Virtual youth: non-heterosexual young people's use of the internet to negotiate their identities and socio-sexual relations

# Details

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## Authors

Downing G.

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Internet usage, practices and engagement

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34 non-heterosexual young people aged 16-25 and 7 LGBT youth workers

# Abstract

This article explores the ways that non-heterosexual young people are negotiating their
identities and socio-sexual relations on the internet in the UK. Drawing on the key concepts
of embodiment and performativity, and based on in-depth qualitative research with nonheterosexual
youth and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth workers, this
article investigates the use of social networking websites which have been specifically
designed for LGBT users, and the connections between virtual and material spaces in young
people’s everyday lives. This research reveals that although the internet is an important
medium through which new and existing socio-sexual trajectories are being negotiated, there
is also a more complex and multi-dimensional relationship between young people’s online
and offline realities.

# Outcome

"New online media platforms are altering the ways in which young
people are making increasingly individualised socio-sexual transitions. These take place within
a UK context in which non-heterosexual young people grow up in a predominantly heterosexual
peer culture, and where gay scene venues tend to be located in urban areas. The internet affords
non-heterosexual young people access to information regarding different sexual identities, peer/
professional support and a variety of communication platforms. LGBT social networking websites
were considered particularly important, as they enabled users to interact with each other
in relative safety and anonymity. Participants recognised and embraced the diversity and temporal
fluidity within these online contexts, and had different expectations and nuanced ways of behaving
as they negotiated a number of LGBT networking platforms simultaneously. Although each
website had its own fixed design features, commercial aims and membership rules, young people
often resisted these structures. The participants also understood LGBT networking websites as
online ‘communities’, which were primarily used to establish friendships and support networks.
Young people were more hesitant about using virtual spaces to develop relationships, which continue
to be measured against romantic heterosexual discourses. Furthermore, the socio-sexual
interactions which took place online were embodied. This was demonstrated by young
people’s online performance of their bodies using webcams and profile photography, and
through a range of normative corporeal classifications (re)produced within the design of LGBT
networking websites. The significance that non-heterosexual youth attached to performing the body during virtual
interactions also suggests that online and offline realities are mutually constitutive. Normative discourses
of being body beautiful were significant to the socio-sexual relations and processes of
exclusion within both LGBT online and offline contexts. LGBT youth groups are also using
the internet to supplement the peer/professional support which is provided during face-to-face
meetings, and LGBT networking websites are frequently used to manage offline socio-political
events." (Downing, 2016: 55)