



The Effects of COVID on LGBT Youth in Finding Community

Anika K. Bristol
Dr. Hira Shafeeq



Abstract:
This study aims to examine the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on LGBT youth's mental health and how LGBT youth are finding community during the pandemic with current social distancing guidelines. The Center for American Progress states that members of the LGBT community face additional stressors in their lives which has led to higher rates of mental illness and alcoholism. The goal of this research was to draw a connection between mental illness, finding community, and the prevalence of social media and the internet as a way to find community. Participants were recruited through St. John's Spectrum club and social media. All participants took a survey to examine the effect the pandemic and social distancing have had on their mental health and wellbeing. Data from the results of the survey showed that the number one stressor for LGBT youth's mental health was school and work, that their internet and social media usage had increased throughout the pandemic, and that most of the respondents reported that they would feel more isolated if they did not have access to the internet. Additional research into the effect of online school on mental health are planned and future interventions include raising awareness through a targeted social media campaign.

Research Question:
In times of COVID where almost all communication is remote, what affect does that have on LGBTQ youth who no longer have in-person outlets to find community and connection, and can social media fill that gap?

Introduction:
Approximately 4.5% of adults in the United States identified as LGBT in 2017, a percentage that has steadily increased since first assessed in 2012 (Newport, 2018). This percentage roughly translates to approximately 11 million adults. Generation Z is suspected to have the highest number of LGBT people within its generation more than any generation before it (Mori, 2017).
Despite this there are still difficulties LGBT people face every day. There is no nationwide legislation that prohibits discrimination based on sexuality and gender identity. In 40 states the "gay panic" defense is still allowed as a valid defense for committing a hate crime. Members of the LGBT community face difficulty with adoption, many states allow adoption agencies to discriminate against LGBT parents.
The LGBT community is also disproportionately affected by COVID-19. According to the Human Rights Campaign, people in the LGBT community tend to work in highly affected industries, are generally poorer than their cis, straight peers, and lack access to healthcare. This poses the question what effect does remote communication have on the mental health of LGBTQ youth who may no longer readily have access things like stable internet connections, in person clubs/activities, or a safe space?

Literature Review:

- **Social Media as a Tool of Connection for Youth**
 - 92% of teens go online daily and 24% reported being online "almost constantly" (Lenhart, 2015).
 - This is primarily facilitated by having access to a mobile device as "...91% of teens go online from mobile devices at least occasionally... [of those] "mobile teens" 94% go online daily or more often." (Lenhart, 2015, p. 55).
 - 83% of teens also said that they use social media to connect to their friends and see what they are doing in their lives (Lenhart, 2015).
 - 36% of teenage smartphone owners report feeling more connected to their friends while only 25% of teens without smartphones said they felt the same level of connectedness (Lenhart, 2015)
- **Use of Social Media by LGBT Teens**
 - In study done by GLSEN Half (50%) reported having at least one close online friend, compared to only 19% of non-LGBT youth.
 - These online friends were considered to be more supportive than their in-person friends.
 - This article also found that two-thirds of LGBT youth "used the internet to connect with other LGBT people in the past year"
 - Sites like Tumblr had features that allowed the user to save and share information without having to directly say this applied to them which also allowed for LGBT people to safely find and share information with less fear of being outed.
 - LGBT youth also found more [comfort] communicating through social media than in face-to-face settings" (Lucero. 2017, p. 123) as well as find more support online
 - LGBT youth are more likely to be active within the LGBT community online as well as search for resources, information, and support than they were in their offline lives with 65% of respondents using online platforms while only 35% used offline channels (McInroy et al. 2019, p. 324).
- **Mental Health in the LGBT Community**
 - LGBT youth are almost five times as likely to have attempted suicide compared to heterosexual youth (The Trevor Project, 2017)
 - 40% of transgender adults reported having made a suicide attempt and of that 40%, 92% of transgender adults attempted suicide before the age of 25 (The Trevor Project, 2017)
 - LGBT victimization, such as physical or verbal harassment or abuse, increases the likelihood of self-harming behavior by 2.5 times on average
 - It is estimated that between 20 percent to 30 percent of gay and transgender people abuse substances, compared to about 9 percent of the general population. (Center for American Process, 2018)

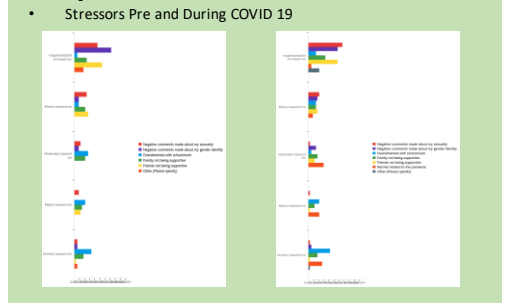
Methodology:

- **Participants**
 - The subjects being recruited for this study would be self-identified members of the LGBT community between the ages of 15 and 24.
 - The survey will be sent to members of St. John's Spectrum club as well as promoted on their and my social media as well as reached out to through message, and email.
- **Data Collection**
 - Participants filled out a survey that covered my four main topics: mental health, their experiences as an LGBT person, their internet access, and their experience with COVID-19.

Results:

The Data collected showed that there was an increase in the frequency that a person's mental health impacted their everyday life. Both pre and post COVID school/work were listed as major stressors. However, the number of respondents that listed that school/work as stressors increased since the beginning of the pandemic. The pandemic was also listed as the second largest stressor. The Data also showed that having an online space was vital to LGBT youth in their ability to connect to their peers and friends. 88% of respondents listed that they would feel significantly more isolated without access internet which could correlate to the fact that 85% of respondents had said their time spent online had increased.

Graphs:



Discussion:

The data collected showed how important social media and internet access was to LGBT youth. Majority of respondents listed it as one of their primary forms of communication with their friends during COVID. As well as their main way of feeling connected to other people during the pandemic. Due to this I plan to develop a social media campaign that will aim to create and organize effective mental health resources that cater specifically to the LGBT community. These resources will primarily focus on helping youth cope with school and work as those were the number one stressors on their mental health listed.

References and Acknowledgements:

Anika would like to acknowledge Spectrum on both the Queens and Staten Campus for their help in distributing her survey.

Calvacante, A. (2018, September 20). *Tumbling Into Queer Utopias and Vortexes: Experiences of LGBTQ Social Media Users on Tumblr*. GLSEN, CIPHR, & CCRC (2013). *Out online: The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth on the Internet*. New York: GLSEN.

Green, A., Dorison, S., & Price-Feeny, M. (2020). *Implications of COVID 19 for LGBTQ youth mental health and suicide prevention*. The Trevor Project, 1-14. Retrieved from: <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/2020/04/03/implications-of-covid-19-for-lgbtq-youth-mental-health-and-suicide-prevention/>

Ipsos Mori (2017). *The Ipsos Mori Almanac 2017*. Ipsos Mori. <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2017-11/ipsos-mori-almanac-2017.pdf>

Lenhart, A. (2015, August 6). *Social Media and Teen Friendships*. Retrieved September 29, 2020, from <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2015/08/06/chapter4-social-media-and-friendships/>

Lucero, L. (2017). *Safe spaces in online places: Social media and LGBTQ youth*. *Multicultural Education Review*, 9(2), 117-128. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2005615X.2017.1313482>

Newport, F. (2018, May 22). *In U.S., Estimate of LGBT Population Rises to 4.5%*. Retrieved September 29, 2020, from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/234863/estimate-lgbt-population-rises.aspx>