JUDING_GERZI ONLINE:
Insights into the Potentials of Virtual Communities on Yahoo! Groups in Addressing the Challenges of Being Gay in the Philippines

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This study probes the state of Filipino gay virtual communities. Filipino gays have built virtual communities that fill a void caused by their marginalization in the real world. These virtual communities provide an alternative to the mainstream media as a source of diversion and information, as well as a venue for social interaction and personal identification. Even if the promise of new technologies for social change has historically been co-opted by prevailing social systems and even if the tenor of the discourse in these communities is very personal, these communities exhibit the potential for forging the ties that will bind the Filipino gays, on and offline, in their struggle for achieving liberty and pursuing human rights.

While searching for online groups for Filipino gays on Yahoo!, I came upon the e-group Juding_Gerzi (joo-ding-ger-zi). The group's name does not evoke the stereotypical image of the limp-wristed Filipino homosexual associated with the word "bading", the Filipino slang word for gay. Instead, Juding_Gerzi creates an image of a strong, invincible fighter, just like the Japanese anime hero Koji and his robot Mazinger Z, ready to go against oppressors. Is this image reflective of the situation of the Filipino gay in the real world? Is he armed to combat the forces of homophobia in his liberative pursuits? Or is this wishful thinking?

Computer Mediated Communication and Social Change

In an earlier case study that explored the world of a Filipino discreet gay e-group, I observed that what McQuail (2000) said about the strong potential of computer mediated communication (CMC) for socio-cultural change – specifically because the medium is involving, flexible, and rich in information — is noticeable in this group. As shown by the exchanges of messages among its members, gay liberation and the active participation in gay rights advocacy have taken hold in this community. The changing tenor and topics of discussion indicates a developing sense of involvement among its members. At the same time, the interaction in the group indicates the possibility of bringing about an understanding of and freedom from internalized oppression.

What is more apparent, though, is that these discreet gays have created a semblance of a real world community, when before they were muted, unorganized, and without a community to call their own (Austria 2002).

These tentative conclusions have prompted me to investigate further and go beyond the world of Filipino discreet gays, or the "wa buking" as I called them in this earlier study, and explore other Filipino gay communities on the net – specifically on the Yahoo! Groups. This investigation aims to discover if these tentative conclusions apply to other Filipino gay e-groups. At the same time, following Fernback and Thompson's (1995) suggestion, this study intends to "re-examine why we continue to place so much hope in technology after so many disappointments".

Fernback and Thompson hold that virtual communities can either "never extend beyond talking to one another" or manifest themselves in the public sphere and promote political action "such as educational reform or political caucuses". They argue that in the same manner that other forms of technology have the potential for social change but are not maximized, CMC and the communities on cyberspace may also fail in this regard. They believe that the power of effecting change does not lie in the technology but in "reforming the political and social environment from which that technology flows". Barber (1998) echoes the idea of not relying on new technologies for social change and observes that historically, technology mirrors the "culture in which it was developed".

From these contrasting perspectives — the promise of CMC to confront the marginalization of Filipino gays and the historically suggested inability of new technologies to foment real change — the question that begs to be answered is what CMC holds for addressing the challenges of being a Filipino gay. Specifically, can CMC be instrumental in providing the venue for Filipino gays to discuss the issues of liberty, equality, and protection of his human rights? In answering these questions, this paper explores the potentials of CMC in promoting social change by understanding the nature of this medium through an analysis of both the content and text of the social archives in selected Filipino gay e-groups on Yahoo!. This paper looks at the features of the Yahoo! Groups, probes into reasons why Filipino gays interactively participate in these groups, and considers the impact of their utilization of this medium.

Yahoo! Groups — The Power of the Interactive

Upon reaching its homepage, one is greeted by this blurb: "Yahoo! Groups: The easiest way for groups of people to communicate on the Internet" (2004). The media consumer is invited to "discuss sports, health, current events, and more... Share photos and files, plan events, send a newsletter... Stay in touch with friends and family..." (Yahoo! Groups 2004: Homepage).

From this homepage, the consumer can either join a group or make one. In joining a group, one can either key in the name of the group one wishes to join or search through the list of groups on Yahoo! To look for a group, one can use the search function of the page or click through several hyperlinks to browse through a variety of topics like business and finance, hobbies and crafts, romance and relationships, and many more. The consumer is then directed to a listing and a description of existing groups that one can join. To create a group, the consumer is brought to a "wizard", an interactive help function that assists the users go through the following steps: categorizing, describing, selecting/creating a profile, and inviting members to the newly formed group.

Each group has a homepage. This page displays the description created by the owner/s of the group; provides the group information consisting of the date the group was created, the number of members, and the language used in the group; details the group settings such as "Listed in directory, Open membership, Posts from new members require approval..." (PinoyHunk 2004: Homepage); and shows the hyperlinks to the other pages in the group. Some of the links are: messages, post, chat, files, photos, and polls.

These features of the Yahoo! Groups "allow or facilitate interactivity among users or between users and information" (Rice 1984: 35). The sharing of informative and persuasive messages in a two-way manner, without regard for time in a communication situation specially constructed for and by its members, is the dimension of "high interactivity" that Downes and McMillan (1998) describe in their study. With interactivity comes the freedom for the members to have "control over their mutual discourse" (Williams, Rice, & Rogers in Severin & Tankard 2001: 370). Aside from being just a media consumer, a member of any group is empowered to participate in the process of "producing cultural texts/mass media messages" (Lille n.d.) and setting the agenda

of discussions. Lille explains that from the standpoint of cultural studies, participation in social, economic, and ideological discourse is imperative "for culturally and socially marginalized groups to free themselves from various aspects of oppression". It is in the interactivity of online groups where the power to effect social changes lies.

Filipino Gay Groups on Yahoo!

Selected Filipino Gay e-Groups. Using the search function of the Yahoo! Groups homepage, I looked for Filipino gay groups using the following key words: Philippines gay, Filipino gay, Pinoy gay, and Manila gay. The search, conducted on 18 April 2004, yielded a total of 112 groups. Listed in the homepage of one of these groups, PinoyBi_Gay, are the online addresses of 20 other Filipino gay groups (nominees to their "All Filipino Bi-Gay Community Awards"). Several of the groups in this list did not come out in my initial search. It appears that there are many more Filipino gay groups on Yahoo! that are not categorized within the parameters I used. Given the limitations of my search parameters and the way the groups are classified by Yahoo!, I decided to include the groups in this listing to expand my sample.

Removing duplications, dead links, and groups that had no direct bearing on the subject of this study, like MalaysianGay and Bobwoosley (a group for the L.D. Woosley Bethany College in Manila), my sample totaled 76 groups. Eight of these groups were created for members of real-world organizations like The Library Foundation and Pro-Gay Philippines. Four are based on chat groups like dalnetmarikina and gay.com. One is for the members of an exclusive gay club. The rest, 64 groups, are open to all consumers of Yahoo! Groups. Some of these groups are for special and specific interests. For example, five are specially created for students; three, for health professionals; two, for chubby (chubs) young urban professionals; and one each for fathers, fetish, witchcraft, Muslims, and male sex workers offering their services. Eleven of these groups were created for members who come from specific locations. For instance, HFS_Eyeball is for those from Cagayan de Oro; GlobalGayFilipinos and PinoyGayCouples are for Cebuanos; pinoyclosetgays is for Filipino gays working in Singapore; while downe is for those in Hawaii.

Names and Images. The names of the groups are telling. Some of the names identify the gender identities of its targets: Pinoy_Gay, bipilipino, and pinoyclosetgays. Other names point to more specific audience segments like fildocs, GBTAteneo, Iftas-spellcasters, pinoygaycouples, thepinoygaydad, and exgayasians. There are names that come from pre-existing groups in both the cyber and real worlds. Some of these are davaosexdalnet and gaycom-philippines, which are for chatters of davaosex on Dalnet and gay.com, respectively; tlf-online is from the initials of The Library Foundation; FahrenheitCAFE is the name of a gay bar. There are those that are sexually explicit or connote the sexual nature of the group like Pinoy_Jackoleros, purititiwang_presents, cebumanwhores, hotfilipinostuds, and HomieZ-Filipino-Orgies-Parties. BI-ETHICS, pinoy_pride, and hiv-aware are examples of names that signify that these groups tackle socially relevant issues. Some carry the names of real world activities such as PinoyGayGames and pridefilmfest. To the uninitiated, these names are either misleading or without meaning: bigbrothers_ph, Al-Fatiha-Philippines, downe, juding_gerzi, and wonderlandboys. Contrary to the sexual insinuation of "big" in its name, bigbrothers_ph is a group for Filipino chubs and chub chasers. Al-Fatiha translates to "The Opening" and is the name of an international foundation "dedicated to Muslims who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning, those exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity, and their allies, families and friends" (Al-Fatiha 2003: Homepage). The words downe and juding_gerzi are slang for gay. There are of course names that do not provide clues to the character or purpose of the group: BPG-trade, blueDROP, and snagg are some examples.

Some of the groups have images in their homepage. Aside from logos that identify some groups (see **Figure 1**) and posters that provide information on what the group is all about (see **Figure 2**), also visually shown are the kinds of members the groups wish to attract and the interests that the groups address. In the group bigbrothers_ph, the name is immediately qualified by the photo in the homepage (see **Figure 3**). The photo of a Filipino "she-male" in Pinoy_Gay defines the gender identity of the group – attracting both male transgenders and those interested in them (see **Figure 4**). Aside from identities and audience segments, some of the images are sexually suggestive and explicit. For example, the image of virile and good-looking Filipino men in downe and metro_bachelors draws the attention of those

looking for diversion and sexual arousal (see **Figures 5** and **6**). In fildoc, the photo, lifted from an underwear advertisement, identifies its target audience as well as provides a clue to the diversion the group can provide (see **Figure 7**). More meanings can be derived from these images — meanings that again signal the gratification of some of the needs and wants of its target consumers. The image of a man holding a child and labeled with the text "The Pinoy Gay Dad" (see **Figure 8**) not only identifies the target audience of the group but also evokes the notion of a nurturing father. This image may also be seen as a metaphor for the group itself — the group as a father caring for and supporting the gay father/child. Freedom is suggested by the photo used in metro_bachelors. For a metrosexual, the audience of this group, freedom from narrow-mindedness and intolerance can come from building personal relationships and fostering identities.

Target Members. The descriptions of these groups identify the gender/s of their target members (see **Table 1**). The range of being gay is defined with descriptors such as discreet, curious, men who have sex with men (MSM), undecided, questioning, and closet gays. Of interest are those categorized under "others". These include ex-gays and metrosexuals. Ex-gays, according to the group, "...seek healing and hope from the gay lifestyle. The gay culture is not what we want and we seek a different avenue" (exgayasian 2004: Homepage)[1]. The owners of metro_bachelors define metrosexuals as those who are not necessarily gay but are not afraid to show their "feminine side in terms of their activities and sensibilities... While their brothers are drinking beer and belching, metrosexuals are unabashedly heading to art galleries and shoe shopping..." (2004: Homepage). Three groups are open to all males — gays, straights, and bisexuals. The "all" gender groups include both males and females, and all other gender identities.

  The category "Gay, Bi, Discreet" refers to identities that range from the effeminate to the straight-acting gay. "Discreet, Bi, Straight" stands for those whose representations are masculine and includes male heterosexuals. These two emerging categories point to the cognizance of the distinction and disparity between the straight-acting and the effeminate Filipino gay. An example is seen in the description of the group lasalle_boys: "This group is for straight and discreet bisexual guys. Strictly no gay please" (2004: Homepage). Here, "gay" denotes the effeminate. In the group AdamsKlub, described as

Figure 1: A pink triangle, a symbol for gays, over the Ateneo logo (Retrieved from http:// groups.yahoo.com/group/ GBTAteneo on May 10, 2004)

Figure 2: Poster for the festival (Retrieved from http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ pridefilmfest on May 10, 2004)

Figure 3: The plus sized bisexual/gay yuppie (Retrieved from http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ bigbrothers_ph on May 10, 2004)
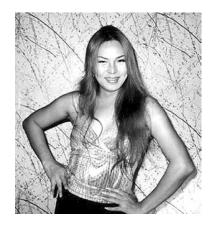

Figure 4: The Filipino lady boy (Retrieved from http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ Pinoy_Gay on May 10, 2004)
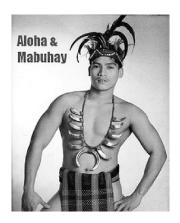
Figure 5: The Filipino downe in tribal wear (Retrieved from http://groups.yahoo.com/group/downe on May 10, 2004)

Figure 6: The Filipino metrosexual free as the wind (Retrieved from http://groups.yahoo.com/group/metro_bachelors on May 10, 2004)

Figure 7: "Doctors" in their underwear (Retrieved from http://groups.yahoo.com/group/metro_bachelors on May 10, 2004)

Figure 8: The nurturing Filipino gay father (Retrieved from http://groups.yahoo.com/group/thepinoygaydad on May 10, 2004)

"exclusively for gay, bi, or str8 MEN who are all into alternative lifestyle/sexuality", membership is specifically restricted to "1. MALE 2. Of MASCULINE demeanor (that means NOT effeminate)" (2004: Homepage). Here, the effeminate gay is clearly excluded. And the use of all caps for the words "masculine" and "not" emphasizes the intention to keep out effeminate gays. Curiously, the absence of a comma between "discreet" and "bisexual" in the description in lasalle_boys may signify the distinction between a straight-acting bisexual and an effeminate bisexual. Another point of interest is the juxtaposition of "str8 MEN" and "alternative lifestyle/sexuality" in AdamsKlub. This illustrates how Filipino gays do not consider male heterosexuals who engage in "alternative sexuality" as homosexuals. For them, such men are straight men who have sex with gays. In one group, they were called "gay-loving" (campycampus 2004: Homepage).

More than just specifying genders, many of the groups define their target members. For example, hiv-aware is "also for all gay men who want to receive bits of news about safe sex information and other interesting gay news in the Philippines" (2004: Homepage). Another example, downe is "for pinoys, by pinoys, of pinoys. But if you're not and just want to hang out, it's cool but remember this is a group primarily for pinoys to get to know other pinoys and a space to be Filipino and out. Also, this group is primarily for Filipinos in Hawai`i, but if you're not from Hawai`i and want to join, hey sure, tuloy kayo, why not" (2004: Homepage).

Three of these groups were established in 1999. Thirty-six were created in 2003. There were 13 new groups formed by April 2004. More than half of these groups have been in existence for less than 12 months (see **Table 2**). The data indicate that the formation of Filipino gay groups on Yahoo! is relatively recent and the number of these groups is increasing.

Critical Mass. There are 53,766 members in all these groups as of this writing. Given the possibility that some individuals could be members of several groups, I compared the membership list of two groups. These groups, selected for having the most number of members among the groups with open access to their membership list, are pinoygayfantasy and tsupaan. After removing repeating e-mail addresses within each group, the two groups had a total of 7,442 addresses. The comparison showed that only 487 or 6.54% of the e-mail addresses

are common to both groups. This percentage suggests that the selected groups are made up of more than 50,000 individuals.

While downloading the e-mail addresses in the membership lists, I noticed that the number of members in each group kept on changing. In just one day, one group had 100, while the other had 14 new members. This shows that the memberships in these groups are continuously increasing. Morris and Ogan (2002) state that a critical mass of members is needed to sustain the interactivity of a group and maintain its viability. For groups like these, they set an arbitrary figure of 100 or more members for a group's critical mass. Forty of the e-groups have less than 100 members (see **Table 3**). Thirty six have more than 100 members. Looking at the groups formed in 1999, only one, bipinoyguy, has more than 100, a total of 889, members. The two others, personal-philip-mm and hiv-aware, have 29 and 47 members, respectively.

As of 20 April 2004, there were 4,529 messages in the archives of bipinoyguy, 81 in personal-philip-mm and 260 in hiv-aware. The number of messages is an indication of the activity in the groups. The increasing number of messages sent to bipinoyguy per month manifests that it has a critical mass of members (see **Table 4**) that ensures the continuous posting of messages to the group. But looking at the quality of messages sent to these three groups is a different matter altogether. A critical mass may ensure the sustainability and viability of the existence of a group as shown in bipinoyguy, but it is not an indication of an exchange of purposive message that will lead to what Morris and Ogan (2002: 139) call the "production of culture, social control, and political communication". The messages sent this year to these three groups are mostly computer generated junk e-mail and virus attacks.

Dahlberg (2001) argues that even if CMC facilitates public discourse for social change, the quality of discussions over the internet does not approach the structure of "rational-critical" debate, partly because participation in the discussions "tends to be quantitatively and qualitatively dominated by certain individuals and groups". At the time of data gathering, the total number of messages sent in all the groups was 52,203. This is even less than the total number of members in all the groups. This brings the average number of messages sent by each member to less than one. This means that not all the

Table 1 Frequency Distribution of Groups according to Gender of Target Members	
Gender	**Frequency**
Gay	30
Gay, Bi, Discreet	18
Discreet, Bi, Straight	3
Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Transgender	13
Male	4
All	3
Others	2
Unspecified	4
Total	76

Table 2 Frequency Distribution of Groups according to Length of Existence	
Number of Months	**Frequency**
Less than 12 months	41
12 to 24 months	15
More than 24 months	18
Unspecified	2
Total	76

Table 3 Frequency Distribution of Groups according to Number of Members	
Number of Members	**Frequency**
Less than 100	40
100 to 499	12
500 to 1000	8
More than 1000	16
Total	76

members in the groups send messages. Getting the averages in each group, I saw that only eight groups have an average higher than five messages sent per member (see **Table 5**). This implies that there are more active participants in these groups. But with more than half of the groups with less than one message sent per member – a realistic impossibility – it appears that there are many groups where the members are not active participants in discussions. As such, there is a very high probability that some members dominate the discussions and that majority of the members are just lurkers – content consumers and not producers.

To validate this observation, I looked at the activity of the participants in terms of posting messages in two of the groups and consequently tried to determine if the discussions in these groups are dominated by just a few members. The two groups selected were PinoyHunk and pinoygayfantasy. These two groups were chosen because among the groups in the sample, both had more members, more messages posted, and a higher average number of messages per member. I randomly selected approximately 1% of the messages from the archives of these groups. At the time the data were gathered, PinoyHunk had 4,633 members and 8,771 messages in its archives. It had been in existence for 12 months, with an average of 731 postings per month and 1.89 messages per member. The selected messages in PinoyHunk were sent by 67 members. Fifty-six of these senders had one posting each while 11 had multiple postings. pinoygayfantasy had

Table 4
Frequency Distribution of Number of Messages Sent to "bipinoyguy" per Month

Year/Month	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
2004	238	232	697	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1,167
2003	45	20	38	48	93	155	193	553	355	164	224	299	2,187
2002	10	34	75	76	57	56	121	43	40	49	43	48	652
2001	4	5	12	6	1	6	14	5	10	3	2	0	68
2000	0	0	1	0	0	0	2	1	3	2	2	1	12
1999	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1

4,287 members and 3,275 messages in its archives. It had been in existence for 10 months, with an average of 327.5 messages per month and 0.76 message per member. The selected messages in pinoygayfantasy were sent by 27 members. Twenty-three of these senders had one posting each while four had multiple postings. With most of the participants in both groups sending only one message each, it may be considered that these groups are dominated by a few participants. The rest of the members appear to be lurkers. Without feedback, it is difficult to tell if these lurkers actually read the contents (messages, files, photos, etc.) in these groups. Without the ability to value this indicator of participation, it is difficult to determine the reach of socially relevant messages to the members of these groups.

Table 5 Frequency Distribution of Groups according to the Number of Messages Sent by Each Member	
No. of Members	**Frequency**
Less than 1	43
1 to 2.99	20
3 to 4.99	4
5 or more	8
Total	76

Topics of Conversation. The members of these groups send a variety of messages in different forms: visuals, hyperlinks, and email. In selecting the messages for this study, I started by categorizing each group according to the interest, purpose, and target members described in their homepages. From the sample of 76 groups, I purposively selected seven groups to represent the "wide range of variation" (Patton 1990: 182) in these categories. Using interval sampling, I picked 50% to 100% of the messages from groups with less than 100 messages, 5% to 10% from groups with more than a hundred but less that 1,000

messages, and 1% to 2% from groups with more than 1,000 messages. The selection yielded a total of 289 out of the 14,815 messages from these groups.

Al-Fatiha-Philippines, is "[a]n email announcement list for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning (LGBTQ) Muslims their Friends in the Philippines" (2001: Homepage). Founded on May 5, 2001, this group is listed under the Lesbian, Gays and Bisexuals search category of Yahoo! Groups. Al-Fatiha has 32 members and has 62 messages in its archives. Only 32 of these messages are accessible to the members. A few of the earlier messages in its archives are encrypted.

Recently established on February 29, 2004, the group Bi-MEN-PHILIPPINES is part of an international organization called the "Bi Men Network". This group is for bisexual men, bi-curious males, gay men, and bisexual couples who are "interested in the Philippines and for visitors to the Philippines" (Homepage). The organization provides the following free services to its members: a "chat room, central travel desk, online support and worldwide networking". Its motto is "You are not alone". The organization boasts of over a quarter of a million members. In this group, there are 141 members and there are 80 messages in its archives. This group is also included under the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual category of Yahoo! Groups. On its homepage is a picture of two men and a woman in a suggestive pose (see **Figure 9**).

The owner and moderator of bipilipino "aimed that this room unites all the Filipino bisexuals in our country & abroad" (Homepage) when he put the group up on September 6, 2002. He differentiates this agenda from those of other gay and lesbian groups by adding that in this group, "the discreetness of Filipino bi's shall be preserved..." He admits that he cannot achieve his aim on his own. He asks for help "so we can help each other". There are 1,411 members in this group. The total number of postings is 770. Although this group falls under the Bisexual category of Yahoo! Groups, this group comes out under the search parameter "Filipino Gay". On its homepage is a filtered/negative image of a group of young men (see **Figure 10**). This appears to be an assurance of anonymity for its members.

The blurb "POR NO *(reads as porno)* BI PILIPINO! MABUHAY! TULOY LANG!" is seen beside the name of the group, pinoy_gay_fantasy, in its homepage. The description says "WELCOME TO PGF! A GROUP OPEN FOR BOTH PINOY AND FOREIGNER GAYS! MABUHAY!!! JUST FEEL FREE TO DO

SO!" It was not explained what "JUST FEEL FREE TO DO SO!" pertains to but it can be construed as referring to the charcoal drawing beside this description. The image is of a naked man watching two other men having sex. This group, categorized under Gay Male, was founded on June 25, 2003 and has 4,287 members. It has a total of 3,275 postings.

PinoyHunk is categorized in Yahoo! Groups under "Relationships". Established on April 27, 2003, this group is "[a] place for everyone interested to meet young Filipino studs...perfectly set up to correlate friends, picture trading, open forums and plan fun activities..." The homepage features a picture of a partially naked young man. Apparently the images in this group's homepage change every so often. In the description we read "For this week only... we take a break on featuring a Pinoy Hunk. So here's one Asian Hunk for this HOT Summer Sizzle!" The description provides a caveat for its content and encourages diversity by pointing out that the images "may inspire you or they may not... What you like and what you don't are what makes you YOU. We can only show you what we like". This group has 4,633 members and 8,771 postings.

Progay is one of the three e-groups under the organization Progressive Organization of Gays – "a national mass organization of LGBT people in the Philippines promoting LGBT rights and welfare". The other e-groups are Pro-Gay Philippines and Progaynet. Among the three, Progay has the most number of members (58) and messages posted (255). Progay was created on January 29, 2001 — the oldest among the three groups. In its description, the group states that its aim is to "work for the empowerment and dignity of the Filipino lesbian, gay, transgendered, and bisexual community" by supporting "the struggle for recognition and rights" with an emphasis on fighting homophobia. This group, together with Progaynet, is categorized under Gay Rights while Pro-Gay Philippines is under Friends.

Founded on June 2, 2001 and categorized under Gay Men, the group thepinoygaydad has 1,188 members and 1,592 messages in its archives. The description encourages its potential members to "Share your war stories: your triumphs and failures as a father, husband, gay-lover, son, and friend to other gay dads. Get advice and support from others who have treaded the same path. To all Filipino Gay Dads, come support this club and celebrate life with us!" In this description, the members are directed to a new e-group called

PINOYGAYDADREBORN where "…THE ACTION IS! EYEBALL MEETS, POLLS, PICS, VIDEOS, and of course DISCUSSION TOPICS!" An image of a father holding a baby can be seen in the homepage (see **Figure 8**).

For the purpose of organizing the messages, I categorized these according to an emerging typology based on the recurrence of themes or subject matters. Although some of the messages are straightforward, and as such, were easy to classify, this is not to say that the messages in these selections can easily be reduced and boxed into strict categories. Most of these messages are complex and could fall under more than one typology.

One of the running subjects apparent in the messages in these groups refers to being a Filipino homosexual. The members of these groups posted messages that in effect describe and define the Filipino gay culture in the information age. The members talk about their activities, which include computer mediated activities such as chatting, building websites, posting photos and profiles, sending real and imagined stories, discussing issues, and engaging in online commerce; and real-world activities like eyeballs, parties, orgies, seminars and workshops, and parades and protests that are organized and arranged through these groups. The members reveal, define, and question identities: "Umabot na ako sa punto na hindi ko na pinakiki-alaman kung paano man ikahon ng lipunan ang mga bakla (I have reached that point where I couldn't care less about how society regards gays)… I have been married, nagkaasawa at nagkaanak: para sa akin, I am still gay dahil I love men… I personally believe that it does not really matter if you are 10%, 50% or 75% gay, and all the associated labels: what matters is the love you can offer in a relationship and what you can contribute in order to make this world a better place" (thepinoygaydad: Msg. No. 100). They also bare their dreams and aspirations as well as their problems and the issues that confront them. One fantasizes about being like this movie star who is still in the closet "kasi sa kakinisan niya at kasikatan, marami siguradong dumadapo sa kaniya! (because with his good looks and fame, I am sure many are attracted to him!)" (thepinoygaydad: Msg. No. 550). Another is challenged when "[n]ot a few have asked me this question and I have to pause and reflect everytime. Kasi naman napakalabo ng depinisyon ng isang gay or bisexual (Because the definition of a gay or bisexual is vague)" (thepinoygaydad: Msg. No. 100).

Gay issues are presented and discussed in some of these groups. For instance, in PinoyHunk, a member expounded on identity issues and ended by saying that "[c]oming out of the closet is a liberating experience for all of us... forget about FEAR!" (Msg. No. 3900). Sexual abuse, health, homophobia, and stereotyping are also discussed in this particular group. Although similar issues are also talked about in thepinoygaydad, the main topics revolve around "problems associated with having affairs with married men" (Msg. No. 25) and being gay, handling heterosexual relationships, and having children. In Progay, most of messages are political in nature. These political messages are lifted from other sources. For instance, the participation of gays and lesbians in the Fourth World Meeting of Families, the political dilemma of gay and lesbian citizenship, the debate over "nature and nurture", and the discrimination of the LGBT community, are some of the subjects of the messages in this group.

Messages pertaining to non-gay issues are also posted in some of these groups. In Al-Fatiha-Philippines, news about the founding congress of the "Suara Bangsamoro" was forwarded by one of its members. Progay has anti-American and other progressive/left-leaning commentaries. Even "social" groups like PinoyHunk and Bi-MEN-PHILIPPINES have their share of political messages. For example, this was posted in PinoyHunk: "korekzhen! hindi po si Eddie Villanueva ang tinutukoy mong pumunta sa mga abu badaf...siya po si Wilde Almeda hi hi hi hi....buti na lang at hindi siya tumakbong presidente (correction! It was not Eddie Villanueva who went to the abu sayyaf...but Wilde Almeda... it's good he did not run for president)! amen. siryusli, what we need now is an honest and godly man who can fight corruption because of his fear in God" (Msg. No. 8700).

Commercial announcements found in the sample were either posted automatically from commercial sites or by the members of these groups. An example of an automated posting is "Shopvirtually Products from all over the world at http://www.shopvirtually.com" (pinoy_gay_fantasy: Msg. No. 150). Personally sold items over these groups include products like fat burners, pornographic video, and an ISP booster. Other promotions are less commercial, such as a member selling his cellular phone or another member disposing of his furniture and appliances. There are also announcements for commercial events like a food festival at the Peninsula Manila Hotel and a show in a gay club.
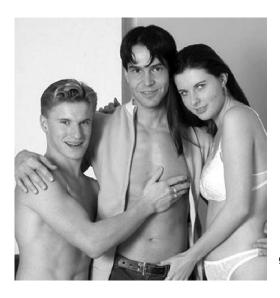
Figure 9: Target members: gay, bisexual and the bi-curious (Retrieved from http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Bi-MEN-PHILIPPINES on May 10, 2004)

Figure 10: Anonymous identities (Retrieved from http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bipilipino on May 10, 2004)

There are messages that point to the building and maintenance of the groups. Bi-MEN-PHILIPPINES encourages its members to actively participate in the group by claiming that "this is your HAVEN! A place for love, play and experience..." (Msg. No. 20). A message in Al-Fatiha-Philippines called on its members "to make this group of ours more alive! what do u think?" (Msg. No. 41). The moderator of thepinoygaydad issued this announcement, "Sabihin niyo lang kung pagod na kayo sa diskusyon at oras na para umiba ng topic—he-he (Just tell me when you are tired of the discussion and it's time to shift to another topic). Please feel free to suggest a topic..." (Msg. No. 200). Some messages show appreciation for the groups and its members. A member of thepinoygaydad said, "It is such a relief to have groups like this... Reading the discussions in this site so far has been like opening my windows to let the light and fresh air into my confined space. I am glad to be here" (Msg. No. 500). In PinoyHunk, this message was posted, "Cant help but love that piece of yours Blu. There is more to every person than meets the eye" (Msg. No. 6400). There are also messages that bring conflict to a group. In such instances, the moderators of the groups exercise their gatekeeping powers. For example, this message was sent by the moderator of PinoyHunk: "I have banned and removed this member... sorry guyz... he is posting messy things in this group... we don't need his presence..." (Msg. No. 6705).

The practice of sending personal ads for friendship or long-term relationship has been institutionalized in thepinoygaydad. The group features members in their "Man Meet" on a daily basis. A sample of the personals: "Handle: Cliff Honda Email: cliden2004@y... About him: I'm an artistic, sensitive Asian soul looking for a long-term relationship. I'm sexually versatile. What he's looking for: Caucasian men in their late 30s, 40s..." (Msg. 700). Similar messages are posted in the other groups. There are replies to these ads. An example: "hey paul, i just saw your posting while checking my mailbox. anyway, here's my profile..." (PinoyHunk: Msg. No. 1300). There are also references to dating and networking sites, such as this posting: "News For Gay, Bisexual And Bicurious! I found a great website for you ..." (pinoy_gay_fantasy: Msg. No. 700).

Sex as a subject comes in different forms. There are references to sex sites on the net; personal ads looking for sex partners (fuck buddies or FB); replies to these personal sex ads; sexually suggestive

and explicit images and stories; invitations to mediated sex activities (cam-to-cam sex, sex chat, sex on the phone); announcements of real-world sex activities (sex eyeball or SEB); ads for sex services; and referrals and advice on sex services as well as on-line and real-world cruising. This instance is one of the more unusual messages in the sample: "[t]his is an invitation for all good looking and discreet gays. A breathtaking and one of a kind and the first SEB interacting photography workshop…" (bipilipino: Msg. No. 660). One of the sex service messages provides a reason why cruising has moved from the real world to cyberspace. To quote, "James was referred by Rodel to try out his luck here on the cyberspace. The streets are not that safe for us and for them" (PinoyHunk: Msg. No. 3100).

Except for Progay, all the other groups have messages that have references to sex and personal relationships (see **Table 6**). Both PinoyHunk and thepinoygaydad appear to have a high level of interactivity, as implied by the presence of all types of messages in these groups. Conversations and continuing discussions are also found in these groups. In Progay, where all the messages pertain to gay issues and the gay culture, no discussions or comments are seen. Aside from the initial coded messages in Al-Fatiha-Philippines, which I assumed are related to gay issues, all the other messages in this group are either personal ads or sexually related postings. In fact, interactive discussions or conversation in this group are almost non-existent. True to how the group describes itself, most of the messages in pinoy_gay_fantasy are sexual in nature.

Gratifying Needs: The Filipino Gay as a Media Consumer

In valuing the factors that induce the media consumer, as an active audience, to choose Yahoo! Groups and its contents, I turn to Morris and Ogan, who point to the uses-and-gratifications perspective as a viable framework for research on Internet communication. Two of the basic assumptions of this approach are: (1) the choice of media and media content is generally rational and this choice comes from the fulfillment of specific goals and satisfactions; and (2) media-related needs of audiences arise from personal and social circumstances and these needs can be seen in terms of motivations (McQuail 2000). Specifically, I refer to the typology of media-person interaction of McQuail, et al. (as cited in McQuail 2000) — diversion, personal

relationships, personal identity, and surveillance — and expand its definition to accommodate the nuances of interactivity and the characteristics of CMC.

Diversion is associated with escapism, entertainment, relaxation, emotional release, and sexual arousal (McQuail 2000; Lille n.d.). In the real world, where gay-oriented entertainment is limited, these online groups provide alternatives that are relatively inexpensive, varied, and safe. Going online for an hour costs much less than, for instance, going to bars or buying gay videos or publications. These groups provide a variety of content for diversion — from sexually explicit images to the latest gossip about local stars. The act of going through the messages in a group and replying to some, i.e., the interactivity that this medium provides, is diversion in itself. The rationale given for cruising online suggests that there is "safety" in cyberspace. In here, with or without anonymity, the Filipino gay is relatively protected from homophobes and abusers. Diversion is aptly illustrated in the description of codepinkpinoy: "this is our tambayan after a stressful day at the ER, where we can meet for romance, exchange notes about the tough day at the operating table, or to while away the time while waiting for the patients to trickle in" (Homepage).

In these groups, personal relationships are not limited to finding "out how other people live... [and identifying] with people in the media and thus gain a sense of belonging" (Lille n.d.) that traditional media offer. The need for personal relationships takes on a more interactive and real dimension that goes beyond the medium. It is not restricted to just "finding out the about the conditions of others... how to play one's roles" that leads to a "basis of social interaction" (McQuail in Windahl, et al. 1992). As the evidence shows, these groups do not only provide this basis but actually facilitate the forging of personal bonds and organizational structures in and out of the virtual world. And more that just answering the needs that arise from the personal and social circumstances of the Filipino gay, CMC creates and redefines these conditions.

Personal identity, according to Lille (n.d.) refers to "finding out who we are, what we're like, and how we compare with others". This motivation as associated in the traditional media is characterized by introspective action such as "gaining self-knowledge and reinforcing personal values" (McQuail in Windahl, et al. 1992). The messages that point to being gay in the Philippines speaks of the fulfillment of

this self-reflective need for personal identification. Further, the messages also show that these groups satisfy the desire and necessity to clarify and question the perceptions of and meanings ascribed to a Filipino gay's identity. More importantly, these groups give the Filipino gay the voice to define his own identity. In a society where stereotypes are prevalent, this "quest" for identity is a means for questioning and resisting imposed identities.

Surveillance, or the need to seek advice and information and learn about the events in various parts of the environment (McQuail 1972 and 2000), is manifested in these groups. From an interactive perspective, this is a two-way process. Apparent from the messages is the need to provide information. Like the other groups, in thepinoygaydad, the members do not just receive information; they are also asked to "Share your war stories: your triumphs and failures as a father, husband, gay-lover, son and friend to other gay dads. Get advice and support from others who have treaded the same path" (Homepage). Again, the groups fill the void for information about and for Filipino gays.

All these motivations are depicted in spicypinoys as it invites its members to "Post your ads, your stories, answer the polls, play matchmaker, fill out the tables, check out the pics, show us your pics, ask for advice, and be surprised at the number of responses you can receive... " (Homepage). As this message suggests, the consumption of this medium is the result of motivations that need to be gratified. Given the circumstances of the Filipino gay, where the traditional media do not adequately provide for his needs, he deliberately and rationally selects to become a member of and participate in these groups. Together, in these groups, Filipino gays build for themselves virtual communities.

Virtual Communities – An Outcome

Slevin (2002: 147) observes that the study of virtual communities is focused on "the impact of the internet on human associations and conduct within strictly limited terms". From a perspective that emphasizes the "opposition of real and unreal communities", Slevin moves beyond to study "how the internet is contributing to the construction of forms of solidarity and association in which the most intimate and the most distant have become directly

Type 6
Types of Messages Found in the Selected Groups

Types of Messages	Al-Fatiha-Philippines	Bi-MEN PHILIPPINES	bipilipino	pinoy_gay_fantasy	PinoyHunk	Progay	thepinoygaydad
Being Gay	-	-	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Gay Issues	-	-	-	-	Y	Y	Y
Non-Gay Issues	-	Y	-	-	Y	Y	Y
Ads and Promo	-	-	Y	Y	Y	-	Y
Group Relationship	-	Y	Y	-	Y	-	Y
Personal Relationship	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	-	Y
Sex	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	-	Y

connected" (148). For Slevin, the study of human interaction online should be grounded on the "concept of community in late modernity" (47). Traditional communities are based on space and time that in late modernity become irrelevant. Quoting Oakshott, Slevin contrasts traditional communities with communities in late modernity, characterizing the former as made up of relationships that are "organic, evolutionary, teleological, functional or syndromic", and the latter as "an understood relationship between intelligent agents" acting under the "demand of spontaneous coordination" (152). In communities in late modernity, individuals are not associates bound by purpose but by practice. As such, "[T]he efficiency of these new ways of teaming up can no longer be measured in terms of goals alone, but needs to be evaluated in terms of "their capacity to share in a give and take experience" (152). From this perspective, Slevin argues that "modern communication technologies such as the internet are opening up opportunities for new forms of human association" (152).

The Yahoo! Groups as a technology has paved the way for Filipino gays to build virtual communities. As observed, groups that are highly interactive not only have the critical mass but also have members willing to "share in a give-and-take experience". They are bound by what Rheingold (n.d.) calls "collective goods". "The experience has to do with the way groups of people are using CMC to rediscover the power of cooperation, turning cooperation into a game, a way of life — a merger of knowledge capital, social capital, and communion" (Rheingold n.d.). The gratification of needs, as earlier discussed, illustrates the collective goods that the members find in these groups and how they contribute to the creation of these goods.

Indeed, some of these groups have demonstrated how virtual communities are capable of addressing the issues and problems of Filipino gays. However, the data show that the focus of these virtual communities is very personal and at best, parochial. The question of whether these virtual communities will extend beyond the personal and toward real political action still remains to be answered.

Overcoming Issues, Problems, and Paradoxes

"The personal is political". This concept, first articulated by radical feminists and now accepted as the "central insight of feminist thought" (Stean 1998: 20), provides a glimpse on how Filipino gay e-

groups can go beyond "just talking". Carol Hanisch, in her essay "The Personal is Political", says "One of the first things we discover in these [consciousness-raising] groups is that personal problems are political problems" (cited in Bickford 1998). Also, in the process of revealing the personal, solidarity is built because the individuals see "how much they have in common with others" (Williams, n.d.). The way I see it, strengthening these personal ties will eventually result in the active participation of the group members and the formation of virtual communities that go beyond cyberspace and into the sphere of social change in the real world. These transformations may eventually include ideological shifts and developments (especially with the online presence of groups like Progay Philippines and the Library Foundation) specific to the Filipino gay community.

The idea that the potentials of CMC are undermined by the present political and social structures and that historically new technologies are just reflective of the present situation should be taken as a warning. What we have now is the beginning of what Thundberg, Nowak, and Rosengren (in Windahl et al. 1992) call the "Spiral of Interaction". The communication in these groups take on expressive, social, information, and control activation functions that lead to the dissemination of knowledge, creation of an identity, development of a sense of community, and joint action, even if at this point these are on a very personal level. Eventually, because the control of this medium is in the hands of its users, these groups can also overcome the inherent problems that limit the potentials of CMC: the commodification of cyberspace; the lack of reflexivity (Dahlberg); the digital divide; and the divisiveness that comes from the strengthening of commonalities (Rice 2002). As Thundberg et al. theoretically predict and as the evidence implies, with the right strategies, CMC can reach its full potential in Filipino gay virtual communities. The question now is, do the Filipino gays online have the capacity to develop these strategies?

In Mazinger-Z, Koji had to learn how to fly and use the powers of this robot before he was able to champion the cause of good. Will our Juding_Gerzi be able to master the power of the technology in his hands? This we should not wait for to see.

Note

[1] To maintain the character of the content in these groups and keep the voices of its members intact, the quotes are purposely left unedited.

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Online resources

http://groups.yahoo.com
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/downe
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/lasalle_boys
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/thepinoygaydad
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/AdamsKlub
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Al-Fatiha-Philippines
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Bi-MEN-PHILIPPINES
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bipilipino
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/codepinkpinoy
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/exgayasian
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/hiv-aware
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/metro_bachelors
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/pinoy_gay_fantasy
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/PinoyHunk
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Progay
http://groups.yahoo.com/group/spicypinoys

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