

'It's just easier'
The Internet as a safety-Net
for same sex attracted young people

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AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH CENTRE IN SEX, HEALTH AND SOCIETY

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NHMRC



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SSAY INTERNET - GLOSSARY

Browser, Web Browser – A Web Browser is software that displays web pages and links to navigate a User around the Internet. There are 2 main web browsers: Netscape Communicator and Microsoft Internet Explorer.

Btw – Abbreviation used in email and during ‘chat’ for ‘by the way’

Chatroom – a cyberspace where users participate in discussion through exchanging typed messages through the keyboard.

Cybersex – sexual intimacy between two people who are connected via the Internet. Cybersex often includes masturbation and fantasy in chat rooms.

Hardware – The hardware of a computer includes all of the physical parts of the computer. Some pieces of computer hardware include the monitor, keyboard, mouse, printer, scanner, CDROM drive, floppy disk drive, modem, speakers, motherboards and memory chips.

Hotmail – A popular email service that is accessed via a Web Browser rather than via special Email software. Originally created in India, it is now owned by Microsoft.

Hit – “A visit to a Web Page or, sometimes, to each file on that page”. (Darnell, et. al. (1997;846)

HTML – Hyper Text Markup Language

-The language in which Web Pages are written. HTML is a language that is understood by both IBM compatible personal computers and Macintosh computers.

HTTP – Hyper Text Transfer Protocol - HTTP is the protocol used by computers when sending information between an Internet Service Provider (ISP) and a computer. It can send different types of information some of which are plain text, images and sounds

ICQ – A software based chat forum with many uses, but is predominantly used to allow members to see when other members are on line and to meet other members for chat. ICQ is a very popular chat medium.

Internet Explorer – Microsoft Internet Explorer – One of two dominant web browsers

IRC - Internet Relay Chat – IRC is used to talk to other people who are connected to the Internet. Users enter ‘channels’ and can talk to other people in that channel. IRC is sometimes simply referred to as ‘Chat’.

ISP - Internet Service Provider – “A business that offers connection to the Internet, usually

through telephone lines". (Darnell, et. al. 1997;848) There is a variety of ISPs, some of which provide a variety of other services alongside Internet connection. Some ISPs offer chatrooms, special member privileges, data storage space and Web space for the User to store their own Web Site.

Link, Hyperlink – A connection between Web Pages or within a Web Page.

LOL – Abbreviation used in electronic communication for '*Laugh Out Loud*'. This is used to indicate that something is humorous and that the person who is typing is literally laughing out loud.

Net - The Internet – A worldwide network of computers who communicate using the same language and protocols. The Internet is more than just a network of computers however. It is now known as a concept for universal access to information.

Netscape, Netscape Navigator, Netscape Communicator – One of two dominant Web Browsers. This software package also offers a variety of other services such as email and Web Page Design software.

On-line – when a user is connected to the Internet

Operating System – The software used to control the hardware of a computer. The most common operating systems are Microsoft's Windows and the Unix system.

RL – Real Life, day to day life when not connected to the Net

Software – Software packages are computer programs that are used to provide the hardware with directions. Software packages range from operating systems such as Microsoft's Windows and email software to word processing such as Microsoft Word and image manipulation software such as Adobe Photoshop.

Upper case text – Used in electronic communication to emphasise a word or to yell at the recipient.

Virtual Reality – a pseudo reality that exists in Cyberspace

Website – "A combination of related Web Pages that are gathered under one directory. They usually deal with a single theme or personality". (Darnell, et. al. 1997;859)

WWW, Web - World Wide Web – "The Web is a section of the Internet that uses hyperlinks to exchange information. It uses the Hyper Text Transfer Protocol". (Darnell, et. al. (1997) p859)

Yahoo – A popular and detailed Web Site that offers many services which include Web searches, email, newsgroups, online shopping, advertising and membership.

:-) :-(- - **Emoticons**. These are only 2 of an extensive range of popularly used Emoticons. They are used to convey emotion in email and chat.

< > **and** * * - These symbols are used in electronic communication to indicate physical feeling or actions.

REFERENCE

Darnell, R. et. al. 1997, Html 4. Sams Net Publishing: Indianapolis

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores the use of the Internet by same sex attracted young people (SSAY). Internet access is increasing in Australian homes at a rapid rate, with more than 75% of young people under the age of 18 years accessing the Net in 1999. Yet little is known about the specific ways in which young people generally, and same sex attracted young people in particular, use the Net for friendship, information and recreation.

This report further develops certain issues raised in previous national research (Hillier et al, 1998) which documented the extent to which same sex attracted young people are denied support and information about their sexuality, and the verbal and physical abuse they experienced in many areas of their life in Australia.

A questionnaire was designed for on-line completion at the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society (ARCSHS) SSAY website. The young people participating in this research were, for the most part, recruited directly via promotion strategies on the Net. In total, 206 valid questionnaires were submitted via the website. Of these 151 (73.3%) were male, 52 (25.2%) were female and 3 (1.5%) were transgender young people. The average age was 18 years and all states and territories were represented as well as urban, regional and rural areas.

SEXUALITY AND INTERNET USE

We asked young people about the broad purpose of their Net use: 25% used the Internet for work and 54% used it for study, 70% used it for general leisure and 86% used it for sexuality-related leisure. Young people's main reason for the latter use was to gain support and affirmation for their sexual feelings. About half of the young people also used the Net to access information about sexuality and safe sex. A smaller number used the Net for more directly related sexual purposes, such as a arousal before sex, Cybersex and/or to meet someone in Real Life (RL).

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NET

Eight-five percent of the young people reported that the Net played an important role in putting them in touch with others like them and 70% felt it played an important role in reducing their isolation. It offered a sense of community and support, especially when young people felt depressed or suicidal at some point (nearly 50%). Two-thirds of the young people found the Net important or very important to them in accessing sexual health information, and 62% of young men and 26% of young women found it important in facilitating Real Life contact and friendship with other SSAY.

We asked the participants how they felt about their sexuality and 65% felt 'great' or 'pretty good' about it, which is slightly higher than our previous research. While we cannot directly compare this sample with our previous research, the findings of this report suggest that the Net is playing a vital role in supporting the development or maintenance of a positive sexual identity in these young people as well as providing them with a strong sense of community.

FAVOURITE THINGS ABOUT THE NET

What young people liked most about the Net was communicating with other young people like them. They used the Net to make new contacts, especially via gay chatrooms, and to keep them in touch with existing friends.

COMING OUT ON THE NET AND IN REAL LIFE

Coming out in Real Life is often not a comfortable or safe experience for SSAY, and research suggests this is a time of heightened risk for suicide of young people in this situation. We found that nearly half of the young people had told 'everyone' on the Net about their sexual identity and almost all (90%) had told at least one person they met on the Net. People in Real Life were less likely to be told by SSAY than those on-line. Young people also found the quality of support on the Net to be better, with most finding it 'very supportive' (62%) or 'mostly supportive' (22%). The Net also clearly provides an important 'rehearsal space' for coming out in Real Life.

WHY THE NET AND NOT REAL LIFE?

We were interested in the qualities that Net life offered, how these differed from Real Life, and what either encouraged or inhibited an openness about sexuality among young people. Young people reported that it was 'just easier' on the Net, with its coexistent qualities of distance and intimacy. Communication about sexuality on the Net was more likely to be comfortable, safe and companionable. Inhabitants of the Net were often experienced as more diverse, less judgemental, and more open, worldly and sophisticated than people in Real Life.

The Net enabled access to same sex attracted young people of all ages and allowed young people to live their sexuality in a 'normalised' way. Real Life was a place in which most young people were hesitant to entrust their sexual identities, and Real Life encounters often loomed as threatening experiences. However, many young people yearned to live their authentic selves in a Real Life context and some found the discrepancy between their preferred 'Net identity' and their camouflaged 'Real Life identity' an uncomfortable and disconcerting experience.

LIFE WITHOUT THE INTERNET?

We asked young people how their life would change if they were without the Internet. The vast majority responded that life would be altered in a negative way, and for some it would be profoundly difficult. Those who felt they would be least affected were those who were currently relatively open about their sexuality in Real Life and to some extent connected to gay and lesbian networks. For others the proposition created an emphatic sense of distress and terms such as 'isolated', 'lonely' and 'desperate' were frequently used. Despite significant proportions of young people feeling good or great about their sexuality, most clearly depended to some significant degree on the support from their virtual community.

MEETING PEOPLE OFF THE NET

Seventy-five percent of the young people, proportionally more young men than women, had organised to meet someone in Real Life after first contacting them on the Net. Friendship (42%), a date (34%), sex (14%) and shared interests (8%) were the reasons for their last meeting of this kind. Some meetings were problematic – failed arrangements, misrepresentations and mismatches of expectations – but rarely traumatic. Most meetings were a positive experience for young people.

HEALTH AND SAFETY ON THE NET

Current adult concerns about Net use by young people include: their exposure to undesirable information and people, loss of ability to relate in Real Life, and time-wasting. Many SSAY who participated (58%) had had concerns about their own Internet use at some point, primarily concerned with escapism from RL and the addictive nature of the Net. Chatroom harassment was reported, particularly by boys, as was discomfort when stumbling across homophobic websites. Others experienced discomfort when they heard about other people's negative life experiences but could do nothing to help.

However young people clearly had a number of strategies that they employed to protect themselves from hurtful or threatening situations either on the Net or when meeting in Real Life.

GENDERED INTERNET USE

There has been little attention paid to gender in research involving same sex attracted young people over the last decade, with many studies focussing only on boys, particularly those looking at youth suicide. Our research suggests that young women were using the Internet in different ways to young men: they were less likely to meet in RL, less likely to use the Net for sex-related activities and more reluctant to use the Net for contacts and support. However, there was a significant percentage of young women who did all of these things and when they did the outcome was very rewarding for them.

1. INTRODUCTION

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

Internet access and use is increasing in Australia at a rapid rate. By November 2000, 50% of all adults had accessed the Internet, The vast majority (95%) of Australian children aged 5 to 14 years of age had used a computer and almost half had accessed the Internet in the previous 12 months (ABS, 2000). In 1999 alone, 75% of 18-24 year olds accessed the Net (ABS, 1999). During the 12 months to November 2000, Internet access in households where there were young people under 18 years doubled to 48%, compared with 32% in households without young people. Young people in rural areas and from lower socio-economic backgrounds, however, are less likely to have access at home.

There has been intense discussion and debate about the cultural and lifestyle impacts of this new medium of communication and information flow. Positions are often polarised and deeply held. Sherman and Judkins have argued that Virtual Reality (VR) was 'the hope for the next century. It may indeed afford glimpses of heaven' (1992;134). Margaret Wertheim reflected these sentiments in her book about the Internet, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace* (1999). In the same vein of optimism Rheingold wrote that 'it could bring conviviality and understanding into our lives and might revitalise the public sphere' (1994;12). Cyberspace has been promoted by these writers as the solution to societal problems of fragmentation, alienation and despair. For people of all marginalised identities the Internet's political potential to reduce or temporarily remove barriers associated with geography, age, class, race and disability has excited great debate.

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

Conversely, there are those who believe that this thinking is unrealistic, even frightening, especially where young people are involved. Much of the concern about the Internet has focused on the potentially dehumanising and depoliticising aspects of life via this medium. Martin (1995) has argued that the lack of face to face relations between people will mean the loss of ethical and socially fulfilling communication. Others are concerned about the removal of the physical self from communications with others and bemoan the subsequent disembodiment of relationships. When young people are involved, these fears are

compounded and often become focussed into two broad themes: the exposure of young people to explicit sex (or pornography) and undesirable people (pedophiles), and the fears that addictive patterns of Internet use will result in an incapacity to relate well in Real Life. Thus we have media reports claiming "Every parent's nightmare is lurking on the Internet" and researchers claiming that "Children as young as six...are browsing through indecent images" and that the Internet "is helping to create a whole generation of people addicted to pornography" (The Age, 6/3/2000).

Concerns about the potential dangers of the Internet to young people have also been reflected in Federal Government moves to censor the information that is available. Fuelling this notion of the Internet as unsafe is the assumption that there are other spaces for young people that will provide them with the information and the support they need to grow up safely and become independent adults. Bessant (1998) has argued that public spaces available to young people are rapidly shrinking and, while it is important to acknowledge this in the context of this report, it is noteworthy that safe public space has never been available to same sex attracted young people. There are many ways of thinking about the notion of 'safe' and in this report we use it in its fullest sense to mean physical, emotional and social safety. The Internet may represent one way to have needs for access to safe public space met when these needs are currently neglected or difficult to achieve in the Real World.

In the first national study regarding the health and wellbeing of same sex attracted young people, *Writing Themselves In*, (Hillier et al, 1998) we documented the extent to which SSAY are denied support and information about their sexuality from the usual trusted sources (parents and schools). It also documented the risks they take when seeking such support from friends and peers. Moreover, this research revealed that many same sex attracted young people suffer verbal and physical abuse in many areas of their lives and few receive support and understanding at home. Though this research did not focus on life on the Net, the survey was available on our SSAY website and half of the sample of young people accessed it there. We have written elsewhere about the Net as a potential source of community, a forum for knowledge exchange and a rehearsal space for 'coming out' to significant others in the 'real' as opposed to the 'virtual' world (Harrison et al, forthcoming). We know little, however, regarding young people's actual use of the Net.

2. AIMS, RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Writing Themselves In (1998) left questions unanswered about the ways in which the Net might provide a safe unregulated space, how relationships might be conducted on and off the Net, and whether young people feel they are safe on-line and if not how they protect themselves. We also needed to know more about the subtle differences between relationships and communication on and off-line.

This project sought to gain more information about how SSAY use the Internet and particularly how it might assist them in positive identity formation in the face of pervasive community homophobia.

2.1 AIMS OF THE PROJECT

- to document same sex attracted young people's use of the Internet including how they spend the time and the contacts they make
- to chart changes facilitated by this medium including whether it provides the missing elements from their real lives (for example, information, support, advice, social space) and whether it helps these young people develop positive sexual identities
- to document safety concerns expressed by these young people and the strategies they have implemented to ensure their own safety and wellbeing
- to explore the differences between Virtual and Real Life communications as experienced by young people
- to document the ways young people negotiate the move from Virtual Reality to Real Life relationships including the reasons for meeting in Real Life.

2.2 RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

A website was developed specifically for the purpose of gathering research data from SSAY Internet users. A second aim for the site was to provide current information regarding any research by ARCSHS investigating the experiences of SSAY. This website was uploaded in March 2000 www.latrobe.edu.au/ssay/ and at the time of writing this report had over 6000 hits.

Questionnaire Design and Development

The comprehensive questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was uploaded to the SSAY web page in May 2000 and was removed in November 2000. During this time, approximately 1700 hits to the site were recorded.

— **Format**

The questionnaire was only available via the SSAY website in HTML format. Participants were not able to receive a hard copy via other means and were only able to send it on-line. The questionnaire was designed for electronic submission.

— **Content**

The questionnaire contained the following 8 sections:

- About you - basic demographic information
- General Internet use – frequency, purpose and length of time on-line
- Comparisons between life and relationships on-line and in the Real World
- Sexual attraction, feelings and behaviour
- Sex and sexuality on-line - feelings and experiences on-line
- The down side of Internet use and strategies for protection
- Importance of the Net and an assessment of life without it.

— **Promotion**

The promotion of the new SSAY website used six avenues:

1. Links
2. Established Mailing Lists
3. Conferences
4. Chat Forums
 - mIRC
 - <http://gay.com>
5. Sexuality Bulletin/Personals Sites
6. Informal Connections

1. Links

The new SSAY website included a 'Cool Links' page that aimed to establish a comprehensive collection of relevant websites for SSAY. Over one hundred predominantly Australian websites were listed. These links were organised into the following categories:

- Youth and Support
- SSAY Youth and Support
- State by State
- Resources for Young Women
- Resources for Young Men
- Resources for Young Bisexual People
- Gender Resources
- Resources for Rural/Regional SSAY
- SSAY Friendly Media
- General Resources for SSAY

These links were asked to list and promote both the questionnaire and website on their own sites. Most sites did this and created direct links from their sites to the SSAY website and, as a result, increased the accessibility of the SSAY website. In addition to the various SSAY friendly links and the 'Cool Links' page, the SSAY website was registered with various search engines. This meant that anyone searching for information on SSAY or similar topics would find the SSAY site in results listed from the particular search engine.

2. Established Mailing Lists

Members of the research team promoted the website and questionnaire electronically via the various established SSAY support networks of which they were members, for example various Cross Campus Sexuality Network lists of the National Union of Students, Queer Collaborations (an Australian network of queer identifying tertiary students) list; and the Australian Women's Research Council list (AWORC).

3. Conferences

The new SSAY website and online questionnaire were also promoted at conferences that supported SSAY or directly involved SSAY. Brochures highlighting the research and website were circulated at the following conferences:

- Queer Collaborations 2001 - Bathurst, NSW (Queer Tertiary Students' conference)
- 'From Virtue to Virtual', The 6th National Sexuality Educators Conference 1999 - Tasmania

4. Chat Forums

The questionnaire was advertised through both Internet Relay Chat clients and browser-based chatrooms. The following two spaces were predominantly utilised as a forum for promotion.

— **mIRC**

Researchers promoted the questionnaire and the new SSAY website by entering chat channels in mIRC. Once permission was gained from the Channel Moderator, researchers entered the chat channel, engaged in dialogue with channel participants about the nature of the research and how to access the questionnaire. Researchers answered any questions about the research at the time. The questionnaire and website were promoted via mIRC at various times during the week. Furthermore, channel moderators were asked to promote the questionnaire and list the web address in the channels' topic listings, which can be read by all mIRC users and not just people entering the channel. Researchers found that participants tended to be online during the later hours on weeknights. The channels on the IRC server mpx.sydney.oz.org are listed in Appendix III.

— **<http://gay.com>**

gay.com is an international website for gay people throughout the world. Its features include:

- news services
- shopping services
- free email
- free web pages
- links to various consumer, lifestyle and support resources
- various message boards and
- browser based chatrooms on various topics.

In an effort to attract more women as participants, researchers visited Australian lesbian chatrooms and promoted the research via a similar method to that used on mIRC. Users on gay.com also receive a free user profile that can be accessed by all other people on the same channel. Researchers used this as an opportunity to promote the website and created specific profiles that described the research and listed the web address. Gay.com has chatrooms relating to a particular city in Australia, and thus all of the following chatrooms were used to encourage female SSAY to participate:

- Australia - Adelaide
- Australia - Brisbane
- Australia - Melbourne
- Australia - Perth
- Australia - Sydney

5. Sexuality Bulletin/Personals Sites

These websites provide Cyberspace for people to leave personal information about themselves in order to meet other people. They also allow people to post messages relating to various topics. As many of these bulletin/personals sites cater for same sex attracted people and are generally specific to a geographical region, they were used to attract people from regional and rural Australia.

6. Informal Connections

Researchers also used informal connections to promote the research. Some used word of mouth, whilst others forwarded information about the research via email to various appropriate connections. These connections were asked to promote the research to people in their own informal off-line and on-line links. As a result information about the research was spread rapidly to a wide range of people and organisations.

2.3. PARTICIPANT PROFILE

In total, 206 valid questionnaires were submitted via the website. Of these, 151 (73.3%) were male, 52 (25.2%) were female and 3 (1.5%) were transgender (two identified as male and one as female). Young people were aged between 14 and 21 years old, with an average of 18.7 years. Ages were weighted towards the older spectrum, that is, over 18. Thirty-nine (19%) were under 18, a further 25% were under 20, and the remainder were 20-21 years. Six (2.8%) were from Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities.

From Figures 1 and 2 below, we can see that all states were represented as well as urban regional and rural areas.

FIGURE 1 - State of residence

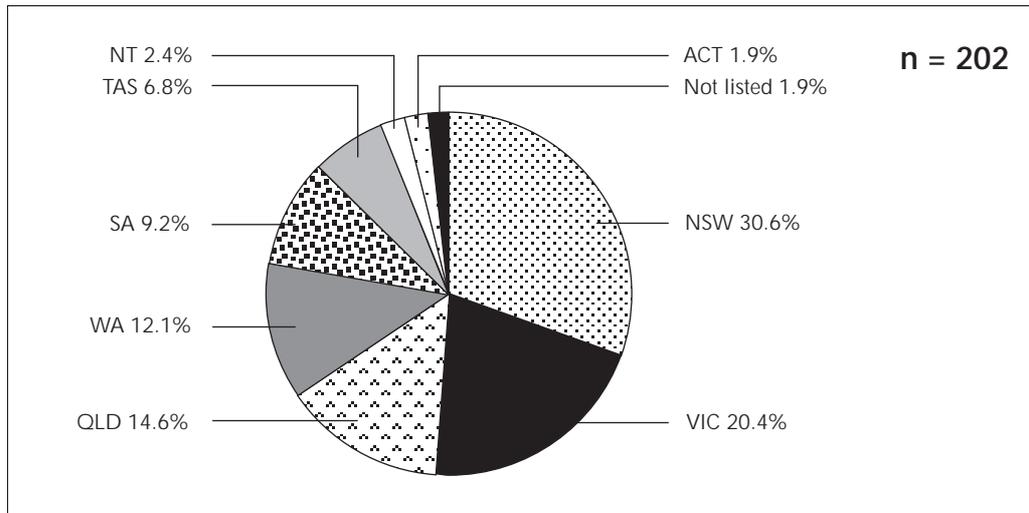
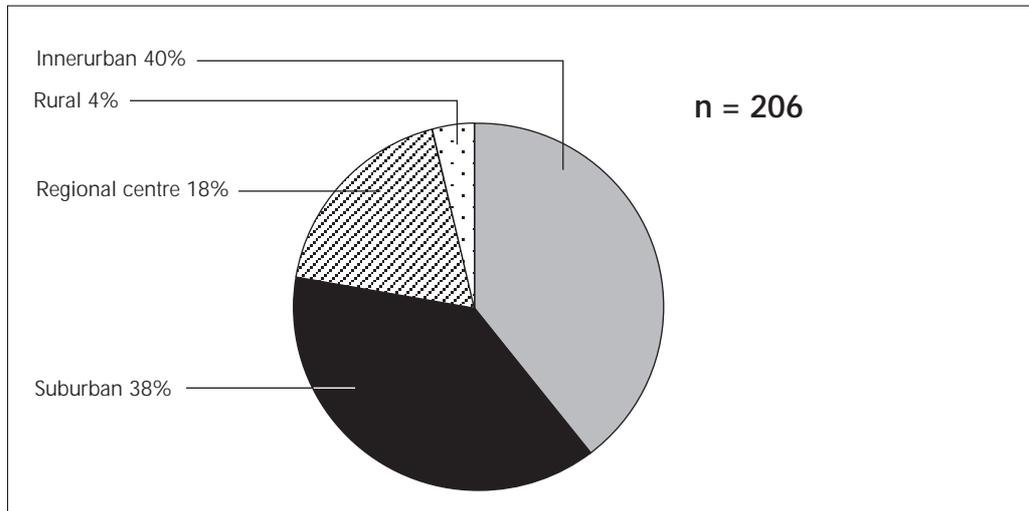
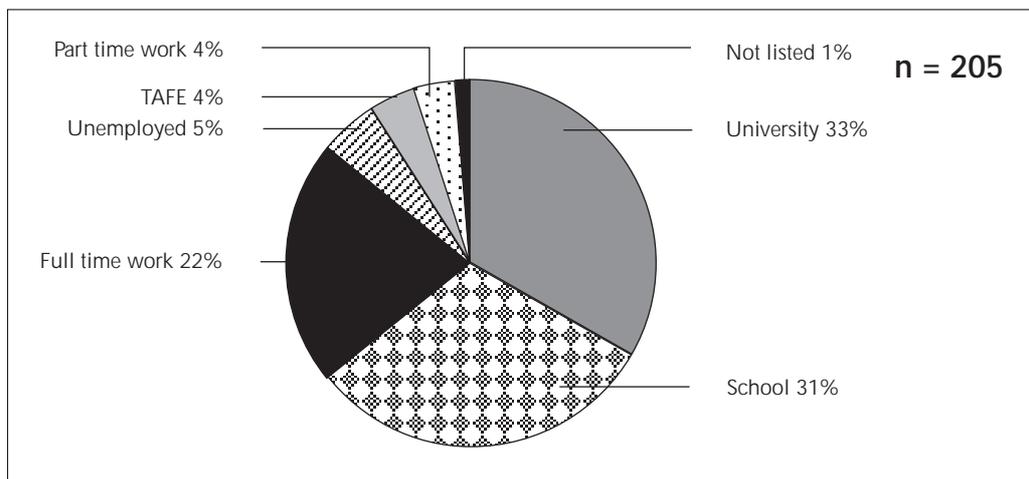


FIGURE 2 - Setting of residence



Most young people were attending school, university or working full time. Young people who were at TAFE, in part-time work or unemployed were under represented in this study (Figure 3).

FIGURE 3 - Current occupation



A note about the profile of the group

The young people in this study are not a representative sample of same sex attracted young people. Young women are under-represented, as are people of low socio-economic status. Of the young men and women in this study, more of the young men were recruited in chatrooms, spent more time on the computer and were more likely to be involved in sexuality related pursuits. Part of this difference in time spent on sexuality related pursuits can be explained by the boys' longer time spent on the Net and involvement with Net communities. Much of the rest can be attributed to constructions of gender, in which the 'good feminine' girl is not interested in decontextualised sex. Notwithstanding these differences, there were young women in this study who were involved in many of the sexuality-related activities in which the young men were involved. It is from this group that we can learn about new possibilities for young women in terms of desire and same sex attraction. For these reasons and because the numbers of young women are small compared with the young men, we will treat statistically significant gender differences with caution (raise alpha to .005) and explore gender more fully using the qualitative data.

Please note: all participants quoted in the report have had their names changed to protect their identities. All quotes are in their own words and reflect their own expressions and grammatical preferences.

3. LEARNING HOW TO USE THE NET

We asked the young people about their first experiences on-line, including who assisted them, where they first went on-line and what happened. Many taught themselves how to negotiate their way around the Net and felt that this was relatively easy to do. Many young people, for instance Nathan & Alex used a 'trial and error' method of learning:

I first got on the Net about three years ago in my home town....I had my own computer....no one helped me I worked it all out for myself....and I found chat programs and started chatting....and I found good places to chat to other gay people as in a country town no one ever knew. (Nathan 18 years)

...4 years ago December I worked out how to use it gradually by myself, i checked out stuff on the Internet and found chatrooms pretty much straight away. (Alex 18 years)

Others reported having access to people who had Internet experience to help them uncover the world of on-line information. Some young people found their friends to be most helpful.

The first time I went online was about four years ago at my best friend's house. She knew what she was doing, and showed me how to connect, search etc. We looked up the usual music and television sites that seem so exciting the first time you go online. (Tully 19 years)

If young people weren't able to readily access someone to help them, they would ask questions of on-line computer technicians or people on-line in chatrooms who were experienced in using the Internet. Other people they sought help from were teachers, parents, classmates, technicians and others on-line:

The first time i went on the Net was at school. The teachers explained what to do and how to log on. I was in a Computing class. I thought it was really good because I've never seen anything like it before. It had everything you could possibly think of. (Tessa 18 years)

My mother got Internet access. I was 15. Her techie helped me with the configurations, but I figured out Netscape for myself. I had a good surf. (Thea 18 years)

First time i got online, was when the family had the Net hooked up a few weeks ago. I pretty much had to work it out for myself, although some people in chatrooms did answer my queries, as did the ISP. (Pat 17 years)

Twenty eight percent (58/205), of young people accessed the Internet for the first time at home, 18% (37/205) at school and university and 12% (24/205) at 'friends' houses'. Presumably because of their youth and lack of work history, few accessed the Net for the first time at work.

4. SEX, SEXUALITY AND INTERNET USE

We asked young people about the broad purpose of their Internet use in regard to work, study, general leisure and sexuality related leisure. Twenty-five percent (52/206) of young people reported using the Internet for work and 54% (111/206) used it for study. Of the leisure use, 86% (178/206) used it for sexuality-related purposes and 70% (145/206) for general leisure purposes.

Given that activities with “sexuality related purposes” were a major interest of the project and the major focus of these young people’s Internet use, we wanted to find out what they were doing and what they were gaining from these Net-based activities. We asked young people if they had engaged in a number of activities for sexuality-related purposes including emailing friends, emailing strangers, downloading sexual materials from sex sites, visiting sexual information sites and participating in sexual chat in chatrooms. We then asked the reason for involvement in such activities.

FIGURE 4 - Activities on the Net with sex or sexuality-related purpose x gender

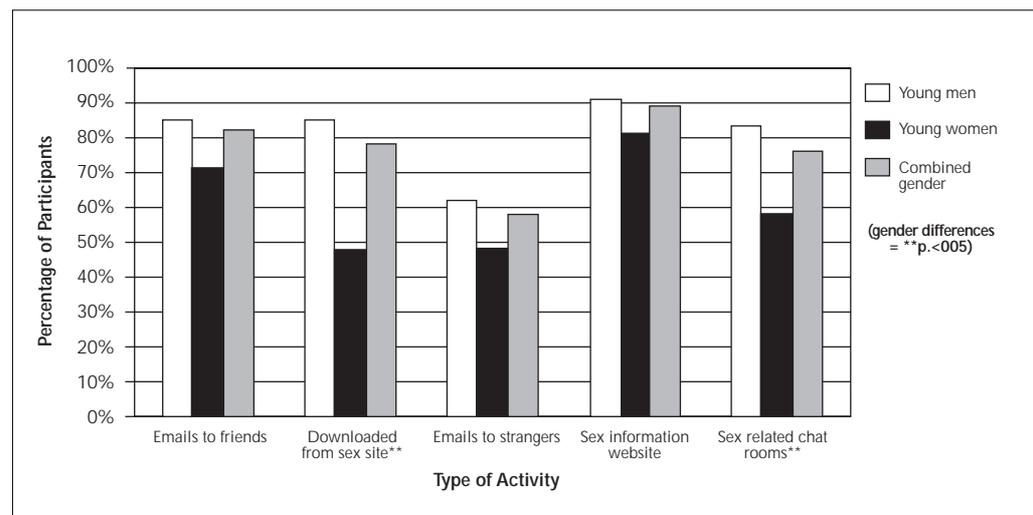
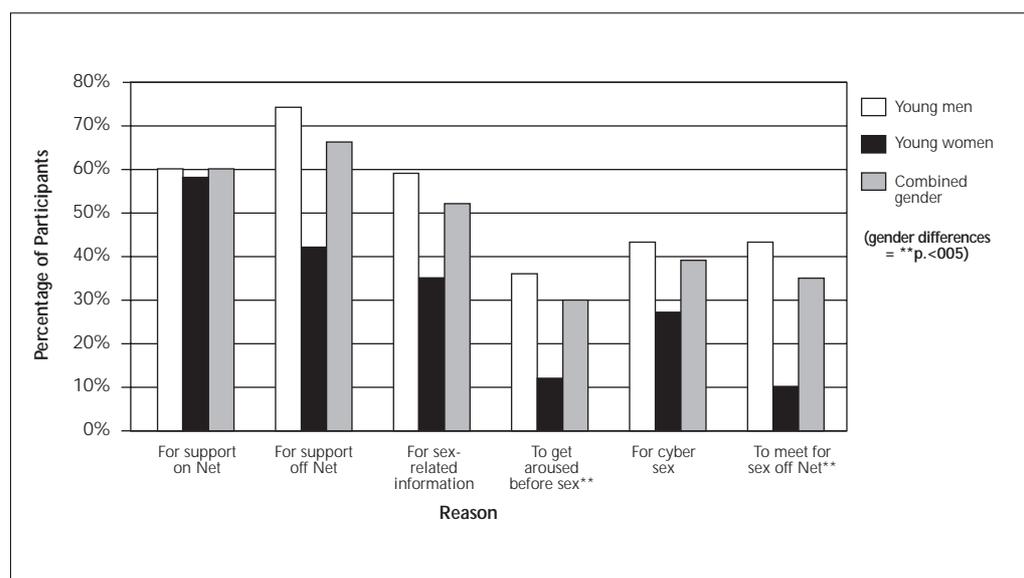


Figure 4 represents the activities used by young people for sexuality-related purposes and Figure 5 summarises the reasons for the involvement. Boys were more likely than girls to download from sex sites, chat in sex chatrooms, go to sex information websites and to use email for sexuality related purposes. This does not mean, however, that girls were not involved in these activities. Four-fifths of the girls had accessed sex related information and over half had used chatrooms to talk about sexuality related matters.

Young people’s main reason for involvement in sexuality-related activities on the Net was to gain support and affirmation for their sexual feelings. Given the lack of sexuality-related support that these young people receive in Real Life and the resulting isolation they feel, this is not surprising.

FIGURE 5 - Reasons for involvement in sex/sexuality related activities



About half of young people (more young men) also used the Net to access information about sexuality and safe sex. We know from past research that information about gay and lesbian relationships and safe sex is rarely available from generally reliable sources such as school or home. Where information is available it is from less reliable sources such as peers and the media, leaving many young people with questions that remain unanswered. Young people often mentioned highly reputed websites, such as those of state AIDS Councils, and peak youth bodies where the information available was regarded as trustworthy and easily accessible. This has implications for the possibilities of sex education in schools. Young people could be taught about reputable websites that are available to them for information and support.

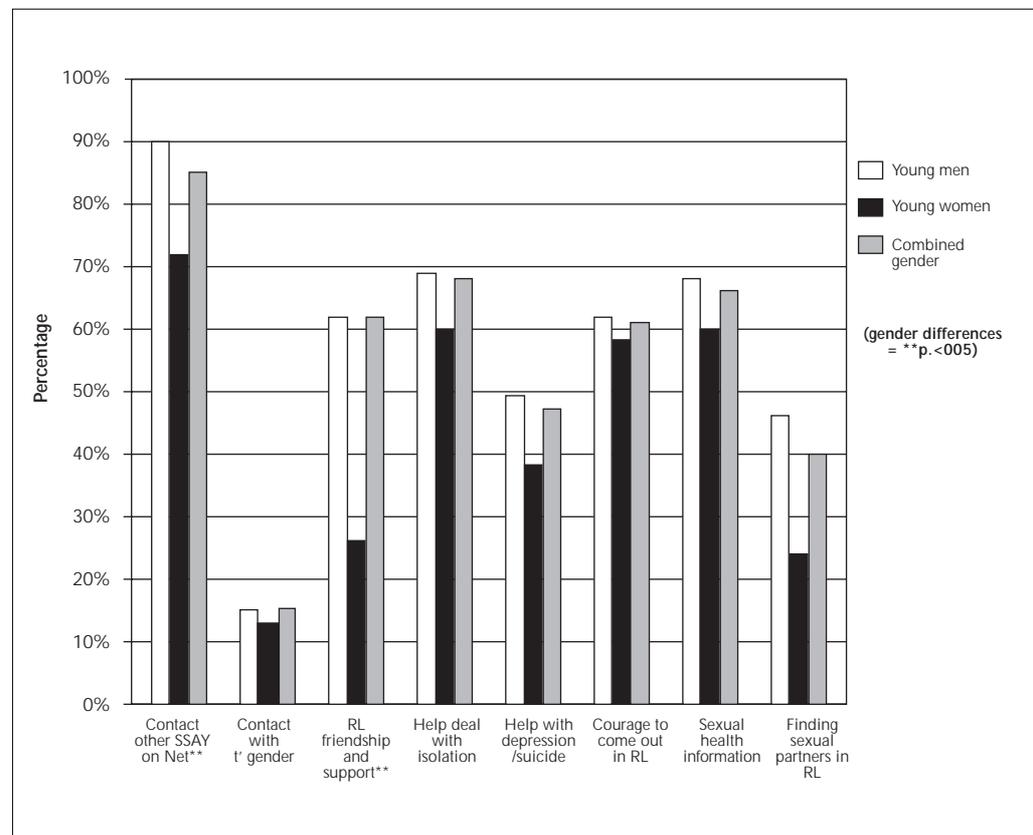
A smaller number of young people used the Net for more directly sex related purposes, such as arousal before sex, Cybersex and/or to meet someone in Real Life for sex. In each of these cases there was a significant gender difference, with boys being more likely to take up those options. This is consistent with dominant constructions of masculinity that allow sex as an end in itself as acceptably masculine, but not feminine, behaviour. Although many of these young women were clearly resisting narrow constructions of the feminine, they were also likely to position themselves within them. There was little evidence of young women being interested in sex as an end in itself, rather, they looked for friendship and relationships with sex contextualised within them.

5. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NET IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES

In order to gain some insight into the potential of the Net to address the needs of same sex attracted young people, especially in light of research that shows discrimination, invisibility and abuse are a normal part of their lives, we asked a number of related questions. The questions concerned:

- the importance of the Net (quantitative) for exploring sexuality and gaining support,
- how the Net had influenced young people's feelings about their sexuality (qualitative)
- how they felt about their sexuality (qualitative and quantitative),
- what young people liked most about the Net (qualitative),
- how life would change if Net access were denied (qualitative) to them.

FIGURE 6. The importance of the Net for exploring sexuality and gaining support



When asked about the importance of the Net in relation to a number of functions it might serve, young people gave us a picture of its value in exploring and coming to terms with a sexuality that is constructed in Real Life as transgressive. This is graphically presented in Figure 6.

FINDING A FRIEND

Same sex attracted young people face a number of issues regarding isolation and alienation. Firstly, they are a stigmatised group and live with the knowledge that their difference is likely to be regarded negatively by those around them. Other minorities (eg based on race or religion) usually share this status with their families and receive acceptance and support from them. However this is almost never the case for this group whose parents are likely to be heterosexual. Added to this, sexual difference is a minority characteristic that can be hidden from the world and many choose this option at least for a time. Concealing sexual difference increases the invisibility of the group, leaving each individual unaware of others like themselves and feeling alone and unsupported. Eighty-five percent of the young people in the study reported that the Internet played an important role in putting them in touch with other SSA people and 70% felt it played an important role in reducing isolation.

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

FINDING A COMMUNITY

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

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

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

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

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

I GET SUPPORT WHEN I'M FEELING DOWN

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

The Internet has been a valuable resource...to relieve the general cognitive dissonance I felt toward my sexuality. It was comforting to have the Internet as a tool to decrease isolation and in turn depression. I still use it from time to time. (Nat 21 years)

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

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

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

I guess the thing that I used to do before I came out was go and find web pages about Ellen Degeneres and kd lang and they kind of made me feel better about myself because it made it kind of ok to be attracted to other girls and that I wasn't the only 'weird' one on this planet. (Tessa 18 years)

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

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

We have written elsewhere about the ways young people use the Net as a rehearsal space for coming out in Real Life (Harrison et al forthcoming). In this study we learned more

about the mechanism behind this process. Sixty-one percent of young people said that the Internet was important in giving them the courage to come out in Real Life. And although 'coming out' is a personal decision and not always a wise move when young people are dependent and vulnerable, the Internet did support this process by helping young people to feel more confident about their sexual identity.

GETTING INFORMATION ABOUT SEXUAL HEALTH

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

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

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

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

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

The Internet provided a space in which young people were free to ask questions honestly and have them answered without the fear of the embarrassment and recrimination that prevented them from asking in Real Life. The various AIDS council websites in each state were popular for this purpose.

MAKING CONTACT IN REAL LIFE

A final aspect of the Net's importance for young people was its bringing them together with similar others who could become part of their sexual, social and support circles in Real Life. Because of the invisibility factor, SSAY were attending school and moving around in

the community, often unaware that there were others like them doing the same thing. It was not uncommon for young people to meet other SSAY and discover that they lived in the same town and even attended the same school. Liz was one example:

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

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

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

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

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

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

PORNOGRAPHY ON THE NET

Using the Net for activities such as downloading sex-related information, sexual arousal and Cybersex all raise the 'spectre' of pornography. Young people's transcripts tell us that they use pornography in many different ways. For some, pornography meant more than arousal, it was also used for information gathering. Given the lack of information about

(homo)sexuality in their everyday lives, a number of young men described the Net's importance in learning what to do when they had sex with a man. In this way they were able to rehearse a homosexual encounter before they tried it in Real Life. Cam explained the difficulty for young gay men who have nowhere to find out about homosexual sex (apart from actually having sex):

A major aspect of the Internet which has assisted me in my self acceptance has been the availability of pornography which I have found really quite informative because it is amongst the only ways that you can find out about actual sex because, whilst there is a lot of social frankness about heterosexual sex homosexual sex is sort of a grey area, and to put it bluntly, this pornography really shows young homosexuals what goes where and how. If this wasn't available then I think there would be a lot of confusion about homosexual sex because information on how it works is fairly scarce. (Cam 18 years)

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

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

Looking at porn – I like to see what I can't have. (Jim 16 years)

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

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

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

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

THE NET AND POSITIVE SEXUAL IDENTITY

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

The young people in this survey largely affirmed that the Internet had a positive influence on their feelings about their sexuality. It provided significant opportunities for them to develop self-acceptance, feel more 'normal', and meet others like themselves. A smaller number were ambivalent, feeling there were both positive and negatives aspects to its presence in their lives. The unanticipated ambiguity of the question itself, taken by a few young people to mean something like 'had it played a role in converting you?' led to some strong denunciations of these implications and assurances that they had always felt attracted to others of their own sex.

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

This is a complex question and I could go into pages of detail but basically, when I first started using the Internet I didn't know what I was. I knew I wasn't really attracted to girls but didn't ever think I'd be gay, one day I found gay chatrooms and from then on I pretty much knew, I'm attracted to guys physically and mentally, it developed what was inside of me and aided me in learning about this lifestyle, it also allowed me to get a feel for it instead of one day just going to a club and being thrown into the whole scene. (Alex 18 years)

*Good question. I don't know *how* long it would have taken me to figure it out if it hadn't been for the net. I fell into bad company (joke). I'd probably make a pretty*

good case for one of those fundamentalist Christian churches who claim the Internet corrupts the young. It all started with the Internet erotica. That's right, porn. I don't look at pictures, I read stories. Anyway, I belong to a category of people who read a specialised sort of erotica involving characters from existing works of fiction. After a while, I figured out that I was quite a bit interested in women, and, well, not actually interested in men at all (well, not sexually, anyway). It seemed to follow at the time. You asked...(Thea 19 years)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Many young people reiterated the importance to them of meeting others 'just like me'. The Internet's influence as a conduit to communication with helpful and supportive others cannot be understated. Not only was the contact effective in terms of providing positive role models, but its networking possibilities ameliorated some of the loneliness and isolation that characterised Real Life for many young people.

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

It's given me the opportunity to meet and talk to people that are the same as me (ie.gay). (Damien 17 years)

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

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

I used to live in north Queensland, I knew no gay people, I had no gay friends, it was a very violent thing if you came out and said you were gay, when I got the net, I could

access places and things, and get a better understanding of who I was, where I would fit in, and got to have a little on-line support group for myself by the people I chatted to online. It helped me get information I needed so I didn't feel alone in the world. (Sam 21 years)

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

The possibilities that the Net provides in assisting young people with the coming out process are explored in more detail later in the report. But it is important to affirm the Net's positive influence in the coming out process, which involves coming out to one's self as well as others. Numbers of young people also indicated that a key positive influence of the Net had been the connection with someone who became a close friend, or boyfriend or girlfriend, and the opportunity to experience sex (Virtual or Real Life).

It has allowed me to explore my sexuality, the sexual side of being homosexual. Before that, I only knew one other gay male, 16 also. The Internet allowed me to experience sex, without, I suppose the 'emotional trappings' of a relationship...(Huey 21 years)

6. FAVOURITE THINGS ABOUT THE NET

We asked young people what they liked most about the Internet. The most common response was communicating with other young people like them. Two main themes emerged from this: the use of the Net to make new contacts, especially other same sex attracted people via gay chatrooms, and the Internet's role in keeping people in touch with existing friends, many of whom they met on the Net. Young people described the excitement of chatting with different people of their own age, interests and sexual preference. They enjoyed the ease and effectiveness of individual and group chat opportunities.

It's definitely chatting. Cause when I was a new user I went into the yahoo chat and visited the bi/gay/les rooms and it helped me about and made me feel more comfortable about the issue, considering that I was completely in the closet at that stage. (Cathy, 16 years)

My favourite activity on the Net would be chatting to my on-line friends. This comes about due to my lack of friends at school and trying to deal with my homosexuality. (Erik 17 years)

Over the years I have found a number of very friendly people who have been extremely important to my development as a gay individual. Without the ability to chat to people on the Net, I think I would have become an introvert, not been able to deal with who I really am, possibly even in a suicidal frame of mind. (Lex 17 years)

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Email was more popular among girls than boys and was generally used to communicate privately with already established friends and partners, particularly about issues that had no legitimate space in Real Life:

I love to chat to my friends from school because I can talk to them in private without anyone knowing what we are saying, I also love to talk to my girlfriend, the only time we really get to talk alone. (Cathy 16 years)

E-mails cos you can contact people and ask them questions when you couldn't ask them in person cos you would be too embarrassed or not want them to know who you were. (Mel 21 years)

The comfort offered by strangers and friends, often across large geographical distances, as well as the range of different people it introduced to young people, was a key feature for young people.

Young men and women were equally interested in using the Net to surf for information, to download music or visit specific types of sites such as TV shows, sport and comics. This often provided an opportunity for them to explore queer centred culture.

I mostly look at websites for different TV shows that I like, especially ones that look at possible lesbian relationships on the show, and I like to read f/f fiction that involves characters from these shows (Rachel 18 years)

The IRC, without a doubt. I've made friends in places as far away as UK and USA, and at the same time many friends in other states especially Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane. My flatmate who is also my best friend ...and I met on the Net and he was from Newcastle. Without IRC I wouldn't have as many friends as I do now, most of whom I've met on the Net, and have travelled to see in different states and cities. (Damien 21 years)

Net use seemed to change over time for young people. Past favourite uses are supplanted by others and, as needs for information or friends are met, young people review their use of time spent on the Net. Stephen has used the Net in an active way to extend his networks and to find ways to have his needs met:

It used to be Internet chatting which i would spend countless hours a week on, or making web pages, and then I played games almost exclusively. Now I just check email because I don't have enough time to do much else. The reason I mostly check email is to keep in touch with people I have met through chat or games, so communicating with people I could otherwise not meet is really why I use the Net. (Stephen 20 years)

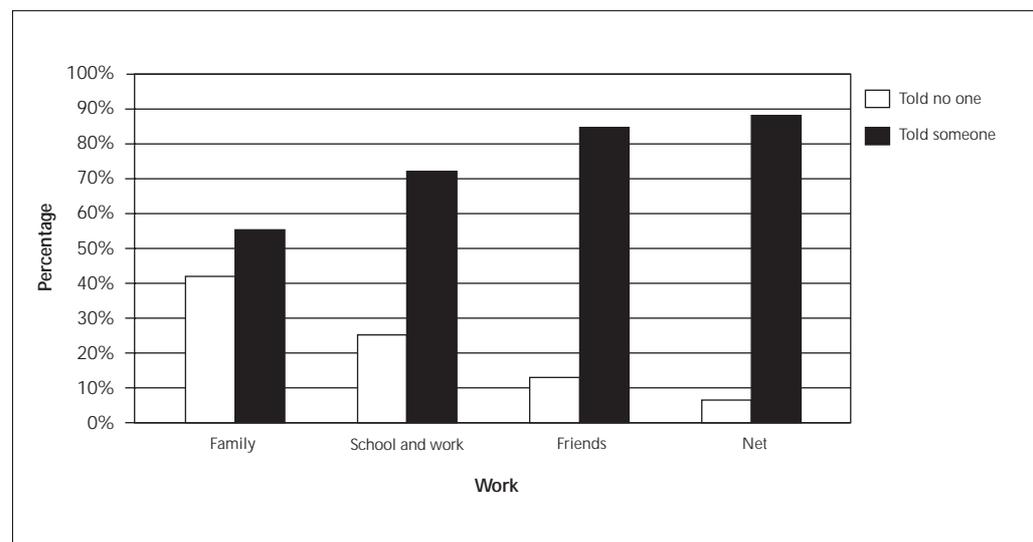
In summary, young people's favourite activities were those which brought them into contact with other same sex attracted young people and which helped to introduce them to a wider queer culture and a sense of belonging to a queer community.

7. COMING OUT ON THE NET AND IN REAL LIFE

We have discussed the importance of the Net for young people in terms of its various uses for information and support. We wanted to explore further the Net as a space for 'coming out'. The decision to disclose one's sexuality – or 'come out' – is often framed as a singular event in popular culture when in fact it is a life-long process for people who are attracted to their own sex. However the first few experiences, in particular, can be extremely difficult and challenging. Research has shown that this is the time when young people are at a heightened risk of suicide (Nicholas & Howard, 2001). Responses at this time can have considerable impact on a young person's wellbeing. Despite the efforts young people make to choose the right time and person, the disclosure is not always a positive experience (Hillier, et al, 1998). Given that almost two-thirds of young people felt that the Net helped them find the courage to come out in Real Life situations, we were interested to explore coming out on-line and in Real Life in the lives of SSAY who disclosed their sexuality. Not surprisingly there were differences in the patterns of disclosure.

Nearly half of the young people had told 'everyone' on the Net about their sexual identity and almost all of the participants (90%) had at least told one person they'd met on the Net. People were less likely to be told in Real Life than on-line. Real Life friends were more likely to have been told (86% had told at least a few friends) than people in the school/work context (72%) or family (57%). Within the family environment, 42% of young people had told no one at all. The pattern of disclosure is broadly similar to that found in our previous research (Hillier et al 1998) which found higher rates of disclosure to friends before family and has been documented elsewhere (Savin-Williams, 2000). Young men were more likely to have disclosed on the Net and young women in RL.

FIGURE 7 - Disclosure to people on the Net and in Real Life



If we collapse the categories of people told in Real Life, we find that 9% of young people had told no one in Real Life compared to 6% on the Net. At face value this does not appear significantly different. However, it is clear from young people's comments about the importance of the Net that the sequencing of their coming out is significant. The Net had given the majority of them the courage and the impetus to come out in Real Life. The nature and quality of the support they received on the Net was also clearly a key factor in taking the next step into Real Life.

THE NATURE OF SUPPORT

Our earlier research data revealed that those who had disclosed their sexuality to at least one other person felt no better about their sexuality than those who had not disclosed to anyone. However those who received a *supportive response* were significantly more likely to feel better about their sexuality. For that reason we were interested in the degree of supportiveness the Net offered overall when disclosures occurred.

The vast majority of SSAY (84%) found the Net was an uncensorious and generally appreciative environment, with most finding it 'very supportive' (62%) or 'mostly supportive' (22%). In the Real Life context, 72% of the participants also found the overall response generally supportive but this support clearly lacked the strength and consistency of that found on the Net, with only 34% indicating 'very supportive' responses.

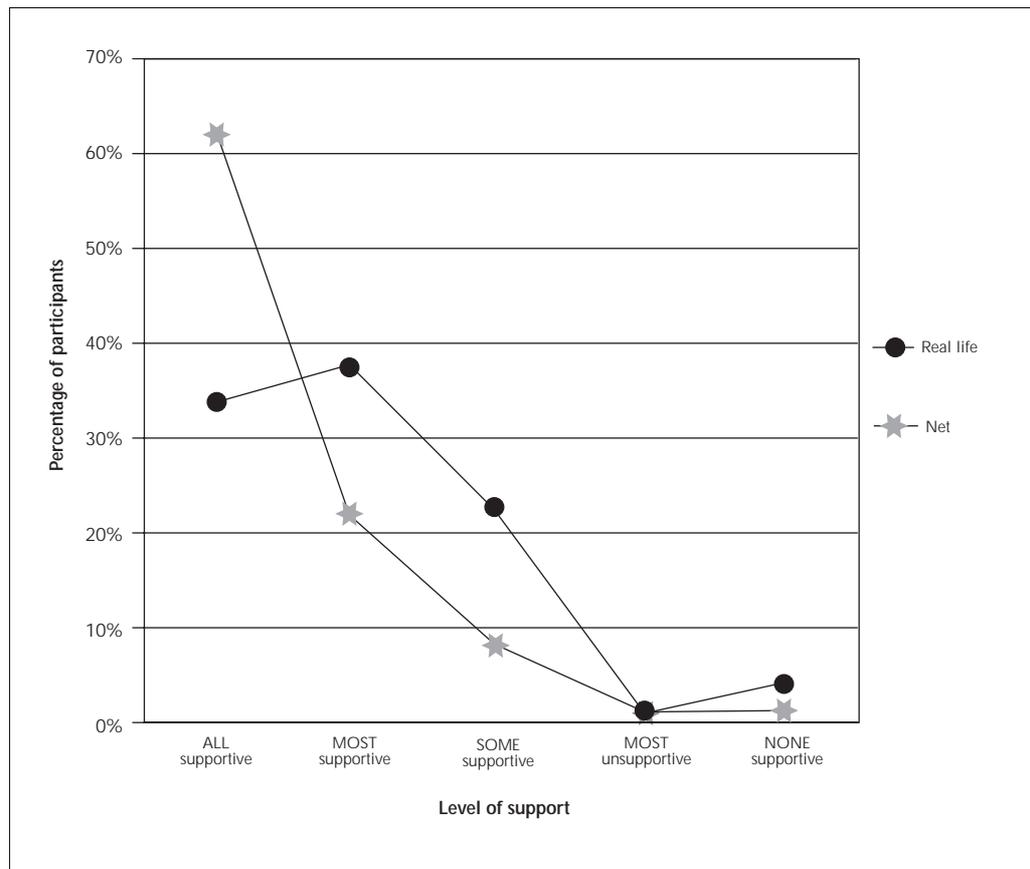
The anonymity of the Net and the support it offered clearly contributed to young people's experience of it as a safe place to come out. They were protected, both physically and emotionally, from the repercussions of a negative response. Rejection on-line, when experienced, could be easier and less confronting to deal with than in Real Life. Some young people pointed out that coming out on the Net could potentially be less hurtful or emotionally scarring because its emotional and spatial distance acted as protection or because, for them, there was less investment in its 'reality'.

If they reject you and you know them from the Net, they can't do much in the way of hurting you. In RL it's a bit harder for them to not react badly if that's what they will do. (Damien 17 years)

It's less traumatic on the Net, you don't have to verbalise anything, you don't have to see their expression if they take it badly, and if they get excited on the Net it's as good as giving you a big hug in RL. (Matt 16 years)

On the Net rejection isn't such a great deal, as you generally don't know the people as well as IRL. (Ben 17 years)

FIGURE 8 – Support for young people on the Net & Real Life



These various qualities provided a perfect rehearsal space for some:

There is anonymity with the Net. You can gradually work up the courage by coming out on the Net to eventually come out in RL. I practiced with Net friends before I came out to family. It meant that my parents were not the absolute first people I told which was good for me. Plus if an Internet friend rejects you, you may not like it but you can get over it quicker than if family does. (Mel 21 years)

I guess one is more open on the Net, as it is less intimidating holding an intimate conversation about ones sexuality, it's a dress rehearsal for then coming out and telling people in RL, yet the implications on the Net are not as high as the real thing. (Andrew 21 years)

The support of Net friends and acquaintances was genuinely felt by many. However, for a smaller number of SSAY the Net was less than a satisfactory avenue for experiencing an authentic sense of acceptance from others:

Over the Net you can't tell if they really do accept or reject you, as emotions aren't easily conveyed on the Net. (Damien 17 years)

Talking to people in RL gives me a real sense of acceptance, whereas the Net is detached, and unreal in a sense. (Fabian 18 years)

8. WHY THE NET AND NOT REAL LIFE?

What is it about the Net that gives young people the confidence to risk disclosure and break down the barriers that isolate them? Why are people more accepting and supportive on the Net? How does Cyberworld communication differ to that of Real Life? We were interested to better understand the qualities of Real Life and Net life that either inhibited or encouraged an openness about sexuality among SSAY. We asked participants to describe what they perceived as the differences between talking openly about their sexuality on the Net and in Real Life and communicating socially with other people in both worlds. In this way we hoped to be able to tease out the special conditions that made the Internet a safe space for many of the young people in the study.

SEXUALITY ON THE NET

'It's just easier'

The young people indicated to us that the motivation to disclose was primarily due to the coexistent characteristics of distance and intimacy embodied by the Virtual World. Young people indicated that the Net's technological filters created anonymous space for safe interaction. This protective medium also generated the potential for greater personal intimacy between its participants. The Virtual World was 'inhabited' by people who young people experienced as more knowledgeable, accepting and sophisticated about sexuality than those in young people's Real Life relationship circles. Being yourself in Real Life, in fact, posed a genuine threat to physical or emotional health for many young people in a way that the Internet did not. In short, the literal and symbolic barriers created by the Internet enhanced communication and offered young people both refuge and respite from the ignorance and homophobia of the Real World. As many repeatedly said of the Net, 'it's just easier'.

The value of anonymity

Many young people described the Net as a space where communication was comfortable, companionable and safe. This was attributed in part to the fact that its technology barred face to face and voice contact, and therefore personal identification was voluntary. For many the anonymity created an environment where people felt they could talk more openly or more freely and be more forthcoming about personal or intimate subjects. As the following young people said:

I can open up to someone more on the Net, than in RL because, on the Net, the people don't know who you are...like if I started talking to someone who I never have talked to before. I can easily talk to them, cause they don't know me and I don't know them. Whereas I find it hard to talk to someone in RL. (Ryan 18 years)

Talking to people on the Net about my sexuality is so much easier because on the Internet I am faceless, nobody really knows who I am whereas if I was to come out to someone in RL then there would be a lot of consequences and repercussions to deal with. The Internet allows me to get off my chest what I need to, I just couldn't do that in my RL. (Will 17 years)

I'm more open about my feelings on the Net than in RL. I find it hard telling people I'm gay in RL. (Craig 18 years)

Young people essentially described the Net as a place they could be their authentic selves, or the self they were most comfortable with, rather than the camouflaged self so often presented to the Real World.

I never let people see me get upset, and at school I act like everything is cool and im happy but when I'm on the Net I open up more and actually talk about it. I prefer talking over the Net about these things (Aaron 15 years)

When you meet ppl with same sex preferences on the Net you tend to talk freely but not in RL coz you tend to draw some facts back from being discovered (Shaun 19 years)

People on the Net are different

Apart from the protection and intimacy the medium offers, young people also identified the Net audience in very positive terms and perceived themselves to be at less risk of negative judgements or personal attacks. Inhabitants of the Net were often viewed as more diverse, less judgmental, more open, worldly and sophisticated than people in Real Life, with a preparedness to ask more questions and answer more questions. Many people also commented that they knew, or could assume, that many Net people they chatted to were gay or gay friendly, which added to a sense of camaraderie or of visiting a 'community of like minded people'.

The people. On the Net, it's easier to select for a particular social group. There are so many people there that the probability of finding someone Just Like You (if that's what you want) approaches 1. It's also a den of free-thinking, intellectually curious, radically polite, intelligent, open-minded people. This means that there seems to be a higher number of educable people. This means that if they don't know what you're talking about, most of them might be willing to stay around and learn. In RL, I'm more likely to be told "Shut up, that's not what I was taught." (Thea 19 years)

On the Net they're not usually as "WOW!" surprised. :) Also, it's more passe on the Net, in RL people are still surprised by it. (Damien 21years)

People who use the Net seem to be more open minded about things, maybe just because they either don't have to deal with it right in front of them or its just the type of people who tend to use the Net often enough. (Jason 17 years)

There was also little evidence that the anonymity of the communicators necessarily meant a superficiality of contact; rather, it often served to intensify the intimacy and depth of communication.

Freedom to be oneself

For most young people the Net enabled access to same sex attracted people of all ages, a practice often fraught with difficulty in Real Life. Chatrooms and ICQ enabled free flowing exchanges about their everyday issues that were not 'everyday' for friends from the dominant culture. The Net provides opportunity for a 'bi-cultural' lifestyle for many young people – their lives are clearly deflected through prisms of multiple realities. The Net allowed many young people the opportunity to live their sexuality in a more 'normalised' way.

At first, although a few RL friends knew I was gay, I didn't feel I could talk to them about sexual relations, boyfriends etc, and so I mainly had to talk to Net people about those things. Nowadays though, I can talk about sexual stuff to a very limited degree with my RL friends, but again, I don't like to push the fact that I'm really gay and that I'm out there on oxford st every weekend, or meeting guys off the Net etc. (Lex 17 years)

On the Net I go to gay chatrooms therefore I am assured of acceptance for the fact that I am gay. In RL – there is a difference since I am a minority and there are still those who have conservative views who do not really accept me. (Blair 20 years)

*On the Net you can talk more openly about topics which affect you, and things you don't understand. In RL, you can't just turn up to your str8 male friend and say, "hi bob I'm having issues about the correct amount of lube for anal" he would find it unpleasant, although the look on his face could be worth it *ponders*..its just more open (Sam 21 years)*

The impact of the freedom to be 'oneself', or whichever self feels real, can never be underestimated. Clearly the Net offers this potential – perhaps only a glimpse for some, a whole lifestyle of friends, love and sex for others. Its impact is obviously related to the degree with which the young person's sexual identity is, or can be, integrated within Real Life. For a small number of young people there was clearly a relatively high degree of congruence between their Net and Real Life identities. And for a small number of other young people, that's not even the point:

On the Net you can be whomever you wish whereas in RL you can only be yourself. (Colby 18 years)

There is the sense for Colby that Real Life pins him down to one way of being himself with few options whereas the Net offers him choices and room to move.

Real Life is a risky space

How did young people feel about the Real World in contrast to the cyber world? It is clearly a place in which most were hesitant to expose their chosen identities. They explained that occasional encounters with prejudice on the Net could be handled routinely through ignoring or disconnecting with that person or chatroom. But Real Life encounters loomed as large and threatening experiences. For many the Real World was considered risky space, populated with potential threats to the physical self. It also represented a conflicted space in terms of certain relationships that were important in their lives. However it was clear that many young people yearned for it to be a safer place for their same sex attracted selves. Their comments suggest the Net would perhaps not lure them so seductively from Real Life if its social and cultural environment embraced them more readily. For instance, there was still discomfort among some young people eg Luke and Lucinda, about the continuing need to hide one's true self in the company of Real Life friends and family.

I am not comfortable telling those who have known me for a long time (family and friends) as I feel like they will think I have deceived them. I don't want my sexuality to define who I am. I am waiting for the time where I feel confident enough in myself and in those I love that my telling them will not change the way they perceive me, but rather it will change the way they perceive gay people. (Luke 21 years)

The whole anonymous thing, u can talk to anyone and they aren't going to ever know who u are. RL friends are far more fragile, as none of them are gay themselves its new to them so you have a bit of explaining so they can understand the whole idea. I guess it's kinda weird for them to find out you're gay after knowing you for so long thinking you were straight. It's like u having been hiding a part of yourself from them. (Lucinda 17 years)

Playing safe

A significant barrier to good communication and close interpersonal relationships in Real Life was ignorance and homophobia – actual or anticipated. For the young people in the research Real Life represented a greater vulnerability to hurt or rejection when related to their sexuality. The issue of safety was a constant in the lives of many young people. Some had told no one or very few people about their sexuality in Real Life. Some were surprised by the generally good response, but this did not allay their concerns about telling others:

On the Net anonymity is the greatest asset, nobody really knows who you are. In RL there are grave risks involved in admitting to people who u are. (Patrick 18 years)

Less fear of discrimination on the Net because I go to gay and lesbian sites. If in a hetero site then just avoid those who react badly. In RL I am hesitant to come out unless I know the person is not homophobic. (Zoe 21 years)

For many young people this caution was well-founded from previous experiences. Phoebe described the Real Life differences that many young people alluded to.

In RL, its like people want to argue about it – ‘you’re just doing this to get at me’, ‘You!, you are not’, ‘It’s just a stage’, ‘You just haven’t met the right guy yet’ ‘You know some people get married and never have sex, you could do that’ (at uni where the christian fundamentalists are RIFE ‘well some people are born murderers but that doesn’t make it right’) blahblah blahblah blahblah. All my school friends just had nothing to do with me once i came out, altho they all KNEW – it was like its ok as long as I didn’t say it/talk about it, this despite the fact they would meet me at a G&L nightclub for heavens sake. On the Net, I’m just me and that’s fine. (Phoebe 21 years)

The complexities of relationships

In Real Life situations the intensity and the exposure facilitated by face to face contact can heighten the risk when relating to others, both familiar and new people. It is more confronting as a form of communication because of the nuances created by shared histories and other interpersonal knowledges. The ability to control or manage one’s own communication in terms of its literal and emotional content is often subverted by the intricacy of the medium of face to face contact. Real Life also offers far less control in terms of choice and frequency of contact with others.

RL, it is more personal, you have to look in their eyes, and have the chance to see their disappointment perhaps. On the Net you don’t, you only see words. (Harvey 18 years)

In RL they are people I know, people I care about, so what they think of me and their reaction concerns me. On the Net I don’t know the people I talk to, I can’t see them and don’t have to have anything to do with them again so I have more confidence telling people and it feels good to tell people (Travis 21 years)

In contrast, the faceless and disembodied Internet communication provides a higher degree of safety and control – the disconnect button is merely millimetres away.

It’s less confrontational on the Internet, you don’t have to face ppl if you don’t want to, just press X if you want to escape. Unlike RL. (Corey 20 years)

I tell more people on the Net, because I don’t ever have to see them again if I don’t choose to. In RL, I see the people every day, and it makes me more cautious as to who I tell. (Emily 16 years)

Twenty years ago young same sex attracted people had far fewer opportunities to meet their peers, or to come out in safety. Even notions of rehearsing the coming out process were alien. Many people, including some older gays and lesbians, believe the situation for SSAY today is 'easier', though research has shown that homophobia does still create hostile environments which most SSAY are forced to endure in Real Life. The existence of the Net has provided a space where there are significant avenues for support, encouragement and friendship. However it is possible that this increased capacity to come out via the Net has heightened, as well as diffused, tensions embedded in the coming out process for some young people. Coming out on the Net does not necessarily obviate the intense desire by many young people to come out in Real Life in their significant relationships with others.

While the Net can create support and rehearsal space it can also operate to emphasise a disconcerting discrepancy between a person's 'Net identity' and 'Real Life identity'. For many SSAY this tension will ease as they grow older and attain greater independence in life through independent housing and incomes. For other young people this sense of relative peace and safety may not be so readily accessible in their 'normal lives' either now, or for years to come. Despite its enormously positive influence on the lives of many SSAY the Net should not be regarded as a panacea for the inequities and prejudices of Real Life.

Well the people I talk to on the Net are in the same position so they must be supportive. The Net, you don't see these people every day. I've told no one in RL for fear of rejection (although my parents pretty much reject me now). Also, I hate being different. All I want is a normal life. (Billy 17 years)

9. YOUNG PEOPLE COMMUNICATING THEIR IDENTITIES: REAL LIFE VS VIRTUAL WORLD

In order to further understand the special nature of the Net we asked young people to describe the differences between the forms of communication and social interaction offered by the Internet and Real Life.

Email versus phone and mail

We asked young people what it was about email that they found different to other forms of communication. The overwhelmingly common response related to its convenience: email was fast, instant, either cheap or free, efficient, informal and fun, and these qualities were especially useful in contact with people who were geographically distant.

A small minority either felt that there was no real difference or found it a slow and boring, essentially a 'very one way thing...identical to the old "snail mail" postal system, but in electronic form' (Lex 17 years). In contrast, another small group attributed creative and innovative capacities to email compared to other forms of communication.

After writing email and not talking for a long night I find my speech is more lyrical. Because its very casual and text based you can experiment both typographically and linguistically. (Adam 18 years)

Others enjoyed the capacity to send pictures, cards, documents and video, and keep records of contacts. As noted by some, the degree of additional intimacy or impersonality offered by email depended very much on the user. Many young people found themselves less inhibited, more open with friends and acquaintances and able to express themselves better with email. Communications, for this group, were more likely to be thoughtful and considered, as well as more emotionally open.

Sometimes it's easier to express yourself. I am better in written word, it gives me more time to think. In person, I talk nineteen to the dozen, but I can often speak before I think, which can be bad. (Damien 21 years)

The privacy and safety that email afforded was important to a significant number of young people. They felt it was easier to be their true selves, or emphasise other aspects of themselves, through a text-based medium.

You can show a different side of yourself as well as seeing a different side of other people even if you know them in RL. You can say things you can't say in person for various reasons. (Stephen 20 years)

This process can, of course, create impressions of people that are experienced as less 'valid' or interesting in a Real Life context when correspondents arrange to meet. One young person advised:

I think that meeting people over the Internet adds 15 IQ points to the impression you get. People seem much smarter and funnier over email (me too). I have met people who seem way cool and clever online, and then we meet for coffee, and they are a total dunderhead. (Dion 21 years)

The impersonal nature of email was a disadvantage for a small number of participants. They found it lacked 'emotional strength' or the requisite warmth or intimacy, despite some obvious advantages over other forms of communication.

I think it's a useful form of communication because it is faster to get the message to the recipient but I think it also has its down side because it is else personal that is why I don't use it to send personal messages. (Cleo 18 years)

However, the majority of young people found email useful and convenient, and helpful in providing an opportunity to communicate with distant partners or friends. Some young people particularly commented that email operated as an escape from isolation and hardship, as one transgender young person disclosed:

I can be myself. I can think before I type so I don't screw things up as I find it hard to talk to others. I can communicate with people around the world who are in a similar situation to me. I can communicate as myself, a boy and learn of other people's experiences. The fact that I am (ugh) biologically female is no matter... (Billy 17 years)

The difference between chatrooms and a party

We also asked young people to explain how meeting and talking in chatrooms might be different from meeting at a party. Most young people replied at some length on this issue and raised issues about safety and control, image and physical appearance, being yourself or someone else, and the advantages of interacting from the privacy and comfort of one's own home.

The absence of a physical body was a key difference, and one specially identified by the girls. Chatrooms filtered out the first impressions of Real Life, so often based on conventional standards of physical attractiveness and dress. This facilitated the opportunity to engage with another person's mind or personality, without the 'appearance bias' often associated with Real Life parties. Young people also noted that experiences in chatrooms could be confidence and skill building for Real Life.

They get an insight into the workings of your mind and personality, not the superficial aspects of ones image or body language. Flirting is more fun!, word play! So it is less

threatening than face to face contact, not that I'm against it!, but it breaks barriers and helps people find confidence...(Dana 20 years)

Consequently some young people felt that it was more possible to be 'a different self' or draw upon aspects of one's personality that they were reluctant to expose in Real Life. There was acknowledgment that attendance at, and successful interaction within, Real Life parties requires far more confidence than the Internet. Chatrooms enabled a controlled exposure of one's self and personal situation, with the young person being able to assess others and carefully judge the degree of intimacy in which they wished to be involved. Interestingly, the absence of party drugs in chatrooms was regarded as a significant bonus by some, who associated alcohol with the stress of parties generally, and therefore less preferable than the privacy and comfort of socialising in front of the computer screen.

They are less likely to be drunk! More likely to express themselves without being shy. Meeting groups of people that you don't know is often very hard for people to do. With IRC you can know the people before you go to the party. (Damien 21 years)

You're generally not drunk/drinking, you can decide what music you want to listen to, and if you're shy like myself, you can meet, talk, make, keep in touch with friends from the privacy of your own home, where you can relax and be yourself. And put those little emotions in :) (Roy 19 years)

The notion of 'being yourself' in a chatroom is also associated with the freedom to be someone else, to play with ideas of self, including gender, and to lie in your responses. For some young people this feels playful and exciting, others use it more as a self-protective strategy. Awareness of the Internet's capacity to facilitate 'lying' is high but some young people nevertheless continue to find it disturbing. However, it generally remains less hurtful and threatening than many Real Life situations. Chatrooms also offer a safety and control for both genders that parties do not; they filter people for similar interests. This is particularly true in relation to disclosure of sexual orientation.

There was ambivalence about the differences and benefits of chatrooms and parties for some, dependant upon their purpose in using chatrooms and the options they have in Real Life.

Firstly, as I am 17 I can't go to gay clubs etc which is extremely frustrating, so the parties I attend are generally straight and there is no opportunity to meet other gay people at parties. In this respect however, I find it easier to start a conversation and chat to someone at such a party, especially a guy, because it is always on a friendly basis. To meet a friendly person on a chatroom, while there is the advantage that they will all be gay/bi etc, the majority i talk to are either not friendly or only interested in sexual encounters. This becomes very frustrating, so when I do meet a genuine nice guy

on the Net, I try my best to keep in contact with them. The advantage of meeting someone on the Net is that you can then get their email address or ICQ no and keep in contact...Whereas at a party I can't exactly ask for a guys phone number so we can keep in touch as friends, because he is most likely straight. (Dean 17 years)

Young women in particular were more ambivalent about chatrooms and less interested in using them. They liked the relative safety of chatrooms and the opportunities they provided for less judgmental responses but they felt chatrooms were more superficial, lacked meaningful personal interaction, were less real and more boring than either email or Real Life.

Because you have no idea what they are really like – they can give themselves any name, age, sex, identity – people can give an identity different at a party but at least you can see them. (Rebecca 21 years)

Chatrooms, to me, are the dull conversations of parties without the food. The only advantage they have over a RL party is that they filter out the terribly loud music. (Thea 19 years)

You'll probably never meet the person you chat to in a chatroom, and when you do it's usually awkward. Meeting people at parties is often difficult (ie sexual orientation issues), but it has a better chance of working out than a Net relationship. (Liz 15 years)

However, the predominant view was that chatrooms created many positive elements for personal interactions, perhaps best summed up by the following comment:

Talking in a chatroom is very different from meeting at a party. The intimacy of being in someone's presence is done away with. The "anonymity" of chatting online allows people to be who they are, for better or worse. Shy people can better interact knowing they don't have to actually see that person and act in a certain way. By this token, self consciousness is done away with. People aren't looking at you and judging you on your imperfections, affectations, idiosyncracies etc. You can choose to start or end a conversation at any time, so the power of communication is in your hands. The ambiguity that can be maintained as body language doesn't come into play. Finally, if you then felt as if u wanted to meet someone, then a certain level of knowing could be built over a period of time, a gradual getting to know the other person rather than having them thrust upon u in a haze of smoke, alcohol and falseness. Although people use chatting to lie and falsify themselves in certain ways, such deception occurs just as much in "RL" circumstances at parties...(Marcus 21 years)

Ambivalences

The Net, of course, was not always a positive experience, and for some the feelings were mixed. Often this came about when young people had intense investment in the outcomes of Internet friendships, or found themselves disillusioned with aspects of gay culture that were promoted through the Internet.

It has been good and bad. It is great that there are other people out there like you to chat to, and that makes things a lot easier to bear. They understand what you are going through, been through etc...Its bad in a way, that sometimes the net can alienate you even more than in RL. i have been attracted to a few people on the net, and when they don't come online or ignore you, it can be more devastating than in RL. People can be just as bitchy on the net as in RL. (Liam 20 years)

Initially (back in 1996) – good. More recently, the Internet depresses me. I see it having the same effect on other friends as well. People do not want to chat in general, they use IRC as a means of picking up and if you are not the cutest, most attractive, most fashionable (and youngest) guy and don't do the scene, then you don't have a chance of even meeting them over coffee. Over the last 3 years or so a very unhealthy clique mentality has developed – mostly people who do the scene. As someone who is expressly non-scene I find an “internal discrimination’ exists within the gay community towards people like myself. This continues over to the Internet. (Justin 21 years)

10. LIFE WITHOUT THE INTERNET?

In order to ascertain the importance of the Internet to these young people we asked them how their lives would change without the Internet. The vast majority indicated that life would be altered in a negative way, and felt that it would make life profoundly difficult. For a small number of young people life would continue unmarked and perhaps improve a little – several remarked they would probably get more study done, get fitter, or be cured of a perceived ‘addiction’ to Internet usage.

The responses to the proposition of life without the Internet were clearly linked to how young people were currently positioned in regard to openness about their sexuality and connectedness to gay and lesbian networks. Those who were currently partnered and comfortably open in Real Life about their sexuality largely viewed the purported loss of Internet services as ‘a bit annoying’ or relatively inconsequential. They felt other avenues such as phone and mail would largely make up for any losses. At the other end of the spectrum of opinion there was emphatic distress at such a thought. Terms such as ‘isolation’, ‘desperation’ and ‘loss’ were frequently used. Such responses from young people were situated in a context where the Internet currently provided friendship, support, information and a sense of community that was lacking in their Real Life situations. Despite significant proportions of them feeling good or great about their sexuality, they clearly depended on the support of their Virtual community to maintain or bolster these feelings of self acceptance and worth.

“Isolated lonely...desperate”

These words by 17 year old Luke sum up the responses of a significant number of young people. The Internet enabled them to access other SSA people, particularly to receive on-going advice, support and friendship. For them, loss of the Internet would not only be a loss of contact with key individuals but also a significant or total loss of connection with the gay and lesbian world. According to Billy, Craig, Lesley and Aaron, the realities of isolation and aloneness that had existed prior to Internet access would be re-established.

I dunno. If the Internet had never been invented: I would definitely be less informed...much much less. I would be more depressed. Doing worse at school. Be more stressed. I might not even be typing this right now, might have suicided, totally cracking from the pressure. If starting from now I can't use it: I would be more depressed, lose my communication with others, feel lost. (Billy 17 years)

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

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

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

Comments such as 'I would be unhappy', 'I would feel cut off', 'feel isolated and uncomfortable', 'I would die' and 'I would, once again, be isolated' were reflective of this continuum of responses.

Changing needs over time

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

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

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

A loss of community

The role of the Internet in linking young people with 'a community' of like-minded people was a very strong theme in their responses. This connection may literally be life-saving for some and merely convenient for others. But it is clear that the young people relied heavily on the Net's facility to connect them with support groups, potential partners, new friends,

as well as to information about gay and lesbian events. Some of the attraction obviously relates to issues of geographical isolation and the need for anonymity. Young people obviously appreciate the breadth, diversity and volume of potential contacts that the Net has instantly at its finger tips, something that is not possible in Real Life situations. The scope of such a network provided some young people with strong, often opportunistic, relationships that were hitherto unimaginable.

I think I would cope better now than I would have when I was coming out though. Then, there was a woman in a chatroom who was really like a mother to me, and she listened to all my fears and worries and gave me the best advice she knew how. She is in America and I don't contact her anymore but I am not sure if I could have made it through without her. (Mel 21 years)

My friendship groups would suddenly be a lot smaller. Much, much smaller. I'd be a lonely girl. I'd have more time for reading. I'd spend a lot of time in my bedroom. (Thea 19 years)

The Net has a role in nurturing young people and their developing sexual openness, and providing key support structures. However some young people were aware that they did need to marry this experience with the Real World at some point to achieve congruence. They commented that, while the loss of the Net would be difficult, it would propel them to take the next steps:

I suppose it would make me explore the gay scene and join the gay group at uni, which I am planning on doing anyway just keep putting it off. (Craig 18 years)

But in general people lamented the potential loss of friendship, support, security and connection and therefore quality of life for them as SSAY that the disappearance of the Net would involve. While it is clear that for some, the Net was receding in importance from a pivotal support to a useful aid, the majority affirmed its principal role in helping them through difficult and dangerous times.

I think it wouldn't be so bad anymore. I could survive where I am today, the net got me there. (Katy 17 years)

11. MEETING PEOPLE OFF THE NET

We asked young people if they had ever organised to meet someone in Real Life after first contacting them on the Internet. Seventy-five percent had done this and significantly more of these were young men (83%, 124, n=150) than young women (51%, 25, n=49). We learn from this that many young people are not completely satisfied with a Net only relationship – most of them attempt to integrate their important Net contacts back into their Real Lives. This answers some of the concern that young people will lose touch with Real Life and forget how to relate 'in the flesh'.

Of the reasons for the last meeting, friendship was the most commonly given (42%, 66/156) followed by a date (34%, 53/156), sex (14%, 21/156) and shared interests (8%, 13/156). Overwhelmingly, young men met other men (98%, 126/129) and young women (77%, 20/26) met other women. The people they met were, on average, three years older than themselves, however, there was a large variation in age difference from five years younger to, in one case, 29 years older.

Given the strong theme of support that runs through this report, it is not surprising that friendship was the main motivation for meeting in Real Life. The Net was the medium through which peers became visible and many of these young people wanted to transform Net contacts into Real Life ones. Interestingly, when we compared what actually happened with the stated intention of the encounters we found that there were many mismatches. Some people who met for friendship had a sexual encounter (that night or eventually) and others who met for a date or sex became good friends but never had sex. One explanation for this might be a lack of honesty in young people's responses, but it seems more likely that the 'in person' or 'flesh-meet' factor came into play and intentions changed, as they did with the young people below:

I had originally viewed her as a potential relationship , but my views changed after meeting her and I viewed her only as friendship (Emily 16 years)

The person was nice but once I got to know him a bit more we decided that just friendship was the best thing. Meeting the person in RL helped. (Gary 21 years)

Meeting in person placed a face to a name which was good. I didn't like him so I haven't chatted to him since. (John 19 years)

Well he was a nice guy but he was not the same person as he was on line – he said he liked many of the things I liked – music and stuff – but I think he was just trying to be liked. (Vlado 17 years)

In some cases the meeting led to an increase in positive feeling and many relationships were strengthened. Cathy, Eva and Ned are examples:

Well funny you ask. We met, I met some of her friends and we instantly clicked, after one month of getting to know her and her friends we are now in a relationship together. We have been together for three and a half months now. I thank the Internet with all my heart. (Cathy 16 years)

Better than imaginable, confirmed feelings of love, best thing that has ever happened (Eva 21 years)

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

In about one third of the meetings, things did not turn out as well as the young person hoped.

When things went wrong

It seemed that there were several things that could go wrong with these meetings. Sometimes arrangements failed and they missed each other as in Roy's case:

We'd arranged to meet at a lunch/restaurant type place. He was gay, basically offered to meet up because he sounded like he needed someone to talk to. I went, he didn't show. Turned out he'd gone by and hadn't seen me there, missed my car. Simple misunderstanding really, should have told him what car I'd be in (Roy 19 years)

There were also problems when people misrepresented themselves or their intentions and there was a mismatch between Real Life experience and expectations. Young people's (all young men) descriptions of these disappointing meetings were short and sharp, the tone of their writing giving the impression of an event that was an annoyance they wanted to be over and done with:

Wasn't what he described. (Davis 19 years)

Basically the guy turned out to be a major old fart and he wouldn't stop touching me. (Sam 21 years)

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

He called himself Andrew 22, despite being 28. (Mungo 21 years)

RL liaison was troublesome and a waste of time (Nat 21 years)

As well, some young people who were comfortable communicating on the Net had trouble making the crossing from the Net to Real Life:

He was extremely sociable on the Net, open and easy to talk to but in person he was just another shy teenage boy with nothing to say. (Liz 15 years)

The person was very different from how they portrayed themselves on line, their confidence in themselves seems to be lacking, the Internet seemed to have given them this false sense of confidence. (Andrew 21 years)

By far the worst outcomes occurred when young people were physically damaged by the encounter. There were very few of these incidents reported by young people and they were rarely willing to elaborate. Ken described one particularly upsetting experience:

I have been raped once by someone I met from IRC who I had trusted a lot. That was when I was 15. I never told him it was not consensual though, I just felt awful about it. (Ken 19 years)

When things went right

For most people, meeting was a positive experience, with young people safely traversing the territory from the Virtual to the Real Life and their social circles and the support available expanded accordingly:

I've met heaps of ppl off the Net which has helped me form a wider base of RL friends as well with these ppl. I've had 3 g/fs that were off Net I think it is excellent (Lissie 17 years)

Have met some wonderful people including present partner (3 yo r/ship living together, have bought house together, is very serious long term r/ship). Have also expanded my various minority sexual interests (SM etc) (Max 21 years)

I have met many people from the Internet in three years that I have used it.....A lot of the people I have had sex with....I also met the three bfs I have had...and they have worked out well...But I always screen the people I meet and if I choose to have sex I will always practice safe sex. (Amber 18 years)

12. HEALTH & SAFETY ISSUES

There are a number of ways in which the Net might be regarded as presenting risks for young people. These depend to a degree on the belief that young people are passive players in Cyberspace. These include:

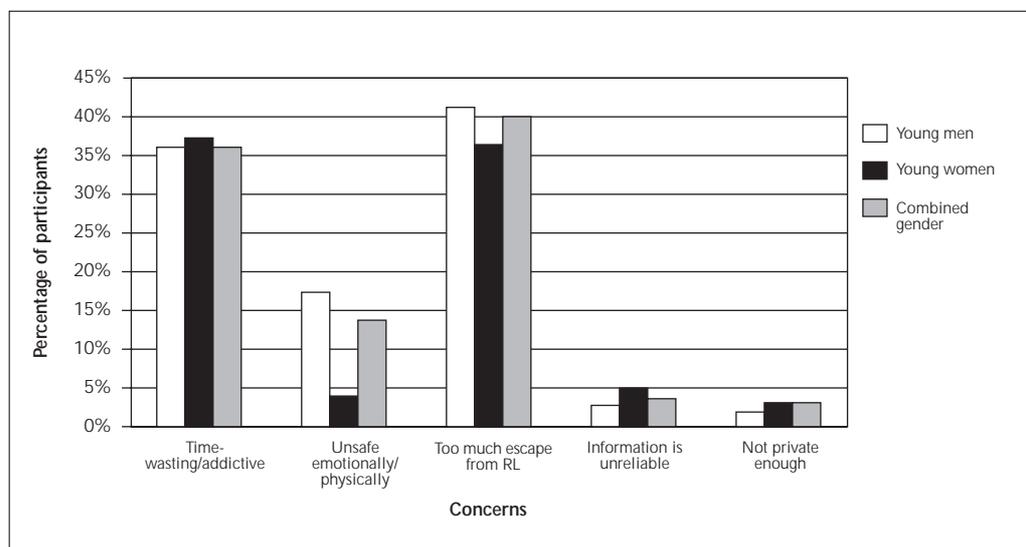
- exposure to undesirable information
- exposure to undesirable people
- loss of the ability to relate in Real Life
- waste of time which could be spent in more healthy pursuits eg sport

Adults concerns about unpalatable or nasty sites lurking with corrupting information and images has lead to the development of filters that can be installed by Internet providers and which reject information containing certain predetermined words and phrases. Concerns about undesirable adults using young Internet players as fodder for their sexual interests have also been expressed. As well, adults argue that young people who spend too much time on the computer will lose the ability to relate to people in Real Life as well as wasting time that could be spent outdoors on healthier pursuits. The notion of the fractured identity which comes about when young people taking on identities that belie their Real Life bodies and personalities has also been considered a potential danger of Cyberspace, especially when the Internet relationship moves into Real Life. We were interested in finding out what SSAY felt about safety on the Net, especially given the hostility in their Real Worlds.

Young people's worries about their own Internet use

We began by asking young people if they had ever worried about their own Internet use and over half (58%, 120, n=208) reported that they had. Those who answered yes were asked to explain their concerns further.

FIGURE 9 – Young people's concerns about their Internet use



Wasting time/addiction

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

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

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

Young people were not uncritically using the medium; many reflected on their own misuse of it. This is important because it indicates to us that young people are aware of their need to maintain links to the Real World. Unfortunately, many of them face the challenge of a Real World which is far less accepting of them than is Cyberspace.

FEELING THREATENED OR UNCOMFORTABLE

As well as our interest in young people's concerns about problems with their own use, we were also wanted to know whether they had had negative experiences while using the Net. Half (105/204) reported that they had. In order to tease out the nature of their negative experiences, we asked them to explain further about feeling threatened or uncomfortable.

Homophobic websites

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

The Internet is an uncensored database of information, sometimes and not often I come across information, be it text, a picture or a video blah blah which I personally can't handle, I wasn't expecting to find it but I did. It gets you a little but not in a hard core way. It's like OK now I've seen THAT!! Would I have been a less neurotic person if I hadn't? (Sam 21 years)

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

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

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

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

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

Unwelcome emails

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

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

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

Each of these threatening experiences seem to be grounded in obsession, experiences that also occur in Real.

Chatroom harassment

Chatrooms are used by a significant minority of young men and some young women (young men 44% 67/151; young women 15% 8/52) including IRC (37% 75/203). Young men were using IRC far more often than the young women and were more likely to be talking about sex. The chatroom was the place young people, especially young men, were most likely to feel threatened. For instance, Alex and Lesley had both experienced persistent unwanted attention from other men:

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

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

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

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

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

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

People who came on too strong or made inappropriate suggestions were also disturbing:

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

Helplessness

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

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

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

Deception

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

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

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

STRATEGIES FOR PROTECTION

A number of the young people in this research had had negative experiences and these are described above. However, there is no sense in which they were passive players in Cyberspace or victims waiting for a predator. We asked the young people what strategies they used to protect themselves from hurtful or threatening situations and they gave us a long list of strategies, some of them more sophisticated than others. These are summarised in the table below.

On the Net

don't give out personal information
use a web-based email
use the ignore command
no emotional involvement on the Net
no Net sexual attractions
when feeling unsafe give false information and
don't be gullible

These safety strategies are quite straightforward and need little explanation. Young people following these strategies would be less likely to encounter harm. In some cases they did not follow the strategies. There were a number of instances in which young people's beliefs left them overconfident and perhaps open to abuse. One young man for example insisted that "you can spot a freak in 10 seconds" and another "you can usually tell when the other person is strange or weird by the way they respond online". It is possible that this overconfidence and the resultant neglect of strategies may compromise young people's

safety. Moreover, one young person's strategies can make other young people feel unsafe, for example, the last suggestion about lying about oneself for protection is the very reason why some young people felt uncomfortable communicating on the Net.

Strategies for safety if you decide to meet

Young people also gave suggestions about safety when meeting someone off the Net. In many ways they had a well-rehearsed list that they repeated like a mantra.

get to know the person on-line first
meet in a public place
don't have sex on first meeting
if uncertain don't go ahead
have safe sex

Below, we have included some examples of young people's experiences of meeting off the Net which include how they put the safety strategies into place. Many young people met in cafés, theatres and other public places, often after having established a lengthy relationship over the Net.

We had been chatting over icq for a long time, but he lived a fair distance from me so we never met, however we promised we'd meet each other one day. One day he came to Sydney and so asked me if I wanted to go out for dinner with him [so I did] (Lex 17 years)

We met and had a coffee, still catch up both on-line, by phone and in person – we've become good friends (Max 21 years)

I went to the movies and we became good friends, no sexual encounters etc ensued. Still now 2 years later extremely good mates (Boyd 18 years)

I had a year long relationship with a girl I met on-line. We met in real life about 6 months after cybermeeting and had a sexual relationship for about a year after that (Mel 21 years)

On occasion young people, particularly young men, broke their rules for safety. Sometimes this worked out well for them, but there were also some occasions which they regretted. Young people such as Lex and Tran were philosophical about their experiences, believing that they were learning processes that were on the whole beneficial for them.

I think there is some concern about the Internet because of the ability to meet people for sexual encounters. People have these concerns rightly so, and i have had experiences

sexually which have made me a little uneasy and perhaps which i may have regretted. However such incidents i feel are important to growing up and developing into a responsible person. the Net has certainly taught me to not trust anyone, and it has also taught me what its really like out there on the gay scene, and i think that that aspect has really prepared me for my future years as an active gay individual (Lex 17 years)

As far as sex goes ive never really got into the whole casual sex deal, sure ive done it a bit using the Net, but i don't get off on just sex, and usually whenever ive met someone off irc with the pretence of sex its been a serious disappointment and ive had to make a quick getaway. But at the same time ive made a lot of friends that i still have now...and the longest relationship ive had since i came out (1 yr) was from a guy i met off irc. i like irc because you can talk to people that are from totally different groups of society that in most cases you'd have never had the chance to talk to (Tran 18 years)

Finally, a small number of young people had stopped meeting people for dates off the Net because of their unpleasant experiences:

I have met guys for dates off the Net. i don't do it any more because I have found that many gay guys especially, think meeting for a date is an invitation for sex (Peter, 18 years)

Is the Net safe for young people and are adult concerns about young people's Net use justified? There are several answers to this question. There is no doubt from this research that young people do sometimes face difficult situations on the Net, especially when they decide to meet in Real Life, however, they also have a sophisticated battery of measures with which to protect themselves. Though many of the group put their safety strategies into place when they met in Real Life, others at times were prepared to relax those rules and left themselves vulnerable. We also know that in the Real World there are almost no safe spaces where SSAY can find affirmation for their sexuality and where they can safely act out their sexual attraction and the spaces that are available allow no time at all for getting to know each other first.

Given the positives that the Net affords these young people in providing affirmation, support, community and information, it is possible to construe access to the Net as good - as long as it is used critically. On the whole these young people give us reason to believe that they are protecting themselves from the potential harms of the Net. And the gains are manifest in their stories.

13. GENDERED INTERNET USE

Gender is regarded as one of the most powerful organising influences in heterosexual young people's experiences of their sexuality. Yet almost no attention has been paid to gender in the expanding research interest over the last decade into same sex attracted young people's sexual explorations. This is due to the fact that many studies have restricted themselves to boys. Since the advent of the HIV/AIDS pandemic the Australian government has funded research into HIV prevention, with a focus on heterosexual young people and on same sex attracted young men. The assumption has been that same sex attracted young women are not at risk for HIV and therefore research dollars should not be committed to their issues.

Similarly, due to erroneous beliefs that woman to woman transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is unlikely and rare, there is a common assumption that lesbians are immune from STIs. The recent campaign *Lesbians need pap tests too* by Pap Test Victoria was partly an attempt to redress the popular belief that lesbians do not suffer from the secondary effects of STIs (ie. HSV infection). The thinking is flawed also by the assumptions that lesbians do not, and have not, had sex with men. The research data which we do have tell us that same sex attracted young women may be four times as likely to report contracting an STI (Lindsay et al, 1997) and that they are more heterosexually active than their heterosexual peers (Hillier et al, 1998).

A third reason for the lack of research focus on same sex attracted young women is the gendering of the youth suicide debate as 'male'. Overwhelmingly the research has been restricted to discussions of risk among young men though some projects include both genders. There is the assumption that it is young men and in this case same sex attracted young men (and not same sex attracted young women), who suffer the hostility and resulting alienation that drives them to suicide. Moreover, many of the studies have focussed on completed suicides to the exclusion of suicide attempts. A recent Australian study found that same sex attracted young women were at least as likely to attempt suicide than same sex attracted young men (Nicholas & Howard, 2001).

We also know that invisibility and associated problems, for example, lack of information, isolation and alienation, are more pressing problems for SSAY women than for SSAY men (Hillier et al 1998) and have particular risk profiles. *Writing Themselves In* found that young women were more likely, than young men, to have injected drugs (15% vs 7%) and smoked marijuana (70% vs 55%).

For all of these reasons, we have focused a section of this report on the young women in this study, even though the numbers were small.

From this research we have observed that the young women are using the Internet in different ways to the young men. This is not surprising given the different constructions of gender and young women's focus on relationships and safety. They were more cautious about giving out details and far less likely to be using the Net for sexuality related purposes, including talking about sex to other young people. Young women were also less likely to meet Net contacts in Real Life though half of them did so. Perhaps as a result of their caution, young women were also less likely to report unpleasant or threatening experiences in chatrooms and through Real Life meetings. Their main threatening experiences were homophobic and sexist websites and men masquerading as women in chatrooms. Overall, young women were more reluctant than young men to use the Internet for contacts and support, but when they did, the outcome was very rewarding for them.

Given the problem of invisibility facing same sex attracted young women, and the knowledge from *Writing Themselves In* that less than one in 10 were able access information about lesbian relationships or safe sex from school or parents, the finding that 81% of them had used the Net to explore sex information websites was important. Also important was the finding that nearly half of them had downloaded material from sex sites and nearly two thirds spent time in sex-related chatrooms. Most important of all is the finding that the Internet was important for these young women for the range of support options that it provided, including contact with other SSAY (33/56), help with depression (27/54) and suicide issues (17/45), Real Life friendship and support (12/46) and Real Life sexual partners (12/46). There is little doubt from these young women's experiences that the Internet has the potential to act as a meeting space, source of support, community and repository of information for these young women, all of which they are denied in Real Life.

We asked young people how they felt about 'being attracted to the same sex' with the range of potential answers being, 'great', 'pretty good', 'OK', 'pretty bad' and 'terrible'. In the *Writing Themselves In* research, 60% of both genders felt 'great' or 'pretty good' about their sexual feelings and we felt this figure was surprisingly high. When we asked this question in the current project, the result was the same for the boys. However, 73% of the girls in the Internet study felt 'great' or 'pretty good' about their sexual feelings. Because of the small numbers we can say no more than that we see this result as promising for the Internet as a supportive and affirming space for young women.

14. TRANSGENDER YOUNG PEOPLE

While young same sex attracted young people generally face significant levels of discrimination, harassment and physical and verbal abuse, transgender young people are particularly at risk of violence, including sexual violence (Peters, 1998; Perkins, 1995). Many transgender people also identify as gay or lesbian and consequently experience both sexuality and gender-focussed abuse and discrimination. They are far less likely than their peers to have access to information, support and understanding among family, peers or the broader society. Consequently, many suffer depression and are reluctant to seek support and counselling because of a fear that their symptoms will be assumed to be related to their gender issues (Seber et al, 2000).

Three young people who described themselves as transgender participated in our survey: Billy is a female to male 17 year old, Angela is a male to female 21 year old, and Lleyton is a female to male 19 year old. Not surprisingly each echoed the key themes of most participants: the Net provided safety, support, information and friendship. All had experienced significant degrees of support on the Net. We cannot claim their experiences to be representative of the issues for young transgender people but we feel it is important that their individual voices are clearly heard, rather than submerged within the broader concerns of SSAY.

We have compiled Billy's story from his responses to present a transgender voice:

Billy's story

(The Net has) given me the opportunity to explore my feelings. Information can be gathered, sharing experiences with others and learning from their experiences. Realising I'm not alone. If it weren't for the net, I don't know what would have happened but I know I wouldn't be as well equipped as I am now (which isn't much anyway). It's opened my eyes but in a way made me more depressed. I know more but can't do a damn thing about it. The whole waiting till I'm 18 is killing me.

If the Internet had never been invented: I would definitely be less informed...much much less. I would be more depressed. Doing worse at school. Be more stressed. I might not even be typing this right now, might have suicided, totally cracked from the pressure. If starting from now I can't use it: I would be more depressed, lose my communication with others like me, feel lost.

I can be myself. I can think before I type so I don't screw things up as I find it hard to talk to others. I can communicate with people around the worlds who are in a similar situation to me. I can communicate as myself, a boy and learn of other people's experiences. The fact that I am (ugh) biologically female is no matter. (neither) My face nor voice is projected so the only thing they get is what is on my mind.

I've learnt of the experience of others. Been able to tell others of my own experiences as a transgendered youth. It's terrible having to keep this to yourself with no one to talk to, to reassure you you're okay. The internet puts me in touch with people who tell me their good experiences and I cheer up when I'm depressed. (I met someone in RL) Uh well it was more of an information exchange meeting. Nothing changed any opinions. I just heard her experiences of being transgendered and she answered some of my questions, gave me some advice...

(My least favourite activity is) talking to my parents. Or the lack of talking to my parents. We don't get along. There's really nothing to say. They don't understand me (they don't know I'm trans). They think I'm weird and abnormal anyway. They control every aspect of my life, they treat me like a kid who doesn't know anything. I hate them because they think they are great but they are ruining my life. There is so much I want, things others take for granted that I can't have, can never go back and do. They say no to anything boyish and try to force me to be girly so actually I'm pretending to b someone else every day. The real me is trapped inside.

...the people I talk to on the net are in the same position so they must be supportive. The net, you don't see these people every day. I've told noone in real life for fear of rejection (although my parents pretty much reject me now). Also, I hate being different. All I want is a normal life.

15. CONCLUSION

We aimed in this research to learn about the ways SSAY use the Internet, particularly in regard to activities that might assist them in developing a positive sexual identity in the face of pervasive community homophobia. The research shows that there is a sub-sample of SSAY and transgender young people who are committed Internet users and whose Internet use is largely sexuality-related. That is, these young people use the Internet to gather information about same sex attraction, desire and experience, including sexual activities and safer sex.

The young people in the study also used the Internet to find other young people like themselves in order to develop networks and gain support that affirmed their sexual identity. By far the most important function of the Internet for these young people was the breaking down of isolation and the building up of friendships and relationships in a way that was not possible in Real Life. Young people revealed that the Internet was important to them because it helped them deal with depression and thoughts of suicide and it helped deal with a hostile and oppressive world in which they felt like “freaks” and “weirdos”. It also helped them tap into a ‘community’.

The Internet was a space in which young people could connect with each other in a way that was not possible (or safe) in Real Life. The special nature of the Internet which allowed for a mix of anonymity and intimacy produced an environment in which young people felt safe to reveal some of their deepest feelings and thoughts without fear of disapproval. Disapproval was less likely to be expressed on the Net, and when it was, it wrought less damage than disapproval in Real Life. People on the Internet were thought to be less judgmental and so young people were more relaxed about talking about their feelings. The function of an ‘ignore’ facility in which homophobic comments could be interrupted at the click of a button, anonymity, and the absence of a body meant that young people were less clearly defined targets of homophobia.

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

One of the most significant findings of this research was that the young people were not content to keep their Internet and Real worlds separate. Most young people brought their significant Net relationships into Real Life and for many of them, the majority of their SSA friendships in Real Life were initiated on the Net. This meant a whole new positive, affirming social circle that enriched their lives and embraced sexual diversity.

There were clear indications also that these meetings in Real Life were choreographed very carefully. Young people put strategies for safety into place when they met someone off the Net and usually this was after many months of communication over the Net. In some cases, the meeting did not go as planned and the relationships changed with the influence of the meeting in the flesh. There were occasional disappointments but on the whole, young people were able to negotiate the crossing safely and benefited greatly from it.

Young people were not uncritical Internet users. They were aware of the potential dangers to themselves on the Net and again, had a barrage of strategies to keep themselves safe. They often made the comparison with a party or situation in Real Life in which they were far more likely to be exposed to danger than on the Net, including where alcohol and other drugs were concerned. In many ways they regarded the Internet as a safe rehearsal space for coming out, for friendship and for sex, which allowed them the chance to gain experience and confidence before they moved onto the Real Life stage.

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

Young women were using the Net differently from young men. In many ways they were more sceptical and wary in their Internet use, spending less time on the Net, being less likely to talk about sexuality related matters on the Net especially in chatrooms. On the other hand there was a group of them that were committed Internet travellers and benefited greatly from their experiences.

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

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

16. RECOMMENDATIONS

The report recommends that:

1. The community has an obligation to provide a safe environment in which acceptance, support and information are available for SSAY in Real Life.
2. Teachers and youth workers should be made aware of the benefits, potential uses and potential risks of the internet for marginalised young people and incorporate this awareness in their work.
3. Teachers and youth workers reframe the Internet from a potential source of danger to a resource for information and support in relation to SSAY
4. Skills required to facilitate all young people's use of the Internet for health information be incorporated in the school curriculum. These skills should include protective strategies, as well as the ability to deconstruct and assess Internet information
5. Organisations which provide information and social websites for young people should ensure that they (and the links they offer) are not heterosexist and are inclusive of sexual diversity
6. Organisations seeking to support and provide information for SSAY should consider the use of the internet for information provision, peer contact and promotion of appropriate social opportunities.
7. Further research should be conducted to find out more about the ways that young SSA women access information, including whether it is appropriate to increase their internet skills

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APPENDIX I

Tables that match graphs in report.

Table 1 State of Residence

State	Frequency	Percentage
NSW	63	30.6
VIC	42	20.4
QLD	30	14.6
WA	25	12.1
SA	19	9.2
TAS	14	6.8
NT	5	2.4
ACT	4	1.9
not listed	4	1.9

Table 2 Setting of Residence

Setting	Frequency	Percentage
Inner urban	82	39.8
Suburban	78	37.9
Regional centre	38	18.4
Rural	8	3.9

63

Table 3 Current Occupation

Occupation	Frequency	Percentage
University	69	33.5
School	63	30.6
Full time work	45	21.8
Unemployed	10	4.9
TAFE	9	4.4
Part time work	8	3.9
Not listed	2	1

Table 4. Activities on the Net with a sex or sexuality related purpose by gender

	%ym	Number N = 151	%yw	Number N = 52	% total	Total number N = 203
Emails to friends	85%	129	71%	37	82%	166
Downloaded from sex site**	88%	133	48%	25	78%	156
Emails to strangers	62%	93	48%	25	58%	118
Sex information website	91%	136	81%	42	89%	180
Sex related chatrooms**	83%	125	58%	30	76%	155

**gender differences at $p < .005$

Table 5. Reasons for involvement in sex/sexuality related activities.

	%ym	Number N = 151	%yw	Number N = 52	% total	Total number N = 203
For support on Net	60%	91	58%	30	60%	121
For support off Net**	74%	111	42%	22	66%	133
For sex-related information	59%	89	35%	18	52%	107
To get aroused before sex**	36%	54	12%	6	30%	60
For cyber sex	43%	65	27%	14	39%	79
To meet for sex off Net**	43%	65	10%	5	35%	70

**gender differences at < .005

Table 6. Importance of the Net for exploring sexuality and gaining support

	%ym	number	%yw	number	% total	Total number
Contact other SSAY on Net**	90%	134/149	72%	33/46	85%	167/195
Contact with transgender	15%	22/146	13%	6/46	15%	28/92
RL friendship and support**	62%	91/146	26%	12/46	62%	103/192
Help deal with isolation	69%	100/145	60%	27/45	68%	127/190
Help with depression/suicide	49%	72/140	38%	17/45	47%	89/195
Courage to come out in RL	62%	91/148	58%	26/44	61%	122/199
Sexual health information	68%	100/148	60%	27/45	66%	127/193
Finding sexual partners in RL	46%	66/144	24%	11/46	40%	77/190

** Gender differences at < .005

Table 7. Disclosure to people on the Net and in RL

	family	sch/work	friends	Net all
No one	41%	26%	13%	6%
A few	18%	35%	27%	15%
Most	20%	22%	20%	29%
Everyone	18%	15%	39%	45%

Table 8. Support on the Net and in RL

	RL	Net
Very	34%	62%
Mostly	38%	22%
Mixed	22%	9%
Generally unsupportive	0.5%	0.5%
Not at all supportive	4%	1%

Table 9. Concerns about own Internet use

	%ym	Number N = 97	%yw	Number N = 27	% total	Total number N = 124
Time-wasting/addictive	36%	35	37%	10	36%	45
Unsafe emotionally/physically	17%	16	4%	1	14%	17
Too much escape from RL	41%	42	37%	10	40%	50
Information is unreliable	2%	2	5%	4	4%	5
Not private enough	2%	2	3%	2	3%	4

APPENDIX II

The SSAY Reference Group of the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health & Society comprises the following people in 2001:

Mr Tom Freeman Australian Education Union	Ms Debbie Ollis ARCSHS
Ian Seal The Action Centre Family Planning, Vic	Jan Watson Department of Education
Mic Emslie Context	Michael Crowhurst Context
Erin Shale Balwyn High School	Peter Gourlay Equal Opportunity Commission of Victoria
Nan McGregor P-Flag Victoria Inc	Rowena Allen Cutting Edge Youth Services
Anne Mitchell ARCSHS	Philomena Horsley ARCSHS
Deb Currin PFLAG	Dean Miller University of Melbourne
Daryl Higgins Deakin University	Lynne Hillier ARCSHS
Lyn Harrison Deakin University	Chyloe Kurdas Taylors Lakes Secondary College
Jim Sotiropoulos Victorian AIDS Council	Rachel Crellin Department of Education

APPENDIX III

The following channels, listed on the IRC server 'mpx.sydney.oz.org', were visited by researchers:

- #bisexual
- #coffeeshop
- #gay
- #gay_country
- #gay_outreach
- #gayact
- #gayadelaide
- #gayasian
- #gaybareback
- #gaybears
- #gaybrisbane
- #gaycanberra
- #gaygeelong
- #gaygoldcoast
- #gayguys
- #gayguys4love
- #gayintellectuals
- #gaymackay
- #gaymelbourne
- #gaynewcastle
- #gayperth
- #gaysafeSEX
- #gayshyboys
- #gaysouthcoast
- #gayStr8Dudes
- #gaysydney
- #gaywacafe
- #ozgayguy
- #gaywesternsuburbs
- #gaywogs
- #gaywollongong
- #gayyouth
- #gayzone
- #ozdyke
- #ozgay

