

# **The Internet as a Mental Health Resource for Sexual Minorities**

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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## **Introduction**

The LGBTQ community, symbolized by the iconic rainbow stripes, is known to be bright and welcoming. However, behind the bright demeanor are hints of depression, substance abuse, loneliness, and deteriorating mental health. According to a survey conducted by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA), people in the sexual minority, people whose sexual identity, orientation, and practice are different from the majority of society and is commonly used to describe the LGBTQ community or non-heterosexual individuals, are twice as likely to have a mental illness than their heterosexual counterpart and are at a higher risk to have suicidal thoughts and attempts (Medley, 2016). There is insufficient evidence to explain the mental health risks faced by sexual minorities.

To better understand why sexual minorities face such health risks, the minority stress model is commonly used claiming that “sexual minorities face unique experiences related to their sexual identity” which in turn effect their mental health (Meyer, 2003; Mereish, 2015). Unique experiences can include discrimination, stigma, loneliness, and internalized homophobia which can deteriorate mental health. LGB individuals face high rates of “antigay victimization” and a large proportion of the LGBTQ community have faced some sort of harassment, discrimination, and structural and personal stigmas (Walch, 2016; Lick, 2013). Violent hate crimes, unfair parenting laws, parental rejection, existence of “gay conversion therapy”, discrimination in the work place, and unfair access to healthcare are some common issues that are a result of stigma. These kinds of experiences can lead sexual minorities to feel ashamed of their sexual identity which shame has been linked to negative results in mental health. In addition, exposure to these experiences can lead sexual minorities to feel alone and cause increased psychological distress (Hatzenbuehler, 2009). As a result, a common theme faced by

sexual minorities is this feeling of loneliness. A Huffington Post article titled, “The Epidemic of Gay Loneliness”, described going through life as a sexual minority as “dangerously alienating” (Hobbes, 2017). The loneliness stems from many reasons – one of them being afraid of rejection. The chronic encounter with minority stresses can take its toll on how sexual minorities view themselves and can form disparaging images of themselves. This can result in overly conscious individuals who are constantly scanning for ways they do not fit in, scrutinizing social failures. Alex Keuroghlian, a psychiatrist at the Fenway Institute’s Center for Population Research in LGBT Health, put it as “primed to expect rejection” (Hobbes, 2017).

Another perspective is framed through the lens of relational cultural theory by analyzing interpersonal connections. Relational cultural theory claims resilience and psychological growth are rooted in interpersonal connections and growth-fostering relationships (Miller, 2008). Although good relationships can be helpful and contribute to mental well-being, relational disconnections can have the opposite effect. Relational cultural theory explains the feeling of loneliness through a different lens – a feeling resulting from a series of disconnections. Chronic disconnections can negatively affect how sexual minorities view themselves and how they connect with others, creating a sense of shame and being socially unsupported. Hartling (2000), defined shame in this context as a “sense of unworthiness to be in connection, an absence of hope that empathic response will be forthcoming from another person.” Relational cultural theory shines light on how social and cultural stigma against sexual minorities can result in many failed relationships, consequently, leading to internalized negative beliefs about belonging to the sexual minority.

As a way to cope with these common mental health problems, sexual minorities commonly turn to online resources in search for a better understanding of their identity and as a

source of support and to reduce isolation (Miller, 2017). Resultingly, online resources can be seen as a technological fix for mental health problems faced by sexual minorities. The term technological fix is used “to describe the use of technology to respond to certain types of human social problems that are more traditionally addressed via political, legal, organizational, or other social processes” (Newberry, 2005). In this paper, I analyze the importance of online resources are for sexual minorities as a technological fix for the high rates of mental illness, and explore how internet resources can help improve mental health in the LGBTQ community.

## **Literature Review**

There is a growing body of literature regarding LGBTQ interactions with online spaces but few analyze the direct relationship with mental health. Many studies have investigated how young sexual minorities use social media in their daily lives. According to Victoria Rideout, “virtually all (98%) young people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual say they have gone online to find information about health issues, compared to 86% of those who identify as straight” (Rideout, 2018). Some common social platforms include Reddit, Facebook, YouTube, and Tumblr which are commonly sought out for information and support. These online platforms help facilitate talk and address stigma while serving as a safe space to form friendships which otherwise may not have been possible without the internet (Hawkins, 2016; Lucero, 2017).

However, some studies also suggest that online platforms can do more harm than help, supporting online spaces as a source of cyberbullying, reinforcing stigma, and promoting unsafe sex practices. Emotions resulting from internalized homophobia and stigma, especially loneliness, can be very intense and detrimental to mental health. Consequently, engaging in substance use and alcohol are a few coping mechanisms to reduce the feeling of isolation or numb the emotional pain (DeLonga, 2011). Online platforms such as Grindr, a social dating app,

can promote unsafe sexual practices resulting in higher risk of catching a sexually transmitted infection or HIV (Hawkins, 2016).

This paper analyzes online resources and the components of the internet sexual minorities interact with to bolster their mental health. I introduce cases that illustrate how sexual minorities use the internet to help learn self-acceptance and combat internalized homophobia.

### **The Internet as a Mental Health Resource**

Social media and online spaces have risen alongside the development of the internet, and studies have shown that they play a role in the development of identity in sexual minorities (Craig, 2014). Seeking information in real life has many complications as it can come at the cost of privacy and facing stigma. Turning to online spaces to explore health information and sexual identity have potential to serve as safe spaces for self-expression and can influence individual's offline identities. This can serve as a coping mechanism against minority stresses which helps build emotional resilience. A survey compared the number of online health information searches by heterosexual youth and LGBTQ youth in different topics such as anxiety, stress, and sleep disorders and reported more LGBTQ youth significantly search these topics than their heterosexual counterparts (Rideout, 2018). In addition, the survey also reported in its study "virtually all (98%) young people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual say they have gone online to find information about health issues." The use of online resources can be viewed as a technological fix used to improve the disparaging rates of struggling mental health in sexual minorities.

The internet offers many different resources to its users. It can be a source of information, entertainment, a social network and more. But different online spaces, such as YouTube and Reddit, have different information to offer. Sexual minorities take advantage of what the internet

has to offer and have their own ways of interacting with digital spaces to help their mental well-being. The internet is unique in that it can help sexual minorities identify relatable role models, create a sense of anonymity and comfortability, curate positive feeds, and serve as a test ground for coming out to help sexual minorities learn self-acceptance and help mental well-being.

### **Role Models**

Diverse experiences of sexual minorities have been shared online in different media forms (video, podcasts, Q&A's, blogs, etc.). These experiences are readily available to anyone who has access to the internet and wants to seek them out. Through social learning, which involves learning and observing from others' behaviors, online spaces become very important in normalizing being a sexual minority (Bandura, 2001). A study by Fox (2016) reported that sexual minorities often reported identifying role models online, feeling drawn to the authentic content they share over the internet and connecting over common experiences.

YouTube, a video-sharing platform, has aided in the dissemination of a wide range of sexual minority experiences such as "coming-out" videos, which are usually videos where one discloses their sexual orientation to family members or loved ones. These videos have been used by sexual minorities as pick-me-up videos and as a source of courage to seek social acceptance, making the sexual minority experience less alienating (Fox, 2016). A popular coming out video on YouTube is by Olympic diver Tom Daley who posted a video in 2013 revealing his private relationship with a man (Daley, 2013). The video has garnered more than twelve and a half million views and over thirty-five thousand comments. The comments section is filled with supportive words like "What a guy. Very brave to talk about this so what. You do you and love life with your mate" (O'Connor, 2020). One particular comment by user Jodie Armstrong (2018) appraised Tom for being their role model and aiding to their coming out. Armstrong said:

“I remember watching this video when it went viral. I was 12, sat on the floor in my bedroom and I cried... I cried because I was a confused teen and you were someone I looked up to massively. I remember feeling an almost relief that I wasn't alone. I was scared of my parent's reactions at the time. Now it's been nearly 2 years since I came out as gay and I've never felt so free in my life. Thank you Tom”

There are many more coming out videos posted on YouTube, such as the coming out videos by Connor Franta (2014) and Ingrid Nilsen (2015), that have also garnered much attention and support. They serve as an inspiration to sexual minorities and help normalize being in the sexual minority.

YouTube also has channels that people can subscribe to see more of a certain content. There are abundant YouTube channels documenting LGBTQ experiences where users can subscribe to see a wide range of content regarding LGBTQ issues. The people behind these channels can be viewed as role models to the communities of users who follow them, creating a supportive network of people. Seeing other individuals that have come to share similar experiences relates back to the relational cultural theory that forming positive connections can have positive psychological consequences. A bisexual woman who participated in the Fox's (2016) study said “it's nice to know that people are so comfortable with themselves...it kind of makes you think, like, I could be just as comfortable.”

### **Anonymity**

The internet can serve as a safe space for sexual minorities as it can shield people's identities when using it. People can create an online identity with creative freedom while remaining anonymous on the internet. This can be very beneficial when seeking sensitive

information without revealing too much of oneself in the process. Sexual minorities take advantage of the anonymity of the internet to fill the information gaps in their knowledge.

Reddit is a social news website and forum where content can be promoted by user voting. Within Reddit there are different “communities” that are dedicated for facilitating conversation and content around certain topics. Reddit serves as a place to ask and post questions and have them answered by people who are part of the Reddit community. Within Reddit, there is a gay community under the Reddit tag, “/r/gay,” where it’s About page states, “/r/gay is a 150,000+ strong community of 10 years based on pride and support” (Reddit, 2008). Reddit forums have allowed people to ask questions without the worry of their online activities being connected to their offline identities. A thread started under /r/gay by user Chubbly-Bubbly reached out for help by expressing his concerns for not accepting himself for being bisexual even though everyone has been very accepting of him (Chubbly, 2020). Sexual minorities have come here to seek advice and comfort, to educate others about ongoing LGBTQ issues and more. A study investigating queer identity online quoted a bisexual man who stated, “[Reddit] kind of allows me to ask questions and comment and say things that I wouldn’t necessarily feel comfortable with everyone I know knowing that I was thinking about or asking about” (Fox, 2016).

### **Comfortability**

The internet also has another advantage; the opportunity to control and edit ideas in an online interaction. Unlike face-to-face interactions, the internet gives users the freedom to take time to craft a response, editing the content until it is ready to be shared. The freedom can give more control to users and be helpful when crafting an online identity (Lucero, 2017). For people who do not express themselves well, online communication gives them the opportunity to express themselves better. The internet prevents face-to-face interaction which helps avoid



uncomfortable confrontation which can lead sexual minorities to feel safer, more comfortable, and more at ease because they have more control over the situation (Hillier, 2012, Lucero, 2017). In a study about safe spaces online for LGBTQ youth conducted by Lucero (2017), a participant explained, “when discussing an uncomfortable topic, I like talking online because you have endless time to respond without seeming like a jerk.” This encourages sexual minorities to explore what it is like to exist as an LGBTQ person by meeting other online LGBTQ users while remaining anonymous and comfortable. Interacting with people online also provides social feedback. When positive interactions occur on the internet, it can help sexual minorities learn self-acceptance and embrace their sexual identity. As a result, they help themselves break down internalized shame and stigma, bolstering their emotional strength and mental well-being.

### **Curated Feeds**

As people navigate the content they want to see online, they are specially curating their online experience. Sexual minorities curate their experiences online to fit their needs and desires. Curating online experiences can include following content that share the same views or continuing with only positive online social interactions. For sexual minorities, it can help shield from discriminatory content such as hate posts and avoid marginalizing experiences online thus positively reinforcing a positive internal image of themselves. In a study investigating social media’s influence on identity making and coming out in LGBT youth, a 21-year-old gay male mentioned curating an internet experience by saying, “if you don’t want to talk to a homophobe you don’t have to, whereas in real life you’re sort of forced to interact with people who you might hate or might hate you” (Craig, 2014). Sexual minorities also have the choice of deciding on which social media platforms to share personal information with others. In the same study performed by Craig (2014), it was reported they often regulated the content on the different

social media platforms they interacted with and were hyper aware of who could see their content. Some share more personal information on certain platforms like Twitter and Tumblr which are both blogging sites because social media platforms offer different levels of anonymity. For LGBTQ members, being able to share personal information to certain audiences can be an outlet that doesn't require face-to-face interaction. By choosing what content to share and where, sexual minorities can create safer online spaces for themselves.

### **Test Ground for Coming Out**

Having an online identity separate from one's offline identity has aided LGBTQ members who are not out to explore their sexuality and experience what it is like to be part of the LGBTQ community. The internet serves as a testing ground to experiment with their private sexual identity before letting it carry into their real personal life. More importantly, online experimentation is a private process that allows sexual minorities to be their authentic selves without the pressures or expectations from stigma and their inherent lives. A study conducted to see the influence of new media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook) on identity in LGBTQ youth said its "participants stated that they strongly believed that the Internet was a good place to start the tentative process of coming out as an LGBTQ person because of the low level of risk involved." (Craig, 2014). In queer theory, the coming out process is one of the most pivotal moments that play in shaping a positive identity as it is a point in time whether they are accepted or rejected by the people in their lives. When coming out on an online space, it can serve as a way to gauge the reaction as if one were to disclose their sexuality in real life. Ultimately, the testing ground offered by the internet creates the opportunity for sexual minorities to be more comfortable with themselves.

## **Cyber Bullying**

The internet and online spaces can serve as an amazing resource for sexual minorities, but on the flip-side it can act as a hostile environment conducive to cyberbullying. Although the anonymity of the internet can benefit sexual minorities by providing them privacy, perpetrators can take advantage of the anonymity to communicate hurtful, cruel, and sometimes intimidating messages. These actions can lead to severe and deadly consequences. In 2010, 18-year-old Tyler Clementi committed suicide after his roommate secretly filmed and shared a video online of him embracing another man (Wiederhold, 2014). His story displays the side of the internet that can be used to partake in cyber harassment. However, there have been conflicting findings on whether sexual minorities experience cyberbullying at disproportionate rates than their heterosexual counterparts. In a study investigating how comfortable LGBTQ youth (13-17 years old) are communicating in digital spaces, it reported that 73% never or rarely been a victim of cyberbullying (Lucero, 2017). However, given the sample size of the study (N=19), it is hard to validate the conclusions of the research. It does give incentive to further investigate the proportion of sexual minorities that have faced cyberbullying using a more holistic method.

## **Conclusion**

The technological fix raises the question whether some problems can or cannot be fixed with technology. As illustrated in this paper, the internet can serve as a mental health resource for the LGBTQ community to combat mental illness. However, the internet may just be treating the symptoms of a bigger problem. Minority stresses and stigma stem from interpersonal prejudice (Meyer, 2003); and although the online resources can help sexual minorities cope with minority stress, it does not directly address the bigger problem of social stigma and prejudice against sexual minorities. From this point of view, internet resources can be seen as a temporary

fix for individuals in the sexual minority. Further research can be done to investigate how online spaces are normalizing being a sexual minority through online discussion. Moreover, further research can also be performed to investigate how age within sexual minorities may have an impact on how they use the internet to help their mental health.

The internet, various social networking sites, and search engines allow for productive interactive experiences online. Among those experiences are the feelings of support and normalcy. Yet, these various online spaces are not a perfect solution for treating mental health problems as a fix would suggest complete solvency, and in no way a replacement for professional and medical help. However, they can serve as an accessible mental health intervention among the sexual minority community.

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