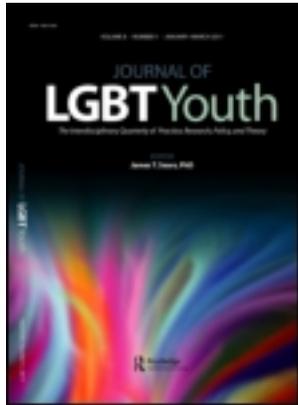


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The Internet As a Safety Net: Findings From a Series of Online Focus Groups With LGB and Non-LGB Young People in the United States

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The Internet As a Safety Net: Findings From a Series of Online Focus Groups With LGB and Non-LGB Young People in the United States

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Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth face special challenges during adolescence including stigma, alienation, and abuse which have been linked with social costs and negative health outcomes. The Internet has been shown to ameliorate the negative impacts of homophobia by providing access to friendships and support, information, romantic partners, and a gay community. In this qualitative study, internet use of LGB and Non-LGB young people were compared. The LGB young people were more adventurous in their internet use than non LGB young people, including meeting new people online. Findings have implications for adolescent health professionals and policy makers.

KEYWORDS *Sexual minority youth, Internet, adolescent sexuality, homophobia, sexual attraction*

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) young people are isolated and marginalized by the greater adolescent and adult populations (Hillier et al., 2010; Ryan & Rivers, 2003). Feelings of depression and isolation, as well as stress from being stigmatized and abused, have been linked to mental

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health problems' (D'Augelli, 2002; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995), including higher rates in this group of suicidal thoughts and attempts (Anhalt & Morris, 1998; Coalition for Education on Sexual Orientation, 2005; Faulkner & Cranston, 1998; Fergusson, Horwood, & Beauvais, 1999; Hillier et al., 2010; McDaniel, Purcell, & D'Augelli, 2001; Remafedi, French, Story, Resnick, & Blum, 1998), alcohol and other substance use (Anhalt & Morris, 1998; California Safe Schools Coalition and 4-H Center for Youth Development, 2004; Coalition for Education on Sexual Orientation, 2005; Hillier et al., 2010), academic concerns (Anhalt & Morris, 1998; California Safe Schools Coalition and 4-H Center for Youth Development, 2004), and sexual risk behaviors (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002). These outcomes are not inevitable, however; most LGB young people manage to find buffers to protect them from the negative health outcomes of homophobia. The role of the Internet in this process is the focus of the present article—in particular, an exploration of the different ways that LGB and non-LGB young people use the Internet for friendship and support.

Supportive and accepting individuals in an LGB young person's life can be protective against the harmful effects of negative life experiences (Anhalt & Morris, 1998; D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998). Family connectedness and supportive adults are not only associated with a lower risk for mental health problems and suicidal ideation but also act as a buffer against the negative outcomes of victimization (Eisenberg & Resnick, 2006; Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2005). Similarly, school-based supports such as teachers can moderate the negative effect of victimization on school performance (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). Not all LGB youth have access to social support, however. Almost one-third (32%) of harassed LGB young people in the United States do not report harassment to school staff because they do not think the situation would be addressed (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006), and only 19% in a recent national study of LGB young people in Australia felt their school was supportive of their sexuality (Hillier et al., 2010). Most U.S. LGB young people report that they do not have or do not attend community-based groups or services for LGB youth (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006).

Where support is not available offline, the Internet may be a tool for creating and maintaining positive, close relationships for LGB youth. In general, adults who report challenges with in-person social situations and relationships say the Internet is a valuable resource for social support (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). There is evidence that LGB young people are more likely to receive support from people online versus offline (Hillier, Horsely, & Kurdas, 2004), and health information found online is a reason cited for choosing to seek out social support in the face-to-face environment (Ybarra & Suman, 2008).

Research about the romantic relationships of sexual-minority youth is lacking (Diamond, 2003). What exists suggests that these young people are less likely than their heterosexual peers to have romantic relationships during

adolescence (Diamond & Dube, 2002), yet the relationships that do occur are often not publicly acknowledged by either partner (Diamond, 2000; Diamond & Dube, 2002). The Internet may be used by LGB adolescents as a means of seeking out romantic partners for at least two reasons: the pool of potential partners is greatly expanded by the Internet; and it is easier and safer for these young people to approach a potential romantic partner online because even asking for a telephone number face-to-face can be regarded as inappropriate by some (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Hillier et al., 2004; Maczewski, 2002). How LGB young people use the Internet similarly to and differently from non-LGB young people and how they develop and pursue romantic relationships and sexual liaisons needs further study (Alexander, 2004; Bauermeister et al., 2010; Brown, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1996).

The Internet is an ever-changing environment that has great potential to aid LGB youth in exploration of their sexuality (Alexander, 1997; Egan, 2000) and to revolutionize how they navigate romantic and sexual relationships (Crowley, 2010; Hillier & Harrison, 2007). This article explores the differences in how LGB youth, compared to non-LGB youth, derive benefit from the Internet, particularly in regard to social support, trusting friendships, romantic relationships, and the opportunity to be out with others.

METHOD

This research was reviewed and approved by Chesapeake Institutional Review Board (IRB). It is possible that obtaining consent from a parent may have inadvertently revealed to parents a young person's sexual orientation or gender identity. As such, a waiver of parental consent was obtained for all focus group participants.

Participants

Three focus groups were conducted online: two with LGB youth ($n = 18$; $n = 15$) and one with non-LGB youth ($n = 26$). LGB youth were oversampled because they were the minority group of interest. The 33 LGB youth who expressed interest in the study were divided into two groups to ensure manageable group sizes that would more likely result in a productive online discussion. The main aim of the LGB-specific focus groups was to identify the major benefits and major threats to being online for LGB youth. The main aim of the non-LGB group was to serve as a comparison between online experiences and exposures for non-LGB and LGB youth.

Recruitment

All youth completed a screener over the telephone that queried age, grade, type of school (e.g., private), type of community (e.g., urban), parents'



FIGURE 1 Example of Focus Group Bulletin Board Layout (color figure available online).

education, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and Internet use. Samples were purposefully balanced to represent a variation across all of these characteristics.

Harris Interactive (HI) managed the online focus groups, including recruitment and moderation. This international survey research firm was chosen instead of managing the groups internally so that we could have access to a national sampling frame and because HI had a proprietary software program designed specifically to facilitate online bulletin board focus groups, as well as extensive experience conducting these types of groups. All researchers were in communication with moderators and could read the online discussions at all times. Figure 1 is the schedule of questions for the three online discussions.

LGB YOUTH

Participants for the LGB focus groups (Group 1: nine young women and nine young men; Group 2: seven young women and eight young men) were recruited through the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network's (GLSEN)¹ National Student Leadership Team. An e-mail was sent to the leadership team

explaining the purpose of the focus group and providing contact information for staff at HI. Eligibility requirements included being 13 to 18 years of age and having used the Internet at least once in the past six months. In order to increase the recruitment list, we used a snowball approach, which is effective in reaching hard-to-reach populations (Heckathorn, 1997; Watters & Biernacki, 1989). Friends of the leadership team were provided with a toll-free number to contact HI if they were interested.

NON-LGB YOUTH

The heterosexual participants in Group 3 (14 young women and 12 young men) were recruited using HI's Harris Poll Online Panel (HPOL) database. Potential participants received an e-mail invitation to participate in the study. If they were interested, they contacted Harris by e-mail and then were screened by phone by a trained interviewer. Eligibility requirements included being 13 to 18 years of age and having used the Internet at least once in the past six months.

Given that the recruitment techniques were slightly different, it may be that the non-LGB groups are a more diverse sample and perhaps more representative of non-LGB youth more generally. As well, the LGB youth may be more politically minded and thoughtful about how their sexual orientation impacts their daily life because they were recruited in relation to their association with GLSEN. On the other hand, because of stigma and discrimination, it may be that LGB youth are more likely to become politicized generally. Efforts made to balance all groups across geographic region, income level, and other factors attenuated some of the differences that otherwise may have resulted from these different recruitment methods.

Development of the Questions

The questionnaire was constructed in stages. An initial draft of the questionnaire was created following three content blocks: (1) history of use and current use; (2) use of the Internet for sexuality and friendships; and (3) risks and strategies for safety and activism. Topics were developed by a research team member based on the literature on LGB youth and youth Internet use (Anhalt & Morris, 1998; Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2000; Guan & Subrahmanyam, 2009; Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005; Mitchell & Ybarra, 2009; Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006). This questionnaire was then presented to the rest of the research team for further development and revision until all members felt the questions fully addressed the study aims. Finally, the questionnaire was piloted with young people and revised according. See Table 1 for the schedule of questions.

TABLE 1 Schedule of Questions for Online Discussions

Day	Online Discussion Board Topic of Conversation
1	<p>First online—age, place, circumstances</p> <p>Changes in Internet and use since first online</p> <p>Meaning of “going online”</p> <p>Range of devices and when and why used to go online</p> <p>Time spent, when and where online</p> <p>Circumstances when online—alone or with others—change in behavior and device according to this</p> <p>Favorite activities online</p> <p>Parental rules on Internet use; young person’s rules; changes in rules over time and place</p> <p>Importance of rules; changes in rules with age; impact of rules on wants and needs</p> <p>Rules in other places; getting around rules</p> <p>Use of filtering software</p> <p>Decisions about sharing personal information, photos, videos online</p> <p>Differences according to medium (e.g., Facebook, e-mail, who has access)</p> <p>Exclusively online friends and differences in support from online and offline friends</p> <p>Differences in ease of doing and saying things online and offline and why</p> <p>Changes in personality and behavior online and offline</p> <p>Where feel more comfortable—online or offline—and why</p>
2	<p>Own and friends’ favorite website and activities</p> <p>Access to health information up online; most important, helpful, and trustworthy sites</p> <p>Information that could not be found</p> <p>Differences between the sites in regard to use, parental and school permission</p> <p>Change in use of SNS over last year</p> <p>Main technology used to communicate with friends; best technology; different technology for different purposes</p> <p>Sites to meet new people; use of webcams; streaming webcams; uploading video from webcams</p> <p>Dating and relationships online; finding a boyfriend or girlfriend online; examples of this</p> <p>Advice about meeting people online; do’s and don’ts</p> <p>Reasons to meet new people online</p> <p>Difference between romantic relationships online versus in-person and types of people</p> <p>Examples of themselves or friends meeting online and then offline and why</p> <p>Process and strategies of meeting people from the Internet</p> <p>Sites that people are more likely to be able to use to meet people offline</p> <p>Different types of people and Internet use; use by 13- to 15-year-olds in comparison with older teens</p> <p>Different uses by girls and boys</p> <p>Main sites for boys; main sites for girls; girl-only sites; boy-only sites</p> <p>Use of the Internet to understand feelings of sexual attraction; examples and stories; how helpful or unhelpful</p>
3	<p>Feeling uncomfortable or unsafe online; talking with friends about it; feeling safe online and offline</p> <p>Strategies for keeping safe online; advice to someone about how to be safe online?</p> <p>Safety issues for different groups online</p> <p>Experiences of harassment or bullying online; disturbing sites online</p> <p>Being propositioned online; what happened; worrying about being in difficult situations online</p> <p>How did you feel; how did they find you?</p>

(Continued on next page)

TABLE 1 Schedule of Questions for Online Discussions (*Continued*)

Day	Online Discussion Board Topic of Conversation
	Regrets about behavior online; examples Effectiveness of the Internet as a tool for activism; ways that it has been used for positive change Usefulness of the Internet to look for a community of people who share similar interests? Usefulness of the Internet to increase connection with people offline? Best things about the Internet; worst things about the Internet Imagining life without the Internet—for better and for worse Biggest benefits and drawbacks of the Internet for teens

Procedures

Focus groups were conducted online via a bulletin board style format in May 2009. For the non-LGB group, a participant's first name and last initial were used to identify him or her in the discussion board; for the LGB groups, only first names were displayed on screen. No other information about them appeared on the discussion board. Also, respondents were instructed against posting any personally identifiable information, such as e-mail address or last name, on the boards. There was no indication that any of the participants knew one another.

The groups occurred over three days. Participants visited the bulletin board two to three times per day and responded to the moderator's questions and the comments of other study participants. The research team could log in to read the history of a dialogue chain and send private messages to the moderator for follow-up; however, at no time did anyone from the research team other than the moderator have contact with the participants.

Because these were discussion groups, it was possible for the discussion to move beyond the scope of the initial question. This happened on a number of occasions of relevance to this article. For example, in the LGB groups, the question about exclusively online friendships led to discussion about coming out online, but such discussion did not occur in the non-LGB group.

Analysis

The data were managed using Microsoft Excel version 7 so that strings of an individual's answers were available at the same time that answers across participants were visible. Researchers looked for differences and similarities in Internet use among individuals and groups. Data were read and analyzed horizontally (across groups and individuals in themes) and vertically (within groups and with individuals). Trends and themes were noted separately within each group (Bradley, Curry, & Devers, 2007). Attention also was paid to each individual and his or her style and experiences. For example, some young people were more adventurous Internet users, and others were more conservative. Finally, comparisons were made based on the answers across

the three groups. Strong interrater reliability was observed: 90% initially, and 95% after discussion of discrepancies.

Because this is qualitative research, no statistically significant differences were sought; rather, findings center on broad differences and impressions made through careful reading of the transcripts. Coders focused on differences in content between the groups. This included the meanings of young people's text, as well as the numbers who expressed similar views. Of importance also were the ways that young people positioned themselves and their sexuality in their narratives and how others reacted to them on- and offline. Differences in tone also were noted, for example, feelings that were expressed in responses such as confusion and certainty. Findings will use words such as *most* and *few*, and broad percentages are included to communicate overall strength of numbers of young people responding in different ways.

Overall, the LGB groups answered the questions in similar ways to each other and so, for the purpose of analysis and reporting, the two LGB groups were collapsed into one. The results section will refer either to the LGB or non-LGB participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of Groups

Participants came from Northeastern, Southeastern, Midwestern, Southwestern, and Western regions of the United States. LGB youth were more likely to come from the more conservative and religious Southeastern (21% versus 8%) and Southwestern (12% versus 8%) regions, and non-LGB from the more liberal Northeastern (31% versus 21%) and Western (27% versus 18%) regions (Keeter and Smith, 2006). They were in grades 10 through 12 with majority attending public schools. In terms of ethnicity, most were White/Caucasian, but the sample included a small number of Black/African American, Hispanic, and Asian participants. Males and females were almost equally represented in the groups by design. Also by design, all participants in the non-LGB group identified as "straight" while the non-LGB group identified as mainly "gay/lesbian" with a quarter "bisexual/pansexual"² or "queer."

There were no discernable differences between LGB and non-LGB groups in response to the majority of questions answered in the discussion board groups (see Table 1 for the interview schedule). For example, topics such as first use of the Internet, types of equipment used to access the Internet, patterns of use, favorite sites, and parental and personal rules were all answered similarly. However, differences emerged when discussion board topics moved to friendships online and offline, exploration of sexuality, social support, relationships, and meeting people from the Internet.

Online Friendships

Young people were asked: *Do you have friends that are exclusively online friends (friends you only talk to online)?* There were clear differences in responses of LGB and non-LGB young people to this question both in tone and content of the answers: 4 in 5 LGB young people, and only 1 in 5 of the non-LGB young people had exclusively online friends. For the LGB group, regular communication with exclusively online friends and meeting new online friends was a normal part of their lives. In contrast, non-LGB youth often were surprised and disturbed by the question. Responses such as “NO that is dangerous. NO, No and no” were not uncommon in this group. One non-LGB young man wrote: “I think it’s too risky to meet someone online because you don’t know their reasons, can’t see their face, it’s like a total stranger. .. so yea I guess it can be dangerous.” A non-LGB young woman wrote: “I don’t meet new people online in case they are kidnappers.”

Words such as *perv*, *stalker*, and *serial killer* were used by young people in the non-LGB group to describe potential online contacts. Not one of the LGB young people mentioned these possibilities. There were, however, three young women in the non-LGB group who stood out from the rest of their group in this response. One refuted the danger discourse: “Yes of course it is dangerous. Everything in this world is dangerous. .. but that doesn’t mean you can’t have a safe online friend. I have had one for many years and I feel very safe and protected. I trust this person and we support each other through a lot.” Despite her expressed trust for this online friendship, this young woman remained wary. She continued: “But even so I have not given out any information that may harm me and I plan to keep it that way.” Another non-LGB group member noted as being distinctive from the rest of the group in her response wrote: “I have no friends that are exclusively online friends. I receive more support from people my own age I see in person and same with adults.” Of those non-LGB young people who mentioned online friends, several were originally offline friends who had moved to another state or country with whom they kept in touch online. For example: “Well I’m friends with people from other countries because of exchange programs but I don’t have any true friends that I only speak to online. I’ve met them all in person first.” By far the overwhelming response from the non-LGB group discussed the potential danger in such relationships.

In contrast to the small number of non-LGB young people who had exclusively online friends, most in the LGB group had made some friends online, with many continuing the friendships for several years. Numbers of exclusively online friends ranged from 1 to 10 per participant. Although no responses to the question about online friends indicated shock at the idea, the notion of risk did come up occasionally. One young man wrote: “I only have maybe 4 exclusively online friends that I do not know outside the Internet. I used to have many more but that was when I was careless.” This

young man's mention of a less circumspect use of the Internet in the past is echoed frequently in the LGB group responses. It refers to these young people's first realizations of sexual difference at a time when they had told no one and so had turned to the Internet to satisfy a strong need for information and support.

These online friendships served a number of different functions for the LGB young people. For example, two young women had made friends on Facebook with people who would be going to the same college after high school graduation: "I've met many friends who are going to the same college as me next year who I have only met online." Similar to the non-LGB group, some online friends were not exclusively online friends. They lived in other states and countries and the Internet allowed them to continue the friendships when distance would have made it more difficult offline. Noted one respondent: "I definitely have exclusive online friends but that's because of the distance."

The main difference between the non-LGB and LGB groups, it seemed, and the main reason for LGB youth having online friends, was that it was possible to find like-minded individuals and get support online that was not available from offline friends. This was not something mentioned by the non-LGB group and relates specifically to stigma and marginalization. For example, one young man wrote about finding similar others online:

I find it easier to discuss my sexuality online than in real life. In real life I generally share that information with girls or other Gay or Bi guys. For whatever reason, I've always been scared to tell straight guys. Online the people that generally migrate to my profile seem to be gay or bi... and I have no issue.

One LGB young woman also commented on the ease of talking about personal and controversial issues online:

I think it's much easier to talk about certain things online such as relationships, sexual things and compliments and insults. It's easier to talk to someone when you don't have to see the physical reaction and think of a response right away.

Reduced concerns about the impacts of stigma and judgment online, in contrast to offline, were mentioned by many young people in the LGB group. This was in part because of the perceived anonymous nature of the Internet. One responder noted: "We aren't worried about rejection or judgment if we can't see the person we're talking to." Others mentioned that they were more likely to be "out" online because it was easier and safer, and this is one example of different directions of discussion across different groups. As one LGB young man wrote:

Coming out in person is so awkward because you never know how that person is going to react. Online is easier because if someone isn't OK with it, you don't have to see the disgust on his face.

In response to several people in the LGB group mentioning coming out online, the moderator then asked the LGB young people whether they found it easier to come out online than offline. Because LGB youth are assumed heterosexual in most aspects of their lives, they must actively refute this if they do not want to be seen as straight. This is not a single event; coming out is a continual process that happens over and over again and takes courage and energy, because young people never know what reaction they will receive to their disclosure (Harrison, 2003). In regard to finding it easier to come out online, many replied in the affirmative. One young woman wrote: "I pretend to be all hetero offline and online I'm free to be me."

Being more out online was possible because of the integral differences in online media previously mentioned, such as anonymity and the safety of not meeting in person. Another LGB young woman reported: "I'm a little more out online than offline. It's easier just to display your sexuality online than to explain it to everyone in person." In this excerpt the young woman is referring to the way she is able, on her networking sites, to include her sexual preference in her description about herself; once this has been done, then she is out for all time—or until she changes her profile details. One young man wrote: "I will blatantly throw out [online] that I'm gay and if anyone is rude about it they just aren't my friends. Versus school if you don't know I'm gay, you don't know a big part of my life."

Throughout all discussion groups, the safety of the Internet in comparison with offline was a common theme. As one LGB youth explained: "Yes I can totally act all gay and they don't care. I can let them see parts of me that I am too afraid to show those around me for fear of being hurt."

Although both LGB and non-LGB groups mentioned risk, safety, and danger, their sentiments about where the danger was situated were very different. In general, online was regarded as more dangerous by non-LGB youth, whereas offline was more dangerous for LGB youth. LGB young people mentioned two types of risk offline. The first, and perhaps the more important, was social risk in which they stood to lose family and friendships. The second was physical hurt in which they could be assaulted or have their possessions stolen or destroyed. In both cases, there were fewer risks online than offline, especially before these young people were out offline. For LGB young people, it is far easier to find similar others and, if that fails, easier to remove a person from their lives when they are online—and therefore far less risky to present their sexuality online.

There was support in these data for a temporal pattern of Internet use from the time of a young person's first realization of sexual difference and feeling alone with the information to the time of coming out and gathering

real-life friends. Accordingly, the Internet was more important for making friends and gaining information and support at the time of realization of difference or before a young person came out offline. One young woman wrote: "I chatted a little when I was younger with others of my own age who were also questioning and it was really helpful to give me support and to share stories with." Another confirmed the importance of the Internet when she was coming out: "As I was coming out, the Internet was an amazing resource for meeting welcoming and supportive people, as well as for meeting other freshly out people that I could talk to." Another young woman reflected: "It doesn't apply as much now cause I'm like 90% out, but I used to talk almost exclusively about being gay online because I was too freaked out to talk about it in person." The importance of the Internet to young people who were not out offline was often stressed, as in the following response:

It depends less on whether they're LGBT or not and more on whether they're out or not. LGBT kids my age who are not out [in real life] tend to seek help and show their identity more online... In that way the Internet helps LGBTs my age. It feels safer being out online.

Support From Friends Online

Both LGBT and non-LGBT groups were asked if they received more support from online or offline friends. The term *support* or *social support* is commonly used in the literature in research with LGBT youth. In particular, LGBT youth often experience a lack of support about their sexuality and so most responses that are not rejection are looked on as support (Detrie & Lease, 2007). Support also is associated with better mental health outcomes in this group (Hillier et al., 2010).

Because so few non-LGBT group members made new friends online, this question was less relevant to them and some reiterated the danger theme: "I don't meet new people online in case they are kidnappers." The few non-LGBT who had online friends overwhelmingly reported having more support from their offline friends. The following example from a non-LGBT young woman is typical: "I do have friends that I talk to only online. I receive a lot more support from the people I see in person."

Those in the LGBT group were divided on whether they received more support and where they felt more comfortable, and this may be related to the degree to which they were out offline. The following young man's response represents a typical answer from the more than half of LGBT participants who felt they received more support online: "I feel more comfortable being myself online because I know the people that I talk to are accepting. Being gay in my area isn't always accepted though I am still myself as much as I can be here." For this young man and others in his situation, the only safe

option was to be out with people online and to enjoy the support of online friends. For those young people who were not out offline, the Internet was an important place where they could be out and safe:

Online I can't be hurt. I will never meet these people out of the world wide web. I don't have to deal with any aftermath. I don't have to stress over how I am going to tell my best friend since I was 8 that I am gay. I don't have to deal with that online. It makes me feel so much better.

One young woman wrote about practicing coming out online before she did it offline: "Yep. I was out online completely except to people I also knew irl [in real life] for months before I actually came out. I sorta used coming out online as practice." The idea that LGB youth use the Internet to practice expressing aspects of their sexuality before they do it offline is consistent with prior research among Australian adolescents. In that study, six different aspects of sexuality were practiced online by same-sex-attracted young people before they moved offline, including coming out, having sex, being gay, and being part of a gay community (Hillier & Harrison, 2007).

Meeting People Offline From the Internet

LGB and non-LGB young people were asked if they had ever met anyone offline that they had first met on the Internet and how this happened. Given the differences in meeting new people on the Internet between LGB and non-LGB participants, it is not surprising that there were strong group differences in answers to this question. More than half of LGB young people had met someone from the Internet face-to-face. Again findings are consistent with previous Australian research that found that 75% of over 200 same-sex-attracted Internet users had met someone offline from the Internet. Despite young people having many strategies to keep them safe—for example, taking a friend and meeting in a public place—this practice remains concerning. It is popular with LGB youth because they feel supportive offline friendships are harder to find (Hillier et al., 2004). The following responses from a young man and a young woman were typical: "I've met several people offline after meeting them first online. The majority of people I have dated I met this way," and "I have met a few people who I've met online in person."

In contrast, only three young people in the non-LGB group—the same three women mentioned previously—had met someone face-to-face from the Internet, and their responses also indicated that meeting people from the Internet was a normal thing for them to do: "I have met a couple people from online offline." One of these young women met men for sexual relationships:

My main reasons for this were for sexual relationships. . . . Most of the time, my intentions were just to talk to the person but in the end we

would meet up. I didn't meet up with everyone i spoke to though. What happened? well we would meet up in a public place, somewhere between my house and his. i would usually recognize them from their pictures online and from there we would talk and get to know each other. I no longer stay in contact with any of the guys i spoke to or saw. I kind of just used them at my own accord and discarded when necessary.

The majority of non-LGB youth had not met someone online and few knew anyone who had, whereas the majority of LGB youth had met people online for a range of reasons, including support, community, romance, sex and friendship.

Finding Romance Online

All young people were asked if they knew of anyone who had found a boyfriend or girlfriend online. In the LGB group the response was overwhelmingly in the affirmative. In contrast, the non-LGB group responded overwhelmingly in the negative. For LGB young people, it was a normal way to meet someone. To the non-LGB group, it was "creepy," "dangerous," "unsafe," "risky," "freaky," "not right," and "not smart." One non-LGB young woman responded: "No I don't. I think that is creepy actually, because you don't know if they're a child molester or something." A non-LGB young man stated: "No i do not. . . . i dont really hang out with people that find relationships with people they cant see. . . . i dont think thats right."

There were one or two exceptions in the non-LGB group, again from the same women who had met new friends online. For example:

This question i can relate to. I know of and have been a person who has found someone to date online. One of my former friends told me about this teenager hookup site and how she met a lot of guys there. Some days, these guys would pick her up from school and i got a chance to meet them. They seemed pretty nice so i decided to try out the site for myself.

In contrast to the non-LGB group, most of the young people in the LGB group had found romance online themselves or knew people who had. One LGB responder noted: "I know a lot of people who found a bf [boyfriend] or gf [girlfriend] online. I did twice." Another said: "Yes. I know of a lot of people my age who have met a SO [significant other] online. Sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn't."

One could speculate on a range of individual reasons why LGB youth are more likely to look for partners online. However, individual reasons do not take into account the systemic difficulties these young people face in dealing with stigma and finding friends they can trust and—even more

difficult—finding romance. This young woman encapsulated the problem for LGB youth well:

I met my most recent significant other online. We found each other actually through a mutual ex, whom I had also met online in a MySpace group dedicated to lesbians within my state. I know a lot of queer youth my age who have met significant others online, but no straight youth. Obviously, this is because we continue to live in a heteronormative society, and it is much easier for a teen to find a potential romantic counterpart of the opposite sex in their school than it is for a teen to find one of the same sex, even within their city.

Similar to this young woman, a number of young people found their girlfriend or boyfriend on a social networking site. This led to text messaging, telephoning, and, for some, finally meeting in person, as was the case for this young man: “They just added me as a friend and then we started talking. Then we started talking on the phone and then we met.”

Other sites mentioned for meeting were a LGB youth site, chat rooms such as the ones found on Manhunt (a dating site), and gaming sites. Most young people described positive experiences and some relationships were ongoing at the time of the current research: “Yes, my friend is engaged to a guy he met on Myspace. They were talking and they both left their boyfriends to be with each other.” However others, such as this young man, had experiences that ended unhappily: “My ex boyfriend, I met him on Myspace and went out with him and then he cheated on me with a woman, (even tho he said he was gay). That’s why I don’t like online dating.”

Young people who are LGB have far fewer options in finding romance do than heterosexual youth. They are in the minority; not only are there fewer potential partners offline but it can also be dangerous for them to initiate a relationship face-to-face because of stigma, and it is not always obvious if the person of interest is same-sex-attracted. The potential social cost offline of making a mistake is enormous; online, a same-sex partner can be found more easily and relatively safely. As mentioned previously, LGBs often feel safer online, and if mistakes are made they can retreat with no real social cost (Hillier et al., 2004). This is particularly important for LGBs who are not out offline and fear what could happen if they were. As mentioned there also is the risk of physical hurt offline. As one young woman commented: “Nobody can physically injure you on the computer.”

Exploring Feelings and Finding Information About Sexual Attraction

All young people were asked: *Have you used the Internet to help you understand your feelings of sexual attraction?* Almost all young people in the LGB group answered in the affirmative. The following examples are from the LGB group:

Yes. At first I would search anything about homosexuality and read tons of sites for hours.

I went to Google and typed in "how do I know if I'm gay?"

I did about four years ago. I searched for articles on sexuality. . . . I just read and looked at things. It helped me realize I was not alone. I wasn't bad or wrong or sick. I am just human. It helped me come to terms with who I was and am today.

I asked people when I played video games. I asked if this or that was normal, of course some teased me about it and others took it more seriously and helped me through some tough times.

Young people in the LGB group used the Internet to confirm their feelings and learn about same-sex attraction. They also used it to find others like them; to find discourses beyond the ones that positioned them as sick, bad, and unnatural; and to get support in tough times. In contrast, non-LGB young people were confused by the question. All but two answered in the negative. Of these two, one wrote: "Yes I have used the Internet to help understand how I feel. I used to think I was bisexual but after reading some things I realized I was just curious." This young woman was one of the three non-LGB young women who had friends online and who had met someone from the Internet. For the rest of the non-LGB group, the answers expressed some surprise, for example: "What do you mean? No. This is an odd question" and "No can honestly say I haven't."

One young man in the non-LGB group who had not used the Internet to explore his sexual feelings wrote:

From what I can remember and if I understand the question correctly, I do not believe I have ever used the internet to understand my feelings of sexual attraction. Since I am straight and this is considered the norm in our culture I just accepted my feelings and moved on.

This question represented a disruption for many in the non-LGB group, and they were surprised by it. From their perspectives, their sexual attractions were normal and therefore needed no explanation or exploration. For the LGB group respondents, whose sexual attractions were regarded as transgressive, the Internet satisfied their need for explanations, information, contact with similar others, and finding support.

CONCLUSION

LGB young people used the Internet differently from their heterosexual peers in regard to friendships, relationships, romance, and sexual exploration. In part because they had fewer options, they were more likely to engage in behaviors usually denoted as risky, such as meeting people online; they also used the Internet in ways non-LGB youth deemed dangerous. Moreover,

some of the activities in which LGB young people were involved (e.g., finding romance online) were regarded as foolhardy and in bad taste by those in the non-LGB group. However, those behaviors that were regarded as untenable for the non-LGB group were regarded as quite normal and useful for most youth in the LGB group. Indeed, the differences in the LGB group's Internet uses are mirrored in those areas that we know LGB young people are often deprived in their offline lives: safe spaces to explore their sexuality, finding other young people like them, accepting and supportive friendships, same-sex romance, and information about same-sex relationships and safe sex.

It has been suggested in the past that that the Internet may provide some protection for LGB young people from the social ills that homophobia imposes on them offline through providing online opportunities to rebuild community, find the support of like-minded friends, explore sexuality, and find romantic partners (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Russell, 2002). Although there has been evidence of the special importance of the Internet to LGB young people, for the first time, through an LGB and non-LGB comparison, these data show that it may be different for non-LGB youth. These data also demonstrate the importance of online support for LGB youth when they are most vulnerable: before they are out and have the chance to garner support offline. Young people talked about the particular importance of the Internet when they first realized their sexual difference and before they were out offline, especially when they lived in conservative communities. However, when young people had friendship and support offline, the Internet often lost some of its importance in these areas.

Also of importance, the Internet provided information about same-sex attraction and sexual health that was not available offline in sex-education classes or from parents. Until schools ensure the curriculum is inclusive, the Internet will continue to fill this need.

It could be argued that this research is limited by differing recruitment techniques for LGB (e.g., snowball recruitment through GLSEN contacts) and non-LGB participants (recruitment among HPOL members), which may have resulted in more politically aware and liberal LGB youth compared to the larger LGB population. Nonetheless, the LGB groups included many youth living in more conservative states (e.g., 21% from the South, 12% from the Midwest); the non-LGB group contained youth from less conservative states (e.g., 31% from the Northeast, 27% from the West) (Keeter & Smith, 2006). This diversity of representation across the country should attenuate some influence that differential recruitment had on the two samples. Perhaps more influential was the snowballing recruitment strategy for the LGB group, which may have led to including youth who were less likely to have social outlets locally. For these young people internet use may be more about the need for friendship and approval than it is for their heterosexual peers who are more likely to have access to these offline.

With the increasing use of the Internet by young people, concerns have been raised about its safety (Finkelhor et al., 2000; Mitchell, Finkelhor, Jones, & Wolak, 2012; Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2001; Mitchell & Ybarra, 2009; Tynes, 2007; Wolak et al., 2006; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008; Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2007), the inappropriateness of some content, and the amount of time that young people spend on Internet-related activities. These concerns have been accompanied by an increase in surveillance and the introduction of software such as “Internet nannies” to restrict young people’s access and use (Ybarra, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Wolak, 2009). For LGB young people, whose offline lives are often hostile and unsafe, and who are often denied important information that they need for their safety, the Internet can be a welcome panacea that addresses questions about sexuality. School-based sexual health education classes are the most common source of sexual health information for adolescents. Given that 69% of LGBT youth report information relevant to their sexual orientation is not included in their sexual health curricula and 12% say it is discussed in a negative manner (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006), it seems likely that LGBT youth have large health information needs that they might be turning to the Internet to address. The Internet provides 24/7 access to information in an anonymous forum (Rideout, 2001; Ybarra & Eaton, 2005; Ybarra & Suman, 2008). Suggestions to caregivers to use monitoring software unwittingly place LGB youth in potential danger in their own homes, particularly if they have not come out—and have concerns about their safety if they do. More important, the beneficial role of the Internet must not be forgotten when policy decisions about access are being made.

NOTES

1. GLSEN is the leading U.S. national education organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all students. It has strong ties to school- and community-based groups.

2. The term *pansexual* refers to someone who is attracted to all gender identities and biological sexes, and in this study was therefore treated similarly to those identifying as bisexual.

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