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Composing New Media

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Cyberbullying

“Why do you keep doing this to me? I hear it all the time and I don’t care anymore,” was a phrase I often used when communicating with my friends over AOL instant messenger, or “Aim.” Before we were terrified of Facebook listening in on our conversations and storing every piece of our lives for the rest of eternity, middle schoolers said whatever they wanted to and about each other over Aim, not worrying about the immutable words they’d be leaving behind. Something about the lack of face-to-face confrontation was appealing, I’d heard. The fact that you could simply exit out of a conversation and never see it again made it feel like it would disappear forever. Out of sight, out of mind. In my case, this was untrue.

I couldn’t figure out why my friends—or in my situation, one member of our group I hadn’t known as well as the rest—had deemed me the odd one out. Who was she to decide my place in the group? She transferred from another school and we didn’t even have any classes together. It was almost as if what was said online after school didn’t carry over to the following day we would all spend together, even if I only shared lunch with her. It started out in quite a trivial fashion. Maddie, I’ll call her, was on my Aim buddy list. I honestly don’t remember how we started talking, because I don’t remember us interacting much at school aside from in a group setting, but it was fifth grade. Everyone talked to everyone. What I do remember, though, is the first time she made me feel like I was not like the others. I’ll now do my best to replicate this conversation, as the bulk of it is pretty much engrained forever in my memory.

Maddie: i dont understand y u like that show

Me: wat do u mean?

Maddie: the naked brothers band.

Me: o idk. its funny and nat [the lead singer] is rly cute.

Maddie: thats sooooooo gay.

Me: how?

Maddie: idk theyre gay. If u like them ur gay.

Me: well i like them. who cares if u dont

Maddie: none of us do. we all think its gay

Me: so u all think im gay?

Maddie: ya i guess

Me: so i dont have any friends?

Maddie: idk. Meg said u asked her to take her top off on video chat.

Me: ummm… i didnt?? i like drew and id never ask meg to do that. ew

Maddie: well Drew likes Amanda and would never like u.

While it seems a bit ridiculous that I’d be offended that Maddie just simply called my favorite show at the time, and me by association “gay” (an insult for its time, but in retrospect, really makes absolutely zero sense), I remember the fear that set in over the rumor she decided to conjure up about Meghan. That week, I tried to brush it off as if nothing happened. When I confronted Meghan later on Aim about it, she assured me that it was a joke and that she told Maddie I never actually said it. However, it worried me that my interests would keep fueling the joke, and that the rest of the group might soon be participating.

My fear materialized. On Aim, you were able to set a status when you were online. Mine often had to do with my current obsession. I was always really into some aspect of pop culture, whether it be my new favorite band, movie, or celebrity crush. I remember the whole group having a designated celebrity crush: professional skateboarder Ryan Sheckler. I didn’t care for him much, and Maddie didn’t like that. I stood by my crush on the front man of the Naked Brothers Band, Nat Wolff, and the “gay” comments continued rolling in. The messages about how Drew would never be interested in me continued. I started hearing it from more members of my friend group, but it was strictly online. I would go to school and laugh with them, going about the day like nothing happened the night prior. I refused to tell anyone it was happening, or that it was bothering me. My parents had been friends with Meghan’s parents for over ten years. Aly, another member of the group, was my neighbor, and our parents had also become close. Although Aly never contributed (as far as I knew), it hurt that she never stood up for me. I wanted to tell someone, but I was terrified of my parents 1. Not believing me because we were all supposed to be close friends, or 2. My parents confronting Meg or Aly’s parents after seeing proof of the chats, and me being deemed further-gay for getting parents and/or teachers involved. In hindsight, the gay comments really weren’t what bothered me. Sure, they were annoying and unwarranted, as I was pretty boy-crazy. But what started to get to me was the fact that they kept telling me I wasn’t good enough for my class crushes. It wasn’t just my interests that differed from theirs, it was my body.

Middle school’s awkward growing pains seemed to affect everyone but my group of friends, excluding me, of course. Each member was blonde and blue-eyed, petite, and very slim. If not blonde, a lanky brunette. Me? I was a brunette. Petite, but not in the way of weight. My belly stuck out. My thighs, although most days covered by my uniform kilt, weren’t slender enough. I developed early, but I was told it was only because of the extra weight I was putting on while my body changed. I wasn’t the class “fat kid” (we had one, unfortunately, and we’re now the best of friends because of our shared grade-school trauma), but they noticed that my body was not like theirs. The difference in this, however, was that they never called me “fat” to my face at school. They never said it directly to me over Aim. While the gay jokes kept coming at me, the fat jokes bounced around behind my back.

At this point, Aim had its own social media site where you could do more than just chat. I would equate it to Myspace (which I missed by a few years), where you could design a profile, post photos, and all of your past statuses would appear in a feed. I can’t for the life of me remember what it was called, so I’ll call it Aim-Myspace. Even if you had someone on your Aim buddy list, you would still have to manually add someone to your Aim-Myspace profile to see their content. I was friends with everyone from my group when we initially designed our profiles—except for Meghan. Of course I’d sent her the friend request, but it took a very long time for her to actually add me. I remember this day quite well. I’d come home from school sometime earlier, done some homework, and settled in to have my computer time. My family ate dinner late, so it was right around the time I’d be getting myself a snack. I sat down with a bowl of microwave popcorn and a glass of Arizona Iced Tea to do my routine Aim-Myspace check, and I noticed Meghan had accepted my friend request. Curious to see what her profile even looked like, I began browsing.

Her profile looked like the rest. A few pictures of herself, a few pictures of her with her family, a few with our group, only one of which I was in. I wasn’t too surprised, seeing as it had taken her this long to let me view her profile. I noticed the photo of all of us was taken a few months prior during a class field trip, and there were a ton of comments underneath. One from each member, respectively, exclaiming how awful the photo was; and this was most likely because it was a candid. Something that isn’t clear in my memory is whether the last comment was written by Meghan or Maddie, but either way, I’ll remember it for the rest of my life.

“We all look horrible. Aly and Sam are sitting widespread, Amanda isn’t even looking, and Natalie practically takes up the whole picture.” There it was. Quite possibly the reason Meghan had waited so long to give me access to her page. I didn’t know whether this was intentional, and she wanted me to see it, or she genuinely forgot the comment was there, as it was posted a few months earlier. I stopped eating my popcorn. I hardly touched my dinner. My parents didn’t seem to mind much, because after all, I was slightly overweight for my age. That day, I made the decision to cut ties with this group of friends. I was so embarrassed about my body that I didn’t even want to tell my parents what happened, nor did I want to confront any of the group about it. It made sense now. I didn’t look like them. They didn’t want a fat girl in their group. And as for my crush, Drew wouldn’t have a crush on a fat girl. He would only go for a small blonde with gorgeous blue eyes and freckles. Of course, there was a reason girls were placing the word “is” in between his first and last name (His last name was Hotte, pronounced “hot”). He was way out of my league. Every boy in our class was out of my league.

While I made up excuses to my parents as to why I no longer wanted to see anyone from this former friend group, I got through my remaining years of middle school by phasing them out and flying under the radar. I made new friends who didn’t treat me as they did. We were interested in things like the Jonas Brothers and 80s movies, and we didn’t care if people were calling us “weird” behind our backs. I decided not to talk to any boys except for one, Nick, who shared similar interests in the movie department. We always kept a platonic relationship, even through high school, as I was too scared to admit my feelings for him in fear that he would laugh.

My middle school split off into two schools after eighth grade: one only for boys, and one only for girls. Girls and boys from other, smaller schools enrolled, so it became a larger mix of people in each school. I was relieved to make some new friends, and of course, meet some new boys. I had lost most of my adolescent weight, and everyone remarked on my now “beautiful, curvy figure.” However, I didn’t see it that way. Every time I developed a crush on a guy from our brother-school, I could never bring myself to talk to him. The voice in my head kept telling me that none of these boys could possibly find me attractive now, and if they did, they would find out I used to be fat and reject me. I held myself back from making new connections. I didn’t put myself out there in fear of failing. I often just retreated into myself, pouring my energies into my writing or pop culture interests. I didn’t have a first kiss or a “boyfriend” until the end of my high school career, and it was only because he initiated the first conversation and further pursued me. It also helped that he went to a totally different school.

It wasn’t until I got to college that I began dating around. I kept my morals about me, though, and never put myself in a position where I felt taken advantage of. But the insecurity still stands with me today. I still have the voice every time I look in the mirror telling me “I’m fat” or “not good enough.” Hindsight is 20/20, and looking back, I really wish I could tell myself that I didn’t need to worry about what was said to me on Aim over ten years ago. I found myself and people I love. However, part of me wishes I wasn’t so scared to talk to more people when I was in high school and to have more positive experiences to reflect upon. I played it safe when I should have been taking more risks. I should have experienced at least one house party, or gone to more football games. I now often tell myself my value isn’t measured through my weight or physical appearance. I still struggle, of course, but it’s a work-in-progress. The voices my “friends” planted in my head through cyberbullying are not going to win, and I’m doing my best to make sure of it.