

# **Sex, Sexuality and Cyberspace: Intersecting Queer Spaces On and Offline.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the discourses operating on websites that are designed for and used by queer youth in order to gain understandings of the ways in which online and offline queer spaces might intersect and inform each other. Drawing on qualitative research carried out in Australia to gain deeper insight into the ways that queer youth use internet sites; the paper focuses on the way discourses of sex operate on websites commonly used by queer youth, such as *Gaydar* ([www.gaydar.com](http://www.gaydar.com)) and *Gaydar Girls* ([www.gaydargirls.com](http://www.gaydargirls.com)), in ways that (re)produce the discourses present in offline queer spaces (such as bars and clubs). These two sites were chosen from a number of sites discussed by participants in the aforementioned research due to their international scope and the pervasiveness of the sex discourse on the sites. Further, it explores the ways such sites work pedagogically for young queer users, particularly in relation to gaining an understanding of what to expect in other queer venues and developing insight into how queer cultures might be constructed and participated with. Drawing on cultural geography to explore the ways that bodies and discourses shape and are shaped by space and utilising both textual analysis of the websites and participant discussions, this paper challenges the assertion that internet spaces are spaces of transcendence, instead positing that they are intrinsically linked to 'real life' and therefore offline operations of discourse.

Following from Foucault's analysis of discourses of sex, this paper demonstrates the ways in which sex operates multiply on the websites. Of particular interest is the ways in which sex is used on the websites as a way of legitimating, or making knowable and recognisable, the presence of various users online while removing others to a periphery status. Sex is a particularly pervasive discourse in this respect. It is constructed on the sites and taken up by users as an integral marker of place within online queer space, in much the same way as it is in offline queer spaces such as bars and clubs. However, sex does not just operate to legitimate particular articulations of queer sexuality (for example 'lesbian' and 'gay'). Sex is also used on the sites in ways that legitimise race or ethnic identities in a variety of ways, usually highlighting whiteness as inherent in recognisable queer sexuality. This paper highlights the deployment of discourses of sex in this way in order to unpack and contest the way sex and whiteness are privileged on the sites in ways which silence and remove non-white and non-sexual queer experience. Although the discussions made throughout this paper are by no means able to be generalised, the paper aims to provide insight into the multiple ways in which websites used by queer young people might be read and the implications for this reading in the context of increasing internet use, particularly among queer young people.

**Key Words:** Internet, Space, Queer, *Gaydar*, Youth

## **1. Introduction**

The internet is a burgeoning social phenomenon in Australia. Used in education, work, consumption and social networking, over the past decade Australia has seen a widespread growth in access to the medium<sup>1</sup>. As a result, attitudes toward the internet,

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particularly with regard to young people and children in Australia have been divided into two broad areas – the internet as dangerous and from which children must be protected, and the internet as a space of freedom and transcendence, particularly for marginalised young people. Certainly, the focus of much research into young queer people and the internet has focussed on the way the medium enables young people to transcend the homophobia and heterosexism of mainstream Australian culture and try on queer sexuality in a safe and supported way<sup>2</sup>. However, while the internet has certainly opened numerous avenues of connectivity and interaction for queer young people which may have been denied them, such an analysis implies that there is little or no connectedness between online and offline spaces. This paper will investigate the intersections of online and offline queer spaces to examine how discourses of sex operate in online space in ways that overlap offline queer space, and the affect this has on the construction of queer youth subjectivities. Through this discussion I will demonstrate the way that young queer people perceive the internet as providing a space where understandings of their sexuality might be ‘bounced back’ between online and offline space, and therefore presents particular situations which must be negotiated in order to find congruence between online and offline discourses.

In order to contextualise the research, I will give a brief overview of the social issues surrounding queer youth in Australia, and the internet within this context. Following this, I will give a brief overview of the research which has informed this paper, as well as an overview of the two websites being discussed. The paper will unpack some of the theory surrounding the spatial organisation of the internet and the impact of space on subjectivity. Following this, I will engage with an in depth critical discourse analysis of the *Gaydar* websites, with reference to interview material in order to demonstrate the way discourses of sex enacted online impact on young queer people’s understandings of ‘legitimized’ queer subjectivity as well as offline queer space.

This paper is drawn from research conducted over three years into the role of the internet in the formation of queer youth subjectivities in Australia. This research examined, using critical discourse analysis, websites identified by participants in the study in order to unpack the discourses present on the websites to see how queer sexuality was presented online. Further, the study engaged young queer internet users in brief information gathering surveys and in-depth semi-structured interviews in order to explore the way users themselves viewed and engaged with these discourses, and the negotiations they undertook in finding placement for themselves in online spaces. Based on feminist poststructuralist and queer theory, the research method was designed to gain nuanced understandings of the workings of online spaces in the production of subjectivities, rather than to provide a generalised account of queer young people’s internet use. As such, this paper seeks to unpack the nuances of the impact of discourses of sex online in the formation of a legitimised queer subjectivity. Using queer theory and feminist poststructuralism together enables an understanding of the subject which can be seen in the context of ‘border crossings’, or the transitioning between online and offline space in the interactions of queer young people.

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The research engaged young people from Australia who self identified as a queer sexuality and were aged between 18 and 26 to participate in either or both an interview and survey. Surveys were available online and offline, and interviews were all conducted face to face. All in all, 10 interviews were conducted. Due to the limitations of space, not all data will be engaged with in this paper, and data will be kept to some interviews and the analysis of the *Gaydar* websites. For the purpose of clarity, the term queer has been used to refer to all sexualities outside of exclusive heterosexuality, and as such has included asexual and pansexual participants.

### **A. The research in context**

Although Australia recognises sexual diversity, queer sexuality is predominantly set up in a dichotomous relationship with heterosexuality whereby the hetero becomes the norm and the queer abhorrent. Such a dichotomy is often seen in the media and political response to queer issues in education, same sex marriage debates and other issues of social, economic or political inequality. While there have been many areas where sexual diversity has been recognised and celebrated, often including legislation changes to better provide equality before the law, young queer people in the Australian context are still faced with discriminatory attitudes, homophobia, and the consistent public reiteration of the normality and privilege of the heterosexual (particularly the white, male heterosexual). In context, young queer people in Australia are still contending with homophobia and heterosexism within school environments, marking school as one of the most volatile environments for queer people<sup>3</sup>. Further, queer sexuality is almost always reduced to sexual practice in ways that heterosexuality seldom is, creating a silence around queer sexuality and young people which enforces a culture of shame and exclusion on the young queer subject. Likewise, the reduction of queer sexuality to queer sex marks it as something that young people must be protected from, in order to maintain the innocence of the child<sup>4</sup>. As a result, the issues effecting queer young people are seldom discussed, nor are debates around queer sexuality in Australian society seen to inherently effect the formation of queer young people's subjectivity. As a result, young queer people often are caught between debates about the legitimacy of queer sexuality, the homophobia within their immediate environments and the shame associated with identifying with a non-normative sexuality<sup>5</sup>. Such volatile positioning has been linked to the increased rates of suicide within Australia's youth<sup>6</sup>.

However, while there is much to suggest that Australian queer young people are 'at risk', critiques have been made of such positioning, arguing that young queer people negotiate the ways they are positioned within dichotomies of normal and abhorrent sexuality in ways that enable them to contest discourses of isolation, loneliness and shame<sup>7</sup>. One such way that young people have been seen to contest such positioning is through the use of mediums such as the internet<sup>8</sup>. Certainly the internet has been an important site of interaction for young queer people, particularly when many offline queer spaces are restricted to those over the age of 18 in Australia, particularly bars, clubs and sex on premises venues. Small numbers of young people are able to access queer youth social groups before they turn 18, however the research into the scope of such groups within Australia is limited. Certainly, groups tend to publish information about their existence within queer press or through queer venues and events, and as such access

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to such information is limited to those already aware of or interactive in queer space. As a result, the internet emerges as a strategic site of engagement with other queer people and a key source of information about being queer.

While the internet has provided an important space of interaction for young people identifying with queer subjectivities, the internet is a text based medium which works to foreground and legitimate ways of being and subjectivities while foreclosing others<sup>9</sup>. As Nakamura indicates, the use of particular languages, hierarchical lists and search results, and the complete textual removal of different identities online does little to promote the space of transcendence and freedom<sup>10</sup>, described by cyber theorists such as Turkle<sup>11</sup>. Rather, such textual practices often reproduce some of the more dominant discourses of sex, race and gender present in offline spaces. As the internet is so important for young queer people it is important to explore the types of discourses enabled online, and the ways in which these intersect with offline spaces in the formation of queer youth subjectivity.

The *Gaydar* websites which form the basis of this paper are segregated into a female focussed site (*Gaydar Girls* – [www.gaydargirls.com.au](http://www.gaydargirls.com.au)) and a male focussed site (*Gaydar Guys* – [www.gaydar.com.au](http://www.gaydar.com.au)). Both sites were mentioned during the research quite frequently by participants. Catered toward users over the age of 18 (although the structure of the internet makes this virtually impossible to police), the websites provide a networking site based on user profiles and forums. Although international in scope, *Gaydar* acts as a sponsor to many of the queer festivals in Australia, including the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras (a pride style festival lasting three weeks). Such sponsorship may account for some of the sites intense popularity, due to the visibility it receives during the festival. The website is largely commercial, and a membership fee is charged for users wishing to access features such as live chat and unlimited messages. However, free membership with limited features is available. With the exception of the gender of users and images on the sites, there is no intrinsic structural difference between the male and female focussed sites.

## 2. Theory

Throughout this paper I use the term subject from a poststructuralist framework. Therefore, the subject refers to the body within discourse – the ‘self’ which is coherent and intelligible through the discourses in which it is constituted. As Butler describes, subjectivity, although it appears to be stable and coherent, is an “all encompassing web of interrelations,”<sup>12</sup> through which discourses act and as a result the ‘self’ becomes intelligible. As a result of shifting discourses, the subject also shifts, therefore marking the ‘self’ as inherently unstable. In this paper, discourses of sex become the lens through which particular subjectivities.

Sex is, according to Foucault, one of the principle discourses governing bodies and spaces in contemporary Western society<sup>13</sup>. Likewise, sex and sexuality are often conflated in Australian society, particularly around queer sexuality, and it is therefore unsurprising that sex features so strongly in online queer spaces. While it is recognised that sexuality is more than sexual practice, queer sexuality is often reduced to sex. In a

Foucaultian analysis, this can be accounted for by the taboo that rests on discussions of same sex sexuality, particularly same gendered sexual practice, which creates a need to speak or an impetus toward speech around same gendered sex. Such impetus is less apparent for heterosexual sexual practice, which has fewer taboos and restrictions in operation. However, this impetus toward speaking about sex and acknowledging same gendered sexual practice likewise becomes a mode of governance and control which disciplines subjects in particular ways, marking some as legitimized and others as abhorrent.

The speaking out about sex, particularly within queer space does not contest the use of sex as a form of population control or legitimization. Rather, speaking about queer sex becomes a mode of control within queer space, marking some bodies as legitimately queer while closeting and removing others. Online spaces enable young queer people to engage with a discourse of sex which has been denied to them in offline spaces, however such engagement simultaneously recreates the controls and taboos about sex and sexuality in different ways. Sex online becomes a way of determining who is a legitimate queer subject, belonging in online queer space, and who is not. Foucault maintains that sex becomes a marker of who is ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ in our society<sup>14</sup>. Likewise sex is a marker of adherence to the legitimized production of queerness within online and offline queer spaces.

### 3. Deployment of sex discourses online

The websites *Gaydar* and *Gaydar Girls* are dominant sites within online queer space, and are perhaps the most obviously engaged with a discourse of sex as governance on the site. Participants within the study highlighted the way the sites structurally emphasise sex as a marker of legitimate queer sexuality, which directly excluded some while others actively took up and participated in the discourse in order to ensure placement in the space. While the discourse is pervasive throughout the site, I will focus on the home pages of the site, with a particular focus on a small number of images in order to discuss the nuances of the deployment of sex discourses in online queer space, and the intersections of these discourses with offline spaces.

*Gaydar* and *Gaydar Girls* actively work to construct the queer subject as willingly and actively sexual, although the sites themselves do not advertise specifically as dating or cruising websites. The discourse of sex operating on the site is initially foregrounded through the text and images of the sites’ home page, and is further emphasised through the membership forms and profile creation options on the sites. The websites offer users “what you want, when you want it,”<sup>15</sup> and this text is linked to an image displayed to its’ right. Reading the image and the text together, it is apparent that the figures represented in the image are the what – what you want becomes that which is portrayed in the image. These images, whether of men or women, suggest highly sexualised interaction. Often containing semi naked men or women in tight fitting clothing, the images are rarely of individuals and are often of groups of two or more people embracing. As an interview participant, Greg<sup>16</sup>, noticed:

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Gaydar...has a new picture everyday...one of their pictures is...three guys in the same shot, you know, holding each other or whatever. It's hardly ever one guy, it's usually two guys, like holding each other or being intimate. So I think it promotes that...look we've got no tops on, we've got three people in the one shot, looking for a gang bang, you know. Use your imagination.

Users are invited, through the text and image of the home page to participate in the types of interaction represented, and to imagine what it is that is being represented. However, the visual clues provided through the particular positioning of the figures in the images, as noted by Greg, leave little doubt as to what users are expected to imagine. As a result, the images and text indicate upfront the operation of a discourse of sex, which legitimates the sexual within the space and invites users to take up and participate in sexualised behaviour whilst online. An important feature of each of the images is the eye contact made between the represented figures and the site users. Eye contact initiates invitation to further participation in the case of media based images<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, the images are not simply indicating that sexualised behaviour is enabled through the websites, or available on the site, but rather that users are expected to actively participate in the maintenance of the discourse of sex operating on the site.

An image on the male website is particularly useful in this consideration. The image portrays two men standing in an embrace. One man stands with his back to the user, while the other makes direct eye contact. Each of the men are naked except for their underpants, and appear to have been engaged in a very intimate act. This act has been interrupted by the user, as the figure making eye contact appears to be acknowledging the users presence. However, the interruption is incomplete, and so the image tends toward the voyeuristic. The embrace of the two men is interesting. The man with his back to the user has both hands around his partner, while the man facing wraps only one arm around the small of the others back, and this appears to be more possessive than intimate. His other hand is held slightly out from his body, and combined with the eye contact made with the user appears to be inviting. The body offers the user proximity, welcoming them into further interaction. Such interaction between user and site is also replicated on the female site, although it is more common that both figures will be engaging the user in eye contact.

Images such as these work in the rhetoric of socialization in important ways. While as a society we are more and more used to sexualised representations, representations of a sexualised nature effect the ways in which we are able to read spaces, and likewise the types of controls in place in such spaces. As a result, highly sexualised and inviting imagery indicates the operation of discourses of sex on the site, as well as offering users free participation in that discourse. Users are invited to take up and act within a discourse of sex simply through engagement with the home page. However, images, such as the one described above also work to demonstrate the ways in which a discourse of sex is used to control the legitimacy of queer bodies online.

While a willingness to participate in sexualised behaviour is foregrounded as the first and foremost marker of legitimized queer subjectivity in online space, such markers

actively work to exclude subjects whose participation in the discourse of sex might be marked as abhorrent. As a result, users who identify as asexual are actively controlled and closeted through the discourse. According to an asexual queer interview participant, Robert<sup>18</sup>, sites like gaydar actively foreclose the possibility of interaction outside of sex. Further, the sites silence representations of self that are not sexual through the lack of provision for non-sexualised language:

When it says what are you looking for, the options are all sexual...like 1 on 1 sex, threesomes. And you have to list all your sexual interests and fetishes. Yeah, and there's none that really don't mention anything sexual.

Such enforcement of sexualised queer subjectivity works to legitimize understandings of queers as sexual, and mark as abhorrent queer subjectivities that are not expressly willing to participate in sexualised behaviour, such as Robert. However, such marking of sexualised behaviour as natural and desirable is deeply rooted in contemporary understandings of sex as natural and ever present<sup>19</sup>, an understanding that is further reproduced through dominant offline queer spaces. As a result, online spaces, mobilised around sex discourses, reproduce offline queer spaces which use sex discourses to naturalise sex practice through the mobilisation of understandings that queer sexuality is predicated on sex practices and gender object choice<sup>20</sup>. As a result, subjects like Robert are intrinsically represented as lacking the very markers of queer subjectivity necessary to recognise them as queer, and are therefore destabilised and removed from such spaces.

While the operations of sex actively remove users like Robert from the site, in much the same way as they are removed in offline queer space, it is interesting that Robert actively engages in the site. Through reporting his sexuality in a way he felt was accurate to his asexuality, Robert is able to disrupt dominant understandings of human sexuality, and particularly the legitimisation of sexualised queer sexuality. As such, Robert disrupts the closeting processes of the website<sup>21</sup> and creates the possibility for other understandings of sexuality and legitimacy.

However, while Robert is able to contest the way sex is centralised in online and offline queer spaces, sex discourses are not only mobilised to legitimate and centralise sexualised behaviour. Sex, and its mobilisation on queer websites, such as *Gaydar*, also works to legitimate white subjectivity and racialises queer sexuality in ways that fetishise and remove non white queer subjects from dominant placement within the space. In the image described above, it should be noted that the coupling consisted of a white man, acknowledging the user through eye contact, and a non-white man, whose back is toward the user. As has already been noted, the man making eye contact is in a position of dominance in the scene. His arm curls possessively around his partners back, and he invites users into interaction. However, the framing of the image also works to decentre non-white queers and racialise queer sexuality as white. Through the discourse of sex, the non-white figure in this image becomes fetishised through his facelessness. The separation of the body from the living person, through the removal of the face, creates the body as anonymous and abject<sup>22</sup>. Such abjection is necessary to the creation of the object of desire<sup>23</sup>. Interestingly, on *Gaydar* and other websites like it, it is usually the non-white

queer that is framed in this way, abjected and therefore created as the objectified body, rather than as a site of interaction. As I have discussed elsewhere<sup>24</sup>, through various markers on websites, queers of marginalised ethnicities are removed to the periphery of online queer spaces, marked as inauthentic or periphery queer subjects. The images, operating through a discourse of sex, on *Gaydar* operate in the same manner; marking non-white queer subjects as objects to be desired and possessed, rather than as agentic and desiring queer subjects.

Mobilisation of ethnicity through discourses of sex is another area in which online and offline queer spaces overlap and intersect in the production of legitimized queer subjectivity. As Barnard argues, when a marginalisation forms the basis of a community, it will always enforce other marginalisations<sup>25</sup>. As a result, “‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ means white lesbians and gay men”<sup>26</sup>. Offline queer spaces often mobilise the whiteness of queerness through discourses of sex, in much the same way as has been articulated above. Non-white queers are perceived through racialised assumptions which maintain the centrality and privilege of white queerness<sup>27</sup>. Offline queer spaces use discourses of sex to either hyper-sexualise or remove from possible sexualisation non-white queers, leading to the abjection and fetishisation of the subject, or the removal based on an perception of lack from queer space. In such ways, discourses of sex online and offline overlap to reproduce the racialisation of the queer subject which orientalis and colonises non-white queer sexualities.

#### **4. Negotiation and ways forward**

While I have painted a rather bleak picture of online queer spaces and the production of legitimised queer subjects through discourses of sex, it is important to note that young people are actively involved in the operations of sex discourses online, and often develop quite important understandings of the operations of offline queer space through such interaction. Further, as has been demonstrated with Robert in the discussion of exclusion, users actively work to negotiate discourses of sex online in ways which potentially disrupt the workings of exclusionary operations. As such, it is important to consider the ways in which online and offline queer spaces interact, as understanding the way users operate within both spaces might enable contestation of the exclusionary workings of discourses of sex both online and offline, particularly through empowering users to contest and work against such discourses, where appropriate, rather than simply disengaging from sites which work to exclude them.

The power of discourses such as sex to legitimize and abject different subjectivities largely is dependent on the investment of users in those others (including spatial objects) with whom they interact<sup>28</sup>. In this way, online space, disconnected spatially and temporally, though not discursively, from offline space provides an opportunity for users to diffuse operations which discipline them within discourses ordinarily, such as shame, and therefore challenge the ways in which they are constructed as intelligible within discourses. As Robert demonstrated throughout his interview, while users of sites attempted to re-write his subjectivity as sexual, largely through the use of highly sexualised messages, the dislocation of the online space enabled him to react to such messages in a way which was different to how he would be able to act offline, and

thereby continue to challenge the construction of sex as inherent and natural to queer identity in online and offline space. Likewise, as Eddy<sup>29</sup> and Greg highlighted in their interview, the internet provides a space where shame is diffused in order for users to be able to learn a language of queerness which forms the basis of an etiquette for offline queer space:

G: Of course it was a place where you could learn about stuff...you learn about all these...queer terms that people would use in terms of sexual preference...and then you learn stuff. And I think there's a sense of humiliation where you know, there are still things I don't know about on that website and when people are chatting in the conversation in the chat room you have o ask them what does that mean...

E: Yeah, I have to agree with that. ...The internet is going to be able to help you expand on that and I guess to articulate it as well...And you have to ask and you feel kind of embarrassed, but it's just the way.

While users still feel a sense of shame about questioning and seeking information through the discourse of sex online, such knowledge acquisition enables them to better participate, or at least understand what is required of participation, in different offline queer spaces. Understanding not only the ways that websites provide for a language of queerness, but also the ways in which such languages and representations re-produce exclusionary and limited offline discourses and subjectivities, and are negotiated and challenged by users might better enable those involved in online and offline queer spaces, as well as those involved with queer young people on and offline, to encourage the production of more inclusive discourses through online disruption of discourses such as sex.

### Notes

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> G Curran, *Young Queers Getting Together: Moving beyond isolation and loneliness*, PhD Thesis, The University of Melbourne, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> L Hillier et al, 'It's Just Easier', op cit. S Silberman, 'We're Teen, We're Queer, We've Got E-Mail', in D Trend (ed.) *Reading Digital Culture*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford, 2001.

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<sup>10</sup> Nakamura, op cit.

<sup>11</sup> S. Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1996.

<sup>12</sup> J Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian reflections in twentieth century France*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1987, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> M Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge*, Penguin Books, London, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Gaydar, [www.gaydar.com](http://www.gaydar.com), 1999-2009

<sup>16</sup> Pseudonym

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<sup>25</sup> I Barnard, 'Queer Race', *Social Semiotics*, 9, pp. 199-212, 1999.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 202.

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