

Gays, the Internet, and Freedom

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Freedom of expression is best exercised by gays in Manila on the Internet. By looking into the motives of selected gays in Manila for going online, this study analyzes how the freedom of communication has allowed them to shape their space on the Internet and how their online experience has resulted in empowerment.

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 19
Universal Declaration of Human Rights
United Nations

How is this right to the freedom of opinion and expression realized by a marginalized segment like gays in Manila? How can they hold their opinion without interference when what they have to say is not within the economic interest of media owners and institutions? How can these gays seek, receive and impart information and ideas when they have limited access to the mainstream media?

Gays in a Revolution

Rainbow Revolution by any means, we don't mean armed struggle (we're too glamorous for that!). Rather, Task Force Pride seeks to revolutionize our way of thinking, how Filipinos see the gay and lesbian community and how we understand their lives and relationships... (Task Force Pride, n.d.).

In 2003, Task Force Pride, a coalition of Filipino lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) organizations preparing for the yearly Pride March, issued the above statement to explain the theme of the celebrations.

The call for a Rainbow Revolution aimed to change mindsets in order to bring the LGBT community out of the margins of society.

Marginalization happens “not only in the obvious gay-bashing-job-discriminating way but also in a subtle, unrecognizable manner. Marginalization takes the form of oppression, discrimination, and exploitation.” (National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, n.d.)

The negative attitude toward homosexuals, or homophobia, stems from a variety of reasons and is often compounded by ignorance. Gunderson and Morris (1996) said that these reasons may be moral, theological, or philosophical. They explained that homophobia is an irrational response to a perceived threat that is not founded on an understanding of the cause of such threat. In effect, homophobia is rooted in the fear of the unknown.

In the Philippine context, homophobia seems less forceful because of some tolerance and acceptance of gays in society. However, Garcia (1996) said that society’s belief that gays are accepted despite being the objects of ridicule is contradictory if not an outright prejudice. Garcia quotes an inevitable characteristic of Philippine society:

Those who hold fundamentalist, traditional views still make up the vast majority of our society, so that homosexuals are still generally denounced, laughed at, caricatured, ostracized, abhorred and/or discriminated against. Some parents, in fact, would prefer their sons to become philanderers and wife-beaters rather than gays (Mendoza in Garcia, 1996: 70).

Compounding this issue of marginalization is the discrimination that gays inflict on themselves. As Hodges and Hutter (1974) put it in *The Gay Liberation Pamphlet*, “[t]he ultimate success of all forms of oppression is our self-oppression. Self-oppression is achieved when the gay person has adopted and internalized straight people’s definition of what is good and bad.” The process of self-loathing begins at an early age. Gays grow up in societies where homosexuality is loathed, where it is a subject of mockery, disgust, and pity. A homosexual growing up in this kind of society begins to loathe the idea of homosexuality even before he acknowledges his being one. Even at home, a homosexual is never exposed to positive values about homosexuality; therefore he adopts negative ones (Hodges & Hutter, 1974).

Sadownick (1996) advanced the idea that the repressions learned become so great that these create a split inside a homosexual person – alienating him from his passions, disabling him from navigating the treacherous world of feelings, internalizing the feelings of sin, sickness, and criminality. As Hodges and Hutter (1976) explained it, “We have been taught to hate ourselves – and how thoroughly we have learnt the lesson... More typically our self-hatred is unconscious and our self-oppression automatic.”

Homophobia and self-oppression create and complicate the overlapping layers of struggle that the LGBT community faces. The violence, strained family relations, verbal abuse, police harassment, inequality, and stigma in educational institutions, in the work place, and in medical practice, and invisibility in the laws that the LGBT community experiences point to a “complex system of oppression that restrains their inherent human rights” (De Castro, 2001: 70).

It is this system of oppression that has triggered the call for a Rainbow Revolution. The latter’s strategy to change the way society sees the LGBT community is by creating awareness on “how Filipinos see the gay and lesbian community and how we understand their lives and relationships” (Task Force Pride, n.d.). This strategy answers one of the problems associated with homophobia: ignorance.

In the same light, self-oppression comes from the internalization of negative information about being different. The Rainbow Revolution, with its task of “raising the visibility” of the LGBT community and pointing out the diversity within the community, contributes to the task of providing images and identities that would help members of the community, specially those still in the closet, to accept and affirm their sexuality. Eventually, those coming out can become instrumental in forwarding the cause against homophobia.

The Rainbow Revolution, a battle to be won in the field of communication, is set against the Internet Revolution.

The Internet and Empowerment

On the Internet human beings are “active masters” of media as they create content. Internet users have the unique and exceptional ability to choose and consume what has been created by somebody else (Levinson, 1999). This characteristic brings the Internet to the forefront of the age

of a “second orality.” In this age, the elements and characteristics of the oral and written modes of communication are combined in the electronic media (Ong in Bingham, n.d.). As the shift from the oral to the written word has changed the ways humans think, the onset of this second orality transforms not only the way we think and communicate but also our relationships and our views of communities. Ong said that the second orality is “essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print” (Chapter 5, Para. 2). This produces much larger communities with a stronger sense of membership than those in the primary orality.

When these online communities engage in rational debate similar to that in the real world, the Internet permits the expansion of the sphere for discussing socio-political issues (Dahlberg, 2001a). This expansion is “part of the evolving universalization of communication technology accompanied by the universalization of human rights” (McIver, Birdsall, & Rasmussen, 2004, Conclusion section, Para. 2).

With rational debate on the Internet comes the “revitalization of society” that begins in the grassroots pointing to the possibility of changes toward a more democratic world. Based on the testimonials in their research, Hauben and Hauben (1995) concluded that the Internet has substantially improved the lives of people. They pointed out that aside from the availability of information and enormous social resources, the Internet brings people together. For many people, it becomes the gathering, discussion, and planning center. “For the people of the world, the Net [Internet] provides a powerful means for peaceful assembly (Hauben & Hauben, Grassroots, Para. 1). Peaceful assembly allows for people to take control over their lives, rather than that control being in the hands of others” (Hauben and Hauben, Conclusion section, Para. 1). This allows Internet users to empower themselves.

McQuail (2002) said that the Internet, being a participatory medium, is “better suited to producing change, because it is more involving as well as more flexible and has richer information” (125-126). McQuail (2000) appreciated the possibilities of “motivated and interactive communication that are not available from mass media nor from immediate physical environment.” He added that “the idea of ‘community’... has long had an important position in social theory, especially as a tool for assessing the impact of social change...” (133-134).

The Internet Revolution is empowering. It facilitates the distribution of knowledge, the appreciation of individual rights and freedoms, and the building of communities. The Internet has potentials for social change. McQuail (2000) even found such potentials central to the medium. What appears to be an overarching theme in these arguments for the potentials of the Internet is the idea that social change begins from individual empowerment. It is the individual user of the Internet who can command and wield the power of this technology to effect change that comes from bonding together and building communities that would stand for the rights of its members. It is in the hands of the active master of this medium to engage others in rational debate, emphasize human rights, encourage participation, form communities, and eventually build stronger democratic societies.

Gays and the Internet

The widespread use of the Internet has created a vast and diverse source of information on homosexuality available to both gay and straight communities. The Internet has contributed to the decrease of homophobia. At the same time, it has aided gays in understanding their sexuality. Gay support sites have helped and comforted young homosexuals in coming out. There are sites that give space to stories of homosexuals. More importantly, the Internet provides opportunities for gay people to meet as well as allows for participation in combating homophobia through politically oriented sites (Oyama, n.d.).

Marcus (1999) pointed to the Internet as a catalyst for the formation of new gay organizations and the growth of older ones. "The Internet has given gay and lesbian people, many of whom are isolated, a direct connection to each other and the organized gay community" (xii). The Internet provides information for and friendship among gays and lesbians, no matter how open or closeted, from different parts of the world.

In Asia, Pusaksrikit (2003) saw that technology such as the Internet and mobile phones has been instrumental for gays and lesbians in coming out and coming to terms with their identities. "PCs [personal computers], cell phones help same-sex groups to overcome taboos and bring them out of the closet to discover themselves" (Pusaksrikit, Para. 1). The environment for discussions of gender and homosexuality, which the

Asian culture has generally discouraged, has opened up because of the Internet. While in the past materials on homosexuality came mostly from the West, gays and lesbians in Asia now see more local and regional materials.

How then do gays in Manila use this technology to exercise their right to communicate? What is the impact of this appropriation of technology to their struggles as gays in Manila?

Grounded on the life stories of selected gays in Manila, this paper describes the experiences of gays in Manila who go online through their motives for using the Internet and values the consequences of their experience as they exercise their right to communicate. This paper argues that given the freedom to communicate, gays in Manila who are online are enabled and empowered.

Life Stories and Motives

The life stories of the narrators were constructed using in-depth interviews with selected gays in Manila. Given that the gay community in Manila is diverse as it is large, a maximum variation selection strategy allowed for “capturing and describing the central themes or principal outcomes that cut across a great deal of participants...” (Patton, 1990: 172). This strategy made it possible to get a variety of insights that made the derivation of motives more comprehensive. The primary criterion for selecting the narrators was their engagement in gay-related activities online. The additional criteria used to ensure that a wide selection or a maximum variation of interviewees would be selected were age and membership in a gay-oriented/political organization.

Nine narrators were interviewed for the study (see Table 1). There were three narrators who belong to the 25-and-below age category and four were between 25 and 35 years old. There was one narrator each for the 36-to-45 and 46-and-above age categories. Four out of the nine narrators were members of at least one gay-oriented/political organization.

Barnard had an early recognition of his sexuality even as he lived in a repressive environment. Growing up, he felt insecure. He has totally accepted his sexuality after realizing that gays needed closure in order to move on in their lives. He represents himself fluidly – at times he is straight-acting and on other occasions he can be effeminate. Barnard is

Table 1. Narrators for the Study

NAME¹	AGE	AFFILIATION
<i>Bernie</i>	23	None
Barnard Miranda	30	Gay Men Support Group
Dax de Castro	26	Amnesty International, The Library Foundation, Pinoypride.org, Lagablab, Progay
<i>Dennis</i>	19	None
Ding Cruz	36	None
Gerard Villafuerte	28	None
<i>Jem</i>	23	Metropolitan Community Church
<i>Jose</i>	60	None
Kokoy Triviño	34	The Library Foundation, Agape

¹The full names are the real names of the narrators while first names are aliases.

a long-time user of the Internet though he is not that adept with its use. He knows that not all the content online is valid or true.

At an early age, Dax de Castro was already aware that he was gay but has not identified himself as one. He came out to his friends in high school and since then he has been out to all his friends. It was only when he graduated in college when he came out to his parents. He says that he is effeminate but he does not cross-dress. He spends at least 22 hours a week online. He is aware that online content is constructed and that not all of it is valid. Dax also recognizes the digital divide especially among gays who can afford to go online and those who cannot. He is aware of the various ideologies represented online, specifically the anti-gay views that are detrimental to the gay community.

Dennis realized that he was gay when he was still young. In school, he is mild-mannered and effeminate. He feels that he needs to come out to his family. He is now out selectively, mostly to his friends in college. At present he is not concerned with gay political action. His personal concerns are his priority and this includes finding a lover. In the real world, the way he presents himself varies according to the situation. Dennis admits that he is not technically proficient with the use of the various softwares related to the Internet. But he knows that online content is constructed and not all the materials you find online are valid.

In grade school, Ding Cruz was teased by his classmates for being gay. In Grade VI, he realized that he was gay because he had a crush on his classmate. He was discriminated against in school and his gayness was revealed to his parents by school authorities. Ding is now out to his friends, family, and workmates. He says that he is obviously gay which he defines as somewhere between straight-acting and effeminate. At this point, Ding is still learning about gay issues. Ding has unlimited online access in his home. Ding knows that the Internet is commercially driven and that online content is constructed and not always valid. He has an awareness of the digital divide.

Gerard Villafuerte was in his 2nd year in high school when he realized that he was gay. He had attractions to the same sex but did not accept that he was gay. In college, he joined a fraternity to find his sexual identity. Gerard discovered his sexuality online and started to come out to friends he met on the Internet. After accepting his sexuality, Gerard sought the acceptance of those around him. Online and in the real world, Gerard prefers to be true to his identity. He does not deny that he is gay. He spends at least two hours a day on the Internet. He is also aware of the commercial nature of the Internet and that Internet content is laden with ideology.

Jem was born to a conservative family of Protestant pastors. When he was in school, he was teased by his classmates because he was “soft”. His identity representation is fluid – he acts straight in front of his family and office mates but in the privacy of his friends’ place, he can be loud and effeminate. Jem spends 10 hours a week online. Jem said that he is not too familiar with the mechanics of the Internet but he is aware that it is commercially driven, that there is a digital divide, and that not all online content is valid.

Jose grew up in an environment where sex and sexuality were not talked about. His physical activities are limited because of his debilitating ailment. He is not interested in sex anymore. His outlook on being gay is conservative. He now has a straight partner. He goes online in his house where he has unlimited access to the Internet. For him, this is a form of mental exercise. Jose understands the commercial nature of the Internet and is also wary about the validity of all online content. He said that he does not allow the Internet technology to control his actions, and that he would rather regulate and shape his online activities.

Kokoy Triviño realized at an early age that he was gay. He felt abnormal because he was not like his classmates. Because of this, he suffered in the closet. When he decided to come out, he felt a dissonance between his self-representation and the stereotypical gay. Since he is straight-acting, he felt weird about coming out because the typical concept of gay is effeminate. Now, Kokoy is totally out and still straight-acting. He is not concerned about gay issues since he feels that it does not directly affect him. Kokoy's online access is through the computer in their office. He said that his knowledge about the mechanics of the Internet is limited and he does not readily believe everything he sees online.

Noel grew up as a loner. He was abused as a child because he was gay. His uncles used to scold and beat him up. He grew up afraid of being gay. His first sexual experience was when he was only 12 years old. Now, Noel lives with his lover and is not monogamous. He has long accepted his sexuality but he is out only to a select group of friends and relatives. He represents himself as a straight-acting gay. He prefers to lurk online. Being a graduate of Information Technology, Noel is proficient in the use of the Internet and he understands that not all content he sees online is valid.

From their life stories, the narrators' motives for going online were derived using Kenneth Burkes' pentad ratios in his "Dramatis" as an analytical tool. Motives are the inducing factors, based on the social and personal circumstances of the narrator and his attitudes, which explain or justify his act of using an agency for a specific purpose within a given context. The dramatic terms relevant to each other were compared to derive the motives for the various ways each individual narrator used the Internet. "It is by discovering in a narrative, an emphasis on one particular term, the relationship between the terms, and the nuances of language used in developing a term, that the pentad reveals something about the worldview of the rhetoric" (Hubler, 2005, *Symbolizing in a Technological Society*, Para. 5).

The Motives of Selected Gays in Manila for Going Online

Gratifying sexual needs

Consuming pornographic materials online is motivated by a variety of circumstances. The Internet hosts a wide selection of gay pornographic material not locally available in other media. Its mere availability causes the narrators to consume these materials. For those who are more sexually active and have a higher interest in sex, satisfying their sexual needs became easier with the availability of these materials. The privacy that the Internet provides is another motive for gays to consume gay pornography online. Kokoy finds that his motivation for using the Internet to get pornographic materials is because it saves him from the embarrassment of having to deal with vendors of these materials in the real world.

The Internet was so convenient because in the real world you have to have the guts to ask for and buy such materials. *Dyabe* [It is embarrassing] to browse for these things in a magazine store (Kokoy).

For Kokoy, the need to be discreet in acquiring pornographic materials is not only because of his being gay. Even though Kokoy has fully accepted his sexuality, and is not ashamed of it as he is already out to his family and friends, he grew up in a conservative atmosphere where the consumption of pornographic materials is taboo.

The Internet gives an opportunity for gays to search for sexual partners. Noel started going online when he was seventeen.

...as a teenager with raging hormones, I was looking for sex. High school *ka, mainit ka. Naghahanap ka ng chuke-chakan* ever [You are in high school and are hot. You look for sex]... And I heard about the sexual activities online from my male friends. They would talk about porn sites and chats [sic] that ended in SEBs[sex eyeballs]. I deduced that if straight guys can seek sex online, then gays can find it too [sic] (Noel).

The availability of networking agencies on the Net is a motivation for seeking sex partners online. Gerard began his gay life online hungry

for sexual experiences, purposely going online to satisfy his sexual urges.

I will say *na dumaan ako sa pokpok* stage [I underwent the sex-seeking stage]. For three years, my ads on the chat rooms were all about having sex, even group sex (Gerard).

While living in the closet to maintain his privacy and with very limited exposure to gays and the gay life, Gerard had no other means of meeting other gays. He found networking activities like chatting a convenient way to hook up with them.

It became a venue for me to meet other people for friendship, even sexual and romantic relationships. From these groups, I found people I can easily talk to, people with whom I can be myself (Gerard).

Like Gerard, gays who are just coming out and those who are still in the closet find the Internet a safe place for hooking up with other gays.

For gays, the Internet is a sanctuary for those in the closet. If you're hot and out, you don't have to go online to hook up or find somebody. But otherwise, the Internet is a safe place (Barnard).

This safety comes from getting a sense of community among gays online. Even for those new to the Internet, the interaction among gays in the chatrooms show bonds that imply a certain security coming from people who trust each other enough to have eyeballs [EBs].

...Through the Internet, gay communities are built and these online communities go beyond the Net. Those [who are] online seem to know each other already. They seem to have seen each other already in the real world (Ding).

Also, because gays online are so used to EBs and there are many places where gays can meet, seeing each other in person becomes a matter of course (Dax).

Having sex online is fast, straightforward, and convenient. Noel, who has always been sexually active and adventurous, is constrained from going on SEBs because of his jealous lover. Avoiding the possibility of getting caught as well as the sometimes long and tedious process of finding a sexual partner for an SEB, he opts to just have sex online.

Ngayon, hindi mo na kailangan mag-SEB [Now, you don't have to go on SEB]. You can do it online already. You can go to chat rooms and view people showing their dicks and masturbating. *Trip na rin yon* [It can pass for a sex trip]. With a webcam and mic, you can really have sex online. *Alam mo na* [You know], you watch each other (Noel).

Getting gay-related information

The availability of a range of gay-related information on the Internet not available from other media motivates the narrators to go online.

Barnard, Dax, and Jem seek out this information in relation to their work and affiliations. Barnard goes online to do research work and get information useful for counseling members of Gay Men Support Group (GMSG).

The Internet is a good source of information about being gay, gay politics, same-sex marriage, discrimination, etc., given that it is difficult to find this information in other media...It is very seldom that you encounter articles; in fact you can't expect information about what's happening in the gay community from newspapers (Barnard).

Dax shares the same sentiment, "The Internet provides gays with information that they cannot get locally." This information is also important for his work in the gender division of Amnesty International and as a moderator of a gay forum online.

But most of the time, when I download materials, these are related to my work – information on gender, HIV, sexuality, gay-related issues... (Dax).



The homepage of Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). Retrieved April 22, 2006 from http://www.geocities.com/mcc_manila/

Jem usually downloads gay-related information materials for his work with Metropolitan Community Church (MCC).

Information about gay issues is readily available online. It serves to educate gay men on a variety of subjects like discrimination and labelling... Through the Internet, we become exposed to other gay cultures. It shows that there are differences among gays but at the same time presents the similarities and common causes... I download online articles, like those on reconciling faith and sexuality, which I forward to the members of the Church (Jem).

The convenience of accessing information online is another factor that motivates the narrators to find information on the Net.

It is also convenient and time-saving since you don't have to go to libraries to do research (Barnard).

For Ding and Kokoy, who are just beginning to be interested in gay politics and the advocacies of gay oriented organizations, the Internet provides the information they seek.

For the gay community, the Internet provides information pertaining to what's happening around them and makes it easier for gay people to meet each other... There are gay cause-oriented groups online, like "Lagablab," which is beneficial for gays. They can provide you with information on being gay and gay issues (Kokoy).

Curiosity and the need to be up-to-date with what is happening in the gay scene and other news on gay life and culture prompt the narrators to consume gay-related materials on the Net.

Kokoy, Noel, and Gerard, after coming to terms with their sexuality, wanted to satisfy their curiosity and learn more about the gay life.

While seated in front of the computer, there are so many places one can go to, so many information one can get. Information like new gay places one can visit in the real world. There are tips and warnings about gay places and people. One time, a warning was posted about a certain person who had crab lice, prompting a discussion on how to get rid of it. Of course who else would help each other but gays themselves? ...Second, the Internet provides information about gay activities. Now you know where the action and happenings are, the new places, the safe places. Gay life now is safer unlike before where it was limited to second-rate cinemas and dark parks and streets (Noel).

Dax, Jem, and Barnard, who are busy with work, and Jose who is physically incapable of directly participating in real world gay activities count on the Internet for the latest information on the gay life.

I still look at these groups for the latest on gay life in Manila (Dax).

Dahil bakla ako [Because I am gay], I have a need to be updated with gay issues and at the same time get involved with gay advocacy projects. And the Internet makes this possible (Jem).

Also I want to be updated with what's happening on the gay scene – the latest gay bar, the other online gay sites, and gay-friendly locations on the Net (Jose).

Expressing opinion

One of the main characteristics of the Internet is its technological features that allow its users to produce content. The narrators are drawn to these features because it allows them to freely express their opinions, identities, and fantasies. Compared to other media, the Internet provides the venue where these narrators are not limited by expense, hampered by censorship, and marginalized by homophobic views. Also, the Internet offers an audience for their opinions.

Dax, an activist in a gay organization and moderator of a gay forum, views the Internet as a space for gays to communicate. This becomes an outlet for him to express himself especially because he seldom goes out anymore.

Once a week, I see my boyfriend. *Tapos ngayon* [These days], I don't go out much on weekends unlike before when on Fridays and Saturdays, you would see me in Malate. *Sa bahay na lang* [Now I stay at home]. Maybe it's age, *tumatanda na* [I am growing old]. *Kasi kung minsan* [Sometimes], going out is tiring, *nakakapagod* — too much effort goes into gimmicks... On "pinoypride.org," with its "shout box" and personal message threads, I get to express myself and talk about my life, *tsikahan lang* [just short talk] (Dax).

Gerard is a critical and opinionated person who actively participates in fora, posts blogs, and chats online. He uses these agencies to satisfy the need to articulate his ideas, experiences, and help other gays with their problems.


I also go to "pinoyexchange.com." There are specific forums there for people with alternative preferences, some of whom have become my friends, who get to talk about their lifestyle. I frequent this site to share my opinion and experiences... I find satisfaction when I am able to express myself especially in the chat rooms – when I'm able to voice out my opinions, offer a

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	PEX FEATURED QUOTE "Cory should shut up. Arroyo should win the support of the military, purge disloyal officers ala Stalin, and start clamping down on the political chaos that has really shackled our country from progress. Sometimes, I feel like Filipinos enjoy too much freedom, and very little discipline. It is almost like anarchy, and we need less freedoms for the sake of stability. There is always a tradeoff between personal freedom and state power. I think there is too much of the former and way to little of the latter. We have shown that as a people, we do not exercise our freedom responsibly." - posted by gox "What's Wrong with Cory?"	HOT ON PEX  Anticipating Holy Week As Filipinos prepare to observe Christ's death and resurrection this coming Holy Week, some are already reflecting on what sacrifice they can offer to God this season. And if fasting isn't one of them, having a kosher menu for lent will have to do.	JobsDB.com Career & Education Fair 2006 JobsDB Phils, Inc. will be holding a Career and Education Fair on May 3-4, 2006 at the World Trade Center, Pasay City. This gathering is expected to draw in 10,000 jobseekers who will apply for thousands of job openings. Read more.

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suggestion. There are also times when chatters, and there are a lot of them, who have problems and ask for advice online. So I give them some advice. I find it gratifying when I am able to help some people (Gerard).

Jose is assertive, confrontational, and cognizant of how media like the Internet can influence opinions. Living alone and far from his friends, the Internet provides him with an audience for his ideas and beliefs about being gay and homosexuality as a whole.

As long as I express what I want to express, *i-express na nila yung kanila* [the others can express theirs, too] And if they disagree with what I said and start a fight, then I'm in on it. You know, in real life, I don't back out from confrontations. That is how I live my life, *hindi ako umaatras* [I never back out]. Daily life *ko ganyan eh* [That is the way I live]. *Talagang* very confrontational *ako eh*. *Hindi ko na iniintindi* how you will react [I am really very confrontational. I don't care how you will react]...When I get e-mails from these groups that interest me,

I reply immediately. If the topic is about politics or religion you will see the maturity in me. My replies are serious. But when you talk about sex, you talk about all kinky things; I will have to invent even kinkier things, even if they are just figments of my imagination (Jose).

Like Jose who sometimes becomes creative online, Dennis uses the Internet to create and express identities and fantasies. Mild-mannered and effeminate, he still has to formally come out to his family. But on the Internet, while representing himself as a female, he gets to convey the identity that cannot find full expression in the real world. Online, Dennis is able to invent another persona and fulfill his fantasies, believing that online content and interaction are constructed and may not often be true. Also, there is a sense of enjoyment that Dennis and the other narrators find in creating these fantasies.

Honestly, I am still a virgin. And I would want my first time to be in a beach with all the works. With fireworks even. I want a romantic setting, similar to what a man would do for a woman. *Parang ganon, napaka-fantasy niya nga kaya sinasabing pa-girl ako* [It sounds like a fantasy, that is why they say I am like a girl]. *Kasi, romantic setting talaga ang gusto ko* [I really go for a romantic setting]...Since I create different personalities I can be whatever you want me to be. *Kung gusto nila akong maging babae, di magiging babae ako... kung gusto nilang straight acting, di straight acting ako* [If they want a girl, then I become a girl. If they want straight acting, I act straight]...And I somehow enjoy this performance. *Kasi pareho kaming naglolokohan* [We know we are not being serious]. How would I know if what he says about himself is true? He also wouldn't know if what I'm saying is true. *Parang in a way, nage-enjoy akong makipaglokohan* [In a way, I enjoy this play-acting]. As it is, I can only be totally out online. It is only through the Internet chats, specially in the dating rooms, where I can be who I want to be, where I can create the personality that I want to have (Dennis).

For Jem, expressing his opinions online is an extension of his membership in a gay cause-oriented group. Aside from voicing his views, his motive is to help other gays as well.

The Internet becomes a venue to discuss issues, to start advocacies, and even to talk about personal problems and to answer personal needs... Feeling *ko*, I'm putting the Internet into good use because I am able to get and share information that is helpful for the gay community (Jem).

Understanding their sexuality and sexual identity

The space that gays have made for themselves online allows the narrators to get information and viewpoints on being gay. Getting this knowledge is driven by the need to understand and affirm their sexuality and sexual identity. At the same time, other gays on the Internet help shape their attitudes towards homosexuality and the issues confronting the gay community.

Jem goes online to discuss gay issues and personal concerns. In the process, he also gets to understand his sexuality, confirm his beliefs and attitudes towards being gay, and find affirmation from self-reflection and others on being gay.

Information about gay issues is readily available online. It serves to educate gay men on a variety of the subjects like discrimination and labelling... Issues are discussed from different perspectives. *Mas nahibimay yung* issues [Issues are dissected]. Everyone becomes involved. Personally, I have met people with whom I have discussed issues that I am not too familiar with. And it goes both ways, I get information while they get to solicit my opinions... Through the Internet, we become exposed to other gay cultures. It shows that there are differences among gays but at the same time presents the similarities and common causes. This makes it easier for those in the closet to accept themselves. *Nagkakaroon sila ng way para i-accept yung sarili nila na parang part sila ng* community [They find a way to accept themselves as part of a community] (Jem).

Noel's initial curiosity for going online to meet other gays has turned into a need to get news on the gay life. This has exposed him to a variety of gay lifestyles and a range of gay identities which he was not aware of. In effect, this need to go online has led him to an understanding of his sexuality and identity and an appreciation of gay issues.

I have learned a lot from my online activities about the gay community and being gay. *Eh, mas marami akong nalalaman. Hindi na limited yung perspective ko* [I get to know more. My perspective is no longer limited]... The Internet has helped to open my mind about gay issues. I've learned about gay liberation and gay rights on theNet (Noel).

This understanding has led Noel to an acceptance of his sexuality.

What you see is what you get. I don't deny it anymore if somebody asks if I'm gay. Readily I would say yes. But I don't owe anybody an explanation. If I deny my sexuality it is just like denying myself. I won't be able to move on. I will be caught in a spiral of self-pity (Noel).

This strength of conviction comes from the understanding and affirmation he gets online. It can be said that Noel, who grew up abused and without gay peers, goes online to derive strength from other gays on the Internet.

Ding is still learning about gay issues. Going online helps him understand these issues and become more accepting of other people's perspectives. His attitude that the Internet is a tool for gays to gain information that leads to affirmation is a strong motive for Ding to go online.

You can say that I am not that active with regard to gay politics. It is only now that I am becoming curious about these things. My attitude is: What is there? What is happening? I am sort of looking at things... Going online helps in understanding these things. It is online where I realized, through the user rooms on Yahoo! Chat, that the gay community is so diverse. *Ang daming klaseng bading* [There are different types of homosexuals]. *Di ba*, by knowing, you tend to accept? The Internet gives the gay community a chance... to talk among themselves without being out there... And I can also say that I got to know myself better through the Net. *Mas nakilala ko ang sarili ko* [I got to know myself better]. There are some things about myself that I sort of affirmed online (Ding).

Gerard was initially in denial, even joining a fraternity to find his heterosexual side. Failing to do so, he turned to the Internet to learn about himself and his sexuality.

I had to learn more about this. During that time, Margie Holmes was very popular so I would go to National Bookstore and read her books about homosexuality... When I started going online, these groups helped me discover myself and the lifestyle that I live [sic]... From these groups, I found people I can easily talk to, people with whom I can be myself... It has made being gay easier because if you want to come out but you are afraid and don't know anybody, the Internet becomes a venue for you to understand what being gay is all about. It also allows you to see how to live a gay life (Gerard).

Because of his experience, Gerard said that the Internet helps gays accept themselves.

I think the Internet is slowly helping gay people accept themselves... The Internet is helping gays cope with their identities and resolve issues within their community (Gerard).

Finding information on sexuality and sexual identity online is easy, convenient, and inexpensive. Going online also guarantees one's privacy while consuming this information.

Feeling *ko din* [I also feel], specially for the young ones, it is now easier to explore and learn about one's sexuality because of the Internet. Before, people read about being gay in libraries, or go to National Bookstore to read "Ladlad" because they cannot buy or leave this kind of books at home. *Ngayon* [Now], the Internet provides them this information (Dax).

Specially for those still in the closet, they can ask questions about being gay, about coming out, without getting embarrassed, without really revealing who you are (Kokoy).

Building personal relationships

The narrators used the Internet for different purposes related to personal relationships including finding friends and lovers. One of the motives for finding friends online is the very few spaces in the real world where relationships can be established discreetly and conveniently. The Internet bridges physical and cultural distances that used to prevent gays to interact. This interaction is strengthened by the knowledge that online relationships can go beyond the Internet and into the real world.

In addition the need to ease loneliness and find people with the same interests and persuasions is helped by networking agencies on the Internet like the chat rooms, e-groups, and personal networking sites.

Noel did not have any gay friends growing up. Online, he found gay friends who also became close to him in the real world. Coming from a financially challenged family, Noel sought out benefactors to support his lifestyle.

My curiosity for going online was driven by my desire to meet other gays. When I was in high school, I did not have any gay friends... Most of the time, I usually chat using “gaydar,” “gay.com,” “Yahoo Messenger” or “mIRC” depending on where there are interesting people... I have also met other chatters who became my friends through grand eyeballs... Sometimes for months, I would live with and live off gay sex partners I met on and offline. I used to have a lot of fuck buddies (Noel).

Like Noel, Jose longed for gay friends. After living abroad and concentrating on his work for most of his life, he had very little association with gays. When he moved out of Manila where his small circle of gay friends was, he found himself alone. He needed gay friends and found them online. The Internet was particularly useful for him since his activities are limited by his physical abilities. For Jose, the Internet is a virtual gathering of people where he could meet other gays.

Meeting people online is like meeting people in a crowd. Probably some of them would be of value and some of zero value in so far as my interests are concerned... There are some who are intellectually interesting. Yes, some of them I have met. And some of them we plan to meet (Jose).

He would sometimes invite those in his e-groups to his place for company.

There was also a time when I invited two of my e-group members over to my place...*Natuturwa din naman ako* [I am also glad when], occasionally there are some who would want to come here in the *bundok*. I am really amused because I see other people. *Na-aaliw lang ako kasi, kung bago nakatungtung pa din ako sa lupa. Dabil nakakakita pa din ako ng tao* [I am amused because I can still be considered down to earth. I still see people]. And in a way I get updated and exposed with [sic] what is happening in the gay world (Jose).

Although he believes that no permanent friendships are developed online, he still continues to seek relationships there.

Relationships online are not the same as relationships in real life because what people project online, and I believe this because this is what I also do, are not their real selves. *Alam mo naman yung mga bakla, puro pantasya* [You know homosexuals, they fantasize a lot]...I've met some very good personalities too, the intelligent ones. Our meetings have been very fruitful — up until now we communicate. It could be because there was a meeting of minds. Not that we always have to agree but we are drawn to how each other thinks. Somehow we have come to respect each other's opinions and even learn from them. But that's how far it goes because very diverse *ang kanilang* professions and their activities. It could also be that they don't have all the time in the world since most of them are younger than I am (Jose).

For somebody who would rather stay home than go out, the Internet provides the opportunity to meet other gays at the relative safety and comfort of one's home. Kokoy went online to look for a lover.

Siguro [Perhaps] my life is on the safe side. I lead a simple life: office, station, gym, *babay* [home]. Very predictable. I'm also family-oriented; I'd rather stay at home than go out...I was envious of my brother Dondon because of how he meets people with so little effort and how he has a lot of friends from the Net. I felt that I can do the same. I mean, if he had

done it, why not me? That is why I started going online. I wanted to find somebody because I was still single.

Although his search for a lover was not fruitful, Kokoy still thinks that the Internet is valuable in meeting other gays and finding friendship.

For others, this [going online] becomes a chance for gays to know each other. Chatting for example makes it easy to have gay friends...For them, it's their social window. It's their channel to the world. It's like going out without leaving home (Kokoy).

Ding, who is very shy and not into the gay scene, prefers going online to talk or meet other gays.

When I started going online, I realized how shy I was. It's only in the chat rooms that I can talk... You also get to know people online. Remember, I met Tom [his American lover] through the Internet...Going online is my 'social event' (Ding).

Born to a family of Protestant pastors and still in the closet, Jem's movements are restricted. The Internet becomes a discreet and safe place to meet other gays whom he can befriend.

I usually go to gay sites at home, *hindi ko magawa sa office* [I cannot do it in the office]. At home, usually late at night...It is also easy to find sex or lovers online. I personally don't look for lovers online, but if somebody finds me interesting, why not?...You also meet people on the Net who can help you out. One time, I met this guy through a gay site and he was nice enough to escort me and serve as my guide to this place I was not familiar with (Jem).

Gerard's purpose for going online was to meet other gays. Initially, he wanted to meet gays for sex. Eventually, the people he met online became more than sex partners. They served as his guide in learning and understanding the gay world. Eventually, he met his lover online. Now, his social world – making and building relationships – revolves around the Internet.

These SEBs also became my opportunity to discover the gay places in Manila. For the longest time I saw chatters talk about some gay places that I did not have the courage to go to by myself...As those years passed, I realized that I have built a lot of friendships from my encounters. I have become friends even with those whom I did not find sexually attractive but whose company I enjoyed...Eventually I found a boyfriend from the chat (Gerard).

Aside from the opportunity to meet other gays online, for a student like Dennis, the added attraction of the Internet is it allows socialization with other gays without spending much.

It makes it possible for you to meet and chat with people. I like it too because it's free. *Walang gastos makipagsosyalan* [You can socialize without spending anything] (Dennis).

Building gay communities

If you want to get a sense of community or become part of a gay community, go online (Barnard).

Although this attitude implies that there are those who go online to belong to a gay community, the stories of the narrators do not provide a direct articulation of using the Internet for this purpose. But it is implied that there is a need to become part of a community.

It has made living out the gay lifestyle easier because if you want to come out but you are afraid and don't know anybody, the Internet becomes a venue for you. This holds true for me – I've discovered I am not alone and it has allowed me to see the proper way to live the gay lifestyle. The Internet has made communities, online communities, possible. *Pinaglalapit niya ang mundo ng mga gay people* [The Internet connects the world of gay people] (Gerard).

The creation of gay communities on the Internet is an unintended consequence of how gays have shaped the Internet as a space for networking. Gays have built this virtual community in the hope that this

community would transcend the Net and foster relationships among gays in the real world.

Through the Internet gays meet each other. They begin to have common activities. It unites those with the same inclinations and interests. Perhaps this would allow for the creation of gay communities (Noel).

Through the Internet and through the e-mail groups gay communities are formed. The Internet strengthens the gay community because we know when we should meet, when to do things, what the issues are at hand...[A]nd these online communities go beyond the Net. Those online seem to know each other already. They seem to have seen each other already in the real world (Ding).

Aside from meeting other gays online, other purposes that the narrators have for using the Internet are: to look for sexual partners; to find lovers; to maintain friendships; to advance gay causes; to discuss gay issues; to learn, understand, and affirm sexual identities; and to help and reach out to other gays leading to a sense of community. Through these, the narrators satisfy the need to build and belong to gay communities. As an outcome of these other uses of and gratifications sought through the Internet, these purposes become motives for going online to build and belong to both virtual and real world gay communities.

The term 'belong to a gay community' on the other hand, can be seen as an overarching motive for the narrators to engage in the various online activities which involve networking and relationships. For example, because a narrator wants to belong to a gay community, he uses the Internet to maintain relationships, to express his opinions, etc.

Gay Empowerment

In valuing how these selected gays have been empowered by their Internet use, this study looks at the components of empowerment posited by Schwerin (in Lillie, n.d.) who, after a review of different definitions of empowerment from various disciplines, enumerates eight primary components of empowerment.

These components include self-esteem, self-efficacy, knowledge and skills, political awareness, social participation, political participation, political rights and responsibilities, and resources. Self-esteem is defined as the individuals' evaluation of their self-worth. This implies how they understand themselves and their identities. Self-efficacy is how persons feel about their power to control their environment after an assessment of their capabilities. Knowledge and skills are "personal competencies such as interpersonal communication, stress management, coping skills, problem solving, etc...." Political awareness is a critical consciousness on matters of social justice. Social participation is the involvement in community organizations and events. Political participation is the involvement in political processes that foments change. Political rights and responsibilities refer to "knowing and standing up for the traditional human rights" and performing the duties of a member of a community. Resources entail the ability to access means to meet human needs. This is the ability to utilize social, political and informational resources (Lillie, n.d.).

These components of empowerment are evident in the life stories and motives of the narrators.

Motives that point to the use of the Internet for sexuality and identity show that the space that the narrators have made for themselves on the Internet enables them to evaluate their self-worth. This evaluation allows them to understand, accept and affirm their sexuality and sexual identity. In a society where they are marginalized and their identities are demonized, power comes from a positive valuation of self-worth. Especially for those with internalized homophobia, this understanding, acceptance, and affirmation provides them with the feeling and conviction that they are not worth less than those in the mainstream of society. This positive valuation leads to efficacy.

Self-efficacy is evident in the way the narrators are motivated to go online to express themselves, gratify their sexual needs, and build online and real-world relationships and communities. These motivations come from the knowledge that they have the power or capability to control this electronic environment. More importantly, this self-efficacy has translated into both virtual and real-world action. They have appropriated the power of the Internet and have shaped it to create their own space online.

In this space, the narrators are enabled with knowledge and skills that augment and enrich their personal competencies. Their motives to go online to get gay-related information show how the narrators have acquired the knowledge and skills that allow them to cope with being gay. Their motives to use the Internet as a medium of expression manifest how the Internet has facilitated interpersonal communication.

In terms of political awareness, the life stories of the narrators provide evidence that the Internet has made some of them conscious of their social circumstances and marginalization. We saw how going online made them critical of the social injustices towards gays. A case in point is how Gerard's motives for going online has shifted from looking for sexual gratification and relationships to seeking and expressing his opinions on the plight of gays in Manila.

The online space for gays in Manila is a venue for social participation. Their involvement in online groups speaks of how the Internet has empowered these gays to become part of a larger gay community. As the motives for building relationships and those related to gay communities suggest, these narrators have participated in social activities that resulted in the formation of bonds online and offline.

Although the narrators have awareness of their political situation, the life stories suggest that there is a lack of direct political participation among the narrators that comes from going online. In fact, all of the narrators view the apathy of gays online as a hindrance to political participation. The exercise of political rights and responsibilities are in the level of personal circumstances and not towards gay liberation. However, the stories imply that because of the political awareness coming from gay space online, some of the narrators like Gerard and Noel are beginning to show the need to assert their rights and practice their responsibilities for the liberation of their community. The motives of going online to express opinions, specifically cause-oriented views, point to the narrators' need to help other gays.

The Internet, in the manner that the narrators have shaped it, has become a social, political, and information resource for them. Similar to the conclusion in Lillie's study on the empowerment potentials of the Internet, going online for gays in Manila is an experience "with more empowerment potentials as compared to some of the disempowering aspects of society in general" (Lillie, n.d.).

The Rainbow Revolution and the Internet

The Rainbow Revolution has a two-fold agenda. First, it calls for the creation of awareness and understanding of the lives of gays and lesbian among Filipinos. Second, it aims to combat internalized homophobia.

Online, the rainbow revolution appears to be working primarily towards providing images and identities that would help the members of the community accept and affirm their sexuality.

As the life stories and motives of the narrators show, these gays have used the Internet to their advantage. They have become active masters of the medium. They have wielded the power of the technology and appropriated the medium to take advantage of its potentials for social change.

Gays in Manila, by shaping the technology, have gone beyond talking to each other and promote action that leads to coming out of the margins of society. Despite the problems of technological and financial access, they have used the Internet to create a functional public sphere where they are able to discuss issues that impact on their lives. They have, to a certain degree, overcome the cleavage between the *bakla* and the straight-acting gay to foment closer relationships. The Internet has become a virtual support group for these gays. And it has gone beyond the Net and into the real world. These are the beginnings of conscientization, of an awareness of the problems of homophobia, which will allow gays in Manila to bond and unite and eventually form a movement towards gay liberation. At this stage, the way gays in Manila use the Internet points to a process where the personal becomes political. Personal problems become political problems. The motives—specifically those that relate to sexuality, sexual identity, and community building—point to consciousness-raising. The narrators are able to examine their own oppression and share their opinions with regard to their predicament. When the personal becomes political, empowerment takes hold in the lives of these narrators.

This is the promise of the freedom of communication online.

On the other hand, it is too early to tell, since the Internet is still in its infancy, if the ways gays in Manila are shaping the technology will lead to liberation. Several questions remain unanswered. For instance, how does this empowerment translate to the exercise of freedom in the real world? How do these “empowered” gays help in the creation of

awareness and understanding for the community? How can gays without online access take advantage of the Internet (and in the process not be, once again, marginalized)?

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