

Logging In and Coming Out:
Group Dynamics in Online Gay Communities

Jarred Srot
ACSENT Laboratory
Department of Psychology
University of Cape Town

Supervisor: Dr. Pedro Wolf

Co-Supervisor: Tarah Swanepoel

Word Count:

Abstract: 252

Main Body: 8 966

Acknowledgements

I'd like to sincerely thank the following people for their assistance with this research project:

My supervisor, Dr Pedro Wolf: Thank you for your endless support, guidance, patience and expertise. Thank you, also, for helping me formulate the idea and design for this research, and for your input every step of the way.

My co-supervisor Tarah Swanepoel: Thank you for your endless support, guidance patience and expertise. Thank you, also, for helping me formulate the idea and design for this research, and for your input every step of the way.

Thank you to participants for their involvement and invaluable contribution to this project.

For their statistical support, thank you to Danielle Boyd and Michelle Louw.

To my friends and family, thank you for your support, encouragement and laughter.

Abstract

The amount of safe physical spaces in which Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI) individuals can be open about their sexual orientations is limited. The Internet, however, provides limitless safe spaces for open disclosure of sexual orientations. The literature explains that, because of this, the Internet allows for the formation of online LGBTQI communities (DeHaan et al., 2013). This study aimed to analyze how one of these communities, the online gay male community, is formed, specifically within online chat rooms, in order to identify the content shared, and how the perception of an in-group presence affects this content. A total of 23 male participants who identified as homosexual were invited to attend 1 of 3 hour-long chat room sessions, in which they were encouraged to speak freely. Each chat room declared the presence of a different percentage of gay male participants, namely 0%, 25% and 50%. Transcripts were analyzed for content, using a text analysis program called Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC2007). Mixed-design ANOVAS were used to compare between-subject and within-subject variances of different categories of words: Sexual words, word count, references to self, biographical words, affective words, and work words. Results show strong variances across groups, with the most sexual words being shared in the chat room in which the declared in-group presence was 25%. When in-group presence was declared to be 0%, the most discussed content involved work words and occupation. An in-group presence of 50% saw the most amount of references to self and biographical words.

Keywords: online gay community, LIWC, chat rooms, in-groups, LGBTQI

Logging In and Coming Out: Group Dynamics in Online Gay Communities

Despite progressions in acceptance of same-sex attraction around the world, sexual orientations that deviate from heteronormativity still face discrimination and rejection today. Members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer and intersex (LGBTQI) community often find that access to public and private spaces, in which they are safe to disclose their orientations, are limited. As a result, many LGBTQI individuals (hereafter collectively referred to as gay individuals) turn to the Internet as a source of tolerance, support, empowerment and community (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). For our purposes here, a community is defined as “any group living in one place or having common interests” (Community, Heinemann English Dictionary, 1995, p. 202). This definition lends itself to identifying the gay community as an in-group, a group with which an individual identifies and belongs (Tasdemir, 2011).

But what does the presence of this online in-group mean for the social and personal development of gay individuals, when it is situated within a presumably intangible, exclusive and anonymous space? Much of the available literature on the subject of online gay communities explains the benefits of the Internet specifically for gay individuals, and the benefits of having access to an online gay community.

Social Processes and Support

A shared theme within the literature is that the Internet allows for social processes to take place, which might not be possible in the offline world. For gay individuals specifically, these social processes include communications with other gay individuals, as well as access to a gay community, both of which are not often accessible or visible offline (Tikkanen & Ross, 2000). DeHaan, Kuper, Magee, Bigelow and Mustanski (2013) explain how individuals who are stigmatized for their sexual orientations may choose to hide this part of themselves, thus restricting their sources for a support system offline. Offline sources of support are not immediately assumed to exist for gay individuals. As a result, the online gay community may come to act as a surrogate, by allowing an individual access to other people who have had similar experiences of being discriminated against, serving as an initial common interest (DeHaan et al., 2013). According to Sanders (2008), access to other gay individuals or communities is often accomplished through gay-oriented forums, social networks, as well as chat rooms. Such access can lead to positive interpersonal relations with both heterosexuals and homosexuals, a sense of in-group membership, as well as increased offline support

(DeHaan et al., 2013). It seems that these benefits are mostly available in online spaces which are clearly demarcated for gay individuals. This would suggest that heteronormativity, the promotion of heterosexuality as the normal or preferred sexual orientation, (“Heteronormative, n.d.) is so pervasive as to be present online.

Problematically, the literature does not provide a definition of a community. It is also not apparent within the literature how an online gay community is formed beyond mutuality in the form of experiences of discrimination, in a space in which identities are anonymous. Rather, the existence of an online gay community is spoken of as a given. Also, no mention is made of how the norms and standards of this in-group are established. In describing how the Internet is used by adolescents, Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008) explain how most online interactions are text-based, including instant messaging, blog posts, bulletin boards, as well as chat rooms. Given that most online communications are text based, in order to establish the norms and practices of an online gay community, it is relevant to determine what the content of the communications in this community are. Such a content analysis would also help individuals identify what measures need to be in place so that they may move beyond simply accessing an online gay community, and integrate within it, defined here as being “absorb[ed] into a culture or society” (Community, Heinemann English Dictionary, 1995, p. 539). By identifying the content and subject matter circulated within an online gay community, individuals may be better equipped to participate within these discourses.

Online Chat Rooms

Chat rooms are particularly favoured methods of accessing gay individuals or communities. Most offer a unique environment for communication, as contact occurs in real time, usernames provide anonymity, and an interpersonal experience is offered, within a virtual space (Jacobson & Donatone, 2009). Also, there is a strong appeal to use chat rooms for the accessibility and relative safety that they offer (Cooper, McLoughlin, & Campbell, 2000). Jacobson and Donatone (2009), in examining how the Internet may be incorporated into therapy for gay college students, believe that chat rooms allow for unique therapeutic gains. Support of all sorts is accessible within chat rooms, and there is an increased sense of freedom in discussing issues of identity, as well as sensitive subject matter (Jacobson & Donatone, 2009). In these ways, students may experience an increased empowerment which allows them to speak about issues that they may not be able to do so in person (Jacobson & Donatone, 2009). It is argued that, through speaking to other gay individuals online, one can become more comfortable with the process of voicing one’s concerns and orientations,

strengthening one's sense of autonomy, which can help one to transition into therapy with clinicians (Jacobson & Donatone, 2009). The point here is that interacting in exclusively gay chat rooms can help strengthen the voices of those gay individuals who often feel silenced in their real, offline lives.

Cooper (1998) posits that chat rooms are used for three main reasons: Accessibility, affordability and anonymity. Of all the multiple sources of contact and communication offered on the Internet, accessing and entering chat rooms is particularly easy. While some chat room websites do require registration, and sometimes payment, more often than not chat rooms are free to use, and do not require any form of identification (Tikkanen & Ross, 2000). King (1999) agrees with these three reasons for chat room use, but suggests a fourth, in that chat rooms have become commonly accepted spaces for communication and meeting other people.

Despite listing the appeal of chat rooms, and how they can allow access to an online gay community, no mention is made of how chat rooms may assist with *integration* within this online in-group. The literature fails to mention, again, the content that circulates within online chat rooms, and how perceiving the presence of other gay individuals affects this content.

Sex-Seeking

Despite the proposed psychological uses of chat rooms, the literature frequently emphasises the ways in which chat rooms are used to acquire casual sex. Sanders (2008) explains that chat rooms, and the Internet in general, offer gay individuals the opportunity to plan occasional sexual encounters with other gay individuals. Brown et al. (2005), however, offers that this occurs more often than Sanders implies, with studies across the US and the UK finding that up to 34% of gay men use the Internet to acquire sexual partners. Chat rooms also provide a space in which the particulars of homosexual sex can be learned and discussed (Sanders, 2008), making such sources of information particularly important for the sexual health of gay individuals (Mustanski, Lyons & Garcia, 2011). While explaining how chat rooms allow for a degree of autonomy and safety for gay individuals, the literature suggests that chat rooms are used most often for sex-seeking, or discussion of sex-related subject matter. The majority of the literature seems to ignore other discourses pertaining to individuals' life experiences that are unique to being gay, including identifying oneself as homosexual and coming out to one's friends and family. Nor are these types of discourses quantified the way that sexual discourses are. Most of the literature, therefore, seems to be lacking insight into other themes of discussion raised in chat rooms. Attention to these

themes is important, as they may play a more significant role in integrating individuals into this online in-group.

Risk for HIV and other STIs

The connections between seeking sex online and increased risks for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) cannot be ignored. Sanders (2008) cites studies which found that men who use the Internet to acquire sex have more partners than those who do not, while syphilis outbreaks are correlated with men using chat rooms for sex. However, in face of the potential for HIV and other STIs, Brown et al. (2005) explains why chat rooms are still so frequently used to find casual sex, by describing how the Internet provides a certain level of safety for one to disclose one's sexual aspirations, decreasing the risk for in-person rejection and identity defamation. Ross (2005) offers a more cynical opinion by suggesting that the Internet is used for casual sex as it allows for infinite pleasures without infinite risks, leading to severe moral bankruptcy. In contrast, Sanders (2008) states that such behaviours online are major steps towards sexual autonomy, characterized not only by the "freedom to be sexual, but equally [by] having knowledge and unrestricted public access to the varieties of sexual pleasure, practice and identity" (p. 274). She holds that sexual autonomy is a form of agency through which gay individuals can claim their sexualities and orientations (Sanders, 2008). Even if such behaviours help enhance the agency of gay individuals, it is still apparent that most of the literature discusses the behaviours of an online gay community in terms of sex-seeking. Other behaviours, such as friendship-making, the sharing of life experiences, and other forms of self-disclosure, which may facilitate integration into this in-group, are given less attention, suggesting that claiming one's sexuality, and integration, has to do only with opening up about one's sexual desires.

Self-disclosure and 'Coming Out'

For many gay individuals, claiming their sexuality has very little to do with expressing their sexual desires, and more to do with 'coming out' and disclosing their sexual orientations to friends and family. Hillier, Kurdas and Horsley (2001), studying the use of the Internet amongst gay youth in Australia, found that for many participants, the Internet, and the support it could provide, created a safe space in which to come out. The factors that contributed to this feeling of safety included contact with other gay individuals, security due to being anonymous, the simultaneous distance and intimacy of the Internet, and the general impression that people on the Internet were more accepting, diverse and open-minded (Hillier et al., 2001). Mustanski et al. (2011) explain how already in the 1990's, large numbers of gay youth were coming out online much sooner than coming out offline. Hillier et al. (2001)

suggests that by coming out to others through chat rooms, gay youth develop the courage, and a certain level of expectation, for coming out in real life. This research contributes significantly to the literature, by paying attention to the use of the Internet for discourses pertaining to the unique experiences of being gay. Also, by addressing the ways an online gay community may assist with coming out, this research suggests a strong tie between integration within an online in-group, and increased self-disclosure. More research into such effects of an online gay community is sorely lacking in the available literature.

Summary and Rationale for Present Study

As is clear, the literature deals primarily with the ways in which the Internet is particularly important for gay individuals, including the safety offered by the Internet, the way it allows access to an online gay community, as well as the benefits and sexual characteristics of the online interactions that may take place. However, it is apparent that most of the literature does not attempt to explain the formation of an online gay community, nor how the perception of an online gay community affects behaviour, instances of self-disclosure, and other types of interactions which may occur in more communal online spaces such as a chat room. Access to an online gay community is discussed, but there is no mention of how the norms, standards, and practices of this community may be less sex-driven. In fact, different content and subject matter discussed within an online gay community is given very little attention. This is problematic as the subject matter circulated within a gay chat room could be used as a marker for how comfortable or integrated a gay individual feels with an online gay community. With this gap within the literature in mind, I sought to identify and quantify the different types of content and subject matter that is circulated within an online gay male community, including content which relates to self-disclosure, instances of sharing of oneself and one's life with others. I also sought to identify what the effect of a perceived in-group presence has on this content. By identifying such content, and the effect of an in-group presence, one may more accurately identify the characteristics and features of an online gay community, which may assist one with the process of integrating within it.

Aims and Hypotheses

This study aimed to investigate interactions among gay men online. Chat rooms provide a means via which such an investigation may be conducted, and were used in order to identify the unique structure and behaviours of this community. Broadly speaking, this study asks the following questions:

1. Does the percentage of a declared in-group presence increase or decrease the frequency of self-disclosure amongst members of an exclusively gay chat room?
2. According to the percentage of declared in-group presence, will participants share more emotionally driven, personal content?
3. Are sexual discourses as present within an online gay community chat room as most of the literature claims?
4. What other subject matter is raised and circulated within an online gay community chat room?

Based on these questions, several specific hypotheses were formed:

Hypothesis 1

More sexual discourses will be communicated as the percentage of declared in-group presence increases.

Hypothesis 2

As the percentage of declared in-group presence increases, more words will be spoken overall.

Hypothesis 3

When the percentage of declared in-group presence is higher, there will be more instances of self-disclosure, which includes more references to the self, as well as more personal content such as biographical words and affective words.

Hypothesis 4

Less personal content will be shared when the percentage of declared in-group presence is low.

Methods

Design and Setting

For this study, I used a between-groups experimental design, as comparisons were to be drawn between groups of participants. Three online chat rooms were established using a website called Chatzy.com, with each containing between six to nine participants. For each chat room, I informed participants of the presence of a specific percentage of gay participants, even though all participants within each chat room were gay. The specified percentage served as the independent variable of this study. The specified percentages for the first two chat rooms included 25%, and 50%. In the case of the third chat room, no information regarding the presence of gay participants was given, thus the percentage allocated to this chat room for the sake of clarity here is 0%. Participants were divided into

each chat room according to when they were available to attend a chat room session, as they were required to attend a chat room for a full hour.

Participants

The inclusion criteria of this study included male participants who self-identified as homosexual, and who were between the ages of 19 and 35. I set this age range to ensure that participants were legally viable to participate, and to establish some measure of diversity amongst participants, considering their mutual sexual orientations. These participants were recruited from two sources. The first source I used was the Student Research Participation Programme (SRPP) at the University of Cape Town (UCT). This programme gave me access to the sizeable amount of psychology undergraduate students at the university, and allowed me to offer 3 SRPP points as incentive, which psychology undergraduate students need as a requirement to write their examinations. The second source of participants included established online gay communities, event pages and activist groups, found on Facebook, in each of which I was granted permission to advertise my study. As the study was to take place online, participants were welcome from any country.

The final sample included 23 male participants who identified as either homosexual or bisexual, between the ages of 19 and 32. 13 participants were derived from SRPP at UCT, with the remaining 10 having been sourced via Facebook groups. The 25% chat room consisted of 8 participants, the 50% chat room consisted of 9 participants, and the 0% chat room consisted of 6 participants.

Measures and Instruments

Questionnaire. Participants were required to fill out an online questionnaire preceding their participation in a chat room session. This questionnaire was created specifically for this study, and asked for various demographic details such as age, location, type of employment, as well as relationship status. Questions related to chat rooms and chatting applications were asked as well. This questionnaire can be viewed in Appendix A.

Online chat room. Online chat rooms were created using Chatzy.com, a website which allows users to create and monitor private online chat rooms. Others can be invited to use the chat room on Chatzy.com, either via e-mail invitation or direct link. Chatzy.com was chosen as it can be connected to via any Internet-enabled computer or mobile phone, and it has a very simplistic interface, making it easy to use.

Transcripts. Data for the study was collected in the form of transcripts. These transcripts contained all the written communications submitted within each chat room by the participants.

Review form. Participants were asked to fill out a review form following their participation in a chat room session. This review form provided scales on which participants were asked to measure their experiences and opinions of the chat room session. Some of these scales pertained to whether participants enjoyed the interactions within the chat room, their perception of an in-group presence within the chat room, as well as their levels of comfort in being able to speak openly about their sexual orientations and related subjects. Some questions were asked relating to past experiences with gay-specific chat rooms. Participants were offered the opportunity to include any other thoughts or opinions about their experiences that they may have wished to share. This review form can be viewed in Appendix B.

Procedure

Advertisements were posted online to SRPP bulletins and online gay communities, event pages and activist groups on Facebook. Participants made initial contact via e-mail and were sent a link to an informed consent form, which they could sign online using a website called Digisigner.com. This consent form informed participants that they were required to attend a single hour-long chat room session, and explained that this study would be examining many different types of online communities, including music communities, art communities, and sports communities. As such, participants were unaware of the exclusive focus on an online gay male community.

Immediately after signing their consent, participants were sent a link to the online questionnaire which they were required to fill out. Upon completing the questionnaire, participants were allocated a date for their chat room session. All 3 chat room sessions were held from 9 p.m. to 10 p.m. on a Wednesday night. Participants were also allocated usernames (e.g. A1, B2, F3), and sent instruction sheets on how to operate and navigate the interface on Chatzy.com. Finally, participants were sent a web-link to the chat room itself, and were informed that they were to be interacting with participants who represented the online gay community, who made up a particular percentage of the participants in the chat room.

Conversations within each chat room were monitored to ensure participants were not exposed to verbal abuse, and to ensure the anonymity of all. Any lines of dialogue which pertained to identifying information were deleted from the chat room.

I entered the chat room itself as “Admin” to inform participants when the chat room session was about to end.

After the chat room session was completed, participants were sent a debriefing form, and a link to an online review form. Upon completion of the review form, those participants who were sourced from SRPP were awarded their points accordingly.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the ethical rules of conduct as stipulated by the Health Professions Council of South Africa, as well as the University of Cape Town Code for Research Involving Human Subjects.

Ethics approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town. Ethics approval is presented in Appendix C.

There were almost negligible safety risks for participants inherent in this study. However, as participants were communicating with other participants in an environment in which there were no restrictions on subject matter, it was possible that participants might be exposed to offensive or discomforting word-use. Such a possibility was clearly explained to participants in the informed consent form (See Appendix D).

As the study took place online, with usernames protecting the anonymity of participants, there were no harmful risks to the physicality and identities of participants. Participants made use of assigned numerical usernames within each chat room, to ensure their anonymity and privacy.

In terms of incentive, the only incentive offered in this study was in the form of 3 SRPP points for those participants who were sourced from SRPP. As stated previously, these points are a requirement for psychology undergraduate students at UCT to write their examinations.

This study did require two degrees of deception. Firstly, participants were informed of a particular percentage of gay participants in each chat room. However, all participants in each chat room were gay. For example, some participants were informed that 25% of the participants in their chat room were gay, while in fact all participants in the chat room were gay.

This deception was important for two reasons. Firstly, as this study wished to examine the frequency of self-disclosure according to the perception of an in-group presence within the chat rooms, it was necessary to inform participants of a particular percentage of in-group presence, despite the entire chat room consisting of gay participants.

Secondly, the deception was necessary as, by making certain that all participants in the chat rooms were gay, the participants were kept significantly more protected from any verbal abuse or cyber-bullying, which might have occurred should heterosexual or

homophobic individuals have been present in the chat rooms. It is reasonable to suggest that homophobic slurs, or any kinds of cyber-bullying, were less likely to occur if all participants in the chat rooms were gay.

The second degree of deception consisted of informing participants that this study would be looking at how multiple online communities are formed, and how they behave and interact amongst themselves and other communities online. This deception was important as it ensured that participants were not immediately privy to the fact that only gay participants were involved in this study. Were they aware of this information, participants may have changed their behaviours and interactions within the chat rooms accordingly.

It was not probable that either deception would have severe negative emotional or psychological consequences for participants. It was also reasonable to suggest that participants would not object to the first deception, as it ensured their safety. The importance of these deceptions was explained to participants in the debriefing form, following the completion of the study. This debriefing form can be viewed in Appendix E.

Data Management and Statistical Analysis

Each chat room conversation was saved as a transcript. Each of the 3 chat transcripts were divided into separate documents, each containing the entirety of the dialogue spoken by a single participant. For example, all of the dialogue spoken by participant A1 was extracted from the transcript of that chat room, and stored in a separate document. This was performed for each participant.

Initial observation of the transcripts showed that, for groups Twenty Five and Fifty, there was a distinct point when a participant within each chat room disclosed their sexual orientations. After this point in both chat rooms, several more participants came out as gay men, and the conversation that followed was more personal, with more detailed content. As such, it was determined that transcripts should be further divided, into the content shared before the initial disclosure of homosexuality, and the content that followed after this initial disclosure. However, in group Zero, the group which received no information about the presence of an online gay community, there were no instances of disclosure of homosexuality at all. This posed a problem: How could I divide conversations according to when disclosure of homosexuality was made, if no disclosure was made in group Zero?

In order to keep the division of transcripts standard, it was therefore decided that the conversations should be split according to time passed within the chat room. By reading the transcripts, it was clear that the first 15 minutes of conversation in each chat room related more to introductions, during which participants greeted each other and asked standard

questions such as “How are you?” As such, the first 15 minutes of conversation were allocated as Pre, referring to the initial stages of contact. The remaining 45 minutes of the conversation contained much richer content, as participants became more familiar with each other. This part of the conversation was allocated as Post. Therefore, the dialogue within each transcript was divided according to when the dialogue was spoken: any dialogue spoken during the first 15 minutes of the chat session was saved as Pre; any dialogue spoken during the remaining 45 minutes of the chat session was saved as Post. As such, each participant had a Pre and Post transcript.

Next, transcripts were cleaned and run through a programme called Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (2007), a content analysis programme which quantifies and categorizes words in texts. LIWC categorizes words according to a built-in dictionary. Scanning this dictionary, several categories of words were chosen, and the hypotheses of this study were formed. The categories included sexual words, references to the self (when people said ‘I’) biographical words, affective words, work words which related to occupation, and finally, word count, a category which counts all words within a text. Examples of each word category are provided in the discussion section of this paper.

The output was merged and corrected. As this study wished to examine between-subjects differences, as well as within-subjects differences, a mixed-designs ANOVA was run using IBM SPSS Statistics 22, with each category of words as the dependent variable, consecutively. The between-subjects measure was Group, and the within-subjects measure was Timing (Pre and Post).

Results

Hypothesis 1

The first hypothesis of this study claimed that more sexual content would be shared as the percentage of declared in-group presence increased. A mixed-designs ANOVA was run to compare between-group differences, and within-group differences, on the number of sexual words used within each chat room.

Descriptive statistics. In terms of timing, far more sexual words were spoken overall during Post ($M=0.92$, $SD=0.66$) compared to Pre ($M=0.14$, $SD=0.23$). At the Pre level of Timing, the most amount of sexual words were spoken in group Fifty ($M=0.26$, $SD=0.32$). At the Post level of Timing, there were more sexual words in group Twenty Five ($M=1.19$, $SD=0.70$), with numbers descending from group Fifty ($M=1.07$, $SD=0.60$) to group Zero ($M=0.34$, $SD=0.33$). A graph of this information can be seen in Figure 1.

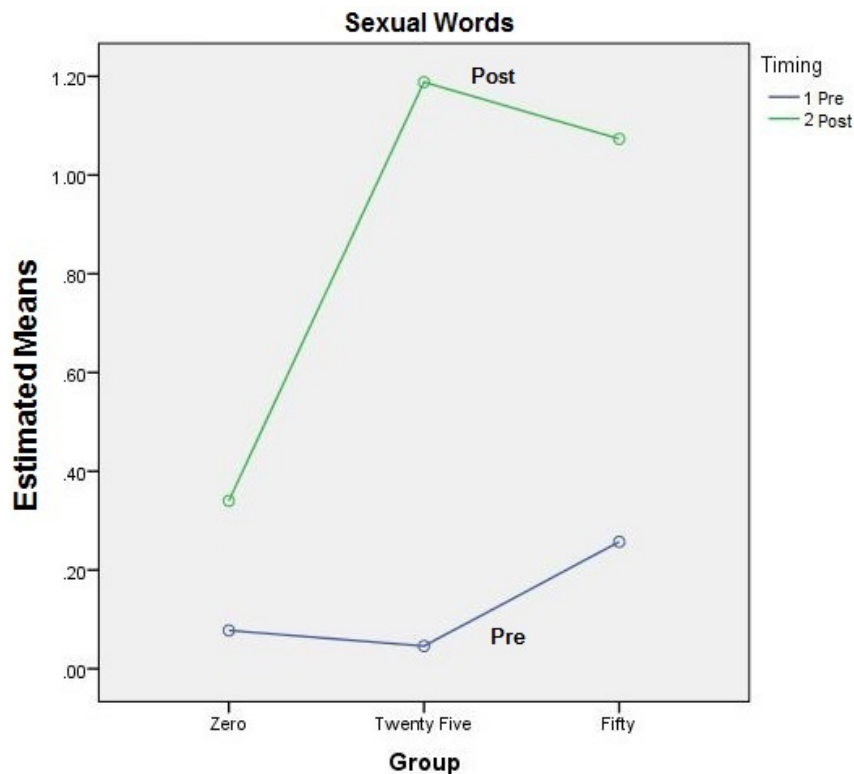


Figure 1. Means of sexual words, across Group. Pre and Post are each represented by a line.

ANOVA analysis. Running the ANOVA found that there is in fact a significant difference in the amount of sexual words spoken across groups. More specifically, results showed a significant main effect for Timing $F(1, 20) = 34.99, p < 0.05$, and a significant main effect for Group, $F(1, 20) = 3.94, p < 0.05$. This means that there were statistically significant differences in the amount of sexual words when considering Timing alone, while there were also statistically significant differences in the amount of sexual words when considering Group alone.

There was also a significant interaction effect between Timing and Group, $F(1, 20) = 3.81, p < 0.05$. A further pairwise comparison was run, to see where the interactions occur. These results are displayed in Table 1, where Timing levels are represented by a 1 and a 2, for Pre and Post respectively. Results revealed that there is a statistically significant difference between groups Fifty and Zero at the Post level of Timing, $F(1, 20) = 3.81, p < 0.05$, and between groups Twenty Five and Zero, at the Post level of Timing, $F(1, 20) = 3.81, p < 0.05$. There was no statistically significant difference throughout the Pre level of timing, $p > 0.05$, nor was there a statistically significant difference between groups Twenty Five and Fifty, $p = 0.69$. These results confirm Hypothesis 1, which means that there were

significantly more sexual words across Groups, as the percentage of declared in-group presence increased. It is worth noting, however, that the amount of sexual words peeked in group Twenty Five, as opposed to group Fifty, in which the declared percentage of in-group presence was 50%. Even though the differences between Twenty Five and Fifty are not statistically significant, this does require further examination and discussion.

Table 1

Comparisons of Sexual Words across Group and Timing

Timing	(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference		Sig. ^b	95% Confidence Interval for Difference ^b	
			(I-J)	Std. Error		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	Zero	Twenty Five	.032	.120	.796	-.219	.282
		Fifty	-.179	.117	.142	-.424	.065
	Twenty Five	Zero	-.032	.120	.796	-.282	.219
		Fifty	-.211	.108	.065	-.437	.015
	Fifty	Zero	.179	.117	.142	-.065	.424
		Twenty Five	.211	.108	.065	-.015	.437
2	Zero	Twenty Five	-.848	.315	.014*	-1.505	-.192
		Fifty	-.733	.307	.027*	-1.374	-.093
	Twenty Five	Zero	.848	.315	.014*	.192	1.505
		Fifty	.115	.283	.689	-.476	.705
	Fifty	Zero	.733	.307	.027*	.093	1.374
		Twenty Five	-.115	.283	.689	-.705	.476

Based on estimated marginal means

*. The mean difference is significant at the .050 level.

b. Adjustment for multiple comparisons: Least Significant Difference (equivalent to no adjustments).

Note: Under Timing, 1 refers to Pre, and 2 refers to Post.

Hypothesis 2

The second hypothesis claimed that more words would be spoken, as the percentage of declared in-group presence increased. A mixed-designs ANOVA was run, with word count within each chat room as the dependent variable.

Descriptive statistics. Considering that Pre refers to the first 15 minutes of conversation within each chat room, it is not surprising that, collectively, far fewer words were spoken in Pre ($M=23.46$, $SD=15.35$) compared to Post ($M=210.55$, $SD=172.80$). In Post, more words were spoken overall in group Twenty Five ($M=294.56$, $SD=256.77$), with fewer words in group Fifty ($M=185.08$, $SD=102.15$), and the least words in group Zero ($M=135.75$, $SD=7.89$). This information is displayed in Figure 2.

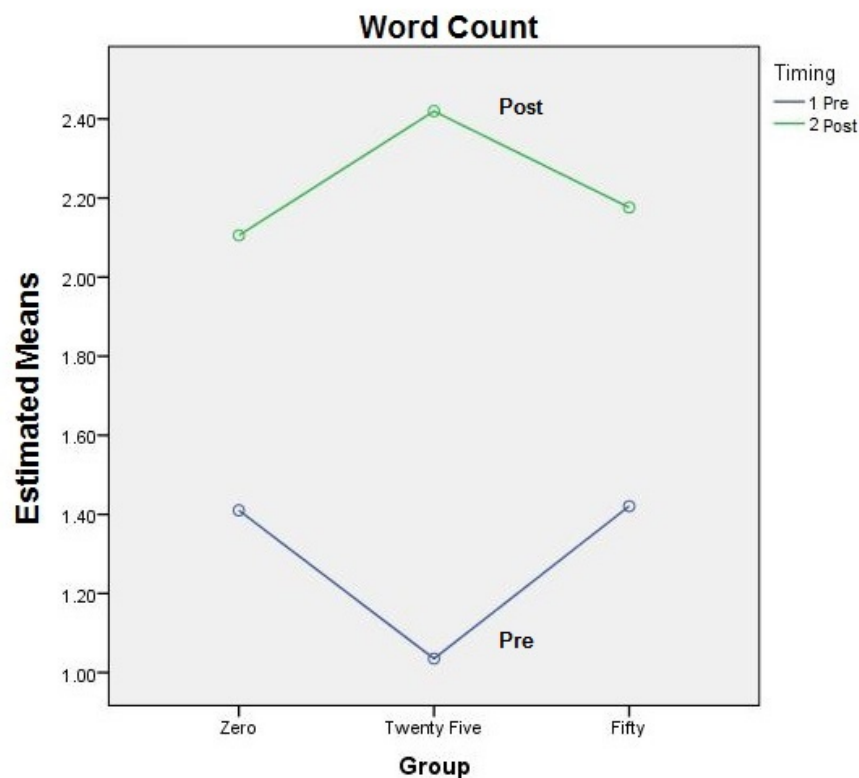


Figure 2. Means of word count, across Group. Pre and Post are each represented by a line.

ANOVA analysis. Running the mixed-designs ANOVA, results showed that Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances was statistically significant, $p < 0.05$, meaning that the ANOVA assumption of equal variances was violated. As such, the dependent variables in the analysis were transformed via log transformation. Rerunning the analysis found that Levene's Test was not significant, meeting the assumption of equal variances, and thus I could proceed with the ANOVA.

Results of the within-subjects ANOVA, comparing subjects across Timing, revealed that there is a statistically significant main effect of Timing between Pre and Post, $F(1,20) = 28.35$, $p < 0.05$. This is to be expected, given that there are significantly fewer words in Pre compared to Post, as described above. Results of the between-subjects ANOVA, comparing subjects across Group, revealed that there is no statistically significant difference in the amount of words spoken between groups Zero, Twenty Five and Fifty, $p > 0.05$.

Furthermore, results show that there is no statistically significant interaction effect between Timing and Group, $F(1,2) = 2.30$, $p > 0.05$. This means that, even though there is a significant difference in word count across Timing, the difference becomes insignificant when Group is considered as well. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is rejected, suggesting that there is no significant change in word count as the percentage of declared in-group presence increases.

Hypothesis 3

Hypothesis 3 states that as the percentage of declared in-group presence increases, so too will instances of self-disclosure increase. Examining the LIWC2007 dictionary (2007), instances of self-disclosure have been categorized into references to self (mentions of “I”) biographical words, as well as affective words. As such, a separate mixed-designs ANOVA was run for each category.

References to self

Descriptive statistics. Overall, more references to self occurred in the Post level of Timing ($M=4.44$, $SD=2.25$), with the most appearing in group Fifty ($M=5.81$, $SD=2.05$). Numbers decrease in group Twenty Five ($M=3.88$, $SD=2.12$), with the least references to self occurring in group Zero ($M=3.09$, $SD=1.79$). This data is displayed in Figure 3.

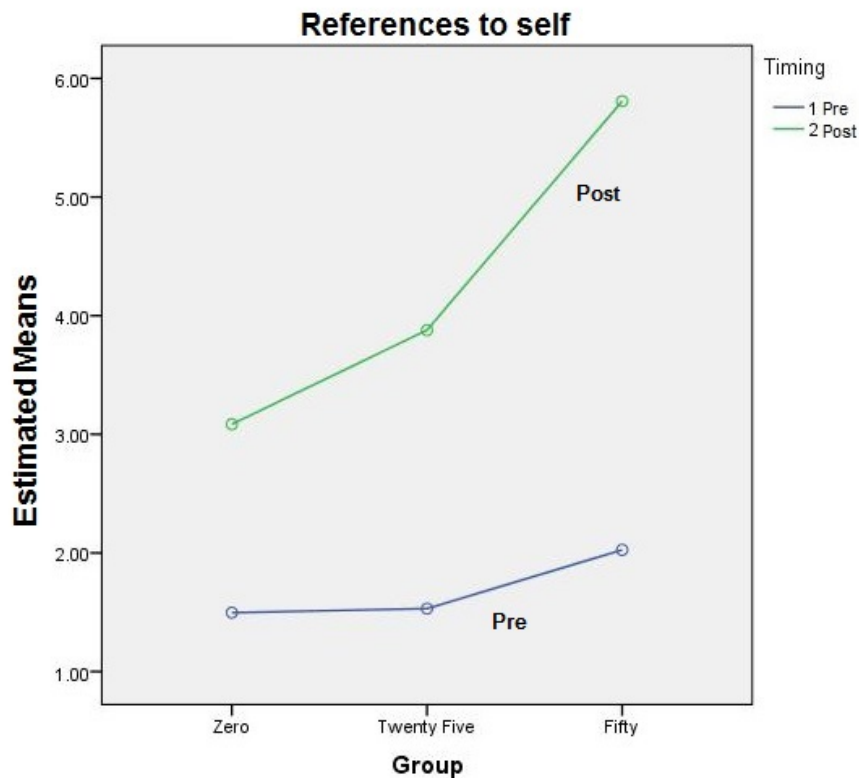


Figure 3. Means of references to self, across Group. Pre and Post are each represented by a line.

ANOVA analysis. Results show a statistically significant main effect for Timing, $F(1, 20) = 45.12, p < 0.05$, as well as a statistically significant main effect for Group, $F(1, 20) = 3.54, p < 0.05$. This means that the variance in mentions of “I” were affected by Timing when considered alone, and when considering Group alone.

The interaction effect between Timing and Group proved non-significant, $F(1, 20) = 2.89, p > 0.05$.

Biographical words

Descriptive statistics. More biographical words were spoken during Post ($M=1.40, SD=0.86$) compared to Pre ($M=0.61, SD=0.56$). In the Post level of Timing, the most amount of biographical words were spoken in group Fifty ($M=1.54, SD=1.02$), the least were spoken in Group Zero ($M=1.13, SD=0.71$), with group Twenty Five falling in the middle ($M=1.44, SD=0.82$). This information is displayed in Figure 4.

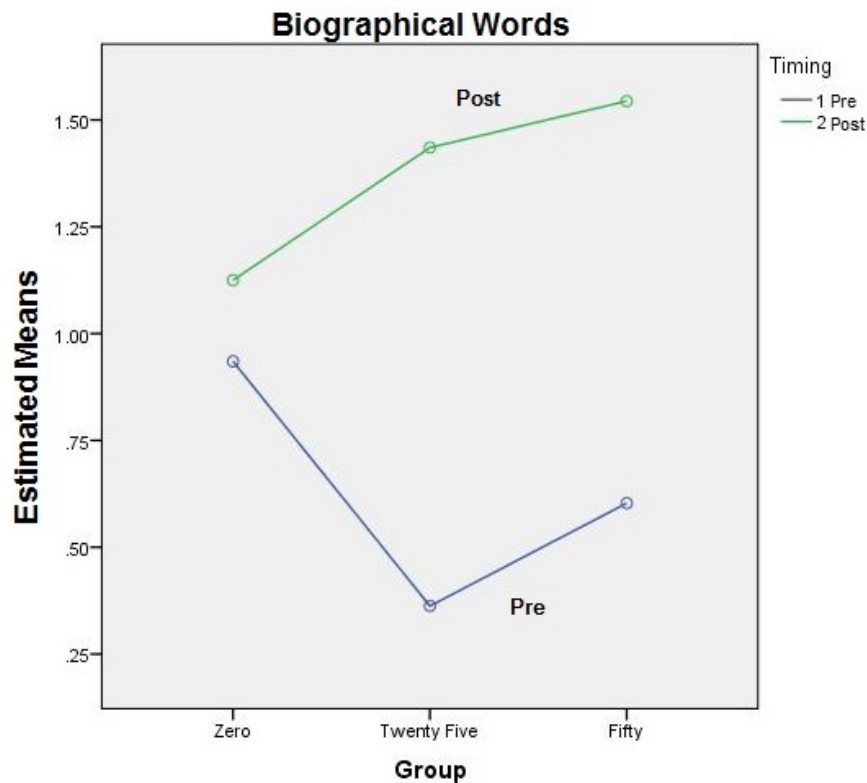


Figure 4. Means of biographical words, across Group. Pre and Post are each represented by a line.

ANOVA analysis. There was a statistically significant main effect for Timing, $F(1, 20) = 12.02$, $p < 0.05$. The main effect for Group proved insignificant $F(1, 20) = 0.79$, $p > 0.05$. This suggests that variance in biographical words had less to do with which group participants were in, and more to do with how much time passed within the chat room session.

Furthermore, the interaction effect of Timing and Group was insignificant, $F(1, 20) = 1.50$, $p > 0.05$.

Affective words

Descriptive statistics. More affective words were spoken in Post ($M=7.15$, $SD=2.11$) than in Pre ($M=2.21$, $SD=0.96$). Across Post, more affective words were spoken overall in group Zero ($M=7.56$, $SD=2.68$), followed very closely by group Fifty ($M=7.47$, $SD=1.66$). The least amount of affective words were spoken in group Twenty Five ($M=6.50$, $SD=2.21$). It is important to note, however, that the mean differences across groups are not very large. This information is displayed in Figure 5.

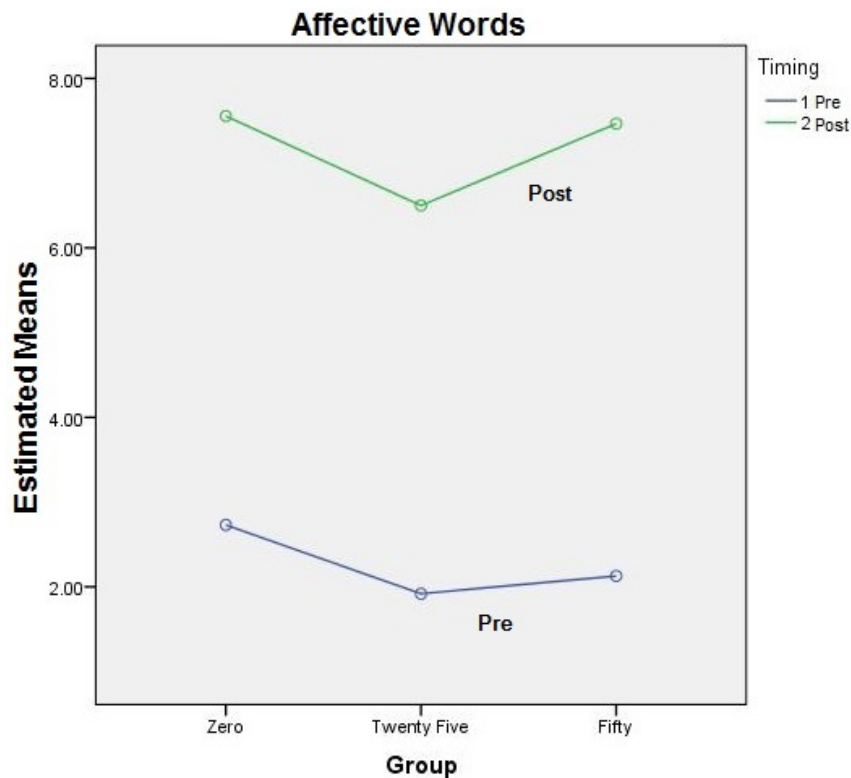


Figure 5. Means of affective words, across Group. Pre and Post are each represented by a line.

ANOVA analysis. Analysis results show that the main effect for Group is not significant, $F(1, 20) = p > 0.05$. This means that changes in affective words were not due to the percentage of declared presence within each chat room. The main effect for Timing is significant, $F(1, 20) = p < 0.05$, meaning that variance in affective words were related to the levels of Timing.

The interaction effect between Group and Timing proved non-significant, $F(1, 20) = 0.34, p > 0.05$.

Summary

The ANOVA results show varying instances of significant differences. No interaction effects were significant. Timing was a significant main effect for all measures, while Group was only significant for references to self, meaning people mentioned themselves directly more or less depending on which Group they were in. Considering these significant main effects, Hypothesis 3 could be said to be partially confirmed by these results, in that participants spoke about themselves more according to which group they were in.

Hypothesis 4

The last hypothesis of this study states that less personal content is shared when the percentage of declared in-group presence is low. Examining the LIWC2007 dictionary (2007), the category that appears least personal is that of words related to work. As such, a mixed-designs ANOVA was run on the amount of work words communicated across Group and Timing.

Descriptive statistics. More work words were spoken during Post ($M=1.40$, $SD=0.96$). In the Post level of Timing, the most amount of work words were spoken in group Zero ($M=2.43$, $SD=0.34$), followed by group Twenty Five ($M=1.04$, $SD=0.67$). This information is displayed in Figure 6.

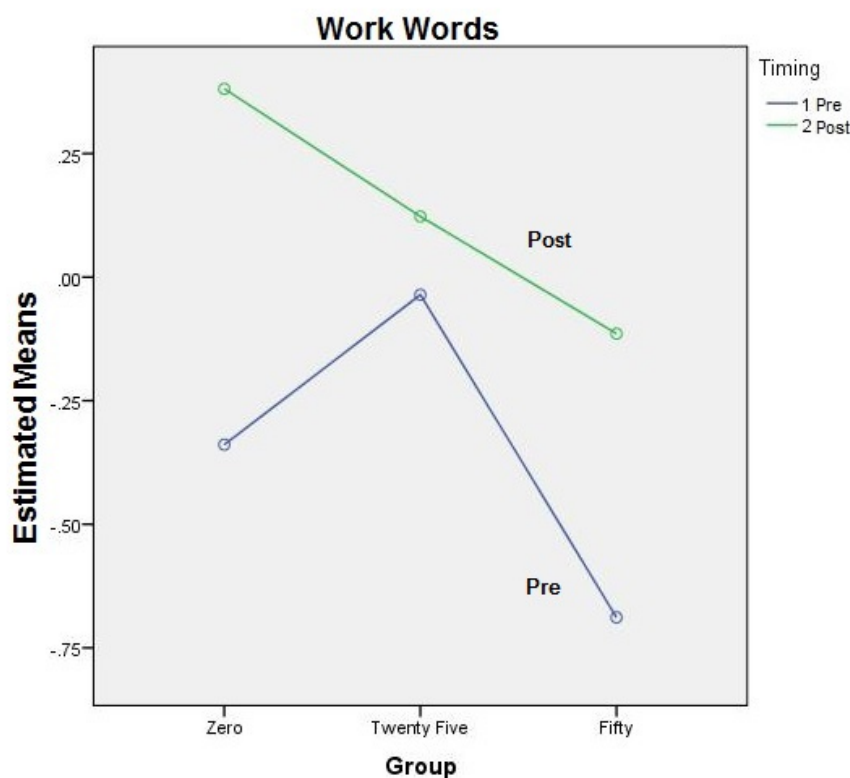


Figure 6. Means of work words, across Group. Pre and Post are each represented by a line.

ANOVA analysis. Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances proved significant, $p < 0.05$, meaning that the Pre and Post variables needed to be transformed in order to make sure the assumption of equal variances was not violated. A log transformation was performed, and the transformed variables replaced the original variables within the analysis. Levene's Test proved non-significant, $p > 0.05$, and thus the analysis could proceed.

Timing was shown to be a significant main effect, $F(1, 10) = 32.06$, $p < 0.05$. The main effect of Group also proved significant, $F(1, 10) = 19.58$, $p < 0.05$. This means that the

variance in work words was affected by Timing, when present on its own, as well as Group, when present on its own.

The interaction effect between Timing and Group was non-significant, $F(1, 10) = 4.01, p > 0.05$. This means that the variance in work words was not due to the interaction between Timing and Group.

The main effects of Timing and Group, respectively, confirm hypothesis 4, in that the percentage of declared in-group presence affected the amount of work words shared within the chat rooms.

Discussion

The results of this study illustrate quite strongly that gay men will speak much more comfortably and openly when surrounded by other gay men online, whether the subject matter is sexual or not. Using gay men as representative of the LGBTQI community, it seems safe to claim that for LGBTQI individuals, being surrounded by other LGBTQI individuals online provides an opportunity for self-disclosure and expression. This opportunity appears to be the result of the security and freedom offered by interacting with one's in-group, as well as the security and freedom inherent in engaging in an online setting.

Disclosure of Sexual Orientation

Many participants began to disclose their sexual orientations around the 15 minute mark of the chat room session for both group Twenty Five and group Fifty. Once some participants 'came out' within these two chat rooms, other participants began to follow suit, and the rest of the chat session included much more personal content, including the categories chosen for analysis in this study. The sense of an in-group presence clearly welcomed participants to disclose of their sexual orientations, after a single participant bravely took the leap, within both groups Twenty Five and Fifty. In group Twenty Five, the first mention of homosexual content was made when participant F1 stated that he was a "gay-mer," implying that he is both gay, and an avid fan of playing console video games. In group Fifty, participant A2 stated that he was considering writing about someone he had a crush on. Immediately after this declaration, participant I2 responded that having a "straight boy crush is the worst." This response had two important possible implications. Firstly, it could be argued that this statement implied that participant I2 was a gay man, as he claimed that pining specifically for a heterosexual man is "the worst." Secondly, it can also be argued that participant I2 believed participant A2 to be a gay man as well as his response was such which he felt participant A2 could relate to, conveying a sense of solidarity in the difficult

experience of being a gay man who develops feelings for a heterosexual man. It is clear that, especially in group Fifty, the perception of an in-group presence had a strong effect on how comfortable participants were to either identify themselves as gay men, or to share subject matter which would only be relevant to other gay men.

This sense of kinship was particularly evident in group Fifty when, approaching the end of the chat session, participant C2 took the initiative to create another Chatzy.com chat room for all participants to enter, where they would be free from the obligations of anonymity for the study, and thus could share their names and identities. In a sense, the interactions in group Fifty led to the formation of a small online gay community. In fact, after data collection for this study was completed, a participant explained to me that most participants had entered the second chat room, shared contact details, and created a chat group for themselves on Whatsapp, a mobile online chatting application. It seems that the effects of an in-group presence were so strong, that participants moved beyond the scope of the study, and continued their small online gay community on an entirely different virtual platform. This is perhaps the strongest indicator of the sense of safety and comfort that arises from gay men interacting with other gay men in online settings, which can lead to the formation of an online gay community.

In complete contrast to groups Twenty Five and Fifty, no mentions of homosexuality were made at all in group Zero, the group which was given no information at all regarding the presence of gay participants within the chat room. This is in line with the idea that the awareness of an in-group presence plays a strong role in how much of oneself one is willing to share with others, even when safety is offered in the form of anonymity.

Sexual Words

Participants in group Twenty Five shared sexual words when speaking about how “most people aren’t open with their sexuality yet,” and how, in Europe, no one has a problem with “gay guys being affectionate in public.” Participants spoke about the “difference between sexual attraction, gender role, gender, and biological sex,” how “human sexuality is by far a simple thing,” as well as the political situation for gay men “back in the 60's where the idea was that gay men must all be sexual deviants, perverts, and child molesters.” These are samples of the types of sexual words and phrases shared within this chat room, and it is clear that the sexual content that was spoken between participants was more observational and ruminative in nature. Participants were interested in the social and political meanings of sexuality and sexual orientation, as well as how heteronormativity is so pervasive that “guys cannot explore their sexuality precisely because of the label pressure, even if they are straight

and only curious.” Participants were also curious about the political situation of homosexual men, discussing how being homosexual is illegal in Uganda.

Comparatively, the sexual content in the chat room for group Fifty included participants commenting on celebrities, with one participant disclaiming “That ass though!” with reference to a particular female music artist. The same participant said “I kinda wanted her to show a bit of vag.” Participants spoke about being “such a drug virgin,” how having a crush can be a result of being “delusional” and “hormonal,” about using one’s “gaydar” and not being “interested in cleavage!” Participants also spoke about what type of men they found sexually attractive, from “younger/innocent type guys,” to “bear types” and “slimmer guys.” It is clear from these examples that the sexual subject matter discussed by group Fifty was more about physicality, sexual desire, and attraction, in contrast to the social and political sexual content discussed in group Twenty Five.

Results showed that the most sexual words were spoken in group Twenty Five. It is interesting that most sexual words were spoken in group Twenty Five, while one would assume that group Fifty would communicate more sexual words, given the larger in-group presence. This is also interesting given that the sexual words spoken in group Twenty Five related to the social and political meanings of homosexuality. It is possible that the differences in sexual words between groups Twenty Five and Fifty, both in number of words and content, have to do with the main effect of Group. It is possible that in group Fifty, participants felt more comfortable to chat about more sexually explicit content very soon into the conversation, as the in-group presence was declared to be quite high, at 50%. In other words, participants were less inhibited in group Fifty, and felt safer to speak about more physically sexual content. However, the fact that participants felt safer to speak about such content, does not imply that *every* participant wished to engage with it. Comparatively, it is possible that participants in group Twenty Five, in perceiving only 25% of fellow participants as gay males, felt more inhibited during their chat session, and so, as some participants began disclosing their sexual orientations, the sexual content of the conversation remained comparatively safer in nature, related to social and political meanings of sexuality. The sexual content, then, was a lot more accessible for the majority of participants, resulting in more sexual words being shared within the chat room. This could explain the higher amount of sexual words in group Twenty Five, compared to group Fifty.

These findings reaffirm the literature and previous research, which has found that gay men are establishing their own culture online, with a large part of this culture pertaining to sex-seeking and engaging in online sexual discourses (Mustanski et al., 2011; Sanders, 2008;

Brown et al., 2005). This research suggests that interacting with one's in-group, even if only online, provides a significant sense of safety and acceptance, allowing for the opportunity to engage with subject matter which one may not be free to express in the offline world. In group Fifty, participants felt safer, and thus the sexual content was more explicit in nature, compared to group Twenty Five. It is not unreasonable to suggest that groups that are marginalized based on sexual orientation would seek to engage more immediately, when given the opportunity, with sex-related subject matter which heteronormative society silences in the real world (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). Chatting online with one's in-group affords this opportunity, as this study has demonstrated.

References to Self

Words which served as references to self included any instances when participants said "I," "mine," "myself" etc. Results showed that references to self words did increase as the percentage of declared in-group presence increased. This could be attributed to the fact that, in identifying an in-group presence, participants may have felt free and safe to share of their own personal experiences, which others may have been able to relate to. Previous research declares that disclosing details of oneself with others online can create a bond "based on support, empathy, and understanding, which facilitates closeness between people over the Internet" (DeHaan et al., 2013). This is one of the benefits of chatting online in general, in that one is able to safely discuss oneself with others. It seems the same can be said for gay men who access online gay communities. As displayed in this study, participants spoke about themselves more, if they perceived a higher number of other people with whom they could identify, thus supporting the literature which claims that self-disclosure is encouraged when one experiences in-group membership (Bargh, McKenna & Fitzsimons, 2002).

Biographical Words

According to the LIWC dictionary (2007), biographical words include words which relate to everyday living, including "sleep," "sickness," "exhausted," "mouth" and "healing." While participants did share the most biographical words in group Fifty and the least in group Zero, results of the ANOVA analysis suggests that participants shared biographical words arbitrarily, more according to the flow of conversation with others, and less according to how many other gay individuals were declared to be within the chat room. This seems reasonable, given that biographical words here pertain to the more common, arguably ordinary details of one's life, and so may not be the most important category of subject matter to share within a chat room (Tikkanen & Ross, 2000), especially when time is limited. Perhaps a longer chat

room session would yield results showing an effect of Group on biographical words. The possibility of a connection between Group and biographical words is worth examining, as previous research has found that many LGBTQI individuals make use of the Internet not only for interpersonal use, but for *intrapersonal* use as well, as a means of finding information that increases comfort or competence with one's offline life (DeHaan, et al., 2013), which could include the everyday functions listed as biographical words in the LIWC dictionary (2007).

Affective Words

It was assumed that more affective, emotional words would be shared in the chat room declaring the highest amount of in-group presence, namely, group Fifty. Group Fifty and group Zero, however, had very similar high numbers of affective words. This occurring in group Fifty makes sense, as it is likely that engaging in a chat room with a higher percentage of in-group presence allowed individuals to feel safer to express themselves in emotional terms (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). The occurrence of the highest emotional words in group Zero defies this explanation, however. Given that group Zero was not provided with a percentage of declared in-group presence, a sense of online gay community was not able to be formed. However, it is possible that participants sensed a different type of online community, and thus shared affective words based on the subject matter discussed within this chat room.

Work Words

Work words within the LIWC dictionary (2007) include words related to occupation, such as "organization," "pension," "duty," "education," and "profession." It could be argued that these types of words are less personal, and less intimate. Therefore, this category of words was used to measure if more impersonal information was shared between participants when the perception of an in-group presence was low. Interestingly, the highest amount of work words were spoken in group Zero, suggesting that participants in this group were indeed less inclined to speak about personal details. This is in line with the claims made by most of the literature, that more personal, emotional and intimate content is shared between gay men online when they are surrounded by other gay men, and thus feel safer to share such information (DeHaan et al., 2013).

Given the high amount of affective words within group Zero, however, it is possible that the participants within this group formed an online community around the subject of work, and as such, shared more affective words with regards to their occupations. This could be argued based on analysis of this group's transcript, in which participants spent the majority of the chat session discussing gym, studying and careers.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

There were several limitations to this study. The most significant of these limitations is that the sample size was really small, at 23 participants. As such, it is possible that the small sample size affected the results of the ANOVA analyses. With a larger sample size in future research it may be possible to identify statistically significant variances, where this study found none.

Another limitation in this study was the limited number of word categories in the LIWC dictionary (2007). It would have been interesting to identify words which related to more ambivalent emotions, as well as psychological health, both of which are not currently present in the dictionary. It would also have been useful to have a dictionary designed specifically for identifying LGBTQI content. While the LIWC (2007) software does allow for the creation of a separate dictionary, time pressures prevented this from being possible for this study.

With regard to future research, the experiment design of this study could be used to identify the behaviours and characteristics of any in-group. Also, it could be interesting for future research to study the behaviours and characteristics of individuals in chat rooms in which there is a mix of LGBTQI individuals, and not only gay men. This could help identify instances of discrimination, marginalization, tolerance and acceptance that occur between these minorities.

Summary and Conclusion

This study sought to examine the online behaviours and characteristics of an online gay male community, specifically within a chat room setting. Due to the unique features of online chat rooms, the content and subject matter discussed amongst gay men within such a space is unique too, as chat room users are granted more safety and freedom to disclose whatever content they wish. As such, by examining the content of an exclusively gay chat room this study has shed some light on how the Internet provides opportunities for LGBTQI individuals to engage with their own in-groups, and thus appear to experience the same social freedoms online that heterosexual individuals are free to experience in the real world. These social freedoms include disclosure of sex-related information, as well as disclosure of sexual orientations, references to self, biographical words, and affective words. This study also shed light on how the perception of an in-group presence affects the content which gay men are willing to share in an online space. As the awareness of a gay male presence within each chat room increased, so did the content shared within each chat room change, in interesting ways. The fact that no gay-related content was shared in the group which was unaware of a gay

presence within their chat room, whereas the subject of occupation and work was discussed thoroughly, suggests that heteronormativity is so pervasive that its effects are even felt on the Internet. This study, therefore, adds to the literature in significant ways, highlighting the need for LGBTQI individuals to engage with others who are like them, and the need for spaces in which they are safe to disclose of themselves more personally. In an ideal world, LGBTQI individuals would be free to do this in as many offline spaces as heterosexual individuals. Until such a time when offline spaces are as safe for LGBTQI individuals as they are for their heterosexual counterparts, the Internet will continue to serve the significant role of providing a safe space in which one is free to be oneself.

References

- Bargh, J.A., McKenna, K. Y. A., & Fitzsimons, G.M. (2002). Can you see the real me? Activation and expression of the “true self” on the Internet. *Journal of Social Issues*, 58(1), 33-48. Doi:10.1111/1540-4560.00247
- Brown, G., Maycock, B., & Burns, S. (2005). Your picture is your bait: Use and meaning of cyberspace among gay men: *The Journal of Sex Research*, 42(1), 63-73. doi:10.1080/00224490509552258
- Community. (1995). *Heinemann English Dictionary* (pp. 202 & 539, 5th ed.). Great Britain: Heinemann.
- Cooper, A. (1998). Sexuality and the Internet: Surfing into the new millennium. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 2(3), 175-193. doi:10.1089/cpb.1998.1.187
- Cooper, A., McLoughlin, I. P., & Campbell, K. M. (2000). Sexuality in cyberspace: Update for the 21st century. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 3(4), 521-536. doi:10.1089/109493100420142
- DeHaan, S., Kuper, L. E., Magee, J. C., Bigelow, L., & Mustanski, B. S. (2013). The interplay between online and offline explorations of identity, relationships, and sex: A mixed-methods study with LGBT youth. *The Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality*, 50(5), 421-434. doi:10.1080/00224499.2012.661489
- Heteronormative. (n.d.). In *Oxford Dictionaries*. Retrieved from http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american_english/heteronormative
- Hillier, L., & Harrison, L. (2007). Building realities less limited than their own: Young people practising same-sex attraction on the internet: *Sexualities*, 10(1), 82-100. doi:10.1177/1363460707072956
- Hillier, L., Kurdas, C., & Horsley, P. (2001). *‘It’s just easier’: the Internet as a safety-net for same-sex attracted young people*. Melbourne, Australia: Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society, La Trobe University.
- Jacobson, B., & Donatone, B. (2009). Homoflexibles, omnisexuals, and genderqueers: Group work with queer youth in cyberspace and face-to-face: *Group*, 33(3), 223-234.
- King, S. A. (1999). Internet gambling and pornography: Illustrative examples of the psychological consequences of communication anarchy. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 2(3), 175-193. doi: 10.1089/109493199316311
- Mustanski, B., Lyons, T., & Garcia, S.C. (2011). Internet use and sexual health of young men who have sex with men: A mixed-methods study. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 40(2), 289-300. doi:10.1007/s10508-009-9596-1

- Pennebaker, J. W., Booth, R. J., & Francis, M. E. (2007). Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count: LIWC2007 [Computer software]. Austin, TX: LIWC.net
- Ross, M. W. (2005). Typing, doing and being: Sexuality and the Internet: *The Journal of Sex Research*, 42(4), 342-352. doi:10.1080/00224490509552290
- Sanders, T. C. (2008). M4M chat rooms: Individual socialization and sexual autonomy: *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 10(3), 263-276. doi:10.1080/13691050701836936
- Subrahmanyam, K., & Greenfield, P. (2008). Online communication and adolescent relationships. *The Future of Children*, 18(1), 119-146.
- Tasdemir, N. (2011). The relationships between motivations of intergroup differentiation as a function of different dimensions of social identity. *Review of General Psychology*, 15(2), 125-137. doi:10.1037/a0022816
- Tikkanen, R., & Ross, M. W. (2000). Looking for sexual compatibility: Experiences among Swedish men in visiting internet gay chat rooms. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 3(4), 605-616. doi:10.1089/109493100420205

Appendix A

Questionnaire

Please provide the following biographical information:

- 1) Age: _____
- 2) Gender: _____
- 3) Current city of residence: _____
- 4) Ethnicity: _____

Please answer the following questions:

- 5) Are you currently employed? _____
- 6) Are you studying? _____
- 7) Are you in a committed relationship? _____
- 8) If yes, how long have you been in a committed relationship? _____
- 9) Do you currently make use of chat rooms/chatting applications? _____
- 10) Have you done so in the past? _____

Appendix B

Review Form

Please provide the following details:

Numerical username: _____

Please mark the box which best suits you:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
I actively participated in my chat room session					
I felt comfortable with the subject matter discussed					
I felt comfortable to share my own opinions and ideas					
I was able to make conversation easily					
I was able to obtain LGBTQI-related information					
I was able to share my sexual orientation within the chat room					
I was able to discuss details about my sexual orientation within the chat room					
I enjoyed my chat room participation overall					

Please read the following statements and mark the box accordingly:

	Yes	No	N/A
I use gay-specific chat rooms/groups/applications frequently			
I have made online friendships from using these resources			
I have made offline friendships from using these resources			
I have used these resources to find LGBTQI-related information			

I have found these resources helpful			
--------------------------------------	--	--	--

I consider myself to be:

Exclusively heterosexual	
Predominantly heterosexual, incidentally homosexual	
Predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual	
Equally heterosexual and homosexual	
Predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual	
Predominantly homosexual, incidentally heterosexual	
Exclusively homosexual	

If you have any comments to make, or opinions to share, about your experience in your chat room, please feel free to include them below:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Appendix C

Ethical Approval

Honours Research Proposal Feedback

Loggin in and coming out: Group dynamics in online gay communities

Jarred Srot

Ethics Comments:
Ethical permission granted with some suggested changes to the consent form: <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. We now ask that all consent forms provide details of the Ethics Chair (i.e. if you would like to speak to the chair of the ethics committee about this study please contact Rosalind Adams at xxx)2. Clarity should also be provided on whether participants will be students from the general UCT community or Psychology students – and consent forms amended accordingly (i.e. for the former SRPP points will not apply).

Ref. no. PSY2014-005

Ethics approved, but please attend to above suggestions. Dawn
27/5/14

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

The purpose of this form is to explain the aims of this study, and to ensure that all participants are informed about the details of their participation before consenting to take part.

What is the purpose of this study?

The Internet has come to play a significant role in the social processes of our daily lives. Because of the Internet, we are able to make contact with friends and family, both near and far. At the same time, the Internet helps us connect with people we are yet to be friends with, people we would not have the opportunity to meet, due to time, or distance. One of the ways we can come into contact with others we haven't physically met yet is through chat rooms. Online chat rooms provide quick and easy access to countless types of online communities, formed out of a mutual interest, location or event. Some examples of online communities include art communities, music communities, political communities, and sporting communities. It is clear that there are multiple online communities available on the Internet. As such, this study wishes to examine the ways in which an online community is formed, specifically through chat rooms, and how the presence of like-minded people plays a role in how others open up and share of themselves with others.

Why are you being asked to participate in this study?

You are being asked to participate in this study as you represent a specific and unique community. The announcement for this study will have specified which community is being studied at this point in time.

What will be required of you?

Should you agree to participate, you will be requested to participate in a chat room, for a single, one hour session. The chat room will specify the presence of a particular online community. You will not be required to divulge any personal information within the chat rooms, and to this end, you will be assigned a numerical username, to protect your identity.

You will be free to talk about anything you wish in the chat rooms, but please do be respectful of others and their opinions and feelings.

Before using the chat room, there will be a questionnaire to fill out. This questionnaire will ask for a first name (this can be any name you wish), an e-mail address and cell phone

number on which you may be reached. Please be assured that this information will be available only to the researcher, for the purpose of reminding participants when their chat room session is to take place. This information will be stored in a safe, password protected location, and deleted on completion of the study.

After your chat room session, there will be a review form available for you to express your feelings and opinions about your experience. These forms will be collected as data. Also, the conversations within the chat rooms will be collected as data.

You will also be asked to fill out two other questionnaires, which are completely anonymous, and will be used for admin purposes.

In total, the duration of your participation should amount to roughly 90 minutes.

Participants

All participants currently live in South Africa, and range in age from 19 to 35 years of age. There will be a total of 8-10 participants in each chat room session. All participants are to participate only if they volunteer to do so.

Benefits

By participating in this study, you ensure that more knowledge about your specific community is circulated. With your participation, this study will give a voice to your community, sharing its unique knowledge and insights. You will be able to share details about, and insights into, your own community. Also, your participation will contribute to the diverse range of online communities that this study wishes to examine.

Risks

This research is considered to be of minimal risk. As you will be using numerical usernames during chat room sessions, you will remain anonymous, and your privacy will remain intact. However, due to the fact that you will be communicating with other individuals, in a space which has no limits on conversation, there is a chance you will be exposed to some offensive language or subject matter. This is not under the control of the researcher.

Participant Rights

All participants have the right to withdraw from participating at any point in the study. There will be no consequences for withdrawing from this study. If you wish to withdraw, contact the researcher at the e-mail address provided below.

Participants have the right to be provided with the results of this research on final completion of this study, should they wish. If you'd like to receive the results of this research, contact the researcher at the e-mail address provided below.

The following section applies only to any participants who are participating for SRPP points:

Compensation

Should you agree to participate, you will be awarded with 3 SRPP points. You will be requested to name the course, and course code, to which you wish these points to be allocated. These points will be allocated at most 2 weeks after the date of your participation

Consent

Once this form has been agreed to, it is the understanding of the researcher that you have read all the information above, including the purpose of the study, the reasons for your participation, the requirements of your participation, the benefits and risks involved in the study, the compensation offered for your participation, and your rights as a participant.

Signing the line below the following paragraph signifies that you are consenting to participate in this study:

I freely give my consent to take part in this study, and authorize that the information I provide in the questionnaires, chat rooms, and review form may be collected and disclosed in this study. I understand that by signing this form I agree to take part in this research.

Signature

Contact details

Contact Jarred using the following information:

E-mail: onlinecommunitiesproject@gmail.com

Cell Number: 083 568 5040

If you wish to speak to the chair of the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology at the University of Cape Town, please contact Rosalind Adams at Rosalind.adams@uct.ac.za

Appendix E

Debriefing Form

While this study presented the idea that it was examining the ways in which multiple online communities interact amongst themselves and others, the actual subject of the study was the online gay community specifically. For this reason, some information provided at the beginning of the study was intentionally misleading, but done so in a way to avoid harming participants.

Given that this study wished to focus specifically on an online gay community, the aims of this study were slightly different to the initially stated aims, including the following:

- 1) To investigate how the presence of other gay individuals within an online social setting, such as a chat room, affects the ways people within the group communicate with each other, including how open individuals are about their sexual orientations, as well as the subject matter that is discussed.
- 2) More broadly, to investigate the ways in which an online gay community is formed, how it functions, and how gay individuals participate within it.

The study also declared that each chat room consisted of a certain percentage of gay participants, while in fact all of the participants in the chat rooms were gay. This was necessary for two reasons. The first reason was to be able to measure how the presence of more gay individuals affected the natural interactions amongst participants, as well as the effect this had on the subject matter discussed in the chat rooms. The second reason for this was to ensure the safety of all participants. By placing participants in a chat room in which all participants were gay, the chances of any verbal abuse, homophobia or cyber bullying were greatly diminished.

By analyzing the conversations held in the chat rooms, this study could shed light on how open gay individuals feel about sharing details about their lives online, compared to how open they feel sharing in their real, offline lives. It is important to shed light, also, on how the presence of other gay individuals affects the ways in which one communicates, how vocal one is in sharing one's opinions, and how free one feels to discuss Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer and Intersexed (LGBTQI) -related issues.

By focusing on a part of the LGBTQI community, a community which is often discriminated against, and marginalized, this study also seeks to show that LGBTQI individuals have the same needs for social interaction, communication, and community as any individuals who make up the heteronormative populations of the world.

If you wish to express any feelings about the study, or the misleading information that was presented to you at the beginning of your participation, please feel free to contact Jarred at onlinecommunitiesproject@gmail.com - you will have an opportunity to do so in the Review Form, too. Also, please send an e-mail if you wish to be sent a copy of the results once this study has been completed.

Once again, thank you sincerely for your participation - your contribution to this study is invaluable!