as interviewers, had a monopoly on the interpretation of interview content.⁵¹ In addition, during the interview process, the interviewer has the ability to direct the flow of conversation, thus allowing for coercion.

Luke lays out three dimensions of power.⁵² The first is an explicit display of control. For example, the interviewee may decide to discontinue the interview.⁵³ This did not occur during any of the interviews. The second dimension is where there is an indirect display of power between parties, which may include setting and influencing the situation. Here, agenda setting powers that include asking pre-established questions restrain the discussion and compel the interviewee to respond to these questions.⁵⁴ This is relevant in the context of this report, as the questions were pre-determined and used to guide the interviews. While the interviews were semi-structured, allowing for interviewees to respond to questions in a manner that was relevant to their work, the guiding questions restrained the discussion. The third dimension is exerting control over how they understand the world and their interests. This third component utilizes cultural

⁵⁰ Semi-structured interviews refers to interviews where some questions are pre-determined but participants are invited to and encouraged to respond to the question broadly and as they see relevant to their work, and follow-up questions may also be asked.

⁵¹ Frederick Anyan, "The Influence of Power Shifts in Data Collection and Analysis Stages : A Focus on Qualitative Research Interview," *The Qualitative Report* 18, no. 8 (2013): 2, 6 <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol18/iss18/2/>

⁵² Anyan, "Influence," 2-3.

⁵³ Anyan, "Influence," 2-3.

⁵⁴ Anyan, "Influence," 2-3.

patterns to influence the interviewee's wants.⁵⁵ I do not believe this to be present in this report.

Those working in this field point to the use of participatory research methods to challenge the power imbalance between the researcher and participant. Some researchers suggest using creative research methods. However, it is also important to recognize individual acts of resistance, which differ based on individual preferences and capacities, and intersecting power structures related to age, class, gender, and race, amongst other factors. For example, some young people may opt out of group activities and instead choose to chat informally over coffee.⁵⁶ For future interview projects, it is advisable to consider an approach that mitigates the above issues and aims to empower both the interviewer and participant during the interview and data analysis process.

FINDINGS

The findings of the report highlight some of the challenges that queer youth program facilitators anticipate that LGBTQ+ youth are experiencing during the pandemic, as well as some strategies to mitigate issues. The data was thematically coded based on the prevalence of certain ideas, a subjective interpretation on interesting interview outcomes, outcomes that appeared to be directly an output of COVID-19, and major themes that emerged in existing literature on the topic.

⁵⁵ Anyan, "Influence," 2-3.

⁵⁶ Emma Davidson, "Saying It Like It Is? Power, Participation and Research Involving Young People," *Social Inclusion* 5, no. 3 (2017): 236

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320048128_Saying_It_Like_It_Is_Power_Participation_and_Research_Involving_Young_People

Experiences of Queer Youth During COVID-19

Social Isolation

“[F]inding ways to connect with other youth, even from an information sharing standpoint, these kinds of pathways for that were really shut down.”

- Member of Organization 1

“That feeling of [...] physical isolation and not having queer spaces [and] queer events like yes there's online spaces and events, but it's still not the same sense of [...] belonging”

- Co-Chair of the CPYC

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, social isolation and feelings of not belonging impacted the well-being of LGBTQ+ youth.⁵⁷ This was often found in spaces that were meant to provide meaningful engagement for queer youth, such as family, school, online platforms and community clubs, and often occurred through stigmatising relational dynamics, taking the form of ‘othering’, social invisibility, and bullying, amongst others.⁵⁸ The impacts of social isolation on queer youth are significant because they have been associated with negative mental health outcomes, such as depression, suicidal ideation and attempt, and substance abuse;⁵⁹ and these experiences are only exacerbated in times of crisis⁶⁰.

⁵⁷Garcia et al, “Social,” 498.

⁵⁸Garcia et al, “Social,” 505.

⁵⁹ Garcia et al, “Social,” 505.

⁶⁰ University of Illinois Chicago, “Disproportionate.”

All the participants highlighted that during COVID-19, many queer youth experienced social isolation. They quoted the impacts of physical distancing measures, such as school closures, which prevented some queer youth from accessing school supports through school Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs), guidance counsellors, and peers, amongst other supports. While virtual supports were sometimes made available, the Intervention Coordinator at Jeunesse Lambda noted that queer youth may not have accessed them due to fatigue from constantly using the same online platforms for school and socializing, thus preventing them from finding community in both physical and online spaces.

Some participants also emphasized that some queer youth were restricted to a non-accepting household.⁶¹ This is particularly significant for queer youth who are 'in the closet' and not yet ready to 'come out', whose parents are unsupportive of their identity, and whose parents are queerphobic. In these spaces, queer youth face additional challenges such as the inability to have private conversations with therapists or guidance counsellors due to their parents listening in and having no other space to go.⁶² In some cases, social 'invisibility' was used to avoid homophobia and transphobia at home, and strategically connected with LGBTQ+ youth to navigate isolation. Though this strategy may be an effective method for limiting queerphobia and marginalization at home, it impairs the development of the 'self', because ongoing misrecognition of queer identities stigmatizes diverse identities and restricts one's exploration and

⁶¹ Megan S Pacey et al. "Beyond a Shared Experience: Queer and Trans Youth Navigating COVID-19," *Qualitative Social Work* 20, no. 1-2 (March 2021): 100

⁶² Pacey et al. "Beyond," 101.

realization of identity. A study has found that lack of social recognition is related to feelings of isolation, fear, and lack of social well-being.⁶³

In addition, many queer youth in these spaces had fear of being kicked out of their home.⁶⁴ A member of Organization 1 shared that they noticed an increase in queer youth in transitional housing situations, suggesting a need for increased research in the area of transitional housing and queer inclusion. Likewise, research has found that during COVID-19 there was an increase in the number of youth living in public spaces, vehicles, and vacant buildings, emergency shelters and community housing.⁶⁵ In the foster care system, queer youth felt more vulnerable because they mistrusted the case workers and had fear of being ‘outed’ as queer. As a result, social ‘invisibility’ was used as a strategy to mitigate the risk of social rejection.⁶⁶ For these youth, access to community is constrained from within, both their home environment, and from community spaces, leading to feelings of social isolation and invisibility from the queer community.

For queer youth at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities, social belonging is experienced differently, and/or to different levels of severity. In a 2020 study, it was found that intensity of loneliness was most acutely experienced by trans and Black LGBTQ youth during the pandemic, in contrast to white and cisgender youth.⁶⁷ For queer youth in rural and small towns, social exclusion may be particularly strong amongst gender and sexual minority youth

⁶³ Garcia et al, “Social,” 506.

⁶⁴ Pacey et al. “Beyond,” 100.

⁶⁵ Abramovitch et al., “Investigating the impacts of COVID-19 among LGBTQ2S youth experiencing homelessness.” *PLOS ONE* 16, no.9 (September 21, 2021): 12

⁶⁶ Garcia et al, “Social,” 510.

⁶⁷ The Trevor Project, “COVID-19.”

because of restrictions to transportation, as the Co-Founder of ROCQY noted.⁶⁸ The minority stress model describes the way that marginalized individuals internalize stigmatising social sentiment, such as queerphobia. Internalized stigma or internalized queerphobia leads to psychological distress and helps to explain the impacts of social isolation on the mental health of queer youth.⁶⁹ Many queer youth experience minority stress due to victimisation, rejection, discrimination, and internalised stigma that is conveyed to them through sources such as family, school, religion, social media,⁷⁰ and from within the queer community itself.⁷¹ This is particularly significant when an individual belongs to multiple marginalized identities and communities.⁷² This model helps to demonstrate the way that social stigma surrounding queerness and other marginalized identities have a profound impact on how queer youth experience social belonging. Often, further excluding queer youth of intersecting identities.

While most of the participants and existing literature points to the negative impacts of social isolation, the Co-Chair of the the CPYC, when speaking about the pandemic and the rise in physical isolation stated that, “having to seek out community online has helped a lot more younger people discover that they’re LGBTQ and kind of become more comfortable with that. And so then get excited to finally be able to interact with more/other queer youth”. While this statement points to the way that social isolation can relegate queer youth to accessing

⁶⁸ Garcia et al, “Social,” 510.

⁶⁹ Garcia et al, “Social,” 500.

⁷⁰ Garcia et al, “Social,” 498.

⁷¹ Ashlar Byleckie, “Biphobia and transphobia have no place in the LGBTQ+ Community,” *The Signal*, October 13, 2020.

<https://georgiastatesignal.com/biphobia-and-transphobia-have-no-place-in-the-lgbtq-community/>

⁷²Garcia et al, “Social,” 498.

community online, it also suggests that certain youth may use the pandemic restrictions to explore their identities leading to community. It is important to consider both the positive and negative ways that social isolation impact queer youth, and create or design programs accordingly.

Resilience

Participants mentioned the resilience of both facilitators within their organization, and queer youth. When interviewing a member of Organization 1 on the shift towards online programming, they expressed their surprise by “the resiliency of facilitators throughout this process, because it’s not easy to adjust to hosting a digital space, and not everybody necessarily had that skill set prior to the pandemic”. This is relevant to the experiences of youth research participants who also identify as being queer, and therefore do work for the queer youth community as a member of that community. Resilience requires finding strategies to reject oppressive situations such as the restrictive circumstances created by COVID-19.⁷³ The organization of online spaces have a significant impact on how the activity is experienced by those engaging with it,⁷⁴ and thus plays an important role in shaping the experience of social connectedness for queer youth who attend these programs.⁷⁵ This section explores how online spaces are engaged with by some queer youth.

According to a 2012 study, LGBTQ-friendly policies and curriculum in schools generate social belonging, suggesting that policy initiatives can have a

⁷³ Garcia et al., “Social,” 510.

⁷⁴ Woodley and Rice, “Intersectional.”

⁷⁵ Garcia et al, “Social,” 507,512.

significant impact on how inclusive a space is.⁷⁶ For example, social inclusion is shown to be higher when school anti-bullying policies explicitly mention protecting LGBTQ youth.⁷⁷ On the flip side, the lack of policies that directly protect LGBTQ youth uphold systemic stigmatization and marginalization of queer youth, because it allows homophobic and transphobic exclusive policies to persist.⁷⁸

Queer youth have been shown to push back against identity-based oppression using both organizational and individual forms of resistance. Organization acts include leisure-based activities where spaces are created to combat marginalization. For example, the Co-Chair of the CPYC explained that during the pandemic, the committee hosted virtual coffeehouse which provided space for queer youth to share art-based projects, such as songs and poetry, with other queer youth. In doing so, this initiative highlighted the voices of queer youth and rejected social isolation and oppressive circumstances that rendered queer youth invisible.

Further, oppressive situations can promote resilient behaviors. For example, ROCQY, an organization that was developed during the pandemic in order to help queer youth access mental health resources, demonstrates the way that pandemic-related oppression encouraged the creation of the initiative which rejects social isolation in favor of connecting rural queer youth. In many instances, LGBTQ+ young people have responded to oppression by creating

⁷⁶ Garcia et al., "Social," 507.

⁷⁷ Garcia et al., "Social," 512.

⁷⁸ Garcia et al., "Social," 507.

GSAs in middle and high school clubs⁷⁹ to foster inclusion, self-development, and to build a chosen family that provides emotional, informational, and material support.⁸⁰ Additionally, as the Intervention Coordinator at Jeunesse Lambda noted, the Discord server allowed for the creation of subgroups, including topics such as identity, which allowed for queer youth to share stories relating to their experiences as member of the LGBTQ+ community, thus rejecting isolating circumstances and the burying of their stories and experiences.⁸¹ The Co-Chair of the CPYC noted that some queer youth have sought out community online and/or explored their gender and sexual identities during isolation to then become more comfortable and excited to be able to connect with the broader LGBTQ+ community. By rejecting the idea that social isolation must be exclusively negative and oppressive, queer youth are shown to push back and instead engage in self exploration and growth.

Accessibility

As a member of Organization 1 explained, a challenge stemming from COVID-19 has been “responding to some of the youth needs [...] in an immediate manner [...] when we were able to previously host in person and out of our space, we were able to provide resources a lot quicker and a lot easier. It didn't involve following up digitally or via text”. For example, pre-pandemic, the organization could easily provide sexual health, harm reduction, wound care, and gender-affirming products from their physical space. They point out that in the context of self harm, the “additional layer of not being able to have a facilitator

⁷⁹ Theriault, “Organized,” 451.

⁸⁰ Garcia et al., “Social,” 509

⁸¹ Theriault, “Organized,” 454.

who's trained in these things be able to go off to the side of the room and talk to somebody or go out in the hallway and talk and get them what they need discreetly [...] has made some of our service provision aspects a little bit more difficult". Likewise, asking for sexual health products in either a written format or in a group where everybody else can see that communication makes it more difficult to access. For individuals seeking gender-affirming resources such as hormones, clean needles, and clothing, the member of Organization 1 program explained that there were times when the waitlist has been very long, resulting in issues of general accessibility and consistency. This is consistent with literature coming from the pandemic, noting that there was often reduced access to in-person health care, which in some cases meant overdue hormone-related bloodwork and unmet health care needs. While individuals were sometimes able to access this care, they often had concerns and anxiety about future shortages.⁵² Access to gender-affirming resources, and health care resources more broadly, is critical for queer youth as they explore their identities and engage in self-development.

For racialized queer youth, access to services is a significant issue. A report by the Trevor Project found that during the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S., Black, queer youth were 4 times more likely than their Black straight/cisgender peers to be unable to receive mental health care, despite expressing interest and need.⁸² This points to institutional structures that fail to account for the unique experiences of marginalization that youth who are queer

⁸² The Trevor Project, "COVID-19."

⁵⁴ Abramovich et al., "Investigating."

and Black experience, further pushing them into the margins. The lack of access to these resources generates a lack of identity safety, and constrains the exploration of identity, which prevents an individual from fully engaging, not only with their own identities, but the broader queer community.

Moreover, for queer youth living in foster care, living situations are more precarious due to a mounting housing crisis. Prior to the pandemic, safe housing has been a significant issue for LGBTQ+ youth. Research on queer youth homelessness in Canada has shown that LGBTQ+ youth are disproportionately represented amongst homeless youth, but they are underrepresented in shelters and community housing programs. This is because for queer youth accessing these services, they must also consider, and/or have issues finding accommodations where they feel safe and respected as members of the queer community, and experience high levels of discrimination and violence in shelters. This experience is only compounded by homeless queer youth who are members of other marginalized communities.⁸³ In some cases, there is reduced availability of housing options and inability to find secure, safe, adequate and affordable housing. This has led to a significant increase in the number of youth living in emergency shelters, vehicles, and vacant buildings amongst other places since the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic. In an Australian study on people experiencing homelessness, it found that social networks, and thus social connections of street-involved individuals, were limited by marginalization, including rejection from the non-homeless due to existing stereotypes of that they

⁸³ START ME UP NIAGARA, "Understanding LGBTQ2S+ Youth Homelessness in Canada, " *START ME UP NIAGARA*, June 3 2022.

engage in antisocial behaviors, thus legitimizing their increased surveillance and violence,⁸⁴ social isolation, precarious relationships within the community amongst other factors.⁸⁵ Combined with existing stigmatization surrounding the queer youth community, queer youth experiencing homelessness face particularly oppressive circumstances that exclude and isolate them from the broader queer community.

Strategies

Use of Online Tools

“People have to get creative with the type of programming, [and] how we carry it out online throughout the pandemic.”

- Co-chair of the CPYC

Although queer youth are more likely to engage with and be more active in virtual queer spaces communities than to in-person queer communities, the pandemic has changed the way and extent that online resources are used.⁸⁶ In a study conducted with sexual and gender minority youth, researchers found that social isolation and stigma drove queer youth to turn to online interventions for adequate information.⁸⁷ The pandemic has “created room, [...] more [...]

⁸⁴ Andrew Clarke and Cameron Parsell, “Turning “big brother” surveillance into a helping hand to the homeless,” *The Conversation*, October 21 2018.
<https://theconversation.com/turning-big-brother-surveillance-into-a-helping-hand-to-the-homeless-104851>

⁸⁵ Marlee Bower et al., “Australian homeless person’s experiences of connectedness, isolation and loneliness,” *Health and Social Care* 26, no. 2 (March 2018):
https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/hsc.12505?casa_token=k5llee-4D0UAAAAA%3AFnSn-g11CThLRKTTKId4JgsiaB9nfM75W54TjV2j22knMoP82wLaUsVgeVICyz4GAc3_GzCVbs6tSCs

⁸⁶ McInroy et al., “LGBTQ+,” 315-333.

⁸⁷ Garcia et al, “Social,” 509-510.

creativity, more accessibility for having online events or [...] a hybrid option for folks who can't make it in person” says the Co-Chair of the CPYC, for people who may be out of the city, be immunocompromised, have chronic pain, and have a disability amongst other realities. While the pandemic has altered the way that programming occurs, it has also shed light on accessibility topics and has paved the way for future programming to be aware of accessibility needs.

Informal Online Spaces for Discussion

“Je pense que briser l'isolement, c'est vraiment comme notre premier objectif [...] j'ai vraiment eu l'impression que le serveur Discord répondait à notre mission de cette façon-là.”

“I think breaking the isolation is really our first goal [...] I really felt like the Discord server was responding to our mission in that way.”

- Intervention coordinator at Jeunesse Lambda

Many participants shared their organization's use of Discord which is an online instant messaging platform where individuals can create 'servers' that contain smaller sub-discussion groups known as 'channels' that can be accessed 24/7. The intervention coordinator at Jeunesse Lambda noted that Discord helps to reduce some accessibility concerns with in-person events such as reduced mobility or handicaps and transportation issues. For Jeunesse Lambda, Discord allowed for queer youth to not only have more time to deliberate on their words and articulate their feelings and ideas in writing, but also to express their ideas in a less structured setting, allowing for more organic conversations in contrast to

scheduled video calls. The organization has a small group of facilitators who moderate the platform 24/7 to ensure safety and to ensure that someone is available to chat at all times of day. They also seek to have youth facilitators moderate the space, in order to create horizontal relationships between participants and facilitators, and encourage friendships. Likewise, a person who worked with Organization 1 found that Discord and Tiktok have become popular platforms for youth to connect. They noted that traditional methods of connecting with queer youth has been less effective than digital strategies. In a similar vein, traditional outreach methods such as hanging posters and speaking in classrooms have been less effective.

That being said, for the CPYC, creating an Instagram account was preferred over a Discord in order to reduce redundant online programming. They point to other queer-youth-oriented Discord servers run by local organizations. The CPYC's creation of an Instagram account during COVID-19 comes at a time when some queer youth are increasing their use of social media to explore their identities online. This is an effective platform to do so because queer youth have agency to curate their feed and share online content as they see fit. In this way, they are able to continue exploring their identity and engage with the broader community at their own pace.⁸⁸ With this in mind, there is a need to introduce more support resources for queer youth, and implement more inclusive social media policies.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Benjamin Hanckel and Shiva Chandra, "How young LGBTQIA+ people used social media to thrive during COVID-19 lockdowns," *The Conversation*, March 15, 2021. <https://theconversation.com/how-young-lgbtqia-people-used-social-media-to-thrive-during-covid-19-lockdowns-156130>

⁸⁹ Hanckel and Chandra, "LGBTQIA+."

Online programming is particularly useful when LGBTQ youth invoke strategies to hide their identities to cope with and/or avoid marginalization. Internet discussion groups, chat rooms, forums, and instant messaging can be useful for creating community amongst isolated queer youth when they are designed to be identity-safe and inclusive.⁹⁰ As many participants noted, this is especially true for queer youth living in unsupportive households. This is significant because LGBTQ youth are 2.4 times more likely to report not being able to express themselves openly at home than straight/cis youth, and trans and/or non-binary youth are nearly three times more likely to report feeling unsafe in their current living situation than straight/cis youth.⁹¹

In inclusive spaces, queer youth are able to develop a sense of “we” which can then be used to reject violence, bullying and discrimination, and empowers queer youth to reject these forms of oppression.⁹² In creating community relationships, queer youth are able to experience social belonging and thus reject isolation and exclusion.

Event Format

In the interview with the Co-Chair of the CPYC which runs stand-alone events, they noted that in some instances, online events where the attendees were able to *watch* the event, as opposed to actively discussing in the event, had a greater turnout. They point to virtual coffeehouses, learning through panel discussions and follow-along drag performances as having good engagement. For

⁹⁰ Garcia et al., “Social,” 510

⁹¹ The Trevor Project “COVID-19.”

⁹² Garcia et al., “Social,” 509

Organization 1 which runs recurring, weekly, drop-in discussion groups they often had community service providers or community members from the LGBTQ+ community give presentations on topics relevant to queer youth. At the event where there was no guest speaker, the discussion group was free flowing, allowing the youth to direct the flow of conversation. Other evenings, they would play games, watch videos online together, and create playlists together, amongst other activities. They also conducted a partnership with a local organization working in gender-based violence prevention, to put on a four part sex-ed series where local speakers with lived experience were invited to speak to the topic, followed by some allocated time for questions and feedback from attendees. In a similar manner, ROCQY hosted a series of workshops. The first half of the workshop was a presentation on themes including harm reduction, self care, and spiritual care, amongst others. During the second half, facilitators would run virtual games and/or lead other activities such as crafts and poetry. Pride/Swell hosted monthly virtual meetings to discuss and analyze the art-based project they had undertaken over the past month. Many of the organizations opted to use the Zoom platforms, suggesting that it is the most accessible format. That being said, participants also noted that Zoom fatigue was an issue and would impact whether queer youth attended these online events. Overall, certain organizations held consistent virtual meetings, while others did not, depending on the nature of their project and the organization itself.

Unscheduled Engagement Opportunities

“We were able to send particular art materials into people's houses. And so at a time when we were apart, we were able to still be together through this kind of a way.”

- Founder of Pride/Swell

Participants, especially those working with queer youth in rural and French-speaking communities, took approaches to fostering community that comprised of unscheduled engagement opportunities such as ongoing Discord channels, Tiktoks, and at-home activities that can be accessed at any time, amongst other activities. By hosting programs and events that could be engaged with at any time, these queer youth could explore identity and connect with the broader LGBTQ+ community when they felt comfortable, and had the capacity to do so. ROCQY, an organization working with queer youth in rural Ontario, noted that there were sometimes issues finding stable, reliable, and fast internet, resulting in issues connecting to queer youth through online mediums, as well as issues finding accessible transportation in Ontario to bring youth to in-person events. While they did opt to run scheduled virtual discussion times, they also created a zine, usually a self-published magazine, to engage with queer youth off-line. In their Spring edition, queer youth in rural areas were encouraged to submit artwork, crafts, poetry, writing, photography, collages, as well as other creative projects that may fit the zine's themes of future, love, community and resilience. A digital version zine was distributed freely to the public and hard

copies were mailed to participants.⁹³ On the success of the zine, the Co-Founder of ROCQY expressed that it was “really well received by people and they were happy to see the different work and like how it came together”. In this way, queer rural youth were able to not only engage with their identities in an accessible format, they were also able to explore other expressions of queerness and rurality. In Atlantic Canada, Pride/Swell, an art archiving project fostered connection between queer youth. For this initiative, art material and a prompt was mailed to 50 participants each month for one year to highlight moments and experiences throughout the pandemic. The art pieces make visible experiences of queer rurality, disability, the impacts of the pandemic on relationships, and finding belonging.⁹⁴ Though queer youth were not able to work in person, working towards the broader project and engaging with the final product has allowed for queer youth in rural areas to experience community with their peers by finding solidarity in shared experiences of queerness and rurality, and through the exchange of ideas and experiences.

As the Founder of Pride/Swell, in reference to the success of the initiative expressed, “there’s such exciting, joyful queer communities in rural spaces and like to be queer in a rural space is a joy, which is [...] such a significant finding”. While their project found that queer rural communities were vibrant spaces, they also found that while there was diversity of class, gender and sexuality, there were very few queer youth who identified as being Indigenous or a racialized

⁹³ Colin Burrowes, “ROCQY asks rural queer youth to contribute their voices for a zine,” *ROCQY*, March 6, 2022, <https://wood-stein.ca/2022/03/06/rocqy-asks-rural-queer-youth-to-contribute-their-voices-for-a-zine/>

⁹⁴ Pride/Swell, “About Pride/Swell,” *Pride/Swell*, (n.d) <https://www.prideswell.org/about>

person. This indicates that outreach to queer youth in rural areas should continue to explore the impacts of spatial isolation, the interaction between spatial isolation, queer identities and racialization, and develop strategies to best engage with these groups in order to foster belonging amongst queer youth of intersecting identities.

In addition, the Discord platform, which some participants found to be an effective online engagement platform, doubles as a mechanism by which queer youth can find community at any time of day. Jeunesse Lambda had a small team of facilitators to moderate the channel 24/7 to make sure that queer youth are able to have someone to speak to if needed and to ensure the online safety of users. Ongoing support channels allow youth to access community at their own pace and leisure, resulting in feelings of continued support and community within the queer youth community.

Identity Specific Spaces

As many participants noted, the main demographic for their community initiatives were white, English-speaking queer youth. Organizations should aim to offer programs to specific social groups, such specific programs for queer youth that are also racialized and neurodivergent, to allow them a space to share their common experiences of oppression. For queer youth of intersecting identities, spaces that are meant to cater to the general queer youth community may not be accessible due to a lack of connection to their white peers. For example, racialized queer youth may experience tensions between choosing to accept their queer identity and being members of their ethnic or religious community,

which may be hostile to gender and sexual diversity.⁹⁵ By creating these spaces for queer youth of specific identities to engage with one another, they are able to connect with others over shared experiences of oppression and empowerment and build solidarity. For example, Jeunesse Lambda shared the need to create specific servers, in their case, specific Discord channels on topics such as art/music, photos, trans identity, and support to allow queer youth to connect with others with similar interests and/or needs. It is important for organizations to be sensitive to the intersections of oppression and ongoing exclusionary practices in predominantly white spaces in order to make spaces identity inclusive, which generates a sense of belonging amongst queer youth of intersecting identities.⁹⁶

Similar language-based considerations should be taken into account. The intervention coordinator at Jeunesse Lambda, when speaking about the popularity of Discord amongst its French-speaking youth stated that,

“C’était quelque chose qui existait, pas vraiment tout cas au niveau francophone. Je pense qu’il y en avait quelques-uns comme plus anglophone, mais il y a quand même beaucoup de jeunes.. qui ne parlent pas ou pas super bien anglais. Ils ne sentent pas confortable dans ces espaces-là fait que la création, notre serveur comme combler un besoin qui avait qu’on [ne] savait pas qui avait.”

⁹⁵ Brian Jacobson and Brooke Donatone, “Homoflexibles, Omnisexuals, and Genderqueers: Group Work with Queer Youth in Cyberspace and Face-to-Face,” *Group Therapy with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Populations* 33, no. 3 (September 2009): 226-227.

⁹⁶ Theriault, “Organized,” 459.

“It was something that existed, not really at all at the Francophone level. I think there were a few more English-speaking people, but there are still a lot of our young people... who [don't] speak English or don't speak it super well. They don't feel comfortable in those spaces so the creation, our server [is] like filling a need that we [didn't] know who had”

The success of Jeunesse Lambda’s Discord server demonstrates the need to have programming that is cognizant of language barriers. On this platform, queer, French-speaking youth are able to develop a sense of unity, which is able to stand up against bullying, oppression and discrimination, and explore their identities in a safe and inclusive space.⁹⁷ These identity-specific spaces can take many forms, for example, organizations can implement specific Discord servers to serve queer youth of intersecting identities and/or host events that address certain demographics of queer youth.

IMPACT

“Did youth connect? Did youth come out? Did people who had never been to that type of event before or to a Capital Pride event or to a CPYC event come out? Now they know that we exist and now they know that there will be future events like this.”

- Co-Chair of the CPYC

The COVID-19 pandemic and shift from in-person support networks to online education and community programming has changed how queer youth access

⁹⁷ Garcia et al., “Social,” 509

the LGBTQ+ community.⁹⁸ Creating belonging, both during and outside times of crisis, is important, because social isolation is associated with negative mental health outcomes for queer youth.⁹⁹ In speaking with people who work, and/or have worked directly with queer youth during the pandemic, this report amplifies their voices and highlights themes and successes that have emerged in their programming initiatives, particularly for queer youth of marginalized identities. In doing so, this report highlights some of key experiences of queer youth in the pandemic, and provides ideas for how program facilitators can adapt online programming to foster community in light of these challenges, in the hope of addressing queer youth specific programming needs during and post-pandemic, with the end goal of creating vibrant queer youth communities that are safe, inclusive, and foster belonging.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the experiences of belonging of queer youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Discussions with individuals who work with/for the queer community were conducted to determine practical methods to create belonging amongst queer youth. This study has found that during the pandemic, queer youth may experience social isolation and accessibility issues. However, they may also show powerful displays of resilience amidst oppressive circumstances. Using online tools, unscheduled engagement opportunities, and identity specific initiatives were effective methods employed by different queer-youth-oriented organizations and projects to facilitate belonging. The authors hope that going

⁹⁸ Keshet, "Supporting."

⁹⁹ Garcia et al, "Social," 505

forth, more queer youth will be able to access safe and inclusive spaces to explore their identities and subsequently develop a sense of belonging in queer spaces and beyond

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