

‘It made me feel braver, I was no longer alone’:  
The Internet and same sex attracted young people

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## **Introduction**

The sweeping process of Globalisation has been variously lauded and vilified for changing the world as we know it. The Internet and related new technologies are a visible and sometimes intrusive evidence of this change, as well as powerful vehicles *for* change. This change impacts on macro structures, such as economic and political institutions, but it also moves within the most personal and intimate aspects of our lives.

Internet access is increasing in Australian homes at a rapid rate and this is particularly so in households with young people. During the 12 months to November 2000, Internet access doubled to 48% in households where there were young people under 18 years, compared with 32% in households without. In 1999 alone, 75% of 18-24 year olds accessed the Net (ABS 1999). Young people in rural areas and from lower socio-economic backgrounds, however, are less likely to have access at home but Internet use is growing in all areas (ABS, 2001).

There has been intense debate about the cultural and lifestyle impacts of this new medium of communication and information flow. Positions are often polarised and deeply held. In 1992 Sherman and Judkins argued that Virtual Reality (VR) was ‘the hope for the next century. It may indeed afford glimpses of heaven’ (1992, p134) and this was reflected in Margaret Wertheim’s book about the Internet, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace* (1999). In the same vein of optimism Rheingold wrote that ‘it 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. For people of all marginalised identities, in particular, the Internet’s political potential to reduce or temporarily remove barriers associated with geography, age, class, race and disability has excited great debate.

In the area of sexuality and relationships many researchers and users claim that the Internet is a very positive development. They argue that it promotes a more open and honest communication and that it enhances sexuality, liberating it from less flexible constructs and makes a diversity of relationships and sexualities more accessible to more people (Wysocki, 1999).

In contrast, there is a fear about the potentially dehumanising and depoliticising aspects of life via the Internet. Martin (1995) has argued that the lack of genuine face to face relations between people will mean the loss of ethical and socially fulfilling communication and the subsequent disembodiment of relationships. Others in the community express concern about the potential for young people to be corrupted through pornographic websites (Flood & Hamilton, 2003) or sexually abused and colonised by paedophiles lurking in chat rooms and other places on the web. However research tells us that some minority groups, for example same sex attracted young people, find that Real Life is already a very dangerous place for them to be (Hillier et al, 2001). Adolescent theorists have pointed to the many ways in which growing up gay, lesbian or bisexual can be a particularly lonely and stressful time in comparison with the experiences of other minority youth (Martin and Hetrick, 1988, Savin-Williams, 1990; Telljohann & Price, 1993). Young people who are members of racial or religious minority groups most often share their status with their families and there is always that opportunity for affirming their minority identity. However, this is almost never the case for young lesbian, gay or bisexual adolescents whose parents are overwhelmingly likely to be heterosexual. As a result of the lack of support for their sexual difference within the family, these young people are over-represented in homeless populations (Hillier et al, 1997; Irwin, et al, 1995). It is also not surprising to find that these young people are more likely than their heterosexual peers to turn to alcohol and other drugs as a way of alleviating the pain often associated with society's reactions to these attractions (Hillier et al, 1998; Rosario, et al., 1997; Sanford, 1989; Smith et al, 1999)

Moreover, research has suggested a link between same sex attraction and suicide in the United States (Bagley & Tremblay, 1997; Gibson, P. 1989; Harbeck, 1992; Remafedi et al, 1997) and in Australia (Howard and Nicholas, 2001). Of the 5000 suicides of young men and women between the ages of 15 and 24 in the US each year, over 30% of them

have been attributed to the emotional turmoil over sexual preference issues and societal prejudices surrounding same sex relationships (Harbeck 1992). In Australia, Howard and Nicholas (2001) found that same sex attracted young people were at a far higher risk of suicide than heterosexual youth.

However this is only part of the story of the struggle in which these young people are involved for they are not just victims of negative environments. They also have agency to work for change and are actively involved in producing their own positive sexual identity. Many same sex attracted young people use their creativity and resilience to find their way through and around a hostile world that works against their health and wellbeing. According to Harris

People are active constructors of their lives and make choices under terrible constraints – constraints including the limited subject positions made available to them through hegemonic discourse, but they are lived out uniquely in the particular forms they take in individual people's lives (Harris 1996, p. 5)

Same sex attracted young people might succumb to depression when they can no longer see positive ways to position themselves within the family and community or they might turn to drugs as a way of alleviating the pain. However the struggle goes on in other more constructive ways as well as they resist negative positioning and invisibility and abuse in a myriad of ways.

In this paper we are interested in the ways a marginalised group of young people might subvert the agendas of mainstream organizations and spaces, grasping opportunities when they arise to create safe spaces for themselves. The notion of safe spaces is one which has been investigated at length by sociologists in relation to other minority groups (ethnic and class minorities), and this work has shown that resistance is 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 in the anti-slavery movement in the US. Safe spaces often refer to geographical location but this is not necessarily so. Safe spaces may not take up space in the traditional sense.

Fine and Bertram described safe spaces in the following way:

“They are not just a set of geographical-spacial arrangements, but theoretical, analytical and spacial displacements - a crack or a fissure in an organisation” (Fine & Bertram, 1999, p158).

What safe spaces do provide is a place where marginalised people, in this case those who are same sex attracted, can position themselves as they wish without fear of 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” (Fine & Bertram, 1999, 158).

In this paper we want to document the importance of the Internet to same sex attracted young people, in particular regarding “coming out” to others and developing networks, friendships and relationships. We are also interested in addressing community concerns about the dangers of the Internet by outlining the strategies young people use to keep themselves safe on the Net.

### **About the project**

Young people who were Internet users, were recruited for this project through the Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society web site <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay>, through chat rooms, and through links from other web sites. Initial difficulty recruiting young women led to some advertising in real life women’s networks. Young people were asked to go to the website and fill out a 30 minute qualitative/quantitative questionnaire which asked about their sexual orientation, their Internet use, the importance of the Internet to them, meeting people on the Internet, meeting people off the Internet, threatening experiences and strategies for keeping safe.

### **About the participants**

Two hundred and six same sex attracted young people (151 male, 52 female, 2 f-m and 1 m-f transgender) filled out the questionnaire. Young people were from all states and

territories, with 22% from regional and rural areas. Three percent were of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander descent. Young people were most likely to be at school, TAFE or university (64%) with 21% in full time work, 4% part time work and 5% unemployed.

Most participants were very experienced and proficient Internet users with over half of them logging on at least once each day for an average of two hours at a time.

### **The importance of the Net in young people's lives**

In order to gain some insight into the potential of the Net to address the needs of this group, we asked how important the Net was to them. The data gave us a picture of its value in exploring and coming to terms with a sexuality that is constructed in Real Life as transgressive.

### **Finding a friend**

Same sex attracted young people face a number of isolation and alienation issues. They are a stigmatised group and live with the knowledge that their difference is likely to be regarded negatively by those around them. As mentioned previously, other minorities (eg based on race or religion) usually share this status with their families and receive acceptance and support from them, however this is almost never the case for this group whose parents are overwhelmingly heterosexual. Added to this, sexual difference is a minority characteristic that can be hidden from the world and many choose this option at least for a time. However, concealing sexual difference increases the invisibility of the group, leaving each individual unaware of others and feeling alone and unsupported.

Eighty-five percent of the young people in the study reported that the Internet played an important role in putting them in touch with others like them and 70% felt it played an important role in reducing isolation. Peta's response to feeling alone was typical:

Well, after realising that I was a lesbian, I just started looking up heaps of gay/lesbian/bi sites. I just wanted to know what was out there. I'm not really looking for a sexual relationship, I just want to talk to others who are in the same boat. (Peta 16 years)

Many young people reiterated the importance to them of meeting others 'just like me'. The Internet's influence as a conduit to communication with helpful and supportive

others cannot be understated. Not only was the contact effective in terms of providing positive role models, but its networking possibilities addressed the loneliness and isolation young people such as Kenton and Mungo.

It has certainly given me networks to base myself around. Without that I don't know what I would have done, other than feel pretty damn alone... (Kenton 19 years)

Living in the country – it has helped my sanity – there are actually others like me!!!! I fairly much told every one I was gay in the city but I had to (and I am enjoying living here) move to the country to get a job teaching which makes me VERY isolated from anything gay – except the net! (Mungo 21 years)

### **Finding a community**

More than any other medium, the Internet provided a range of support options from a single access point. For Liam, the Internet meant connection to gay community and a feeling of belonging that in turn gave him the confidence to come out in Real Life:

The friends I have made, the various events/radio stations/clubs/help groups etc I have heard of through the Net have made me feel like a normal person again. I used to worry there was something wrong with me, but I now know, thanks to the Net, that there is a whole gay society out there, and that even if my immediate society decides to reject me (friends, family etc) there will ALWAYS be a heap of people and services out there willing to support me. That has been a most comforting fact, however so far i have not been rejected in any way by people i have told about my sexuality, which is a real bonus (Liam 21 years)

Similarly for Jemma and Daryl, connection to, and knowledge of, a gay community was made possible through the Internet and this in turn addressed their isolation issues and helped develop a positive sense of self:

It has opened up the gay world to me. I would never have had the courage or information about the gay community had it not been for the Net. (Jemma 17 years)

I simply believe that the Internet is a fantastic tool for isolated gay teens. I believe that without the Internet I would not be the proud and confident person that I am. The best aspect of the Internet is ICQ, a chat module where I can find gay people from around the world to talk to in depth (Daryl 17 years)

The sense of 'community' that developed for some young people was evident. Not only did they have on-line friendships but they were introduced into many aspects of gay culture that were previously unknown or unfamiliar. While not all aspects of community were appreciated, they nevertheless had developed a sense of the potential, diversity and breadth of the queer community on-line. The Net facilitated exchanges of personal stories and information, and created a sense of possibility, place and community for those who had hitherto felt 'outside' or 'alone'.

### **I get support when I'm feeling down**

The link between sexuality (or more specifically hostile environments) and depression and suicide has been well established in research in the United States (Gibson, 1989; Remafedi et al 1997) and Australia (Howard and Nicholas, 2001; Hillier et al 1998). Though not all same sex attracted young people are abused or become depressed, the rates are much higher than in the general adolescent population. Half of the young people in this research regarded the Net as important in addressing issues around depression and suicide. Katy and Matt were two of them:

I got to know a girl from the other side of the country and we got along very well and I met her. Another girl I talked to a bit wants to meet me. I also met another girl who was very confused about her sexuality. I talk to many people to help me get through little problems I have with my sexuality and just life in general. The Net plays a major role in my life. If I didn't have it I wouldn't be here. (Katy 17 years)

I used to get really depressed (ie I hated myself with a passion, had an aversion to sharp objects: no more needs to be said) and talking to people on the Net, or rather being told I have no reason to hate myself by people on the Net contributed to the healing process. (Matt 16 years)

Young people had little difficulty describing the depression they experienced prior to accessing the Internet. Once on-line, they realised that they were not alone and that they were not "weirdos & freaks" but part of a larger, albeit hidden group. This helped them to see the problems they were experiencing as, not of their own making, but to do with factors outside themselves.

I guess the thing that I used to do before I came out was go and find web pages about Ellen Degeneres and kd lang and they kind of made me feel better about

myself because it made it kind of ok to be attracted to other girls and that I wasn't the only 'weird' one on this planet. (Tessa 18 years)

Part of the process of gaining courage and confidence was learning alternative positive ways of thinking about their difference. For example Dana wrote:

Learned about the going political debates regarding topics of sexuality, helped formulate my political beliefs to a large extent. Helped break down the stereotypes I felt I didn't fit into and helped me find my place. (Dana 20 years)

### **Getting information about sexual health**

Part of the general invisibility that same sex attracted young people face is the well-documented dearth of available relevant information about sexuality and safe sex. Most sex education classes are about heterosexual sex, leaving these young people uninformed and unable to ask for information. Two-thirds of young people said that the Internet was important to them in accessing information about safe sex and other sexual health matters. There were obvious difficulties for them in getting the information outside the Net because of embarrassment and access issues. Jim, Sean, Nat and Kris explained their difficulties and the importance of the Net in overcoming them:

Is helpful to not have to actually ask someone and say out aloud the words which are often hot topics (e.g., AIDS, STIs, etc) ... Finding a web site with reliable information usually isn't that hard and you can be usually more confident using this information than relying on second hand info from someone you know. (Jim 16 years)

A few times i've had issues - a condom broke once. There was decent advice that helped reassure me while i waited for test results. (Sean 19 years)

Safe sex info and issues- high-risk activities, I think I learnt it all from the Net. School only gives an embarrassed overview of it, while trying to maintain the facade of responsibility (Nat 21 years)

Very important to know what is what thru the Internet, i dont know anyone in my whole knowledge base of friends that would ever ask a 'guidance counsellor', 'doctor' or anyone of that description (Kris 21 years)

The Internet provided a space in which young people were free to ask questions honestly and have them answered without the fear of the embarrassment and

recrimination that prevented them from asking in Real Life. The various AIDS council web-sites in each state were popular for this purpose.

### **The importance of pornography on the Net**

Using the Net to download sex-related information, arousal for sex and cybersex all raise the “spectre” of pornography. The participants’ transcripts tell us that they use pornography in many different ways. For some, pornography was used for information gathering. Given the lack of information about homosex in their everyday lives, a number of young men described the Internet’s importance in learning what to do when they had sex with a man. In this way they were able to rehearse a homosexual encounter before they tried it in Real Life. Cam explained the difficulty for young gay men who have nowhere to find out about homosexual sex (outside actually having sex) and of the value of Net pornography for this purpose:

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 amongst the only ways that you can find out about actual sex because, whilst there is a lot of social frankness about heterosexual sex homosexual sex is sort of a grey area, and to put it bluntly, this pornography really shows young homosexuals what goes where and how. If this wasn’t available then I think there would be a lot of confusion about homosexual sex because information on how it works is fairly scarce. (Cam 18 years)

Boys also used pornography as a fun activity or because it was currently the closest thing to a sexual relationship that they could find:

Hmmm, dare I say it, getting off on porn sites ...is easy, risk free and easy for a teenager who can’t really consider a relationship until he is fully out. (Fabian 18 years)

[I like] using ICQ and looking at pornography because I am lonely and those two give me company. (Harvey 18 years)

Young women also described their use of pornographic materials. Like Cam, Kiri, who was 17 was also using the materials to improve her knowledge about sexual behaviour: “I have been to various porn sites to see what people actually do” and Tina, to improve her sex life with her girlfriend:

I have been trying to find out the best ways for my partner and I to have a fulfilling sex life by adding variety and using the things I have read about on the Net (Tina 19 years)

Young heterosexuals are constantly exposed to heterosexual sex and ritual at school, at home and in the media. This is not so for non-heterosexuals who are often left wondering what to do when they act on their sexual desire. For them, trawling through pornographic sites on the Net is one way to address the invisibility of same sex desire, sexual performance and behaviour in Real Life.

### **Making contact in Real Life**

The Internet was also used to bring young people together with similar others who could become part of their sexual, social and support circles in Real Life. Because of the invisibility factor, they were attending school and moving around in the community, unaware that there were others like them doing the same thing. It was not uncommon for young people to meet other same sex attracted young people and discover that they lived in the same town and even attended the same school. Liz was one example:

I actually met my first girlfriend via the Net. I'd accidentally clicked "reply all" on a long chain letter, and days after I received an email from this girl. After general chit blah blah blah for a few weeks we discovered we were at the same school, met up, built a friendship and things developed from there. I guess without the Net I would never have met her. (Liz 15 years)

Sixty-two percent of young men and 26% of young women felt the Net was important because it facilitated Real Life contact and friendship with others and nearly half of the young men and a quarter of young women felt it was important in helping them find romance and sex. In this way the Internet was playing the role that school, youth groups and discos might play for heterosexual young people. For many, a large proportion of Real Life friendship networks and sexual relationships had their origins on the Net:

Basically, I've met all of the gay people I know over the Internet, and indeed most of my current social circle I came into contact with over IRC originally. I frequently meet people off IRC on a social basis hoping to meet new friends or perhaps (rarely) meet someone special. (Ben 17 years)

I have met 2 boyfriends off the Net and have made many gay friends that I would not have met without the Internet. (Angus 21 years)

Not all experiences in meeting people were positive as Toufic explained:

I haven't had a great time on the Internet. I've met 2 guys (at separate months) who were my boyfriend, and they didn't feel the same when they saw me or didn't feel ready for a gay commitment. I was used sexually by one of those guys. I met a friend off the Net and ended up having a brief sexual encounter which destroyed our friendship, met a guy as a friend and have been friends for over 12 months now. In the beginning I was attracted to him but now I'm OK with him just wanting to be friends. Thanks to the Internet I found out that my best friend was gay and this improved our friendship. The Internet is a great place for gay guys to meet as there aren't many places to find gay friends or lovers elsewhere! (Toufic 18 years)

### **The Net and positive sexual identity**

We asked the participants how they felt about their sexuality, with possible answers being great, pretty good, OK, pretty bad and terrible. In the *Writing Themselves In* project (Hillier et al, 1999) we asked the same question and found that 60% felt great or pretty good about their sexuality. Here the rate was higher with 65% feeling great or pretty good. More importantly, the main effect of this increase lay with the young women, 72% of whom fell into this category. We have written previously about the particularly difficult position same sex attracted young women face in regard to a lack of sexual outlets for their desire and the resulting frustration that this creates (Dempsey et al, 2001; Hillier, 2001). There were many young women in this study who were using the Net to find other same sex attracted women for friendship and potential intimacy. While we can not directly compare the sample to our previous national study (Hillier et al, 1998) it does raise a valid question about the potential of the Internet to support positive identity development and may be one medium to be employed by those working with same sex attracted youth.

In general social terms sexuality is often presented, quite erroneously, as a simple choice of two distinct and obvious options (heterosexuality or homosexuality), as something that is instinctively known to an individual, and simply negotiated from that knowledge. It was therefore not surprising that a number of young people alluded to the extended process of self-discovery and the important role of the Internet in assisting them to work out 'what they were'.

This is a complex question and I could go into pages of detail but basically, when I first started using the Internet I didn't know what I was. I knew I wasn't really

attracted to girls but didn't ever think I'd be gay, one day I found gay chat rooms and from then on I pretty much knew, I'm attracted to guys physically and mentally, I'd say it 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. (Alex 18 years)

It has helped me discover who I am, I don't think if it wasn't for the net I would have realised yet that I am gay. I love being gay, it doesn't worry me at all. (Simon 17 years)

Young people described the Net's influence in providing a space to explore these, sometimes unwelcome, feelings and develop a stronger and more certain sense of self-identity.

It has allowed me to explore my feelings about being attracted to guys, and this led to me feeling I am free to express such feelings etc. I also think it has allowed me to take control of my life, as opposed to being a "bi guy" and all the uncertainty/confusion/frustration that comes with that, I am now able to say to myself that I am gay, that's who I am, there's no way I can change etc so in that respect, the net, and the people I talk to on the net, has basically helped me to come to grips with myself. (Lex 17 years)

I dunno. It made me feel braver I suppose. It showed me I wasn't alone :/ (Riley, 14 years)

It was also clear that, while for some the process of accepting one's sexuality is a mostly positive process, for others the development of self-acceptance is an on-going and difficult struggle. When this struggle is largely unsupported in Real Life the Net continues to provide a context where positive feelings can be renewed or sustained.

It has made me feel a lot better about it because I don't know a lot of gay people very well in real life, I know a few but since nobody else knows about me generally I find it really difficult to accept that it is a good thing that I am attracted to my own sex, especially when my girlfriend broke up with me because she didn't want to be with a girl, so looking up things and talking to other gay people on the net gives me a chance to accept it and feel better about it (Rebecca 21 years)

Made me accept it a lot more. Not that it hasn't taken time, but you realise when people are worse off than yourself and you can understand that your situation could be a lot worse. Makes you get on with it and stop farting around. Also, it makes you get out more and mix more with people like yourself and you realise it's not quite so bad ever. (Damien 21 years)

A significant number of young people were quite adamant that, while they were clear about their sexuality prior to using the Internet, involvement with the Internet had hastened the development of self-acceptance and part of this process was the facilitation of access to others.

It hasn't (influenced my feelings) it merely reinforced what I knew was inside of me, it hastened my being comfortable with my sexuality as I discovered others who had been in the same boat and had "survived" (Andrew 21 years)

It helped me a whole heap. If it hadn't been for the Internet, then I would have had a LOT harder time meeting other gay people. But as for me dealing with me being gay, it didn't really make a difference. I was fine with it before I discovered the Internet. (Rick 21 years)

It has liberated me! When we got the net at home especially, I could look up the ever so elusive words. Such as 'lesbian', 'gay' & 'homosexual' and gain lots of information. It was my escape and my saviour. I learnt what I was feeling was both OK and it had a name, other people and a special place. I had previously thought what I was feeling was the same as everyone else, until I got to high school. The net gave me education that my family, school and friends couldn't give me! (Dana 20 years)

### **Risks on the Internet**

Notwithstanding the very great value of the Internet for same sex attracted young people there are a number of ways in which the Net might be regarded as presenting risks, and these depend to a degree on the belief that young people are passive players in Cyberspace. These include:

- Young people waste time which could be spent in more healthy pursuits eg sport
- Young people are exposed to undesirable information
- Young people are exposure to undesirable people

The belief that there are nasty sites with information and images which might corrupt young people has led to the development of filters which can be installed by Internet providers and which reject information containing certain predetermined words and phrases. Concerns about undesirable adults using young Internet players as fodder for their sexual interests have also been expressed. As well, adults argue that young people who spend too much time on the computer will lose the ability to relate to people in Real Life as well as wasting time that could be spent outdoors on healthier pursuits. The notion of the fractured identity which comes about when young people taking on

identities that belie their Real Life bodies and personalities has also been considered a potential danger of Cyberspace, especially when the Internet relationship moves into Real Life. We were interested in finding out what SSAY felt about safety on the Net, especially given the hostility in their everyday lives.

We began by asking young people if they had ever worried about their Internet use and over half (58%, 120, n=208) reported that they had. Those who answered yes were asked to explain their concerns further. Their answers clearly showed that these young people were not uncritically using the medium and that they were aware of the disadvantages as well as the benefits of its use.

### **Wasting time/addiction**

Thirty-six percent (45/124) worried about wasting time and 40% (50/124) were concerned about the time they spent escaping from the Real World. An underlying concern behind both of these issues that emerged from young people's explanations was the addictive nature of Internet use, and the belief that it needed to be controlled or it got out of hand:

For a little while, especially during the holidays (but sometimes during semester time as well) I felt worried that I was using the Net far too much and that I may develop an addiction to it. I was neglecting my work and staying up until all hours of the morning chatting and surfing, so I made a conscious decision to restrict my use and all seems to be OK at the moment. (Theo 16 years)

I get too addicted to it heheheh, i find myself spending a fair bit of time on it and find it preferable to talking to people in RL, which probably isn't good (Will 17 years)

We were also interested to know whether they had felt threatened or uncomfortable on the Net. Over half (51% 105/204) reported that they had. In order to tease out the nature of their negative experiences, we asked them to explain further.

### **Feeling threatened or uncomfortable**

Young people reported feeling frightened or disturbed while involved in a number of activities. Eight percent (16/203) experienced discomfort when they stumbled across sexually explicit materials on various websites. Sam and Rachel said:

The Internet is an uncensored database of information, sometimes and not often I come across information, be it text, a picture or a video blah blah which I personally can't handle, I wasn't

expecting to find it but I did. It gets you a little but not in a hard core way. It's like OK now I've seen THAT!! Would I have been a less neurotic person if I hadn't? (Sam 21 years)

Stumbled on some really disturbing images that were very hard to forget about. (Rachel 18 years)

Others were shocked at the violence of some of the homophobic websites on the Net:

I found a whole lot of hate speech on some fundamentalist Christian sites. Don't ask me what I was doing there. I hardly know myself. It was more the anti-witchcraft and sexism that upset me. (Thea 19 years)

Stumbling on sites like "godhatesfags" certainly distressed me. (Lizzie 17 years)

There are some disturbing websites and the "godhatesfags" site is extreme in its hatred of gay men. However homophobic hatred and violence in Real Life is likely to be at least as frightening and destructive in a same sex attracted young person's life. This is particularly so because protective factors, such as anonymity and the absence of the body, reduce the power of homophobia on the Net.

### **Unwelcome emails**

Around 15% (31/203), of young people (more young men) felt unsafe because of emails that they received, particularly in cases where people had obtained their email addresses by stealth and they felt uncomfortable about this.

I got an email from this dude's boyfriend. I liked this dude, I had no idea that he was going out with another guy. He never told me that. His boyfriend sent me an abusive email. He had looked up my name in the phone book, knew where I lived, and said if he ever heard of me making contact with his boyfriend (the dude I liked) he would kill me (probably not kill me as in death but hurt me some). (Angus 18 years)

One guy from Brisbane got my email address (I stupidly gave it to him) and he wouldn't leave me alone. He's got the message now! (Lochy 18 years)

Each of these threatening experiences seem to be grounded in obsession. For Angus, a jealous boyfriend and Lochy, a stalker – all experiences that happen frequently in Real Life and both of which appear to have reached some resolution.

### **Chat room harassment**

The chatroom, (ym 44% 67/151; yw 15% 8/52) including IRC (37% 75/203), was the place young people, especially young men, were most likely to feel threatened. They were using IRC far more

often than the young women and were more likely to be talking about sex. Alex and Lesley had both experienced persistent unwanted attention from other men:

I've had someone who I believe was mentally unstable and formed an attraction, purely Internet based over only a couple of hours, who became obsessed with me to the extent that he hacked my computer and found out my personal details and address which was extremely frightening. Nothing happened thankfully. ( Alex 18 years)

Generally I have felt uncomfortable when males, particularly much older males, have tried to chat with me specifically to engage in a sexual activity and especially if they have been persistent about that. (Lesley 17 years)

Others, such as Mel, Rebecca & Matt, had been upset by heterosexuals who abused and threatened them in chat rooms:

Just freaks wanting a private chat in an IRC room, and opening with a revolting come on, or a question about my sex life, or even a homophobic comment. The hosts of IRC rooms are usually good at keeping these nuts out but sometimes they sneak in. People think we are perverts...they should look at the shit some straight people say on the Internet. (Mel 21 years)

One person on IRC figured out my phone number and where I lived and threatened to call my parents and tell them I was gay when I was 15 and not ready to come out. (Kenton 19 years)

Just talking in chat rooms and people saying that i was a stupid dyke and to just f... off and die and things like that (Rebecca 21 years)

Finally, people who came on too strong or made inappropriate suggestions were also disturbing:

Just really creepy mostly...The first time I was ever on IRC (I was 17 at the time.. Maybe it was 16... ANYWAY..) Some guy from Sydney was offering to pay my airfare up to Sydney to meet him.. (Creeped me out a bit..) Oh.. and I once had some guy ask for me to bite him hard enough to draw blood, and then he was going to rub ink into it, so that the teeth marks were permanent (tattoo like..) He was really weird :) (Phil, 21 years)

### **Helplessness**

Other young people experienced discomfort when they heard about other people's bad experiences and could do nothing to help:

Hmm, I don't take kindly to hearing about situations when I can't directly help. It's frustrating. A guy I knew once was being beaten up by his dad and stuff and though he lived in Sydney he was scared to death to meet me. I would hear about it and I couldn't help. Not fun. (Damien 21 years)

I had a guy who I had been chatting to for over a year tell me he was going to kill himself because his parents found out he was gay and wanted him out of the house. He was serious too. I rang up a friend who knew him in RL and he went over and when he got there he had a knife next to him...was scary as hell. (Peter 18 years)

### **Deception**

Another area of young people's discomfort lay in the dilemma of deception on the Net. It is well recognised that the Net as a medium allows users to try out different identities and this may have advantages for the person who does this. However many of the young people in this study found the practice particularly disturbing. Lizzie felt unsafe in chat rooms because of men impersonating women:

When people lie about themselves, i.e. some men masqueraded as women (usual story) got found out and were abusive. (Lizzie 17 years)

Young people had experienced a range of unpleasant situations on the Net. They also had a battery of measures to protect themselves.

### **Strategies for safety on the Net**

Despite the negative experiences on the Net, there was no sense in which the participants were passive players in Cyberspace. We asked the young people what strategies they used to protect themselves from hurtful or threatening situations and they gave us a list of strategies, some of them more sophisticated than others. These are summarised below.

- don't give out personal information
- use a web-based email
- use the ignore command
- no emotional involvement on the Net
- no Net sexual attractions on the Net
- lie about self
- don't be gullible

These strategies on the Net are quite straightforward and need little explanation. The list is comprehensive and if young people abided by the suggested strategies, no harm would ever befall them. However clearly, in some cases, they did not. Sometimes young people's beliefs left them overconfident and perhaps open to abuse. One young man for example insisted that "you can spot a

freak in 10 seconds” and another “You can usually tell when the other person is strange or weird by the way they respond online”. It is possible that this overconfidence and the resultant neglect of rules may have compromised young people’s safety. Moreover, one young person’s strategies can make other young people feel unsafe, for example, the last suggestion about lying about oneself for protection is the very reason why some young people felt uncomfortable communicating on the Net.

### **Gains versus losses**

We have learned from the young people’s stories that there are up and down sides of Internet use. In order to gain a summary perspective on the value of the Internet to these young people we asked them how their lives would change without it. The vast majority indicated that life would be altered in a negative way, and that it would make life profoundly difficult. For a small number of young people life would continue unmarked and perhaps improve a little – several remarked they would probably get more study done, get fitter, or be cured of a perceived ‘addiction’ to Internet usage.

The responses were clearly linked to how young people were currently positioned in regard to openness about their sexuality and connectedness to gay and lesbian networks. Those who were currently partnered and very comfortably open in Real Life about their sexuality largely viewed the purported loss of Internet services as ‘a bit annoying’ or relatively inconsequential, and felt other avenues such as phone and mail would largely make up for any losses. At the other end of the spectrum of opinion there was emphatic distress at such a thought. Terms such as ‘isolation’, ‘desperation’ and ‘loss’ were frequently used. Such responses were situated within a context where the Internet currently provided friendship, support, information and a sense of community that was clearly lacking in the Real Life situations of these young people. Despite significant proportions of them feeling good or great about their sexuality, they clearly depended on the support of their Virtual community to maintain or bolster these feelings of self acceptance and worth.

According to Billy, Craig, Lesley and Aaron, the realities of isolation and aloneness that had existed prior to Internet access would be re-established.

I dunno. If the Internet had never been invented: I would definitely be less informed...much much less. I would be more depressed. Doing worse at school. Be more stressed. I might not even be typing this right now, might have suicided,

totally cracking from the pressure. If starting from now I can't use it: I would be more depressed, lose my communication with others, feel lost. (Billy 17 years)

It would be heart breaking because I wouldn't really have any contact with any gay people because I have not really explored the gay scene yet. (Craig 18 years)

I'd be out of touch with the world beyond my miniscule enclave in Canberra, which would be very scary indeed (Lesley 21 years)

A LOT!!!! I'm not sure I would survive. My parents always threaten to take it away if I don't study but obviously they don't know im gay hence they don't know how much support I need. (Aaron 15 years)

Others used the question to reflect on what the Internet had meant for them in the past – how it had been of vital assistance in developing their current positive feelings about their sexuality and a sense of community. For this group, the loss of Internet services would be regrettable and difficult, perhaps significantly changing their lives, but not catastrophic. This was particularly true for those who were currently in relationships or who had established satisfying gay and lesbian friendship networks that were operational in Real Life contexts (ie. were not anonymous).

It would change greatly. I would lose contact with a lot of very important gay people who help me to deal with some of my problems. Without the net, I wouldn't have access to information about gay youth groups, help services and generally I would lose contact with the gay community altogether. This would not cause me to become suicidal or anything, for I have already matured and developed into a sexually aware person (thanks only to the net) so I would probably find it reasonably easy to network and get in contact with other gays, especially once I turned 18 and had the opportunity to be out in the "RL" gay scene. Removing the net NOW would not be as detrimental to removing it just before I started using it, because without contact through the net I would be an extremely different person, and possibly suicidal due to my confusion. (Lex 17 years)

I think my life wouldn't really change if I could no longer use the Internet but I think I would be a totally different person now if I had never been able to use it. It has allowed me to embrace my homosexuality even though I am not 'out'. It has allowed me to become unrepressed and I honestly think that if I had never had the Internet available to me then I would not be experiencing very good mental health, it has allowed me to accept and like the person that I am. (Will 17 years)

In summary, the Internet is a space in which young people can connect with each other in a way that is not possible (or safe) in Real Life and for most of them, the losses were clearly a small price to pay for the enormous benefits they received. The special nature of the Internet that allowed for a mix of

anonymity and intimacy produced an environment in which young people felt safe to reveal some of their deepest feelings and thoughts without fear of disapproval. Disapproval was less likely to be expressed on the Net, and when it was, it wrought less damage than did disapproval in Real Life. People on the Internet were thought to be less judgmental and so young people were more relaxed about talking about their feelings. The function of an ignore facility in which homophobic comments could be interrupted at the click of a button, anonymity, and the absence of a body meant that young people were less clearly defined targets of homophobia.

We learned from this study that the Internet is an invaluable resource for same sex attracted young people and one that they actively use. There were many examples of young people who received support and who were active in creating support for others who needed it. For the first time, young people developed a sense of community in which they felt that their contribution was valued and that they belonged.

Nor were young people uncritical Internet users. They were aware of the potential dangers to themselves on the Net and again, had a battery of strategies to keep themselves safe. They often made the comparison with a party or situation in Real Life in which they were far more likely to be exposed to danger than on the Net, including where alcohol and other drugs were concerned. In many ways they regarded the Internet as a safe rehearsal space for coming out, for friendship and for sex, which allowed them the chance to gain experience and confidence before they moved onto the Real Life stage.

Young people's experiences are strong evidence that their lives on the Net contribute to their health and wellbeing in Real Life. On the Net they learned to create safe spaces for themselves, they were affirmed and felt positive about their identities. Eventually this bled out into their Real Lives in which they felt confident to come out to their friends and families and to engage with Real Life discourses about same sex attraction. Being visible allowed them to connect with other like-minded young people and to garner support and community. When the Real World was hostile, young people always had their Net friends and communities to go back to for debriefing and support.

Finally, this research reveals little evidence to support fears about young people being victims in Cyberspace to predatory adults, or empty vessels to be filled with unsavoury information. These young people were active agents who used the Net to reconstruct their worlds both on and off line. In these new worlds they gained connection to community, were affirmed and accepted for their

difference and were able to act out on their sexual desires in a safer environment than their Real Worlds.

Sites are available which provide sexual health and sexuality information, contact with other SSAY through chat-rooms and email lists, referrals for sexual and other health needs, web-based and Real Life social and other support groups. The Internet has the potential to provide a space for SSAY in which many of their needs can be addressed. Rather than filtering out important sexuality-based sites, we see potential for schools and other youth agencies to document and advertise them.

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