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To Come Out or Log On?

Why gay male infatuation with online culture may harm the LGBTIQ community

By Trevor Hoppe

So much ado has been made in the past several years over the potential of the World Wide Web to bring people together as never before. In particular, gay men have latched on to the Internet as a means to meet new people. Unfortunately, the toll that this massive logging on is taking on LGBTIQ physical communal spaces remains unexplored. Increasingly, mainstream research is showing that the Internet fails to live up to its promise for community-building, but a parallel investigation into the effects the Internet is having specifically on LGBTIQ communities has yet to occur.

I'm not one to say that the Internet is without merit for LGBTIQ people. For young people with few resources in their communities, it is remarkably useful, and in my experience, a remarkably positive way to talk to other non-straight people. At 13 I obtained access to the Internet and discovered that there were quite a few people out there who were also attracted to people of the same gender. I was able to meet people across North Carolina through a now little-used chat protocol called IRC (Internet Relay Chat). This gave me a community to access when there was certainly no peer support in middle school or, later, high school.

The prospect of being able to anonymously connect to other same-gender-loving men with the click of a button is certainly enticing. After all, if you're just going to the bar to find a hookup, then why not cut the bar out of the picture? It's also potentially relieving to people who might not be as outgoing and who have a hard time meeting people in crowded social situations such as bars. But perhaps the greatest appeal comes from the fact that coming out may no longer be as relevant for users. Why come out when you can log on?

However, these seemingly tantalizing qualities about Internet communities have come with unintended consequences. As more and more men log on and log out of LGBTIQ physical spaces, the communities that have been built over the past few decades pay the price. Sociological research shows that people who use the Internet habitually opt out of community networks and are less civically engaged. In short, some LGBTIQ-owned businesses, friendly spaces, and organizations may eventually have to close shop.

Another such unintended consequence that hasn't been as well explored is the hyper-race-conscious environment that is created on services likeGay.com. It seems, initially, that race might be less important due to the anonymity of online chatting. If you can't see someone, it's hard to determine their skin color. However, Gay.com users have "profiles," in which the user's race or ethnicity is among the first features listed, and can also post pictures that appear next to their name in the chat room. This enables other users to "screen" people out based on demographics. Some individuals even choose to declare what race(s) they are interested in, and it is not uncommon for people's "bioline" (which appears next to their screen-name in the chat room) to say things like "White male looking for other white men ONLY" or "Asians A+."

This self-imposed limiting of dialogue has made race a deciding factor in the conversations that take place online, to an unparalleled degree. In physical spaces like bathhouses and bars, people are much more likely to engage others across these barriers simply because race isn't so easy to "determine" when there's no box to be checked.

And it isn't just race that is brought into the limelight – similar effects can be seen in regard to age, bodies, and sexual preferences. Often the most important information other chatters seek is whether you prefer to penetrate, be penetrated, or both. A whole range of colloquial language has appeared to describe people's preferences: top, bottom, versatile, pitcher, catcher, and switch-hitter. You don't have to spend much time online to know that people prefer that users choose a side – top or bottom – and stay there (not unlike the divide between gay, straight, and bisexual). This has had an incredible impact on the kinds of relationships queer men are entering into online.

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All of these factors, when combined, are putting the future of our communities in crisis. Minds are narrowing and communities are thinning. While online networks may seem to hold great promise for bringing people together, social scientists are beginning to recognize that the Internet cannot possibly bring people together in the way that many had hoped. Online networking is only successful when it's done as a complement to physical networking, not as a substitute. Moreover, if queer men continue to log on in such large numbers, we can almost count on an increased narrowing of minds. Creative solutions are direly needed to bring LGBTIQ communities together in positive ways.