

## **Expanding shrunken spaces, building strong connections: LGBT youth online**

### **I. Introduction**

The internet has been lauded for its ability to bring together often disparate groups of people who may not be able to find one another nearly as easily in offline contexts, including minority groups. This article examines the usage patterns of new media, specifically the internet, by one of these minority groups, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered teenagers. LGBT teens are marginalized in at least two basic ways: They are teenagers and thus not full citizens; and they are a sexual minority. What we have found using both qualitative and quantitative methods is that online communities and relationships, both interest -driven and friendship -driven, are central to the lives of LGBT youth for information gathering, friendship and the formation of romantic/sexual relationships.

Adults are profoundly anxious about what teens are doing online and these fears about the online world have dominated policy and popular culture discussions since the middle of the 1990s (Soderlund 2008). Policy makers, scholars and pundits have divided roughly into two camps around the topic of youth and new media: optimists or boosters and pessimists or detractors (Holloway and Valentine 2003; Thurlow and McKay 2003). Optimists tend to hype the educational (and economic) possibilities of increased media literacy, claiming that new media helps youth learn, makes them responsible citizens and augments their social lives (Holloway and Valentine 2003; Livingstone 2002). Pessimists are usually concerned about the same level of knowledge and use, arguing that new media renders teens more vulnerable to predators, leads to social isolation, ruins concentration and prematurely exposes youth to adult themes (Holloway and Valentine 2003; Livingstone 2002; Osgerby 2004; Thurlow and McKay 2003).

## **II. Research on Teens, New Media and Sexuality**

For teens, the online world has quickly become a primary venue through which to engage in youth culture and the developmental tasks associated with adolescence, such as the formation of identity, autonomy, intimacy and sexuality (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield and Tynes 2008). Their daily activities and social worlds now orbit around new media and new media practices such as cell phones, instant messaging, posting and watching online videos, and social networking (Rideout, Roberts and Foehr 2005). Indeed as American social life becomes increasingly wired, so too do contemporary teen cultures (Ito 2005; Montgomery 2000). In fact, youth spend more time with media than any single other activity besides sleeping (Roberts and Foehr 2008). With the personalization of media as well as its miniaturization, youth can stay continually plugged in with laptop computers, cell phones and handheld devices. For young people, however, this “new media” does not feel “new” because they have used it for most of their lives (Oksman and Turtainen 2004; Biocca 2000; Osgerby 2004). This generation of teens is more likely to engage with new media than their parents, often integrating new media devices and practices into their social worlds in ways which are invisible to adults (Oksman and Turtainen 2004). For most young users the web is not an alternative world, a virtual reality or some sort of technological subculture (Abbott 1998), it is simply another (seamless) way for them to connect with their friends and peers (Osgerby 2004).

Youth use these sites to stay in contact with friends they already have and to make plans to hang out (Lampe, Ellison and Steinfield 2006; Lenhart et al 2007). In other words, these online practices augment teens' already existing social ties, more than they extend them to unknown people (Lenhart and Madden 2007; Ito et al 2009). Contrary to popular belief, most teens do not post an inordinate amount of personal information online (Hinduja and Patchin 2007). In fact, between 40% and 66% of teens who have a profile on a social network site have limited access to their profiles (Hinduja and Patchin 2007; Lenhart and Madden 2007). Given that a primary focus of adolescent culture is friendship, love, romance and sexuality (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield and Tynes 2008), it is little surprise that teens have quickly put new media to use in these pursuits. Friends and social circles provide “opportunities to meet and interact with romantic partners, to initiate and recover from such relationships, and to learn from one's romantic

experiences” (Collins and Sroufe 1999:126). Themes of dating and romance, so central to teen cultures, dominate teenagers’ new media practices as well (Lenhart and Madden 2007; Oksman and Turtainen 2004). Meeting potential love interests, flirting, solidifying, repairing and ending relationships all take place in these “networked publics” (Ito et al 2009).

Communication technologies have provided a more extensive private sphere in which youth can communicate primarily with age-clustered friends, acquaintances, and sometimes strangers outside of the purview of their parents or other authority figures. In their intimacy practices youth use three primary technologies—mobile phones (though many do still use home phones), instant messaging (IM), and social network sites. Mobile phones provide youth a way to maintain private channels of communication, enable continual contact, and also serve as a “leash” through which teens in a relationship keep “tabs on” one another. Teens use instant-messaging technologies to maintain frequent casual contacts with their intimates. Social network site profiles are key venues for representations of intimacy, providing a variety of ways to signal the intensity of a given relationship through both through textual and visual representations.

Digital technology extends youth's domestic spaces and engenders a sense of freedom, much like the car used to (Laegran 2002; Maczewski 2002). The online world has broadened teens' social horizons allowing youth to meet, stay in touch with and make plans with others, both globally and locally (Holloway and Valentine 2003; Laegran 2002; Osgerby 2004). New media are important tools for LGB teens who want to date, because “the biggest obstacle to same-sex dating among sexual minority youth is the identification of potential partners” (Diamond et al. 1999:187). It allows them to meet other teens for friendship or dating and affords them a level of independence, as it does for straight teens, to carry on relationships outside of the purview of their parents if need be (Hillier and Harrison 2007). There are several traits and activities that are more likely to put one in an uncomfortable online situation: youth most likely to be contacted by strangers about sexual topics are girls, those who have created a social network profile and those who have posted pictures online (Smith 2007). Youth who receive sexual solicitations were also more likely to report experiencing offline physical abuse, sexual abuse, and alienation from their parents (Wells and Mitchell 2008; Wolak et al. 2003).

The other group particularly at risk is LGBT teens. Research shows that gay and lesbian teens are often marginalized, harassed and isolated in high school settings (Pascoe 2007), especially in rural areas (Gray 2009), and don't have community or family support to the extent that straight identified teens do. If teens do have sex education, rarely does it address non-straight sexual identities, desires, or practices (Luker 2007). LGBT teens do less well in school, are more likely to use drugs and alcohol and report higher levels of emotional distress (Pearson et al 2007). As Hillier and Johnson (2007) put it, queer teens are “space deprived” and thus the internet is a place where they can do “sexuality work” that their peers can do offline. The internet reconfigures the social networks of many users and transform the composition of their social networks by changing communication and friendship patterns, enabling them to meet people they otherwise could not have met (di Gennaro and Dutton 2007). Earlier research on queer teens, especially students, positions them as victims, but recent scholarship underscores their agency (Blackburn 2007). Computer mediated communication can enhance and intensify interpersonal relationships, involving higher levels of disclosure and connection (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006; Walther, 1996; Wellman, 2004; Wellman & Gulia, 1999).

### **III. Methods**

This endeavor is a unique one that combines both quantitative and qualitative data from two separate studies.

The quantitative data comes from two sources. The first data source comes from an online survey distributed virally from November 2007 to September 2008 by Elise Paradis. 692 LGBT-identified youth from 46 different states in the United States filled this survey. More details about the survey and its methodology can be found in Paradis (in press). The results previously published by Elise established that pre-college LGBT youth had significantly different online experiences from their college counterparts. High-school and middle-school attending youth were significantly more likely than college-attending youth to use LGBT youth to socialize, be out or come out, to find support groups and formal counseling spaces, and to value shared spaces with allies. The current paper therefore uses only the data gathered about the pre-college population (aged

14 to 18,  $n = 381$ ), who answered the survey. We believe this approach makes the qualitative and quantitative data sources more comparable.

The second quantitative data source is data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project Parents & Teens Survey, 2006 edition. Data was obtained through telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 935 teens age 12 to 17 years-old and their parents living in continental United States telephone households. Statistical results are weighted to correct known demographic discrepancies. The margin of sampling error for the complete set of weighted data is  $\pm 3.7\%$  (Lenhart, 2006).

There is just over a year of lag between both surveys: Elise’s survey was conducted mostly in 2008, while the Pew Internet survey was conducted in 2006. Some of the differences in findings could be attributed to this time lag, especially with the rise of Facebook and Twitter. Furthermore, the Pew sample is randomly selected, while Elise’s sample is constructed virally, diffused by online and offline LGBT communities, college-based LGBT centers, and the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). Because there are few alternative sampling methodologies available to access the LGBT youth population, and the U.S. Census does not record information on gender or sexuality beyond the Man / Woman dichotomy, the comparison appears to us to be as good as it can get.

The qualitative data is drawn from a study entitled “Living Digital: Teens and Technology,” conducted by C.J. Pascoe and Christo Sims in conjunction with the Digital Youth Project. The Digital Youth Project comprised 20 qualitative case studies of youth’s use of new media. The case studies included 737 interviews, 28 diary studies, 5194 observation hours, and the analyses of 10,468 online user profiles, 15 online discussion groups, and 389 videos. Pascoe and Sims conducted interviews with 81 teens from northern California, Philadelphia and New York City about their use of new media in their intimacy practices. The interviews were conducted either in person, over an instant messaging program or through a video chat. The respondents ranged in age from 14 to 19 years old. Out of these 81 respondents, ten identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered. While ten respondents is a small sample size from which to make claims, their experiences are combined with those of the teenagers from Elise’s study, who expressed themselves freely in many of the open-ended questions in the survey. When

comparing their experiences to those of the 71 other straight-identified teenagers whom we interviewed, it is clear that the online world plays a different role for them in terms of community, friendship, romance and dating.

Quotes have not been edit for typographical errors, in order to preserve youth’s original means of expressing themselves.

#### **IV. LGBT Youths’ New Media Use**

We found that teens use online venues to gather information and resources about gender and sexual identities as well as to initiate and sustain as friendship, community and sexual or romantic relationships. These findings held true across qualitative and quantitative data. While all teens are increasingly using new media, it seems that youth in our sample are slightly heavier new media users than the average American teenager. In the 2006 Pew Survey, 93% of youth claimed that they were using the Internet at least occasionally. We can suppose that 100% of the youth in our survey use the Internet, since they were recruited to fill it on the Internet, and as such suppose that either our sample of users is biased towards heavier Internet users, or LGBT youth are heavier users than the youth population at large. In the Pew Survey, 61% of youth claimed that they went online daily (34% are online several times a day), and another 28% of youth were online weekly. In our sample, youth reported about 5 hours of time spent online on average, per day.

Although few questions in the Pew Internet and American Life Project Survey are comparable with the data gathered from Elise’s online survey of LGBT youth, both asked whether youth use chatrooms and social networking sites. We can use answers to these questions to compare the prevalence of use of certain online features across samples. Chi-square tests, which compare actual data against predicted data based on a random distribution of answers, help compare populations and their behavior or characteristics. Table 1 below shows stark differences in youth’s involvement with others online, based on chi-square tests by LGBT status (degree of freedom = 1). We see, first, extremely significant differences in the patterns of use of chatrooms. Whereas 49.3% of the youth in our restricted sample of LGBT youth use chatrooms, only 18% use them in the Pew sample (Chi-Square = 132.075, df = 1,  $p < 0.0000$ ). Similarly, whereas a full 89.2% of

youth in our sample use social networking sites (such as Facebook or MySpace), 55% of youth in the Pew sample do (Chi-Square = 138.062,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.0000$ ).

--- TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE ---

It could be argued that our youth are much greater users of the Internet than the population of youth at large by virtue of our sampling method. We checked our results for robustness by looking at the youth who used the Internet two hours a day or less ( $n=30$ ).<sup>i</sup> Chi-Square tests were significant with this subsample of youth, both for chatroom usage and social networking site usage (Chi-Square = 19.968,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.0000$  and Chi-Square = 14.958,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < 0.0005$ , respectively). Clearly, LGBT youth are much more involved in online communities, be they chatrooms or social networking sites, than is the general population, and results are robust across level of Internet use.

### **A. Information Gathering**

All teens, including LGBT teens, are increasingly turning to the internet for purposes of gathering information. Teens often feel uncomfortable consulting physicians, peers or other adults for information about sexuality because of their concerns about confidentiality (Rideout 2002; Suzuki and Calzo 2004; Curry 2005). In a context where families often fail in their socially prescribed “role” to provide sex education to their children, where sex education is reduced to abstinence-only education, and where traditional publishers provide scant sex education resources for youth, teens rely on new media to get information about intimate questions pertaining to gender, sexuality and relationships (Levine 2003; Alexander 2004). They use the internet to find information on a range of health topics (Gray and Klein 2006), but also to identify LGBT fiction (Rothbauer 2004). The internet offers teens unprecedented access to information about sexuality in a convenient and confidential way (Gray and Klein 2006; Harvey et al 2008). In fact, 25% of adolescents acquire some or a lot of sexual health information online (Tolani and Yen 2009).

In fact, because they often lack information about non-heterosexual identities, practices and health concerns in offline contexts, especially in terms of sex education (Luker 2007; Alexander 2004; Levine 2003), queer teens are increasingly turning to the

internet for information about being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered, especially to find health and social resources.

The LGBT teens in Elise's survey reported that they used new media to search for LGBT information. 86.9% of respondents claimed using the Internet to access LGBT-related contents; these youth reported an average of 3 hours daily accessing LGBT-specific contents. When asked how often they use LGBT environments for a varied set of purposes, 78.8% of sampled youth claimed they used them to find information at least once a month, and 51.1% claimed they went online to ask questions at that same frequency. Qualitative coding of the "number one reason why" LGBT youth "use LGBT online environments" found that an overwhelming number of youth are looking for a sense of belonging and understanding, and go online to socialize, the third most important reason youth cited was to gain information.

Health-related topics were of particular interest to our respondents. On a 5-pt scale from "not at all" to "extremely" important, the average rating youth gave LGBT-specific health information was 3.28 (s.d. 1.30, between moderately and very important), with as many as 47.7% of sampled youth rating it as "very" or "extremely" important. In comparison, data from the 2006 Pew survey tells us that 28% of American youth say they use the Internet to find health, dieting, or physical fitness information. While the data are not directly comparable, they nevertheless provide an indication of the scale of the phenomenon, especially since the question in the LGBT survey was more specific than the one in the Pew survey: LGBT youth clearly use the Internet for information gathering purposes to a greater extent.

Devin, a transgendered 14 year -old in New York City is a good example what this sort of information seeking looks like. Devin discovered the definition of "transgendered" online, "I knew what LGB meant but never the T. So I found [out] it was trans and I asked questions about being trans and things of that sort." He told me that he Googled LGBT to find out what the T meant, "Just like I googled FTM treatment." Devin used the \$25 payment he received for participating in the project to purchase binders online saying that they were "really hard to find" and that it was "easier to get one online then it is to go to a store." He said that his "new research theme" is finding a way to procure testosterone and administer it at the correct dosages.



Other teens look for information online about being gay. Even though he said he wasn’t “active in any kind of gay community online,” Adam told me that “there was a sexuality section of a teen help site that I visited on and off for a while.” The site was called TeenHelp.org and he found it to be a wealth of information about being gay and specific social issues that accompany that identity.

Given the importance of LGBT youth’s informational needs, the availability and quality of online resources on topics that are of interest to them seem critical.

## **B. Relating to others**

One of the main uses of new media by teenagers is to maintain friendships and participate in their social groups on an ongoing basis. “Engaging with social media is important for developing and maintaining friendships” (Ito et al 2009: 79). For LGBT teens this is equally if not more important. They seem to use it more frequently and differently to maintain friendships and craft community.

While Hillier and Johnson (2007) argue that LGBT teenagers are “space deprived,” our respondents reported if not robust resources and community, certainly some of both. A majority of the youths in the survey sample (55.2%) mentioned being part of an offline LGBT community and as many as 62.5% mentioned being part of an online LGBT community. Interestingly, 5% said there was a GSA in their middle school, but 63.5% had a GSA at their high school. A slim majority reported that they had ties with a supportive non-family adult, as 58.5% said they had an adult to talk to about their LGBT identity at their school. The correlation between having an adult to talk to in school and the presence of a GSA was high and highly significant ( $r = 0.358, p < 0.01$ ). Thus we would like to refine the notion of space deprivation by pointing out that a majority of LGBT teens seem to have at least some offline resources either in the form of an organized peer club or a supportive school based adult.

While many LGBT teens do have caring adults or organized school resources to turn to, for the 30-40% of teens who have anemic offline online social ties, the internet is full of important resources. As many as 41.5% of respondents in Elise’s survey noted that they only feel “moderately” safe as LGBT youths in their offline communities, and 38.5% of youth are not “out” to their parents. Devin, for instance, shared with me how

profoundly frustrating it was to not find community offline. He told me he has one friend who is trans, who has an extremely supportive family, “it’s so much easier for him, he has had his top done.” This was in distinct opposition to Devin’s experience. Devin says “I envy him at times” because his family is so supportive. Devin met him at summer camp for kids who are or come from LGBTQ families. His teacher who was a lesbian told him about it. However, he says he lost that ally when he came out as trans in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. He says that he continues to have a hard time getting any of his teachers, including that one, to use the correct pronouns and name. He describes camps as “supportive and people at camp helped be not be afraid to be myself. He told me that this friend “Lee helped me a lot while coming out.” Lee lives an hour away so Devin says “I ever see him” and “we talk whenever he is online.

These online social ties are also important in less dramatic ways. Queer youth who went to college, like other teens, used social network sites to get to know other members of their entering class. As Alissa, a 19 year old college student illustrates, it also helped to have a ready-made gay community that was often missing in high school. She told me that it was exciting to use Facebook to “getting to know who all the gay girls were.” This is significantly different than what we heard from straight teens who, like John, a college freshman, indicated that he was “disappointed” or found it “awkward” to meet people at college whom he had “friended” before arriving.

53.6% of them go online more than once a month to meet other LGBT people to socialize, something that one fifth (20.9%) of them never do. Youth’s answers to the question of how often they use the Internet for such purposes proposes a more nuanced appreciation of the data. Indeed, as Table 2 indicates, 71.6% of youth never go on LGBT sites to meet people they can then meet offline, and a mere 7.1% go online for such reasons more than once a month. This suggests that while youth do go online to meet others, they would prefer to meet people offline if possible.

Unlike straight teens, LGBT teens are less likely to see anything “weird,” “creepy” or strange with meeting people online for friendship (or for relationships for that matter) (Boyd, 2008; Ito et al. 2009). Elise’s survey asked: “If you meet people that you like online, how often do you try to meet them offline?” and “These days, how often do you use LGBT online environments to meet people you can then meet offline?” A

distribution of answers to both questions can be found in Table 2 below. What we see is a clearly bimodal distribution of responses when it comes to meeting “strangers” offline: about one quarter (25.6%) of respondents say they never try to meet offline the people they meet online if they have come to like them; just under a third of respondents (32.4%) claim to “always” do, and another fifth (18.9%) claim to try to meet them “most of the time.” A substantial share of LGBT youth do not seem to find serious issues with meeting offline “strangers” they meet online: more than 50%, when they like the person, try to meet them offline most of the time or always. Many of them have never met those “strangers” offline. This may be because they are too shy to express their intentions to meet others offline, because they actually do not go online for these reasons, or because they have stringent criteria for deciding whom they would choose to meet.

--- TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE ---

These patterns take an interesting twist when checked against youth’s responses to an open-ended question about their experiences meeting offline someone they first met online: an appreciable number of youth responded with variations of “it hasn’t happened yet.” Notice the use of “yet.” LGBT youth are open to the idea, but appear to be careful in choosing who they meet.

In their responses to that same question, surveyed youth mentioned having found connection, friendship and community through the Internet. Connection with “someone like them,” whom they felt wouldn’t be judgmental, was highly praised. A 12th-grader lesbian from Texas wrote, for example: “It was a little awkward but we got along pretty well. I was able to talk to her about a lot of things that i didn't feel like i could with my other friends.” A mixed-race, bisexual woman 12<sup>th</sup> grader from Arizona wrote that: “They turned out to be the nicest, most accepting person ever and is one of my best friends to this day.” Other youth had mixed feelings about the connection they developed with a person they first met online:

we had a very nice evening and continue to keep in contact with each other and see each other regularly. im not sure if this will turn into a romantic relationship but i hope it will. if it doesnt in the end i think we will still end up being close friends. i feel kind of weird that i am so close

to someone i met online but usually it doesnt bother me because the companionship overrules the awkwardness, which slowly lessens each time we talk. i feel like we have been friends forever (homosexual / bisexual man 11<sup>th</sup> grader from Hawaii).

Clearly, the lives of today’s LGBT youth are built across the divide between the online and offline worlds. Youth develop connections, friendship and community using the Internet as a tool.

### **Online Communities**

Another way to investigate the extent to which LGBT youth use the Internet to meet others and to engage in community building is to look at their responses to the question: “Are you currently a member of an \*online\* LGBT community, a place where you interact with other people on a regular basis?” 62.5% of the youth in the survey answered “yes;” 27.4% answered “no;” and 10% answered “not anymore.” 81.4% of the youth who are part of LGBT online communities report visiting them once or more every week, indicating a substantial online presence and important commitment to these communities.

To evaluate which factors, if any, impact LGBT youth’s participation in online LGBT communities, we transformed the answers to this question into a binary variable where “yes” was coded as 1, “no” was coded as 0. “Not anymore” answers were dropped. We ran binary logistic regressions on this dichotomous variable, and used a variety of factors identified in the literature as independent variables. We divided these factors in three sets: individual-level, computer-related, and community-level variables. Descriptions and descriptives of the variables used in the analysis can be found in Table 3. Regression results can be found in Table 4.

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Individual level variables included: (1) an indicator variable for “gender queerness.” This variable was coded 1 for any youth who answered at least one of the following labels as “gender(s) [they] most identify with”: female to man (FTM),

genderqueer, male to female (MTF), questioning / uncertain, transgender or transsexual, and for youth who filled the “other” box with another label. (2) An indicator variable for non -white respondents, who were coded 1. (3) An indicator variable for parental awareness of LGBT status was coded 1 for youth who reported having one or more guardians or parents they were “out” to. (4) A 5-pt scale for the reported level of tension in the family environment.

Computer-related variables included: the number of hours spent online on LGBT specific sites (5). A 5-pt scale for the level of privacy youth have when using the internet (6). A 6-pt scale variable for the frequency of attempts to meet offline a person whom youth first met online (7). An 8-pt scale variable for the frequency of online visits that are done to meet LGBT people for socializing purposes (8).

Community-based variables were included to evaluate the impact of LGBT youth’s “offline” lives on their belonging to online LGBT communities, in order to assess whether youth tend to go online to palliate a lacking support structure offline. Variables included: Five-point scale variables for the level of openness (9) and safety (10) they feel as LGBT youth in their communities were used. Worthy of note is that youth rate the openness of their “offline” communities significantly higher than the level of safety they feel as LGBT youth in their communities ( $t(281) = 1.684, p < 0.10$ ).

Indicator variables for whether or not they have an adult to talk to about their LGBT identity at their school (3), whether or not there is a GSA at their school (4), and whether they are part of an offline LGBT community (5). A three point indicator variable was used to indicate where these youth meet most of their LGBT friends: mostly online (coded 1, 21.8% of youth), equally online and offline (coded 2, 30.4% of youth), or mostly offline (coded 3, omitted variable, 47.8% of youth) (6).

Variables were evaluated step-wise: individual-level variables together (Model 1); Model 1 and all computer-related variables together (Model 2); and Model 2 and community-based variables together (Model 3).

Binary logistic regression on individual-level variables held little predictive power, with a pseudo  $R^2$  of 0.012 for Model 1, compared to an  $R^2$  of 0.187 for Model 2, and an  $R^2$  of 0.181 for Model 3. No individual-level factors proved to be statistically significant across all three models, suggesting that all LGBT youth, regardless of their

gender identity, racial/ethnic profile, level of “outness” to parents, or family tension, are equally likely to be members of online LGBT communities.

Among computer-related variables, hours spent on LGBT-specific websites is significant and positive variable before controlling for community-level variables. The greatest predictor here is the frequency at which youth go online to meet other LGBT people “to socialize,” which is positive and highly significant in both Models 2 and 3. For every increasing level of frequency for online socializing (a 7-pt scale), youth are 1.4 times more likely to state they are part of an online community. The level of Internet privacy youth have did not seem to matter, nor did the frequency at which they meet other youth offline when they have met them online.

The safer LGBT youth feel in their offline communities, the less likely they are to claim to be part of an online community. Youth whose school has a GSA are about 50% less likely to be part of online communities ( $e^{(-0.72)} = 0.49$ ), while youth who are members of offline LGBT communities are three times more likely to be part of an online community ( $e^{(1.11)} = 3.03$ ). Finally, the place where youth meet their LGBT friends is the most important predictor of their involvement in online communities: youth who meet most of their LGBT friends online are more than six times more likely to be part of an online community than youth who meet most of their LGBT friends offline, while youth who meet them equally online and offline are three and a half time more likely to ( $e^{(1.82)} = 6.17$ ;  $e^{(1.29)} = 3.63$ ).

Two teenagers in Elise’s survey pointed to some of the mechanisms that may be at play here, in response to the question “What is the number one reason why you use LGBT online environments?”

There are only 3 other out kids at my high school, none of whom I have any interest in, or are even friend material in my opinion. 1 of them is nice-ish, but pretty stuck up (white 10-th grade homosexual boy from Massachusetts).

It is an easy way to socialize with people going through the same things I am. There aren't many places to go and just meet up with gay kids. Actually there is one and once one person doesn't like you then you're totally out (12<sup>th</sup>-grade homosexual boy from Indiana).

The adult-defined community centers or schools may not hold much promise for all youth, and the law of small numbers.

Many also discussed using the Internet to organize group meetings with strangers, and how the Internet allows them to build community. A lesbian / bisexual 8<sup>th</sup>-grader from Florida wrote that she met a girl “at bush gardens with a group of friends and talked and she's one of my bes friends now.” A homosexual man 10<sup>th</sup>-grader from Massachusetts told how a “bunch of people went to the Boston Pride Parade” together, and how positive the experience had been for him, even as the youngest member of the group. Others discussed the importance of online communities for organizing offline group events and hang out. A gender-questioning queer / lesbian 11<sup>th</sup> grader from Massachusetts wrote: “We have a facebook group for LGBT kids at prep schools that allows us to network and plan school events together. Or, more commonly, just say hi and meet up at sporting events.” As such, online communities serve as extensions of offline communities, places where youth can hang out with their friends, and make plans for offline socializing.

### **Intimate Relationships**

As we have demonstrated, use of the internet allows marginalized teens to beat the law of numbers and meet others like themselves (Halloway and Valentine 2003). New media is an especially important communication tool for queer teens looking to date because, “the biggest obstacle to same-sex dating among sexual minority youth is the identification of potential partners” (Diamond, Savin-Williams, and Dube 1999: 187).

Previous research suggests that LGBT youth extremely rarely go online to find a date, a hook up, play out fantasies or have online sex; rather, they go online to be themselves, feel like they belong, be out or come out, and explore their identity (Paradis, in press). The internet allows teens to meet potential dating partners and to pursue relationships without their parent’s knowledge, if necessary. The internet can put LGBT in touch with other teens so that they can have the romantic experiences that their heterosexual counterparts presumably find more easily in offline arenas. From our data, we could identify two main mechanisms in LGBT youth’s relationship building: the mobilization of their social capital via the internet, and continuous online involvement leading to the development of romantic feelings over time.

*The strength of weak ties*

Robert's story is particularly telling. He is a 17 year-old at a private school in Philadelphia. While he went to a supportive, liberal school, he still found that having digital connections helped to facilitate a love life that was often lacking in his immediate social world. Robert was so frustrated about not finding other guys to date that he wrote a Facebook “note” about what his difficulties dating as a gay teen:

I am realizing that I am sexually frustrated. I know your thinking “that's a weird thing to say”, yeah it is, but I don't really care anymore. I have always been in good spirits about this, and still am to this day. BUT every time I have a crush or something, it doesn't work out (he's not gay, not enough time, etc). I'm not a downer, but I'm just realizing that if a straight person's chance of compatibility is 1 in 100. AND only about 3 in 100 are gay, and the compatibility is still 2%, then my prospect is .03 in 100, or 3 in 10,000. That is not very encouraging! I don't want to sacrifice my standards just to get with someone, I want it to happen in its own time, but with my prospects, it would probably happen in about 3000 years. But that's why I have to stay optimistic. So, I was thinking, this is my senior year and I have yet to go out on a date/have my first dance/ any of that jazz. This whole thing sucks, but it was how I was made, I can't change who I am, and I can accept that and the prospects too. My sister said that things will be different in college, but still, I don't know. SO, if anyone set me up, not just that they are gay and available, but just that you know that they are compatible with me. I hope this is not too personal, maybe I should not post this, but as a maturing Robert, I don't really care! This was all prompted by having a dream last night, where I went to prom alone, not that I would ever do that, but Betsy, you're taken this year! good for you, but bad for me.

Robert told me that a friend set him up on a blind date as a direct result of the announcement he placed on Facebook: “Andrew, another gay guy at my school, and (my) friend, set me up with Matt because he saw my desperate note on Facebook!” Matt and Robert were introduced through Facebook and after the initial contact, Robert was giddy with excitement and told me “We've been texting the past few days a lot, he is really good looking, and a jock, believe it or not, but we seem to really have hit it off, I hope for the best.” The two had a very sweet day picked for their first date: Valentine’s Day. Robert and Matt’s case shows how the internet can help LGBT youth draw on the strength of their weak ties to identify other LGBT youth, and thus help them beat the odds of small numbers and find dating partners who are not in their immediate vicinity.

Youth in Elise’s survey also described having met other LGBT youth through



their friends or family members. After initial contact online, some youth went on to meet the youth they had been introduced to offline. A self-proclaimed genderqueer Asian bisexual in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade in Massachusetts wrote: “I felt it was bit awkward because I was being set up with my other two friends and their boyfriends so it felt pretty weird for me to be the only girl to linked to another girl for that occasion.” Others discussed the role played by online communities. One 10<sup>th</sup>-grade lesbian from Massachusetts commented: “I have offline friends who know this person (actually one of my offline lesbian friends is dating her) and I met her online first and then met her in person and a couple other people from an LGBT online community.”

In this sense, LGBT teens use the internet slightly differently than straight teens do in the beginning stages of relationships. Straight teens often find it “weird” or “creepy” to start relationships online when they haven’t met the person first. However because of geographic and numerical constraints, this is not necessarily an odd move for queer teens. Adam, for instance, told me that his now boyfriend “added me on Facebook before I IMd him” shortly before they had met in person. He said “we did Facebook, IM and phone before meeting.” The two had been set up by a mutual friend, who in typical straight teen form, “asked me if I wanted to meet him first and then Chad friended me.” Now the two had a competition for how many wall posts they could garner, “When I have over 1000 I fully intend to make fun of him.” For Adam this was his first “guy I’ve dated ‘officially’” though he’d had other “experiences.” Chad lived near Adam’s school, which was about one half an hour from him. He added that it was “not awkward at all” to move the relationship online to offline. “I thought it would be but it wasn’t.” In fact, Adam said they “got along so well my first time meeting him that i actually made the bold move of kissing him and he asked me out. I’m not a first move kind of guy, so this was big for me.” Because of this distance Adam says “We do talk online and send texts... I’d say it’s 50% online, 40% on the phone, and 10% text.”

#### *Committed, but under the (parental) radar*

Surveyed youth also discussed how the Internet allowed them to find ways to sustain meaningful relationships across the online / offline divide. Their responses hinted at the importance of the Internet in building long-term relationships, maintain distance

relationships, and keep their illegitimate relationships secret from their parents. When asked to recount an experience he had had meeting offline someone he first met online, an 11<sup>th</sup>-grade, mixed-race homosexual man from Alabama wrote: “We ended up dating... he lived in the same town and all... so yeah! It was a good relationship for a while until we broke up.” Another wrote, straightforwardly: “Both times ended up dating them. Currently still with second person” (12<sup>th</sup>-grade homosexual man from Washington State).

Many youth discussed long-term involvement with someone they first met online. A 12<sup>th</sup>-grade homosexual man from Kansas said: “I had him pick m up a couple blocks from my house, and we started dating, and we've been together for 9 months.” A mixed-race 11<sup>th</sup>-grade genderqueer lesbian from California wrote: “I've met two girls online. One ended up becoming my friend and one is now my girlfriend...almost 5 months now.” Other youth discussed being or having been involved in long-distance relationships with someone they first met online: “I met a gay guy online and flew out of state to see him. I flew about 2,800 miles and he flew back with me when he and I were 16. He then flew back and we broke up” (mixed race, “gender neutral” homosexual from Washington State, 12<sup>th</sup> grade).

Others are in relationships that have been long-lasting, committed, yet remain under the radar of parental and adult authorities. This youth, for example, wrote extensively about her relationship with her online girlfriend:

After meeting her in 2004 and first dating in 2006, my online girlfriend and I have tried for years to meet, but have so far been unable to because her parents told her not to talk to me (when they found out that she was lesbian and we were dating), we live 11 hours away, both of us are unable to drive, and somehow getting her to fly to where I live would involve a lot of lying and difficulties on both of our ends (12<sup>th</sup> grade, Michigan lesbian).

She and the others mentioned above are not alone in relying on new media to bridge the distance. Lana had also met her girlfriend at a summer camp. Her girlfriend lived on the east coast while Lana lived in Washington state. As well, Lana’s mom didn’t know she was gay. So the majority of their relationship was conducted via IM and cell phone. She told her mom that the long distance calls on her phone were from her best friend in Minnesota to explain the daily long

distance calls to her girlfriend in New Hampshire. This was true of Adam and his boyfriend as well, as his boyfriend was not out to his parents and “they don’t know we’re involved, but they’re suspicious.” Like many of the other gay teens C.J. talked to, Chad isn't out to his parents, “they don't know we're involved but they're suspicious. They know but they don't know.” In this sense new media carves out a sphere of privacy such that LGBT teens can carry on relationships outside of the purview of their parents.

Finally, some mentioned the “negative feedback” they got from people around them for using the internet to meet people. For example, a genderqueer 12<sup>th</sup>-grade lesbian from California wrote:

I met my current girlfriend and my ex girlfriend on OurChart. I received a lot of negative feedback from my peers about meeting people online but I enjoy(ed) both relationships. The initial meetings were awkward at first but only for the first few minutes until we got used to each other in real life.

Her testimonial underscores the normative pressures exerted on LGBT youth, but also the broader cultural fear of online predators and the abnormality of such behavior among non-LGBT youth.

### **C. Vulnerability**

For all the outcry about dangers to youth posed by online predators (see Levine, 2002, for a review of this literature), across qualitative and quantitative studies we encountered only a small number of mildly unpleasant interactions online, in line with the findings of Wolak et al. (2008). We found that teens were savvy about how much information they revealed, and that threats to their safety may come from intimates as well as strangers. That said, it seems that youth who are more dependant than others on online venues for socializing and resources may be more at risk of unwanted attention from strangers.

Several youth in Elise’s survey expressed their concern with safety when navigating the Internet and meeting people offline whom they have first met online. Very few explicitly expressed that they would never meet someone that way, because it is “too dangerous,” not “necessarily safe,” or mentioned feeling “lucky” that the people they met

offline were “good people.” Others mentioned what we would call “necessary conditions” that have to be met before they accept to meet someone they have never met before or was not introduced by a mutual friend. One wrote that meeting a stranger is a “horrible idea unless u no them VERY wel” (11<sup>th</sup>-grade gender-questioning bisexual from Michigan). Others wrote that they always speak on the phone first, that they purposely meet in “crowded places.” Finally, the most disappointing experiences recorded by the survey were notes of “character flaws” youth found in their counterpart, such as “They were pretty stupid,” (12<sup>th</sup> grade lesbian woman from Maine), , or “They were a bit different than I thought” (12<sup>th</sup> grade genderqueer lesbian / queer from Illinois).

Finally, out of a total of 98 answers to a question asking youth to “[d]escribe any experience you had when you met someone offline after meeting them first online” (total youth surveyed 231, 42.4% response rate), none were explicitly predatory, and two were vague (“it was bad” and “Well... I would rather not say”). While traumatized youth may have avoided the question altogether, it seems equally probable that predatorial behavior that targets these youth is a rare thing, and / or that youth are savvy at avoiding predators or the locations where predators are.

Teens are smart about how much information they reveal online. Robert for instance had his sexual orientation revealed online, which made his father “very disappointed/angry” even though, as Robert states, “I have just as much right to put my orientation in that internet field as a straight person does, and they do.” Unfortunately, “I think he just wants me to be straight soo bad!” He did take his orientation off of MySpace, however, because he found MySpace to be “creepy.” Like many teens, Robert believes Facebook is much safer than MySpace. He summarizes, “MySpace vs. Facebook = stalker/creepy old men vs. your friends!” and argues that “adults see them both as the same thing.” Adam agreed about Facebook: “I wasn't directly solicited but some people I didn't know who looked kind of weird added me. It was just sketchy. I feel WAY safer on Facebook.”

Similarly Devin is very careful about what he posts online. He says that “I do think about what to post and what not to post,” just as he thinks “about what to say and what not to in school or outside of school.” He is more careful about what he posts because of some of the feedback he has gotten online like, “Are U a transvestite dyke?”

He said that he “got one recently it said ‘is it true ur a transestite dike and that ur just a GIRL who dresses like a DUDE’ I wrote back correcting the spelling and stating that I was not.” Of course, such interactions are not limited to the internet. As Devin said, “I heard lot of people ask if I’m a girl or guy when I walk by and seeing as I always have my ear phones in my ears they think I don’t hear what they say.”

Julian told me that teens are responsible for their own mistakes online,

If you are approached by a cyberstalker it’s not because you were on the internet minding your own business, it’s because you were adding friends that you didn’t know that well, or because you were in public chat rooms. Why are you in a public chatroom and talking to people you don’t know? I don’t know; because you want to meet a stalker?

For all the opportunities the internet provides to create community for gay teens, it also puts them at risk as they seek this community. Robert related what he perceived as a particularly perturbing story about his experience on the internet as he was coming in his early teens:

So a couple times a week, after my parents went to bed, I visited some internet sites..., then after awhile, I found a chat room web site, a gay teen chat room. I chatted with a lot of guys, eventually I started to talk to people outside of the chat room, on msn messenger. There were people who wanted to do things with cameras and pictures, and for a while I went along with some of it, not really doing to much. Then one day, it wasn’t a teenager who sent me their pic, but an old fat man, I was disgusted, beyond words. I smashed my computer camera, deleted my msn, and barred any memory from those times out of existence until I recollect now. Today I have lots of friends, and am secure with my sexual identity, and don’t ever go on chat rooms. *Anyways*, yeah, I am completely disgusted with myself that I ever did any of that, not that I ever did much, but that I had “IM ---,” totally totally creepy.

As we have pointed out earlier, however, threats do not always come from the outside. Some youth are more afraid to be discovered by their parents, teachers and friends than they are to meet strangers who are “like them.” Because they are still dependent on adults, there is much at stake for LGBT youth, online and off.

## **V. Discussion**

Our analyses of interview, ethnographic, and survey data about LGBT and non-LGBT youth has afforded us to provide a multi-faceted portrait of LGBT youth’s online

usage. We found that teens use online venues to gather information and resources about gender and sexual identities as well as to initiate and sustain as friendship, community and sexual or romantic relationships. We found quantitative and qualitative differences in youth’s information seeking: LGBT youth use the internet more often than non-LGBT youth to find a variety of information, but they are also more likely to look for information regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, and health.

The internet is used by most youth today to maintain existing friendships (Ito 2005; Lampe, Ellison and Steinfield 2006; Lenhart et al 2007; Montgomery 2000; Osgerby 2004; Rideout, Roberts and Foehr 2005). For LGBT teens, however, this is equally if not more important than for non-LGBT youth. Youth in our data use the internet to find a sense of belonging and understanding with “people like them,” (Holloway and Valentine 2003), as well as to socialize with their friends, regardless of where they met them first. They seem to use it more intensely to maintain friendships and craft community than non-LGBT youth.

Our data also clearly indicates that most LGBT youth are open to the idea of meeting offline people they first met online, unlike their non-LGBT counterparts for whom this behavior is rare (Lenhart and Madden 2007; Ito et al 2009), “creepy” and highly undesirable, and in counterpoint to their parents’ beliefs and to a culture of fear that overplays the online predator phenomenon. LGBT youth are careful about who they meet offline, and document the circumstances under which many youth say they are willing to meet.

To evaluate which factors, if any, impact LGBT youth’s participation in online LGBT communities, we ran logistic regressions on their answer to the question: “Are you currently part of an online LGBT community?” No individual level variables were found to be significant, suggesting that all LGBT youth, regardless of race, “genderqueer-ness,” family tension and “outness” to parents, find LGBT communities online. Youth who claim going online for the express purpose of socializing with other LGBT people were significantly more likely to be part of an online community, suggesting that LGBT youth who look for community often find one. The largest effect was for the trichotomous variable for where youth meet their online friends. Youth who meet most of their LGBT-

identified friends online, and youth who meet them equally online and offline, are significantly more likely to be part of online communities.

Our regressions also showed a complicated pattern of influence of gay-straight alliances (GSAs) and offline LGBT community on participation in online LGBT communities, a pattern for which our interview and ethnographic data, as well as some responses to survey questions, provide explanations. These data force us to refine the notion of space deprivation for LGBT youth. While most youth sampled in Elise’s survey have some sort of structure around them that supports their nascent identity, their life is complicated by the peculiarities of adult-defined spaces – from families to schools to GSAs – and by the scarcity of other LGBT youth around them. Interestingly, youth who were part of offline LGBT communities were more likely to be part of online LGBT communities, hinting again at the bridging of online and offline worlds for these youth.

From our data, we could identify two main mechanisms in LGBT youth’s intimate relationship building: the mobilization of their social ties via the internet (the strength of weak ties) (Granovetter, 1973), and continuous online involvement leading to the development of romantic feelings over time. LGBT youth use their communities to meet and interact with others and experience romance, just like other youth (Collins and Sroufe 1999).

Finally, some mentioned the “negative feedback” they get from people around them – peers and parents – for using the internet to meet people, underscoring the normative pressures exerted on LGBT youth, but also the broader cultural fear of online predators, and the abnormality of such behavior among non-LGBT youth.

In sum, our data suggest a few things. First, LGBT youth are greater users of the information and socializing functions of the Internet than non-LGBT youth. Second, that while LGBT youth do go online to meet others, they would prefer to meet people offline if that was possible, and they often do. Third, the lives of LGBT youth frequently bridge the divide between online and offline worlds, and these bridges take a variety of forms: friendship, support, community, love, LGBT youth find them all.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Our research has several implications, both practical and theoretical. On the practical side, the *fact* that LGBT youth turn to the internet for information and to relate to people makes critical the availability of reliable resources and safe spaces for youth. Adults who are looking to support LGBT youths’ identity and relational development should be able to send them in the direction of such resources, and should help in the development and diffusion of quality materials for them. They should also, following Wolak et al.’s (2008) recommendations, remind minors that romantic or sexual relationships with adults are illegal. They should suggest that they meet other youth in crowded spaces, or with a group, and remind them of the importance of practicing safe sex.

Their “online” friendships, relationships and communities should be acknowledged as real and important (MacIntosh & Bryson, 2007; Walther, 1996), and part of a healthy development and transition to adulthood (Sadowski, Chow, & Scanlon, 2009). As Diamond (2003) has argued, encouraging youth to explore their same-sex desires is not equivalent to “making them” gay, as the causal relationship between teen same-sex sexual experiences and the development of a same-sex attraction identity isn’t clear in research. LGBT youth are often less likely to experience relationships as teens, for a wide range of reasons. The internet is for LGBT youth today an exciting way to meet other youth beyond their immediate social world, a way for them to find affirmation, support, community, and belonging, and others before us have documented this phenomenon (Gray, 2009; Laukkanen, 2007; Munt, Bassett, & O’Riordan, 2002). An overwhelming majority of youth in our data connected to others online; we didn’t find evidence that this behavior was restricted to “at-risk” youth (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2003).

Theoretically, our findings suggest that the restricted space taken for granted by Hillier and Harrison (2007), documented by Mufioz-Plaza et al. (2002), and made explicit in the school policy literature (Irvine, 1997; Macgillivray, 2004), may not be the main reason that drives a large number of youth in the United States toward the Internet today. Many youth have access to LGBT-friendly resources, from parents and teachers to GSA leaders and other LGBT youth groups. Yet the existence of these community-level



structures doesn’t necessarily mean that LGBT youth find in them the type of connections, friendship or romantic, they are looking for, nor that they can feel affirmation in their same-sex relationships or gender transitioning or questioning. And if we take seriously the “new gay teenager” put forward by Savin-Williams (2005) and others, many LGBT youth today may not want to associate with pre-established labels, and may hope to distance themselves from the “narrative of struggle and success” available to previous generations of LGBT youth and adults, in the United States (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Savin-Williams, 2005) and Israel, for example (Pizmony-Levy, Shilo, & Pinhasi, 2009).

Based on our own data, we see that youth expand their local possibilities through the internet (Laegran 2002; Maczewski 2002), and maintain community ties, friendships, and romantic relationships regardless of the existence of supportive adults around them, or their perception of a community that is open to LGBT youths. A key factor behind these realities seems to be what we call the law of small numbers, the reality of the scarcity of LGBT youth who are considered as potential friends or romantic partners by any youth. Adults often forget that sexual orientation is not sufficient to guarantee that two youth will have something in common and get along. Not all heterosexual women are attracted to all heterosexual men, and vice versa. The analogy with gender and race also holds, as decades of feminist work have shown.

We also found support for the blurring or bridging of the “gap” between online and offline realities for today’s teens, a point that has been stressed by a large number of internet scholars for over a decade now (Gray, 2009; Ogersby, 2004; Wellman, 2004; Wellman & Gulia, 1999), but still sets the tone for most public accounts on youth’s online behavior today (e.g. ). We found that youth who are part of an offline LGBT community are much more likely to be part of online communities, that youth call their “online” significant others “boyfriends” and “girlfriends,” and that they are open to meeting offline people they have first met online.

Of course, our research has its limitations. The comparisons between Elise’s youth and the nationally representative survey of the Pew Internet and American Life project are limited, based on sampling methods and the lack of a perfect overlap for those questions singled out for this study. We can’t be sure that all youth shared a same

understanding of what a “community” is, nor can we ascertain the veracity and accuracy of their own reporting of their online behavior, priorities, motivations. On another level, we cannot compare the quality or meaningfulness of LGBT youth’s online connections to more traditional “offline” ones, nor can we compare the relationships of LGBT youth to those of non-LGBT youth. However, by combining a variety of data sources, and juxtaposing the large-sample data with interview data, we hope to have provided as reliable a portrait of LGBT youth’s online lives as possible given the limitations of all research project, and of research projects with minorities in particular.

TABLES

**Table 1**  
**Frequencies (%) and chi-square test results, Pew and LGBT surveys**

<b>Chatrooms</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Sample size</b>
LGBT Survey	193 (50.7%)	188 (49.3%)	381
Pew Survey	727 (82.0%)	159 (18.0%)	886
Chi-Square = 132.075, df = 1, p < 0.0000			
<b>Social Networking Sites</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>Sample size</b>
LGBT Survey	41 (10.8%)	340 (89.2%)	381
Pew Survey	399 (45%)	487 (55%)	886
Chi-Square = 138.062, df = 1, p < 0.0000			

**Table 2**  
**If you meet people that you like online, how often do you try to meet them offline?**

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Never	25.6
It happened once	3.9
Sometimes	2.8
About half the time	16.4
Most of the time	18.9
Always	32.4
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>

**These days, how often do you use LGBT websites to meet LGBT people...**

<b>Answer</b>	<b>you can meet offline (%)</b>	<b>to socialize (%)</b>
Never	71.6	20.9
Less than once a month	17.7	17.6
Once a month	3.5	7.8
More than once a month	7.1	53.6
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>

Table 3: Descriptives, variables in the analyses

VARIABLES	Type	Coding	Mean	s.d.
<b>Individual-level variables</b>				
genderqueerdum	Indicator	yes = 1; no = 0	0.24	
nonwhite	Indicator	yes = 1; no = 0	0.41	
parentknowdum	Indicator	yes = 1; no = 0	0.61	
overalltensionfamily	Scale	not at all = 1; a great deal = 5	3.26	1.075
<b>Computer-related variables</b>				
hrsonlineLGBTspecific	Scale	min = 1, max = 8	3.07	1.877
internetprivacy	Scale	none at all = 1; a great deal = 5	3.90	1.076
howoftenmeetfmetonlinefirst	Scale	never = 1; always = 6	3.96	1.997
meetLGBTpeoplesocialize	Scale	never = 1; 8 = more than once a day	3.81	2.277
<b>Community-based variables</b>				
opentoLGBTyouth	Scale	not at all = 1; extremely = 5	3.39	1.006
safeasanLGBTyouth	Scale	not at all = 1; extremely = 5	2.77	0.985
adulttotalkto	Indicator	yes = 1; no = 0	0.59	
gsabhighdum	Indicator	yes = 1; no = 0	0.63	
memberLGBTofflinerecommendum	Indicator	yes = 1; no = 0	0.55	
wheremeetLGBTfriends	Categorical		2.26	0.794
		1 (n = 63, 21.8%)		
		2 (n = 88, 30.4%)		
		3 (n = 138, 47.8%)		
<b>Dependent Variable</b>				
memberonlineLGBTcommunity	Indicator	yes = 1; no = 0	0.63	0.485

Table 4: Logistic regression models, youth participation in an online community (yes =1)

VARIABLES	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	b	s.e.	b	s.e.	b	s.e.
<b>Individual-level variables</b>						
genderqueerdum	0.36	(0.293)	0.34	(0.373)	0.28	(0.431)
nonwhite	-0.04	(0.246)	-0.22	(0.291)	-0.05	(0.329)
parentknowdum	0.15	(0.255)	-0.10	(0.301)	-0.23	(0.345)
overalltensionfamily	0.14	(0.114)	0.11	(0.136)	0.21	(0.154)
<b>Computer-related variables</b>						
hrsonlineLGBTspecific			0.15 *	(0.088)	0.14	(0.098)
internetprivacy			0.04	(0.137)	0.17	(0.158)
frequencyofflinemeetifmetonlinefirst			0.12	(0.076)	0.05	(0.093)
frequencyonlinemeetLGBTpeoplesocialize			0.40 ***	(0.080)	0.36 ***	(0.090)
<b>Community-level variables</b>						
opentoLGBTyouth					-0.39	(0.245)
safeforanLGBTyouth					-0.45 *	(0.234)
adulttotalkto					0.47	(0.379)
gsathighdum					-0.72 *	(0.406)
memberLGBTofflinerecommendum					1.11 ***	(0.408)
wheremeetLGBTfriends						
Meet mostly online (1)					1.82 ***	(0.516)
Meet equally on- and offline (2)					1.29 ***	(0.440)
Constant	-0.12	(0.443)	-2.17 **	(0.880)	-0.49	(1.559)
-2 log likelihood	383.20		289.77		234.12	
Pseudo R2	0.012		0.187		0.284	
n =	292		263		242	

Significance levels: \* p < 0.1; \*\* p < 0.05; \*\*\* p < 0.01

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<sup>i</sup> Results available from the authors.