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# Situated Agency: How LGBTQ Youth Navigate and Create Queer(ed) Space

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## **Situated Agency: How LGBTQ+ Youth Navigate and Create Queer(ed) Space**

Research on LGBTQ+ youth often portrays them as either as victims whose lives are defined by violence and discrimination, or as inspirational success stories whose ability to thrive is attributable to external interventions and policies. Drawing on theories of situated agency, minority stress, and queer monstrosity, this participatory qualitative interview project with LGBTQ+ young adults illustrates instead how LGBTQ+ youth actively shape their coming-of-age experiences and develop unique strategies to survive and thrive in the spaces they occupy. Rather than wholly traumatic or ecstatic, most participants reported mixed experiences with varying support from the people and spaces they encountered. Youth had to regularly engage in the labor of evaluating and responding to this mixed support and mistreatment in everyday situations and relationships. Based on these evaluations participants reported self-regulating their sexual and gender identities and behaviors, shifting tactics between spaces, seeking out and creating queer spaces, embracing their own difference, and engaging in direct resistance. Implications for research and practice suggest that refusing to center deficit-based narratives and recognizing the full range of young people's queer expressions will produce a more accurate picture of LGBTQ+ coming of age and the supports that allow more youth to thrive.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ youth, situated agency, minority stress, queer space, gay-straight alliances

Word count: 7,928

In 2016, the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice released a “Dear Colleague” letter that extended Title IX protections to transgender students, establishing their legal opportunity to attend schools free of harassment and discrimination. In 2017, the Trump administration rescinded that guidance, and, in February 2018, the U.S. Department of Education clarified that they will no longer hear complaints or take action in support of transgender students’ access to school facilities. This example demonstrates that despite some progress for LGBTQ+ youth in recent years, the current political and social environment is uneven and unpredictable. Thus, it is as crucial as ever to identify the contexts and practices that provide affirming and supportive tools for LGBTQ+ youth to thrive in an often challenging world.

Yet the prevailing practice wisdom in social work and education, dominant pop-culture discourse, and much of the scholarly literature presents a portrayal of young people’s lives in deficit terms. Their coming-of-age experiences are depicted as fundamentally fraught, painful, characterized by school failure, substance use and abuse, familial rejection, negative feelings of difference at best and outright bullying, physical violence and abuse at worst. The majority of research on LGBTQ+ youth has focused on these “individual-level risk outcomes” (Russell, 2005). Heeding Russell’s (2005) call to shift attention from the overwhelming focus on risk to a focus on resilience, this community based participatory research (CBPR) project was conducted alongside LGBTQ+ youth and explored how they negotiated queer(ed) spaces during young adulthood. Their narratives indicate the dimensions of a supportive space, and how people within those spaces can affect the coming-of-age experiences of LGBTQ+ youth.

### **Risks and Supports for LGBTQ+ Youth**

Countless studies have documented LGBTQ+ youths’ heightened risk of violence and victimization, as well as the negative impacts discrimination has on these youths’ mental

health, academic achievement, and general well-being (Kosciw et al., 2010; Toomey et al., 2011). While harassment and violence are the unfortunate reality for many LGBTQ+ youth, research trends provide an incomplete understanding of LGBTQ+ youthhood as one characterized entirely by suffering and helplessness. Other researchers have emphasized the positive outcomes that LGBTQ+ youth report mostly as a result of intervention and support strategies implemented in schools and other institutions serving marginalized youth. Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in schools have been a space of particular interest for researchers, with multiple studies reporting a correlation between GSA presence in schools and better academic achievement, mental health, and social outcomes for LGBTQ+ students (Kosciw et al., 2009; Poteat et al., 2013; Toomey et al., 2011). Though these findings challenge the idea that LGBTQ+ youthhood is defined by suffering, they tend to view LGBTQ+ youths' resilience or *successes* as resulting from external factors, such as certain institutional practices or resources. In other words, LGBTQ+ youth are treated as passive objects who receive "help" or "support" from external sources, rather than as subjects who actively participate in shaping their own realities and resilience strategies.

The result is a body of literature that tends to present LGBTQ+ youth's experiences in extremes: LGBTQ+ youth are understood either as helpless victims whose lives are defined by violence and suffering or as inspirational success stories whose ability to thrive is attributable to external interventions and policies. This binary understanding of LGBTQ+ youthhood is insufficient to understand the full complexity of LGBTQ+ youth experiences, which vary widely across time, space, and context.

### **School and Online Spaces**

Much of the research about LGBTQ+ youth has been conducted within school settings. The high rates of verbal, physical, and sexual harassment LGBTQ+ youth experience at the hands of both peers and faculty in schools are well-documented (Bochenek

& Brown, 2001; Craig et al., 2018; Kosciw et al., 2009). These conditions put LGBTQ+ youth at higher risk of poor academic performance, truancy, and dropping out than their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts. However, school conditions for LGBTQ+ youth vary widely depending on factors such as geographic location and student demographics (Kosciw et al., 2009). Schools with GSAs generally report safer school climates and better academic, social, and emotional outcomes for LGBTQ+ students (Kosciw et al., 2009; Poteat et al., 2013; Toomey et al., 2011), though these benefits extend primarily to white students and are less effective at mediating the effects of high levels of violence and victimization (Baams & Russell, 2020; McCready, 2004). Although harassment, discrimination, and heteronormative curriculum are common obstacles, schools can provide LGBTQ+ youth with the space to build relationships with supportive peers and staff, engage in rewarding extracurricular activities, and connect with community and campus resources (Marshall et al., 2015; Mayo, 2013; Porta et al., 2017).

The internet can be a valuable alternative space for support, friendship, resistance, resource sharing, and self-exploration for LGBTQ+ youth (Hillier et al., 2012; Jenzen, 2017; McKenna & Chughtai, 2020; Ybarra et al., 2015). LGBTQ+ youth spend more time online than non-LGBTQ+ youth (GLSEN et al., 2013), perhaps due to the ability to access support and information with some anonymity (Fox & Ralston, 2016). While the internet is not universally safe for all LGBTQ+ youth (Ybarra et al., 2015), there is a range of online forums and social media platforms where youth can explore trans identities and queer sexualities (Hillier et al., 2012; Jenzen, 2017). Wargo (2017) has commented on young people's use of both static (selfie) and more dynamic (livestreaming) technologies to curate their experiences, substantively shaping young people's "storytelling of the self" (p. 560). Together, this literature shows that the internet is certainly a new, and often a "safer," space for LGBTQ+ youth to socialize than in-person, and necessitates further study.

### **Varied Strategies**

Social stress theories are useful in understanding LGBTQ+ behavior. Minority stress elaborates on social stress theory by distinguishing excess social environmental stress experienced by “individuals from stigmatized social categories” (Meyer, 2003, p. 3). In applying minority stress, scholars have developed the *intersectional minority stress* framework as a way to both recognize that many LGBTQ+ youth occupy numerous marginalized positions and to document stigmatization across various minority status positions (Robinson, 2021; Schmitz et al., 2019). As a result of social stigmatization, LGBTQ+ youth often experience the stress of self-regulating and managing their visibility within their social environment (Blackburn, 2007; Lasser & Wicker, 2008). These acts of self-regulation and visibility management can be understood as a result of existing within a constant surveillance state as theorized by Michel Foucault (1975) in his analysis of the Panopticon. While surveillance intends to produce docility in its subjects, it is only partially effective in schools, as youth strategically evade and resist such disciplinary power (Gallagher, 2010). LGBTQ+ youth perform similar strategies in order to mitigate surveillance as a minority stress, however, the literature on the topic is marginal and seeks further documentation.

One queer strategy in the face of disciplinary power and surveillance is to embrace a marginal positionality as a source of personal power and motivation for social change. Judith Butler (2011) and Susan Stryker (1994) have written extensively about the construction of queerness as monstrous, drawing comparisons between queer/trans subjectivity and that of literary creatures such as the monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. “Monstrousness” represents those bodies and behaviors which society has deemed unnatural; perverse; incapable of categorization (Cohen, 1997). For some LGBTQ+ people, identifying with the monstrous is a way of resisting the oppressive conditions that have rendered them “other.”

In deconstructing victim binaries in research, *situated agency* was developed as an alternative to describe how individuals strategically live with, and beyond, social limitations (Panelli et al., 2005; Wignall, 2020). Situated agency acknowledges that one's social context, or the cultural discourses they are situated in, their personal biography, and their spatial relations provides the individual "with both constraints and possibilities from which to generate a sense of agency" (Panelli et al., 2005, p. 499). In applying situated agency to trans high school students, Hillier and colleagues (2019) showed how trans youth use strategies for coping, surviving, and resisting violence and harassment in high school settings. In living "with" and "beyond" conflict and violence, trans youth navigated their high school environment and negotiated risk by: "avoiding, ignoring, selectively sharing, teaching and advocating, arguing and fighting, seeking support, and making changes" (Hillier et al., 2019, p. 387). By highlighting resistance and resilience, situated agency redirects focus to the context and systems in which trans youth exist for further analysis.

This article adds to the literature on situated agency by exploring how LGBTQ+ people negotiate and "queer" spaces in youth and young adulthood. Drawing on theories of situated agency, minority stress, and queer monstrosity, we describe a participatory qualitative interview project with LGBTQ+ young adults that illustrates how LGBTQ+ youth actively shape their coming-of-age experiences and develop unique strategies to survive and thrive in the spaces they occupy.

### **Research Design & Methods**

This research study was embedded within a collaborative project, (Project Title). In the first phase of the project, researchers (Abelson and Anderson-Nathe), along with collaborators, conducted interviews with 51 LGBTQ+ people ages 16-60 in the Pacific Northwest to understand their experiences as queer youth in multiple contexts. We did not attempt to separate participants or analyses according to experiences of gender and sexuality,

understanding that they, and the oppressions that target their respective transgressions, were inextricably connected. Abelson and Anderson-Nathe secured funding to expand the project to include a youth peer researcher component, with the dual purpose of including youth voice in the next stages of the project and enhancing the participant sample by working within existing community youth networks. This resulted in the recruitment of six youth, aged 18-24, who were subsequently trained in qualitative research interviewing, recruitment, transcription, and thematic data analysis. As part of their interview training, youth researchers experienced being an interview subject by giving an interview for the project with one of the faculty researchers. Based on the core principles of participatory methods, youth and faculty researchers engaged in a process that fostered co-learning and capacity building for all involved (Nicolaidis et al., 2011). Thus, youth brought their knowledge and understanding of their communities and lives into the project. In all, peer researchers conducted 29<sup>1</sup> interviews.<sup>2</sup>

Youth researchers recruited participants through messaging, email, social media, face-to-face requests, and recruitment flyers. Generally, participants were part of youth researcher social circles, which benefited the project because youth researchers themselves were of diverse backgrounds and experiences by virtue of race, class, and gender. Interviews utilized a semi-structured interview guide and averaged 60-90 minutes. In order to cater to participant schedules and needs, interviews were conducted at times and locations most convenient, such as their living rooms or in coffee shops. Through open-ended questions, study participants were asked about their experiences during their teenage years in order to explore how spaces can and do support LGBTQ+ youth. While participant ages ranged from 18 to 36, all participants were asked to speak, currently or retrospectively, to their

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<sup>1</sup> Four of the 29 interviews conducted by youth researchers were excluded from analysis due to missing audio files

<sup>2</sup> This project received approval from the Committee for Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS), the University of Oregon Institutional Review Board (IRB). Protocol # 03202015.021

experiences as queer youth. Specifically, questions centered these areas: what stood out to participants about their young adulthood; how being LGBTQ+ affected those experiences; and their current interpretation of their teenage experiences. The sample was diverse in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and class (see Table 1). Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym, which we use here. Interviews were recorded and transcribed by youth researchers.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Because we wanted to highlight the work done by peer researchers, and their knowledge and understanding of their community, our analysis solely explored 25 of the interviews they conducted. We carefully reviewed peer interview files to explore how study participants described their queer(ed) *negotiation of space during youth and young adulthood*. As an exploratory study, thematic analysis allowed us to seek meaningful patterns while also describing and organizing the data (Braun & Clark, 2006). The research team conducted its first level of analysis by reviewing multiple transcripts all together, identifying and operationalizing preliminary analytic codes through the use of Atlas.ti software. These codes were then organized into a central codebook, which the research team revisited to assure shared understandings of the meaning and use of each code. At the second level of analysis, two researchers read and individually coded each interview transcript. The research team then collapsed codes into themes that were further refined through the use of thematic memos. Throughout this process, the research team met bi-weekly to discuss participant meaning-making, develop codes, and organize findings.

In the following section, we highlight three ways that participants described their queer(ed) negotiation of space during youth and young adulthood. First, participants employed different strategies to self-govern and regulate the visibility of their queerness in anticipation of adverse reactions and risk. Second, they shifted between online and offline

spaces as a way of negotiating their queerness and queer community. Last, participants created and queered alternative spaces that allowed them to build community, embrace monstrosity, resist oppression.

### **Findings**

Participants described their young adulthood in a variety of ways. Some participants reported being bullied or harassed, some got along fine socially, and others felt outside or in-between the social life of their school, community, or family but did not necessarily mention being targeted by others. A few even reported being wholly accepted and supported by family, friends, and in their school and communities. The majority of participants reported mixed experiences at different times, with different people, and in different spaces.

Despite sometimes not fitting in, a number of participants described fairly unremarkable teen years—neither deeply traumatic or wholly ecstatic. For example, Techie, a 19-year-old, white transgender/genderqueer and queer person said that while they struggled with mental health, their middle and high school years were fairly “normal.” They said,

I had friends, and I had a really good school, apart from the danger. It was, I don't know, I guess a normal childhood. There's nothing out of the ordinary. I went to school during the day, I had friends that I hung out with. I lived across the street from one of my friends. It was nothing special.

Techie attributed this “normal” existence as a queer youth to finding friends and a sense of community in theatre and having generally accepting parents. Darian, a 36-year-old Latino bisexual man, reported that while some people did not like him, others stood up for him when he was bullied:

I don't know if anyone bullied me because they knew I was bisexual or they thought I was gay or whatever, but I would just say like kids being kids just because they don't like you for whatever. I had a couple of people bully me,

but I never felt afraid to go to school or anything, it was just stupid kids being annoying.

Even when participants didn't experience explicit homophobia or transphobia in school, they reported a sense of not "fitting in" while growing up. A general sense of being different, queer, or odd, existed before they understood their non-normative gender and/or sexuality. For participants of color, racism further compromised their feelings of belonging. For example, Vanilla Bean, a 21-year-old Chicana/Mexican bisexual, fluid, woman, described experiencing racist and anti-Mexican prejudice:

I used to get bullied by the teachers [in Mexico] just because of being from the U.S. When Trump won, I got told by the principal to go back to my country. Meanwhile Trump was telling me to go back to my country. It kind of puts you in a limbo. It's like, Wait, is there a Vanilla Bean-topia? Vanilla Bean Island? Where the fuck am I supposed to go?

Their sense of not "fitting in" was exacerbated by a narrow representation of queerness or a lack of representation altogether. Across these varied experiences of being young and queer, participants employed strategies to negotiate and "queer" space.

### **(Self) Regulating Behavior and Visibility**

Participants spoke about strategies they used to self-govern their sexualities, gender identities and expressions in anticipation of negative reactions. While few participants reported experiencing direct threats or harm, most spoke about proactive measures they took in response to the generalized or hypothetical experiences of others. Many participants chose not to "come out," or be visibly queer, as a way to avoid threats or harm. Rae, a 19-year-old white and Korean lesbian, queer, bisexual, pansexual, who was female and genderqueer, described how being visibly queer was a nonpossibility and could result in violence or harm: "Growing up through high school, it was like a no-no. You were sought out in school, made

fun of, you didn't have friends, you were beaten, pretty much. People knew, but they would hide it at the same time." Riley Gray, a 19-year-old Asian and mixed race gay man, responded to hearing homophobic slurs by regulating his behavior, even when the language was not directed at him specifically:

I don't think that there's anything dangerous, cause like I was never threatened or anything but you just hear stuff like people say "faggot" or people would make fun of gay people and you know you just know not to act like that in front of them.

Athletic school spaces surfaced as a site of self-governance. John, a 21-year-old white bisexual male, regulated his queerness, choosing not to come out as gay, to attend to his peers' insecurities:

I really wasn't in any rush to come out in water polo just cause I didn't really want to make my teammates uncomfortable... walking in speedos around a gay person that's where it would be so I just didn't wanna deal with that.

Conversely, Cowboiz, a 25-year-old white queer, bisexual, genderqueer/gender-non-conforming person *had* been out to some of their teachers and decided to regulate their gender expression after receiving invasive questions from peers in gym class:

I didn't bind anymore, and I didn't bind in gym class and have girls go like, "What's that? Is that to suppress breasts?" And I was like, "Yeah." [Laughs] So I went from being out to some of my teachers and that sort of thing, to wearing dresses again and kind of feeling like a "failure" at being trans, or like it was a phase and I was lying.

John's image of a bisexual person in speedos causing presumably straight boys discomfort invokes stereotypes of gay men as hypersexual and promiscuous. John's and Cowboiz' experiences occurred where youth are physically vulnerable and often lack adult supervision.

In these spaces, it seemed especially important for participants to calibrate their behavior according to what they thought would make others more comfortable.

Several participants described how their families' homophobia caused them to regulate their queer visibility and decide not to come out, even to a family member they otherwise trusted. Chris, a 25-year-old white bi and pan female, said,

My aunt is very religious, so her and her husband would talk about so many gays have been on the news lately and how they shouldn't be spotlighted. There's been times when I just had to leave. So even though I know that my dad would be really understanding because he's part of that side of the family I still haven't come out to him... to not be sure if I'll be safe around my own family is... a really unsettling place to be.

Like Chris, John described how he regulated his queer visibility around people (e.g., teachers, students) who were devout Christians, fearing that their Christian faith would also mean disapproval or hostility towards queerness. Their strategies for negotiating spaces as a queer person shifted, at times, based on how secular or religious a space they were in.

In each of these cases participants reported that they had to regulate their visibility as queer or some aspect of their genders or sexualities, but they received other kinds of support from these same people in their lives—support that they potentially jeopardized if they expressed their full selves.

### **Moving Between Online and Offline**

Shifts between on- and offline spaces were prominent in participants' descriptions of how they used different regulation strategies. Online spaces allowed for forms of visibility, education, and self-exploration that were not always available in in-person spaces. For example, Dolin, a 21-year-old genderqueer Latinx gay/queer, questioning, demisexual, spoke

about how a Youtube channel offered information on access to top surgery for nonbinary people:

Seeing that Youtuber's channel and seeing their experience kind of made me feel even better about myself, like "Oh, this is something that is actually done. That's cool." It like, validated my experiences more. Not that I needed to see that to do it, but I did, like it just kind of reassured me like, "Hey, this is something you can do." It's not something I would have thought of on my own.

The validation that Dolin received from this online space allowed for ideas about how to negotiate queerness that she may not have otherwise considered or found possible.

Online spaces allowed for exploration and community building when participants' location or family situation seemed unsupportive. Shirley, a 27-year-old white gay, queer female spoke to the potential benefits of anonymity and agency available in online spaces, as juxtaposed with the challenges of coming out in a rural community: "You kind of just get that sense of community without having to be too vulnerable. I think that was really helpful for me, especially being in a really rural area while I was coming out." Similarly, before coming out to friends, Devin, a 26-year-old white nonbinary trans man, who was queer, bisexual, and polysexual, explored his gender identity online:

I started [coming out] online, like I started using different pronouns and stuff online and people were cool about it. There was actually a girl I was dating long distance who was the first one I told about my gender and stuff and she was really nice about it.

For most participants, online spaces were positive but they also expressed wanting in-person spaces where they could find community and support.

While online space served as a potential facilitator for identity exploration, access could be mediated by the limited agency some participants had as minors. For example, Cowboiz discussed how losing access to Tumblr compromised their ability to be semi-out:

My mom had found my Tumblr, so she woke me up in the middle of the night while I was sleeping on the couch. She yelled at me before going to bed, and I was freaking out... and I decided that I didn't want this to happen anymore, so I was like, "I'm sorry. I'm going to delete my blog." Which I did. She made me delete my blog. And I basically went from being this semi-out trans person to being, "No, I'm a girl again," the next year.

This loss demanded a change in how Cowboiz regulated their queerness. Gaining access to online space was a way to claim agency and express themselves, which was compromised when this space was taken away.

### **Making Alternatives**

Some participants found moments where they did not have to self-regulate their queerness. Instead, they found ways to negotiate coming-of-age as a queer person through strategies such as community-building, monstrosity, and resistance. In this sense, they queered other spaces when LGBTQ+ organizations or spaces proved inadequate or uninteresting.

**Creating Queer Supportive Spaces.** The majority of participants that attended schools with GSAs or other LGBTQ+ support spaces said they were glad they existed, but did not necessarily participate in them or want to. Sometimes they avoided these spaces because they did not get along with the people there, they encountered mainly straight people, or they found the spaces unaccepting of their whole selves. Participants described how they negotiated their time as youth by finding and building community around people and resources, irrespective of how explicitly LGBTQ+ supportive a

space was advertised to be. Sheila, a 20-year-old white and Jewish lesbian, gay, queer, homo cis woman discussed how the official LGBTQ+ spaces in her high schools did not interest her:

[I]n high school there was... a QRC type of club after school, but the four people that went there (chuckles) mind you it was in the thousands, thousand student school, but only four students were there - every time I would walk by it just....didn't seem appealing. Nobody really took it serious...It wasn't where I wanted to spend my time. I had other interests.

Finding people with shared interests was more compelling and perhaps more important for their negotiation of their teen years. Shimizu, a 20-year-old mixed-race gay homosexual man was busy with other activities:

I was part of the dance club from a dance company. I was also part of women's empowerment. ...I tried to get into GSA but I didn't 'cause women's empowerment and dance took up most of my time... I didn't really feel like I needed to go.

In another example, Techie attended the GSA early in high school but gravitated to theater where there were other LGBTQ+ youth and, perhaps more importantly, general support for different forms of being. These alternatives allowed youth to focus on their interests and have supportive spaces with people they liked.

For Vega, an 18-year-old Black trans woman, LGBTQ+ spaces were more than uninteresting—they were hostile. Below, she described how the spaces advertised as “safe” were no less elitist and racist than any other space:

Well for one I feel like most of that shit is like, a huge hypocrisy, and I've always said, especially since I came out, that I'm not a part of none of that shit. Like... they don't fuck with us like that, trans women, Black trans women especially. It's like, they

have this huge idea of community and embracing, but just from growing up and watching these communities, it's like they're just as elitist and racist as everyone else. While for some, getting involved in LGBTQ+ centered spaces can be a form of survival, coping, or resistance, confronted with a culture that is white supremacist and inaccessible those spaces were not supportive. In response, Vega described carving out her own spaces:

But everything else doesn't really matter, because the only resource I need is my hormones and a safe space, which would go with being friends with somebody like me. Like if we're together and we're good, then that's the only safe space I need.

Similarly, Rae created spaces away from a broader LGBTQ+ community, or anyone else. Outdoor spaces allowed Rae to *not* negotiate their queerness. The woods offered a sort of sanctuary or escape. When asked where they found support, Rae said:

Spaces, I would say just outside. Not at anyone's house, where I could just be free and outside, mainly in the woods, where no one was around so you could just do and be whatever you wanted. That's where I found sanctuary.

Across these moments participants created spaces that were supportive of them as whole people, including being LGBTQ+.

**Embracing Monstrosity and Direct Resistance.** Some youth expressed their feeling of difference as “being alien” or “monstrous,” and embraced aspects of this difference by looking inward and reevaluating their own worth. For example, Darian did not have any models of LGBTQ+ people when he was growing up. Instead, he looked up to figures like Godzilla:

I like Godzilla because...like nothing stops him, he's forever this big giant monster and sometimes I feel like I'm a monster. You know, you feel different - even though you have people who love and support you, you still feel different to other people...I don't know, it's just like sometimes you feel ugly inside cause you wanna be like

everyone else, and that's why I like Godzilla, cause he's just a monster, he's a monster and he is what he is and everyone just has to deal with him.

By embracing the monstrous figure of Godzilla, Darian shifts the onus of responsibility for negotiating queerness onto those around him, refusing to assimilate or change himself. By embracing one's monstrosity, queer subjects may free themselves from some of the pressure to conform because they understand their monstrosity not as a personal failure but as the result of an oppressive world order (Jones & Harris, 2016). This approach also showed up when participants rejected typical high school culture, including activities like attending football games or subscribing to hierarchies of popularity. Dolin, for instance, said,

me and my friends, we were like, "yeah, we're not doing any of that...we were also different from, like, the norm of the stereotypical high schooler. Just like going to football games and I'm guessing they went to parties. I never heard of any parties because I was like an outsider. (Dolin, 21)

In these ways, participants take on another feature of the monstrous: the ability to challenge and unsettle that which we think we understand (Cohen, 1997; Abdi & Calafell, 2017).

Through these acts of resistance - whether refusing to assimilate, as Godzilla, or refusing to subscribe to the tropes of popularity and high school ritual typically assigned to the "normal" youth subject - participants used their outsiderhood to challenge the pressures to conform.

While some participants managed harassment and violence through self-regulation, like those above who shifted their visibility or changed their behavior, others employed more direct forms of resistance. In response to sexual harassment after coming out, Devin fought back in self-defense:

[W]hen I was on the bus and stuff people would just ask me really intrusive sexual questions and ....if I acted like I wasn't interested in talking to them they would still do it. And then there was this guy ....who had a crush on me but after I came out as

trans and stuff... he would like whisper slurs at me. So we rode the same bus and I was getting sick of it and he would say slurs and stuff and one day I was getting off the bus and he has his leg going across the aisle and so as I was walking through it I jumped on his knee cap and then he stopped bothering me after that.

Devin's self-defense was effective in stopping the peer's harassment. In another example of direct resistance, after a classmate expressed distress about being visibly queer at school, Chris organized her peers to hold hands in protest, resulting in a few days of pseudo-suspension. While Devin did not report any negative consequences of their self-defense and Chris only faced mild consequences, it is possible that self-defense or other direct resistance could result in youth facing harsh punishment, like being expelled from school or drawn into the school-to-prison pipeline/criminal punishment system.

### **Discussion**

Study findings illustrate that LGBTQ+ youth actively shape their coming-of-age experiences, and routinely develop unique strategies to survive and thrive in the spaces they occupy. In all, they engaged in situated agency to work through challenging dynamics, navigate mixed support networks, or create new possibilities for themselves and others. As mentioned earlier, situated agency posits that individuals generate coping strategies, informed by their social context, to advocate and make changes in their lives (Hillier et al., 2019; Panelli et al., 2005). Overall, the LGBTQ+ people we interviewed survived their youth by negotiating their safety and ability to live a full life through three sets of strategies or tactics.

First, youth negotiated coming-of-age as queer by self-regulating their identities and behaviors. For instance, some participants actively decided to present as non-queer or shield themselves from discussions about sexuality and gender with individuals they assessed might disapprove of their identity. This self-regulative behavior allowed youth to control how they were received by others, and was a way to protect an aspect of self that they were not ready to

expose to the outside world. Young people engaged in this self-regulation through complex assessments of their social surroundings, calculating relative risk and safety of disclosure or queer presentation. While self-regulation may reflect some of the restrictive and normalizing effects of Foucauldian governmentality (Foucault, 1975), many youth nevertheless used this strategy with a high degree of agency. By assuming responsibility for their own safety through in-the-moment reads of environmental cues, young people took charge of any disclosures their behaviors or words may represent; self-regulation was restrictive but also affirming.

Second, youth shifted their tactics between spaces to avoid perceived threat and identify spaces to develop their identities and communities, particularly in shifting between online and offline spaces. For some participants, online spaces gave them an opportunity to try out pronouns, date, and build community, though they could be limiting. Participants benefited from having the option to vacillate between online and offline spaces depending on their self-assessed need, thus illustrating their agency.

Finally, we found a set of alternative tactics where youth created or found hospitable spaces not marked as explicitly queer-friendly, queered their own understanding of being different, and found spaces where they could be free of identity. For instance, though GSAs are important, the situated agency of LGBTQ+ youth also meant that they sought—or created—people and places they read as safe, and did not solely rely on the ones provided them through school. As often as not among our participants, the importance of a GSA or another similarly “official” LGBTQ+ space rested in what its existence signaled, not how regularly it was accessed. In fact, for many, the existence of a GSA served as an implicit endorsement to create for themselves alternative queered spaces in other areas of the school (e.g., drama, music).

Because Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are often referenced as supportive spaces for LGBTQ+ youth, this finding is particularly important as it names that queer and trans youth create queer(ed) space by finding affirming people and resources, and use those as a vehicle for self-expression and self-understanding. Vega, a Black trans woman, highlighted this point in her interview when she expressed, having hormones and good friends are “the only safe space I need” because she found official queer spaces were hostile. For Vega and others, there was power in having the option to reject, accept, or create queer(ed) space.

This study is not without limitations. Given the small sample size and the centrality of a peer researcher model, one study limitation is that we were not able to disaggregate and reaggregate data alongside demographic categories such as race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and class. Future research should explore how these demographic categorizations inform LGBTQ+ youth’s negotiation of queer(ed) space, and their expressions of situated agency. Additionally, amidst the challenges of completing a collaborative peer researcher project and issues with technology, the original audio of four interviews were lost before they could be transcribed. The demographic information for these interviewees are shown in Table 1, but were not included in this analysis. In spite of these considerations, study findings have implications for researchers and practitioners who work with LGBTQ+ youth.

### **Implications for Research**

Researchers have long examined the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ youth across social systems. One consequence of focusing on dehumanizing narratives about coming-of-age experiences is that those assumptions then get translated into practice and hide how youth actively participate in, and negotiate their experience. Research should move away from highlighting purely “individual-level risk outcomes” (Russell, 2005) and name how youth negotiate varying life stages, and their understanding of self-power.

In their piece on refusal in research, Tuck and Yang (2014) encourage researchers to use refusal as an analytic practice in order to “counter narratives and images arising (becoming claims) in social science research that diminish personhood or sovereignty, or rehumiliate when circulated” (p. 811). They encourage social scientists to learn from historically marginalized peoples “without serving up pain stories on a silver platter for the settler colonial academy, which hungers so ravenously for them” (p. 812). In this project we aimed to listen to the LGBTQ+ youth coming-of-age experiences, and refused to center a deficit-based narrative. This allowed the research team to hone in on how youth negotiate queerness in space in a way that was not about the exceptional or the tragic, but what lay in between. In many ways, study findings show that for many youth, their negotiation of space was not necessarily traumatic, nor was it special. When researchers ask questions in different ways, specifically ways that name agency, different answers and resolutions arise, ones that look at the power and resiliencies that have always been present within historically marginalized groups.

### **Implications for Practice with Young People**

These findings hold significance for practice with queer young people in educational and social service settings. First, we highlight the importance of recognizing and affirming the full range of young people’s queer expressions. Illustrating the parallel concepts of self-regulation as a form of situated agency and queer monstrosity, the participants in this study demonstrated not only that they are capable of reading and responding strategically to the cues they receive from their social environments, but also that they can access significant power through expressions of their own queer monstrosity. For example, when Darian said “[Godzilla’s] a monster and he is what he is and everyone just has to deal with him,” he enacted a clear power move in which he demands visibility on his own terms. This holds implications for practice in that it directly contradicts assimilationist messages reinforced by

equality discourses, which often restrict young people's ability to be fabulous in their queerness. We encourage practitioners to interpret queer extravagance as demonstrations of young people's agency, resulting from their critical assessment of their own vulnerability or safety.

A second implication for practice concerns the role of minority stress theory and marginalized people's need for spaces in which their experiences are centered. Our findings support mixed appraisals of the effectiveness of GSAs. Our participants uniformly expressed appreciation for their existence but few indicated they used the GSA as a primary site of support or community. Nevertheless, we caution that this does not indicate that the GSA serves no purpose. It may be, instead, that the GSA sends a signal that a school is at least somewhat accepting of LGBTQ+ students (Kosciw et al., 2009; Poteat et al., 2013; Toomey et al., 2011), and that this, in turn, provides a green light for queer youth to create their own similar (though often not officially sanctioned) spaces elsewhere. Particularly for queer youth of color, the ability to create their own queered spaces as alternatives to sanctioned spaces offers meaningful opportunities to escape or resist racism within established queer settings.

Across the board, having access to both LGBTQ+ spaces (which they may not fully utilize) and unofficially queered ones provides contexts in which queer young people's queerness no longer marks them in the minority. Schools and social service organizations, therefore, may do well to continue creating official spaces for LGBTQ+ young people to access support while also removing barriers to those young people choosing to create their own spaces as alternatives.

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**Table 1**

Pseudonym	Age at time of interview	Race	Sexual Identity	Gender Identity	Childhood Class
Alex Jacobsen*	25	White	Queer, bisexual, pansexual	Genderqueer/GNC, questioning	Upper middle class
B*	26	Mixed (Black & White)	Gay, lesbian, queer	Female, genderqueer/ GNC	Working middle class, solve provider
Chris	25	White	Gay, lesbian, queer, bisexual, pan	Female	Lower class, disabled
Cowboiz	25	White	Queer, bisexual	Transgender, Genderqueer/GNC	Low income, government assistance
Darian	36	Latino, Mexican	Bisexual	Male	Working class
Devin	26	White	Queer, bisexual, polysexual	Transgender man, non-binary man	Middle class
Dolin	21	Latinx	Gay, queer, demisexual (w/ opposite sex), questioning	Genderqueer/GNC	Lower middle class
Grace*	36	White	Bisexual	Female	Working class
Jake Doe	20	Latino	Gay, bi-curious	Male	Poor but enough
Jazberry	21	Black	Queer, pan sometimes	Female	Working class to lower middle class
John	21	White	Bisexual, 80/20 for guys	Male	Upper middle class
Lil Booty	30	Black, Mixed	Gay, queer, faggot	Male	Poor working class
Milo	19	White	Queer, bisexual, pansexual, ABCD (“All But Cis Dudes”)	Transgender man, genderqueer/ GNC	Upper middle class, then comfortably middle class

Rae	19	White, Korean	Lesbian, queer, bisexual, pansexual	Female, genderqueer/ GNC	Upper middle class
Riley Gray	19	Asian, Mixed	Gay	Male	Middle class
Riley Rei	29	White	Queer	Transgender man, genderqueer/ GNC	Lower middle class
Rude Boi	22	Asian, Brown	Gay, queer, bisexual, dynamic	Female, cis girl	Working class
Shawn	20	Asian, White	Gay	Male	Upper middle class
Sheila	20	White Jewish	Lesbian, gay, queer, homo	Cis female	Middle class
Shimizu	20	Mixed	Gay, homosexual	Male	Working class
Shirley Benjamin	27	White	Gay, queer	Female	Middle-upper class
Simon Oak	23	White	Gay	Transgender man	Middle class
Simon Snow	17	White	Queer	Female	Middle class
Techie	19	White	Queer, questioning constantly	Transgender, genderqueer/ GNC	Middle to low class
Vanilla Bean	21	Chicana, Mexican	Bisexual, fluid, pansexual?	Female	Lower middle class
Vega	18	Black	Pansexual	Transgender woman	Working class
Zayn	24	Brown, Multiracial	Gay, queer	Transgender, Genderqueer/GNC	Mostly working class
Zero	19	White, Native	Gay	Transgender man, genderqueer/ GNC	Working class
Zuna*	21	Latina, Mexicana	Gay, queer, bisexual	[left blank]	Low income/ working class

\*Missing audio file. Interview not included in final coding and analysis.