Maya Hillis

Mrs. Wilkinson, AP English Language and Composition

November 4, 2016

The Internet: A Gay Revolution

The internet was invented in 1983 by the military in order to securely communicate over long distances and spread information. This initial intent has since changed to create a unique culture and provide a multitude of uses beginning with the invention of the World Wide Web by Tim Berners-Lee in 1990 that has spread to benefit an array of communities and individuals. Aside from the possibility for online sexual harassment and bullying, the progression of the internet has provided education, support, and representation leading to increased wellbeing to individuals in the LGBT+ community.

Sexual harassment is an issue in all areas of society. It occurs in the workplace, public arenas, online settings, and even in the home, and this issue strongly affects the LGBT+ community. For instance, a student survey conducted by the Harris institute and other child health institutions found that 32% of the LGBT+ youth have admitted to being sexually harassed online. Though additionally, this survey found that 86% have been harassed at schools (Marra). Most of the sexual harassment threats lay offline and extend online through real world connections where the internet is being used as a tool by the harasser. Though online sexual harassment is a major problem within the community, the internet has definitely helped more than it has hurt it.

One of the most important ways the internet has improved the wellbeing of the LGBT+ community is by providing sex education information that may not be available in traditional classroom settings. The LGBT+ community is disproportionately affected by negative sexual

health. HIV and Syphilis are both sexually transmitted diseases that have been prominent in the community, so it is vital for young members of the community to be informed about safe sex (Slater). Since many schools neglect to discuss LGBT+ safe-sex, this leaves these children uneducated and confused in regards to their needs. Furthermore, if non-vaginal sex is discussed in schools, it is often spoken of in a negative light, which leads youths with needs to look elsewhere for information (Ybarra). In a mass survey conducted by the Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire and partners, it was found that 81% of the LGBT+ youth searched for medical and health information on the internet compared to only 46% of non-LGBT+ youths (Marra). The internet has provided a way for youths in failing schools or hostile environments a method to seek out and learn about safe-sex without having to draw special attention to themselves.

Yet, information found through online research can often be intimidating, confusing, uninformative, or incorrect. This is why sex-education in schools needs to be more inclusive so this method of searching does not need to be done independently and in private. It would be ideal to include relevant LGBT+ health information in all public schools, though unfortunately incorporating this information in schools is troublesome in conservative areas of the United States. So, until then, the internet has served as a safety net for LGBT+ individuals searching for health information.

Along with LGBT+ sexual education in health classes, discussion of sexualities are also generally absent from conversation. Adolescence is a confusing time for development and self-discovery, and in a heteronormative world, members of the LGBT+ community can become even more lost in this time than non-LGBT+ youths (Kaufman). Sexuality is typically not discussed in public or private school settings and, in some cases, it is discussed negatively

(Slater). Confusion due to lack of education on various sexualities and identities can be detrimental to development (Kaufman). Contrasted to non-LGBT+ youth, LGBT+ youth has been strongly effected by information on sexuality and sexual attraction through web sources. A survey conducted by the Harris Institute and other organizations focused on child health and human development has shown that 62% of LGBT+ youth have searched online for sexuality based information versus the 12% of non-LGBT+ youths (Marra). The internet has provided resources for youths to anonymously discuss and question sexuality in order to find confirmation for any introspective confusion.

However, the internet provides a vast amount of sources that can lead the searcher to confusion, especially when presented with conflicting information. This overwhelming network may be counterproductive to youths and the alternative void of information is disadvantageous. It would be better to integrate sexuality based information into health classes, but until this can be achieved, the internet serves as an adequate alternative.

Aside from sexual orientation-based health information, the internet has provided a safe place for youths of the transgender community to anonymously search for medical options without drawing attention and scrutiny. Many of these medical aspects revolve around curing gender dysphoria, which is the condition in which one's emotional and psychological gender identity differs from the biological sex assigned at birth (Harding). This includes providing options for surgical, hormonal, and behavioral treatments to help settle individuals into the gender they identify with. One way the internet has assisted in this process is through connective groups like Susan's Place. This self-organized group focuses on providing reliable resources and support to the transgender community. One way they assist is through providing speech videos via YouTube to counsel individuals in speech therapy based on their gender identity. In stories

like that of Jen, a transgender female, it is apparent the effect that the internet can have on members of the transgender youth. Jen explained as a participant in a study that when she was transitioning she "did it all online." She utilized Suzan's Place where she says she learned about gender language, hormone treatments, and surgery (Cavalcante). Many other transgender individuals have reaped the benefits the internet provides for transgender information and resources.

Conversely, this method of almost self-counselling is not always effective for settling individuals. It does not provide the face-to-face benefits of in person counselling that can be imperative in settling transgender youths into the mannerisms of their gender identity. The internet is not an adequate substitute for this form of counseling. However, since some doctors and health information sites often fail to provide information on where to find transgender settlement counseling and in some cases shame them for looking, the internet has provided a network of resources to help these kids find the type of counseling they may be looking for in their area.

Though education is an important aspect in LGBT+ lives, a debatably more important need is that of support from peers and family members. Since religious beliefs and societal conformities may inhibit the support needed for individual health, the internet has provided networking options for support to both individuals and the community as a whole.

The internet has provided connectivity and opportunity for social relations within the LGBT+ community. Correspondingly, individuals struggling with inner turmoil in relation to their familial and peer-based conflicts may look for support through the internet rather than confronting loved ones in person. Online, individuals are able to be more open about sexuality which may result in building friendships and limiting isolation. The internet blurs boundaries

between mass groups and provides a relatively controlled social environment that can be logged in and out of with ease (Bryan). This means that declaring personal thoughts on the internet feels private, even with the knowledge that millions of other users could see it, due to anonymity, so upon getting a response there is no sense of confrontation. This type of environment is less intimidating to individuals who are insecure about their orientations and identities but ready to "speak up" about their personal issues. People who are not out offline can be online with ease, leading to a better sense of belonging and place.

Yet, there can be downsides to focusing on online relationships in favor of offline ones. Psychologists like Kenneth Gergen present the importance of physical presence, stressing that the internet causes people to focus too heavily on virtual presence and not on the people in our physical location (Baym). This can lead to the assumption that internet friendships do not provide the same level of connection and personal involvement real world relationships can provide. However, as studies in ostracism and its effects have suggested, internet relations reduce the effects of social isolation regardless of physical interaction (Blascovich and Bailenson). Individuals in the LGBT+ community specifically struggle with societal exclusion and the connectivity the internet provides can dramatically reduce an individual's sense of isolation.

Additionally, it is easier to find acceptance online; YouTubers such as Tyler Oakley have displayed this exact concept. By being an activist for the LGBT+ cause, he claims "…I want to do this for all people! Not just LGBT+, but aromantic, asexual, pansexual – all these different identities! The internet has opened up new avenues of discussion for younger people, and this makes sure that the organizations and charities pay attention and listen to them" (Wells). Oakley has used social media to amplify his and many voices. In this case and many others, social media has provided a way for members to anonymously and safely discuss their struggles. Helping

LGBT+ members find others brings a level of confirmation and support through day-to-day issues and discrimination which is important to the life and wellbeing of LGBT+ individuals.

Also, many individuals living in areas with little acceptance and who deal with excessive amounts of discrimination are incredibly likely to lose hope in the future. The internet has provided a way for others who have overcome this hate to share their story of happiness and success. Websites and online organizations like It Gets Better, a group founded by LGBT+ members to organize a collection of YouTube video posts, focuses on sharing these types of success stories, brings positivity to the overall community and further to the individuals within it.

This forum-based setting, unfortunately, can provide an opportunity for more hate and scrutiny. 26% LGBT+ youths have been bullied online for sexual orientation or gender identity and more LGBT+ youths have report being harassed online than non-LGBT+ youths (Marra). While this is true, it is important to point out that LGBT+ youth are bullied more in person as well. Bullying is a culturally-induced outcome based on social standards and the insecurity and upbringing of the bully. The internet, like any other method of communication, will have people using it for hate and aggression, but this does not overshadow the positivity that can be given over long distances through online communication that would not be accessible otherwise.

Along with the social relations aspect of support, comes individual mental health support. Conflicts specific to LGBT+ youths lead to individual insecurity that can develop into self-loathing. Consequentially, members of the LGBT+ community are at a much higher risk for attempting suicide. Transgender members especially are affected by this in that 41% of this population has attempted suicide, compared to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc. population's 20%, and the overall population's 4.6% (William Institute and American Foundation for Suicide prevention). Technological progression has led to the development of organizations specifically

focused on preventing LGBT+ suicides. Lifelines have been developed over various regions in order to communicate with these struggling individuals. Among these includes the Trevor Project, which is a "national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to l, g, b, t, and q young people 13-24" (Trevor Foundation). This specific organization was formed by an extensive psychology advisory board and is partnered with the Ben Cohen Foundation, GLSEN, PFLAG, and other organizations focused on bettering the lives of LGBT+ individuals. These and other online lifelines can assist in crisis counselling via phone calls, texting, and online chatrooms. Suicide prevention is an important way the internet has assisted the entirety of society, but has been prominent in assisting the LGBT+ community.

Though in person counseling is more effective in treating disorders and this level of internal conflict, this is not always available to children of poor economic status and those living in stricter conservative areas where they may be afraid to reach out for help. These online sources have provided a way for members to anonymously vocalize their issues in a safe environment. Still, it is essential that individuals are encouraged to seek direct help, and these organizations are accommodating in that they help find safe ways for these kids to find counseling options.

Another method of support comes through providing information for individuals considering coming out to friends and family. Coming out is always intimidating and often dangerous. The internet has provided ways for members to communicate with each other without making any sort of commitment. Online organizations such as the LGBT Foundation, a non-profit charity organization focused on helping LGBT+ youths, provides advice on this particular need and offers resources for helplines and face-to-face counseling (LGBT Foundation). It also

has an array of articles focused on answering common questions. This type of source is one of many that has provided help and support to members of the LGBT+ community.

However, the internet provides a cloak for an individual's personal life, which is good for remaining anonymous, but not when considering coming out. Living situations for individuals vary and so should the information; it is imperative to consider aspects of an individual's personal life when providing advice. The reason being, an individual with information focused on coming out to one type of population may not extend to individuals living in other areas. The internet can not accurately provide a full picture to an individual's situation and may lead to poor results from coming out. Sadly, there are few real-world alternatives for individuals looking to come out since asking others for counsel would be doing just that.

Aside from individual support, the internet provides a path of connection to social and political issues, encourages activism, and eases vocalizing support of causes. In the United States specifically, this can be seen through social media campaigns for equality. For instance, in the 2013 campaign for legalizing same-sex marriage, there was a surge in LGBT+ social media campaigns (Glasionov et al). Internationally, the internet has informed people of LGBT+ rights in other countries. For example in 2013 it had been difficult for those in Russia to promote LGBT+ rights due to a Parliamentary legislature that passed to ban "the promotion of homosexual propaganda". However, individuals took to online methods of protest. Russian gay activist Nikolai Alexeyev began an online petition to blacklist two main lawyers responsible for the law. Later a trend, #dumpsoil, developed through social media and focused on boycotting a brand of Russian vodka in protest. (Glasionov et al). In this way, the internet has provided a method to mobilize the community in favor of LGBT+ rights activism.

Unfortunately, social media can ignore certain issues or make it feel like things have been resolved when they haven't been. For example, the Kony 2012 movement, which focused on taking down a Ugandan resistance leader whom militarized children, died down soon after it rose, giving the wide spread feeling of resolution, though this leader has remained in power and corruption and not been removed (Ronan and Dougan). Though social media gives selective attention to certain issues and creates the illusion of resolution, it has provided the spread of awareness of issues and consistently encourages social activism.

Along with individual support comes the confirmation of viewing representation in media. LGBT+ representation is limited in modern and past literature and media. Representation is important since normalizing relationships helps make members feel less abnormal in their sexual attraction (Corrigan). The internet has provided online websites like Archive of Our Own, fanfiction.net and other fan-based sharing websites to share stories that spread normality, but also social acceptance of LGBT relationships and can inspire the creation of original works with LGBT+ relationships. Writers such as Rainbow Rowell, the author of *Fangirl* and *Carry On*, have published original works based on their inspiration from fanfiction that contain normalized homosexual relationships. When presented correctly, this representation in media brings entertainment and confirmation to LGBT+ readers and has been made possible by the internet's networking.

Unfortunately, fanfiction tends to be oversexualized in LGBT+ relationships which can be detrimental to young LGBT+ readers. In other cases, these relationships in this type of forum have the tendency in some cases to be fetishized by heterosexual readers. This can lead to assigning heteronormative roles to homosexual relationships where they do not belong. Assigning gender roles to homosexual relationships is not accurate to the experiences in these

relationships leading to unexperienced readers developing confused misconceptions. This blemish should not erase the fanfiction which provides healthy relationships and representation in online communities.

The internet has increased the opportunity for creative expression and sharing in the forms of not only fanfiction and fan art, but also inspiration for creating authentic media. The internet has also allowed the self-publication of content apart from fan-based content as organizations such as LGBT Creative have encouraged (LGBT Creative). Through start up websites, individuals have the opportunity to publish original content. Felicia Day, an actress and gamer, utilized YouTube to start her own web series, and after this series grew in popularity her acting career took off and she went on to play more well-known roles, such as Charlie Bradbury, a lesbian computer nerd, in *Supernatural (*Day*).* In the video game world, many indie content creators have displayed more LGBT+ representation than mainstream games through publication and self-advertising through the internet. For example Toby Fox, the creator of Undertale, a popular indie game displaying many LGBT+ storylines and characters, made his game available for download through his website (Undertale). Other more underground creators, such as Gaming Pixie, promotes normalizing representation in gaming and awareness of other social issues(Gaming Pixie). Promoting LGBT+ representation in gaming and other content areas leads to a sense of community and acceptance. However, these can be hard to find and come across unless you are looking. Normalizing LGBT+ content in mainstream video games and media would be more beneficial, but as television shows and video company producers slowly work toward this goal, the internet provides gaming and content for LGBT+ representation.

Artistic expression of LGBT+ experiences can also be seen through political cartoons. Leftycartoons.com and other politically oriented websites express these ideas and allows people

to share thoughts on politics. This provides a way to communicate LGBT+ issues through art to those outside the community. A downside to these websites can be the standardization of beliefs within the community. Since the LGBT+ community is built on nonconforming orientations and identities, diversity is something to be celebrated. But, by posting these political cartoons alongside mainly liberal ideas may lead to a community-based pressure to believe what everyone else in the LGBT+ community seems to believe without developing individualized opinions. Nonetheless, it is important to consider the effect LGBT+ political cartoons have on the non-LGBT+ population. Considering the struggles of the community, influencing public opinion outside the community is vital to making changes in society.

Though there are many downsides to the services the internet provides, its progression has led to widespread access to in sexual and medical education that has unfortunately been lacking in public and private school health classes. It has also provided communal support and connectivity leading so a sense of belonging and engagement for members and been vital to promotion of LGBT+ representation not only in the form of fan-based content, but also original works of media. Though the community existed well before the rise of the internet, the network that has been provided by websites and social media communication has improved education and representation for the LGBT+ community.

Work Cited

Baym, Nancy K. *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2010. Print.

Cavalcante, André, Ph.D. "Managing Transgender Identity Online." *Communication Currents*.

National Communication Association, June 2016. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

Day, Felicia. *You're Never Weird on the Internet*. Ed. Joss Whedon. New York: Touchstone, an

Imprint of Simon & Schuster, 2015. Print.

Deutsch, Barry. *Ampersand*. VisionMule for Creative, N.d. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

GamingPixie.com. Gaming Pixie (Rochelle), 2013. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

Glasionov, Esther, et al. "Social Media and the LGBT Community." *The Salzburg Academy on

Media and Global Change*. Creative Commons Attribution 3.0, n.d. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

Harding, Mary, Dr. "Gender Dysphoria. Transsexual and Gender Identity Disorder | Patient."

Patient. N.p., 23 Feb. 2015. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

itgetsbetter.org. It Gets Better Project, 2010. Web. 31 Oct 2016

Kaufman, Miriam, Dr. "Adolescent Sexual Orientation." *Paediatrics & Child Health*. Pulsus

Group Inc, 13 Sept. 2008. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

lgbtcreative.com. National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, et al, 2014. Web. 31 Oct. 2016

lgbt.foundation. LGBT Foundation Charity, N.d. Web 31 Oct. 2016

Marra, Andy. "Out Online: The Experiences of LGBT Youth on the Internet." *GLSEN*. N.p., 10

July 2013. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

Ronan, Paul, and Lisa Dougan. "How to stop the LRA Abduction Children in Central African

Republic." *Newseek*. N.p., 6 Mar. 2016. Web. 31 Oct. 2016

Slater, Hannah. "LGBT-Inclusive Sex Education Means Healthier Youth and Safer Schools."

   Center for American Progress. N.p., 21 June 2013. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

The Trevor Project. Ben Cohen Foundation, et al, N.d.. Web. 31 Oct. 2016

Undertale.com. Fox, Toby and Kickstarter Campaign, 15 Sept. 2015. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

Wells, Jonathan. "Tyler Oakley: How the Internet Revolutionised LGBT Life." *The Telegraph*.

   Telegraph Media Group, 12 Nov. 2015. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.

Ybarra MPH, Michele, Ph.D. "The Internet: A Sex Education Class for Teens." *Psychology

   Today*. Sussex Publishers, 23 Aug. 2013. Web. 31 Oct. 2016.