

PRIDE INTERVIEW

In the lead up to WorldPride Deniz Agraz spoke to Dr Benjamin Hanckel about his interests and passions for LGBTQ+ initiatives and some of his recent research.



Can you talk about your research interests and how your passion for LGBTQ+ initiatives started?

My research examines how young queer people navigate increasingly diverse online and offline spaces. I am interested in finding out how they find community, find connections and deal with difficulties such as 'hate speech' in online spaces. I guess, some of my interest in this field stems from my own experiences. As a young queer man in a regional town in Australia in the mid-90s, I was exploring identity, trying to make sense of it in a marginalised world where

diverse sexualities were not accepted. I found myself a space online and found other people to connect with. Back then, there wasn't much research done on this topic, particularly in Australia.

I worked as a youth practitioner after finishing my undergraduate degree for a couple of years. I worked for a mental health organisation where we looked at online spaces where young people could come together, connect, and talk about issues related to mental health and concerns facing them. This professional experience, combined with my interest in online spaces, led me to conduct one of the first in-depth studies in this field in Australia.

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- Ben on the impact of his research.

Tell us about your most recent research project.

In the last couple of years, I've

examined how LGBTIQ+ young people in Australia have been using social media platforms during COVID-19. I looked at the social media platforms they have participated in, how their behaviours have changed during the pandemic, and the impact of these technologies on their lives. My research found that during the pandemic, young LGBTQIA+ people's social media use went up and they had strategies, allowing them to thrive on social media platforms and connect with others.

What are some of the challenges of studying this area?

There are many challenges, of course, but funding is the first one. Accessing participants can be an issue and making sure that they feel safe to be involved. The recruitment process can be a challenge too. Because the recruitment is made public across online social media platforms, research itself can become subject to hate speech and problematic views by people outside the community.

Can you talk about the impact of your research?

I always look at how the research I do can be applied to real-world problems and provide adequate support to the people we work with. So, it's about informing services, informing formalised health systems and

spaces, as much as it's about providing them with tools and information they can easily access.

But in terms of specific impact, my work has informed service delivery of digital programs and services that are in existence. For instance, my work informed Facebook and platform delivery, and was considered in the design of services. That work I did with LGBTQIA+ young people during COVID-19 was also referenced in a house-select committee inquiry into social media and safety. Getting evidence into the hands of decision makers is important, as it ensures they understand the lived experiences and practices of LGBTQ+ young people in their decision making.

For people and services who work with or provide services for the LGBTQ+ community, what would you like to tell them/what would you like them to take from your research?

I think it is critical to think about how we can listen to young queer people better and note down what they consider is acceptable support. There is a lot we can learn from young people. It's only through listening to them we can understand what is working for them and figure out the components that aren't working. This helps us make sense of, and address, the problems and structural barriers young people face in their everyday lives.



How do you feel about Sydney hosting the 2023 WorldPride?

I am incredibly excited about it. This is an excellent opportunity to sit back and reflect on how far Sydney and Australia have come in terms of creating an inclusive environment for LGBTQIA+ people. I think it is crucial to highlight that queer experiences are not the same across the board. For example, within the LGBTQIA+ community, there are trans people, and there are also those whose identities intersect with other marginal identities, in relation to race, ethnicity or Indigeneity. I think the biggest thing is to think about how we can listen to young queer people better and note down what they consider is acceptable support. There is a lot we can learn from young people. So, world pride is about celebration, protests, and inclusion, and we need to think of how we bring them all

together for equal outcomes for everyone across the community.

Any WorldPride events people should be keeping an eye on?

There is a book launch for ['Stories out West'](#), which is an anthology that brings together LGBTQIA+SB First Nations or LGBTQIA+ and culturally, linguistically and ethnically diverse writers from Western Sydney. I think, it is incredible to participate in such events that provide diverse representations and engages with communities. There is also [the Queer Screen Film Festival and varied theatre and performances taking place](#), which show multiple representations within the community. I believe participating in these events is important, not only to support artists but also for the pleasure of being in spaces where it is safe to have conversations and present the diversity that is the community. It also offers important spaces for us to collectively come together and in doing so imagine more inclusive futures together.

- Dr Benjamin Hanckel

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