

‘Building realities less limited than their own’:

Young people practising same sex attraction on the internet

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### **Abstract**

The internet has met with mixed community reactions, especially when the focus is on young people’s internet use. There are those who fear that the internet will introduce undesirable people and information into the home, leaving the young vulnerable and exploited.

Alternatively, there are others who argue that the exclusion of young people from the internet is one of many examples of the diminishing public space that is made available to young people in this post modern world. In this paper we focus on the internet use of one ‘space deprived’ group of marginalised young people, those who are same sex attracted. Regardless of some important changes in Australian culture and law, these young people’s opportunities to openly live their sexual difference remain restricted. In this paper we were interested in exploring the role of the internet as a space in which some important sexuality work can be done. What we found was that the internet was providing young people with the space to practise six different aspects of their sexual lives namely identity, friendship, coming out, intimate relationships, sex and community.

**same sex attraction; young people; sexuality; gay and lesbian community; rehearsal**

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## **Introduction**

The exclusion of young people from certain kinds of public spaces has received a great deal of attention in Youth Studies since the late 80s. Although on the surface public means open to all, young people increasingly find that their access to public spaces is curtailed. Marginalised young people, in this paper those who are same sex attracted<sup>1</sup> and who may or may not include those who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual, are the subjects of particular technologies of exclusion which work to mark them as deviant and prevent them from full participation in public life (Bessant et al., 1998; Rose, 1998).

A consideration of young people and their ever-diminishing access to public spaces can be seen against a backdrop where social networks that traditionally brought people together no longer work as they did. For example, in big cities, children no longer play in the street because it is labelled unsafe or they are discouraged from playing in shopping malls because they are thought to create risk (Evans, 2000). It has been suggested that new information technologies such as the internet have the potential to fundamentally change the way we relate to self and others; the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities and our very identities (Turkle, 1996a). In line with this, Judith Bessant (1998) has posited the internet as a

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term 'same sex attracted' in our research because we focus on feelings of attraction which are more universal than identity. Research tells us that identity comes later or not at all and often carries stigma which makes it difficult to use in institutions such as schools. Because we want to maximise on sample numbers, do not want to foreclose on young people's future sexuality, and because the term is more user friendly we used 'same sex attracted'.

democratic and safe space for young people to explore issues around identity politics at a time when accessible public space is diminishing. The eager uptake of this medium by young people in Australia suggests that in the face of practices of exclusion in their immediate physical worlds, the internet may provide the possibility of new and potentially liberating alternatives for the building of new forms of culture and community among young people.

There has been intense discussion and debate about the cultural and lifestyle impacts of this relatively new medium of communication and information flow. Much academic writing on the internet has focussed on the dehumanising and/or depoliticising aspects of cyberspace. In these critiques, an over-reliance on communication via cyberspace leads to loss of community and dissolution of necessary physical boundaries between embodied individuals. People are seen as losing a sense of agency and purpose within the disembodied culture of internet life. Martin (1998) commented on the lack of genuine, face to face personal relations that are seen as crucial to ethically and socially fulfilling communication.

In regard to the wider community and the media, Lupton (1995) has described how Australian news reports about the internet tend to focus on security risks for children and youth, for example, paedophile and pornography scares.

[In these accounts]...the home is now no longer a place of safety and refuge for children, the computer no longer simply an educational tool or source of entertainment but is the possible site of children's corruption. "Outside" danger is brought "inside" into the very heart of the home, via the Internet. (Lupton, 1995 p. 110).

Here the internet facilitates the breaching of boundaries between the so-called sanctity of the home and the 'dangerous' outside world, a state of affairs, which the media easily exploits in

producing fear and anxiety among parents: A recent study on pornography and the internet reflected these concerns about the potential of the internet to exploit children and corrupt their minds (Flood, 2003; see also Hanley, 2002).

Beliefs about the dangers of internet technology have exacerbated current Australian policy directions that lean toward prohibition and censorship. As the number of Australian households connected to the internet increases so too does community concern and legislation against the moral and physical threats to young people which this technology purportedly poses eg the *Broadcasting Services Amendment (On line Services) Bill 1999* could lead to Internet Service Providers acting as censorship agents. This requires the use of a range of ‘filters’, which work on the principle of blocking access to sites that contain key words, deemed by authorities as ‘inappropriate’. Examples of inappropriate words may be ‘sex’, ‘rape’, ‘butt’ and ‘virgin’ (Miller, 1999).

In contrast to a negative view of the internet, Sherman and Judkins argued that virtual reality is ‘the hope for the next century...[and] may indeed afford glimpses of heaven’ (1992, p134). Margaret Wertheim reflected these sentiments in the title of her book about the internet, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace (1999)*. In the same vein of optimism Rheingold wrote that the internet ‘could bring conviviality and understanding into our lives and might revitalise the public sphere’ (1994, p12). Cyberspace has been promoted by these writers as the solution to societal problems of fragmentation, alienation and despair. Willet & Sefton-Green (2003) note that various commentators have argued that on-line experiences promote interactivity and the development of community thus extending ‘forms of social interaction’ (p.1). For people of all marginalised identities, the potential of the internet to reduce or temporarily remove barriers associated with geography, age, class, race and disability has excited great debate. According to

Bessant (1998), cyberspace gives young people access to important and useful information. As well, it offers a basis for collective action and access to political space, as it provides conditions which foster anonymity.

It may be that viewing cyberspace in a positive light is especially important with regard to marginalised groups such as same-sex attracted young people for whom the practices of regulation and exclusion, identified by Bessant and others, are multiplied and extended into almost every area of public and home life. We propose in this paper that it is in the context of same sex attracted young people's often negative experiences of their immediate physical world and the lack of spaces in which they can explore and practise same sex attraction, that the internet can provide a space for important developmental tasks. Indeed, the internet has become an important space for same sex attracted adults, especially men who have sex with men to meet, communicate and in some cases translate this into a meeting face to face (Murphy et al., 2004; Weatherburn et al., 2003).

Researchers have pointed to the many ways in which growing up same sex attracted can be a particularly lonely and stressful experience (Martin & Hetrick, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1990; Telljohann & Price, 1993). Same sex attracted young people are over-represented in homeless populations (Hillier et al., 1997; Irwin et al, 1995; Rossiter et al., 2003) and are more likely than their heterosexual peers to misuse alcohol and other drugs (Hillier et al, 1998; Rosario et al., 1997; Sanford, 1989). These young people are also more likely to attempt suicide in the United States (Bagley & Tremblay, 1997; Gibson, 1989; Harbeck, 1995; Remafedi et al., 1997) and Australia (Nicolas & Howard, 2001). Elsewhere, we have documented the unacceptable levels of violence which these young people are subjected to in schools (Hillier et al., 1999; Hillier et al., 2005), and within their families (Hillier, 2002). It is somewhat ironic that schools are often

understood to be 'safe spaces' away from 'an increasingly stressful and pluralistic world' (Boostrom, 1998, p. 398).

Notwithstanding the recent increase of gay and lesbian characters on television, in film and the media (McNair, 2002), the world is still dominated by heterosexual romance, sex and desire. Heterosexual scripts are embedded in fairy-tales, films, magazines, books, television, advertisements and posters. Heterosexual models are readily available in parents, teachers, strangers in the street, pop star idols, sporting greats and friends. There is an infinite pool of potential and visible opposite sex partners at school, in the neighbourhood and at social and other clubs.

Siedman (2004) has argued in his book *Beyond the Closet: the transformation of gay and lesbian life* that the closet is no longer the primary reality for most gay and lesbian people in the United States though he admits this does not mean they have equal rights. In America and Australia same sex couples are still denied marriage and many other rights that are an accepted part of heterosexual privilege. More importantly, for most young people who are experiencing same sex attraction, the closet is still a reality, at least while they ascertain the potential reactions of family and friends at school. Young people's dependence on their families and school for such basics as food, shelter and education make them especially vulnerable if their feelings become known and Australian research has shown that school remains the place that homophobic verbal and physical abuse are most likely to occur (Hillier et al., 2005). Many young people do hide their sexual difference at least for a time. However, concealing sexual difference can increase the invisibility of the group, leaving same sex attracted individuals

feeling alone and unsupported. Safe spaces, and here we mean safe in a social sense,<sup>2</sup> where these young people can express their sexual difference, are relatively rare.

The notion of safe spaces is one that has been investigated at length by sociologists in relation to other minority groups (for example, Evans & Boyte, 1986; Scott, 1990). Scott, in particular argued that resistance to discrimination and marginalisation may be impossible without access to safe unregulated spaces. Safe spaces are not necessarily those that are created for a particular group, and indeed may have different purposes altogether, eg the role of the church as a covert space for resistance against slavery in the United States. Safe spaces often refer to a geographical location but this is not necessarily so. Safe spaces may not take up space in the traditional sense and may indeed be virtual space.

Fine and Bertram described safe spaces in the following way:

‘They are not just a set of geographical-spatial arrangements, but theoretical, analytical and spatial displacements - a crack or a fissure in an organisation’ (Fine & Bertram, 1999, p. 158).

What safe spaces do provide is a place where marginalised people, in this case young people who are same sex attracted, can take up subject positions as they wish without fear of

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<sup>2</sup> It is the loss of networks and relationships that young people fear through making their sexual feelings known and the internet is experienced by them as more socially accepting, especially because they can be anonymous and therefore not risk their social reputations. We acknowledge that there are other risks in internet use, including virtual rape that can profoundly affect young people’s lives.

persecution for their difference and where the usual damaging stereotypes are not acknowledged or used to alienate and exclude. For Fine and Bertram these spaces offer much:

'...where young men and women find unsuspected places within their geographic locations, their public institutions and their spiritual lives to sculpt real and imaginary spaces for peace, solace, communion, personal and collective identity work...Individual dreams, collective work and critical works are stolen, smuggled in and re-imagined. Not rigidly bound by walls/fences, these spaces are often corralled by a series of fictional borders where community intrusion and state surveillance are not permitted. These are spaces where trite social stereotypes are precariously contested. Young women and men, in the constant confrontation with harsh humiliating public representations of their ... gender and sexuality, use these spaces to break down public images for scrutiny and invent new ones' (1999, p. 158).

### **The relationship between the Internet and the immediate physical world**

The relationship between the virtual and the immediate physical world has been discussed at length recently by a number of theorists. The internet figures prominently in stories about the construction of postmodern identities, but its influence, according to Turkle, cannot be separated out from the larger cultural context in which the 'boundaries between the real and the virtual, the animate and inanimate, the unitary and the multiple self' (1996a, p. 10, see also Green & Bigum, 1993) are eroding.

Sherry Turkle suggests we consider virtual reality as a possible tool for self-reflection and learning when she states that:

Virtual environments are valuable as places where we can acknowledge our inner diversity. But we still want an authentic experience of self. One's fear is, of course, that in the culture of simulation, a word like authenticity can no longer apply...We don't have to reject life on the screen, but we don't have to treat it as an alternative life either. Virtual personae can be a resource for self-reflection and self-transformation. Having literally written our on-line worlds into existence, we can use the communities we build inside our machines to improve the ones outside of them. Like the anthropologist returning home from a foreign culture, the voyager in virtuality can return to the real world better able to understand what about it is arbitrary and can be changed (Turkle, 1996b).

Poster has suggested that rather than positioning the virtual and the real in opposition to each other we should instead see them as mirroring the meaningful and important communication vital to sustaining communities (1995, p. 90). Similarly, Stone has suggested that virtual reality is coded as 'normal' reality' by internet participants who communicate to each other '...as if they were in physical common space' and regard interactions '...as events, as fully significant for the participants' personal histories' (1992, p. 618). In this sense it may be more accurate to refer to experiences in both the virtual and the real in terms of multiple realities.

Holloway and Valentine (2003) emphasise the symbiotic relationship between on-line and off-line worlds, with one's conduct in one world affecting that in the other. We acknowledge that the use of terms such as rehearsal, virtual and real can be construed as setting up artificial boundaries between on-line and off-line worlds. There is no sense in this paper in which one space is regarded as more authentic, despite the use of the term 'rehearsal' to describe young people's internet experiences. It is the case, however, that the young people in our research used

terms such as the ‘virtual’ and the ‘real’ to describe distinct spaces that regulated behaviour in different ways. Holloway and Valentine (2003), assert that young people’s use of technology is both balanced and sophisticated and used to ‘develop and enhance both on- and off-line social relationships which can open their mind to a wider...world (p. 155). In the following we look at the ways in which the internet provided a space for same sex attracted young people to rehearse sexual difference and in doing, enhance their lives off-line. Young people wrote about the internet as a space for the type of information gathering and rehearsal of behaviours and lifestyle that was not accessible to them in their everyday physical worlds. They used many different internet platforms to communicate including email, chat rooms, personal web pages and websites where they could post ideas and stories. At the same time they were moving between the two spaces with experiences in each space impacting on their use of the other.

Based on two studies of same sex attracted young people’s use of the internet, we explore its potential as a safe space to rehearse aspects of sexual difference. Drawing on quantitative and qualitative data gathered in two projects, one in 1998 (Hillier et al., 1999) and the other in 2001 (Hillier et al., 2001), we explore how this medium might create a space for same sex attracted young people to rehearse aspects of their sexuality, in the same way that life on and off the screen allows other young people to rehearse their heterosexuality.

## **Methodology**

The data for this paper were drawn from two national projects.

1. A national research project conducted with 749 same sex attracted young Australians aged 14 – 21 years (Hillier et al, 1998; 1999). Approximately half were male and half female. Thirteen percent were born outside Australia, two percent were of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent. The project was advertised in national youth

magazines, street press and on the radio. We collected data through a short questionnaire, which asked about experiences of discrimination and abuse, well-being, sources of information about safe sex, relationships, sexual behaviours, and support and safety issues. The questionnaire also included a number of open-ended items and a request for autobiographical stories. Questionnaires were completed on the internet and emailed to researchers or completed on hard copy and posted back. Many young people wrote unsolicited accounts of exploring their emerging sexual identities using the internet. Five participants referred us to their own web sites for detailed accounts of their 'coming out' stories.

2. The second project, carried out in 2001 (Hillier, et al., (2001), was conducted entirely on the internet, and was aimed particularly at same sex attracted young people who were competent users. A web site was developed specifically for the purpose of gathering research data from SSAY internet users and a questionnaire asking about good and bad internet experiences, importance and uses of the net, strategies for safety and real life meetings which had occurred as a result of internet contacts. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from 209 young people (60% young men) aged 14 – 21 years.

What follows are six different aspects of non-heterosexual life that these young people rehearsed on the net before performing them in 'real life'.

### **Rehearsing sexual identity on the net**

In the post modern era, the modern unitary subject (autonomous, instrumentally rational) has been called into question and young internet users, in particular, are often represented as the post modern fractured subject *par excellence* moving through chat rooms and IRC channels and

changing gender and sexual identities at will. This acting out of other selves is one well-documented aspect of 'life on the screen' (Turkle, 1996a). There was evidence that some participants were doing just that. One young man wrote that part of the process he went through in accepting that he was same sex attracted involved pretending to be a 'straight' homophobic Christian on an IRC channel. As well, Jude wrote:

...given the total anonymity, I occasionally got kicks out of pretending to be a girl and net-sexing cute guys:) (Jude, 18 yrs s2).

Others, such as Raph had two identities in chat rooms, one heterosexual and one homosexual.

It's been helpful because I've been able to change my nic/hostmask and chat on gay channels which is what I did at first because I knew I was attracted to guys (there's some things you just can't deny) and didn't know what to do so I thought I'd chat with some people and find out what they were like. (Raph 19 yrs s2)

Hugh Miller sees the internet as a safe space for exploring presentations of self because 'you can put yourself up for interactions without being aware of a rebuff' and 'others can try you out without risking being involved further than they would wish' (1998 p.3). Because of the lack of face-to-face relations the internet can provide a safety net for young people exploring same sex attraction. For Jack, the internet allowed the exploration of parts of himself that he felt unable to risk in 'real life'.

[Chatting] gives you the ability to bring about part of your personality that you may be too afraid to explore in real life. In virtual life you aren't going to be as easily hurt by the rejection, if this new aspect of your personality doesn't rub well with others (Jack 18 yrs s2)

Many young people moved between an ideal or chosen homosexual identity on screen and real life where 'compulsory heterosexuality' (Mac an Ghail, 1996, p.197) threatened their emotional and physical well-being to such an extent that many worked hard at passing as heterosexual. It could be argued that these examples of young people misrepresenting

themselves are in contradiction to the ways that they take at face value other people's presentations of self. However young people initially enjoy the superficiality of new relationships, the playfulness if you like, in which the anonymous nature of the space means they have little to fear from disclosure. At the same time they, initially at least, have little investment in those relationships and so misrepresentation at this stage is not important. However, many of their relationships do develop beyond the superficial and in 75% of cases in the second study, young people had extended relationships from on to off-line. It was much more important in these circumstances to foster 'authentic' relationships. Participants often commented that people were more relaxed on the web and life was not taken as seriously.

### **Rehearsing same sex friendships on the net**

When young people discover that they are same sex attracted, their friendship groups are overwhelmingly likely to be heterosexual. There is little opportunity for them to experience friendships and social networks in the context of same sex sexuality. The internet provides an opportunity for young people to socialise with other same sex attracted youth. Many participants wrote about their experiences of friendship and self-affirmation on the internet. For many, this was the first time they had the opportunity to communicate with others in similar situations to themselves. As Amber said:

The internet has allowed me to find other people like me. Not necessarily meeting them but knowing they exist is a major bonus. I have not been exposed to gay people through my family and seeing there are gays all over the world really takes the loneliness away. I'm not the only one, there are others like me and they are living a great life. There is happiness after the whole youth coming out nightmare experience (Amber 21 yrs s2)

This was also the case for Angus who came from a small rural town, and Mark who discovered the advantages of IRC for meeting other same sex attracted youth.

Being from a rural setting, there is no place like Oxford St in Sydney where you can meet others going through the same thing as you. So the internet allows you to do this in the privacy of your own home (Angus, 21 yrs s2)

I've also made some gay friends via IRC (if you're gay and not using IRC you don't know what you're missing!!!) ... it was just the internet and the people using it who made me realise that I'm not alone, and gave me the chance to talk to people like myself (Mark, aged 20 s2).

Claire found that the internet was not always supportive of her same sex sexuality.

I've been open about my sexuality over the internet since I was about 13, and I've mostly found this to be a good idea it's mostly a supportive environment, and people who insult you for your sexuality don't seem as threatening (Claire aged 14 s2).

However, the lack of face-to-face relations made any insults directed at her less threatening than they would be in 'real life' and she was therefore happy to continue being her same sex attracted self on line because it was mostly a positive experience. Miller points out that 'there are two senses in which you can make a fool of yourself on the web: there is little to stop you doing it, but doing it will cause you little pain' (1998 p.3). There are advantages in not being able to see or otherwise physically experience a person who is insulting you, and conceivably the internet facilitates the development of skills in deflecting and otherwise resisting homophobic criticism.

### **Rehearsing disclosure on the net**

A populist view of young people's interactions with new information technologies is that they will use cyberspace as a retreat from the everyday world. However, Sherry Turkle has argued that, rather than retreating from everyday life, internet users may be working through important personal issues in the safety of life on the screen' (1996a). Chandler, in an article which

examines the presentation of self via home pages cites an on-line interview with James, a British internet user, who told him that 'having a home page meant that he was 'out' in cyberspace long before being out in daily life...' (1998, p.12). Personal web-pages are one means by which our participants worked through their personal issues on the Net, and all of those submitted for project 1 (five in total) were devoted to variations of the 'coming out' story.

The coming out story is a rite of passage in modern gay and lesbian culture that has been immortalised in numerous volumes of gay and lesbian writing. This story is referred to by Plummer (1995) as a modernist quest narrative, whereby suffering is endured in a predominantly straight world and in the face of this suffering or difficulty, the homosexual self gradually emerges from an imaginary closet.

Coming out stories have provided a powerful source of group cohesion in the face of the continuing stigmatisation of homosexuality. There were many examples of young people 'rehearsing' coming out scenarios in our data which indicates that they were using the internet as a safe way to experiment with coming out. In Turkle's words they were 'building realities less limited than their own' (1996b). In the following excerpts from Ben and Zac, the internet provided such an opportunity to imagine and work towards new realities.

I guess one is more open on the net as it is less intimidating holding an intimate conversation about one's sexuality. It's a dress rehearsal for then coming out. (Ben 21 yrs s2)

Early on before I came out I read a lot about coming out and how other people deal with it to work out how to break the news to my parents. (Zac 17 yrs s2)

Nick created a link to his homepage where he had constructed a pro-forma for a coming out letter to parents. The pro forma was preceded by the following instructions:

Please feel free to copy this page to your computer or print a copy for future reference. Perhaps you could use it yourself, or maybe it could be a starting point for your own “coming out” plans. Good luck!

The following excerpt provides some indication of the letter’s content and tone:

Dear Mum and Dad,  
You’re both probably wondering what this is all about, although you may already know. If I built up the courage to tell you what I was supposed to when I handed you these envelopes, then you’d both know that I am gay. That is something which is really hard for me to say to you...I hope we can still be as we are now; one happy family. Thank you and please remember I love you both always,  
Love from your son (Nick, aged 21 s1).

Nick’s letter functioned as a resource for other young people and he was at pains to declare that although he had not yet had the nerve to use it himself with his own parents, this was his ultimate goal. Other parts of his website contained a diary in which he recorded various aspects of his coming out journey. The construction of the site allowed for others to email Nick and give him feedback about his experiences, based on their own ‘coming out’ journey.

### **Rehearsing Intimate relationships**

As previously mentioned, same sex attracted young people do not have the same opportunities as heterosexual youth to learn about, and rehearse, intimate relationships in ‘real life’.

Heterosexual love stories are presented to very young children in the form of fairytales and heterosexual intimacy is modeled from parents and other family members. Same sex attracted young people spend a lot of time imagining what a same sex relationship might be like with little but broad stereotypes to guide them and many of these are negative. Moreover, because of

the assumption of heterosexuality, when an attraction forms to a person of the same sex, young people find it difficult to declare their feelings without risking everything. As Tim argued, even asking a boy for his phone number can be too risky in 'real life'.

The advantage of meeting someone on the net is you can get their address and keep in touch with them...whereas at a party, I can't exactly ask for a guys phone number so we can keep in touch as friends because he is most likely straight (Tim, 17 yrs s2)

That virtual encounters often lead to meeting in 'real life' for many young people was borne out by the data from the second study reported in this paper, which found that 75% of the participants had 'real life' meetings with someone they met on the Net. For Liam and Than, the internet was a safe space in which to spend time with someone you want to get to know better, before you meet in 'real life'.

You get a chance to talk a lot without nervousness in 'real life'. Build up a series of qualities in common and become friends ... before you consider meeting. (Liam 18 yrs s2)

You get to know the person online first, then progress to talking on the phone, sending each other a picture maybe, getting to know the person better maybe before actually meeting them (Than 18 yrs male s2)

The net also allowed young people, for example Phil, to get to know each other over a long period of time and this was felt to be much safer than the rush of first meetings at parties and bars where drugs were involved:

Finally, if you felt as if u wanted to meet someone, then a certain level of knowing could be built up over a period of time, gradually getting to know the other person rather than having them thrust upon u in a haze of smoke, alcohol and falseness (Phil 21 yrs s2)

Young people who established intimate relationships on the net, did not always continue them in 'real life'. Sometimes the 'flesh meet factor' meant that sexual interest subsided and the relationship evolved into friendship, or in other cases, like Mitchell, it lead to no further contact.

A bit disappointed with the physical appearance of the person, I never made contact again (Mitchell, 21 yrs).

In other cases, Like Ned and Eva, the 'real life' meeting lead to a continuation of the relationship in 'real life' which began and was rehearsed on the Net.

I met him and we hit it off really well and he's better in 'real life' than on the Net. My feelings haven't changed but have gotten stronger for him (Ned, 21 yrs)

[The 'real life' meeting was] Better than imaginable, confirmed feelings of love, best thing that has ever happened. (Eva, 21 yrs)

Thus, the internet gave these young people the opportunity to meet other young people, decide who was attractive to them and try out same sex intimacy in a relatively safe space in their own time and at their own pace before attempting it in 'real life'.

### **Finding out about, and rehearsing, homosex**

Young people also used the internet to find out about sex, that is, what physically happens in same sex encounters, and to try sex out to see if it was what they really wanted. We know from study one that less than one in ten of these young people were able to access information about homo sex at school or home and many turned to the internet to fill this void, using sexual health sites in Boyd's case and pornographic sites in Pierre's:

Well there are so many sites out there dealing with sex and sexual health and they helped me become really clued up on what was what when it came to having sex with guys and what precautions to take (Boyd, 18 yrs s2)

A major aspect of the Internet which has assisted me in my self acceptance has been the availability of pornography which I have found really quite informative because it is among the only ways you can find out about actual sex because while there is a lot of frankness about heterosexual sex, homosexual sex is a sort of gray area. To put it bluntly, this pornography really shows young homosexuals what goes where and how (Pierre 17 yrs s2).

A recent survey with senior students in Australia found that heterosexual young people do not use the internet for information about sex, rather they are provided with this information and school and other more credible places (Smith et al, 2003). Same sex attracted young people are not given relevant information from trusted places and so are forced to resort to the internet for this information (Hillier et al 2005). Notwithstanding public concern about the potential for corruption and exploitation of young people who visit pornographic sites on the internet, there is a dearth of visible homo intimacy in 'real life' and internet pornography can and does fill this gap for these young people.

As well as getting information about homosex on the Internet, young people, for example, Amber and Angus, were able to use the internet to try sex out in a safe on line environment:

I had cybersex with a girl and a guy on different occasions to see which I preferred (Amber 16 yrs s2)

The Internet has allowed me to experiment with my sexuality at an earlier age than would be allowable in 'real life' (Angus 21 yrs s2)

Once satisfied that they were same sex attracted, some young people, for example, Billy and Zac, continued to practise sex on line because it was easier than 'real life', especially when they were young and not 'out' in 'real life'.

Hmm dare I say it, [I enjoy] getting off on porn, cause it's easy, risk free and easy for a teenager who can't really consider a relationship until he is fully out (18 yrs male s2)

I have found some mutual on line masturbation to be to be a relatively healthy homosexual expression (male 17 yrs s2).

For these young people, the internet provided a space in which sexual intimacy could be practiced before moving on to 'real life' experiences.

### **Finding out about and rehearsing living as part of gay community**

Except for small geographical pockets and late night television, gay community remains relatively invisible in today's predominantly heterosexual culture. Same sex attracted young people have few opportunities to learn about and 'live the lifestyle', including experiencing being part of the gay community in their real world situations. Moreover, unlike other stigmatized and/or marginalised communities that mentor their young and value them as important for the community's future, there appears to be little outreach from the adult gay community to same sex attracted youth. There may be many reasons for this, however, we suspect stereotypes about predation and gay and lesbian adult fears about recriminations are at least part of the equation. As a result many young people turn to the internet to look for role models and information about gay culture and to try out their same sex attractions among similar others in an internet based community. Most young people in the two studies had not experienced same sex attraction as normal, nor had they experienced living in a gay friendly

culture. For Emma, Brylie & Irene, the internet provided a first step in finding out about community.

At present I like to find out as much information as I can on Australian lesbian culture. Stories, poems, pictures, information, resources...basically anything I can find, because I feel like I have an obligation to myself to find out as much as I can (Emma. 19yrs s2)

One of my favourite activities on the net is ...looking up lesbian issues because I know I'm anonymous and no one knows the information that I am looking for (Brylie 21 yrs s2)

Searching and searching for and looking through other transgender people's web pages to gather as much info as I can about their experiences, opinions and thoughts to hopefully stabilize and form myself as an accepted member of a community on and off line (Irene 19 yrs s2).

Jack and Raph were able to use this information to be part of a virtual gay friendly community.

The net has allowed me to realise that my sexuality is OK and there is nothing wrong with it. ...talking to people [and] visiting gay web sites has been very important to my development as a gay individual....I used to worry that there was something wrong with me but now thanks to the net, I know that there is a whole gay society out there and even if my immediate society decides to reject me I know that there will ALWAYS be heaps of people and services out there to support me (Jack 17 yrs s2)

I'd say it [the Internet] developed what was inside of me and aided me in learning about this lifestyle. It also allowed me to get a feel for it instead of one day just going to a club and being thrown into the whole scene (Raph 18 yrs s2)

As Ralph suggests, rather than jumping straight into the gay community unknowing and unprepared, the internet allows these young people to first learn about, and experience community on line so that later, 'real life' experiences can be better managed and enjoyed.

## **Conclusion**

We seek in this paper to first challenge the view that our cultural imperative is to ‘police’ the internet on behalf of our helpless and endangered youth. In particular, same sex attracted young people do not appear to be helpless online players, conversely, many of them are using the Internet in productive ways to prepare them for living their sexual difference in ‘real life’. We are not arguing that there are no risks to these young people through internet use, rather that the benefits far outweigh the dangers, real or imagined, of the medium. Moreover, in a recently published paper from data from the second study, we show that these young people are not naïve internet users, rather, they have a myriad of strategies to protect themselves from unwanted information and people they come in contact with in cyberspace (Hillier et al in press). It is important to note here that the young people who wrote of making friends and contacts over the net were exercising a good deal of agency in deciding how far to take new relationships, for example, those made in chat rooms.

Our second point is that the internet does not replace ‘real life’ for same sex attracted young people, rather it allows young people to gain confidence online through rehearsal in a space which they argue is easier to negotiate when they are exploring their sexual feelings than ‘real life’. We agree with Bessant who argues that new information technologies will not and should not completely replace older forms of being together and collective action, but they do provide ‘opportunities for many young people to gain experience and confidence as they engage in the public sphere’. Being ‘plugged in’ to cyberspace allows ‘young people the opportunity to redefine the ways they have been known’ rather than being subject to the ‘definitions, categories and problem setting activities’ of others’ (1998 p. 16).

These young people are choosing the internet because it is an anonymous and safe space in which they can rehearse aspects of same sex sexuality. They know it is much more dangerous to do this in 'real life'. As one young man wrote:

On the net anonymity is the greatest asset. Nobody really knows who you are. In 'real life' there are grave risks involved in admitting to people who you are (male 18 yrs s2)

Whilst recognising some of the dangers of unrestricted access to the internet, our research points to the need to give voice to alternative and more positive views of the possibilities for its use. It is also important to question an ever-increasing moral panic about the 'dangers' inherent in this medium, which leaves unexamined, assumptions as to the 'safety' of other cultures in which same sex attracted youth are forced to spend time (Hillier et al, 1999; Hillier et al, 2005).

An examination of the ways in which these young people use the internet to explore their sexuality raises interesting issues around identity politics in a culture of simulation that we have only touched on briefly here. What we have been able to do is to gesture towards the importance of the internet to these young people as one of the few safe spaces available to them where they can forge relationships that affirm their sexual identity and rehearse many aspects of living 'real life' as a same sex attracted young person.

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