In and Out, On and Off: LGBT+ Online Experiences <1>

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It is widely acknowledged that the internet impacts on our lives in ever more ways. This is particularly true for young people, arguably the group most connected online. It is becoming apparent that the lives of older people are also increasingly entrenched in the internet in a variety of ways in their later life. Much has rightly been made of the potential vulnerability of children and young adults online. LGBT+ youth in particular continue to face unacceptable levels of abuse in their day-to-day lives whether at school or online; LGBT+ young people are almost three times more likely than non-LGBT+ youth to be bullied or harassed online (Kosciw 2013). Older LGBT+ people, however, have been relatively ignored by the research community but there are indications that they too are potentially placing themselves at risk when they enter the cybersphere. However, for LGBT+ users of the internet, young and old, this awareness of risk is tempered by the valuable cloak of anonymity afforded by online communications. The internet is frequently a valuable source of information and support when they have no one, or nowhere, left to turn to (Drushel 2010). Online spaces can be places where sexuality can be explored without the risk of outing oneself in local communities (Green *et al* 2015). For instance, LGBT+ young people are more likely to have searched for health and medical information online compared to non-LGBT+ youth. Older LGBT+ people are increasingly using the internet to find their intimate partners. However, cyberspace is, arguably, part of Butler's (1990) heterosexual matrix. This places young, and indeed older, LGBT+ internet users at particular risk of exclusion and exploitation, the implications of which will be explored in this chapter.

Introduction <2>

Our lives have become increasingly interwoven with online technologies. They have the potential to impact on almost every aspect of our daily lives; we use them to shop, study, work, network, monitor our sleep, bank, find love, 'find ourselves' and find out about the world. Such a rapid, and relatively recent, change in our lives doesn't come without its risks. Indeed, an aspect of modern power-knowledge relations is 'risk taking' and the notion of 'harm' (Beck 1992). We are frequently warned of the risks of living online. Reports indicate that cyberabuse has increased exponentially as technologies have become more available and as new and advanced technologies continue to be developed (Hinduja and Patchin 2010). Barely a day goes

by when we don't see a news story about an event of online abuse, stalking or harassment. Revenge pornography, unwanted 'sexting', child pornography, death threats, blackmail, rape threats have all been enabled by digital technologies. Of course, most of these forms of abuse are an extension of the everyday abuses (mainly) women and children experience offline (Todd 2017).

Yet, paradoxically, there are also risks involved in avoiding cyberspace. Here, Beckmann's (2009) concept of 'civilization' versus 'wilderness' is useful. If you are a 'civilized' member of society, you are supposed to embrace all the technologies available to you. Failure to do so, leaves you out in the 'wilderness' an atavistic product of disengagement. By engaging with such a world, we are required to acknowledge the potential risks involved and face the consequences. One of the risks at play on the internet involves ownership of space – who is deemed as having a legitimate right to use and claim cyberspace? Again, this is not a new problem. In Ancient Greek society, the forebear of so-called modern Western civilization, there was hostility and violence to those constructed as 'Other'. Perhaps in more modern times, a search for 'Truth' has led to the violent exclusion of difference. Such conditions of domination potentially have a significance for LGBT+ users, who arguably are viewed as 'Other' both online and offline (Dubois and Meon 2013). As Marcuse stated, 'technology as such cannot be isolated from the use to which it is put; the technological society is a system of domination which…results from the play of the dominant interests'; destruction, he argued, is frequently the 'price of progress (1964: xvi). Of course, this leads to bigger questions about the relative merits of technology and its uses, which we do not have time for here. Save to ponder whether that which has so much promise is causing us to be distracted, as Bruce Sterling (2000) has suggested, from what really matters.

From research into people's experience of online spaces, we know that sexual harassment is very common (Powell and Henry 2017). In particular, it affects women – especially young

women. To date, less research which has looked specifically at LGBT+ experiences, particularly older people's use and experience of the internet. This chapter, therefore, will be looking at the intersections of gender, sexuality and age in experiences of online spaces. In part, this will make reference to my own research into global lesbian communities (Todd 2013), and my research into LGBT+ lives in North West England. The chapter begins with a consideration of LGBT+ experiences offline. In particular, it will look at the lack of information available for many LGBT+ youths, which frequently serves to act as a pull factor to internet usage. It will also focus on the ways in which living through moments of homophobia impact on older LGBT+ people's trust and confidence in local communities, service providers and how this, combined with experiences of ageism on the gay scene, drives many to seek solace online. The chapter then moves on to younger and older LGBT+ people's experiences of online spaces, before finishing with some recommendations for changes in policy and practice; changes which would ensure online spaces are safer and more inclusive for its LGBT+ users.

Off limits? LGBT+ lives offline <2>

Living on the edge? Young LGBT+ Lives Offline <3>

In general, adolescence is conceptualized as a difficult and sensitive period in which many young people begin to explore their sexuality and engage in romantic relationships. For young LGBT+ people, this period can present some particularly problematic challenges. When exploring their sexual identity, LGBT+ youth may fear being judged, secluded, or victimized due to their sexual orientations (Mustanski, Newcomb and Garofalo 2011). For instance, many studies report that victimization by their peers and coerced or unwanted sexual experiences are more frequently reported by LGBT+ youth than non-LGBT+ youth. Gallopin and Leigh (2009)

also stated that LGBT+ youth victims of such abuse found that existing (offline) social assistance systems were not helpful to youth of their sexual orientation.

LGBT+ young people also frequently receive formal sex education which is silent about anything other than a restricted representation of heterosexual dynamics. UK Conservative minister, and ex-cabinet member, Andrea Leadsom got herself into political hot water in early 2019 when debating new legislation on mandatory sex education in primary schools. The new material includes information on the rights of LGBT+ people; in reference to this she argued that parents should be able to choose when children are 'exposed to that kind of information'. Many conservative Christian, Muslim and Jewish parents have demonstrated outside schools in protest, often bearing homophobic slogans. As LGBT+ rights activist Peter Tatchell has noted, what is currently happening, is very reminiscent of events in the 1980s (Ferguson 2019). Under Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's leadership, Section 28, of the Local Government Act 1988, prohibited Local Authorities (LA) in England and Wales from 'promoting homosexuality' (Todd 2013). The impact of such high-profile anti-LGBT+ sentiment can be significant. Over 60% of LGBT+ youth surveyed by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network reported feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual identity, and many showed increased levels of depression, truanted from school, and performed less-well academically than their heterosexual peers (Kosciw et al. 2013).

Informal sex education or discussions at home are also often unrepresentative. For instance, Karin Martin (2009) studied what parents say to their children about sexuality and reproduction, discovering that even with children as young as three years old, parents routinely assumed their children were heterosexual, told them they would get (heterosexually) married, and interpreted cross-gender interactions between children as 'signs' of heterosexuality. With this kind of socialization is an additional element of normative sexuality - the idea of compulsory monogamy, where exclusive romantic and sexual relationships and marriage are

expected and valued over other kinds of relationship (Willey 2016). Studies also reveal that up to half of LGBT+ teens experience a negative reaction from their parents when they 'come out', including being kicked out of the family home (26%) and or being physically assaulted by family members (33%) (Ray 2006).

For many young LGBT+ people, the cumulative impact of such prejudice will lead them to go to great lengths to try and conceal their sexual identity, thus limiting their offline opportunities for support (Detrie and Lease 2007). In turn, this lack of support, along with the limited availability of sex education and information, and relatively small numbers of 'out' LGBT+ peers and potential romantic partners, may lead LGBT+ youth to seek online relationships.

***Invisible Attraction: Older LGBT+ Lives Offline* <3>**

Although the twenty first century has been a time of potentially progressive legislative and social change for LGBT+ people [the UK alone has seen The Civil Partnership Act (December 2004), Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2007, Same-Sex Marriage Act (which came into force in 2014)], many older LGBT+ people have lived through less liberal times, experiencing both informal and formal discrimination. On one hand, this might mean older LGBT+ people find ageing less problematic than their heterosexual counterparts; living in a hostile, homophobic society can provide skills in 'crisis competence' (see Balsam and D'Augelli 2006). However, it can have a profound effect both on their preparedness to 'come out' as LGBT+, and impact on their use, and experience, of a range of services, including health and criminal justice services (Fredriksen-Goldsen 2011). In fact, older LGBT+ people are five time less likely to access services for older people than is the case in the wider older population, because they fear discrimination and homophobia (Todd 2011).

Older LGBT+ people may have lived through times when making themselves invisible, and 'passing' as heterosexual was a deliberate and necessary coping strategy; the alternative might

have meant losing children, friends or employment (Barrett 2008). Living through times when their sexuality was a criminal offense, feeling the ramification of Section 28, or experiencing the homophobic campaigns around AIDS/HIV and living through devasting and cumulative effects of grief for friends and lovers who died, can have a significant impact on willingness to come 'out' (Todd 2013). This can lead to what's referred to as a fracturing of relationships (Barrett et al 2016). Many will also have experienced levels of discrimination to the point of violence in their earlier lives (DeLamater and Koepsel 2017). The ongoing effects of homophobia are closely linked to participants' relationship with 'the closet'. Being recognisable as LGBT+ was, in effect, a marker of difference which might incite violence and abuse. This is an example of what Ann Cvetkovitch terms 'insidious trauma'; she argues that 'trauma becomes the hinge between systemic structures of exploitation and oppression and the felt experience of them' (2003: 12). Cronin and King (2014) argue that fear of discrimination prevents many older LGBT+ people from making friends in the wider 'heterosexual' community. Such social isolation perhaps puts them at risk of abuse, in addition to preventing them from seeking support. Intimate relationships for older LGBT+ are often viewed as a safe space (Smalley 1987), making it even more dangerous when things go wrong (Todd 2013).

Weeks (2007) argues that society has recently undergone a transformation, from being a place where same-sex desire is seen as an aberration, a sin or sickness, to becoming a culture where LGBT+ lives are perhaps 'respectable'. The potential to age as an 'out' lesbian or gay man, in a comparatively tolerant society is a relatively recent phenomenon and is itself a consequence of social change, (Weeks 1986). Paradoxically, these older LGBT+ people now often find themselves viewed as asexual – deemed physically unattractive in a youth-orientated society, uninterested in, or incapable of, having sex (Heidari 2016). In much the same way as their younger LGBT+ counterparts, older LGBT+ people may well be drawn to online spaces

because of the anonymity it offers, as well as the potential for reaching a like-minded community or a romantic/sexual partner.

The cyberqueer: LGBT+ lives online <2>

The internet, therefore, is of interest when studying sexuality, in particular LGBT+ lives. Much literature has emphasized the possibilities offered by cyberspace for experiences of sexuality, often constructing it as a safer place offering 'sex without secretions' (Kroker 1989). The digital queer who has access to a (utopian) global community, a community which offers chat rooms or websites dedicated to a range of subcultures, emphasizes the importance of the internet (O'Riordan 2018). Michael Brown (2005) highlighted the need for cyberspace for, for instance, as means to accessing education around issues relating to HIV; the anonymity and confidentiality provided by the internet were significant.

However, a dose of cyber-scepticism might not go amiss. What are the costs of an insistence on the cyberworld? Does it lead to a loss of real-time/off-line spaces? Whose sexual stories go unheard? The internet, of course, is a resource still not available to all – we need to be mindful of the intersections of poverty along lines of class, age, gender and ethnicity. What risks are there in the virtual world? As early as 1996, Hall pointed out the prevalence of anti-LGBT+ flaming (abusive messages) on general websites.

Online and in trouble? LGBT+ youth online <3>

Young people are, arguably, 'digital natives' (Palfrey and Gasser 2008). The ways in which they interact, work, study and play are very different ways to previous generations (of course, as digital natives, they have much more access to sexual imagery/spaces than preceding generations, the implications of which need to be considered more fully). Among the general youth population, the internet has become a mainstream mode of access to information about aspects of health and sexuality, as well as anonymous support for personal issues such as drug

use, depression and relationship problems (Borzekowski et al 2006). The internet is a useful way for youth to access sensitive health information, gather the courage to access offline resources, and find available information on offline services (Gray et al 2005). Youth have also begun to search online for relationships that may not be available to them offline. Comparatively little research in the UK has focused specifically on the experiences of LGBT+ youth online, who certainly have differing offline experiences and, it would seem, have differing online experiences too.

Whilst we are often told that cyberspace is a dangerous place for young people, this is not always the case for young LGBT+ people. We know, for instance, that LGBT+ youth are more likely than heterosexual youth to have online friends. They are also more likely to view these as better than their offline friends for giving emotional support. Research with young LGBT+ people between the ages of 12 and 18 suggests that social media can also be a useful tool (Naezer 2019). They used the internet in four key ways: to build sexual knowledge; develop and play with their identities; engage in romantic intimacies and also to gain a sense of adventure. These young people were very aware of the consequences of online behaviours and the potential risks. Rather than being reckless, they were actually very cautious. Other research supports this view. For instance, looking into the ways in which young LGBT+ people use the internet, Hillier and Harrison (2007) found that it provided a space for young people develop their sense of identity and 'come out', enhance a sense of community and make friends, in addition to meeting potential sexual partners. Such relationships can be an important source of support, empathy and understanding, leading to close friendships with heterosexual and LGBT+ peers, social support and feelings of group membership (Bargh, McKenna and Fitzsimons 2002), thus having a positive effect on self-esteem and identity (Bories, Cooper & Osborne 2004). By minimizing loneliness and social rejection, it is suggested that they can also

increase social skills and help young people create relationships that occasionally move to being offline (Bargh et al 2002).

Despite these positive benefits, research suggests that LGBT+ youths' use of the internet can simultaneously have negative consequences. For instance, social media spaces produce particular values and norms about sexuality which arguably reflect a conservatism that impacts on young people's perceptions of sexuality. The result is a hierarchy of supposed 'good' and 'bad' sexual practices, with LGBT+ experiences falling very clearly into the 'bad' category (De Ridder 2017). There is also evidence to suggest that increased online participation brings with it a very real risk of decreased offline community participation. Heavy internet usage can lead to young people feeling isolated from society and engaging less with family and friends (Nie and Hillygus 2002). A large amount of time spent in cyberspace is also linked with increased feelings of depression (Cardew and Rettew 2006), as is meeting people online (Boneva et al 2006).

In recent years, the media and academic research have rightly drawn attention to the violence, such as hate crimes and bullying, experienced by LGBT+ youth but have tended to ignore the fact that vulnerable LGBT+ youth may also be at increased risk of violence in their intimate relationships. Irrespective of whether online internet usage impacts *either* negatively or positively on mental health and sociability *or* does both, there are clear suggestions that high levels of internet usage for young LGBT+ places them at risk of intimate partner abuse. Studies indicate that young LGBT+ people experience higher counts of cyberabuse, as a dynamic of intimate online relationships, than their heterosexual peers. It is argued that the levels of depression and suicidal thoughts, familial rejection and abuse, lack of peer/social acceptance, relative poor school performance and higher levels of substance abuse experienced by LGBT+ youth, make them more vulnerable to violence in their online dating relationships (Vezina and Hebert 2007). My own research into LGBT+ people's live in the North West of England found

young people, often in their first relationship, experienced pressure from partners to send sexual pictures of themselves, and also threats to 'out' them online (Todd 2008). Other studies reveal that abuse often consists of young LGBT+ people receiving unwanted sexual pictures of themselves, being sent threatening text messages by their partners, and having their social networking account used by partners without permission (Messinger 2017).

Whilst there are similarities between offline abuse and that experienced online (both are about power and control for instance), there are several important differences (Todd 2017). For instance, online abuse does not simply involve those who abuse and those who are abused but rather involves a potentially high number of actors. There is also the 'online disinhibition effect' (Suler 2004), whereby users of technology do things in cyberspace that they would not normally do offline as a result of the anonymity afforded by the internet. Arguably, online abuse is more invisible to family and friends than offline abuse. Crucially, because the internet is seen as a vital source of support and a means of accessing information, various surveys, including my own, have revealed that a significant majority of those who experience abuse online would not tell parents about it because they fear it would curtail their use of the internet, or they fear it will lead to retribution. And here they would not be wrong - evidence suggests that online hate crimes can also lead to offline violence and abuse (Treisis 2002). Thus, our LGBT+ youth are learning that online abuse is a rite of passage but they continue to use the internet because they don't want their virtual window on the world closed down.

***Sharks and silver surfers: LGBT+ older people online* <3>**

The Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch 2015) argues that the internet plays a significant role in promoting sexual rights as both a source of sexual health information and as a place where people can explore and express their identities. But to what extent are older people, in particular older lesbians, included in this? For instance, certain online dating sites

have excluded LGBT+ people – eHarmony, for instance, had to create a specific site (called Compatible) for LGBT+ singles in 2008, following a public court case about the exclusion of LGBT+ people from their existing website (Coleman 2012). We need to explore the experience of older LGBT+ people online and consider the impact a growth of online dating has, for instance, on more traditional, offline social spaces.

The baby boomer generation, in many ways, was the generation that steered the digital age and quickly embraced what is has to offer Athique (2013). The LGBT+ community were quick to explore what cyberspace had to offer. Early lesbian spaces on the internet were often mail discussion groups, which tended to be more hidden and 'private', thus seemingly offering a safe space for women (Wincapaw 2000). However, it is imperative that we locate these spaces within the wider social, political and economic context. As Kaplan and Moss (2003) have shown, the internet is a major site for the commission of hate crime. In particular, it is a place where LGBT+ communities are targeted (Gerstenfeld et al 2003).

The Internet clearly offers the potential to access to important information about changing bodies and shifting health needs (Berdychevsky and Nimrod 2015). Scaunich (2014) argues that for older people, the internet becomes the preferred source because it avoids potentially awkward and embarrassing face to face situations with health professionals who may hold stereotypes about older people's, especially LGBT+ people's, health requirements. Some studies have suggested that older LGBT+ people are more likely to experience depression and loneliness compared to their heterosexual peers (Shiu et al 2017), whilst at the same time, they are much less likely to access services designed to offer support. In many cases, this is a direct result of homophobic discrimination either experienced or anticipated. However, much online material remains directed at younger people and is heteronormative (Riggs 2013, Bauer et al 2015). Lesbians, for instance, have been told, erroneously, that they don't need cervical screening and older lesbians and bisexual women remain at high risk of breast cancer (Todd

2011). As such, at best older LGBT+ people's access to health information is restrictive and at worst, it reifies harmful stereotypes.

How do older LGBT+ people fare in matters of the heart? There is no doubt that online dating is now a global phenomenon, with a significant number of people finding their partners through the internet (Hogan et al 2011). There is also some convincing research to suggest that older people are more likely to use the internet for these purposes than their younger counterparts (Hogan et al 2011), also evidenced by the growing number of websites targeted specifically at this age group such as Our Time® and Singles Over Sixty®, or Scruff for older gay, bisexual and trans men. Older people, it seems, constitute the fastest growing group of internet users (Perrin and Duggan 2015). A survey conducted by Match.com showed that large numbers of LGBT+ people from 18-70+ were using the internet for online dating.

Before the advent of the internet, the LGBT+ 'community' relied on bars, clubs and social spaces (many of which were political) in order to make friends and find love or sex (Todd 2013). However, 'the internet is displacing those classic venues' (Rosenfeld 2010). The relative ease with which it is possible to find online materials about LGBT+ sexual health, history or life more generally, means that traditional gay or queer spaces perhaps have less meaning for younger LGBT+ people or those coming out in later life. It also means that those who remain in the closet, can still explore sex and identity in the virtual world (Usher and Morrison 2010). Many older people are pushed into online dating; it is seen as a better option than the youth-orientated bar and club scenes, where many older LGBT+ feel unwelcome (Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012, Todd 2013). Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) claim that since 2000, for instance, 60 per cent of LGBT+ people meet their partners online. This has prompted some to ask whether gay communities are dying, leading to a 'diaspora of gays from traditional urban enclaves' (Rosser et al 2008: 588). It also means that older people are facing similar risks of online abuse, as their younger counterparts. Older lesbians I spoke to believed threats of being

outed online, for instance, were '*part of everyday life'*. A loss of LGBT+ spaces offline, also means they have less access to social support if they are experiencing domestic abuse (Todd forthcoming).

We also need to consider the impact of living online for older people's sexual health in relation to this. Rates of STIs, and also HIV/AIDS, are growing among older people across the globe. In part, this is because sexual health education prior to the 1960s was restrictive and contemporary sexual health campaigns frequently ignore older people (Sherrard and Wainwright 2013). There have been limited studies looking at older people, STIs and online dating but studies focusing on younger people, suggest that online dating may lead to more STIs due to the relative increase in offline sexual encounters (Couch and Liamputtong 2008). Online daters, it would seem, are less likely to think about the risks of offline sexual encounters, and the growing numbers of older people using the internet to meet sexual partners, means potential exposure is greater. Also, there are greater levels of sexual risk-taking in this age group (Amin 2016). In part, this might be because the baby boomer generation have always been risk-takers and are familiar with challenging traditional norms and values (Twenge et al 2015). However, there is also evidence to suggest that ageist, sexist and heteronormative values proliferate in the sexual health advice available on the internet (Gewirtz-Meydan et al 2018).

***Thinking through the matrix* <3>**

Judith Butler's (1990) notion of the hegemonic heterosexual matrix is useful here. Her conceptualization is based on Monique Wittig's (1980) assertion that the social contract is a heterosexual one. She also uses Adrienne Rich's (1980) idea of 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Witttig, drawing on the work of the likes of Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau, argues that the assumptions of heterosexuality are absolutely fundamental – to live in society is to live in heterosexuality. Issues of sexual citizenship come into play here; what are the consequences

for those people who are not treated as fully part of civil society? Women, historically, have effectively been written out of the social contract, a contract presumed to be between two adult males, due to their assumed inability to transcend their bodies and live rationally (Lister 2007). In effect, LGBT+ people are also outside of the social contract. Discourses in such a society serve to erase non-heterosexuals. Through social constructions of gender, sex and sexuality, a dominant notion of heterosexuality is positioned as the benchmark norm, against which individuals both perform their own gender and sexuality but crucially, also police that of others, in accordance with social expectations and norms. LGBT+ people, young and old, are susceptible to such policing on the internet.

In some ways, it might be possible for older people to exist outside of the heterosexual matrix, to be shielded from its hegemony. Older people's bodies, for instance, are arguably not understood primarily as gendered or sexualized bodies – their intelligibility comes from their status as belonging to old bodies – a post-sexualized body, much as children have been constructed as pre-sexual beings (Renold 2006). Older people are often excluded from economic and social participation (Todd 2013). Whilst this, in many respects, is problematic (see Todd 2013), it also offers up a discursive, potentially transformative, space.

The internet becomes the preferred space to get information (Adams et al 2003), presenting older LGBT+ people with the opportunity to meet others and to explore their sexuality (Malta and Farquharson 2014). It provides a sometimes comfortable, sometimes exciting and dangerous, alternative to the club and pub scene where they don't feel welcome (Todd 2013). In addition, the internet offers a much larger pool from which to meet new people, the lesbian dating scene, in particular, being notoriously 'incestuous' (Pritchard, Morgan and Sedgley 2002).

Whitehead (2003) argued that there has been a dramatic rise in the numbers of older people in the dating 'pool' – where once this was limited to younger unmarried people, more recently, with people getting married later, divorcing and wanting to re-marry increasingly and living longer, there are more in the 'market for love'. In addition, the growing legitimacy of LGBT+ relationships, has meant that older people, who may not have sought same-sex relationships as their younger selves, may now feel more comfortable seeking a partner, and are able to do so using the ever more conventional and accepted method of online dating sites. It is important to consider, however, the extent to which LGBT+ relationships are marketed in such a way as to co-opt or assimilate them into a hegemonic model of heterosexual intimacy, ignoring the rich history of LGBT+ sexual subcultures (see Ng 2013).

Conclusion <2>

Whilst in many respects, this 'matrix' is the basis of, and excuse for, much of the online abuse experienced by members of the LGBT+ population, it is important to recognise the ways in which, through these very discourses of normative heterosexuality, LGBT+ people, especially young people, are furnished with a language that enables them to express their sexuality and to achieve agency. Identification against the matrix provides LGBT+ people with the opportunity to experience the power of naming in the social world. In this way, we can perhaps see potentiality beyond Butler's presentation of the heterosexual matrix as universal. LGBT+ people, young and old, are potentially finding ways to resist the heterosexual matrix online and make it less powerful. The internet is undoubtedly a valuable space for the sexually marginalized (Tsang 2002). Thus, we are entering what Plummer (1995) describes as a new telling of sex; what was once perhaps experienced as private and hidden, is now potentially open to any number of people. Cyberspace has transformed how and what we learn about sex and sexualities. It has presented the possibility of making friends or romantic partnerships on a global scale. The internet has also made it possible to explore a range of sexual identities and

fetishes. In many ways, such transformation of time, space, knowledge and identity is to be welcomed.

But we must not be complacent, we also need to acknowledge the potential for the sharpening of new social inequalities which the internet brings. LGBT+ people clearly constitute a minority group at risk of cyberabuse, harassment and related offline risks. For many older lesbians, for instance, being in an intimate relationship is their only form of social support (Barrett et al 2017). Often, the initial hidden nature of relationships formed online is a pull factor but one which can create social isolation (see Smalley 1987). This is placing older LGBT+ people in a potentially risky position; they are feeling a need to seek relationships online for affirmation and support but, paradoxically, shunning traditional, offline spaces means they are losing other avenues for support. Key structural changes are required; we need deliberate strategies to combat ageism online and offline. There needs to be more provision of sexual health material targeted specifically at older people, better access to communities offering support in a range of areas related to their health more generally. Crucially, we need to recognise older people's sexuality in order to allow them their sexual rights,

Similarly, given the ubiquity of the internet in the lives of youth today (Madden et al 2013), we need to better understand the relationships youths form online and consider whether these relationships confer protective benefits or something more sinister. This chapter has shown that almost twice as many LGBT+ youth experience cyberbullying compared to their heterosexual peers. In particular, LGBT+ youth show significantly higher rates of all types of cyber dating abuse and sexual coercion than heterosexual youth. Much more research is needed into cyberabuse but the data available suggests it is a serious problem, the consequences are real and should not be dismissed as a 'virtual' by-product of an increasingly digitialized childhood and adolescence. There is a real need for further prevention and intervention efforts specifically

designed to address the needs and vulnerabilities of LGBT+ youth online. Birkett et al (2009) have shown that when a school's climate is perceived to be positive, it can serve as a buffer against the bullying of LGBT+ youth. In their study, counsellors at schools were trained to spot the signs of domestic abuse – an equivalent is needed to combat the abuse these young people experience online. There are also significant gaps in our knowledge still. Few studies consider the experiences of transgender people online. They constitute a particularly marginalized group within the LGBT+ 'community'. Of the limited evidence we have, it seems clear that transgender youth report the highest rates of victimization with regards to all forms of interpersonal abuse, including cyber abuse.

The push and pull factors for life off and online are complicated and overlapping. Abuse can occur at any time and in any place. Home never was a 'haven in a heartless world' for those experiencing interpersonal abuse but it is clear that cyberspace is also is no longer (if it ever was) a refuge for those who are abused.

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