SPECIAL REPORT: SEXUAL AND GENDER MINORITY YOUTH

Special Considerations for SGM Youth Online

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Despite rapid social progress, including the landmark Supreme Court ruling on same-sex marriage in 2015, challenges remain for young individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender/trans, or queer (also known as sexual and gender minority or SGM youth). Fortunately, since the start of this century, online environments have revolutionized the lives of young SGM individuals, so even those in the most remote of locations can access discrete and timely supports. While the internet has generated many benefits for SGM communities, it has also created new problems, such as the rise of internet-based homo-, bi- and trans-phobic bullying, online sexual exploitation as well as worrying conversion tactics. **[Dr Lucassen: The peer reviewer suggested you also discuss the risks of online exploitation.** https://www.jaacap.org/article/S0890-8567(20)32214-0/pdf **]**

Given the diversity implicit under the wider SGM umbrella, it is important to briefly define these unique sub-populations and their mental health needs before delving into the impacts of online environments for these young people. **[Dr Lucassen: The peer reviewer suggested condensing the definitions part of the manuscript to 2-3 paragraphs, and then**

spending a larger amount of time going further in depth about the good and bad aspects of how LGBTQ youth use the internet.]

Defining the Sub-Populations or Communities

To identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) is to claim a certain, often politicized, sexual identity label. However, sexual attractions and sexual behaviors are other important dimensions of human sexuality.[1] Depending on the dimension of sexuality assessed, estimates of non-heterosexual prevalence varies considerably, even when estimates are derived from population-based studies. Assuming questions related to sexuality are included in these large-scale studies, researchers have consistently reported that a substantial proportion of youth identify as being a sexual minority individual. For instance, up to 8% of youth identify as bisexual, and up to 3% of youth identify as lesbian or gay.[1] Whereas being LGB is related to sexuality, being transgender/trans pertains to one's gender identity. *(See sidebar for more information)*

The Mental Health Challenges Facing SGM Youth

Robust population-based data has demonstrated SGM youth are at an elevated risk of a range of mental health problems, including suicide attempts, depression, anxiety, and addiction issues.[9,10] Unfortunately, there is limited population-based data focused on the mental health of transgender adolescents. For instance, a systematic literature review and meta-analysis of suicide attempts among SGM young individuals identified only a single study in which the results for transgender adolescents were presented separately, and not combined together with SGM youth.[11] Based on the meta-analysis, transgender adolescents were nearly 6 times more likely to attempt suicide when compared to their cisgender peers.[11]

The increased rates of mental health problems are hypothesized to be caused by minority stress, whereby the mistreatment associated with the high levels of stress they encounter is thought to place them at an increased risk for emotional problems.[12] Experiencing this mistreatment also results in internalizing the negativity associated with anti-SGM messages, which can lead to mental health issues.

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Environments for SGM Youth

[Dr Lucassen: The peer reviewer suggested breaking this section down into subsections, like Bullying and Harassment Risks, Exploitation Risks, Opportunities for Affirmation & Community, Provision of Mental Health Services, and Risks of Online Conversion Efforts. Then perhaps the resources and recommendations to parents / clinicians could follow.]

Opportunities for Affirmation & Community

The internet has initiated a revolution for SGM youth because geographic boundaries are no longer limiting; they can now connect with others like themselves online. As such, the internet has exerted a powerful influence, with numerous advantages. For instance, those in rural or more socially hostile environments can obtain support via online groups as well as from charitable organizations that provide free online services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (**Table 1**). This is a huge advantage. SGM-specific information on relationships and sexual health is also freely available online.

Bullying, Harassment and Exploitation Risks

Bullying behaviors and trolling via social media platforms are concerning issues, especially for SGM youth. It is worth noting some of this mistreatment can take the form of horizontal

violence (i.e., one SGM youth bullying another). Both youth and health professionals have previously identified internet safety and security issues being important considerations.[16] Specific examples include the risk of SGM youth being outed against their will on social media and youth being targeted for sexual exploitation online.[16, REF] The United Kingdom-based SGM charity, Stonewall, has recently made recommendations to support the safety of youth online.[17] Selected top tips from this report are summarised in **Table 2**.

Risks of Online Conversion Efforts

SGM youth in high income countries are thought to be coming out earlier.[13] Consequently, many will still be living at home and will be dependent on their families when they first come out. Not all families will be supportive and some will actively attempt to secure services and information, online or face-to-face, aimed at "converting" or "correcting" the youth. This practice still occurs, despite the disapproval of professional bodies toward reparative or conversion therapy, including strong opposition from the American Psychiatric Association[14] as well as the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.[15]

Provision of Mental Health Services

The online context is a valuable milieu in which to deliver psychotherapy at the present time, especially for SGM youth because they have previously indicated a preference for web-based support for mental health issues.[16] Yet few evidence-informed interventions have been developed for these youth. Two systematic reviews of psychosocial treatments found only a single tested online tool—Rainbow SPARX—to support the mental wellbeing of SGM adolescents in the peer-reviewed literature.[18-20] This cognitive-behavioral therapy program for adolescent depression has been specially adapted for SGM youth, but it has not been made

available to prospective users outside of a research context. The mainstream version of SPARX has been freely available to all youth in New Zealand since 2014. However, SPARX was less effective for transgender adolescents in comparison with other users who did not identify as transgender.[21] The results suggest targeted efforts are needed to address the mental health needs of SGM youth.

Concluding Thoughts

The internet is both ubiquitous and influential. SGM youth have grown up with modern technologies in a way that their caregivers and clinicians have not. As such, it is important that clinicians defer to their expertise as "digital natives" and remain open-minded about online environments as they proffer many benefits. Clinicians also need to be non-judgemental and aware of the considerable challenges facing SGM youth online, so that SGM youth will discuss their concerns with their clinicians as these arise. As a result, treatment providers should encourage their SGM youth patients to maximize the benefits from their online experiences while managing the potential risks or challenges. We anticipate more work will be undertaken in the fields of cognitive-behavioral therapy and e-therapies for SGM youths.

[Dr Lucassen: The peer reviewer thought it important to highlight that kids often know more about digital technology than their parents (and often clinicians) and that it's important to take a humble stance and an open non-judgmental environment so that youth can come to you with questions and concerns when they come up.]

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Table 1. Resources for SGM Youth, Families, and Professionals

For awareness, education, and support	- The Trevor Project www.thetrevorproject.org - Human Rights Campaign www.hrc.org - National Gay and Lesbian Task Force https://www.thetaskforce.org/ - National Center for Transgender Equality www.transequality.org - Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) https://www.glaad.org/ - Gender Spectrum www.genderspectrum.org/ - Family Acceptance Project https://familyproject.sfsu.edu/ - Parents, Families, Friends, and Allies of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) https://pflag.org/ - It Gets Better Project https://itgetsbetter.org/
School resources	- Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) www.glsen.org - Stomp Out Bullying https://www.stompoutbullying.org/lgbtq-bullying - Trans Student Educational Resources www.transstudent.org - Gender and Sexualities Alliance (GSA) https://gsanetwork.org/what-is-a-gsa/
Educational resources	- The Gender Wheel www.genderwheel.com/ - The Gender Book www.thegenderbook.com - The Gender Unicorn https://transstudent.org/gender/
Legal resources	- Lambda Legal www.lambdalegal.org - Transgender Law Center www.transgenderlawcenter.org

Table 2. Tips Communicating With Young Patients

Top tips*	*What this entails*
- Use the internet for all the right reasons	- The internet can be used for a range of positive purposes, from raising money for charity to sharing posts from other SGM youth doing great things, or simply for sending a friend an amusing photo to cheer them up when they are down.
- Report online bullying and mistreatment	- If someone is treating an SGM young individual unkindly online and/or not respecting them for who they are, encourage the young individual to report this behavior.
- Ask if it is okay to do	- Encourage the youth to reflect upon how their own online actions might make others feel. Obtain permission before posting a picture with others, or before adding others into group chats.
- It is important to keep personal information safe	- Personal information includes SGM status, full names, date of birth, addresses, and passwords.
- Think before posting	- Consider the possible consequences of online actions, because a posting can be seen by a lot of individuals. Sometimes, for reasons of self-preservation, an SGM young individual may be better off not commenting on certain posts in unsupportive forums.
- Think critically	- Not all information on the internet is trustworthy or helpful. Youth should use their critical thinking skills, as well as the support of those around them, to figure out what is reliable, helpful, and good for their mental health.
- Not everyone is who they say they are online	- Youth should seek advice from a trusted adult if anyone (only known to the youth online) makes them feel uncomfortable, or asks to meet up or share personal information, including images.
-Talking helps	- Talking to a trusted individual (especially if something happens online that makes the youth feel worried, upset, or confused) is important.

*Tips derived from the 'Staying Safe Online' report[16]