Łukasz Szulc and Alexander Dhoest

The internet and sexual identity formation: Comparing Internet use before and after coming out

Abstract: Even in its early years, the Internet was recognized as a medium with great potential for lesbians, gay men, and bisexual individuals (LGBs), especially for LGB youths struggling with their sexual identity. Yet, Internet research related to coming out tends to focus on particular cases or Internet use before and during coming out. Consequently, as such research emphasizes the opportunities and positive aspects of the Internet for LGBs, it may lead to an overestimation of the importance of sexual identity in terms of LGB Internet use. Therefore, in this paper we explore the LGB-specific Internet use of a broad cross-section of the LGB community both before or during and after coming out. Our quantitative online survey and in-depth interviews show that LGBs use the Internet for LGB-oriented purposes less after coming out than before or during it. The results suggest that sexual identity becomes a less salient topic in terms of everyday Internet use after coming out.

Keywords: Internet use, LGB, gay and lesbian, coming out, Belgium, sexual identity

Łukasz Szulc: lukasz.szulc@ua.ac.be
Alexander Dhoest: alexander.dhoest@ua.ac.be

1 Introduction

Coming out is a pivotal moment in the lives of many lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people (LGBs[1]), at least in contemporary Western cultures. Plummer (1995, p. 86) explains that "in coming out to him or herself, to the gay community and to the wider environment, the lesbian and gay can develop a consistent, integrated sense of a self". He states that since the 1970s we have observed

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1 We use the term 'LGB' throughout for the sake of clarity and consistency, although there are some terminological complications, which we will discuss more extensively later in the article.

a great proliferation of coming out narratives, arguing that "the rise of an advanced form of capitalism and a technological society" (1995, p. 91) has strongly facilitated the emergence of coming-out stories and LGB subjectivities.

In this context of greater social visibility of LGBs, some communication scholars have become interested in the role of mass media in the formation of LGB identities. Early studies usually focused on the representation of LGBs in mass media. Gross and Woods (1999a), in the introduction to one of the first volumes on LGBs and the media, concluded that LGBs in the United States once shared a common fate: "media invisibility, stereotyping, and confinement in restricted secondary roles" (p. 4). They called for not only an increase, but also for more positive representations of LGBs in popular culture so that the individuals discovering or developing their non-heterosexual identities would be able to know that they are not alone and have access to positive role models.

More recent studies point to the increasing visibility of LGBs in Western mass media (e.g., Barnhurst, 2007; Dhoest and Simons, 2012; Edwards, 2010). Walters (2001) argues that "the love that dare not speak its name became the love that would not shut up" (p. 29 in Gamson, 2004, p. 339); Ross (2012) notes that coming-out storylines are "now almost de rigueur of popular culture" (p. xx). At the same time, other scholars (Gamson, 2004; Sender, 2012) have become increasingly suspicious about the celebration of increased LGB media visibility. Gross (2007, p. 267), for example, seems to be disappointed with recent developments: "Despite the dramatic increase in the public visibility of gays found in nearly all domains of public culture, most lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youths still find themselves isolated and vulnerable." He nevertheless adds that "for these teenagers, the internet is a godsend, and thousands are using computer networks to declare their homosexuality, meet, and seek support from other gay youths" (2007, p. 267).

In its early years the Internet was indeed heralded as a source of great opportunity for LGBs, particularly for LGB youth struggling with their sexual identity. Such an approach is important to counter the practice of demonization of the Internet with regards to youth sexuality. In her review of the literature on the Internet's impact on sexuality, Döring (2009, p. 1098) concludes that studies mostly emphasize risks, including the harm online pornography can represent for children and adolescents as well as the sexual harassment and abuse of minors. Yet, the overwhelming focus existing scholarship places on LGB youths and their development of sexuality online may lead to an overestimation of the importance of the Internet for LGBs. Gray (2009) suggests an alternative approach, which shifts the focus from the medium to the people. She encourages us to ask: "What role do media engagements play in people's

lives? When do they turn to media and when is it expendable background noise?" (p. 1168).

Drawing on Gray's perspective, in this paper we explore the LGB-specific Internet usage in the LGB community in Flanders, the northern Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Rather than focusing only on the role of the Internet during the period of coming out and identity formation, we also include the period afterwards, thereby taking into consideration that coming out is important life event structuring Internet use. Moreover, rather than focusing solely on youths or particular subgroups, we discuss the Internet use of a broad cross-section of the population, including older LGBs. Consequently, our main research questions are: How much and for which purposes is the Internet used in relation to issues of sexual identity formation? And what are the differences in LGB Internet use before or during and after coming out? We believe that such an approach will allow us to provide a broader, more balanced, and more precise picture of the specific role of the Internet for the formation of LGB identities.

2 Coming out and the Internet

In academic literature, the Internet is generally considered to be a facilitator of the coming-out process. Consequently, the focus has predominantly been on positive aspects and advantages the Internet has for sexual minorities. For one, scholars point to the even greater proliferation of coming-out stories online, also in new forms such as vlogging (Alexander and Losh, 2010), and more generally to the immense amount of *LGB-related information* that is more readily accessed online. Furthermore, the Internet is recognized as a safe place to engage in *social interactions* with like-minded people and thus provides a promising support network for LGBs (Drushel, 2010). Additionally, Barnhurst (2007, p. 2) writes that "new technology promises to free everyone, but especially queer youths, from the shackles of geography, especially in rural and prejudiced places"; Alexander et al. (2004) discuss the great potential of the Internet for non-mainstream LGBs, for example, people who are "older, darker, fatter" or HIV-positive. Various researchers have investigated other online spaces devoted to specific LGB sub-communities, such as barebackers (Mowlabocus, 2010), gay men who possess and/or are attracted to non-normative bodies (Campbell, 2004), and LGBs who are into BDSM (from BDDSSM: Bondage and Discipline, Domination and Submission, Sadism and Masochism; Rambukkana, 2007). Yet, some authors also criticize different normative constraints of the usually general-interest LGB spaces on the Internet, particularly with regard to racism (Gosine, 2007; Lee, 2007) and sexism (Bromseth and Sundén, 2011).

Munt, Bassett, and O'Riordan (2002, p. 136) conceptualize the Internet as "a facilitatory space [which] allows the development of social identities that might otherwise be more constrained". The Internet then gets to be regarded as a testing ground or a "social laboratory" (Turkle, 1995) where LGBs or questioning youth may *try out new sexual identities* (see also Alexander et al., 2004; Boellstorff, 2008; Egan, 2000). Some authors refer to their own experiences to explain how the Internet helped them to discover or develop their stable non-heterosexual identities (Saffista in Alexander et al., 2004; Walsh, 1999). Others point rather to the queer possibilities of playing with sexuality and gender, pushing the boundaries of identities and discovering new desires online. For example, Driver (2007, p. 192) argues that "it is online that young people find ways to safely and creatively explore their queer differences as lesbian and bisexual girls, transyouth, genderqueers, and birls" (see also Alexander in Alexander et al., 2004). There is also evidence that the Internet facilitates earlier coming out, both online and offline (Gross, 2007; McKenna and Bargh, 1998).

Additionally, Braquet and Mehra (2006) point out that Internet use for LGB-specific purposes may depend on the different stages of coming out a particular person is going through. Referring to the three main stages of coming out (Cass, 1979), they argue that in the initial stages LGBs tend to "use the internet for exploring the realities of sexual orientation or gender identity issues". During the later stages, LGBs often "share the information and experience they had gained with others via the internet". In the final stages, LGBs search for new kinds of information "on topics which would allow them to fully integrate their sexual orientation and gender identity with all other parts and dimensions of their lives", such as health, legal, and cultural information (Braquet and Mehra, 2006, pp. 3–4). While such an approach provides a more complex image of LGB-specific Internet use, as is the case in other studies, it still focuses largely on Internet use before or during coming out.

A relatively strong sense of *anonymity* online is usually recognized as the key Internet feature that makes the medium particularly well suited for the coming-out process (Correll, 1995; McKenna and Bargh, 1998; Mehra et al., 2004; Owens, 1998). Drawing on Rheingold's (1993) concept of cyberspace as a "third space" – an informal public space, distinct from home and work – Woodland (2000) argues that "cyberspace has become a distinctive kind of "third" place for many gay and lesbian people ... combining the connected sociality of public space with the anonymity of the closet" (p. 418). Furthermore, Driver (2007) claims that the main advantage of the Internet for sexual minorities lies not in anonymity itself but in the possibility of "moving back and forth between anonymity and self-disclosure ... [which] creates flexible spaces for young people to explore the very process of representing themselves as queer" (p. 172).

Additionally, as another advantage of the Internet for sexual minorities Gray (2009) emphasizes the *authenticity* of online LGB representations as compared to fictional images of other popular media, especially TV. Mitra (2004, p. 506) also investigates the concept of authenticity online in relation to underrepresented social groups and stresses that web content is more authentic when it is not only *about* a specific minority group but also *created by* the group. Authors exploring LGB cyberspaces emphasize that the Internet makes it much easier for LGBs to self-represent themselves (see for example, Alexander, 2002 or Gudelunas, 2012). The latter notes that "for the younger gay men and lesbians who oftentimes created their own self-representations online through video blogs, websites, and social media platforms, the question of representation by others was seen as an insignificant one" (p. 13).

Only a few authors write about possible negative effects of the Internet with respect to the coming-out process. Discussing the proliferation of positive representations of LGBs online, Sender (2012, p. 209) remains rather skeptical of what she calls "an ideological investment in progress", which suggests that "ever newer media will produce greater, more accurate representations and these representations will, in turn, produce happier, more socially integrated gay people" (see also Gamson, 2004). Barnhurst (2007, p. 15) writes about possible material consequences of the earlier coming out, in particular for dependent youths, and adds that coming out entails "the dual promise of freedom and risks of exposure". Similarly, while Alexander and Losh (2010, p. 48) point to the great potential of coming-out videos posted on YouTube, they also caution those videos "elicit heteronormative responses that can be damaging, and that might cause hosts to censor the kind of information disseminated on their servers, and content-creators to remove such videos from their channels".

Such negative voices do however constitute a minority. Overall, Internet studies on coming out focus on Internet use by LGB youth before and during coming out and, consequently, emphasize the opportunities and positive aspects of the Internet for LGBs. Furthermore, most studies tend to investigate particular cases, such as Internet use by particular groups with a strong online presence (e.g., Alexander, 2002; Alexander and Losh, 2010; Driver, 2007) or particular websites and applications (e.g., Gaydar: Mowlabocus, 2010; Gay.com: Gosine, 2007; Internet Relay Chats: Campbell, 2004). Although these more focused studies are highly valuable, as they provide us with deep insights into specific LGB practices online, their prevalence may have the side effect of creating the misguided impression that all LGBs are heavy users of LGB-related online services and therefore may overestimate the importance of sexual identity in the ways LGBs use the Internet. What we miss is a more general sense of the broad range of Internet use across a broad cross-section of the LGB

population. Therefore, in this paper we decided not to focus on particular cases, but rather to take a step back and ask a large and varied sample about a broad range of their LGB-specific Internet usage before or during and after coming out. Our aim is to investigate coming out as a particular – if not one-dimensional[2] – moment that structures LGB Internet use.

3 Methodology and terminology

Although many scholars recognize qualitative methods as better suited to study the complexities of sexuality in social science research (Browne and Nash, 2010; Gamson, 2000), we think quantitative insights into the prevalence of certain Internet use are also needed. Therefore, we decided to combine quantitative and qualitative methods. In a first, exploratory stage, we used an online survey to chart general patterns in media use, including (but not limited to) Internet use. We used an online survey because it is a low-threshold, anonymous, and familiar method of quickly reaching a large group of LGB respondents (Dewaele, 2008). In a second, qualitative stage we deepened these insights using in-depth semi-structured interviews.

Particularly for the quantitative stage where a representative sample is important for the findings to be generalizable, we were confronted with a problem recurrent in LGB research. As sexual orientation is usually not included in official statistics, it is impossible to obtain large representative samples of LGBs (Dewaele, Cox, van den Berghe, and Vincke, 2006). Younger, higher educated, white, upper-middle class, urban, gay men are the easiest group to reach. Sandfort (2000) indicates that most research uses convenience samples, recruited through magazines, groups and organizations, meeting places, and snowball sampling. This strategy, in combination with self-selection by respondents, leads to the overrepresentation of the previously mentioned groups. One solution, also proposed by Dewaele et al. (2006), is the use of diverse recruiting channels, not restricted to gay associations or the gay scene. The invitation to participate in our online survey was advertised through 17 different LGB associations (websites, online newsletters and forums) as well as social network sites, such as Facebook and Netlog. In addition to these online resources, other media were also used to avoid the overrepresentation of respondents who are very active on the Internet.

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2 Although authors such as Plummer (1995) or Sedgwick (1990) point out that coming out is usually a multi-layered and long-term process, in this paper we adopt the perspective of our respondents, who tend to perceive coming out as a particular act at a specific point in time.

This recruiting strategy led to a large sample of 761 respondents. Not surprisingly, a large majority (97.5 %) of the participants had already come out to at least one person. While this is a common tendency in LGB research, it is nevertheless something we should keep in mind when discussing the findings. Our sample was quite balanced in terms of gender (57 % male, 43 % female) and age: 43 % of the respondents were 30 or older at the time of research in 2010. We use the 30-year-threshold, as the group under 30 was born after 1980 and therefore had access to the Internet during high school at the latest. 74 % of our respondents had a higher education degree or were pursuing one at the time of the survey, confirming the tendency that the higher educated tend to be overrepresented in LGB research.

As there is very little existing quantitative research in the field of LGB media use, our survey was meant as an exploratory baseline study. In addition to socio-demographic questions and some questions on LGB identification and coming out, the majority of the questions measured the frequency of and preferences for different media usages. For the Internet, the frequency of different applications and uses was measured (e.g., searching for information, sending e-mail, watching films or listening to music, using social network sites, etc.). More relevant to this paper were the questions asking about the search for LGB-specific content and contacts online, using a four-point scale from "never or hardly ever" to "very often". As this set of questions was asked twice, once about current use and once about the period before and during coming out, this allowed us to look for significant differences between the time periods.

For the qualitative follow-up, we used in-depth interviews to expand on those themes, with a particular focus on coming out. As we worked with multiple interviewers, the interviews were semi-structured to ensure comparability. We started with a few broad exploratory questions, such as "Do you visit LGB-related websites?" (and if so, "Which ones and how often?"); "What do you look for on the Internet?" (further asking about information, social contacts, and dating); and "What are the advantages of the Internet in comparison to other media?" The sample for the in-depth interviews comprised 60 respondents who were selected from a group of survey participants who indicated their willingness to take part in further research. The selection was based on gender and age and aimed for a balanced stratified sample of men and women under and above 30 years of age. 31 men (16 under 30) and 29 women (18 under 30) were interviewed. As in the quantitative sample – as well as with regard to most LGB research – respondents with a higher education or currently pursuing a post-secondary degree were overrepresented (52 respondents). For the analysis we used the Atlas.ti software to code answers referring to the different Internet uses and advantages as indicated in the literature review.

Regarding the terminology, which is a particularly delicate and divisive issue in research on sexual minorities, we decided to use the abbreviation LGB. This is an English equivalent of the Flemish neologism "holebi" (for "homo, lesbisch en biseksueel", plural "holebi's"), which is most commonly used in Flanders with reference to sexual minorities. Additionally, the majority of our respondents are also most comfortable with the term and its constituents. In the online survey, on a seven-point scale of sexual identity, a large majority of the sample identifies as exclusively (65.4 %) or predominantly (24.3 %) gay or lesbian; the remaining 10.2 % considers themselves as bisexual (6 %) or rather bisexual (4.2 %). Only 27 respondents choose the open option "other", and although they get the opportunity, these respondents do not elaborate what "other" means to them.

This acceptance of sexual labels is confirmed in the interviews, where few respondents explicitly distance themselves from the current labels. When asked what they think about the term "holebi", most agree that it is a good, positive, and inclusive term. The respondents indicate that while they would generally use one of the group labels (gay, lesbian, bisexual) to describe themselves, they find "holebi" an acceptable umbrella term. The term "queer", which is more common in current academic research, is not used at all and has negative connotations (of exaggerated effeminacy) for the few respondents who are familiar with the term, which is in line with Eeckhout's (2011) observation about the lack of popularity of queer concepts in Flanders. Some interviewees, however, question the use of labels, as they do not want to be put in a box defining them solely according to their sexuality.

4 Comparing LGB Internet use before and after coming out

Our quantitative findings confirm the importance of the Internet in the lives of LGB respondents, with 87.7 % using it daily to read or send e-mail, 73.1 % to search for information, and 60.1 % to visit social network sites. Turning to LGB-specific Internet use, at the time of research, 40.4 % of the respondents use the Internet regularly or very often to seek information about LGB sexuality, 37.8 % to visit LGB association websites, 33.2 % to seek contact with other LGBs, and 16.1 % to seek a partner (see Table 1). Clearly, looking for *information* and *social interaction* are the two main reasons for LGB-specific Internet use, which is in line with the literature discussed above.

Table 1: LGB-specific Internet use ("regularly" or "very often") by Flemish LGBs[3].

	Before and during coming out	After coming out
Seeking information about LGB sexuality on the net	49.9 %	40.4 %
Visiting LGB association websites	44.1 %	37.8 %
Seeking contact with other LGBs	42.6 %	33.2 %
Seeking a partner	23.7 %	16.1 %

Two important specifications should be mentioned. First, it is essential to add that we did not explicitly ask about purely sexual uses of the Internet (such as watching porn or looking for sexual encounters), as we considered this to be a delicate topic for such a widely distributed and freely accessible survey. Nevertheless, sexual content is and always has been an important driving force for the use and proliferation of the Internet, also for LGBs (see, e.g., Gross and Woods, 1999b). Second, an important distinction should be made: These LGB-specific uses are particularly important before and during coming out. Although most of our respondents had already come out at the time of the interview, we also asked them about their Internet use before or during coming out, and the figures for this period are consistently and significantly higher (with the exception of 'visiting LGB association websites').[3]

After compiling and comparing these frequencies, further analysis revealed significant age differences. LGB-specific use of the Internet before and during coming out is particularly important for the group under 30, which may be partly explained by their earlier exposure to the Internet during adolescence. More so than the older group, they used the Internet to seek LGB information (Chi square 87.501, *df* 3, $p < 0.005$), to visit LGB websites (Chi square 53.472, *df* 3, $p < 0.005$), to seek social contacts with other LGBs (Chi square 52.037, *df* 3, $p < 0.005$), and to seek a partner (Chi square 15.217, *df* 3, $p < 0.005$). Even after coming out the younger group still uses the Internet significantly more for

3 For the sake of clarity, the answers to eight items are compiled in this table, with each cell containing the percentage of respondents answering 'regularly' or 'very often' on a four-point scale, the two remaining options being '(almost) never' and 'from time to time'. Significance was tested using the paired samples *t*-test. Three pairs of means were significantly higher before and during coming out: seeking information ($t(650) = 3.20$, $p < 001$), seeking social contact ($t(650) = 3.19$, $p < 001$) and seeking a partner ($t(650) = 5.02$, $p < 001$). Respondents also visited association websites more prior to coming out, albeit not to a significant extent ($t(650) = 1.84$, $p = .067$).

social contacts (Chi square 12.390, *df* 3, *p* < 0.05). This is in line with the results of Gudelunas (2012), who found similar age-related differences, although he used different age demarcations.

The qualitative in-depth interviews allowed us to explore these patterns more deeply. The interviews clearly confirm the greater importance of the Internet for LGBs *before and during coming out* than afterwards. They also help us to better understand the particular role of the Internet during this process. In particular, younger interviewees point out that they sought *LGB-related information* online more when they were struggling with their sexual identity. For instance, Kristien (21), when asked if she used to look for LGB-oriented information online, answers: "Yes, but that was mostly earlier, when you are looking for information because you are discovering yourself. At that time you don't know about anything and then you find information online so you know, 'OK, this is possible and this is good'"[4] This quote is typical of the first stage of coming out as described by Braquet and Mehra (2006), when LGBs use the Internet for exploring issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. Similarly, Steven (20) admits he used to visit porn websites before coming out to obtain sexual information:

> I did it when I was younger, because then you don't know it yet, you haven't experienced it yourself, and all the things that are possible. So in fact I've learnt how to have gay sex through the Internet (...) You don't learn how to give a blowjob during sexual education classes and you don't see that sort of thing on television.

In addition to the easy access to LGB-related information online, participants emphasize the advantage of the Internet in establishing *social interactions* with other LGB individuals while still in the closet. They say having online LGB friends is useful "when you're still young and you can't go out that much and you don't know other LGBs" (Kristien, 21) and "just to be able to talk to somebody who is experiencing the same things" (Carine, 21). The Internet therefore provides an important support network for closeted LGBs. Patrick (19) recollects his first visits to LGB websites:

> When I was still looking for who I am sexually, I wanted to know other people's opinions. (...) That was at a time when I had many doubts and wanted to classify myself, to put myself into a box, so to speak. I stopped doing that later on.

These results confirm the findings of other studies in the field which emphasize the significant, positive role of the Internet in the development of LGB identity.

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4 All quotes are literal translations by the authors. We identified the respondents by age, but for reasons of anonymity, we assigned them nicknames.

In particular, they confirm the use of the Internet in the second stage of coming out, as distinguished by Braquet and Mehra (2006), which is about sharing information and experiences online.

Most of our interviewees, particularly those under 30, also mention the *anonymous* character of Internet communication as especially important to them (and others) before and during coming out. Among the most-quoted reasons are the possibilities to search information on homo- or bisexuality in private as well as the possibility to ask questions and seek advice anonymously. For instance, Kevin (20) discusses the website of the Flemish platform for younger LGBs Wel Jong Niet Hetero:

> People who feel they are gay or who want to come out but don't really know how to do it, they can anonymously ask questions there or post stuff on forums. Then everybody responds saying: "You can do it this way or that, and maybe you should also try this …" So I do think it's important that there are ways to stay anonymous.

Again, this is in line with the findings of other researchers who demonstrate that the strong sense of anonymity online makes the Internet a safe space for LGBs to explore their sexual identities (Correll, 1995; McKenna and Bargh, 1998; Mehra et al., 2004; Owens, 1998; Woodland, 2000).

While all of the findings discussed above are in line with the existing literature, our interviews confirm the survey finding that Internet use and its advantages are most salient before and during coming out. Indeed, (Flemish) LGBs use the Internet for LGB-oriented purposes less *after they come out*. This is particularly true for the younger respondents, who tend to look less for *LGB-related information*. For instance, when asked if she visits LGB websites, Kristel (21) explains:

> Yes, from time to time I visit the website of Enig Verschil [a website for LGB youth in Antwerp] to find out if there are interesting activities on the agenda. (…) But in general, I don't really look for information about LGBs.

Similarly, Koen (26) states: "In fact, I don't visit all that many LGB websites. Of course, I have a number of contacts on MSN, but I don't really actively search for new LGB websites."

Respondents from the older group more often state that they look for LGB-related information online but are now less interested in general topics about homo- or bisexuality. Instead, they look for more specific information, often related to international LGB solidarity, for example, on the "big changes which have happened in the gay world" (Jan, 30). This is especially true for those involved in LGB activism, regardless of age. Manon (46), who used to be the president of an LGB association, explains:

> I often go to gaynews.uk and gk.nl. I also regularly visit the website of ILGA [International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association] because they have so much news. I get the monthly newsletter from ILGA, which contains information from all around Europe, often about issues like the recognition of adoption, marriage and civil partnership.

Daniel (27) also states that he looks for LGB-related information mainly because he is an active member of LGB associations in Flanders: "I look for information from the Holebihuis [LGB House] in Leuven, especially when there is a particular activity or when I have to provide some information to somebody."

Additionally, some of those respondents also indicate the desire to share their knowledge with other LGBs and thus create more *authentic representations* of LGBs online, echoing the observations made by Mitra (2004). Iris (68), for instance, explains her motivations for founding a Flemish group and a website for older lesbians:

> When you get older, you don't count any more. It's getting better but there's still too little information about it. (...) Our generation and the one before, we lived at a time when sexuality wasn't discussed, let alone homosexuality, it was seen as something dirty.

After coming out, online *social interaction with LGBs* also became less intensive and less important to many of our interviewees. For example, when asked if he uses online dating sites, Steven (20) answers:

> No. I have visited some in the past, one site specifically for gays and one for straight people but there were also some gay people there. But that was just to test, it's not really a good way to find someone.

Of course, after coming out many of our respondents still interact with other LGBs online but, in many cases, the non-heterosexual identity of others ceases to play an important role in such interactions. Manon (46) explains that, to her, it is nice to have LGB friends online "because sometimes they send different things than other people, but this is more because they're, for instance, artistic people who happen to be gay or lesbian". In particular, younger respondents tend to emphasize that the sexual orientation of their friends is now no longer important. Kristel (21) says: "I do have some LGB friends online, but I'm equally satisfied with my straight friends. After all, it's all about having fun. Your sexual orientation really doesn't matter in that respect." Similarly, Patrick (19) explains:

> I do know some LGBs but they don't constitute such a large percentage of my friends. I think that up to 80 percent or more of my friends are straight male and female friends. The LGBs I know online aren't those who hang around together. They are people I met

> by accident, for instance at a party. So it's not like I make a conscious decision to go out and meet gay people.

One exception is Carine (21). While she still uses the Internet to meet new LGBs, her aim is to also meet them offline:

> I've met my best friend there [on the Internet]. I don't use the Internet that much for dating sites, but I do use it to meet new people. And also because I belong to the Flamingo's [LGB student association in Antwerp], it is very useful to meet people online who are coming to Antwerp or who are already here but still look for different clubs they could belong to.

In general, our respondents tend to see exclusively online social contacts, whether friends or dates, in a negative light. They often make a clear distinction between 'virtual' and 'real' friends, as in the following quotes: "I have enough real friends" (Kristien, 21), "I need friends that I can see and touch" (Jan, 30). Therefore, after coming out, they generally prefer to interact online with LGBs they already know offline or may meet offline in the near future. Braquet and Mehra (2006) reach similar conclusions, writing that for their participants, US university students, the Internet seems to be "a means to an end, in that the internet was used as a tool to discover venues, events, and organizations that would enable them to meet and connect with people in face-to-face situations" (p. 5).

The distinction between Internet use prior to the coming-out process and afterwards also proves to be significant in relation to the sense of *anonymity online*. After discovering, accepting, and revealing (at least to some) their sexual orientation, most of our interviewees do not see anonymity online as the key feature of the Internet: "It plays absolutely no role for me, because I'm openly gay there [on the internet]. In your virtual life you have to be who you really are, I think" (Steven, 20). Similarly, Kristel (21) says: "If anonymity was no longer possible on the Internet, it wouldn't be a big deal, because, after all, there isn't anything that I look for online which I'm ashamed of or which other people can't find out." Moreover, some participants, when asked about online anonymity, do not automatically connect it with its specific advantages for LGBs. Instead, they understand it more in terms of privacy, particularly while revealing personal information online: "Well, I have two names [online], my own one and a pseudonym, and I use the pseudonym when, for example, I make a bid for a coffee machine. Or when I upload my photos on Picasa" (Manon, 46).

Yet, we should be careful not to overgeneralize these findings. Some of our interviewees state that anonymity is an important feature, even after their com-

ing out. This is especially the case with respect to online dating. Because they feel anonymous online, some interviewed LGBs find online communication "more personal", "more open", and "less restrictive", as illustrated in the example: "I think I'm more open online. I can't say why that is, but you restrain yourself less. Maybe you're more anonymous, though you're more personal. But you don't have the feeling that you're sitting face to face" (Daniel, 27). Additionally, our interviewees mention the lower level of social surveillance online, which is especially appreciated by the older group of respondents:

> When I came out of the closet 20 years ago and I wanted to go out somewhere, I had to go to a gay bar. You checked if no one saw you entering, but they could still see you when you were leaving. Now, it's all through the computer and the Internet. (...) [On the Internet], the limits are reduced, I think. You sit at home. Nobody sees you or knows you. You can use a nickname. You actually do what you want. (Bart, 40)

Overall, while there is some continuity between Internet use before and after coming out, LGB-specific content and use seem to become less important after coming out. This is further supported by our respondents' answers to the question about the advantages of the Internet for LGBs. Tellingly, the majority of our participants emphasize general, not LGB-specific, advantages of the medium, such as quick and easy access to resources, large amounts of up-to-date information, and convenience of use ("alone", "at home", "at night"). After coming out, their sexual identity seems to become less salient in relation to Internet use, particularly for the group under 30. This is supported by the fact that some interviewees prefer not to discuss the advantages of the Internet with exclusive reference to LGBs, which suggests they do not think about their Internet use in terms of their sexuality:

> Q: Do you think it is more attractive for LGBs to look for information on the Internet than in a magazine?
> A: I think you can't look only at LGBs but also at straight individuals, as people have become lazy and prefer to search for information on the computer rather than first search for a magazine and then start reading. (Kevin, 20)

> Q: Do you often search for LGB-related content in new media?
> A: It happens from time to time when I use Wikipedia. Sometimes I want to read more specific articles there, but these are not only on LGBs but on all possible technical and nontechnical topics. I also use Wikipedia for my work. (Koen, 26)

Again, contrary to previous LGB Internet research, which focused so strongly on specific LGB-related uses that it seemed to imply that sexual identity was continuously and equally salient for Internet use among LGBs, our research suggests that sexual identification becomes more salient before and during coming out or, if after coming out, only in certain instances and contexts.

5 Conclusions and limitations

This paper focuses on coming out as an important dimension of LGB Internet use, extending the scope of previous research by also considering the period after coming out and by including a broad and varied sample of respondents, including older LGBs. In particular, we build on Braquet and Mehra's (2006) argument regarding differentiated LGB Internet use at different stages of coming out by investigating LGB Internet use after coming out as well. Our participants attest that although they often looked for LGB-related information and social contacts with other LGBs before and during coming out, these activities have become a less important part of their Internet use after coming out. For this reason, some of them refrain from talking about their Internet use through the unique perspective of sexual orientation.

In particular for younger LGBs, the Internet proves to have played an important role in the process of discovering or developing their LGB identity. Our participants indicate that before and during coming out they used the Internet to find general information about topics such as homo- and bisexuality or gay sex as well as to contact other LGBs whom they could consult for advice or share their experiences with them. Our research also confirms that the sense of anonymity online significantly facilitates the formation of LGB identity. At the same time, most of our participants state that they use the Internet less for LGB-specific purposes after coming out. Young participants in particular say they do not look for any, or much, LGB-related information after coming out. Older interviewees and those involved in LGB activism still tend to search for LGB-related information, but this is no longer general information about homo- or bisexuality, but rather more specific information on LGBs' social, legal or cultural situations. After coming out, online interactions with other LGBs also tend to be less important for our participants and, preferably, they are complementary to offline contacts. Similarly, a relatively high sense of anonymity online, often recognized as the key Internet feature for LGBs, proves to be much less important for the majority of our participants after coming out (with some exceptions, most significantly in the case of online dating).

Despite the clarity of these findings, our research also has its limitations. First, as we decided to focus on the importance of coming out in the broad range of LGB Internet use, we were forced to neglect other (often equally important, though more often addressed in the scholarly literature) dimensions of difference such as gender. For the same reason, we did not inquire into specific Internet usages, most importantly sexual ones. Second, it is important to acknowledge the context of our study. In Flanders, LGBs enjoy a relatively high level of acceptance which probably makes the difference between LGB Internet

use before or during and after coming out more evident. In more hostile contexts, coming out may be much more difficult, may occur much later in life, or not at all. Consequently, the distinction between LGB Internet use before and during coming out and afterwards may be less clear in those contexts, and anonymity online may continue to play an equally important role even after coming out. In any case, our study encourages future researchers to qualify their findings about LGB Internet use, particularly with regard to use before or during and after coming out. Age should also be taken into account. Lastly, one must be careful not to overestimate the importance of sexual identification for LGB Internet use. Research in less LGB-friendly contexts, although more difficult to execute, may be especially useful for investigating the importance of the Internet and other media as means to explore and express sexual identifications.

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Bionotes

Łukasz Szulc is a PhD student at the Department of Communication Studies, University of Antwerp, Belgium.

Alexander Dhoest is Associate Professor at the Department of Communication Studies, University of Antwerp, Belgium.

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