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Life Writing on Sex and Relationships: Australian LGBTQ+ Youth's Sexual Subjectivities

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Abstract: Narrative therapy and expressive writing interventions have been found to improve health and wellbeing among vulnerable populations; however, few have been conducted with young lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people, and those of other diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (LGBTQ+). This study aimed to determine how young LGBTQ+ people in Australia might make meaning of themselves and their experiences through life writing and the implications for health and wellbeing. A study was conducted with 20 LGBTQ+-identifying participants, aged 16 to 20, in or around Melbourne, Australia. The participants attended one of two writing workshops held at a public library in Melbourne in October 2019 and February 2020, where they were taught creative nonfiction writing techniques. They were asked to submit pieces of life writing ("narratives") and reflections about participating in the study. Fifteen participants submitted one or more narratives in response to a prompt, and 10 participants provided reflections. Thematic analysis was used to code the data and identify themes that emerged. The participants' processes of meaning-making were analysed using a performativity lens. This article explores the theme "sex and relationships" that emerged and the related sub-themes. The participants' writing provided insights into sociocultural norms, discourses, and tropes, including those present in school-based sexuality education and in the media, that may impact the developing sexual subjectivities of young LGBTQ+ people in Australia. Engaging in life writing provided an outlet for developing self-knowledge, agency, and subjectivity. The findings can be used to promote the use of creative, youth-centred and queer-affirming practices and interventions for LGBTQ+ youth in school and community settings, including peer support and community health approaches. They indicate the need for de-pathologising the medicalised risk- and prevention-based interventions for LGBTQ+ youth in health and education research and policy, particularly around sexual and mental health.

Keywords: LGBTQ+; queer; youth; life writing; education; sexuality education; sexual subjectivities; mental health; interventions; peer support

1. Introduction

New tools and strategies are needed to promote the health and wellbeing of young people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or other diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (LGBTQ+) in Australia. LGBTQ+ youth, particularly those experiencing harassment and violence related to their identities, have higher rates of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts than the general population (Hill et al., 2022).

The 2020–2022 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing by the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that 38.8% of people aged 16 to 24 had experienced symptoms of a diagnosed mental health disorder in the past 12 months (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023b). In 2022, suicide accounted for 15.5% of deaths of children aged five to seventeen (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023a) and 20.4% of people aged 16 to 24 reported having engaged in self-harm in their lifetime (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2023b).

In the largest survey to date of LGBTQA+ young people in Australia, 81% of participants (aged 14 to 21) reported experiencing high or very high rates of psychological distress (Hill et al., 2021). This was higher for transgender and gender-diverse participants, at 90.2%. Additionally, the largest study on the mental health of transgender young people in Australia found that 79.7% of transgender and gender-diverse young people had ever self-harmed and 48.1% had ever attempted suicide (Strauss et al., 2017). Young trans and gender-diverse people have a high frequency of mental health conditions and high rates of self-harm and suicide attempts (Becerra-Culqui et al., 2018; Perry et al., 2018; Poon et al., 2020; Tollit et al., 2019).

The importance of improving outcomes for young LGBTQ+ people is well supported by literature (Finlay-Jones et al., 2021; Fulginiti et al., 2021; Hill et al., 2021; Rojas et al., 2019; Skerrett et al., 2017; Skerrett et al., 2015; Skerrett et al., 2016; Stevens et al., 2020). There is limited research examining the effectiveness of evidence-based psychotherapeutic interventions among same-sex attracted youth, and even fewer in transgender and gender-diverse youth (Bochicchio et al., 2020; Sheinfil et al., 2019). Policy changes, additions to curriculum documents, and medical or psychological interventions (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021; Department of Education and Training, 2021; Orygen, 2021) have sought to improve mental health outcomes in young people with some success.

Recent interventions have found positive outcomes related to offering peer support, mentoring and facilitation to young LGBTQ+ participants, such as an increased likelihood to graduate from high school (Drevon et al., 2016). This may be achieved by partnering with LGBTQ+ support organisations (Finlay-Jones et al., 2021); by using "system of care" approaches (Painter et al., 2018; Stevens et al., 2020), which refer to community-based service delivery approaches and supports that build partnerships and networks; and by using e-therapy and telehealth (Craig et al., 2021; Lucassen et al., 2021). Involving high-risk groups in the co-design (Nakarada-Kordic et al., 2017), research, and evaluation of programmes (Orygen, 2016) may help to develop effective, acceptable, and accessible evidence-based interventions. LGBTQ+-specific services play an important role in suicide prevention and crisis support (Goldbach et al., 2019). There are barriers to LGBTQ+ youth accessing and engaging with mental healthcare, including fears of experiencing stigma, stereotyping, and judgement (Haire et al., 2021; McGlynn et al., 2020; Prunas et al., 2018; Seelman et al., 2017). Multiple forms of crisis support are needed, including from healthcare providers, family and friends, and self-coping strategies (Waling, 2019).

Creative methods for health promotion, such as digital storytelling (Botfield et al., 2018; Davis & Foley, 2015; De Vecchi et al., 2016; De Vecchi et al., 2017; Fiddian-Green et al., 2019) and "photovoice" (Budig et al., 2018; Wang, 2006), have become increasingly important tools for those working to improve health, wellbeing, and inclusion among vulnerable populations, and new creative health promotion methods were trialled during the COVID-19 pandemic (Appiah et al., 2022; Mastnak, 2020; Petteway, 2021). Flood and Phillips (Flood & Phillips, 2007) found that creative activities can increase self-esteem and coping skills and reduce anxiety (particularly about shared experiences such as prejudice) and a sense of "Otherness" or not belonging.

Narrative therapy has been used for therapeutic purposes in many populations (White & Epston, 1990), including in counselling with gay men, helping them to understand, decon-

struct, and rebuild their own stories (McLean & Marini, 2008). Journal writing and expressive writing have been explored as forms of narrative therapy (Pennebaker, 1997, 2018) and have been found to result in improvements to physical and psychological health (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005). Expressive writing refers to writing about traumatic, stressful, or emotional events (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Following the positive psychology movement that began in the 1990s, the development of a positive writing paradigm, in which participants write about intensely positive experiences, found that this strategy compared to controls was associated with an enhanced positive mood (Burton & King, 2004).

Few expressive writing studies have been conducted with at-risk youth (Greenbaum & Javdani, 2017), including LGBTQ+ youth. This is a significant gap in the literature given the data on LGBTQ+ youth mental health and the research indicating the benefits of writing, particularly around identity development, which will be explored further below. Of the limited studies on expressive writing interventions with LGBTQ+ participants, one study explores the effectiveness of an expressive writing intervention on gay men, and the findings suggest that a writing task targeting gay-related stress or trauma can improve psychosocial functioning, especially openness with sexual orientation (Panchakis & Goldfried, 2010). Another study found that participants exposed to greater minority stressors experienced significantly greater three-month reductions in depression after an expressive writing intervention compared with a control (Chaudoir et al., 2023; Panchakis et al., 2020).

Drawing on the existing evidence base supporting writing interventions (Baikie et al., 2012; Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Greenbaum & Javdani, 2017; Lowe, 2006; Pennebaker, 1997, 2018; Pennebaker & Seagel, 1999; C. Taylor et al., 2016; E. Taylor et al., 2016; White & Epston, 1990), we wanted to create a writing workshop for LGBTQ+ youth that was based on elements of expressive writing, narrative writing, and life writing (Baker, 2013; Brockmeier, 2015; Douglas & Poletti, 2016; Johnson, 2017). Life writing, a broad genre that includes autobiographical writing, memoirs, personal essays, travel writing, and diary writing, is an innovative way to further address mental health and wellbeing disparities among young LGBTQ+ people. While writing about life experiences has been found to have quantifiable, demonstrable benefits for mental and physical health, the studies have remained disconnected from humanities scholarship (Valtonen, 2020). In this research study, we adapted existing research on expressive writing and narrative therapies so that it was creative, exploratory, and literary. This offered a creative and unique approach to identity development and mental wellbeing in young LGBTQ+ people. We explored the use of creative nonfiction, memoir, and life writing as tools for self-expression and making sense of identity and subjectivity. Autobiographical practices can provide opportunities to shift away from a coherent and unified "identity" to multiple intersecting identities (Miller, 1998), which can be beneficial for those with diverse and fluid sexual orientations and gender identities.

This study aimed to determine how the processes of meaning-making are reflected and enacted in young LGBTQ+ people's life writing and the implications of life writing for health and wellbeing. We considered this aim in relation to three objectives, namely to explore what life writing narratives may reflect about young LGBTQ+ people's understandings of themselves, their bodies, and their communities (and sense of belonging within them); to explore how young LGBTQ+ people make meaning around identity and subjectivity through life writing; and to examine how life writing may be connected with a sense of mental health and wellbeing. This article will focus on representations of "sex and relationships" in the participants' writing, which—while separate from mental health—has strong implications for the health and wellbeing of young LGBTQ+ people.

Young people's sexuality and gender are often considered through "risk-based" understandings, focusing on sexual health risks and moral panics rather than a strengths-based or rights-based approach framed around self-expression and sexual citizenship (Albury & Byron, 2019; Grant & Nash, 2019). Discourses of childhood innocence are used to regulate and, arguably, to protect young people, denying adolescents' sexual agency and subjectivity (Angelides, 2019). Definitions of sexual agency differ, some emphasising "choice" and bodily autonomy, while others emphasise becoming a sexual subject and negotiating power relations between people (Cense, 2019; Grower & Ward, 2021). Sexual subjectivity is also a contested term, which may refer to young people's understanding of themselves as sexual beings and incorporate cognitive and emotional elements of the sexual self (Zimmer-Gembeck & French, 2016) and their sexual self-perceptions, including sexual empowerment (De Wilde et al., 2020). Sexual subjectivity and sexual citizenship can also involve fostering affinities, producing alternative relational ways of being, and shifting beyond neoliberal norms of individuality and self-responsibility (Cover et al., 2020).

As educational settings are a common context for young people to receive their first formalised sexuality education, the educational contexts for young LGBTQ+ people in Australia, the ideologies and discourses embedded within curriculum documents, and their discursive gaps must be considered (Berlak & Berlak, 1981; Bernstein, 1996). Over time, theorists have depicted schools as social institutions that reinforce ideologies or forms of social oppression (Althusser, 1984; Foucault, 1975) and present and impose dominant views and norms as the universal (Bourdieu, 1989). In school settings, students are encouraged to follow social norms and adhere to ideologies imposed through structures to increase their social and cultural capital (Reay, 2004).

Relationships and sexuality education in Australia continues to be critiqued for its lack of inclusive resources and content for LGBTQ+ students (Grant & Nash, 2019; Shannon, 2024; Waling et al., 2021) and, in some cases, for exposing young people to religion-based conversion ideology messaging, which attempts to change or suppress their sexuality and/or gender identity (Jones et al., 2022). In 2015, revisions were made to the Health and Physical Education learning area of the Australian Curriculum to include references to same-sex-attracted and gender-diverse students (Australian Curriculum, n.d.). Even within a curriculum that deals with human sexuality, however, there are limited opportunities for nuanced discussions of gender and sexuality-related issues (Shannon & Smith, 2017).

The Australian federal government funded a national coalition of schools and organisations, referred to as the Safe Schools Coalition Australia (SSCA), which was developed with the goal of creating safe and inclusive school environments for LGBTQ+ students, staff, and families. It led to public debate that politicised young LGBTQ+ people's identities (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2017) and pathologised homosexuality and transgender identities (Shevlin & Gill, 2020). Following media backlash over the Safe Schools programme (McKinnon et al., 2017; Ullman, 2017), the federal government announced a review of the SSCA resources and subsequently ceased funding the programme, although heated debate has continued since (Cover et al., 2020; Cover et al., 2017), and it continues to impact how sex and gender are discussed at school (Gerber & Lindner, 2022).

Despite these limitations, schools can provide spaces for social justice and curricular justice, the latter referring to a shift from "diversity" as an abstract idea to a curriculum that acknowledges diverse life experiences and cultural contexts (Pearce & Cumming-Potvin, 2017). Educators play a large role in marginalised young people's wellbeing at school (Ullman, 2017) and need to be equipped with specific knowledge and skills to foster affirming school cultures and disrupt normative assumptions, including those about gender, sexuality, and identity (Bryan, 2017). Beyond being affirmative, teachers can develop an environment that offers opportunities to explore queer subjectivities (Malinowitz, 1995).

Educators can interrupt dominant discourses and provide opportunities for identity work to take place (Kedley, 2015), particularly by shifting norms within the classroom (Miller, 2015). This praxis involves reflection and action so that oppressed people can acquire a critical awareness of their own condition (Freire, 2000). With demonstrated links between sexuality and gender-diverse students' wellbeing and academic outcomes (Ullman, 2014), it is evident that young people benefit from learning in a safe and generative space. Some emotional discomfort may be experienced by educators and students when questioning or challenging norms (Staley & Leonardi, 2016). Additionally, educators may lack support or may not have been prepared in their pre-service education to counter heteronormativity (Rickard, 2014; Staley & Leonardi, 2016). It is, therefore, necessary to have "whole-of-school" approaches and supports in place (Shannon, 2024), as affirming, inclusive, and supportive educational settings have a positive impact on the mental health, connectedness, and educational outcomes of young LGBTQ+ people (Smith et al., 2014).

We used the term "meaning-making" to explore how LGBTQ+ people might make themselves and their experiences legible in a heteronormative and cisnormative society that erases or rejects particular identities and subjectivities and considered it as a set of performative processes rather than a singular act. Meaning-making is associated with comprehension and expression (Wohlwend et al., 2018), as humans organise experiences into narratives to create constructs or constitute "reality" (Bruner, 1991), and it is an active, multimodal, and social process (Meyer & Whitmore, 2020) that refers to how people construct meaning around their experiences and how they understand them (Cosgrove, 2021).

We viewed the participants' life writing narratives as performative acts (Smith & Watson, 2010). We analysed them based on Judith Butler's notion of performativity (Butler, 1988, 1990/2011, 1993), which considers the norms, values, or ideologies reified or disrupted in a text that make it possible to produce power or assume consensus from readers and audiences. We considered the act of writing iterative, constitutive, and performative narratives, as the participants made their identities, subjectivities, and experiences intelligible through language and existing discourses (Butler, 1993).

The participants' narratives offered insights into the participants' processes of developing as agentic selves, as narratives are "inherently and explicitly agentive" (Kubowitz, 2012). Storytelling can provide people with opportunities to make sense of events and experiences with themselves as agents of their lives (McAlpine, 2016). Rather than viewing agency as a property of the subject, Butler conceptualised agency as discursive practices that negotiate power. Language constitutes the "possibility of agency in speech" (Butler, 1997). Austin's speech acts theory (Austin, 1962) argues that all utterances have a performative or illocutionary aspect. According to Butler, the possibility of a speech act to assume authorisation in a context where it has not belonged is "the political promise of the performative" (Butler, 1997), which may work in counter-hegemonic ways in political spheres.

The research was interdisciplinary, combining health, education, and creative arts approaches with a strong commitment to social justice. Interventions can be implemented with a justice lens for LGBTQ+ youth (Ginwright & James, 2002), including activism, civic engagement, and increasing critical consciousness (Wagaman, 2016a). The interdisciplinary nature of the research had implications for the theoretical framework. While the philosophical approach for this research was based on transformative and emancipatory paradigms, at times we drew on the literature and methods of data collection and analysis that were more aligned with positivist and post-positivist paradigms. We utilised tenets of creative and arts-based research and participatory approaches (Leavy, 2017), including proven and exploratory research methods.

Scope of the Research

In this article, we refer to young lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people, as well as those of other diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, including gender-diverse and non-binary people, as "young LGBTQ+ people". The + symbol has been used to denote other non-heterosexual, non-cisgender, and/or gender non-conforming identities. The acronym used does not include the letter "I", representing people with intersex variations, as none of the participants indicated they had intersex variations when they filled out their demographic information, and it was important not to misrepresent the study as including this population (Intersex Human Rights Australia, 2020).

Historically, research has been conducted into the categorisation and classification of sexual orientation and gender identity and its purpose and function (Brickell, 2006; Foucault, 1979; Weeks, 1981). Over the past two decades, increasing sexual and gender fluidity (Diamond, 2020; Fontanella et al., 2013; Katz-Wise, 2015) may be changing the purpose and function of terms and labels around sexual orientation and gender identity, with terminology for marginalised identities shifting quickly and frequently (Brammer & Ginicola, 2017; Cover, 2019; Persson et al., 2020; Universities Scotland, 2010). LGBTQ+ young people are expressing themselves "in ever more complicated ways with an ever-changing matrix of identities related to sexuality, gender identity, gender expression, and relationship patterns" (Wagaman, 2016b). Young people may not identify with the labels commonly used to refer to LGBTQ+ identities and communities (Perrin-Wallqvist & Lindblom, 2015), and we have used other terms when the acronym LGBTQ+ was not appropriate.

We have used the terms "youth" and "young people" to refer to adolescents and young adults from 15 to 24 years of age, although the study was only open to those aged 16 to 20 years of age. This age range covers a selection of young adults, from those in secondary school settings to tertiary and vocational settings or those outside of any institutional learning. The data collected from participants aged 16 to 20 offer insights into meaning-making processes in late teenage years to early adulthood.

While the study was open to participants of all genders, including cisgender, trans, and gender-diverse people, the participants also had to identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or another diverse sexual orientation to be eligible to participate.

2. Materials and Methods

In the following sections, we outline how we approached data collection and how the study progressed and evolved over time. The study took place in two phases: the first, a participatory approach involving a stakeholder consultation, followed by the development of the study design. The study's methodology connects the theoretical perspectives of queer theory and performativity with the qualitative methods outlined below. Applying a queer theory methodology and performativity lens (Butler, 1988, 1990/2011, 1993) to research provides the opportunity to investigate meaning-making processes around identity that become constitutive of subjectivity. We wanted to explore "subjectivation"—the process in which a person is discursively and performatively constituted as a subject, made intelligible through the repetition of social norms in relation to LGBTQ+ identities and subjectivities—and to question how LGBTQ+ subjects can become intelligible and interpretable in a heteronormative and cisnormative society where particular identities and subjectivities are denied, erased, or rendered unintelligible and unknowable. Queer theoretical perspectives involve the denaturalisation and destabilisation of categories around sexuality and gender, and we decided that this approach could offer the participants opportunities to resist, transgress sociocultural norms, and make meaning through the lenses of identity and subjectivity as they constructed themselves, their bodies, and their identities on the page.

In *After Method*, John Law argues that standard research methods "are badly adapted to the study of the ephemeral, the indefinite and the irregular" (Law, 2004). This description resonated with us, particularly once the COVID-19 pandemic struck during data collection. With many unexpected obstacles and subsequent changes, we appreciated the flexibility and intuitiveness of the methods selected.

Early in the research process, we decided to conduct participatory research using an approach that was informed by some of the principles of community-based participatory research (Hacker, 2013; Israel et al., 2013; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). These principles form a valuable philosophical framework that can be interpreted and "operationalised" in accordance with the research context and communities (Reece & Dodge, 2004). CBPR aims to create a dialogic and inclusive space in which everyone participates as co-learners (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). CBPR seeks to address power relations and imbalances between researchers and communities, aiming for shared power and decision-making (Wallerstein et al., 2019). Equity is a key principle and is important to consider in relation to balancing power and influence in CBPR relationships (Israel et al., 2013). CBPR has the potential to address some of the social disparities in health for LGBTQ+ populations (Northridge et al., 2007).

After receiving ethics approval from the La Trobe University Human Research Ethics committee (Human Ethics ID: HEC18488), we held a stakeholder consultation meeting in February 2019 to discuss initial ideas for the study, define and engage the community, discuss the research aim and objectives, design the study (Hacker, 2013), including implementation, data analysis, and the dissemination of findings, and identify issues and concerns. We had preliminary ideas but planned to formulate our study design based on the input from the stakeholders.

Twelve key stakeholders, including writers, representatives from community organisations, youth workers, counsellors, parents of LGBTQ+ young people, educators, and academics, attended the half-day consultation meeting. We explained that the proposed research study would examine young people's writing practices to see if they impacted their identity formation and their wellbeing. By referring to the minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), we proposed that if young people were able to become more comfortable around their identities, this could lead to better or more positive outcomes.

We asked the stakeholders for their thoughts and participated in a facilitated discussion about the relationship between writing, identity development, and positive outcomes in LGBTQ+ youth. We referred to studies that found that having a well-formed view of one's LGBTQ+ identity is associated with better mental health outcomes (Brady & Busse, 1994; Miranda & Storms, 1989; Rosario et al., 2011). We asked the stakeholders whether writing is a process that young people can use to work through identity formation. As the stakeholders stated that they felt that writing may be effective for this process, we described the ways that other fields and disciplines have used directed writing in interventions. The stakeholders provided their insights and thoughts on how to make the study the most effective and accessible for the participants, how to evaluate the writing workshop, what the potential outcomes might be, and how this could be useful to educators and policymakers. We determined a plan for their future involvement in the study and collaborated on an approximate timeline and a rationale for the study. The stakeholders agreed to be consulted at various stages of the research process with information about the study, findings, and opportunities to be involved.

We considered the data collected from the stakeholder meeting when designing the research study. After we coded and categorised the data, we identified themes through inductive thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017), which were the language and content of the writing; addressing accessibility in creative methods; holding space for partici-

pants; overcoming the limitations of current services; the therapeutic nature of storytelling; making sense of the experience; and considerations for after the research study.

Following the stakeholder consultation and our analysis of the data collected from the meeting, we endeavoured to incorporate as much of the feedback and suggestions as possible when designing this research study. We were not able to implement all of the stakeholders' feedback due to time and budgetary constraints but recorded their suggestions in case they were possible in the future.

Following the early stages of the study design, we faced challenges in reaching members of the original group. Some of the stakeholders were no longer able to offer their time, while others, particularly those who had worked for LGBTQ+ community organisations, had left their positions. Due to issues contacting the remaining stakeholders, we were not able to continue to work in partnership during the data collection and analysis stages of the research. This may reflect broader issues with funding and thus job insecurity in the LGBTQ+ sector. Since using the data from the meeting to inform changes to the research aim, objectives, and study design, we have not been able to conduct subsequent stages of the research through a participatory framework. However, we contacted the stakeholder participants to disseminate the findings upon completion.

2.1. Data Sources and Collection Methods

Based on our review of the literature, discussions with our research team on ensuring an evidence base around efficacy and interventions, and the feedback from the stakeholders, we decided to collect qualitative data primarily in the form of participant narratives. Additionally, we asked the participants an open-ended question following their submission of the narratives to find out about their experience of participating in the study, as we wanted to ensure there was a direct prompt eliciting participant reflections. We wrote field notes throughout the process as a form of participant observation, which were collated as another form of data. We have discussed the data sources further in the section on research methods below.

We collected each of the sources of data with the view of responding to the research aim and the three research objectives. We drew on the participants' narratives and reflections to understand how young LGBTQ+ people make sense of themselves, their bodies, and their communities, as well as how they make meaning around identity and subjectivity through life writing. We also used the participants' data, along with our field notes, to understand how life writing may be connected with health and wellbeing.

2.2. Sampling and Recruitment

We used a flyer for recruitment, which we posted at libraries, bookshops, universities, and on social media. Many of the stakeholders had connections with young LGBTQ+ people through their work and distributed the flyers as appropriate. As an incentive for their participation, we offered participants up to AUD 80.00 in gift cards for attending the workshop and submitting the pieces of writing required. In total, we recruited 20 participants between the ages of 16 and 20, which was the sample size we had aimed for. We chose 20, as this was likely to provide rich thick data (Morse, 2015; Younas et al., 2023) that would be sufficient to address the research aim and objectives (Guetterman, 2015; Staller, 2021).

Of the 20 participants we recruited, 17 attended the workshop and 15 submitted one or more narratives. One participant withdrew from the study after submitting a narrative. The table below (see Table 1) summarises each participant's self-selected pseudonym, gender identity, sexual orientation, pronoun/s (where applicable), age and study status at the time

of participating, and the number of narratives submitted in total, and the participants are listed according to the workshop they attended.

Table 1. Participant information.

Pseudonym	Gender	Sexuality	Pronouns	Age	Study Status	No. of Narratives
Attended workshop in October 2019						
Hex Machina	Woman	Bisexual Queer Demiromantic	She/her	20	University	5
Jessie Douglas	Non-binary	Queer	They/them	20	University	5
Joey Frank	Man	Bisexual	He/him	16	High school	3
Lauveden	Woman	Queer	She/her	18	High school University	7
Michael	Trans man	Queer	He/him	20	Not studying	5
Nicholas	Man Transgender	Bisexual	He/him	18	University	5
Reina	Man	Gay Queer	He/him	20	University	2
Rowan Kahlo	Woman	Lesbian	She/her	20	University	2
Wren	Non-binary	Queer	He/him	18	Not studying	7
Attended workshop in February 2020						
Atticus	Non-binary Transgender	Queer Demisexual	He/him	20	University	1
Ivy	Woman	Lesbian	She/her	19	University	4
King	Man Transgender	Gay	He/him	16	High school	1
Marcus	Man	Gay	He/him	17	High school	5
Sophia	Woman Non-binary Transgender	Bisexual Queer	They/them	20	University	5
Zoya	Non-binary	Lesbian	They/them	18	University	6

2.3. Ethical Considerations

Prior to recruiting young LGBTQ+ participants for involvement in the study, we obtained ethics approval from the La Trobe University Human Ethics committee (Human Ethics ID: HEC19231). There were many ethical considerations for this project. We considered the participants' privacy and confidentiality first and foremost and took steps to counter possible risks to them. We stored the data in a locked file cabinet during the research process and subsequently stored it in a secure archive room. We de-identified the data and used pseudonyms that were selected by the participants (Allen & Wells, 2016).

We supplied all participants with participant information and consent forms (PICFs) to ensure they were aware of what the research entailed and their rights regarding their data and withdrawing from the study. We explained the PICF to each participant and answered questions before they provided consent. We did not require the participants to have parental consent to participate in the study. We considered the participants' ages and contexts in relation to vulnerability. We followed the National Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2007) guidelines

for research involving children and young people in the research design and conduct. According to the NHMRC, parents or guardians do not have to be informed about the research if the participants are mature enough to understand the relevant information and give consent and if gaining consent from parents or guardians may be contrary to the best interests of the participants. Requiring parental consent in studies involving LGBTQ+ young people may be problematic, as participants may have yet to disclose their identities or may not feel comfortable seeking permission to participate in a related study, and standard consent policies may exclude young people or put them at risk of forced disclosure (Flores et al., 2018). We ensured that we conducted the research with a strong emphasis on the participants' safety, security, and wellbeing.

Trauma exposure is common in LGBTQ+ young people (Orygen, 2018). We considered how to minimise participants' risk of experiencing distress and avoid re-traumatising participants who have experienced trauma, and we planned for this in the research design (Legerski & Bunnell, 2010). We provided the participants with links and contact numbers to appropriate support networks in the PICF, on the day of the workshops, and in reminders prompting them to submit their narratives. We utilised trauma-informed practice models designed for schools (Newton et al., 2024) in planning and facilitating the workshop, including creating a routine and structure around the workshop and writing prompts; being attuned to the participants' needs, emotions, and behaviours; providing opportunities for participants to experience success; and giving the participants opportunities to self-regulate their emotions during the process. We also used the trauma-informed models to consider how involvement in the study could be healing and therapeutic and how to manage any trauma, anxiety, and shame experienced by the participants.

2.4. Positionality

Another significant ethical implication for this study is our positionality (Holmes, 2020). We have multiple discursively mediated identities (Wells et al., 2016). We aimed to address our positionality through reflexivity and by directly addressing power imbalances and subjectivity. Throughout the research process, we kept reflective field notes as a method of bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2012) to address positionality and bias.

2.5. Research Methods

2.5.1. Writing Workshop and Collection of Narratives

The participants attended one of two six-hour facilitated writing workshops for self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or queer people aged 16–20 living in the Melbourne metropolitan area (or able to attend a workshop in the area). We made the study open to participants of all gender identities, as our research focus was on sexual orientation rather than gender identity. The lead author, with expertise in life writing, taught the participants creative nonfiction writing techniques at the writing workshops, which we ran twice (in October 2019 and February 2020). Ten participants attended the October 2019 workshop and seven participants attended the February 2020 workshop.

Between October 2019 and May 2020, we asked the participants to submit pieces of life writing, which we have referred to as "narratives". Of the 17 participants who attended a workshop, 15 submitted one or more narratives. The participants who submitted narratives were asked to submit one narrative before attending the workshop and any consequent narratives were submitted following the workshop. We requested that the participants submit their narratives under a self-selected pseudonym, as we felt this may make them more comfortable to write and share their life writing.

While writing can allow marginalised subjects to access authoritative speaking positions, these positions can be fraught with dominant discourses and ideologies (Poletti,

2016; Smith & Watson, 2010). The ideological "I" (Smith & Watson, 2010)—the first-person speaking voice—risks naturalising "identity", "truth", and "reality" as fixed, immutable states. To avoid this and to provide some distance and detachment for the writer, we designed a recurring writing prompt that required the participants to describe a recent experience in the third person ("Write in the third person about a recent experience you had"). Writing their narratives in the third person may have allowed the participants to subvert ideologies and discourses or write around them rather than naturalise them. Where relevant, we have addressed the participants' use of voice and tense in the analysis. Vignettes have been included to capture the participants' original phrasing, which have only been edited when essential for clarity. We initially collected up to five narratives per participant and then extended the study when COVID-19 began and collected up to three additional narratives per participant.

We held the workshops in a private study room at a public library in Melbourne's central business district. We selected the venue, as it is centrally located and has wheelchair access and gender-neutral toilets. Also, as a non-LGBTQ+ specific venue, it was accessible to those who were not "out" as LGBTQ+. We provided a collection of personal essays, memoirs, and other forms of creative nonfiction from a variety of authors for participants to look through. The introductory activities included sharing pronouns and starting with expectations, including the group's diversity and differing contexts. We encouraged participants to create a group agreement for the workshop, which referred to confidentiality, privacy, respect, and boundaries. We discussed the benefits and risks of sharing and publishing life writing (Douglas & Poletti, 2016), and we reminded participants that all activities were optional.

2.5.2. Observations

At all stages of this research study, we engaged in participant observation and recorded observations and reflections about the research process (Wainwright et al., 2018). We have referred to our observations, which do not contain identifying information about participants, as "field notes". The observations served as a way for us to process the participants' discussions during the workshop and their writing, particularly when it contained highly sensitive and, at times, challenging topics. We recorded field notes following each of the life writing workshops, as we were not recording any quotes or information verbatim, and as various stages of the research took place. We wanted to see if the field notes provided insights into the participants and their experiences of engaging in the research that differed from the narratives and reflections they submitted. They capture the themes and topics that came up during the workshops and contain our thoughts as we collected, read, and analysed the participants' narratives and reflections.

2.5.3. Participant Reflections

We asked the participants to respond to the following open-ended question about the participants' experience of participating in the research study: "Here is a space to write anything you would like to share with me about your participation in this research study". Ten participants provided reflections in response to the question, which ranged from a sentence in length to a paragraph or, in some cases, multiple paragraphs. Some reflections were formal, while others were emotive and personal.

2.5.4. Data Analysis

We considered life writing in relation to young LGBTQ+ people's processes of meaning-making and the implications for identity development and mental wellbeing. Studies that have researched the impacts of life writing, particularly expressive writing, on participants' wellbeing and physical health symptoms (Baikie et al., 2012; Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005;

Greenbaum & Javdani, 2017; Lowe, 2006; Pennebaker, 2018; C. Taylor et al., 2016; E. Taylor et al., 2016) have often focussed on the outcomes of the writing process rather than analysing the writing itself. In this study, we viewed the participants' narratives as performative acts (Smith & Watson, 2010) and analysed them through a performativity lens (Butler, 1988, 1990/2011, 1993). During analysis, we examined the norms, values, or ideologies reified or disrupted in a text that made it possible to produce power or assume consensus from readers and audiences and how processes of meaning-making were reflected and enacted in writing. Participants constituted their lives and selves as subjects, which were made intelligible through language and existing discourses (Butler, 1993). We considered the act of writing iterative, constitutive, and performative narratives, as the participants reified and disrupted dominant discourses. As this study involved unique data, the analysis drew on several qualitative analysis methods.

The participants submitted up to seven narratives each (63 in total), which ranged from half a page to four pages in length. Once all the narratives were submitted, we grouped them together by participant. We considered the data from each participant as a small case study, and we analysed the data both within each situation and across them (Yin, 2014). We made comparisons between the narratives, including the commonalities and differences. We considered the narratives individually as texts rather than as decontextualised themes and quotes. We read the participants' narratives, their responses to the open-ended question about their experience of participating in the study, and our field notes multiple times, and entered them into QSR NVivo 12. We conducted thematic analysis inductively using six phases of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), developing codes through generative and iterative processes to find recurring themes in the participants' narratives, and we analysed the themes in relation to the research aim and objectives. In this article, we have included excerpts from the participants' narratives, which have been presented verbatim, apart from the use of ellipses to indicate where we have removed material for clarity and brevity. Italicised sections are original to the submitted narratives.

We integrated the participants' responses to the open-ended question and our field notes as sources of data, and we looked reflexively at the research process, including our discoveries along the way and our participants' reflections. We used thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017) to identify themes inductively in the participants' responses about their experience of participating in the research study. The field notes that we wrote at each stage of the research study contain observations and reflections on the individual information sessions with the participants and the consent process, the writing workshops, and the process of reading and analysing the participants' narratives. Reflexivity can be used to establish validity and as a tool for achieving emancipatory goals within a critical paradigm (McCabe & Holmes, 2009). We used our field notes reflexively in the analysis stages to address the subjective nature of the interpretive process and the research process generally and to facilitate a deeper level of engagement by fostering additional insights into the data (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Throughout the research process, we considered the implications for future research and policy and curriculum design.

"Sex and relationships" emerged as a theme in 26 of the 63 narratives submitted, suggesting that it was a significant part of the participants' lives. We used a performativity framework (Butler, 1988, 1990/2011, 1993) to analyse the ways that participants' narratives responded to aspects of identity, subjectivity, and broader sociocultural norms and how they made meaning and constructed identity and subjectivity around sex, sexuality, gender, and relationships. Gender and sexual norms are often subject to normalising discourses and oppressive power mechanisms and therefore offer potential for textual and discursive resistance (Baker, 2013). We examined how the participants "performed" broader socio-cultural norms in their narratives, reifying certain sociocultural narratives and discourses

around sex, sexuality, and gender and disrupting, contesting, or challenging others, often within the same narrative.

3. Results

The participants made meaning of sex and relationships through their narratives in diverse ways. We identified three sub-themes under the theme of "sex and relationships", which were "young LGBTQ+ people's sexual subjectivities", "young LGBTQ+ people, intimacy and risk", and "the (re)shaping of sex and relationships in the context of alcohol and other drugs". We considered the three sub-themes in relation to prominent discourses in the mainstream media that may impact on the developing sexual subjectivities of young LGBTQ+ people in Australia. Harmful discourses can emerge along with movements, campaigns, and legislation that directly impact on young LGBTQ+ people, such as the federal government ceasing to fund the Safe Schools programme after media backlash (McKinnon et al., 2017; Shevlin & Gill, 2020), the lead up to the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey (Chonody et al., 2020), legislation being implemented to change sex/gender markers on birth certificates (Moulds, 2019), the emergence of the #MeToo movement and public discussions of consent (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019; Gill & Orgad, 2018; Gleeson, 2019; Setty, 2021), the politicisation of transgender and gender-diverse children's gender identities (Jones, 2020), media coverage and public debate around the Religious Discrimination Bill (Raj, 2020), and campaigns to stop LGBTQA+ conversion practices (Csabs et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2018). We also considered the data around sex and relationships in relation to the implications of life writing for wellbeing and sexual health.

3.1. Young LGBTQ+ People's Sexual Subjectivities

In the narratives submitted for this research study, only two participants referred to sexual behaviour explicitly. None of the participants wrote about masturbation, sending or receiving nudes, or engaging with pornography, which are often the focus of dominant media narratives about young people. The general absence of sex and sexual experiences in the participants' narratives highlights the fact that young people's lives are multifaceted and about more than sex, despite media narratives suggesting otherwise (Enson, 2017). There may also be other mitigating factors. In our field notes taken during the writing workshops, we recorded that several participants mentioned that they learned about sex from pornography. The participants linked this to the absence of LGBTQ+ information in their school-based sex education, which led them to seek relevant information elsewhere. This is supported by the literature that indicates young LGBTQ+ people seek out LGBTQ+ content on digital media for self-expression and to negotiate sexual feelings (Byron, 2019a, 2019b; Clarke et al., 2018; Hanckel et al., 2019), for information on LGBTQ+ sexual health and relationships (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2017; Greene et al., 2015; Hobaica et al., 2019), and to find connections in digital spaces (Byron, 2019a, 2019b; Cannon et al., 2017; DeHaan et al., 2013; Wright, 2017).

Participants who identified as women and/or as gender-diverse made inferences about pleasure or sexual experiences rather than explicitly describing them, suggesting an avoidance or resistance to writing about sex. This is consistent with a societal desexualisation of certain marginalised groups, including lesbians, transgender people, people with disabilities, some racialised groups, and people of size within a system of compulsory sexuality (Gupta, 2015; Przybylo, 2019). Socially and structurally enforced asexuality and desexualisation, separate from agentic and internal senses of being asexual, pose barriers to both asexual and sexual expression, which can be seen particularly in the desexualisation of people with disabilities (Kim, 2011). In the 1980s and 1990s, the trope of "lesbian bed death" became widespread in research and in broader society, including popular culture. The

trope suggests that sexual contact decreases more quickly amongst female couples than in heterosexual and gay couples (Grabski et al., 2018). Researchers have since questioned the definitions and methodology used and found that lesbian, queer, bisexual, and questioning women in later stages of relationships were as likely to report engaging in sex than those in earlier stages (Wood et al., 2014) and that women who have sex with women tend to have higher results on scales of sexual satisfaction than women in opposite-sex relationships (Cohen & Byers, 2014; Grabski et al., 2018). This ongoing trope continues to fail asexual people and lesbians by pathologising an absence of sex (Przybylo, 2019). Those whose identities are commonly desexualised may be led to believe that it would not be appropriate to write or talk about sex.

Conversely, certain sexual orientations, gender identities, and people from particular racial and class backgrounds are hypersexualised (Ringrose et al., 2019). Trans women tend to be fetishized and hypersexualised in society but are also expected to self-regulate and silence their sexuality in order to be considered acceptably and "authentically" feminine (Lloyd & Finn, 2017). Sophia (20-year-old bisexual and queer transfeminine woman and non-binary person) was the only participant who wrote about feeling aroused, disrupting the social expectation that women, particularly trans women, silence their sexuality.

> *She's had a busy day with a lot of long-distance public transport, which she's always found a bit stressful, with a heck of a lot of luggage, which always makes it worse. She also spent a lot of that time feeling very horny, which definitely has its fun side, but with little practical and positive method of release. And there's complicated dysphoria feels mixed in there with the fun, which really just adds to the cocktail of emotionality.*

Sophia's usage of the euphemism "method of release" immediately after referring to feeling "horny" can be interpreted as a shift back towards the societal norm of not being sexually explicit. It was interesting to note that Sophia wrote about arousal while they were travelling overseas, and not in their narratives written in Australia. It is possible that having distance from their usual environment bolstered their confidence and comfort to write about arousal, particularly in London, a city containing many spaces of sexual diversity (Sanders-McDonagh & Peyrefitte, 2018).

LGBTQ+ men are another group who tend to be hypersexualised in LGBTQ+ communities and mainstream society, with their behaviour depicted as promiscuous, compulsive, and highly sexually active (Pachankis et al., 2015; Parsons et al., 2016; Yeagley et al., 2014). This discourse is often linked with the HIV epidemic, and there is stigma associated with LGBTQ+ men's sexual practices, usage of dating apps (Miles, 2017), their decisions around using condoms, and their uptake of PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis, an antiretroviral medicine taken by HIV-negative people to prevent seroconversion) (Broady et al., 2020; Down et al., 2017; Prestage et al., 2013). Other tropes and stereotypes associated with gay and bisexual men include assumptions around expressions of masculinity (Elliott, 2019; Waling, 2019) and non-monogamy; however, research suggests that many LGBTQ+ men may not experience static relationships and are not as often fixed to monogamy or non-monogamy (Philpot et al., 2018). Monogamy and non-monogamy are often positioned as a binary, associated with the binaries of "homonormative"/"radical" and "assimilation"/"transformation" rather than deconstructed to consider the impact of binaries on the sexual opportunities and relationships available to sexual subjects (Duncan et al., 2015; Elund, 2019).

Two participants in this study, Reina (20-year-old gay/queer man) and Marcus (17-year-old gay man), wrote about their sexual experiences or preferences explicitly. Notably, only Reina wrote about having sex, while Marcus discussed his lack of sexual experience. Reina described a recent sexual encounter in one of his narratives, in which he referred to himself as Dan.

Though annoyed and let down once again, Dan did not cease to Snap or SMS, just in case Arvo would ever be horny enough to take a[n] Uber over and fuck his arse... Days went by, messages being replied briefly, mostly about whether Arvo would be available to fuck, and answers would always be something around, "I miss your ass so badly, but I've got to save money to travel with mates, Uber costs me $15"... Dan matched with numberless (sic) good-looking young gay men on Tinder, and two of those he was deeply fond after two weeks chatting with them.

Reina described continuing to "match" with men on Tinder while he waited to hear back from his partner and narrated his sexual experiences and desires explicitly, reifying the tropes of LGBTQ+ men being non-monogamous and sexually explicit. In one of Marcus's narratives, he contested an acquaintance's sexual assumptions about young LGBTQ+ men.

Jessie is an interesting girl, she's bisexual, or pansexual, definitely sexual. She looks butch, has a nose ring, and speaks really frankly about her exploits: how she is attracted to boys but prefers girls because 'going down on a guy is annoying', how she almost bit her boyfriend during oral, how she once almost choked another girl... I am taken aback by her blatant honesty. As with all blabber mouths though the spotlight quickly turns on to me. "What letter are you?" she says. I hold my ground. "G?" she asks. I nod. "Man, it's so obvious" she sighs. "You've got that gay sass, the tote, and feminine voice" she continues, listing all my give-away traits... "Are you a bottom or a top?" she asks. I feel attacked, but the question is so ridiculous that I just find it funny. "Let me guess, you're surely a bottom" she cuts before I can reply. "Actually, I don't really like the idea of anal sex" I say. Jessie's jaw drops to her feet, "What??!! That's what gay guys do, the prostate is there for a reason" she exclaims. I tell her that I think that the ass was not made for things to go up it. She proceeds to casually enquire about my virginity. Once again she is shocked when I say that I'm a virgin. "Why haven't you done it yet? Aren't there any guys at your school" she continues. Before long she is sizing up my options like some pre-Grindr matchmaker, telling me what I should do, and how there must be someone at my school. Honestly I don't feel that I need to rush to lose my virginity...

Marcus's reference to his acquaintance "sizing up my options like some pre-Grindr matchmaker, telling me what I should do, and how there must be someone at my school" suggested the pressures he felt from parts of the LGBTQ+ community to enact or perform particular norms around his identity. Research has found that the dating app Grindr (used among men who have sex with men) affects users' body image in multiple ways, including social comparison (Lloyd & Finn, 2017). In his narratives, Marcus's resistance to particular norms and expectations is clear, including his dislike of "the idea of anal sex", which contrasted with Reina's explicit description of anal sex.

The variation within the participants' references to sex indicated a contested space around sex, sexuality, and gender in the stories they told and in broader cultural narratives around gay male sexuality and identity. In addition to his commentary about sex, Marcus was also critically reflective about conformity in the LGBTQ+ community in two narratives, one about a party for adolescents and one about Melbourne's Midsumma Carnival.

I soon realised, not very surprisingly, that this may as well have been a Minus18 Queer Formal, in the time I was there I reckon I saw at least thirty lesbian couples holding hands and not a single straight couple. It had the 'queer vibe' which you just feel if you're in the know, you could tell that many people were definitely not straight. I doubt they'd call themselves gay or lesbian, it'd probably be 'queer'. They wouldn't like to take on a specific label, and they liked the ambiguity that that label gives them. I have the feeling, which I'm not sure to feel guilty or not about, that so many young people use that label to seem cool amongst that demographic, to call oneself 'gay' seems almost looked down on in these

circles, almost as though 'gay' is the vanilla end of the rainbow flag. It's like "you're not that LGBT, I mean you're just gay; not bi, or pan, or trans, or ace".

For the first time, I went to the Midsumma Carnival… As we walk around there are throngs of slim boys (these 'boys' are all in their twenties), too slim, white, young, twinkish, the 'gay look'. My friends agree that they're the same. I can't help but think that at this event to celebrate diversity, everyone looks, talks and walks identically. I wonder where they got the gay uniform guide. I can just imagine them all having the same interests, going to the same places, doing the same things, knowing the same people. Is this what coming out is for? To mark yourself out as different amongst straights, only to then conform to what is considered mainstream amongst gays?

In the same narrative quoted above, in which Marcus described attending Melbourne's Midsumma Carnival, he also critiqued what he perceived as the corporatisation of LGBTQ+ identity and pride.

The city seems to be taken over by gays. Never have I seen such an overt display of homosexuality, rainbows are everywhere, guys and girls (but more guys) are holding hands as they walk along Princess Bridge, and all manner of gay kitsch can be seen festooned upon the festival-goers. It is one thing to go to the carnival, and it's totally another to go with total strangers. We swerve through the hundreds of mostly corporate stalls, NAB, ANZ, Price Waterhouse Cooper, 'Save your foreskin', Eczema Australia, Jetstar, Liberals, Greens, ABC etc. I can't help but feel a subtle disgust at this corporatisation of the fight for human dignity. What have these companies got to do with Pride? Where were all these companies when being gay wasn't cool and mainstream? Where were they in the 80s when people were getting locked up and Gay Liberation was more than just a merch slogan? Even now these companies which talk of diversity and acceptance wouldn't air an ad or have a billboard of two men, or women, or a transgender person, not outside of a few select places like South Yarra or Darlinghurst. How dare they capitalise on people's misery, to use our stories simply as a marketing strategy.

In these descriptions, Marcus positioned himself on the outside of LGBTQ+ communities. In his critiques, he invoked some of the social and cultural stereotypes about LGBTQ+ communities. His depictions of LGBTQ+ communities and sub-cultures, ranging from the "vanilla end of the rainbow flag" and "not that LGBT" to those who wear a "gay uniform" and "conform to what is considered mainstream among gays", reified tropes including the hypersexuality of gay men, that queer people are deliberately "ambiguous" about labels to be "cool", and the LGBTQ+ community conforming to the cultural commodification of its identities and cultures.

Two trans male participants, Nicholas (18-year-old bisexual trans man) and Michael (20-year-old queer trans man), wrote about aspects of masculinity and romantic relationships without referring to sex, which disrupted the trope of LGBTQ+ men being hypersexual. Nicholas described his anxiety about contacting a love interest over his phone.

Nicholas: What's up?

Pippi: Just chillin u?

This was the most intense question Nicholas had been asked all day, despite being the most mundane topic of conversation. He left the message unread as he considered his answers. Does he tell the truth and admit that he's spent the last three hours watching TikTok in bed? Does he pretend to be the athlete he so clearly isn't and say that he's been in the gym all week? He took a swig from the open beer bottle beside his bed and began typing.

Nicholas: Checking out Netflix's horror selection. There's some good stuff but most of it's crap

> *This message wasn't opened as promptly as the last one. In fact, it wasn't opened at all. Nicholas sighed. This always happened and it left him frustrated beyond words. They would talk back and forth like normal people for a short time and then she just disappeared. Nicholas opened his conversation with his best friend.*
>
> *Nicholas: It's like she presses send then yeets her phone across the Atlantic Ocean*

Nicholas's narrative indicated the importance of relationships and connections with others, online and offline, which was also evident in other participants' narratives. Nicholas's writing also indicated the pressure he felt as a trans man to be "stealth" (Beauchamp, 2019; Straayer, 2020) and pass as a cisgender man.

> *His heart sunk as he realised she was most likely ignoring him. Tears stung his eyes but then he remembered that men—real men—don't cry. Not about a girl, at least. They cry about manly things like footy and beer and fishing. Falling prey to unreciprocated love wasn't what Nicholas, or society for that matter, considered to be a typically masculine pastime. His stomach lurched as a notification appeared on his screen.*

Similarly, Michael's narrative about being misgendered on his way to work captured his need to be "perceived" as a man.

> *It's hard to pour drinks when you are consumed with the idea that you're being perceived as the wrong gender. All night Michael focused on seeming Manly, Masculine, Macho (although his perceived queerness takes away from this naturally). With ever[y] "sir", "man", "buddy" he receives, he treasures the words and uses it to plaster the wound left in him by his experience. But in the end, Michael knows he looks like a man. Which is why he can't shake the thought of being such a helpful young woman from his mind. Michael shakes it off, laughs at his insecurity, but it's difficult. Dysphoria is an obsession, a root that wraps around his core, and some days are better than others.*

Michael's description of the importance of being perceived as "Manly, Masculine, Macho" and Nicholas's focus on "real men" indicated the pressures they experienced as men. Their desire to be considered "masculine" men suggested that being gendered correctly, avoiding gender dysphoria, and seeking a romantic relationship were priorities for them, perhaps more than sex.

While the other participants did not write about sex explicitly, it is important to note that LGBTQ+ youth may be hypersexualised regardless of their orientation and identity. Non-monogamous practices extend beyond men to the LGBTQ+ community more broadly (Moors et al., 2017; Stephens & Emmers-Sommer, 2020), and LGBTQ+ individuals have a desire to engage in consensual non-monogamy at higher rates than cisgender and heterosexual individuals (Moors et al., 2017; Stephens & Emmers-Sommer, 2020). Bisexual people experience "othering" and silencing due to negative conceptualisations of bisexuality, which include bisexual people being perceived as untrustworthy, hypersexual, and likely to spread sexually transmitted infections (Hayfield et al., 2014; Yeagley et al., 2014). Young LGBTQ+ people's sexual agency and subjectivities may be affected by factors outside their control, including hypersexualisation from those inside and outside the LGBTQ+ community and stereotyped representation in the mainstream media. While they are depicted as a population who tend to engage in "risky" behaviours, the findings indicated that they are more likely to be experiencing external forms of risks from others, which will be explored below.

3.2. Young LGBTQ+ People, Intimacy and Risk

Many of the participants' narratives referred to relationships they were in or hoped to be in, which provided a strong contrast with mainstream media and culture's depictions of young people engaging in "dangerous" and "risky" behaviours, such as "unsafe sex"

(Logie et al., 2021; Salvatore & Daftary-Kapur, 2020). This focus on relationships was evident across age groups, sexual orientations, and genders. Relationships are one of the dominant paradigms of adolescent development (Byron et al., 2021; Korchmaros et al., 2015; Wright, 2017), and being in a relationship may hold extra significance for young LGBTQ+ people. For participants experiencing a lack of belonging, a sense of being a burden, peer victimisation and microaggressions at school (Hatchel et al., 2019; Munro et al., 2019), not being adequately represented in the school curriculum and policies (Hill et al., 2021; McKinnon et al., 2017; Shevlin & Gill, 2020), and facing increased risks of family instability and rejection and homelessness (Robinson, 2018; Tunåker, 2015), relationships appeared to offer protection, a source of pride and confirmation of their sexual orientation.

Some participants described experiencing conflicts between wanting to be proud and visible in their relationships and prioritising safety. Ivy (19-year-old lesbian woman) depicted her shyness and reservations about being publicly "out" on her travels. In a narrative about going to an LGBTQ+ venue, Ivy described her "fear and nervousness" about being physically affectionate with her girlfriend.

On the red double decker to the underground they felt like millions upon thousands of eyes were looking at them holding hands, or softly leaning in for kisses. It was a rare occasion when someone would mutter, or yell or drunkenly swap (sic) towards them with dark intent, but the fear and nervousness remained ever present in their lives...

The two women had to weave their way in past the security guard to access the quiet heat and shimmering costumes inside. If they had to describe the feeling, they might have explained it like stepping inside of a whale's belly or like they were underground or like they were being lifted from the bustling London night streets into gentle arms. They were intimidated by the confidence of all the colourful, brilliant, unabashed people inside the LGBT pub. They held hands shyly and leaned against the wall to kiss...

The women turned to each other, blushing and giggling and whirling from the piece. They burst outside those tall brown doors, feeling like they were leaping across the pavement and into the tunnel once more. The adrenaline rush from seeing that dark green silk made them feel brave and suddenly daring. On the tube they slow danced and on the bus back home they traced each other's hands and kissed without looking at anyone else but at each other.

Later in the same narrative, after visiting the pub, Ivy described feeling "brave and suddenly daring". In another narrative, Ivy depicted her fears as she left a safe space with her girlfriend.

When they left the cat, the quiet cave of a room, the chattering books and pushed back through the heavy door into the dark, Ivy and Clara felt like a peaceful dream had been shattered. No longer holding hands, they made their way back to their flat in the rain.

In these two narratives, Ivy deemed certain spaces to be safer than others. She referred to holding hands with her girlfriend in spaces that felt safe, such as the LGBTQ+ venue and bookshop, and either not holding hands in the uncertain and potentially threatening outside world or displaying intimacy despite their surroundings. Her descriptions of each setting in which she experienced intimacy suggested a need to measure danger and prioritise safety over pleasure, intimacy, and self-expression. This can be seen to position queer intimacy as inherently risky or to suggest that queer intimacy may ameliorate risks experienced externally.

For other participants, anxieties centred on the burden of keeping their identities secret rather than on visibility and safety fears. In her first narrative, Zoya (18-year-old lesbian non-binary person) depicted having relationship difficulties and discussed the impact not being "out".

For years they had to convince themselves it was because neither of them were out, it was because they were both too busy, it was because they just hadn't had enough time yet. They always told themself it would click one day, that they could make it click. They really were in love, they just showed it differently. That had to be the truth.

In a narrative submitted at a later stage of the study, Zoya described the care and support they experienced in their relationship with their girlfriend in stark contrast to the challenging relationship they depicted having with their parents.

"I wish they could just know about us and then I wouldn't have it on my mind all the time trying to keep it a secret," she pressed her fingertips into her back through her flannel. Her head was ringing and her skin was hot. She couldn't do this all over again, she was so panicky about going home and being around her parents, she dreaded it, she counted down the hours that moved too quickly. . . It wasn't enough. She wasn't sure what she wanted Deb to do, but ringing wasn't enough. She needed more. . .

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted participants' relationships, particularly in relation to isolation and disconnection. In a narrative submitted during the first lockdown in Melbourne in March 2020, which impacted on young LGBTQ+ people's wellbeing (Grant et al., 2021), Wren (18-year-old queer non-binary person) described missing the safety his relationship brought him, which can be an aspect of intimacy for some people, and the relief he felt when he experienced it again.

We cry together that we can't see each other, hold each other, keep each other safe. . . Hearing them hum to themselves and breathe deeply . . . makes [me] feel safe for the first time in a long time.

While several participants found safety in romantic relationships, many indicated that they experienced risks in their relationships with certain family members, around whom they did not feel safe or comfortable. Lauveden (19-year-old queer woman) described her reactions to her father's homophobia, which she captured through his reaction to representation of LGBTQ+ people in popular culture and his decision to vote against marriage equality.

She hates the way she feels the need to hold her breath when he is near, how her body tenses and her jaw clenches. She hates the way she instinctively walks out of the room when he steps foot in. She hates that she feels self-conscious around him. . . She knows he loves her, but sometimes it's hard to believe it. It hard to believe it the time he gripped his hands around her neck and pinned her to the wall in a fit of rage, glaring at her with his teeth clenched, like a wolf threatening to kill its prey. It's hard to believe it the time when [he] shouted at the TV when a gay couple was kissing on screen. It's hard to believe. . . the time he voted 'no' on marriage equality.

It's hard not to hate someone you're terrified of, someone who has the capability to hate you if they knew the whole you.

It was evident that for some participants, "risk" involved encountering their family members' homophobia and transphobia. Despite Lauveden describing feeling terrified of her father, she believed that the fact that he did not know about her sexual orientation meant that he did not hate her. This suggested that her decision to remain "in the closet", as she described it in a later narrative, was about safety and avoiding risk. Sophia's (20-year-old bisexual and queer transfeminine woman and non-binary person) narratives also indicated fears about being "out" around particular family members. While Sophia did not depict the sense of violence and physicality present in Lauveden's, one of their narratives described their decision not to come out as transgender to their family members as a "complication".

Being not fully out as transfeminine is a strange and confusing experience at times. I was travelling around England lately, to see my family and friends. My family don't know about me being trans yet, because I've known them forever but don't ever see them… and that makes it weird. Plus some of them are really old, which adds to the complication on whether I feel safe telling them. So I was spending all my time around them in neutral or masculine clothes, really feeling in my mind the siren song of the couple of skirts I had with me calling out from deep in my suitcase. And then when I was around my friends or safely by myself I dressed however I damn well pleased and it was wonderful! Of course there's a whole other anxiety that comes from being visibly trans and alone in a city that isn't anymore my own, a whole different kind of "wrongly" dressed (in the eyes of people I'm keen to avoid).

While Sophia described dressing the way they pleased around friends or "safely by myself" as "wonderful", their narratives suggested it would be dangerous to affirm their gender in public or around certain people. Similarly, Jessie Douglas (20-year-old queer non-binary person) submitted a narrative during the COVID-19 lockdown that explored their need to express their identity safely and in their own time.

All this time at home, in isolation, lets me stay in my place of comfort, of safety. A place to learn how a new name feels, to correct people with love and be met with understanding, and to privately celebrate how it feels to be acknowledged as the person I am and am growing into. Just as we are selecting the people we let into our spaces to protect our physical health, I get to choose who I tell, get to choose the people that I let into the space where my gender nonconformity is accepted. Coming out becomes a slower process.

The lockdown appeared to provide Jessie Douglas with the opportunity and distance to decide whether to trust and confide in certain people from the safety of their home. Jessie Douglas depicted this process as positive and agentive.

Despite young LGBTQ+ people's identities, relationships and behaviours being socially constructed as sites of risk, research suggests that the "risk" and "danger" young LGBTQ+ people experience is often related to societal heterosexism and cissexism (Munro et al., 2019; Worthen, 2016). Structural discrimination and violence can be present in educational institutions, foster care, religious settings, healthcare settings, workplaces, at home, and in public settings (Beck et al., 2018; Davis & Anderson, 2021; Fuzzell et al., 2016; Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015; Kelly et al., 2020; Rasmussen et al., 2017). Stigma—whether structural, interpersonal, perceived, or internalised—can impact on young LGBTQ+ people's sense of safety and comfort exploring their identities (Mefford & Chen, 2021), which was evident in the participants' writing about relationships and intimacy. Many of the narratives explored above indicated that young LGBTQ+ people desired relationships. Some of the participants in relationships described experiencing a sense of safety, comfort, and protection from societal discrimination and violence, which may suggest that young LGBTQ+ people's relationships ameliorate risk rather than promote it. Young LGBTQ+ people's relationships will be explored in further detail in the section below, in relation to the consumption of alcohol and other drugs.

3.3. (Re)Shaping of Sex and Relationships in the Context of Alcohol and Other Drugs

Many of the participants' narratives referred to the consumption of alcohol and other drugs (AOD), suggesting that AOD served as a facilitator and mediator in navigating romantic and/or sexual encounters. Some participants referred to their own consumption of AOD, while others wrote about observing it in others. Their narratives about AOD tended to be highly reflective and self-aware, often questioning certain behaviours or hypothesising about how they might have acted differently in romantic or sexual encounters with or without consuming AOD. Marcus (17-year-old gay man), who described himself as

"never a party man", wrote two narratives about attending parties that mentioned other people consuming alcohol and subsequently losing their inhibitions, particularly about sex.

> ...*drunk Kayla is refreshing, she's more genuine, honest and uninhibited...I love Kayla except it's a shame that it's only when she's drunk that she's like this.*

Despite finding people's disinhibition "refreshing", Marcus did not reflect an interest in consuming AOD himself and seemed to prefer to access alcohol-free spaces for young people.

> *It was by sheer coincidence that I happened to hear about the NGV's Teen Arts Party, maybe it was by word of mouth, or maybe by some email. I'd never heard about it before even though it was running for some years, and it seemed like the Holy Grail, you could meet smart, artsy, quirky teens, at a party, without alcohol...*

Just as the participants' narratives referred to "coming of age" experiences and milestones in relation to sex and relationships, they also depicted these in relation to their "first time" trying AOD. Lauveden (19-year-old queer woman) described the first time she tried an alcoholic drink in her childhood, while Zoya (18-year-old lesbian non-binary person) depicted going out for their first alcoholic drink with their siblings.

> *We dance, my brother tries every cocktail on the menu, we make friends, I enjoy it and I don't feel so tired. It's the best day I've had all year. I'm never this confident with talking with other people, but somehow we're all friends now.*

> *When we leave it's so much later than I thought it was. Aside from a confidence boost I'm still pretty clear-headed. Drinking was not nearly anywhere as scary and debilitating as I thought it'd be until my sister told a story that I laughed so hard at I had to sit down on the curb for ten minutes to recover.*

> *It wasn't so scary at all. In fact, the night felt like it had been just for me.*

Zoya's description of alcohol consumption as a "confidence boost" was similar to the way Lauveden depicted alcohol in several of her narratives. In Lauveden's first narrative, she described her attraction to a female friend by referring to "their secret touches" and "giving into her touch" in addition to feeling "tingly" and "jittery". Depicting physical contact with a female friend, Lauveden stated.

> *If she wasn't so intoxicated in this moment she would push Penny away, she would sit away from her in their circle of friends making sure she was not next to her in case their knees brush against each other and not across from her just so she wouldn't have to consciously look away from her all the time. But she didn't, unlike her usual self she didn't care that her other friends were watching, she didn't care that they could see them holding hands, see that Penny was stroking her hair and that she was laying her head on her lap. She didn't care what they would think.*

In her second narrative, Lauveden linked consuming alcohol to an unwanted sexual experience (in which she referred to herself as Marlee).

> *Marlee knew it was wrong that Jay's hands were now on her thighs, caressing slowly up and down making goosebumps rise on the exposed skin of her arms. She could smell the vodka infused sweat on his hoodie from where her head is resting on his shoulder. She wanted to push his hands away but she didn't want to risk provoking an unwanted reaction. Maybe he was just as out of it as she was. She pretended not to notice his suggestive touches and instead bit down on the inside of her bottom lip creating a deep indentation with her teeth. She prayed that one of her friends would come and find her in her vulnerable state. Pull her away from Jay and scold him for trying anything with her when she was clearly unable to even walk without feeling like the earth itself is tilting*

from side to side. . . Marlee waited for it to stop, waited for him to realise that she was uncomfortable. For him to realise that he shouldn't be doing what he was doing. She wanted the table to collapse from beneath them and the ground to open up and take her in.

Her use of words such as "wrong", "out of it", and "vulnerable state" indicated her discomfort and fear in the situation.

In both narratives, Lauveden described herself as intoxicated; however, drinking alcohol impacted her differently in the two encounters. In Lauveden's depiction of the unwanted encounter with Jay, she wondered if "he was just as out of it as she was" but was aware that pushing his hands away might provoke an unwanted reaction. The phrase "out of it" was used as a possible excuse for Jay's behaviour, while Lauveden also described herself as intoxicated but was evidently alert enough to assess the situation, determine what might happen, and remain silent. Building on the concept of "agency" explored in the first sub-theme, it is notable that Lauveden's narratives depicted a lack of agency in both encounters. She appeared to be aware that her agency was affected by alcohol consumption and fears of what other people thought of her. In Lauveden's fourth narrative, she explained the following:

That's the appeal of alcohol: my mind is free, it's empty of thoughts from the past or the future, free from the anxieties and to do list and fear and anything that holds me back from really enjoying the moment. It makes me present and aware of the gift of being able to control the moment. It is only when I'm drinking that my mind stops racing, stops overthinking and starts really living. It is the only time I really let loose and stop worrying about everyone else and live for me. I dance like nobody's watching and they really aren't watching and if they did who cares? I say what's on my mind without thinking about what the possible response from the other person may be, because I honestly can't control that and I shouldn't have to worry about that.

I'm the happiest I have ever been when I'm drinking because I never have to care, I have no fears, I let myself out of the cage I trap myself in, inside my mind. But nothing good comes without the bad.

My relationship with alcohol is a faulty, deceiving contract. It never really stops with one drink and no matter how badly it hurts me I always go back.

Despite it "hurt[ing] me", drinking appeared to provide Lauveden with a perceived sense of control and happiness that she did not feel she could access without it. Her narratives demonstrated her desire to understand the nuanced relationship between alcohol consumption and her sexuality, sense of community, and sexual health.

AOD appeared to play a distinct role in intimacy and self-exploration for several participants, as a navigator of uncertainty, such as Lauveden questioning whether "it was the alcohol that warmed her cheeks or if it's from the physical contact of their bodies"; as a way of enabling intimacy, in Ivy's reference to drinking before feeling "brave and suddenly daring"; and Jessie Douglas's reference to being "full of that same feeling, probably aided by the lit cigarette in hand". The narratives about young people using AOD to navigate sex and relationships reified the sociocultural narrative of needing "liquid courage" before approaching a love interest. In addition to AOD being part of relational development practices, consumption is often linked with "risky" behaviours in adolescents, including young LGBTQ+ people (Emslie et al., 2017; Fenkl et al., 2020; Pienaar et al., 2018; Pienaar et al., 2020). Studies have indicated that binge drinking is prevalent amongst young LGBTQ+ people (Demant & Saliba, 2020; Salvatore & Daftary-Kapur, 2020). The role of drug use in gay identity, culture, and sex has also been researched, including the motivations of gay and bisexual men engaging in chemsex (Møller & Hakim, 2021; Needham & Austin, 2010; Pienaar et al., 2018; Pienaar et al., 2020; Weatherburn et al., 2017). However, in this

study, the participants' depictions of consuming AOD indicated their awareness of their own limits, boundaries, and sense of safety, and the only risk explicitly mentioned was related to another individual disrespecting a participant's boundaries and not seeking consent before touching her.

4. Discussion

Social understandings of young LGBTQ+ people often tend to be framed around sex and relationships rather than individual identity and subjectivity (Clarke et al., 2018). Representations of LGBTQ+ characters, relationships, and culture in media and popular culture vary between being positive and affirmative, containing one-dimensional stereotypes, promoting normative body ideals, exploring identity politics and LGBTQ+ rights, or remaining ideologically ambiguous (Dhaenens & Burgess, 2019; McInroy & Craig, 2017; McNicholas Smith, 2020).

The participants' narratives navigated mainstream tropes around young LGBTQ+ people's behaviours and sexual encounters—occasionally disrupting, reifying, or building upon certain norms. For example, the risks that the participants depicted encountering were external and ranged from homophobia and transphobia to sexual harassment or assault, which disrupted the trope of LGBTQ+ relationships and sex being "risky". It was evident that for many participants, their sense of safety and comfort in particular settings influenced how they inhabited physical and digital spaces. Romantic relationships appeared to offer some participants a sense of protection or a source of comfort when facing isks.

The participants' narratives suggested a diversity of views and beliefs that conflicted with, worked alongside, and expounded broader cultural narratives of what it means to be a young LGBTQ+ person in Australia. They indicated contested spaces around identity, subjectivity, and behaviour, including how the participants wrote about facilitating, not facilitating, or resisting sexual experiences and how they negotiated identity and subjectivity relationally. Young people navigate social, cultural, and narrative contexts alongside discourses of "choice", "autonomy", and "personal responsibility" as they develop their gendered and sexual selves (Cense, 2019). It was evident in the participants' narratives that life writing can be an effective tool for exploring one's subjectivity around sexuality and identity.

Many participants appeared to undergo emotional and creative transformation through the outlet of life writing. Stories are often governed by transformations that reveal the meaning of events (McAllum et al., 2019). "Transformation", in this study, may have involved developing skills to explore and find ways to cope with challenging circumstances and feelings. The study provided insights into how meaning-making processes are enacted or reflected in life writing. Meaning-making has been found to buffer the impact of negative life effects on self-continuity (Habermas & Köber, 2015). For people facing negative sociocultural norms and tropes around their identities, behaviours, and relationships, perceiving the interconnectedness of one's past, present, and future is critical. Meaning-making processes around self-representation, identification, and identity exploration are valuable amongst LGBTQ+ people, who may seek to make themselves and their experiences legible in a heteronormative and cisnormative society that erases or rejects certain identities and subjectivities.

Writing about life experiences has been found to be beneficial for mental and physical health (Valtonen, 2020) and can bring out the nuance of certain experiences in way other methods are not quite able to catch. In this study, we identified several key areas in which life writing may have been valuable for participants' mental wellbeing and physical and sexual health. While other methods of data collection could have collected information

about their experiences, life writing narratives captured their fears and hopes, alongside some of the social tropes that impacted their lives.

Many of the participants referred to adversity, crisis, and turmoil in their lives that were not being addressed in ways that felt helpful, nurturing, or intuitive by their medical practitioners, school counsellors, or family members. Writing offered the participants another way to explore and make sense of the events taking place in their lives. The participants may have discovered, through their narratives, how they navigated adversity, who they turned to, the sorts of sociocultural norms and tropes that interfered with or inhibited their agency and subjectivity, and how they might develop agency over certain sociocultural norms and tropes and become agents in their own narratives. Some of the sociocultural norms and tropes around LGBTQ+ youth are the psychopathologisation of LGBTQ+ gender identities and sexualities, the conflation of LGBTQ+ identities and mental illness, and the association with LGBTQ+ lives with risk and vulnerability, with neoliberal, individualistic, and medicalised "solutions" prioritised.

Life writing provided an outlet for the participants to develop self-knowledge, agency, and subjectivity, even alongside the adversity some experienced. The participants discussed Safe Schools debates, marriage equality activism and legislation, and the lack of LGBTQ+-inclusive sexuality education. They analysed their schools' contexts in relation to homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, or erasure. Their awareness of the gaps, inequities, and discrimination was evident in their peer-based conversations but invisible in their narratives. This suggested another context in the narratives worth exploring further; the participants were aware of the intelligibility (and lack thereof) of their identities and subjectivities. Mainstream society might hypersexualise, desexualise, or enforce compulsory heterosexuality upon LGBTQ+ people, but this was not the story they wanted to tell. Sex and sexuality were areas of self-knowledge, perhaps, to be explored in their next stages of life or privately, at their own pace, not in narratives for an audience.

By signing up to participate in the study, the participants responded to the terminology used in the recruitment flyers, i.e., "lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or queer (all genders welcome)" and "young LGBT+ people". We wondered about when each participant had begun to respond to these labels. Exposure to popular culture narratives about queer identities makes it difficult to determine what came first, queer feelings and desires or a sense of recognition when consuming a narrative containing queer representation. Did they become queer when someone recognised them as such, or was it an internal process from the outset? Did it require following a checklist, like Marcus's descriptions of people wearing a "gay uniform" and being pressured by a peer to engage in anal sex? Perhaps, in order to be legible, the participants were compelled to perform and enact recognisable tropes around sex and gender that constituted and naturalised their identities. Marcus and Reina's writing around sex, for example, offered highly contrasting accounts of how they viewed dating apps and particular sexual practices, as well as the pressures Marcus faced in relation to sex as a young gay man. In their narratives, they interrogated sociocultural norms and tropes about sex and sexuality, shifting beyond neoliberal norms of individuality and self-responsibility to sexual subjectivity and citizenship (Cover et al., 2020).

Another finding of the study was how much the participants appreciated the opportunity for peer support and networking through a creative workshop, which was consistent with what the stakeholders stated at the 2019 consultation. It is also consistent with research that found peer mentoring and facilitation to foster social support among young LGBTQ+ people (Finlay-Jones et al., 2021; Poštuvan et al., 2019). We reflected on the participants' experience of participating in this research study through their responses to our question about this and our observations of the workshops (and of the research process broadly) recorded in our field notes. In response to the open-ended question, the participants re-

ferred to a range of aspects of being involved in the study, including their appreciation of the opportunity to meet other young LGBTQ+ writers at the workshop. Their feedback about this included "It was really nice to be around queer people going through some similar things to me"; "Having a space to talk to like-minded queer youth writers was genuinely exceptional, it would be so great to have a regular group like this which would come together to chat, and critique writing", and "This has been a really great opportunity for me to practice sharing my writing, the workshop was helpful and interesting and a nice chance to meet other LGBTQ+ writers".

This suggests that a core aspect of promoting health and wellbeing in young LGBTQ+ people is the creation of spaces and contexts in which they can navigate their identities and subjectivities safely and with nuance. Life writing can provide young people with spaces and contexts for meaning-making; similarly, the workshops themselves provided spaces and contexts that may enable holistic approaches to peer support. In some of the vignettes we have included above from the participants' narratives, they indicated whether they felt safe and comfortable in particular settings and with certain people, which subsequently impacted how they inhabited spaces. Some participants, like Jessie Douglas, described agentively selecting who entered their spaces for physical and emotional safety, while others made deliberate decisions about how to act to protect their safety in settings they felt they had little control over or around people they felt uncomfortable around. Gathering with others in the LGBTQ+ community while discussing writing seemed to be an important element of participating in the workshop for the participants. In this setting, it is more likely to encounter an audience who understands, validates, and affirms various identities and subjectivities. Also, as a participant who was not "out" to their parents commented, gathering for a writing group provided a "cover" to attend a peer group.

The writing workshop provided a space and context for peer support around multiple key issues in the participants' lives, many of which involved health and wellbeing. The participants built an immediate rapport and discussed a number of issues, including their relationships with their parents; their schooling; the impact of religion on their lives, especially Christianity; and sex and relationships, which they wished there was space to discuss at school. Many of the participants expressed the view that their schooling lacked appropriate and inclusive sexuality education and appeared to enjoy the opportunity to discuss sex with their peers.

Sex and sexuality are revealing areas through which to explore identity, subjectivity, and agency in a study framed around writing and diverse sexual orientations. Only two participants wrote explicitly about sex; however, sex and discourses surrounding the sexual self lurk in the shadows of many narratives. As Alexander and Rhodes (Alexander & Rhodes, 2011) question, "What behaviors, what subjectivities, what possibilities, and what impossibilities are created through the intersections of sex and text?" (p. 199). If by constituting oneself on the page, there is the opportunity to play and experiment with identities and subjectivities, then it is necessary to make sense of the absence of writing about sex, particularly in a life writing study with LGBTQ+ peers. We noted in our field notes that discussions of sex, sexuality education, and pornography took place in the writing workshops. Once the participants submitted their narratives, we found ourselves questioning why these participants had not written about sex. One possibility is quite literal, namely that the prompt asked the participants about their past few weeks, and perhaps there was nothing sexual to write about. Other possibilities are that the participants lacked a sense of sexual subjectivity or were more comfortable discussing sex with their peers than in a piece submitted to a researcher.

Relationships, however, came up in over a third of the narratives, while mental health and adversity emerged in over two-thirds of the narratives, suggesting that life writing

offers opportunities for young LGBTQ+ people to navigate mental and sexual health issues. Whether or not this can be achieved through life writing interventions or activities in formal institutionalised educational settings remains to be seen, perhaps in future research; when we asked the participants whether they thought schools should teach life writing, a participant replied "They'd have to value you as a human first".

As this was an exploratory study, the findings would best be used to inform the understanding of those working to promote the health of young LGBTQ+ people in Australia, in health, education, and community settings. The data provide insights into how young LGBTQ+ people are thinking and feeling about identity, subjectivity, and agency and making sense of life experiences. While this was a small-scale study, it found that life writing is an effective tool for capturing the needs of this population and gaining a sense of their health and wellbeing. The narratives indicated that for those who have experienced a loss of agency, life writing may provide an outlet for (re)gaining agency, particularly through meaning-making around identity and subjectivity. Further research is required into how to implement the findings of this study into larger life writing interventions with young LGBTQ+ people and other populations and on how to apply the findings from this study to inform current gaps in health and wellbeing interventions.

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