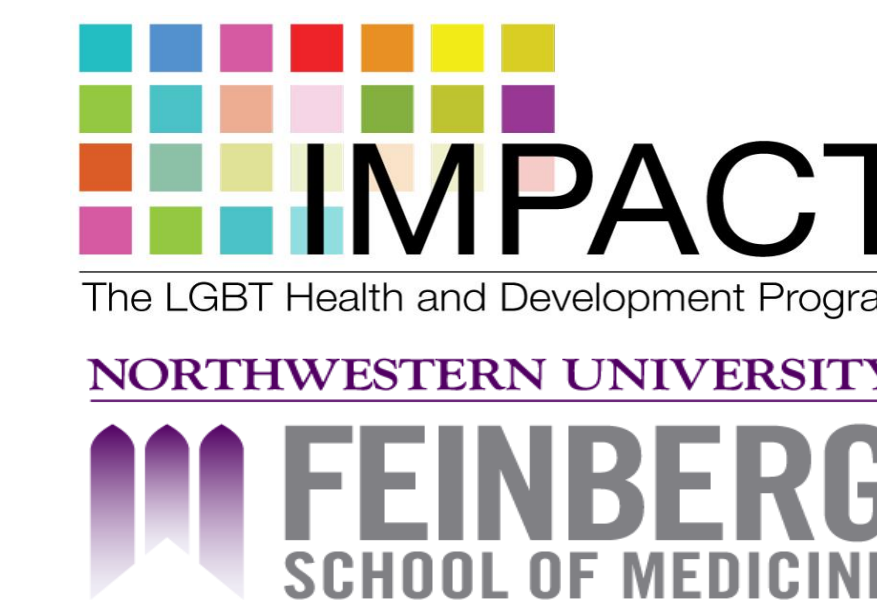




# Tailoring HIV-Prevention to Meet the Needs of Gay, Bisexual, and Queer Adolescent Males: Online Focus Groups as an Innovative Tool for Participatory Research

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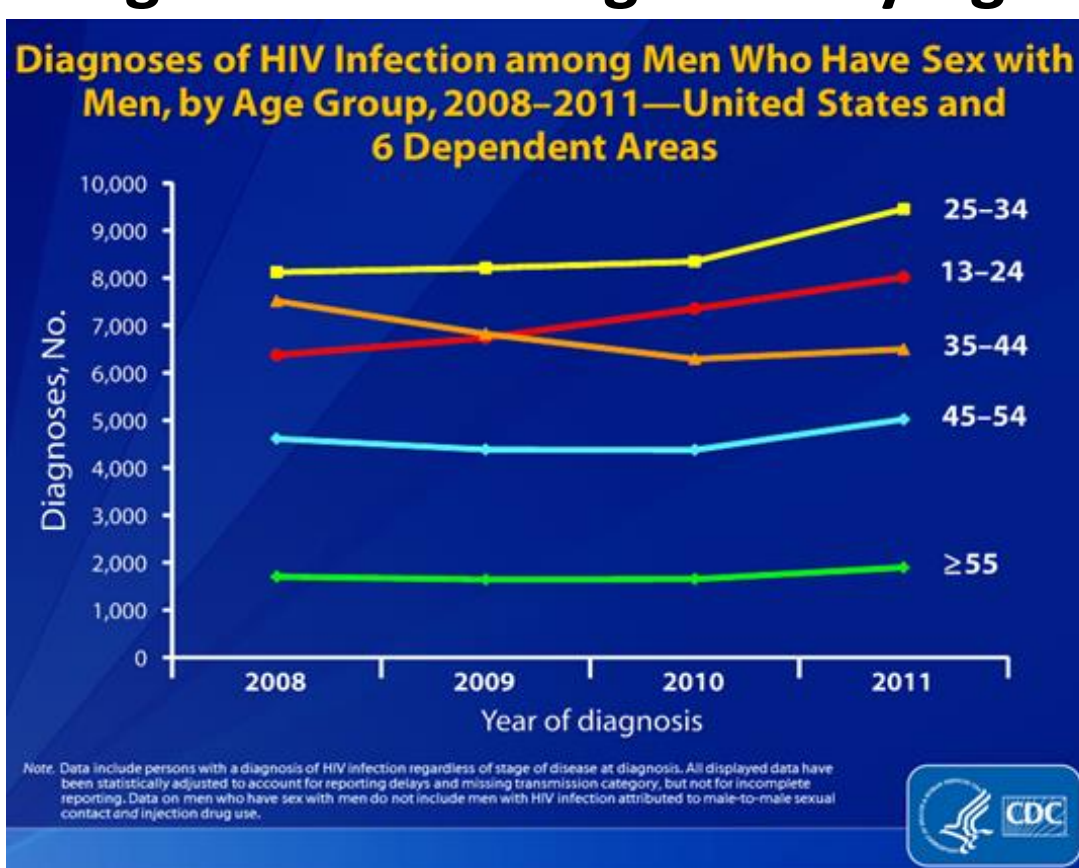
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## INTRODUCTION

Adolescent gay, bisexual, and queer (GBQ) males are alone in facing increasing incidence of HIV/AIDS (Fig 1)—with most transmission occurring through unprotected sex. Nonetheless, the majority of prevention programs focus primarily on GBQ adults and heterosexual youth. To address this gap, **Guy2Guy (G2G)** is a text-messaging-based HIV-prevention project that will be designed specifically for GBQ adolescents.

**Figure 1: HIV Diagnoses by Age**



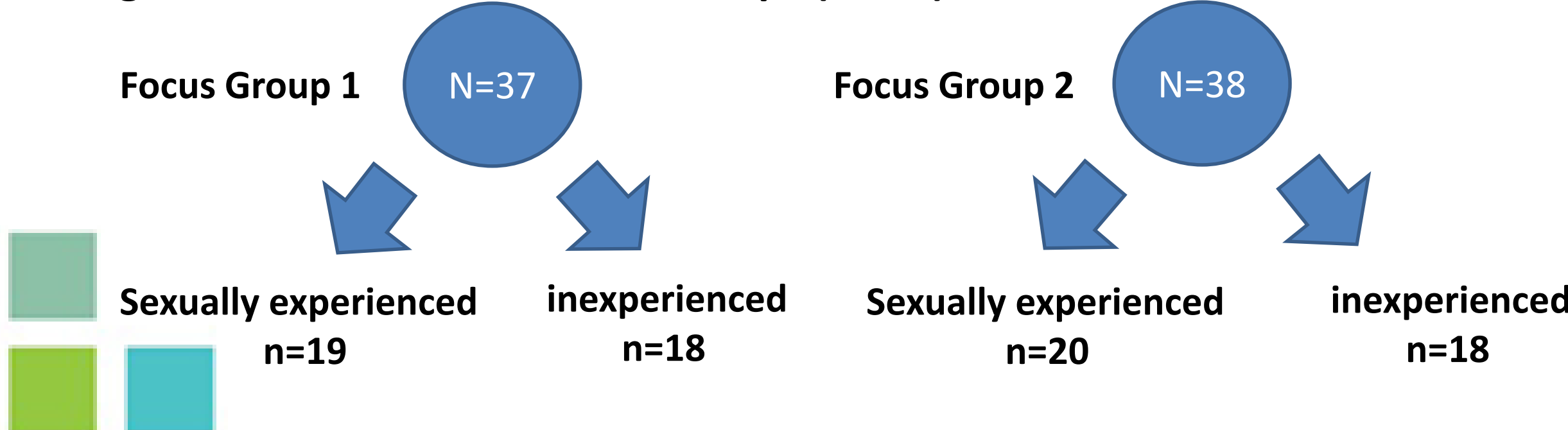
The G2G program will focus on HIV preventative behavior (e.g., condom use; delaying sex) and sexual decision-making. Using an asynchronous online focus groups methodology (Hillier et al. 2012), the study presented here aimed to engage youth community members in order to confirm intervention program components (e.g., Text Buddy, SOS Tonight) and logistics (e.g., optimal message delivery time, promoting participant safety/ privacy). We also explored the saliency of intended program topics and word choice.

## METHODS

Participants were recruited to reflect a range of geographic location, race, ethnicity, and age (Table 1). Recruitment was conducted online through ads placed on Facebook, TrevorSpace, and GLSEN. In addition to being 14-18 years old, eligibility criteria required participants to be male sex, identify as GBQ, have a cell phone, and use text messaging for more than 6 months.

Participants were stratified by self-reported sexual experience (i.e., ever had vaginal or anal sex, or never having either type of sex). Online focus groups with GBQ (n=75) youth 14-18 years old were conducted in November 2012 (n=37) and January 2013 (n=38; see Figure below).

**Figure 2: Structure of Focus Groups (N=75)**

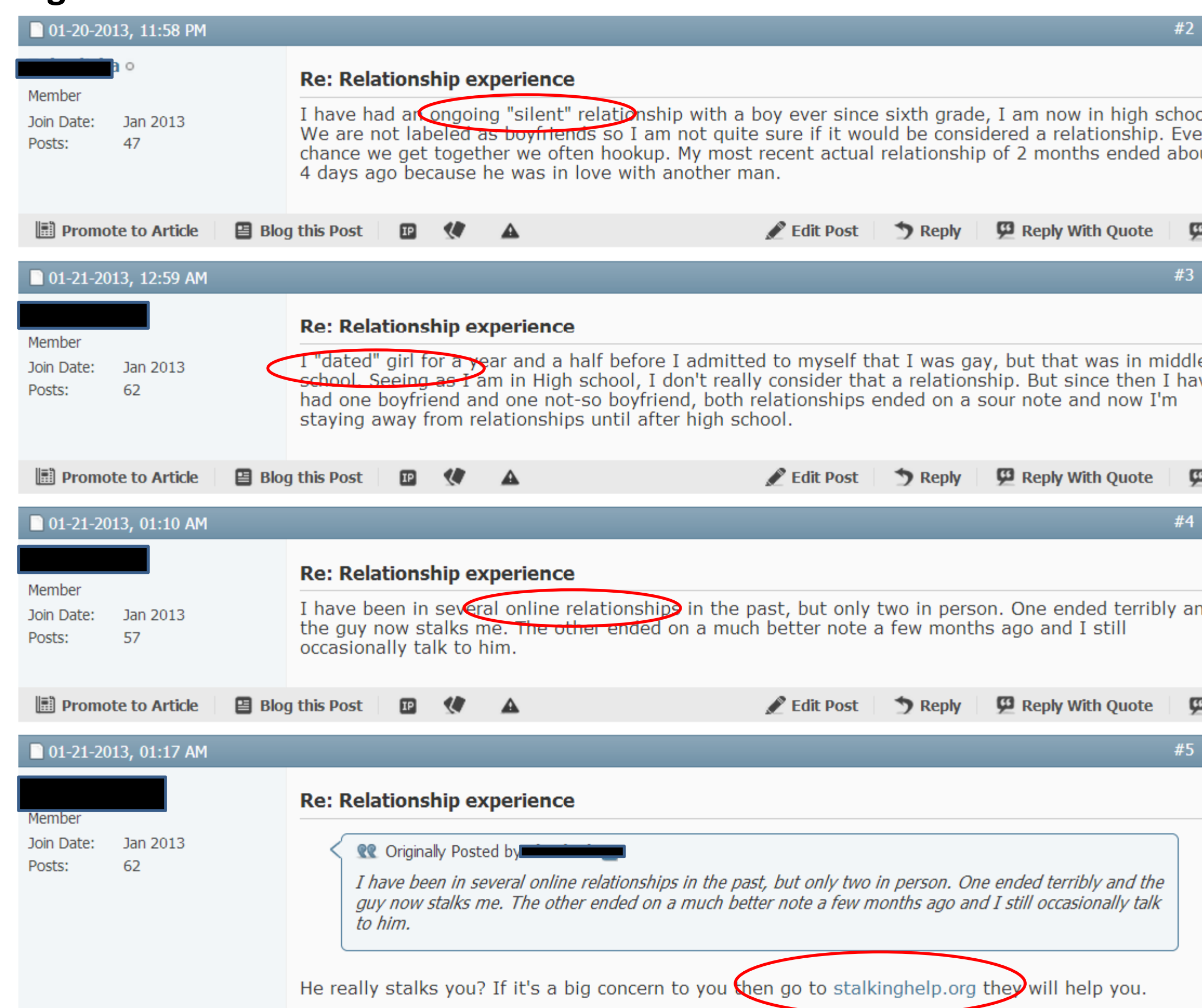


**Table 1: Participant characteristics**

	Group 1 (n=37)		Group 2 (n=38)	
	Inexperienced (n=18)	Experienced (n=19)	Inexperienced (n=18)	Experienced (n=20)
Age (Mean years)	16.38	16.15	15.94	16.15
Race	Asian	0%	11%	0%
	Black or African American	11%	5%	0%
	Mixed racial background	17%	21%	6%
	Native American or Alaskan native	0%	0%	0%
	Other	11%	26%	17%
	White or Caucasian	61%	37%	67%
Hispanic ethnicity	11%	26%	22%	35%
Sexual Orientation	Bisexual	22%	11%	17%
	Gay	72%	89%	83%
	Gay/Bisexual	6%	0%	0%
Urbanicity	Rural	11%	26%	39%
	Urban	89%	74%	61%

We posted questions twice daily for three consecutive days. The password-protected bulletin board was asynchronous, meaning that people could log on whenever it was convenient for them. (Figure 3). Participants used anonymous usernames and posted responses, responded to moderator probes, and interacted with each other. Topics included: text-messaging habits, privacy issues, relationship experience, condom use, and experiences with sex education.

**Figure 3: Bulletin Board**



## BENEFITS: Online Focus Groups for Community Engagement

Benefits of using this online forum emerged from the data. Although the sample only included GBQ youth, these benefits seemed to be particularly powerful because safety and privacy may be an issue. For example, this methodology:

- Invites youth to “talk” freely and interact within a familiar framework

Overall, the level of engagement and willingness to respond to our questions seemed to reflect a high level of comfort with talking online versus talking in-person. The online bulletin board functioned much like a moderated chat-room where guys freely interacted in an informal way with one another, sharing experiences as well as resources (Figure 3). They even initiated chatting in a “free space” on the board.

- Provides an opportunity for social connection and positive reinforcement for healthy behavior

*“I never am around other LGBT people so it was rather interesting to hear other people’s viewpoints and realize how similar they are to mine...”*

*“This discussion has helped me realize just how many guys out there want to wait for the right guy for sex...”*

- Allows participants to “arrive” and “leave” at their convenience

Unlike traditional (in-person) focus groups, participants can engage in online groups at anytime. Many of the young men in our study logged on multiple times over the course of the day, including late at night when they had privacy and the time to write freely. This flexibility fostered what felt like an ongoing ‘conversation’ and allowed for guys to share stories and experiences at length.

- Facilitates moderation

The asynchronous style of the bulletin allowed participants to respond to questions without eclipsing other’s opportunity to “speak.” This lack of ability to “interrupt” one another meant that moderators could focus entirely on the content of the discussion, submit follow-up questions and draw out less active participants.

## CONCLUSIONS

Asynchronous online focus groups were an innovative tool for participatory research. We were able to effectively elicit information needed to design a program that will address the healthy sexuality education needs of the community we aimed to reach.

**Citation:** Hillier, L., Mitchell, K.J., & Ybarra M.L. (2012). The internet as a safety net: Findings from a series of online focus groups with LGB and non-LGB young people in the United States. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 9, 225-246.

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