Chapter 13

The Role of Internet Newsgroups in the Coming-Out Process of Gay Male Youth: An Israeli Case Study

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ABSTRACT

The study examines internet newsgroups as a potential mitigating tool in the complex coming-out process of gay male youth. Employing a qualitative discourse analysis of the newsgroup’s messages, the chapter focuses on an Israeli newsgroup that appeals to GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender) youth and operates within the most popular UGC (user-generated content) portal in Israel. The findings indicate that the researched newsgroup functions as a social arena that offers its participants an embracing milieu, where for the first time in their lives they are free of moral judgment of their sexuality. Through four distinct yet interrelated ways, the newsgroup helps its participants to cope with one of the most significant milestones in a gay person’s life – the coming-out process: (1) refuting prevalent stereotypes of homosexuality; (2) facilitating the acceptance of one’s sexual orientation; (3) prompting its disclosure; and (4) creating social relations within and outside the virtual environment.

INTRODUCTION

The 1960’s and 1970’s were charged with significance for the lesbigay struggle. Two decades after the publication of Alfred Kinsey’s startling findings (Kinsey, [1948] 1998) regarding the prevalence of homosexuality, three pivotal events occurred: The Stonewall riots in 1969, the removal of homosexuality from the DSM (The American Psychiatric Association’s Manual of Mental Disorders) in 1973, and the publication of Foucault’s ([1976] 1978) renowned book “The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge” three years later. In tandem with these events scholars abandoned the pathological focus in favor of social and cultural explanations. Consequently, a rich body of research that examined the interrelationship between media and homosexuality took shape.

Alongside these processes, from the 1970’s onward the Israeli GLBT community achieved
impressive developments in societal, cultural and legal spheres, with the founding of the Society for the Protection of Personal Rights (SPPR). Among the societal achievements were the nationwide deployment of the society’s branches, the formation of various community-based organizations, and the increasing popularity of the Gay Pride Parade (Kama, 2005; Moriel, 2000). In addition, the community experienced a cultural upsurge, reflected in publication of several GLBT journals, the emergence of queer movies, and a significant improvement in media attitudes toward homosexuality (Kama, 2005; Padva, 2005). In the legal-judicial field too, numerous achievements constituted a “gay legal revolution”, as Harel (2000) put it. 2

Starting in the 1990’s, the unique characteristics of the internet attracted substantial attention in media research. However, in spite of the growing body of research that focuses on the internet and homosexuality, there is a notable absence of research assessing the internet’s role in the lives of gay youth and more particularly its role in the coming-out process, entitled a “rite of passage” (Bridgewater, 1997) due to its importance for the gay individual. Research linking the internet and gays tends to focus on random sexual relationships, Aids, and other elements (Grov et al., 2007) that formerly played a central role in reducing the homosexual individual (who later became a “gay”) to his sexuality.

This investigation seeks to contribute another layer to “the science of oppression”, a term coined by Monique Wittig ([1981] 1993) in relation to feminist and lesbian insights based on personal oppressed experience, in order to shed fresh and critical light on the homophobic reality. Many gay male youth undergo an onerous life experience as a result of continuing homophobia. The innovative nature of the internet, historically a new medium, opens up new possibilities. Examining the interaction between these possibilities and the peculiar life experience of gay youth is, therefore, of primary importance. This chapter examines newsgroups as a potential mitigating tool in the complex coming-out process, by tracking the impact of gay youth’s participation in those newsgroups, the quality of this impact, and the ways it’s achieved. However, the chapter focuses on a specific newsgroup, and therefore there is no intention of generalization. This research is placed in a broader context in which the internet is examined as an empowering tool for various marginalized minority groups.

BACKGROUND

Coming-Out of the Closet during Adolescence: Meanings and Implications

The coming-out process consists of three chief stages during which the individual recognizes his sexual orientation, adopts an appropriate identity, and discloses it to others. This process, as depicted by informants, is a linear progression of self discovery whereby the heterosexual identity – enforced and artificial – is gradually replaced by a substantive and genuine gay one (Rust, 2003).

During the 1970’s and 1980’s several models depicting the gay identity formation were introduced (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; McDonald, 1982). By and large, these models are composed of gradational stages through which the individual faces dilemmas and obstacles, while the last stage is the desired one. Although each model underscores different facets, all of them indicate an initial stage in which the individual identifies himself as heterosexual and sequential stages in which he acknowledges his uniqueness, tries to explain it, strives toward contact with peers, and finally accepts his new identity. While early awareness of homosexual attraction may begin as early as the age of nine (Herdt & Boxer, 1993), acknowledging the orientation and exposing it occur at 15 and 17 respectively. These ages are under a steady decline (Grove et al., 2006).
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