

## Closeness without consequences

In college, I participated in a panel with other young adults at a conference about youth health. At the end of the session, an audience member stood up to ask, “Can you tell us what websites helped provide you with sex education, growing up?” I provided a prudent, if not particularly inspired, list: Planned Parenthood, Bedsider.org, Columbia University’s Go Ask Alice. My friend Jack, a cheeky grin lighting his face, said, “Naruto fanfiction.”

Laughter exploded. *Funny because it’s true*, I thought. Where earlier generations might have had to make do with pilfered copies of *Playboy* or hearsay from the older kids at school, we had a veritable wonderland. There were all the real sex ed websites, plus sites like fanfiction.net, with its barebones HTML straight out of the early aughts and a prolific collection of fiction rated M for “Mature,” or Tumblr, where (once upon a time) reblogged GIFs pulled straight from porn lived alongside posts from queer activists, sex workers, and the growing left-wing sensibilities of myriad teenage girls. For many young people with internet access, part of the promise of online content platforms was the gift of a space where you could be sexual without being sexualized — or at least, where you could exercise more control. We logged into Omegle to write nonsense in anonymous chat rooms where strangers asked “A/S/L?” (Age, sex, location). Sometimes, we asked first. Sometimes, we made things up: 45, male, Denver. Sometimes, we just hit “disconnect.” It was easier than escaping the threat of danger in real life, where people could follow you home in the dark.

I’m reminiscing on adolescence online today, in thinking about how we build community without in-person gathering and physical touch, because this quarantine has made children of so many of us. Before disposable income made as many “[third places](#),” like coffeeshops or clubs, attractive or accessible, what did my friends and I do but lounge around at home, chatting aimlessly online, taking ridiculous quizzes, kept indoors by strict parents and curfews, the greatest outing being the Costco trip on Saturdays. We didn’t have many places to take our questions, angst, and desire but our phone screens. In the first (ill-fated, one-sided) romance of my teenage life, there was lying close enough for our noses to touch on a

mattress on the floor during a co-ed sleepover; but it was, equally, lived out in the blue light that bathed my face when I snuck barefoot into the living room to plug in a laptop that had run out of juice mid-chat. Later, I acquired a first boyfriend, who I spent more time talking to on Facebook than in real life, probably. It was *de rigueur* to stay up until 1 or 2 in the morning. One night, he told me about a narrative computer game he was playing with beautiful illustrations he thought I'd like, and then, my laptop hot on my knees, we Skyped just so he could share his screen and walk me through the gameplay. I remember his voice in my ear as sunlight began to spill through the curtains. It was closeness without consequences.

Online, my friends and I could exercise authority no one would grant us in the physical world, racking up followers on the question-and-answer site Quora or making thousands of edits to Wikipedia. We could also be sillier, weirder, and more exploratory. We made amateur films with collaborative scripts on Google Docs and webcams and YouTube. My best friend and I devised a “slashfic” (a term from the fanfiction world used to refer to a relationship between two men, even — maybe especially — if they're not gay in the canon) about my then-boyfriend and his friend, who drove me to school every day, and we presented it with great aplomb. There were games and memes and joke posts on subreddits. The boundaries of online social groups felt more dynamic, too. In the high school cafeteria it wasn't easy to simply grab people from different social groups and talk to them at the same time, but anyone could start a new group chat with a motley crew of people.

My experience wasn't everyone's. For one thing, not all young people have reliable internet access. And too many young people deal with sexual harassment and violence, on- and offline. There are stories like Steubenville's: young men assaulting classmates and posting about it on social media. In these situations, online platforms provide a channel for the publicizing of a violation, but they are not themselves the cause.

A more likely cause of violence is objectification. Martha Nussbaum writes in “Objectification and Internet Misogyny,” a chapter in *The Offensive Internet*, of seven ways to objectify a person, one of which is “violability: the objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into”; feminist philosopher Rae Langton adds “reduction to

body,” “reduction to appearance,” and “silencing.” There are ways to use online platforms to do these things. But some of the worst “violability” potential that comes with physical interactions isn’t there when you communicate on a screen, and there are also ways talking online could help build the kinds of relationships that are hopefully more resistant to Langton’s “reduction.” Lying in bed at midnight with the miniscule Chat Heads of my friends beneath my fingertips, I rarely thought about their bodies. Maybe it’s presumptive to think they felt the same, but it seems difficult to reduce to appearance, at least in the moment, someone who you know primarily as the words they’re sending you. Even if they’re sending you words about sex and about appearance, you’re still bearing witness to a thought process: *what are the fantasies we share? How can I express desire with language?* To the extent that I was seducing anyone at fifteen, I’m thankful it took place in the medium of a chat window and not a rager at someone’s house.

This all is not to say that I don’t miss the physical intimacy and in-person gathering of pre-pandemic times. I do. But I would be remiss not to express gratitude for the self-actualization, education, and intimacy within the bubble of my childhood bedroom that the internet allowed. As we all explore the transition to socializing, organizing, and loving each other in online spaces, it may be worth taking inspiration from the ways we used the internet among friends as kids. How big can we dream, how silly can we get, and what will we say when we know nobody can touch us?