

Spring 2017

# Creating Safe Spaces in a Homonormative Society: A Study of The Hang-Out 010

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## Recommended Citation

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Creating Safe Spaces in a Homonormative Society: A Study of The Hang-Out 010

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
The Netherlands: International perspectives on sexuality & gender,  
SIT Study Abroad, Spring 2017

## **Abstract**

During the month of April 2017, I interned with The Hang-Out 010, a nonprofit organization in Rotterdam that serves as a community center for LGBTQ youth. During this period, I assisted the volunteers and staff by attending events, writing blog posts, helping to plan future activities, and developing a feedback survey to be completed by visitors. My main objective was to gain a better understanding of the organization through immersive observation, feedback from visitors, and interviews with the volunteers and director of The Hang-Out 010. I analyzed the role of the organization in the context of a society characterized by homonormativity. By the conclusion of the internship I understood why this organization is important for the LGBTQ community in the Dutch context, and was able to identify precisely how the organization succeeds in meeting the needs of the young people who visit there, as well as some ideas for expanding the programming that is currently offered.

*Keywords:* LGBTQ rights, homonormativity, activism, nonprofit

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Gert-Jan Verboom for supervising me through this internship and giving me valuable insight into the world of nonprofit management and queer activism, as well as all of the other staff and volunteers at The Hang-Out 010 for welcoming me into their community. I would especially like to thank Olave Basabose and Brandon Lacle for sharing their stories about volunteering with me. Lastly, I would like to thank Yvette Kopijn for arranging this internship, and Garjan Sterk, Sabine Bastiaans, and the rest of the School for International Training staff for allowing me to experience this program.

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## **Introduction**

The Hang-Out 010 (hereafter THO), located in Rotterdam, is a venue for LGBTQ youth aged 16-24, as well as their friends and young people that are questioning their own identities, to socialize, learn, and build community. It was founded in 2014 when Gert-Jan Verboom developed the concept for the organization with the intention of providing an empowering social space for LGBTQ youth. The programs put on by the center vary, and include unstructured social time, as well as educational workshops and group discussions. One of their staple events is “After-School Special,” which is a time for students to relax after school by playing video games or simply talking with friends. Another is “Gender Free Sunday,” which caters specifically to transgender and gender nonconforming youth, and provides dinner, followed by an evening activity such as watching a documentary related to gender identity. In addition to these social events, THO empowers members to influence the world around them through #mylgbtqlife, a photo project that aims to showcase the full diversity of the LGBTQ community, challenging the common narratives and damaging stereotypes surrounding queer and trans people in the Netherlands. THO also arranges specific events for sub-groups within the LGBTQ community as needed, such as “Colour Ground Live,” which is for bicultural youth, and queer Muslim empowerment events.

In examining this organization’s role in society, we should first review the context of LGBTQ rights in the Netherlands. In 2001, it became the first country to legalize same-sex marriage, and has also incorporated anti-discrimination laws to protect queer people, earning a reputation for being the most progressive and tolerant nation in the world. However, legal equality has not guaranteed social equality. First of all, violence against queer people persists, and may have even increased following marriage equality, according to some sources (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011b). While same-sex marriage granted queer people greater legal rights, it

also instigated some backlash, including vocal complaints by prominent religious figures who believed that homosexuality was a sin. This outcry, along with physical acts of violence, has made queer people fearful of expressing their identity; teachers, for example, have become less likely to come out of the closet following marriage equality due to this fear (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011a). And in recent events, a gay couple was attacked in Arnhem while holding hands in public, an event that has stirred up extra anxiety in the queer community in regards to being visibly queer in public.

The legal protection of queer people in the Netherlands has also caused some pushback against the formation of queer organizations by straight and queer people alike who believe that such groups are unnecessary because complete equality has been achieved, and their existence may even be perceived as a slandering accusation that the Netherlands is not a utopia for LGBTQ people after all (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011a). Flagrant expressions of queer identity, such as the Gay Games, particularly come under attack because they are seen as off-putting. Similarly, local governments have recently been shutting down gay cruising areas due to public outcry that such visible displays of sexuality are inappropriate (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011a). This means that, while gay men may continue to cruise in these areas, they are no longer officially recognized, and as a result may become the targets of homophobic violence without the government's protection. These actions deliver a clear message: the Netherlands tolerates queer people, but only if they remain quiet and unobtrusive in expressing their sexuality. Straight, cis Dutch people are actually only tolerant of queer people that behave in a way that they deem acceptable, which often means making their queerness invisible. For instance, 42% of respondents in a survey reported that they would be disgusted by seeing two men kiss in public (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2011b). Juxtapose that with figures stating that 95% of Dutch people accept homosexuality, and you can see that the notion of Dutch tolerance doesn't extend beyond the surface. This

phenomenon can be described by the term homonormativity, originally coined by Lisa Duggan, which entails a mindset in which certain ways of being homosexual are depoliticized, normalized, and become mainstream (Drucker, 2014).

A consequence of homonormativity is that queers that don't fall into the category of "normal" homosexuals are marginalized. People of color, migrants, and Muslims in particular are largely silenced within the mainstream Dutch LGBTQ community. The representation of queer people in the media is often stereotyped, whitewashed, and doesn't display the full range of identities within the community. As a result, queer people who don't fall within a narrow range of visible identities, such as migrants, are influenced by media images that do not accurately represent them (Dhoest, 2016). The COC, which is the most prominent LGBTQ rights group in the Netherlands, can be described as homonormative because it has long focused on the integration and normalization of homosexuality rather than actively challenging heteronormativity within society (Hekma & Duyvendak, 2015). They have left migrants and other invisible queers behind while privileging gay people who are able to assimilate to heterosexual norms. Particularly, the COC has come under fire for not being inclusive of people of color, and for not addressing the influence of white privilege within its own operations (Eski & Kahya, 2012). Furthermore, the political pitting of gay people against migrants creates a false and damaging binary that puts queer youth with migrant backgrounds in a particularly difficult situation. According to right-wing politicians, immigrants should be kept out of the Netherlands in order to protect queer people; of course, this does not take into consideration that some migrants *are* queer, and as a result, queer migrants have their identity erased. Teenagers, who are often in the early stages of formulating their identities, direly need a space to build community and learn about LGBTQ issues from each other, rather than simply relying on popular media images of queer people to guide the creation of their sense of self. This issue is especially pertinent in Rotterdam, a city

in which 45% of the residents were born outside of the Netherlands, with sizeable populations from Suriname, Turkey, Morocco, and the Dutch Caribbean (Rotterdam Population, 2016).

The Hang-Out 010 is important to the LGBTQ community of Rotterdam because it creates a space that fosters community-building around collaborative discussion and education, helping queer young people to navigate their own identities by connecting with each other and relating through shared experiences. In a Dutch society that tells them that they are already treated equally, THO provides a platform to challenge the narrative of Dutch tolerance and work towards true equality. This venue is much needed in a society where most queer-designated spaces are bars and clubs in which healthy communication is made difficult, and which can be dangerous for teenagers. For young queer migrants, THO provides an opportunity to escape the harmful queerphobic and xenophobic messages that surround them on a daily basis, and offers programs that empower them to advocate for themselves and take their own steps to change the limited and problematic portrayal of queer people in the Netherlands, for example with the #mylgbtqlife project. Overall, THO is much needed in the context of Dutch society and is an important tool for empowering LGBTQ youth.

### **Focus Project**

I chose to intern with THO because I wanted to learn from an LGBTQ-centered organization, and I found the concept of a social and educational space for queer youth appealing. Forming connections and building community with other queer people has always been a very important part of my life, and I have considered my sexual orientation to be a central part of my identity ever since I realized I was queer. I think that organizations such as THO are very important for the queer community in that they help to form friendships between young people, who are often the most vulnerable and insecure in their identities, and for whom a support system like the one offered by THO is crucial and can even be life-

saving. I aspire to become a professional LGBTQ rights activist, and through my internship with THO I hoped to learn what the needs of the LGBTQ youth in Rotterdam are, and how THO meets these needs. I wanted to gain knowledge from this position that I can apply to future jobs, as well as to my current position as a leader of my university's Gender and Sexuality Alliance. I hoped to gain valuable skills that are necessary for working as part of an organization based in advocacy and activism, and learn effective strategies for empowering queer and trans communities. Some particular competencies that I wanted to improve were interacting with clients, working together as part of a professional team, and communicating with other volunteers.

Along with Gert-Jan Verboom, the director of THO, I identified the goal of determining whether the programming that the organization provides meets the needs of the young people that participate. I particularly wanted to see if young people of color, people with a migrant background, Muslims, and trans and gender nonconforming people feel safe and affirmed at THO, since one of the reasons that THO was founded was to provide an inclusive space for marginalized queer youth that is not present within other organizations, such as the COC. In exploring this question, my goal was to identify the specific needs of the young people coming to events at THO, as well as potential strategies for meeting these needs. My plan was to analyze two main aspects of THO's work: their greatest successes in serving the LGBTQ youth community, and areas that could be improved upon.

## **Methods**

I had three main strategies for finding an answer to my focus question. First, I went to almost all of the events hosted by THO during the internship period. The purpose of this was observation, so that I could learn more about the breadth of activities run by THO, the types of people who come to these events, the position of volunteers, and the general

atmosphere. Second, I created an anonymous feedback survey for participants, which was distributed via THO's email list and Facebook page. The questions in this survey focused on whether the events hosted by THO were satisfactory, and whether volunteers were successful in creating a safe space in which all participants felt comfortable to be themselves and share their opinions. All questions were open-ended and allowed respondents to provide as much detail as they wanted to in their answers. I chose a survey to reach out to participants in the hopes that I would get a greater number of responses than if I conducted interviews. Additionally, I wanted participants to be able to share their thoughts anonymously and voluntarily so that I would receive the most honest answers possible, as opposed to face-to-face interviews that could put pressure on them. Lastly, I conducted interviews with volunteers and the director, the focus of which was on strategies for achieving THO's goal of creating an inclusive atmosphere and empowering queer youth. Through these interviews, I could elicit more detailed answers and ask clarifying questions if necessary. Through my combined methods of my own attendance at events, anonymous feedback from participants, and interviews with volunteers and staff, I was able to learn about THO from multiple perspectives.

## **Ethics**

THO is run by primarily volunteers who interact directly with young people coming to their events, and who establish a casual, friendly setting. I am a queer student within the age range of THO's target audience, so in that sense, I was able to relate to the people that I worked with, and did not need to worry about exploiting a vulnerable group that I am not a member of as part of my project. However, I recognize that I am still privileged and that many of the youth at THO may have experienced bullying, harassment, or abuse because of their queer identity, or their racial, religious, or migrant background, a situation that I have

never gone through. I maintained ethical integrity by keeping responses from the feedback survey anonymous, and I will not share information given to me by the visitors of THO outside of this report. Additionally, I will not spread people's personal stories and experiences that were shared at THO's events.

I also recognize that, as an American who has only lived in the Netherlands for a short period of time, my perspective on this project is limited by lack of nuanced understanding of the cultural context in which I was situated. As such, I acknowledge that my analysis of THO is merely my own opinion, and I invite anyone who has experienced THO for a longer time than I did to disagree with any of my comments. Likewise, my suggestions for improvement are merely that—suggestions. It is important that the visitors and volunteers at THO are in control of any changes that the organization may make moving forward.

### **Observations and Analysis**

As part of my observation of THO, I learned about how it was founded in the first place. I interviewed Verboom to learn more about why he established it. He originally worked for Rainbow City, another LGBTQ advocacy organization in Rotterdam, but found that it was ultimately not meeting the needs of queer and trans people of color. He also mentioned that, in recent years, he believes that people of color have been treated with less respect in Rotterdam than they had in the past. There didn't seem to be any LGBTQ organizations in the Netherlands that allowed trans people and people of color to hold leadership roles and have a real say in how the organizations were run, so Verboom decided to break off from Rainbow City to create a space that centered these groups. His goal was to simply create a space where LGBTQ people from *all* backgrounds would be able to build community and be themselves. In his words, "The Hang-Out is . . . a youth center community house for LGBTIs, and set up in a respectful way that, no matter your gender orientation or

ethnic background or sexual orientation or whatever it is that makes you different and special, that is all okay and accepted and celebrated.”

When Verboom initially pitched his idea to the City Council of Rotterdam, they did not see THO as necessary. In their eyes, the COC and gay bars provided space for queer community formation, and thus, THO was not worth funding. So, Verboom entered a contest and won €10,000 to kick off the life of THO. He was interviewed by several news outlets reporting on the contest, and used this opportunity to promote THO to a wide audience. He also drew attention to the new organization by setting up a booth at Rotterdam Pride and organizing activities there, which successfully demonstrated THO’s ability to attract LGBTQ youth with a variety of backgrounds. Nowadays, the main way that new visitors find THO is through their friends.

THO hosts a variety of regular activities. Some of them are unstructured, and just allow visitors to hang out, talk, play games, or do whatever else they want to do. Others are centered around a particular topic with the intention of discussion and learning. For instance, I went to an event called “Let’s Talk About . . . “ where we had a small group discussion about recent events affecting the LGBTQ community of the Netherlands. Another such event was “Proud Supporters,” which is a session open to friends and family of queer youth who come to THO. At this particular session, a member of a transgender advocacy group called The Transketeers came to answer questions about his work, and about issues facing the transgender community in general.

Regardless of the theme of the event scheduled, one thing always remains the same: the environment is extremely welcoming. The volunteers clearly have a great deal of passion for what they do, and the visitors that I met all seemed equally enthusiastic about THO. Many of the visitors and volunteers had been going to THO regularly for a long time and clearly had an established connection with each other, yet new visitors were never ignored and were

always welcomed into the tight-knit community that existed there. For example, everyone present at the events that I attended made sure to speak in English at all times so that I would never feel left out. Free dinner is frequently served at these events, another demonstration of the hospitality practiced by staff and volunteers. It was easy for me to understand why so many of the people I met there said, “The Hang-Out is my second home.” About half of the visitors and volunteers at any given event that I attended were people of color, which seems to demonstrate that THO is successful in its mission of fostering a community in which the groups that are typically marginalized in mainstream LGBTQ groups feel welcome. Overall, based on my immersive observations, THO is everything that it claims to be: a space in which queer and trans youth of all races, religions, gender identities, and sexual orientations are accepted and celebrated.

The most important factor in my analysis of THO was feedback from the visitors. During my internship, I developed a survey to ask visitors about the organization’s success in meeting their needs, and possible ways that it could improve. I only received four responses, but the answers were thoughtful and thorough, and I found them quite useful in increasing my understanding of THO. Upon reading the responses, I was not surprised to find that the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The answers I received were also completely consistent with my own observations as an intern.

My first question asked the respondents what their favorite event hosted by THO was, and this question received the widest variety of responses. Two respondents mentioned discussion-based events such as “Let’s Talk About . . .” because they valued the opportunity to learn and hear new ideas. One brought up casual events, like movie nights, because they enjoyed the informal atmosphere and felt comfortable with the other people who attended those events. Another said that a spoken word event was their favorite. A common thread through these responses was that they liked these events because of the atmosphere. The

responses that this question received gave me the impression that visitors to THO have a range of interests, and that THO is successful in catering to the wants and needs of their visitors.

My next question asked respondents if there were any new events that they would like to see come to life at THO. One person replied that they would enjoy participating in more creative events, and another said they would like events that focused on dialogue with people outside of the members of THO. I wasn't interning at THO for a long time, but during my internship there weren't any art-focused events hosted, so I can understand why one respondent would have wanted more events of this nature. Similarly, I got the impression that THO is a fairly self-contained community that doesn't put a lot of focus on outreach, so it may be beneficial for the organization to engage more with the wider Rotterdam community.

The last few questions regarded THO's ability to create a safe and affirming atmosphere for visitors from a range of backgrounds, and the responses were quite unanimous. There were three statements that the respondents agreed with enthusiastically overall: that volunteers are good at listening and responding to participants' needs, that THO is a safe space for being one's authentic self and voicing one's opinions, and that visitors of all races, religious affiliations, and gender identities are respected within that space.

Taking into account the survey responses, my own observations, and my interviews with Verboom and the volunteers, I gathered that THO is true to its mission of creating a supportive and affirming community for LGBTQ youth from all backgrounds. I was also able to analyze *how* it achieves this success. First of all, THO succeeds in creating a welcoming atmosphere, in part because it reduces the presence of a hierarchy. Volunteers inevitably have some level of authority since they are in charge of events, but they do not use this authority to create an imbalance of power over the visitors, and instead try to maintain a relationship as equals. One of the volunteers that I interviewed, Olave, said that she tries to maintain a

horizontal distribution of power between herself and THO's young visitors, explaining that this is important to make them feel affirmed in the space. She explained that transparency is a major part of being a successful volunteer, saying that it's important to be "visibly vulnerable and to be visibly searching for answers, and to include [the young people] in that process of seeking answers." During my time at THO, I certainly got the impression that volunteers treated visitors as equals. During discussions, they listened attentively to what visitors had to say, and offered their own thoughts and opinions freely. They were also very open and honest about their personal experiences, and were willing to share their stories about difficult situations such as facing racist microaggressions, being misgendered, and coming out. In my experience, all of these factors combined to make volunteers trustworthy and easy to talk to, and the feedback survey respondents all shared the same opinion.

I believe that the element of community love also makes THO stand out as a welcoming space. The volunteers display obvious passion for their work, and I found that this gave THO a very alluring quality for me, that made me want to stay there and experience the community that was clearly making the volunteers so happy. Verboom told me that the greatest difficulty in running THO is that it demands so much time from the volunteers, but they care about it so much that they are willing to put in the work. Olave and Brandon, another volunteer that I interviewed, both said that they consider THO to be their family, and that it provides a resource that they didn't have while growing up. Their own personal experiences have driven them to cultivate this supportive environment so that they can "make it a better place for kids like [them,]" according to Brandon. In her interview, Olave shared that she feels many LGBTQ organizations focus on external advocacy, overlooking the fact that creating safe spaces is, within itself, an important form of activism. For marginalized communities, creating support networks of people who take care of each other is important, and THO achieves this. One way that THO provides this kind of care is through free

dinners. Brandon said that cooking was his favorite way of helping out at THO because of how it acts as a gesture of love and support. All of these measures that volunteers have taken have made THO an environment where familial love flows between volunteers and visitors alike, reinforcing the community's bonds.

Another way that THO achieves success in its mission is in the way that events are structured. They are designed with flexibility in mind, with the intention of allowing young people to use the space however they would like. This physical layout of THO reflects this, with a front room set up with several tables and another in back that contains two circles of couches. Many of the scheduled events, such as "Lazy Sam & Suzyday," for example, don't have any specific activities planned, simply providing visitors with books, video games, and a TV to use the space however they would like. Olave agreed that one of THO's strengths is that it is "a very malleable, flexible platform, a space where you're free to be, to do, to explore," because this empowers individuals to get what they need out of the space and even start their own projects if they feel so inclined. Similarly, THO does not advocate that there is any "right" way to be queer. For instance, they do not discuss coming out as an essential rite of passage of being in the LGBTQ community, understanding that this may not be a safe or realistic goal for everybody who comes to THO. Instead, they prioritize self acceptance, as well as demonstrating that there is a community ready to support anyone who feels ashamed or afraid because of their gender identity or sexual orientation.

THO fosters an environment in which participants feel free to share their opinions during discussions. No topics are off-limits, and visitors are free to have conversations on topics that may generally be considered taboo in Dutch society, such as polyamory and kinks. Volunteers at THO also bring up challenging discussions, such as racism within the LGBTQ community, rather than skirting around them. Visitors' opinions and ideas are valued and respected. If someone says something that is problematic, in that it supports a

misogynistic or racist myth, for example, volunteers challenge the person to think critically about it and educate them on why it is damaging, rather than shutting them down.

Lastly, a major aspect of THO, and an area in which it truly goes above and beyond compared to the COC, is its ability to meet the needs of queer and trans people of color by centering their experiences. Verboom explained that mainstream LGBTQ organizations will pay lip service to marginalized people and claim to be prioritizing their issues, but then fail to create substantive change because their leadership still consists of queer people who have cis and white privilege. THO, on the other hand, has a diverse set of volunteers, including people of color, trans people, and intersex people. Putting the most marginalized members of the LGBTQ community into positions of authority diminishes the effect of oppressive systems, such as white supremacy and patriarchy, within the operations of THO. Critically, it also provides role models that reflect the background of the visitors. Having trans volunteers and volunteers of color creates an environment in which marginalized voices are not only heard, but uplifted. Verboom, Olave, and Brandon all separately told me in their interviews that racial and religious diversity among the volunteers is critical in that it has allowed for THO to naturally become a safe haven for people of color. From this starting point it became easy for THO to then tailor some of its programming specifically towards certain marginalized groups, by providing group discussion events for queer Muslims, for example. THO excels in its commitment to diversity and inclusion by giving agency and power to marginalized individuals, rather than simply making it a talking point.

During my limited time with THO, I got the impression that the organization is exceptional at what it does. THO could move forward by expanding beyond what it currently offers. Primarily, this would mean learning how to reach a new group of young people, and shifting some more resources into advocacy and activism beyond the walls of THO itself. One goal that was brought up by Verboom, Olave, and Brandon was promoting THO

so that it would reach new members. The organization can be found online and is sometimes featured in the local news, but currently, most new visitors to THO are brought in by friends who are already part of it. This means that LGBTQ youth who may not have any queer friends, and who would probably benefit the most from THO, are less likely to find it. Volunteers at THO have already been brainstorming ways to contact young people through schools, and I believe this is a great idea. THO already partners with the LGBTQ student group at Erasmus University, but spreading information to local high schools could be an even more effective way to reach young people who may just be uncovering their sexual orientation and gender identity. Perhaps representatives from THO could even give educational presentations at local schools. I also believe that THO could benefit from collaborating with other organizations on events taking place outside its own walls in order to reach a new audience. One of the survey respondents mentioned that they would like to somehow spread stories and have conversations outside of THO, and I'm sure some of the other visitors would probably agree. Since I have very limited knowledge of the social justice community in Rotterdam, I would advise THO to invite visitors to brainstorm ideas for outreach events.

It might also be worthwhile to occasionally host events that are specially designated for new members. Although THO is already a very welcoming space, most of the events that I participated in during my internship were attended by a small group of people who already knew each other well, and as a new visitor I would probably be nervous about trying to make friends in a community that is already so tight-knit. Arranging events for existing members to meet new visitors and get to know them could help take pressure off of new visitors to carve out their own space with the community of THO.

Lastly, THO can expand its activism by empowering visitors to get involved with political action. This was a point that Olave was very enthusiastic about. She felt strongly

that it was important to educate participants at THO on how to go out into the world and improve LGBTQ rights, rather than just talking about it. This does not mean shifting the role of THO from a casual social space to a political action group; in fact, I think THO is a valuable space precisely because it allows individuals to *escape* from the stress and trauma that politics can cause at times. Rather, THO should give visitors the education and tools necessary to practice political activism in their lives. Once again, I don't know as much about social justice in Rotterdam as the volunteers and visitors at THO do, so I would advise leaders at THO to form a group of young people who are interested in political action, and allow them to decide together exactly what this particular action would manifest as.

During my time at THO, developing and analyzing the results of the feedback survey was my main responsibility, but my role also involved writing blog posts, discussing ideas for future events, and even painting a mural to liven up the space. In terms of what I personally gained from my internship, the most important was simply learning about how THO is run and what makes it so successful. The fact that I got to immerse myself in this environment helped me to understand how to build community among LGBTQ youth. Furthermore, the fact that my project required me to think critically about the activities of THO and examine *why* they work was enlightening. I was also able to learn more about LGBTQ advocacy and community-building in a Dutch context, and learn about how the “most progressive country in the world” which is seemingly post-racial and yet has an issue of racism directed particularly at immigrants creates a unique situation for queer people. I have observed many similarities between right-wing attitudes in the Netherlands and Republican rhetoric in the United States, particularly in terms of protecting gays by persecuting Muslims. Also in both countries, there exists a presumption that now that queers have achieved legal equality (even though there are no anti-discrimination laws in most states in the U.S.), there is no need for LGBTQ rights organizations or pride parades. I can foresee the U.S. gradually becoming more like the

Netherlands in the future if it continues to pass laws advancing the rights of queer and trans people, so I think THO provides a good model for the U.S. of how to continue the LGBTQ rights movement in a society where many people believe that there is nothing more to fight for.

In terms of skills, I learned to connect with an entirely new group of people. I was met with a mostly new set of faces each time I went to THO. Meeting new people tends to be a source of anxiety for me, so the group activities really forced me out of my comfort zone. I was pleased with myself because I made a real effort to have conversations with the people at THO, and was satisfied with the results. There was one event at which I just felt too tired and had trouble focusing, and sat back and listened in the discussion, but was not an active participant. I did not see this as a failure or setback, but rather a success because I was able to recognize my limitations that day and did not overexert myself. My ability to have meaningful conversations with visitors and volunteers at THO was certainly helped by the fact that everyone else present was so open with their own experiences, and expressed genuine interest in what I had to say. I found myself easily sharing personal experiences that I would not ordinarily talk about with a group of strangers. This is a testament to THO's ability to foster healthy, nonjudgmental discussion. That said, I feel that this internship met my goal to improve my communication skills, both with visitors and with staff and volunteers.

Upon returning to my university, I will apply my new knowledge that I gained from my internship to how I act as an executive board member for my school's Gender and Sexuality Alliance. For example, I learned that being vulnerable and open as a leader will make members of the group feel more comfortable and secure. If I share my own personal experiences, it will help to make a space in which others know that they can share without being judged. I also learned that members of an organization such as this need to have agency

over the events that are planned. In order to ensure this, I will open up the opportunity for members who are not on the executive board to lead meetings if they want to, and I will seek ideas for meeting topics from the whole group.

## **Conclusion**

During my time at The Hang-Out 010, I had the opportunity to immerse myself in a supportive community of queer activists and learn about how it was formed and maintained. This organization creates a much needed safe space for queer youth in a “progressive” society in which LGBTQ rights are considered by many to be a battle that has already been won, and in which queer and trans people who do not measure up to a mainstream stereotype of homosexuality are pushed to the margins. THO resists this homonormative culture by giving real agency to marginalized queers and addressing issues that still exist for the LGBTQ community in Rotterdam. It has successfully established a passionate and supportive queer family by reducing hierarchies between young visitors and adult volunteers, inviting young people to share their ideas and talents, and putting people of color and other marginalized members of the queer community into positions of influence. Visitors love THO largely because the leadership really listens to their input and then adapts the programming to fulfill their interests, so that everyone is able to find what they need at THO.

Even during this short internship I gained a wealth of knowledge about effective queer activism. One of the most important messages that I took away from the experience is that safe spaces are a crucial part of activism. Changing public policy and educating the public about LGBTQ issues is important, but this work is not meaningful if it does not make a real positive change of members of the LGBTQ community who are suffering from queerphobia and transphobia. THO nurtures queer youth on a personal level by providing care and

connecting them with peers and adult volunteers who share similar experiences with them. It also empowers them to think critically, share their ideas, and take action. I agree with Verboom when he told me, “I don’t really have to put in a lot of effort to tell people that we are so diverse or that we are safe, because what they see is what they get.” THO is an organization that claims to empower marginalized queer youth--and then actually follows through. This puts it a step ahead of most mainstream LGBTQ organizations in the Netherlands, which preach diversity, but tend to inadvertently maintain homonormative power structures within their institutions. All in all, I am extremely grateful for the experience I had at THO, and hope that my analysis will help them to improve and expand upon their efforts to empower the queer youth of the Netherlands.

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