

LGBTQ Youth and Technology: Finding Their Way Through Online Communities

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Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer (LGBTQ) youth come of age in a heterosexist and homophobic society with few, if any, resources or role models to help them formulate their sexual identities. They often turn to online communities to explore coming out, relationships, and health concerns as they navigate this developmental stage. This literature review examines the information seeking behaviors of LGBTQ youth, the online communities they use, and the outcomes of their participation as they develop their identities through websites, computer mediated communications, social media, and video-based platforms. LGBTQ youth gather and share information, assist others with their developmental process, and form relationships online and transfer them to their offline lives. Several reasons for the success of the online communities are explored and the conclusion provides suggestions for future research.

Introduction

Adolescence and young adulthood are crucial periods for developing physical, emotional, and social identities and emerging as productive and engaged citizens. Youth questioning their sexual and gender identities experience the unique challenges of homophobia and heterosexism not experienced by their heterosexual peers when examining and expressing their identities (Coon Sells, 2013; Harper & Schneider, 2003). Most often referred to as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth in the research and used here to encompass the wide range of identities, some have supportive family members willing to help them access online and offline resources (Mehus et al., 2017), but others lack traditional support and information systems (Harper, Serrano, et al., 2016; Magee et al., 2012) and role models in their communities (Bond & Figueroa-Caballero, 2016; Fox & Ralston, 2016) to help them process and integrate their identities.

To help them through this period, LGBTQ youth have significantly embraced the use of online technologies and their communities to explore and develop their sexual and gender identities in a safe and supportive environment as early as 13 years of age (Bond & Figueroa-Caballero,

2016) and as old as 29 years old (McInroy et al., 2019). LGBTQ youth used online communities more than heterosexual youth (Palmer et al., 2013) with some using it as their primary source of information (Bond et al., 2009) and others preferring offline resources (DeHaan et al., 2013). Participation in the online communities provided them with essential information on how to come out online and offline (Bond et al., 2009; Coon Sells, 2013; Harper, Serrano, et al., 2016), build friendships and intimate relationships with their new narratives (Hillier et al., 2012), and gather information on health concerns and sexuality (Harper, Serrano, et al., 2016; Magee et al., 2012). The importance of online technologies cannot be overstated for they are the lifeline of LGBTQ youth who have few, if any, places to turn to ask questions, experience sexual awakenings, and feel accepted.

This article examines the use of online technologies and their communities by LGBTQ identified youth to fill the void of offline resources needed to maneuver through their sexual identity development. It considers the information needs of LGBTQ youth seeking a non-judgmental and accepting environment and the types of online communities utilized. The benefits of their membership and participation in them is examined along with the negative outcomes of their participation. Suggestions for further research with specific groups within the LGBTQ community and emerging technologies conclude the article.

Online communities

A major aspect of acknowledging and accepting their minority status was gaining identity, health, and lifestyle information from a variety of online technologies with each technology generating specific information. Many researchers have investigated the use of online communities by LGBTQ youth as they gathered information and connections often not available offline (Ybarra et al., 2015). LGBTQ youth sought information on health matters, including sexually transmitted infections, local LGBTQ resources, and news related to their LGBTQ identities on websites (Fox & Ralston, 2016; McInroy et al., 2019; Mustanski et al., 2011). Computer-mediated communication technologies such as instant messaging and chat rooms allowed LGBTQ youth to communicate in real-time, investigate individual identity concerns, and establish lasting online and offline communications (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Gray, 2009). Various social networking sites were used by the youth such as Facebook (McConnell et al., 2017), MySpace, Tag, Downelink (DeHaan et al., 2013), Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr (Fox & Ralston, 2016) to identify role models (Bond & Figueroa-Caballero, 2016; Fox & Ralston, 2016), find friends and partners as well as LGBTQ events (DeHaan et al., 2013). Web-based television and video technologies supplied information on the issues inherent with their new identities (Fox & Ralston, 2016) including bullying experiences (Green et al., 2015) and declaring the youth's

sexuality to the world with the most used platform being YouTube (Alexander & Losh, 2010).

With the negative societal pressures of their identities, LGBTQ youth sought affirming information for their exploration and development. When LGBTQ youth accessed online resources to resolve their challenges, they found that the communities allowed for anonymity and privacy that alleviated the anxiety produced by fears of being discovered as a sexual minority (Bond & Figueroa-Caballero, 2016; Hillier et al., 2012; Pingel et al., 2012) and seeking answers to sexual information (Thomas et al., 2007). The communities were considered safe spaces in which to explore their identities (Bond et al., 2009; Hillier et al., 2012; Pingel et al., 2012) and broke the barriers of geography by allowing communication with peers from around the country (Bond & Figueroa-Caballero, 2016). Youth in rural areas found these communities especially important because offline support was not available due to the social stigma associated with their sexual and gender identities (DeHaan et al., 2013). Suddenly, youth feeling alone and confused had safe spaces to gain answers to questions that their heterosexual family members and friends could not answer even if they were supportive of the newfound identities.

Reasons for exploration

Since LGBTQ youth are usually raised in a heteronormative environment, they must reexamine who they are and define themselves in terms other than heterosexuality. This realization ignites many feelings and questions to be resolved before accepting and defining their identities. The literature examined three main reasons for seeking information online and the first one was coming out to others. Although no coming out process is identical, it can be generally defined as the “process in which a person first acknowledges, accepts and appreciates their sexual orientation or gender identity and begins to share that with others” (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.). LGBTQ youth sought information, answers, and support as they proceeded through the coming out process (Miller, 2016) in a homophobic, homonegative, and heterosexist society (Harper & Schneider, 2003). Without traditional support systems of family, friends and community members enjoyed by heterosexual peers (Magee et al., 2012), they turned to online communities to receive the missing support needed for their sexual and gender identity development (Alexander & Losh, 2010). Connecting with peers experiencing or previously experiencing a search for sexual identity provided necessary information and support for their identity development (Bond et al., 2009; Harper, Serrano, et al., 2016). By participating in these communities, youth gained the strength to acknowledge and accept their sexual identity (Thomas et al., 2007) and shared information on best practices for coming out with others (Miller, 2016). Practicing techniques of coming out online with accepting peers helped them learn the best approaches by trial and error as well as coaching without detrimental effects (Alexander & Losh, 2010;

Green et al., 2015). Many youth led an LGBTQ life online and a heterosexual life offline (Coon Sells, 2013; Thomas et al., 2007) and some LGBTQ youth reported being out online more than offline (Palmer et al., 2013). Being out online increased their confidence in their identities and may have provided them time to contemplate when to come out offline.

The second reason was to develop friendships and intimate relationships. LGBTQ youth discovered the ease of finding support and forming relationships online to supplement the few, if any, supports in their offline lives with Hillier et al. (2012) reporting about 80% of LGBTQ youth had exclusive online relationships compared to only 20% for heterosexual youth. They formed online relationships that created a sense of belonging (Thomas et al., 2007) and often were better relationships and provided more support than their offline relationships (Ybarra et al., 2015). Friendship was a significant relationship type sought in the online communities (Harper, Serrano, et al., 2016) with some youth having exclusive online friends (Hillier et al., 2012) and others shifting those friendships to their offline lives (Hillier et al., 2012; Thomas et al., 2007). Chat rooms were safe spaces offering support and friendships that sometimes moved to their offline lives (Thomas et al., 2007) and developed into intimate relationships (Harper, Serrano, et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2007). At times, LGBTQ youth found it necessary to use online communities to hide certain offline relationships from family and friends (DeHaan et al., 2013).

Sexual and health information was the third reason for using online communities, though some LGBTQ youth did not access such information online (Magee et al., 2012). Sexual matters are often a delicate subject to discuss in person, but the added layer of sexual and gender minority issues created a greater barrier to gathering information. So, they sought information online at a high rate (Palmer et al., 2013) not only for privacy reasons, but also because they had no one to answer their questions (Mitchell, Ybarra, Korchmaros, & Kosciw, 2014) as schools and government agencies rarely provided pertinent information (Magee et al., 2012; Palmer et al., 2013). One study found that LGBTQ youth sought online sexual health information nearly twice as much as their heterosexual peers (Mitchell, Ybarra, Korchmaros, & Kosciw, 2014). LGBTQ youth considered the Internet helpful in finding offline health services targeted to their community and special needs regarding HIV/AIDS, free condom distribution, and health professionals in their area (DeHaan et al., 2013) with HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections information sought more often (Magee et al., 2012). In addition, transgender individuals sought online information on transition-related procedures such as hormone therapy (DeHaan et al., 2013). Since heterosexual family members, friends, and health professionals do not know the intricacies of the sexual practices of LGBTQ individuals, the youth searched for information on LGBTQ sex (Thomas et al., 2007) and

sought intimate relationship advice online from others (Magee et al., 2012).

The online communities would not have been helpful and supportive if the participants did not contribute to them. This is pivotal because the exchange of information and support between experienced and non-experienced individuals was crucial to the success of the online communities. LGBTQ youth not only requested information and learned about the LGBTQ community, but also helped and supported others (Coon Sells, 2013; Miller, 2016; Thomas et al., 2007). Youth posted videos announcing their sexual identities and stories on coming out to family and friends as well as commenting on such videos on YouTube (Alexander & Losh, 2010). In addition, sharing information and images on other technologies contributed to many positive exchanges (DeHaan et al., 2013; Fox & Ralston, 2016). The positive exchanges prompted the youth to repeatedly interact and form collaborations that led them closer to identity acceptance.

Online communities were significant resources for LGBTQ youth, but they were not the only technologies instrumental to their identity formation. General websites provided a variety of information to meet their diverse needs. LGBTQ youth read LGBTQ-related news, watched LGBTQ movies (McInroy et al., 2019), and discovered LGBTQ events and parties (Mitchell, Ybarra, Korchmaros, & Kosciw, 2014) on non-profit and corporate websites usually focused on the community. Websites supplied health information on topics other than sexual health such as fitness and weight management, mental health issues, and substance use (Mitchell, Ybarra, Korchmaros, & Kosciw, 2014). In addition, they found local LGBTQ resources such as LGBTQ social groups online (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Mustanski et al., 2011).

Success of online communities

Online communities were instrumental in the lives of LGBTQ youth. One reason for their success was that youth gravitated to online technologies because they instinctually utilized them to seek all types of information (Bond et al., 2009) while older LGBTQ persons do not use them for support since they had already accepted their sexual and gender identities (Bond, Hefner, & Drogos, 2008). Without these online communities, many LGBTQ youth would not have easily gathered the information and support they needed from offline venues (Craig & McInroy, 2014).

The second reason involved the interactivity of the technology. Thomas et al. (2007) found that the personal support received through the technologies helped them to face their realities and later provided support to others. Whether youth discussed issues in chat rooms or watched and created coming out and other LGBTQ-related videos on YouTube, they were free of the issues associated with finding offline resources (Craig & McInroy, 2014).

A third reason was the anonymity and safety LGBTQ youth experienced. Several researchers reported the anonymity of the sites was crucial to the participation of youth (Craig & McInroy, 2014; DeHaan et al., 2013; Green et al., 2015; Harper, Bruce, et al., 2016; Harper, Serrano, et al., 2016; Magee et al., 2012). With many LGBTQ youth feeling unsafe in schools because of their sexual identity or gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2020), the online communities created a safe space for them to explore without judgement (McInroy et al., 2019; Ybarra et al., 2015) through empathetic and compassionate responses to video postings by members, for example (Green et al., 2015). The youth were adept at managing comments to their videos and therefore managed their identities (Alexander & Losh, 2010). Safety was amplified by the ability to adjust privacy settings on some online technologies to keep their information out of sight from certain individuals in their offline lives (DeHaan et al., 2013; McConnell et al., 2017).

LGBTQ youth experienced other significant benefits from the social interactions and support. The emotional toll from confusion, fear, and isolation was alleviated through the therapeutic conversations of others. The genuine understanding and empathy from the online participants about the youth's challenges provided comfort (Green et al., 2015; Miller, 2016), reduced loneliness by discovering other LGBTQ youth (Bond et al., 2009; Mustanski et al., 2011), and isolation by providing new friendship outlets (Pingel et al., 2012; Thomas et al., 2007). With an increase in comfort with one's identity, the self-esteem of the youth increased (DeHaan et al., 2013; Harper, Serrano, et al., 2016).

Many LGBTQ youth do not have LGBTQ role models because there are none in the heterosexual community. However, youth found role models online even when the youth had not come out (Fox & Ralston, 2016). The role models were "influential ... because of the authenticity of their shared experiences" (Fox & Ralston, 2016, p. 638). Sometimes these role models were supplemented by LGBTQ celebrities. The role models showed how much the LGBTQ community cared for one another and that LGBTQ youth can proudly accept themselves.

Negative aspects

As LGBTQ youth left their negative offline lives and joined positive online communities of strangers, the risk of negative experiences was not completely absent. Some youth faced negative experiences such as bullying and sexual victimization online (McConnell, 2017; Mitchell, Ybarra, & Korchmaros, 2014). They experienced online bullying at varying degrees (Green et al., 2015) with Ybarra et al. (2015) reporting at the same rate as in-person bullying and Palmer et al. (2013) reporting one in four LGBTQ youth reporting online bullying. LGBTQ youth were mostly targeted for sexual harassment online through texting and at a high rate as compared to heterosexual peers with transgender youth, gender non-conforming youth, lesbians, and bisexual females reporting the

highest amount of harassment (Mitchell, Ybarra, & Korchmaros, 2014; Palmer et al., 2013). The academic performance of youth in schools and relationships with family and friends were affected by the harassment (Mitchell, Ybarra, & Korchmaros, 2014). When meeting people offline from online connections, some LGBTQ youth reported physical and sexual attacks as well as stalking (DeHaan et al., 2013). Other youth did not face negative experiences but witnessed them in the posts of others (Fox & Ralston, 2016). These negative experiences made the youth feel unsafe online, lowered their self-esteem, and fostered depression (Kosciw et al., 2016), and led some youth to view online communities as unsafe (Palmer et al., 2013).

Lastly, online technologies are only helpful if obstacles to their access do not exist. Some LGBTQ youth may have difficulty accessing online information for a variety of reasons. For some LGBTQ youth, it was risky accessing sexual health information online because they might be discovered and stigmatized by their peers (Magee et al., 2012). Similar situations may occur when family members discover their LGBTQ-related searches when privacy at home is compromised (Mitchell, Ybarra, Korchmaros, & Kosciw, 2014) or the youth just desired private information gathering (Mehus et al., 2017). However, difficulties were not limited to the home or peer group environments. Many school and public libraries use computer filters to block sites deemed harmful to minors and allow monitoring of searches to comply with laws such as Children's Internet Protection Act (Adams, 2012; Batch, 2014; Wexelbaum, 2015). These filters disproportionately affect LGBTQ youth as well as all youth who rely on public and school libraries because they cannot afford their own devices and are unable to access the Internet due to the cost (Batch, 2014; Wexelbaum, 2015). Additionally, for youth in rural areas, libraries are often the only providers of free Internet access (Batch, 2014) and the Internet infrastructure may not be available to some residents.

Conclusion

Online technologies have shown great promise in aiding LGBTQ youth in their sexual and gender development. The variety of technologies allowed the formation of a range of communities for LGBTQ youth to access information, maneuver through the coming out process, and form friendships that sometimes led to intimate relationships. With a host of online technologies from which to choose, the youth found one or more communities with the positive environments and connections they desired and the information they needed. The youth connected with peers to exchange multiple perspectives on matters of importance to them. They experienced the goodness and kindness of humankind as members welcomed new participants into their communities without reservations. With such positive outcomes, LGBTQ youth will not stop utilizing these technologies as they are essential tools in the lives of many youth.

As with any exploration online, LGBTQ youth must be aware of the potential negative impacts that arise from such exploration. While a few researchers have examined negative consequences, more research is needed so a complete picture of their experiences exist. When those negative consequences are well-established, safeguards can be implemented to protect LGBTQ youth online and possibly provide insights into reducing offline negative experiences, too.

This paper contains many references spanning approximately twenty years of research with only a few within the last three years. Although the references are not meant to be exhaustive, they do indicate the need for future research in this area. The research needs to address the changes in societal acceptance, emerging recognition of identities such as trans-queer individuals, and the inclusion of experiences with TikTok and other new technologies.

Except for a few articles focused on gay male youth (e.g., Harper, Bruce, et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2007), research articles concentrated on the overall sexual minority and gender identity community instead of concentrating on specific groups within that community. Each group experiences the acknowledgement and acceptance of their unique identities in different ways with different outcomes. For example, lesbians not only experience heterosexism, but most likely misogyny. The information needs of bisexuals are rarely researched and contribute to bierasure (Brown & Lilton, 2019). These differences, and others, warrant future research on specific groups to reveal their reasons for utilizing online technologies and communities.

In addition, some research included LGBTQ youth of color in their samples (e.g., Bond & Figueroa-Caballero, 2016; DeHaan et al., 2013). However, concentrated research on LGBTQ youth of color would determine how they experience discrimination and how they participate in online communities in more depth. If differences between the groups exist, different types of online communities might be created to meet the specific needs of those individuals. Expanding the number of online communities will increase the number of success stories and demonstrate the power of technology to address societal and personal issues on a large scale.

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