LGBTQ digital activism, subjectivity and neoliberalism

Abstract:
The internet and, more recently, social networking sites (SNS) have become an important arena for sexual politics. They are used for campaigning on particular issues, for the circulation and finding of information and political news, for debate, for connecting with like-minded people, for awareness-raising activities as well as a publishing platform for a range of vernacular creative outputs ranging from political satire to the celebration of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) subcultures. Social media of the type that encourages users’ creativity (like YouTube or Tumblr) have been exploited as an artistic and creative space by marginalized groups of young people to a larger extent than by youth in general. Yet at the same time we need to be aware that SNS, such as Facebook for example, are carefully managed spaces of civility with clear commercial end aims and users are increasingly up against restricting limitations that make them seek out alternatives or attempt to subvert inscribed norms of mainstream sites. These factors combined present us with a rather complex picture in terms of the type, depth, conditions and extent of use.

This paper explores the conditions and changing style of LGBT people’s digitalized public cultural and political production. It looks at legacies of earlier forms of visual language and aesthetic form of LGBTQ protest as well as developments that are linked to the ways in which media drives and mirrors social transformation.

Exploring the employment of commercialized aesthetics, as well as potential acts of resistance and subversion in the digital realm, the paper raises questions about what happens to strongly subcultural traditions as increasingly the production of meaning is formed online.

I will look at some larger scale social media campaigns and compare and contrast these with some DIY media production within grassroots LGBTQ youth communities with the aim to give some insight into the exploitation of digital and social media for political advocacy by younger generations of LGBTQ identified people.

Paper sections
Intro

This paper will look at LGBTQ activism and subcultural lore as part of online participatory culture. Sonia Livingstone states that ‘as the media environment
becomes the infrastructure for all spheres of social life, to participate in society people must engage with the media’ (Livingstone, 2013:26) and further that ‘the processes of participation are increasingly shaped’ in particular by networked digital media (25).

It’s prudent to note here of course that not all audiences participate, and not all participation is mediated. But increasingly, Livingston proposes, ‘these intersect: audiences are becoming more participatory, and participation is ever more mediated.’ (25)

In line with these broader societal developments, the internet and, more recently, social media and social networking sites (SNS) have become an important arena for sexual politics. They are used for campaigning on particular issues, for mobilisation and debate, for awareness-raising activities and for media watchdog functions.

Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006) conceptualise of the digital media infrastructure as a combination of ‘artifacts (technologies, texts), activities (practices of engagement), and social arrangements’ (in Livingstone 2013: 26) and in my talk I will consider these in relation to LGBTQ political communication.

My main methods include discourse analysis of publicly available material on SNSs and of archive material in combination with community based participatory action research, together with the Brighton based LGBTQ youth organization Allsorts.

1. Youth, Pop and Politics

With the territory of digital activism comes a number of adjacent debates, exposing prevalent pessimistic views on youth disengagement from civic participation; the perceived inauthenticity of activism in the digital realm; and the argument that there is an emerging watering down of activism by corporatisation and fragmentation (individualistic agendas).¹ Some of these arguments date further back than the debates about digital activism per se, but nevertheless tend to coincide in criticisms of net activism. On the other hand, mainstream media fuel a broad general positivistic investment in the networked digital sphere as instrumental for new social movements and forms of activism, exemplified in reporting on the Arab spring for example.

¹ widely held notions of young people as apolitical and concerns about a decline among young people in terms of civic engagement –discussed by Buckingham (2000), Kimberlee (2002) Marsh (2007) and several other commentators.
In terms of LGBTQ politics there are also generational gaps. Young people are assumed to grow up in a post-homophobic, post-sexist society. Following this, one view in terms of LGBT youth activism, or the perceived lack of, that is widely circulated is that young LGBT identified people are just fine – not motivated to get involved in activism.

Positive messages about equality, civil rights and multiculturalism increasingly dominate.

Young people are interpellated, in the Althussian sense, if you like, to think of themselves as equal and unproblematically socially accepted. In short, they are expected to have moved on. This is even implied in UK’s leading LGB rights organisations, Stonewall’s statement slogan: ‘Some people are gay. Get over it!’ [addressing we are meant to understand those that have ‘issues’ with gay people – but also, I suggest, interpellating LGB people to get over themselves; to act up to the assimilation on offer].

A quotation from Stonewall’s current website would further support this:

‘Stonewall has been working to gain legal equality for lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Britain since 1989. Now the job is almost done. Gay people are treated as fairly as everyone else in most of the key areas of their lives.’

The same message is also represented in the very successful video campaign it gets better initiated in 2010 by Dan Savage and his partner Terry Miller.

The project was initiated as a response to reports about queer youth suicides, related to intense bullying. The video posted on YouTube describes Savage and Miller’s own struggles as a gay youth and how they overcame harassment in college and pressure from their religiously conservative families. Within a week over 1000 people had uploaded their own personal videos in the same testimonial style, repeating the core message of the original video. Soon exceeding the data capacity of YouTube, subsequently videos have been migrated to a dedicated web portal which now hosts over 50 000 videos (Krutzsch 2014: 1245). As Krutzsch, Halberstam and other commentators have pointed out, the rhetoric of not only Savage and Miller’s video

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2 There are some interesting development of how the video repository is now being used as a digital ethnographic resource for providing evidence in various legal cases and other uses in terms of having an impact on policy making etc.
message, but the now sizable campaign as whole, is one steeped in neoliberal ideologies prescribing assimilation, through upward mobility as the end goal. Here queer youth are positioned as victims without agency. However, the promise is of acceptance and happiness in adulthood if you only endure the hardship of your teen years, of ‘ever expanding liberties and endless possibilities’ as Krutasch points out (2014: 1246). The rhetoric is problematic for a number of reasons – the dubious suffering leads to redemption logic, the taken for grantedness of the desirability or even possibility of assimilation for all queers and measure of progress in family life, holidays abroad and other markers of affluence. The progressive narrative is as highlighted by Krutasch’s analysis perhaps most forcefully reiterated in the website’s ‘about’ section where there is a timeline charting the development of the project. It starts with the death of Justin Aaberg, in July 2010. It mentions the deaths of Billy Lucas and Tyler Clementi, also by suicide, also in and around that time that the first video is launched. But after September 2010 the timeline doesn’t mention any further suicides or any other violence targeting queer youth or any other changes in law or politics that have negative impacts on LGBTQ lives. ‘In an effort to codify the promise that things actually do get better’ Krutsch demonstrates, the timeline only lists celebrational milestones of civil rights victories, celebs joining the campaign, successes of LGBT public figures. The strategy not only erases the precariousness of many queer people’s lives and political gains but convey an expectation that all queer youth will be full beneficiaries of these once they have escaped their bullies. More problematic however is perhaps the implied message of the campaign that it is the responsibility of the individual to overcome homophobia and that it is the attitude of the young person that is going to bring success.

In an overwhelming amount of rhetoric addressing young people, by young people themselves or others, this very strong tendency to individualise or privatise this expectation to live up to the post-homophobic subject position is prevalent; you should embrace your right to express who you are; your individualism. And freedom in the post-homophobic world is defined predominantly by an increase in individualism.
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Relatedly one could argue that in a post-homophobic society, LGBT activism is only a topic of nostalgia, as in the case of the recent feelgood film *Pride* [about the Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners campaign (dir Matthew Warchus)].

Or, I would suggest, it might rather be the case that the conditions of, the style, rhetoric and form of queer youth activism look different from that of the previous generation, causing a situation where youth activism simply isn’t recognized as activism by previous generations.

Furthermore, we might also discern a disillusionment with the gay liberation, to use the 1960s term, in that it has not been fully realised, and we need to ask if that frustration is taken out on the younger generation so to speak. The recent writing of Prof. Jack Halberstam, may suggest just that: Halberstam argues that queer youth politics today ‘centers [on] self-preservation and security, over the risky work of collective liberation’. The aim of Halberstam’s critique is to warn against a divisive culture of hurt feelings, a sort of fetishisation of victimhood, but in the process it situates youth as humourless and easily offended, and condemns them for cultivating ‘a rhetoric of harm and trauma that casts all social difference in terms of hurt feelings and that divides up politically allied subjects into hierarchies of woundedness’ (Halberstam 2014).

In contrast, summarising a body of work that is questioning the prevalent dismissive attitude towards youth political engagement, Rhon Teruelle, concludes young people are engaging politically, “but crucially through means and methods that are unfamiliar to adults” [(Banet-Weiser (2004: 282)]. The youth of today are challenging tradition and engaging in activist practices that either go unnoticed or are disregarded as non-activism when applying the old staid terms: technological advancement has necessitated a new way of understanding activism among young people.’ (2012: 202)

In this paper I will look at contextualising and critiquing some of these debates by looking at the conditions and changing style of LGBT people’s digitalized public cultural and political production.

I will discuss some examples of earlier forms of LGBTQ activism visual language and aesthetic that are being remediated in online activism.
To nuance claims of corporatisation I will explore the employment of commercialized aesthetics, as well as potential acts of resistance and subversion in the digital realm, looking at some larger scale social media campaigns and compare and contrast these with some DIY media production within grassroots LGBTQ youth communities.

2. Online big and loud
This section focuses on a case study of a major online LGBT campaign The equal rights Facebook campaign which is really a multi platform campaign that encompasses Facebook, twitter, instagram, tumblr and of course a website. Formally, the campaign is based on the format of a single issue with a simple and striking visual representation. It has been called Facebook’s most viral campaign ever and has been likened to a massive virtual street demo.

Some of the main digital media genres of civic participation that LGBTQ groups and individuals have made use of include the e-petition model [like All Out who has launched over 150 campaigns in 35 countries and operates very much on the concept of an imagined global collective]; the video testimonial style campaign, like the It gets better YouTube campaign, mentioned earlier; and the visual statement viral campaign, a cause based effort, like the Human rights Campaign I’m going to turn to now.

Here I’m going to highlight a few characteristics of the campaign that gained momentum in in March 2013, to contextualise it as a form of mediated participation and digital LGB advocacy. I will be focussing on the campaign’s entanglement with mainstream popular culture –including celebrity culture and consumer goods advertising as well as DIY culture or amateur produced online pop culture.

In their recent book *Protest, Inc.* Peter Dauvergne and Genevieve LeBaron (2014: 1) argue that ‘Over the last two decades activist organisations have increasingly come to look, think, and act like corporations.’ – a process they argue is both ‘deepening and accelerating’. This seems particularly to be the case for large advocacy organisations. To speak in intelligible ways to the governing groups in society increasingly means to speak the language of the market. Put in a more cynical way, as Dauvergne and LeBaron do, the objectives become ‘to brand social causes and sell feelings of “doing good” to the “cappuccino class”’. Their aim is not to argue activists are sell outs, but to illustrate the extent of our entanglement with dominant power, the market.
The Human Rights marriage equality Campaign it could be argued fits this description. It is run by the largest gay rights advocacy organisation in the US, relatively well resourced and with a professional marketing and public relations team. They launched their marriage equality campaign in response to two US Supreme Court high profile marriage equality cases and the social media campaign was one component of a larger campaign strategy that comprised of both paid and earned traditional media cover, and people rallying on site. The profile picture logo campaign can be likened to asking someone to wear a badge. But it was also a staged media marketing event in itself. The organisation ‘dressed’ their blue and yellow logo in red and pink to mark an event and to create interest around it they talked about it on social media and asked their followers to also insert the logo where normally your profile photo would go. They were not the first to use this profile picture method, it had been attempted before on twitter in relation to the so called Iranian Green Movement, following the 2009 presidential elections. Nevertheless, millions of Facebook and twitter users replaced their profile pictures with the red equal sign symbol to display their support. Facebook users change their profile picture more or less frequently, but according to Facebook more than twice as many than what they call their average changed their profile picture on the day the Human Rights Campaign encouraged their followers to switch to the red and pink version of their logo. This type of low-level activism has come under criticism as armchair activism – characterised by low risk, low personal cost and constituting a weak commitment, a poor substitute for traditional means of activism. Whilst not wanting to overstate the impact on legislative and governmental decisions a social media campaign may actually have I think it important look at the whole media ecology of a campaign to understand its impact on people who engage with it as well as public opinion, rather than just focusing on an isolated component. 

For example it may be useful to look at how the campaign mobilised imaginations about an alternative emerging public sphere in the form of visually presented statistics or feedback about its impact and reach using the meta data of social media to tell that

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3 The campaign coincided the Supreme Court arguments over Proposition 8, California’s gay-marriage ban, and DOMA, the Defense of Marriage Act, a law that denies federal benefits to same-sex couples.
story. A map like this which visualises the geographical spread of the campaign and the areas of peak activity in deeper red is thus folded into the campaign itself as a tool to construct a sense of a mass movement or united voice and reinforce the fantasy of the networked public sphere. The internet is not the public sphere, but this type representations of public opinion is an establishes function of the public sphere – to provide citizens with information or feedback about other people’s opinion on civic and political matters.

Celebrities!
The HRC also gained significant Celebrity endorsement. Celebrities bring public attention and can help make a campaign or event newsworthy. Mayer (1995) notes that, ‘The chief asset that celebrities can offer social movements is the visibility that comes with their participation; celebrities carry a spotlight with them.’ Furthermore, and this is very much the case in the event of the Human Rights Campaign, ‘In addition to drawing media attention, celebrity participation may draw in other participants and potential supporters.’ (ibid) And lastly, as Mayer, drawing on Brownstein and Prindle, reports ‘ politicians and policymakers are not immune to the lure of celebrity contact, if only to share the celebrity spotlight (186). They highlight a number of potential drawbacks too, but these seem less relevant for campaigning in the digital economy. For example, Mayer warns that by engaging celebrities movements may find it harder to control their self-definition, but I’d suggest that self-definition is something that the internet kind of make you relinquish anyway, and doing so actually works to your advantage. 4 The role of celebrities in activist campaigns and social movements is not new, but what this example suggests is that it has slightly changed in that the semiotic meaning of the celebrity in the networked digital media communication structure is drawn upon by numerous participants in their various social and political online engagements. The function of the celebrity is no longer primarily a matter of getting the attention of newsmedia, or gain access to powerful institutions, but more of an integrated part of the whole semiotic system of the networked circulation of meaning. However, as Mayer concludes in his analysis of celebrity participation in opposing the 1992 passage of a Colorado state law denying lesbian and gay people minority status

4 Does vying for celebrity support deradicalise the movement? Probably? But it is not celebrities alone that have a softening effect.
and the legal protection that comes with it, their participation imposed a shift away from ‘the particularity of anti-gay discrimination in favor of a focus on the universal “immorality” of discrimination’ and ‘the frame of the movement response was necessarily shifted away from the territory of identity politics.’ The central issue became one of discrimination that happened to target gay people, rather one of anti-gay discrimination. (199) Similarly with the HRC; although the court cases were quite complex the campaign message was condensed to an issue of human rights and thus also universalized – we can conclude it resonated with a much wider audience than the LGBT community.

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Another key aspect of the campaign was its open source style. The initial remake of their own logo struck a chord with internet audiences and appeared to have invited user generated individual creative responses to the logo. In the eyes of internet popular culture audiences the HRC had created a meme from their logo and this was an open invitation to spurn further memes - parodies, imitations, and derivations, all in accordance with internet meme culture (see Limor Shifman, 2014 on memes as political communication).

Here we have just two of the thousands and thousands of HRC memes in circulation on the internet. Grumpy cat says YES and the TV series true blood version. These memes raise some interesting questions about types of engagement and motivations to partake in online campaigning – humour and display of playfulness – seem to be key aspects as is the impetus to deliver novelty – also known as the ‘oh my god factor’ (Thorson 2014: 209).

It is perhaps also indicative of the ‘openness and sharing’ culture – that if a media artifact is open not just to be commented on but to manipulation, editing, re-mixing and the like, it may invite such further engagement.

Sonia Livingstone (2004: 11) argues that attention to content creation as a key area of digital literacy is ‘crucial to the democratic agenda’, positioning digital and social media users ‘not merely as consumers but also as citizens’ and a recent study by the Pew Research Centre purports that SNS users are ‘much more politically engaged than most people’ (Brenner 2013), which stands in contrast to debates questioning the authenticity and ulterior aims of digital civic engagement and activism. You are familiar, I’m sure, with terms such as clicktivism (Drew 2013) and slacktivism which
mark a dissatisfaction with departures from previous forms of political communication.

Also corporate brands published spin-offs on the logo theme which further contributed to the HRC’s success in similar ways to celebrity endorsement but in a more visual and playful way. Thus there is a two way exchange of symbolic currency between the cause that is being promoted and the brand image. However, you could of course argue that the superimposing of consumer goods brand identities onto the HRC logo risked watering down its meaning. On a similar note it can be worth noting though that though case of the HRC and consumer brands clearly must be understood within a framework of current online and social media marketing strategies the enmeshing of activism and pop culture, and activism and advertising is not new, but very much part of earlier forms of LGBTQ activism paraphernalia.

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The array of different brands that in this way at least temporarily were willing and eager to align themselves with a gay and lesbian civil rights agenda demonstrates to us the pervasiveness of the campaign’s rhetorical move to frame the demands as being about principles of equality for all people, and their success in translating the agenda into a narrative that strongly echoed popular culture notion of romantic love. Similarly we have seen elsewhere many companies making a rainbow version of their logo or company image as part of their communication with their audiences, and this can thus be considered as low risk, as long as it is tasteful and gives out a message about being generally open minded rather than as a statement that would explicitly align yourself with any form of radical minority politics. We had a surge of this in conjunction with the Sochi Olympic games for example, a context in which the rainbow symbol came to stand for Western liberal democracy in an upmost general sense.

The way the HRC embraced the hacking of their logo and encouraged playful media making in the form of photo montages and memes that were comical, satirical, or just cute most definitely played a part in the campaign’s success in terms of how wide the message travelled beyond their immediate Facebook and twitter audiences and it could be argued made the original visual composition more meaningful in two ways; firstly the memes in effect brought the corporate looking, sleek and rather abstract logo [produced in 1995 by marketing and design firm Stone Yamashita] more in
keeping with grassroots community styles of design. Secondly, the memes in themselves are visual evidence of social media audiences’ engagement, which signals that what the organization is saying is meaningful to them.

Some of the strategies and stylistic components of the red version of the HRC logo can be traced back to the visual AIDS red ribbon campaign that was launched in 1991, at the Annual Tony Awards broadcast by CBS (on June 2). The colour combination of the HRC square is an amalgamation of two previously separate significant pieces of queer political communication – the red ribbon to raise awareness around HIV/AIDS and its cultural stigmatization and the pink triangle, the most prevalent gay and lesbian visual trope before the rainbow motif; sometime with more or less direct reference to its origin in Nazi camps, but more often inserted into completely new and culturally specific contexts. The Lesbian and Gay News Archive in London has a nice collection of pink triangle badges. The Visual AIDS project like the HRC has a non confrontational style, exemplified by the words of Patrick O’Connell, one of its founders:

"People want to say something, not necessarily with anger and confrontation all the time. This (red ribbon) allows them. And even if it is only an easy first step, that’s great with me. It won’t be their last.” And like HRC the visual AIDS project was at least in its early years very attuned to celebrity culture and strategically worked to placed the ribbon in showbiz environments and gaining TV exposure.

In terms of the style and user engagement strategy, the HRC has become a standard model that many other LGBT organisations now utilise. Here is an example of a free mobile phone app with the purpose to help the user customize and share their picture in a very user friendly way whilst also making sure that the visual codes of the organisation are strictly maintained. It is an example of how the creativity of internet audiences is being harnessed for strategic forms of political communication.

But online digital campaigns are not without their critics. Rintel (2013) has written about the popular culture critical responses which he terms ‘snarkivism’ – and here is an example of one such meme.

Looking at the conversations and interviews from my fieldwork however, I note that the people active in the young peoples voice group do not call their activities
activism, – they say campaigning; or use terminology such as ‘raising awareness of particular issues’ (ST 2013). Yet their engagement goes beyond the ‘clicktivism’ (Drew 2013: 172) associated with social media and its assumption that social media activism aims mainly to make the ‘participants feel good because they have taken a stance, but in fact may have done very little’ (Hinton and Hjort 2013: 74).

To an extent, the group sees themselves as supporting other young people on a very local basis in that they ‘support from a distance’ (ST 2013) the young people who seek support from the centre at their drop ins, counselling and other services – by campaigning on issues that they have identified as being of direct relevance to their respective constituencies; bi-awareness, transphobic violence etc.

It may not be entirely helpful to set up hierarchies of authenticity when it comes to understanding cotemporary political advocacy using SNS. Our observations suggest that in the case of Allsorts and their youth led volunteer group YPV, their engagement is rooted in the lived experience of the young people at the centre as well as in a more international context through their participation in online culture.

I now like to turn to young people’s own creative practices.

3. DIY creativity and ‘Equalilollity’

Within media and cultural studies there is a resurgence of interest in amateur creativity, regarded as a vital alternative to the commodified creative industries and looked to as providing forms of cultural practice that are different from those of the metropolitan, middleclass élite. There is however I argue little value in in attempting to create an understanding of mediated DIY cultures as completely separate from popular culture, understood as mass produced, fully commodified media texts or lived experience, as popular culture and DIY media culture are deeply entangled in multiple and interesting ways. Memes for example, which can be in the style of chain-letter-like games circulated on social media or in the style of photo montages or short animations of images – amateur creations produced using basic desktop publishing tools or a mobile phone photo editing app, or created on a meme generator website, and then often based on a given template, typically draw heavily on popular culture
references [ like the meme here which is referencing the TV show the new normal] and rhetorical conventions of comedy and satire.

I’m first going to talk you through some examples of DIY campaigning by a local youth organisation here in Brighton called Allsorts and then move on to some further examples from across different social media making styles and genres. The aesthetics of protest are at once the medium and the message of collective action because they communicate the ideas and demands of activists whilst simultaneously attempting to ensure that such ideas resonate with the public. Traditionally activism has deployed banners, placards, flyers, stickers, badges, clothes, visual and performance art, as means of communication. And in my presentation I have already outlined some of the changes and continuities in the repertoires of political expression and activism brought by the digital realm.

If we look at my first example from one of Allsorts’ campaigns to mark the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia, we note a traditional or analogue mode of communication – the placard – being used in an online campaign. The visual language of the placard, its handwritten using a marker pen, signals a very personal address as well as a nod to a tradition of grass roots aesthetics. Looking at the placard more in detail we can note how it is also drawing on the widely familiar symbolism of the closet, signaling perhaps an intent to resonate with a wide audience.

The photograph of the girl holding the placard works as a digital message when posted on Facebook etc whilst also alluding to a link between offline DIY campaigning activities and the FB campaign. As one photo among several, using the same style, it contributes to the notion of a critical mass and its situating online, as a digital artifact, allows for both a potentially wider and a more long lasting engagement with it [you can look at it for as long as you want for as often as you like]. As a digital image it is of course also open to further annotation or alteration once it is shared among SNS audiences.

In contrast to the technological deterministic view suggesting that access to media technology in itself will increase democracy and equality (Marwick 2013, see also Baumgartner and Morris 2010 on social media and political engagement of young adults), I argue that we need to look at how users negotiate – and sometimes subvert –
the values and norms that technologies incorporate in order to make pragmatic use of mainstream platforms and technologies in working towards agendas of increased sexual democracy and gender equality.

In my and Irmi Karl’s research with the young people at Allsorts we’ve found plenty of examples of pragmatic use of the formal communicative conventions of the platform. Here is one where they have utilised the feature of the status update to creatively combine text and image by producing a widget that if you post it in your status field it will incorporate your profile picture in a political statement.

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like this

Whilst what most engage with may not amount to a new kind of electronic civil disobedience, it is still a subversion of the conditions that limit or shape forms of expression on a particular platform.

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The next example I’d like to look at here is the Allsorts of stars campaign which illustrates how the remediation of web material work alongside the material created by the young people themselves and how a local grass roots campaign [this is a collaboration between two youth groups – Allsorts in Brighton and the stars peer project in Dorset] mirrors the idea of a imagined global community (see Anderson, 1991).

The campaign features photo-collages of portrait images of members of Allsorts against a rainbow graphic design with various parts of their identities highlighted in text. This rhetorical device is emulating an US campaign for trans visibility entitled ‘I AM: Trans People Speak’ [featuring actress Laverne Cox ad other successful individuals] which also focuses on communicating the diversity of transgender communities and utilises the same listing of identity ‘labels’ as the YPV campaign. [show video]
The use of the hashtag indicates the aim to build momentum around a particular cause or topic across both twitter and FB. As noted by Zappavigna, the hashtag enables users to ‘affiliate with a copresent (Goffman, 1963), impermanent, community by bonding around evolving topics of interest’ (2012: 800).

Further, the campaign aligns itself with online popular culture through the aesthetics of the meme. On the one hand in each of the ‘memes’ or posters, the person is engaged in giving an account of oneself, to use Butler’s term (2005), highlighting the narrative aspect of identity formation, but yet on the other hand they are very playful in their evoking of the multiple ‘selves’ we enact in our online and offline lives. And it aims to humorously subvert how LGBT folks are often stereotyped, by de-prioritize sexual identity.

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What we see in this example is a rather seamless organisation of material from across the globe presented alongside the campaigns and posts that the young people create themselves – their curating of political material as well as creating and publishing their own I would argue is a typical feature for the social media era of civic engagement and activism. The young people’s reworking of already existing media texts into new user generated content for a local audience indicates that their sense of connectedness is both enabled and conditioned by the social media platform.

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Although the whole of the ‘I AM: Trans People Speak’ is nationally and culturally specific, and its production value very different, something about its intent and address has struck a cord with the young people and they have translated this into their own language and thus the message becomes meaningful in their local context. For example, their linguistic repertoire is much more ‘quirky’ or playful than that of the original videos. The playful trying out of different ‘genres of political expression and their suitability across multiple social media platforms’ that Thorson associates with the segments of youth she calls ‘entrepreneurs of political talk’ (Thorson 2014: 204) is clearly engaged with by the young peoples voice members.
For the young people participating in producing campaigns using their creativity and artistic and media technology these activities reinforce pre-existing social bonds as well as allows for an expansive notion of community.

Commentators debate whether SNS are merely ‘instrumental’ in relation to social activism or if they ‘change the dynamics of activism’ (Hinton and Hjort 2013: 72). I would argue that in the case of the campaigns that the YPV have produced that both the global nature of the internet and the vernacular culture of SNS have impacted on the dynamics, direction and style of the campaigns. What we see emerging is local mobilization that draws on a much wider context of LGBTQ agendas and digital output. For the young people it is a question of situating their ‘voice’ both in a local and global context; their travels online put them in contact with a host of international gay rights trends, yet to engage their more immediate audience they need to mould their strategies to speak to their local environment and concerns of their peers.

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Similarly in my next example the very popular form of vlogging or video blogging we see an erasure of the boundaries between different spheres such as private and public; professional marketing and video diary; consumerism and activism and a mash-up of mainstream popular culture genres such as the talk show mode of speech and queer people of colour subcultural aesthetics such as ballroom body language also known as reading and vouging.

The video blogger in this case study is 15 year old Brendan Jordan of Las Vegas.

In an interview by Today.com Brendan Jordan talks about ‘video bombing’ a news reporting from a local shopping centre, a clip featuring Brendan at the front of a crowd, bursting to break out in spontaneous dancing, that got a lot of view on YouTube, and he says : “I just saw a camera, and did my thing. I was imagining myself as if I was Lady Gaga, and that no one could destroy me.” This is an interesting and valuable correction to the dominant narrative of queer youth as victims that can only long for empowerment in adulthood.
Brendan was spotted by the clothing company American Apparel, supposedly because he was wearing their clothes in the video and subsequently hired to feature in their publicity [which you see here]. In a move that blurs the line between the official advertising campaign and amateur or enthusiast video blogging, Brendan has now set up his own YouTube channel featuring videos shot in a teenage bedroom setting where he mainly talks about shopping and fashion and wearing American Apparel clothes. But he also addresses specific LGBT issues as ‘coming out’ and bullying. He has more than 250,000 Instagram followers and almost 40,000 Twitter followers.

Apart from his shopping channel style blogging Brendan also feature in more direct activist roles such as in this instagram vine or short video where he takes on the role an ambassador for LGBT youth, helping to raise awareness for Spirit Day , which campaigns to stop the bullying of LGBT young people.

5. Neoliberal culture and new spaces of political activism
The paper has critically reflected on the congruence between the aesthetics of digital and social media forms of LGBTQ activism and the resonance of these ideas amongst the public. It has also considered some of the changes and continuities in the repertoires of political expression and activism brought by the digital realm. As Ito (2009, cited in Livingstone 2013) observes, ‘we are witnessing the emergence of new kinds of participation genres’.

New rhetorical categories are also emerging in online social media culture, such as for example the category ‘hater’. Haters is a general term for those posting hyper critical or hurtful comments in Facebook posts and in comments fields on blogs and YouTube. It is often the case that the term encompasses homophobic, racist or sexist attacks or bullying. It may be the case that this new category opens up for new forms of alliances amongst those targeted by hate speech and encourages new strategies for dealing with homo and transphobia, in the emerging practices of addressing haters, which is evolving as a social media genre in itself.
I hope to have demonstrated that LGBTQ digital activism and youth cultures both display legacies of analogue forms of grassroots activism and forge new styles and conventions. They are often deeply imbued in neoliberal ideologies yet regularly subvert and resist these too, challenging expectations.

Works cited:

Notes:
In a recent survey of All Out members, more than 60% indicated that their participation with All Out was the first time they had ever been involved with lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans issues.