Literature Review: Best Practices for Creating Safer Spaces Online for LGBTQ2S+ Youth

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Table of Contents

Adolescents spend increasing amounts of time online, and researchers, along with parents, teachers and youth themselves need to better understand how to create safer online spaces for adolescents.[1-3] Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, two-spirit (LGBTQ2S+) youth may face particular challenges in navigating online contexts such as balancing important activities like identity development and community building with safety and privacy. Here, we review existing literature on the online contexts LGBTQ2S+ youth, and how this research can be used to inform best practices for creating safer online spaces for these youth. We start by defining what we mean by online space and LGBTQ2S+ youth and talk about why online contexts may be particularly challenging for these youth. We then briefly summarize different ways that LGBTQ2S+ youth interact in online contexts in ways that may be pertinent for understanding how to make these spaces safer. Finally, we conclude by addressing how the existing literature can be used to create safer online spaces for LGBTQ2S+ youth.

Key Concepts

To start, what constitutes online space has rapidly expanded over the past decade, and will likely continue to evolve over the next decade. Adolescents are frequently early adopters of both emerging online platforms and new functions within existing platforms.[2] We will consider not only time spent on websites or in web forums, but also engagement with and self-presentation on social media (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Whatsapp), and as well as services where youth create their own and review others' content, such as TikTok and Snapchat. Youths' online activity includes traditional media consumption that now occurs

online (i.e., consuming material created by larger media companies like movies, music and games) along with more interactive online activity (i.e., creating and interacting with content created by other youth, communicating via online sources).

We are using the term LGBTQ2S+ youth to refer to youth whose sexual identity (i.e., how one describes their interest in sexual intimacy and/or romantic/emotional connection to others) and/or gender identity (i.e., how one understands and feels in their gender) minoritizes them in comparison the population at large. While youth who are minoritized based on their sexual, romantic, and/or gender identities (e.g., pansexual, asexual, non-binary, grey romantic, agender, etc.) experience some overlap in terms of their experiences (e.g., heteronormativity), it is important to note that within Western contexts, sexual and gender identities reflect different constructs. And, while the term LGBTQ2S+ captures a range of sexual and gender minority identities (i.e., lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, two-spirit), youth identify with increasingly diverse sexual and gender identities, such that this list is in no way definitive or comprehensive. Furthermore, some identities (i.e., lesbian, gay, and bisexual) have received much more attention in the research literature than others (i.e., two spirit, pansexual, asexual). We have tried throughout the review to be as specific as possible when describing the identities assessed in the samples from which data were drawn.

While creating safer online spaces can and should be a priority starting in childhood and extending across the life course, several factors make adolescence (defined for the purposes of this review as being from ages 12 to 18) a particularly important period for understanding safer online spaces for LGBTQ2S+ youth. During adolescence it is important

for individuals to assert their autonomy, develop their identities, form intimate relationships and explore their sexuality.[2,4,5] In thinking about how youth achieve these goals, online forms of interaction change the frequency, quality and demands of the social environment, and can reduce the social cues observed in offline interactions.[2] More concretely, adolescents are drawn to online spaces as an important place for exploring and presenting their identities, acting autonomously, learning how to form close and meaningful relationships and developing as sexual individuals. Youth may underestimate, however, the permanence, dissemination, reach and findability of their online activities.[4,6] Finally, youth are not merely passive recipients of media, but play an active role in selecting and interacting with their media environments.[7] Understanding how LGBTQ2S+ youth select and interact with their online platforms is fundamental to making online spaces safer for these youth.

Online Space in Supporting the Development of LGBTQ2S+ Youth

While safe spaces online in general is important, these spaces may be particularly important for LGBTQ2S+ individuals during adolescence. LGBTQ2S+ youth are coming out at earlier and earlier ages,[8,9] such that many youth come out when the pressure surrounding conforming to gender and sexuality norms are at their strongest.[5] Online spaces provide a crucial source of support for youth who are have few opportunities to explore their identities in other contexts. While almost all North American adolescents spend some time online, either on computers or cellular telephones, research is mixed as to whether LGBTQ2S+ youth spend more time — or not — in online activities than their heterosexual and cisgender peers.[10–12] Indeed, online contexts have long been recognized as important for LGBTQ2S+ individuals who may be unable to access in-person communities due to geographical

distance, as well as fears about discrimination and victimization,[13,14]. We discuss how online spaces promote identity development, social interaction and information seeking for LGBTQ2S+ youth.

Identity Development: Online contexts can be important for identity development among LGBTQ2S+ youth.[13,15,16] In online contexts, youth are able to learn about LGBTQ2S+ identities and communities, meet other youth with similar identities, and try out emerging identities. Adolescents' online activity, including looking up information, communicating with other individuals with similar identities, watching pornography, or participating in LGBTQ2S+ social media, are important for both sexual identity exploration and initial identity disclosure among youth.[13,17,18] Adolescents described online activities as being critical for increasing self-awareness about sexual identity, learning about their sexual minority communities, and accessing and creating communities related to these identities.[18] Online sources of information may be especially significant for adolescents whose identities are less frequently discussed in other settings like transgender or asexual adolescents.[19] Given variation in both the quality and quantity of representation of LGBTQ2S+ individuals in society more broadly, online activity can play a key role in informing identity development among LGBTQ2S+ youth.

Social Development: Online contexts also are an important source of social support for LGBTQ2S+ youth. Social contact online may fill a crucial need for LGBTQ2S+ youth. LGBTQ youth are more likely to have online friends than heterosexual youth, and unlike heterosexual cisgender youth, they report that these friends provide more support than their offline friends.[20] Youth also report using online contexts as a gateway to making LGBTQ friends and

participating in LGBTQ2S+ events offline.[16] Furthermore, LGBTQ youth report using online environments for developing a sense of community.[13,14] Online contexts may also provide sources of social support for dealing with homophobic and transphobic discrimination.[21]

Health Support: Finally, online contexts can provide an important source of information for LGBTQ2S+ youth, and for health information in particular.[13,14] LGBTQ2S+ access information about sexual health, and health information in general, at much higher rates than their cisgender and heterosexual peers.[22,23] In understanding why LGBTQ2S+ youth are more likely to access this type of information online, youth indicate that it is because they are both more concerned about privacy than heterosexual and/or cisgender youth, and because they report having no one to ask.[23] Indeed, a major source of information regarding sexual behaviour for heterosexual and cisgender youth, sex education courses, may provide little relevant information for LGBTQ2S+ youth.[24,25] Online contexts can also provide important insight into the mental health of LGBTQ2S+ youth.[26] Indeed, in analyzing how LGBTQ youth discuss help-seeking online, McDermott (2015) identified youth concerns about having their mental health problems taken seriously (i.e., being worried that their serious problems would be interpreted as adolescent mood swings), disclosure of their sexual or gender identities, or of being labelled as a person with serious mental health problems. These findings underline the need to respect mental health problems among adolescents, as well as the importance having contexts where youth can discuss their problems and receive help without disclosing their identities. Especially for youth who cannot seek information within their geographic communities, online contexts can be an important source of health information, and sexual and mental health information in particular.

Sexuality Exploration Youth in Online Spaces

During adolescence is when many individuals develop interest in sexual or romantic activities.[4,27] LGBTQ2S+ youth may experience particular challenges compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers in navigating these relationships. Many LGBTQ2S+ youth grow up in predominantly heterosexual and cisgender families, in communities where they may not have access to adults or peers with similar identities, potentially limiting their ability to find sexual and/or romantic partners. Even youth who live in places with active LGBTQ2S+ communities face barriers to in-person interaction, including concerns about: outness, safety, fitting in, and the inaccessibility of some LGBTQ2S+ spaces for youth (i.e., bars and clubs). The internet is an important way for members of the LGBTQ2S+ in general, and LGBTQ2S+ youth in particular, to meet romantic and/or sexual partners.

The option of meeting potential partners in online contexts has numerous advantages for LGBTQ2S+ youth, and identity exploration often includes online flirtation with potential romantic partners online.[17,18] Gay, lesbian and questioning youth are more likely to report seeking partners online than heterosexual youth.[28] It is important to note, however, that while LGB youth are more likely to meet partners online than heterosexual and cisgender youth, the majority of LGB youth do not meet partners online.[29] Beyond meeting romantic or sexual partners online, three main topics have been examined regarding sexual development in online contexts for LGB youth: sexting, pornography use, and online sexual solicitation.

Sexting: Sexting is the sending and receiving of sexual images, videos, or text using online methods.[30] Much of the discussion around adolescent sexting focuses on the potential risks associated sexting such as the potential legal and reputational consequences of having sexts circulated beyond the intended receipient.[3,31] Despite these potential risks, a sizeable

minority of adolescents report engaging in sexting,[30] and that sexting is increasingly understood by many adolescents as a normative part of sexual behaviour.[31] Adolescents' sexting behaviorwhile potentially risky, needs to be considered as a potentially normative type of sexual behavior. Research suggests some LGBTQ2S+ youth engage in higher rates of both sending and receiving sexts compared to their cisgender and heterosexual peers. [32–35] However, not all LGBTQ2S+ may be more likely to be sending or receiving sexts. For example, at least one study suggests that transgender youth did not differ in terms of sending or receiving sexts compared with their cisgender peers.[36] And, while LGBTQ youth are more likely to report sexting, less than half of LGBTQ youth report engaging in this activity.[29]

There are critical distinctions with respect to consent and sexting. These can include cases in which the person felt coerced or pressured into sending a sext, if they received a sext that they did not want to receive, or if they forwarded a sext that another person sent to them to a third party or parties without receiving permission from the original sender. Sexting may also be cause for concern when it occurs between an adolescent and an adult. Some research suggests that LGBT youth are more likely to report feeling coerced into sexting than cisgender and/or heterosexual youth.[34,36] LGB youth, conversely, were not more likely to forward a sext sent to them by another person,[34] and transgender youth were not more likely to engage in other types of non-consensual sexting behaviour, than heterosexual and cisgender youth.[33] These findings highlight the need for future work focusing on issues of consent in assessments of sexting for LGBTQ2S+ youth, and for considering sexting, and the potential risks posed by sexting, within a continuum of normative behaviors.

Pornography Use: Another online sexual behaviour that has received a lot of attention among adolescents is pornography use.[37,38] As is the case for sexting, the discussion around pornography use among adolescents reflects the risks associated with pornography use, including sexual objectification, the development of unrealistic sexual standards, and the increased likelihood of engaging in higher rates of casual sexual behaviour,[38] although the research has been mixed in supporting the extent to which using pornography leads to these outcomes.[3] What is clear is that in North American and European samples, the majority of adolescents have viewed pornography by early adolescence, and that approximately half use pornography at least weekly.[39] Rates of pornography use vary dramatically based on population, and to date reliable estimates of pornography use among LGBTQ2S+ youth are not available.[37] Some research suggests that while cisgender gay and bisexual boys are not significantly different than cisgender heterosexual boys in terms of pornography consumption, cisgender bisexual and lesbian girls are more likely to report pornography use than their cisgender and heterosexual peers.[39] Grubbs and Kraus (2021) propose a framework for understanding the benefits and risks associated with pornography use among adolescents, including some aspects that may be particularly relevant for LGBTQ2S+ youth, such as the role of pornography use in exploring and affirming sexual identity and sexual education and exploration. Research is unclear as to whether LGBTQ2S+ youth are more likely to engage in problematic pornography use (i.e., use characterized by compulsivity, intensity in trying to access pornography, and emotional distress), and their use of pornography has not been tied to more problematic outcomes when compared to their cisgender and heterosexual peers.[37]

Sexual Solicitation: Another major concern about the online context is sexual solicitation, and particularly unwanted online sexual solicitation, where youth are approached by individuals online to engage in sexual behaviour either on or offline.[40,41] Greater access to the internet via mobile phones has increased concern about the solicitation of youth in online contexts. Some of the limited research available suggests that bisexual youth, compared to heterosexual youth, are more likely to be sexually solicited online.[28] Many of the risk factors for that may make youth more vulnerable to online sexual solicitation, such as higher levels of family conflict and childhood maltreatment,[40,42] may be more prevalent among LGBTQ youth,[43,44] suggesting the importance of future research examining online sexual solicitation among LGBTQ2S+ youth. While online sexual solicitation can have serious consequences for the health and safety of adolescents, and while 25% of youth who were solicited for sexual activity online reported being extremely distressed or frightened by these solicitations,[45] an extensive literature addresses popular myths about the sources and contexts for this kind of solicitation among adolescents. This literature suggests that, in general, youth are more likely to receive solicitations from their peers, or from slightly older adolescents as opposed to adults, and that youth are aware of the motivations of the individuals who are soliciting them.[40] The extent to which these findings extend to LGBTQ2S+ youth has not been explored, and more research is needed in this area.

Cyber-Victimization

A final major focus on research related to online spaces for LGBTQ2S+ youth is the experience of online victimization, or cyber-victimization. While defined in multiple ways, cyber-victimization refers to victimization occurring via digital media or technology.[46] Cyber-

victimization includes, but is not limited to, types of victimization that are more like traditional verbal (i.e., someone saying or writing mean things to the individual) and relational (i.e., someone trying to damage an individual's reputation and social relationships) victimization, only it occurs in an online context. With regards to cyber-victimization more specifically, the persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability of online victimization[3] highlights why virtual victimization is an important safety consideration in online spaces.

A major focus of research on LGBTQ2S+ youth has been on their heightened vulnerability for peer victimization among these youth.[47,48] Existing research has examined cyber-victimization among LGBTQ2S+ youth extensively, and at least one high quality review on this topic is available.[46] Because different studies measure cyber-victimization in different ways it is difficult to assess prevalence of cyber-victimization among LGBTQ+ youth, but studies consistently report higher levels of cyber-victimization for LGBTQ+ youth compared to heterosexual and cisgender peers.[20,46,49,50] Understanding cyber-victimization may be particularly important for LGBTQ2S+ youth as in addition to higher rates, LGBTQ youth experiencing cyber-victimization have worse outcomes than their heterosexual and cisgender peers.[46]

Overlooked Groups in Online Contexts

A major limitation of the literature assessing the online contexts of LGBTQ2S+ youth is that this literature generally focuses on LGBTQ2S+ youth in general, and is rarely able to examine how other identities and societal factors may explain variation within groups of LGBTQ2S+ youth. Social inequalities and experiences of marginalization shape access to and/or use of online contexts.[51] Two factors that may be particularly meaningful in terms of creating safer online contexts for LGBTQ2S+ youth are race/ethnicity and socioeconomic

status. Existing research underscores how racialized LGBTQ2S+ youth (i.e., youth who are identified by others as not white) experience specific challenges (e.g., excessive discipline), especially in terms of school contexts.[52] And, while there has been some specific research on the online contexts of racialized LGBTQ2S+ youth,[37] it is important to acknowledge that very few of the studies we examined had the statistical power to examine differences in the experiences of LGBTQ youth in online contexts across racialized groups. More research is also needed on safe spaces online for specific subgroups of racialized LGBTQ2S+ youth, such as Two-Spirited and other indigenous LGBTQ+ youth, who may experience unique challenges in terms of online access, especially for individuals living in remote communities.[53]

Second, factors related to socioeconomic status like family income are also going to be important for understanding the online contexts of adolescents. Indeed, adolescents from families with more money typically have greater access to online spaces, use these spaces more frequently and may be able to spend more time online, which in turn will shape their online skills and internet self-efficacy.[54] Constant changes in the ubiquity of internet use suggests the importance of further research in this area, in terms of understanding how socioeconomic status shapes online contexts for LGBTQ2S+ youth.

Best Practices for Creating Safer Spaces: What We Know and What We Need to Move Forward

Existing research suggests several pathways for creating safer online spaces for LGBTQ2S+ youth. An essential part of making online spaces safer for LGBTQ2S+ youth involves making their offline spaces safer (i.e., increasing the presence of supportive adults while decreasing experiences of discrimination and violence). While online contexts present new challenges for adolescents, including LGBTQ2S+ adolescents, online contexts are not a

foreign and distinct environment, but are an extension of offline contexts where adolescents learn and play.

Families: Families can play an important role in supporting safer online environments for adolescents.[46,55–58] Parents and guardians should focus on creating open, direct and honest conversations about media use with adolescents, especially given the near impossibility of monitoring and supervising 100% of adolescent online activity. Developing positive relationships are likely to be more important for helping LGBTQ2S+ youth navigate online contexts than any specific short-term intervention. As adolescents spend more and more time online, focusing on the elements of the online environment that pose specific dangers for adolescents, rather than painting all online interactions as hazardous, may be helpful.[59] Parents and other concerned adults may be better advised to be generally aware of how their adolescents are spending time online, and with whom, rather than trying to oversee all online interactions. A potential tool for addressing communication around online environments are family media agreements in which adolescents and their caregivers discuss and reach consensus on the kinds of behaviours that are expected online.[60] And, while these kinds of agreements are useful, families need to keep in mind that these types of agreements cannot replace the value of the creation of an open dialogue. Specifically, strict rules around internet use, especially in the absence of dialogue about the importance may shut down communication. Parents need to be aware about how punishment regarding technology use can create barriers for youth discussing negative online experiences with their families.[46] More specifically, even if youth are distressed by online experiences, they may be less likely to

reach out for help if doing so will result in punishments that limit their access to online environments.

Families play an important role in how adolescents explore their sexuality online. Research suggests that communicating specific love and respect-based norms around sexual behaviour is associated with adolescents having less permissive attitudes towards sexual behaviour, and less involvement in sexualized media.[56] And, while these findings were drawn from a primarily heterosexual and cisgender sample, they reflect the importance of open communication for sexual behaviours and attitudes among youth more broadly. Adolescents, and particularly LGBTQ adolescents, wished that there was more support for parents and educators to learn about their specific sexual health needs.[61] These findings suggest that families can play a critical role in helping youth navigate sexuality online.

Schools: Schools are also essential for creating safer online contexts for LGBTQ2S+ youth. Within school contexts, having faculty and staff who are easily identifiable as "safe" for LGBTQ2S+ youth to go when they are experiencing various stressors, including online challenges, is an important first step.[62] Allowing staff to be open about their sexual or gender identities, or permitting staff to use symbols affirming their support for LGBTQ2S+ students (i.e., pride flags, positive posters about the LGBTQ2+ community) can becritical for signaling to students that there are staff members who will respect their identities. Schools can also play an role in educating youth about online environments. Indeed, while youth are often assumed to be experts in online environments, knowledge about and efficacy with online use varies widely among adolescents, suggesting the importance of educational programming that prepares youth to interact in safe ways online.[54]

Schools can play a cental role in helping LGBTQ2S+ youth navigate sexual health information online. While ideally information on sexual health that is pertinent to LGBTQ2S+ youth would be included in regular health curriculum, schools can also play a vital role in directing students to extra information from reputable online sources. Indeed, online programs have been shown to be feasible and effective places for interventions addressing sexual health issues for LGBTQ youth.[63] Including information from these types of sources, helping youth to identify accurate and appropriate sources of online health information, and providing websites where youth can find relevant content are ways that educators can make online spaces safer for LGBTQ2S+ youth.

With regards to cyber-victimization more specifically, multiple school-based interventions have been developed to address cyber-victimization among adolescent populations in general, and show modest efficacy in reducing both victimization and perpetration.[64] To date, no interventions have been tested for efficacy among LGBTQ2S+ youth specifically, although researchers have suggested that peer to peer interventions may be particularly appropriate for this population, and encourage more work in this area.[46] Important barriers exist for reporting cyber-victimization by LGBTQ2S+ youth that have implications for creating safer spaces online. Youth report fears of losing their electronic devices, not being believed, retaliation from their bully, and getting outed in the process of disclosing their bullying experience. Within the school context, being able to identify faculty and staff with whom they can disclose their identities, who will believe youth, and who will not punish them for their experience may help youth come forward when they experience

online victimization.[46] More specifically feeling connected to an adult at school can be protective against the negative impacts of cyber-victimization among LGB youth.[65]

Youth: LGBTQ2S+ are active participants in making online spaces safer for themselves and their peers. Online contexts provide communities in which LGBTQ2S+ youth can network with each other, communicate about events, and develop tools for addressing inequalities that they see in their schools and communities.[16] Furthermore, adult-led organizations, such as the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network and the Gender and Sexuality Associations Networks/Queer-Straight Alliance network provide online resources for youth and their allies trying to organize online and within their communities.[1] In discussing online activism, LGBTQ2S+ youth with racialized identities may need specific resources in terms of engaging in activism, as they may lobby for change based on many of their identities.[66,67] Creating safer spaces involves acknowledging the complexities of activism for many young people, as well as an understanding the role youth themselves in making their online spaces safer.

Online Contexts: There are also ways in which online spaces can be made safer for LGBTQ2S+ youth. Part of making online spaces safer is ensuring that online sources are accurate, appropriate, and appealing to youth. Websites designed to disseminate information to LGBTQ2S+ youth should be informed by honest and varied LGBTQ2S+ youth experiences. It is essential to acknowledge that not all youth live in environments where they can freely access information on sexuality and gender identity.

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[1]Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network : https://www.glsen.org/; GSA Network: https://gsanetwork.org/

One feature, common in online sources on intimate partner violence, is the presence of quick-leave buttons, or a button that allows a person to quickly close a website if they feel unsafe. This may be a useful feature for websites providing information to LGBTQ2S+ youth who are trying to access information in contexts where being able to maintain privacy is important.

Conclusions

Online contexts reflect an extension of daily adolescent activity, and youth in safe and supportive relationships will be better able get the help they need when they feel unsafe online. The risks posed by online contexts for LGBTQ2S+ youth are a concern for researchers, families, community members, educators and youth themselves,[3,38] and youth face real challenges like cyber-victimization and unwanted sexual solicitation online. More research is needed to develop intervention and prevention strategies to help LGBTQ2S+ youth deal with these experiences. Furthermore, an important aspect of making spaces safer for LGBTQ2S+ youth is to provide media training that is sensitive to their needs, that does not exclude or ignore their specific experiences, and provides youth with the tools they need to evaluate the quality of information and the types of risks associated with different online behaviours. Finally, we need to acknowledge the role LGBTQ2S+ youth play in creating these safer spaces, and it is important to continue the development of resources that can support youth in online contexts. Ultimately, making online spaces safer for LGBTQ2S+ youth requires making all spaces safer for youth exploring their sexual and gender identities.

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