Chapter 13

The Role of Internet Newsgroups in the Coming–Out Process of Gay Male Youth:
An Israeli Case Study[1]

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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,[1] 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.

BACKROUND

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).

Coming-out during adolescence is even more complex. As a formative and sensitive period, adolescence poses harsh challenges (Erikson, 1968) that appear to be even harsher for gay adolescents (Garnets & Kimmel, 2003). The fundamental challenge is the heterosexual socialization gay youth go through. Unlike members of other minority groups who have easy access to socialization agents similar to themselves, for gay youth such agents are neither visible nor accessible (Kama, 2002). Consequently, they grow with a default heterosexual identity. During the coming-out process this identity is replaced by a new, extrinsic and stereotyped one, in a process of resocialization. This process is portrayed in the literature as a loss that situates the individual in a state of psychological vulnerability, requiring support and relief (Rust, 2003).

In addition to that fundamental and ongoing challenge, gay male youth come up against quotidian impediments that burden their daily routine and hinder the acquisition of positive identity. Paradoxically, it is the schools – pivotal socialization agents – that fail to function properly. This failure finds expression in the nurturing of a homophobic and oppressive atmosphere (Smith, 2007); in demeaning attitudes of teachers (Meixner, 2006; Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006); and in the failure to provide relevant and accurate information on homosexuality (Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). A research report of The Israeli Gay Youth Organization supports this state of affairs and provides data regarding the Israeli education system: Out of 390 GLBT respondents, 31% complained that most students had uttered homophobic comments, 55% reported that teachers had ignored these comments and 23% complained that teachers themselves had made such comments. As to information resources in schools: 45% reported to have access to GLBT internet sites, 15% reported that books and other resources existed in the school library and 50% noted that at least one staff member in the school was "open to the issue" (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2008). The direct implication of the shortfall of information is the inability to refute homophobic prejudices. More importantly, the lack of relevant, accurate information in the first stage of Cass' model (1979) may impede the progression to the next stage and therefore hinder or prevent the consolidation of an affirmative gay identity.

Two additional factors compound the difficulties that gay youth encounter. The first and most significant is frequent abuses, including verbal insults, threats of physical violence, and chasing or following – in ratios of 80%, 44%, and 31% respectively (Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995). Here too the research report of The Israeli Gay Youth Organization reveals that 20% of the respondents suffered from physical assaults and 36% felt insecure, both as a result of their sexual orientation (Pizmony-Levy et al., 2008). The second factor is parental reaction, which tends to be severe and uncompromising (Mallon, 1998; Thompson, 2001). This reality explains the social isolation that many gay youngsters suffer (Martin & Hetrick, 1988). In this reality, coping with sexual orientation can often end in failure (Beaty, 1999; McDonald, 1982), which is reflected among others in suicide statistics that are three times higher than those of heterosexual youth (Gibson, 1994). The importance of this state of affairs intensifies in view of the positive impact of coming-out on the emotional (Lasala, 2000) and physical (Larson & Chastain, 1990) state of the gay individual. Considering these difficulties, and the life circumstances of marginal groups in general, many researches stressed the actual contribution of the internet as an empowering tool for these groups (Barak & sadovsky, 2008; Bowker & Tuffin, 2007; Mehra et al., 2004; Radin, 2006).

The Newsgroup as a Social Arena

"Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge […] when enough people carry on […] public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feelings, to form webs of personal

relationships in cyber-space" (Rheingold, 2000: xx). Virtual communities are based among others on newsgroups, defined as a specific forum style method of communication (Long & Baecker, 1997). Newsgroups belong to the category of computer-mediated communication (Marcoccia, 2004) and are actually a hybrid of interpersonal and mass communication (Baym, 1998). They constitute a multi-participant arena that is not dependent on time (asynchronous) or place (Granit & Nathan, 2000), and characterized by the public nature of its messages (Baym, 1998). Whereas the asynchronicity disrupts its inner dynamics and makes the discussion structure more complex (Marcoccia, 2004), the technical interface allows progressive interactions that counteract this complexity (Donath et al., 1999).

Granit and Nathan (2000) list five types of communities. Two of them are relevant for this study: A supportive community and a social community. The goal of the first is to improve its members' condition, while its principal advantages are the common denominator that unites them and the interactions based on it. The virtual form of the supportive community benefits its members with accessibility in time, accessibility in place and anonymity. The goal of the second type is to create social relations while the benefit of its virtual form lies in the willingness to accept members who suffer from social inferiority, and to help them to create relations as equal peers.

On-line communities and newsgroups in particular provide their members with a sense of belonging (Wellman, 2001) and help them to form and maintain social ties (Boase et al., 2006). These insights were demonstrated in two different empirical studies, where 66% of respondents reported that they felt a sense of belonging to the group (Roberts, 1998) and 61% reported that they formed a personal relationship with someone they "met" in the newsgroup (Parks & Floyd, 1996). Some scholars even credited newsgroups as propitious agents of a social and civil revival (Connolly, 2001).

As to adolescents, the newsgroup functions as an unprecedented arena of information.[3] This merit becomes more prominent in light of the substantial difficulties of youth to obtain information on the web (Dresang, 1999), as well as the unique information needs of GLBT adolescents and particularly the blocks to the provision of information they face (Fikar & Keith, 2004). On-line searches reduce the difficulties of traditional search methods, such as problems of access and embarrassment, whereas the heterogeneity that typifies the newsgroups – where members of different ages and experiences gather – may help the neophytes with guidance. Another merit of the internet at large relates to its role as an arena for mental-aid seekers (Gould, Munfakh, Lubell, Kleinman & Parker, 2002) and to the assuasive potential it may consequently have.

The researched newsgroup is a lesbigay medium. Lesbigay media, as depicted by Kama (2007), are produced by and for the members of the lesbigay community and are able to compensate for the deficiency in the mainstream media. Lesbigay media hold several objectives: Forming a shared consciousness; fostering empowerment and communal consolidation that provides a sense of belonging; validating the self, and remedying alienation. It also serves as a socializing agent that fosters the development of positive gay identity, being a symbolic sphere where gay adolescents feel free of judgment. These merits were stated in research studies that had examined the internet's role in the lives of minority groups, including sexual minorities (Mehra et al., 2004), and gay male youth in particular (Nir, 1998). The first study examined the importance of computer-mediated communication for adult GLBT, and stressed its role as a social support system as well as its contribution to the development of positive "queer" identity, and to the establishment of political awareness. The second study focused on Israeli gay teenagers' involvement patterns in newsgroups. However, both studies refrained from relating to the coming-out process which, as

stated, constitutes a major milestone that merits a thorough study.

The above literature portrays the newsgroups as social arenas. Considering the unique life experience of gay male youth, and especially the social consequences of the coming-out process, these arenas seem to be an ideal sphere to embrace this process.

The significance of the internet and newsgroups in particular intensifies due to new statistics that reveal their popularity among youth: 93% of the American youth surf the internet (Lenhart et al., 2010) and over half of them regularly participate in on-line groups, whose number constantly increases (Joyce & Kraut, 2006). Similar data characterize the Israeli case: 92% of the Israeli Jewish youth surf the internet, whereas "only" 34% participate in newsgroups (Rafaeli et al., 2010). The general internet penetration-rate, it should be mentioned, is higher in Israel than in the United States (Internet World Stats, 2009). In light of these statistics, today's youth can be best described as "digital natives" (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008).

METHOD

The research is aimed at illuminating the role of newsgroups for gay male youth in coping with the coming-out process and is based on a qualitative discourse analysis of the messages posted on the newsgroup "Young Pride". The newsgroup, launched in 2002, applies to GLBT youth and operates within the most popular user-generated content portal in Israel.

Since the portal's management decline to furnish details regarding the newsgroup (out of confidentiality), the only available information is the one accessible on the "About" page, where the newsgroup is depicted as a "home for GLBT youth", open to various discussions with emphasis on pride.

The number of active participants is unavailable as well since posting messages is not con-

ditional on subscribing. Nevertheless, during the research the newsgroup included 66 members aged 14 to 20 who had chosen to subscribe and maintain a visible profile, and many more unsubscribed members.

At the beginning of the research, which extended over five months in 2008, the newsgroup's archive contained 9,000 messages (on 600 pages, with 15 messages per page). Of these, 250 messages were sampled by non-probability purposive sampling: Out of the 600 pages, 100 were sampled (in equal increments of six pages), while two or three messages pertaining to the coming-out process or related aspects were sampled from each page. Sampling 250 messages out of 9000 inevitably restricts my interpretation; yet the fact that the messages' topics tend to recur allowed me to classify them into eight thematic categories.[4] The recurrence of the discussion topics, and thus the ability to categorize them, made it possible to study the newsgroup's prevailing mindset and to identify the most pertinent messages.

A discourse analysis of the messages as a sociocultural text has been conducted, assuming that within different social contexts these messages embody concealed meanings (van Dijk, 1990). Those meanings were interpreted on the basis of insights gained from the theoretical section (of the research) in compliance with the inner dynamics of the newsgroup, shaped predominantly by interpersonal relationships. Examining these dynamics through the messages, I assumed that they may reflect reality but also – and maybe primarily – serve as a significant constructing factor of it.

This examination adopts Foucault's ([1969] 1972) insight regarding the nexus between power-relations and discourse, and Butler's (1993) assumption as to the constructive quality of discourse and its ability to shape our perceptions of the normal as opposed to the aberrant.

Discourse Analysis is an umbrella term used to characterize different approaches to the study of textual components and discursive practices

(Tracy, 1995). The messages examined in the research were analyzed by Tracy's (ibid) Action-Implicative Discourse Analysis (AIDA),[5] which focuses on the examination of communicative practices, and the problems and contradictions elicited thereby. Moreover, it aims at revealing the meanings behind them. The text was examined by addressing the interrelationship between the explicit meaning of the text and the broader context in which it appears, in order to indicate how the individual's world, values and tenets are reflected in the text. During the research I avoided any intervention in the newsgroup's inner dynamics in order to grasp its natural atmosphere, unaffected by external manipulations.

DISCUSSION

Participation in the newsgroup helps its participants cope with the coming-out process in four main ways: Refutation of stereotypes; coming to terms with their sexual orientation; encouraging them to reveal it; and creating social ties. The majority of the posts describe feelings of relief, evoked by the participation itself. Among such posts are explicit declarations of the participant's wish to come out of the closet:

(1) It encourages me: the very fact that I posted here brought me **huge relief**, knowing I've got someone to share all my dilemmas and problems with ☺, and since I started posting here (just a few days ago), I feel an even greater need to **shout out loud** and tell everyone.[6]

(2) I think I'm close to being happy: writing here has been so helpful…I feel I'm about to become really **free**! I'm happy to say that I think my close friends will accept it really well… huge thanks to all of you!

As noted, in these messages the writers connect the sense of relief with their desire to come out. According to Rust (2003), coming-out of the closet is indeed easier for gay youth who feel they can connect socially with other gays. That is, the very fact of posting on the newsgroup and creating contact with similar members encourages coming-out.

The Newsgroup's Contribution to Refutation of Stereotypes

A major part of the messages reflect stereotypical perceptions shaped by a biased world of images through which the newsgroup's members see the adult community. Researchers (Beentjes et al., 2001) assert that adolescents devote much of their time to media which inevitably become a chief source that informs their world of images. The importance of the media for young gays intensifies due to the lack of similar agents of socialization, a lack that leads them to rely more strongly on gay images presented in the mass media. These images, to put it mildly, are far from being ideal and were accompanied over a long period by symbolic annihilation and negative stereotypes (Kama, 2002) in various media: Film (Dyer, 2002), television (Croteau & Hoynes, 200) and the press (Alwood, 1996).

(3) Dissatisfied with myself: […] don't get me wrong, I haven't got a problem with lesbians and gays but their way of life looks frightening. I don't want to go to drak [drag] queen parties and live in an **isolated** community, that's **totally frightening** for me […].

(4) A quickie or a serious relationship?: And now there's something that really **worries me**. I'm 17 and I'm so looking for a serious relationship with someone. I feel it's something I really lack in life. […] I know that **life alone is tough** […] I'm afraid that the stigma is true and most gays are looking for quickies. **I don't want to remain alone for the rest of my life** […].

The finding that gay and lesbian youth suffer from a lack of actual role-models (Vincke & van-Heering, 2004) explains the stereotypes discernible in these messages. In the absence of appropriate models, young people rely on partial representations that picture gays as lonely people who waste their time at parties.

Perceiving the stereotypes as true is liable to cause the young people to reject their gay identity, in an attempt to escape such a lifestyle. Beyond that, however, social tagging entails significant psychological implications: Meyer (2003) argues that gays, like any tagged minority group, suffer from chronic tension as a result of the tagging they receive. Society's reaction to deviance causes the tagged individual to develop defensive behavior, with attendant mental symptoms. In practice, it finds expression in self-hatred, in over-shyness, in obsession deriving from the stigmas, and even in rebellion. Goffman (1963) holds that among the implications of the perceived stigma, the individual feels he is "less deserving" and develops mistrust in-, and a sense of alienation from the dominant culture. These feelings coincide with the low self-esteem that characterizes young GLBTs (Garnets et al., 2003), and are evident in messages dealing with love. The vast majority of such messages relate to the lack of love, to perceptions of love as the root of all evil, and as the source of the general depression expressed there. It is hard to assess whether this attitude toward love is the cause or the outcome of low self-esteem, but it can be assumed that the second option is more probable because gay youths are exposed to numerous risk factors such as negative stereotypes and heterosexist attitudes that may foster poor self-esteem.

The discourse on the newsgroup reflects an agreed-on division between two groups: Confused "newbies" who are unfamiliar with lesbigay matters, and senior, self-aware surfers who have gained their position after having "gone through the mill" of experiences typifying the early phases of the coming-out process. The main advantage of this division lies in the tendency of the senior members to refute prevailing stereotypes, as a part of a conscious attempt to ease feelings of distress. In other words, the juxtaposition of the two groups enables the experienced members to provide useful instructions, as reflected in many posts, such as posts nos. 8, 10 and 18 below.

In contrast with the negative influence of stereotypes, positive gay images are likely to help prevent denial of the identity by reducing internalized homophobia (Rust, 2003). Indeed, some of the messages contain links that provide positive role-models, such as GLBT Israeli artists. For example, in a reply to a message claiming that gay couplehood doesn't exist, surfers provided links to articles relating the story of a well-known gay Israeli couple – Dr. Amit Kama and Prof. Uzi Even – who contributed substantially to advancing the Israeli gay community. Gay Israeli respondents, it should be noted, state real longing for normative images of gays in the media (Kama, 2002).

The Newsgroup's Contribution to Reconciliation with Sexual Orientation

Discourse on the newsgroup reveals that some of the youths are not reconciled with their conscious sexual orientation. Unlike the confusion entailed in the sexual orientation, which may occur because they are still in the early stages and due to immaturity, the failure to reconcile with the *conscious* tendency should be examined in terms of internalized homophobia. It has been claimed (Garnets et al., 2003) that this is one of the outcomes of the heterosexist ideology prevailing in society. It goes without saying that internalized homophobia is a delaying factor that one must overcome in order to complete the coming-out process. Many of the messages posted on the newsgroup indeed contain expressions of self-homophobia (examples 5 and 6 below).

(5) **I hate myself:** hate those thoughts, that attraction, that I'm the way I am […] you don't think perhaps it's true what they say and if I do everything possible, I'll get over it? […] I'm simply angry at myself […] I was always different, I've had enough of it!!

(6) "I can't accept it: […] I don't want to be gay, or a gay in denial. Every day I battle my tendencies, and it's **destroying me from the inside**. What do I have to do to become straight? [i.e., heterosexual]. I don't want to accept myself. Maybe witchcraft would help me, or hormone treatment […] because I can't live this **split** […] but I have to, I mustn't give in, otherwise I'll be lost, it's so stupid that God created me a boy and I'm not attracted to girls, what a huge joke, just to see if people can cope with their lives? […] Is there anyone in the whole world who managed to **change his sexual tendency**, or is it in your genes for ever?

These messages fit the situation described in the first stage of Cass' model of identity formation (Cass, 1979). At this stage, the individual wonders whether his behavior fits the description of homosexual behavior. The thoughts undermine his heterosexual identity and, to resolve the contradiction, he either seeks relevant information or reacts with denial. Denying one's sexual orientation is common on the newsgroup's messages, and it mostly finds expression in posts where the writer wants to learn something from the newsgroup members, but claims that he's straight. Responding to a message where the writer maintained he was straight, but wanted to know how other participants' fathers reacted when they heard about their sons' sexual tendencies – another participant wrote:

(7) You're curious, as a straight guy? Why do you want to hear what our fathers think about it? Do you want to share something with us, maybe? Regards.

According to Rust (2003), such a response, despite its lack of sensitivity, can render an unthinkable situation conceivable. It validates the individual and his denied tendency, helping him to imagine an alternative reality in which he accepts himself. The individual's understanding of his power to bear and cope with that reality may well advance him along the coming-out stages by reducing denial reactions. As noted, in contrast with the option of denial, the healthy option involves attempts to obtain information about the community. The internet in general, and particularly the messages posted on the newsgroup, facilitate the individual to obtain information relevant to him, and thus backs-up the transition to the second stage. In many cases, the information needed to come out of the closet is contained in the talkbacks to messages describing lack of acceptance:

(8) Coming-out of the closet toward yourself: society conditions us to think that the only normative lifestyle is heterosexual. Everyone raised in this world assumes that he's straight […]. That's the precise reason that coming-out of the closet is such a big deal - it shatters some kind of assumption. Regrettably, the situation you're in is the rule for everyone who isn't straight. A gay who doesn't go through this stage […] is the exception to the rule […] gradually you'll start to realize there's nothing wrong about your sexual orientation […] just think of yourself as a caterpillar that eventually becomes a butterfly.

This talkback was apparently written by a young man somewhat older than the others, and it projects several ideas to the addressee: First of all, there is an attempt to inform the youth about his condition, to locate him on a linear development axis, and also to make it clear that despite the deviance (due to heteronormative definitions) – it's OK. Additionally, the writer tries to show what the future holds ("you'll start to realize") and

to sow hope about it ("a caterpillar that eventually becomes a butterfly"). In other words, this response tries to compensate for the instability that, according to Savin-Williams (2005), characterizes many young gays. Similar to that message, hinting that linear development does exist, other messages detail the coming-out stages, and those details are likely to be beneficial since they help identify which stage the youth is at, and its typical problems (Rust, 2003).

The most common reason for rejecting the gay option and for the uncompromising desire to be "straight", as elicited from the messages, is unwillingness to give up the family framework which is perceived possible only as part of a heterosexual lifestyle. Rust (ibid) asserts that during the process of mourning the lost heterosexual identity – a normal and necessary stage in the reconciliation process – the individual forces himself to abandon certain expectations, such as the expectation for a family, while in fact he only should adapt his expectations to the new circumstances. Some of the messages on the newsgroup supply information as to the feasible coexistence of a family framework and a gay way of life:

(9) Just wanted to ask your opinion: […] I really want to be straight. […] I know you'll say it's ok to be gay or bi […] but I want to be straight. I always **dreamed** about having a wife and kids, and I could travel the country to meet my parents and hers. […] but I still want a regular family […].

A response:

(10) Want to be straight: […] I have to say that's one of the stages I went through myself […] I thought about not having a wife, a home, two kids and a white picket-fence, like I always dreamed. It seems that some dreams are never fulfilled […] what will happen if in a few years time you fall in love with the man of your dreams? Will you go back to that

childhood dream when you were 16 and tell him 'Listen, it's over between us, because I'm looking for a woman?' I'm positive it won't happen. Take your time, and think about it […].

Other responses offered more concrete information:

(11) If the reason is children, you can take it off the list, because lesbigay parenting [a link to Gay-Lesbian Parenting newsgroup is provided] is starting to be run-of-the-mill, including court cases and adopted kids […]. If you're sure about yourself, it's a pity to keep on 'trying' to be straight, because it's impossible, **it simply takes your strength away** […].

(12) And now it's official: gays and lesbians can be the heirs of their partners [a link to an article is provided] – a major step in the struggle for rights.

Unlike response 10 which attempts to "soften" the young man's feelings by expressing identification and pointing to his error, the two other responses provide URLS to internet sites where concrete information is available. The very awareness of the existence of a newsgroup for gay and lesbian parenting may settle the erroneous discrepancy between the familial framework and the gay way of life. As noted, this awareness may encourage self-reconciliation and assists coping with the coming-out process.

In addition to this kind of information, many messages provide information relating to historical, psychological and legal matters relevant to the GLBT community. For example, responses to questions like "what is a bisexual?", "can gays get married?" or "how does sexual identity take shape?". Other messages explain how the Gay Pride Parade was created, or invite newsgroup members to a meeting that will discuss similarities and differences between the gay and feminist

struggles. According to Shiloh (2007), as part of the consolidation of identity, youth need information about lesbigay culture, the community's history, the local community's activity, safe sex and so on. Sharing information, particularly during meetings, he continues, may serve as a catalyst for advancing personal development processes and helps boost self-confidence. It is a vital condition for disclosing one's sexual orientation.

The Newsgroup's Contribution to Disclosing Sexual Orientation

The various messages analyzed so far contribute in diverse ways, mostly indirect, to completing the coming-out process. Alongside these messages are more than a few that deal directly with coming-out and its ramifications. Most of them address the connection between coming-out and the family's reaction, which young gays consider an influential and significant factor. Studies indicate that concerns about parental reactions and about damaging the relationship with them after disclosing one's sexual orientation is the central issue that worries teens who attend support-groups (D'Augelli et al., 2002). The newsgroup provides a suitable platform for bringing up troubling questions and dilemmas regarding these issues:

(13) What did you feel when you came out of the closet?! Did you come out to your parents / friends / family?! How did they react?! Did you lose any friends?! Did you come to terms with it right away, or did it take time?! Write here everything that happened!"

(14) I want to come out of the closet: how do I do it, do I tell all my friends and my parents? In a way they will accept?

Answers to these sort of questions are immensely important because the questioners receive reliable answers from people like them, who went through the same experience. This is all the more important when it concerns young gays who suffer

during adolescence from a central deficit – the lack of socialization agents who can provide information and advice on related matters. Moreover, messages like these are often answered with practical recommendations and salient information likely to help in the coming-out process:

(15) Warmly recommend: I want to recommend the book "Mom, I have something to tell you", which I think most of you know. It's about gays and lesbians, how they live with it, coming-out of the closet, and how their parents reacted […]. It also has explanations and answers to questions we all ask, and always wanted to get answers [about]. I'm sure you'll feel better about yourselves after you read the book, which will **fill you with hope** about the next stage […].

Other messages include declarations about the intention of coming-out, and are generally followed by encouraging, motivating replies. They tend to support the declarations and to urge the writer to take the next step, offering backing and advice on how to come out, as well as noting that another reality is possible – to those participants who view coming-out as an impossible option:

(16) Coming-out: …me?: Guys, it sounds a bit unexpected but **my head's starting to change**… and I'm actually starting to think about coming-out…[…] yes…I'm aware of the problems ahead but they'll be there anyway. I can already predict their hate for me…the mortification... not allowing me to meet boys … but I won't give in […] I'll fight to the end…I'll struggle … I'll rebel – everything, until they start accepting me the way I am…**it can be done**…[…].

(17) Fateful decision: OK, that's it… I've finally decided! I'm going to tell my sister in a day or two, and then my mother […] afterwards I'll tell my father and older brother… wish

me luck!!! And a hug won't do any harm, either.

In response:

(18) First of all, **way to go for taking the step!** I hope you're really ready for it, and your parents and friends too. There are lots of ways to do it, but first of all I think you should read an article about coming-out, and then decide if it's really right for you. Then **we'll** move to ways of telling them and how they'll accept it. Look at the Tehila site [gives the URL and a link to a specific article]. […] And afterwards if you like, I'll gladly help you and answer questions. Anyway – lots of luck!

As discernible in Message 16, this is a participant who changed his mind about the feasibility of coming-out, although he understands that problems may result from taking the step. Coming-out of the closet after taking part in the newsgroup (even passive participation) is done *despite* the exposure to the tough implications it may have. While participating in the newsgroup, the young people read about coming-out experiences that include stringent reactions from society and from the family too. Therefore, the choice to come out of the closet *nevertheless* is necessarily a considered, calculated step that requires self-acceptance. Its significance lies not only in accepting one's sexual orientation but also in the willingness to deal with the results of disclosing it, even if they are harsh. Participating in the newsgroup, as the messages show, helps to overcome some of the barriers and speeds up the disclosure of orientation through support and help, practical hints or suggestions, and providing an attentive ear for the young men's dilemmas.

The Newsgroup's Contribution to Creating Social Ties

Taking part in the newsgroup plays a central role in creating a consolidated sub-community (of newsgroup members) and in linking it up with the broader GLBT community. The contribution is reflected at two levels: At the first conscious level, it seems that the newsgroup members feel part of the community whose members share similar circumstances. At the second physical level the newsgroup serves as a platform for creating social ties with members of the community, while simultaneously offering official and unofficial support.

The messages on the newsgroup provide gay youth with three types of information that helps them join a new social community: Information about communal social groups, about places of entertainment for the community, and about professional support organizations. A supportive social community composed of people with similar identity provides its members with a sense of shared destiny and according to Rust (2003), contributes to coping with the coming-out process, which is inevitably accompanied by the loss of social relationships. Examining the community using Cass' model (1979) makes that contribution clear: Unlike the first stage in the model, where the individual confronts lack of self-acceptance, in the second stage – although he is beginning to accept his queer orientation and consider its implications – he still presents himself as a heterosexual. At the same time, at this stage the individual is likely to allow trusted friends to give him support, and he tries to disclose his identity gradually, attempting to test initial reactions before the "great revelation". At the third stage – the Identity Tolerance stage – the individual is more strongly committed to his new identity, and seeks a GLBT community; the next stage includes strengthening ties with its members. Familiarity with the GLBT community and access to it are therefore almost vital conditions for progressing along the various

stages of the coming-out process. Participating in a newsgroup lets the members learn about the very existence of the community, get to know its members, gradually become part of it, and enjoy its potential advantages in coping with the inherent difficulties of the coming-out process. A great number of messages that describe distress and isolation are answered with a recommendation to join a community-based social group:

(19) It's tough in this glass closet: Okay. So I'm gay in the closet and of course everybody guessed it because of my nickname […] I feel really alone […] I'm very frustrated at school, and ashamed to come out in the classroom […]. I tried to meet other gays in chat rooms but they've only got sex on their mind. **Please help me!!!**

In response:

(20) Go somewhere like the Open House: there's one in Jerusalem and one in Tel Aviv, if you come to Jerusalem I'll introduce you to friends... How about it? […]. Every city has its own community, **and you're not the only gay where you live!!!** Go out, get to know gays, go to places where gays get together, but the most recommended thing is meeting groups of gays and lesbians, who talk, enjoy themselves, and make contacts… and you get to meet lots of new people. I hope I've helped you.

An answer like this, which could be perceived as a rather amateur, trivial recommendation, can in fact contribute immensely to consolidating sexual identity and helping the individual with the coming-out process. According to Yalom (1995), lesbigay youth who were in social contact with other lesbigay youth, have a similar health condition to that characterizing heterosexual youth. This finding is notably important in view of the findings presented previously that GLBT youth

suffer from low self-esteem and problematic psychological state. Yalom's findings (ibid) also coincide with Cass' (1979) claim that the quality of social ties is a significant factor in the process of coming to terms with one's sexual orientation.

Social groups of lesbigay youth, as the cited reply recommends, help youth to share their feelings with others and to receive validation for their feelings from other young people who have undergone similar experiences. Such groups also help to develop social skills and to get accustomed to a resocialisation process that matches the new circumstances (Shiloh, 2007). The importance of these groups increases in places where the lack of a GLBT community intensifies the difficulty (Rochlin, 1994). Other people post to the newsgroup express a conscious need for involvement in the community:

(21) I assume I won't change schools at this stage […] but what I can do is get to know people from activities outside school. I need to meet new people because the primitive homophobes at my school are driving me crazy!!! I want to know if there are normal people in the world! Can you recommend me a volunteering place […] in the central Israel?

Alongside information about social meetings and places of entertainment, there is great demand for information about professional support and help organizations. Obtaining help from sources that take a positive approach to sexual orientation is likely to be strongly significant in creating a positive gay identity (Klein, 1993). Professional advisers can ask questions that help the individual to imagine himself as gay. Questions such as "how will people around you react to your coming-out, and how will you react to their reaction?" allow the individual to assess more realistically if the coming-out process will be a "worthwhile step". Moreover, questions of this kind can reduce the social alienation that typifies closeted gays, be-

cause they allow the individual to imagine himself creating social ties that he perceives as impossible (Rust, 2003).

Participation in the newsgroup therefore enables users obtain information about social groups, places of entertainment, and support groups. The social relationships created within the newsgroup join forces to create a communal framework that facilitates the coping with the coming-out, due to its physical existence but no less because the young boys become aware of its embracing nature. At this stage, when the social isolation is replaced by social ties and feelings of belonging, expressions of pride are likely to surface.

Pride and Subversion

Some of the discussions on the newsgroup transcend the everyday preoccupation with sexual orientation. As such, the newsgroup is also a social arena that encourages debate on general matters that can divert members' attention from the daily difficulties entailed in their sexual orientation. Thanks to this role of the newsgroup, and taking into account the psychological situation of many young gays, as described previously, the newsgroup is important not only as an arena encouraging coming-out, but also as an "island of sanity" that lets them take a break from their complex life circumstances – an ever-present part of their adolescence. Another kind of messages, less common but still noticeable, are those messages expressing a discourse of pride as well as subversion of heterosexual norms:

(22) *Ucht'ch-ism*.[7] A way of life or an incurable illness? […] I was always more sensitive and had no tendencies for the usual male brutality, but recently I took on the burden of being an *ucht'cha*. Why? **Just because!** […] if I would want to keep my sexual attraction secret I could talk and act about it differently, more concealed, but that's not my goal […] You ask yourselves - so why be an

ucht'cha?! Why?! And I say – **I feel like it.** It's the figure **I choose** to represent myself with […] If I really want to do something, **I immerse myself in the stereotype**. […] And so, my dear freaks […] **standing before you is an *ucht'cha*** […].

Nicknaming himself as a sissy attests to the acceptance of his identity and even pride in its queerness. Moreover, the content of the message and particularly the way it's phrased, correspond with the central idea of the political lesbigay struggle, during which gays and lesbians adopted the term "queer" precisely because it is homophobic slander. Similar to adopting the term "queer", a young man proudly defining himself as a sissy challenges the "compulsory heterosexuality", a term coined by Rich (1993 [1986]) in the lesbian context. At a deeper level, this message can be identified with Butler's (1990) notion of gender as a performance. She argues that gender is not an essentialist-intrinsic component but merely an expression of physical gestures, subjected to a strict social policing that catalogues them into two genders: Woman and man. A deviant gendered appearance – by adopting gestures of the other gender – enables the individual to undermine the naturalness of the concept and disclose its inherent depressive nature. The message's author **chose** "to appear" as a sissy, a figure characterized by those deviant physical gestures that Butler discusses. In doing so, he rejects the policing norms and refuses to accept the gendered identity he was designated for. In other words, the writer's choice deconstructs the enforced trinity (biology, gendered identity, gendered appearance) and thus subverts its naturalness. In another message, where the writer relates that he came out of the closet during a class, and was applauded by his classmates, he says:

(23) […] and I know I'm proud and did what I felt, and no one can take my pride away! I wish you all happiness, love and pride!

Although in this case it is not easy to determine conclusively if participation in the newsgroup is what inspired the feelings of pride, or whether it is a case of feelings that took shape outside the newsgroup, in both cases the newsgroup's contribution is discernible. Even if the second option is correct, it is an expression of affirmative feelings on a newsgroup whose members gathered due to shared traits, principally those of deviance, alienation, and rejection by family and society - and hence its importance. For participants who perceive coming-out as an unreasonable option, expressions of pride may sow hope for the future, being proof of absolute self-acceptance.

CONCLUSION

The Young Pride newsgroup is an empowering arena that is capable of easing the coping of young gays with the coming-out process. Its contribution is achieved through four chief ways: Refuting stereotypes; reconciliation with one's sexual orientation; encouraging young people to reveal their orientation; and helping them build social ties.

A discourse analysis of the newsgroup's messages and a study of the inner dynamics prevailing there allow charting an imaginary line. At one end of the line is the closeted individual, confused and lacks social ties with the GLBT community, and at the other is one who has come to terms with his sexual orientation and is seeking to integrate into the community. Between these two poles the four mentioned processes unfold, in parallel with the process of consolidating a gay identity. The newsgroup allows its members to "find their place" along that line, in accordance with their progression (as they perceive it) and to choose the contents most relevant to them. As such, it becomes a social arena that can help a broad spectrum of young people, at whichever stage they are (attesting to this, a 16-year old who presented himself as transgender, a situation considered extreme on

this newsgroup, also received appropriate help and support).

The newsgroup's content is embedded in three levels. At the first level – the personal – the individual experiences inner processes, which lead him to reconcile to his orientation as a vital but insufficient condition for coming-out. The second level - the familial – includes processes that help the individual understand his interaction with the family, which he perceives as a significant factor in the process. At the third level – the social – the individual comprehends the relationship between himself as a gay and his social setting. The importance of the three levels (myself, family, society) is that they serve as criteria by which young men assess their progress in the coming-out process, and thus their position as to the gay matter.

In addition, an overall view of the newsgroup's dynamics reveals two contributions at the macro level. They are ostensibly contradictory, but in fact complementary. Above all, the newsgroup is an "island of sanity", precisely because of its ability to detach its members from the homophobic, heterosexual environment – where the young men are subject to constant, inflexible judgment. Moreover, for young gays further along the coming-out process the newsgroup functions as a bridge that connects them with the external GLBT community. In other words, these are two gradual stages: First, the newsgroup is a protective sanctuary allowing them to consolidate their identity as gays, while receiving support from similar people, and only afterward to come out into "the real world".

Nir (1998), who examined gay youths' involvement patterns in newsgroups, regards her respondents as an imagined community (Anderson, 1983), and she distinguishes between the space where it exists and the tangible world of its members. Although the newsgroup initially constitutes an isolated arena, social relations are subsequently formed outside the newsgroup, where the imagined community becomes a tangible one. This is how the newsgroup compensates for the lack of

a central need – a healthy socialization process – and socializes its members into the gay world, where for the first time in their lives, their sexual orientation is not an indication.

The potential contribution of newsgroups for young gays coping with the coming-out process supports research studies pointing out the positive influences of the internet on different minority groups, such as cancer patients (Radin, 2006), low-income families (Mehra et al., 2004), the hearing-impaired (Barak & Sadovsky, 2008), and the physically handicapped (Bowker & Tuffin, 2007).

In the light of these findings and the varying patterns of coming-out of the closet among populations with varying socio-demographic characteristics, such as ethnicity, race, and gender (Grov et al., 2006), there is room for future quantitative research that examines the correlation between internet access, internet usage patterns and scope, and surfers' coming-out experiences. The percentage of internet use is higher among the young, educated, and affluent (Slevin, 2000). A potential correlation between internet-use patterns of gays belonging to different cultural groups, and the coming-out experience (if it occurs, at which age, and so on) might be complex, but certainly interesting and important.

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KEY TERM AND DEFINITIONS

Computer-Mediated Communication: The full range of communicative acts that occur through the use of networked computers. Research in the field of CMC usually deals with the social implications of networked technologies.

Heterosexism: An ideological array of attitudes, acts or institutions that nurture the belief in the superiority of heterosexuality and discriminate none-heterosexual people on that basis.

Homophobia: Antagonism, fear or hatred toward those who love and sexually desire others of the same sex. Homophobic attitudes derive from prejudice and find expression in discrimination, harassment or acts of violence.

Newsgroup: One kind of a networked discussion group. Newsgroup is a multi-participants forum mostly focused on a specific topic of interest. Unlike some other kinds of discussion groups, the newsgroup is asynchronous and usually public.

Stereotype: A common public belief directed toward a social group or "representatives" indi-

viduals. The stereotype is a simplified conception based on a prior assumption in order to reduce complexity, and it may result in generalization and prejudice.

Virtual Community: A network of individuals who maintain social ties in cyber-space. The virtual community is not place-bound and therefore it potentially transcends traditional boundaries such as geographical, racial, political etc.

ENDNOTES

1   The Stonewall Inn was a New York bar for gays that, like similar venues, suffered from frequent police raids accompanied by violence, humiliation and arrests. On the evening of 27 June 1969, the raiders encountered powerful resistance from the guests in the bar, which ended after three days of riots (Alwood, 1996).

2   On 1 August 2009, a gunman opened fire at a gay youth center in Tel Aviv and killed two people. The incident served as a rude awakening to the local community that has been experiencing a very gay-friendly atmosphere.

3   Surfing the internet, it should be noted, is fraught with dangers. This chapter focuses on the ways by which the participation in newsgroups shapes the coming-out process, and therefore it does not elaborate on these dangers. However, this is not to deny the concrete negative aspects of surfing.

4   These are the subjects of the posts on the newsgroup: requests for information on a specific subject; love matters; expressions of confusion and disappointment about the writers' sexual orientation; a direct reference to the newsgroup's centrality in the young people's lives; the coming-out experience; expressions of depression alongside expressions of pride; announcements about newsgroup meetings; and discussions of stereotypes.

5   Under this approach, the discourse-analysis process is principally ethnographic, and requires the researcher to be familiar with the examined environment. In this context, it should be noted that my personal experience with the coming-out process naturally structures the worldview that runs through the textual analysis.

6   Message structure: a chronological number added for convenience and for common language (in parentheses); the message title as written by the surfers (unless no title was written); a colon, followed by the message's content. The emphases as well as all the text in square parentheses are mine. Three dots in square parentheses […] reflect deleted text.

7   From the word "*Ucht'cha*". It is commonly used in Israel's GLBT community as a derisive nickname for feminine flamboyant gays (analogous to "sissy"), and is part of a whole language that has developed in Israel's GLBT community. Israeli gays tend to talk about themselves using the feminine (Hebrew is a gender-biased language). *Ucht'cha* is a corrupted form of the word *Uchti* - Arabic for "my sister".