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The online environments of sexual and gender minority youth: Contexts of risk and resilience

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The online environments of sexual and gender minority youth: Contexts of risk and resilience

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The increasing amount of time adolescents spend online underscores the importance of understanding these online spaces and contexts of both risk and resilience (Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Nesi et al., 2018; Twenge et al., 2019). While youth in general face opportunities and challenges from online environments, both sexual minority (i.e., youth with identities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, same-gender-loving, pansexual, asexual, queer/questioning, two-spirit, etc., youth who report same-gender sexual or romantic attraction or behavior) and gender minority youth (youth whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth, such as agender, non-binary, transgender, two-spirit, gender nonconforming, etc.) may experience online environments differently than their heterosexual and/or cisgender peers (i.e., youth whose sex assigned at birth aligns with their current gender identity). The aim of this research review is to provide a summary of the existing literature regarding the online experiences of sexual and gender minority youth (SGMY), and to identify how to support SGMY in these spaces. We start by defining what we mean by online spaces. We then situate SGMY online experiences within a developmental framework. We then review the literature discussing how these spaces are both contexts for risk and resilience. We conclude by providing recommendations concerning what this literature tells us about creating positive online environments for SGMY.

Conceptualizing online spaces

The nature of online space has expanded over the past decade and will likely continue to change in the coming decades. This rapid evolution is a caveat in any review of online behavior, and the age of articles must be kept in mind when considering their implications for today's adolescents. Moreover, adolescents are frequently early adopters of both emerging online platforms and new functions within existing platforms (Nesi et al., 2018), and researchers are often playing catch up due to the rapid evolution in online adolescent activity. In this review, we focus on a relatively broad range of activities and behaviors, including use of websites or web forums, engagement with and self-presentation on social media (i.e., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Whatsapp), as well as services where youth create their own and review others' content, such as TikTok and Snapchat. We start by acknowledging that we can only review the literature that exists and that more research is needed, especially as adolescent social media use moves away from text-based or photo-based mediums to those incorporating more videos (Piper Sandler, 2022). Moreover, adolescents' online engagement often can include consuming traditional media online such as movies, music, and games, or more interactive activity such as creating their own content, or communicating with other adolescents

online. We take this broad approach because many positive (i.e., friendship formation and identity exploration) and negative (i.e., cyberbullying and sexual exploitation) impacts of online activity happen across multiple platforms in ways that are complementary and compounding.

While many individuals engage in online activity starting in childhood, several factors make adolescence (ages 12 to 18 in this review) a particularly relevant period for understanding online activity. Peter and Valkenburg (2011) outline the importance of taking a developmental perspective for understanding adolescent online behavior. They argue that online activity supports the principal developmental goals outlined for adolescence: autonomy, identity, intimacy, and sexual development. More concretely, adolescents are drawn to online spaces as places for acting autonomously, exploring and presenting their identities, learning how to form close and meaningful relationships, and developing as sexual individuals.

Although online environments may provide contexts for certain developmental tasks, characteristics of these contexts make virtual platforms different compared to offline environments. Researchers in particular express concern about how the ongoing cognitive and emotional developmental processes of adolescence may lead youth to underestimate the permanence, dissemination, reach, and findability of their online expression (Moreno & Uhls, 2019; Peter & Valkenburg, 2011). Nesi and colleagues (2018) proposed the Transformational Framework for understanding the impact of online contexts for child and adolescent development. This framework outlines key particularities of online forms of communication that are likely to impact ongoing developmental processes. Online contexts are posited to change the frequency of social interactions, amplify particular experiences and demands of the social environment, and change the nature of the social environment, most notably by reducing the social cues and increasing the asynchronicity of social interactions. These factors differentiate the potential impact of online contexts for adolescents' developmental outcomes compared to other environments. A helpful example in understanding these differences is in thinking about a conversation between two people. Offline, conversations generally occur synchronously, with both individuals having fairly accurate understanding of who can hear the conversation, and both participants providing important verbal and non-verbal social cues. In an online context, individuals may respond to each other at differing time intervals, may have less insight into who has access to the conversation, have fewer social cues about how the

other person is responding emotionally to the discussion, or have less insight into emotional state of their conversation partner.

These developmentally salient aspects of online environments have specific ramifications for understanding online privacy (Peter & Valkenburg, 2011). The ability for individuals to determine when, how, and to what extent information about them is communicated to others changes in light of the persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability of online contexts. The factors that render online spaces more complicated for adolescents also impact the capacity for these spaces to support the privacy needed for identity development.

Finally, Steele and Brown's (1995) media practice model highlights how youth select and curate when and how they engage with media. In particular, this model highlights that while adolescents' norms and values may be shaped by the media that they use, adolescents also play an active role in curating the media to which they are exposed. And, while this model was developed prior to many of the online activities in which adolescents currently engage (i.e., texting, social media, online gaming), the reciprocal role between adolescent interests and media messaging is even more important for understanding the impact of online environments for adolescents in increasingly granular media spaces. The media practice model has been used to understand how social media use is associated with risky behavior (Vannucci et al., 2020), how media shapes gender role stereotypes (Ward & Grower, 2020), and for understanding adolescent pornography use (Farré et al., 2020). This model underlines that while adults may be concerned about how youth are impacted by their online environments, youth themselves play a role in shaping the environments to which they are exposed.

Online Activity among SGMY

Adolescence is an important developmental period for many SGMY. With people coming out at earlier and earlier ages (Bishop et al., 2020; Dunlap, 2016), developmental collision theory suggests that youth are more likely to come out when the peer pressure to conform to sexual and gender norms is at strongest during early-to-mid adolescence (Russell & Fish, 2019). Peer pressure to conform during early-to-mid adolescence may heighten the importance of online spaces for youth who are less safe or have fewer opportunities to explore their identities offline. Almost all North American adolescents spend some time online, either on computers or cellular telephones. Research is mixed as to whether SGMY spend more time engaged in online activities than their heterosexual and cisgender peers, with some work suggesting no differences (Ceglarek & Ward, 2016; Perales et al., 2020), and other work suggesting that at least some groups

of sexual minority youth spend more time online than their heterosexual peers (Luk et al., 2019). While establishing differences in use between gender and/or sexual minority individuals and heterosexual and cisgender individuals is important, SGMY—a heterogeneous grouping—are not homogenous in their internet activity. For instance, youth reporting same and different gender attraction spent higher overall amounts of time on social media than youth with only different gender attraction or youth reporting only same gender attraction (Luk et al., 2019), with little research examining rates of internet use among gender minority populations.

Perhaps more important than potential quantitative differences in the use of online space are the different functions of online space for SGMY compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers. Online contexts have long been recognized as an important venue for gender and sexual minority individuals who may be unable to access in-person communities due to geographical distance, as well as fears about discrimination and victimization (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Pacey et al., 2020).

Online Contexts as Supporting Development among SGMY

Existing work has focused on how SGMY use online spaces to support their ongoing development, most notably in terms of identity development, social development, and for promoting agency by providing access to health information.

Identity development. Identity development is a central developmental task during adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Online environments can be important platforms for identity development among SGMY (Craig & McInroy, 2014; DeHaan et al., 2013; Hatchel, 2016), where youth are able to learn about different sexual and gender minority identities and communities, meet other peers with the same or similar identities, and try out emerging identities in contexts where they can remain anonymous. Online activity, such as looking up information, communicating with others, watching pornography, or participating in gender or sexual minority social media activity, are linked with both sexual identity exploration and initial identity disclosure among youth (Bóthe et al., 2020; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Giano, 2019; Harper et al., 2016). For instance, gay and bisexual male adolescents in one qualitative study described online activities as being important for increasing their self-awareness about their sexual identity, learning about their sexual minority communities, and accessing and creating communities related to these identities (Harper et al., 2016). Online contexts may be especially important for individuals whose identities are less frequently discussed in other settings, such as transgender or asexual individuals (Fox & Ralston, 2016; Selkie et al., 2020). Given variation in both the quality and quantity of identity representation in society more broadly,

online activity may play a crucial role in informing identity development among SGMY.

Social development. Symbolic interactionist perspectives underscore how self-concept both informs and is informed by social interactions (DeLay et al., 2018; Yeung & Martin, 2003). Online contexts may inform identity development inasmuch that these contexts facilitate interactions with others. More specifically, social contact online may fill an important need for SGMY, as sexual minority youth might spend more time alone (Perales et al., 2020) or have less extensive social networks (Martin-Storey et al., 2015) than their heterosexual peers.

These patterns of behavior may reflect safety concerns among SGMY (Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2012). Indeed, qualitative research focusing on the online experiences of SGMY highlights how they feel that online contexts are safer than offline contexts (Craig et al., 2014; McInroy et al., 2019). SGMY are more likely to have online friends than their heterosexual counterparts, and they report that these friends provide more support than their offline friends (Ybarra et al., 2015). More broadly, SGMY report using online environments for developing a sense of community (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Pacey et al., 2020). SGMY in a publication dating from 2013 also reported using online contexts as a gateway to socializing with other members of their communities offline (DeHaan et al., 2013). Online contexts may also provide sources of social support for dealing with homophobic and transphobic discrimination (Jackson, 2017) and may be particularly important when other offline support from friends is low (Brandt & Carmichael, 2020). Therefore, online contexts can provide an important source of social support, particularly for SGMY who may be physically isolated or face other barriers for participating in accepting non-virtual environments. As such, online contexts can offer an important social bridge as youth start to explore their offline communities.

Health support. Online contexts can provide an important source of health information for SGMY (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Pacey et al., 2020). Online contexts as sources of health information have received significant attention within the existing literature, as SGMY use virtual content to access both general and sexual health-specific information at significantly higher rates than their cisgender and heterosexual peers (Magee et al., 2012; Mitchell et al., 2014). In terms of understanding why these differences are observed, SGMY report more privacy concerns and less people to pose questions to when compared to heterosexual and cisgender youth (Mitchell et al., 2014). A major source of information regarding sexual behavior for heterosexual and cisgender youth, sex education courses may provide little relevant information for SGMY (Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017; Pampati et al.,

2020). Empirical work supports online contexts as being feasible and effective places for interventions addressing sexual health issues for SGMY (Mustanski et al., 2015; Nelson et al., 2019). Indeed, SGMY themselves describe how online access to mental health services may address important barriers for seeking services (Craig et al., 2014).

Online Sexual Behavior among SGMY

The development of the sexual self is also an important developmental task for adolescents (Peter & Valkenburg, 2011; Tolman & McClelland, 2011), and an abundance of research focusing on sexuality in online spaces for adolescents in general suggests that this topic merits a specific focus when discussing the virtual experiences of SGMY. In particular, we discuss online dating, sexting and pornography use.

Online dating. SGMY may experience distinct difficulties in romantic and sexual relationships, such as outness and emotional and physical safety when compared to their cisgender and heterosexual peers. Many SGMY grow up in predominantly heterosexual and cisgender families and in cultures that primarily or exclusively provide examples of heterosexual relationships between cisgender people. Beyond limited access to sexual and gender minority romantic and sexual relationship representation and modelling, many SGMY live in communities where they may not have access to peers with shared or similar identities, potentially limiting their ability to find sexual and/or romantic partners. Even youth who are physically nearer to sexual and gender minority communities face in-person interaction barriers, including concerns about outness, safety, fitting in, and adult-centric queer spaces (i.e., 'gay' bars and clubs). The internet has long been important for members of sexual and gender minority communities in general, and SGMY in particular, to meet romantic and/or sexual partners.

Meeting potential partners in online contexts has numerous advantages for SGMY. Compared to their heterosexual peers, for instance, gay, lesbian, and questioning youth are more likely to report seeking partners online (Rice et al., 2015). Despite the fact that geosocial network applications (i.e., applications that allow an individual to identify potential partners in their geographic area, such as Grindr) are technically restricted to individuals who are 18 or older, evidence increasingly suggests that SGMY use these applications (Macapagal et al., 2020). It is important to note, however, that this may be primarily true for cisgender sexual minority boys, and that while sexual minority youth are more likely to meet partners online than heterosexual and cisgender youth, older research suggests that the majority of sexual minority youth do not meet partners online (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2016).

Sexting. Sexting refers to the online sending and receiving of sexual images, videos, or text (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2017), and research suggests that some SGMY send and receive more sexts compared to their cisgender and heterosexual peers (Kim et al., 2020; Van Ouytsel et al., 2019, 2021; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2014). As is frequently the case, however, important variability is observed within different subgroups of SGMY. For instance, one study found that transgender youth did not differ in terms of sending or receiving sexts compared with their cisgender peers (Van Ouytsel et al., 2020). And, while SGMY are more likely to report sexting when compared to cisgender and heterosexual youth, older research suggests that a minority of these youth send or receive sexts (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2016).

Much of the discussion around adolescent sexting has focused on the risks associated with this online behavior (Lippman & Campbell, 2014; Livingstone & Smith, 2014). While there are potential negative ramifications associated with sexting (i.e., legal issues surrounding sexualized imagery of minors, potential for images to be widely shared within social networks), this behavior, like sexual behaviors in general among adolescents, needs to be considered developmentally. For instance, existing research suggests the importance of understanding why youth sext (Bianchi et al., 2016; Cooper et al., 2016), including sexual motivations (e.g., expressing and exploring sexuality among peers and romantic partners), body-image reinforcement (e.g., using sexting for feedback about body adequacy from peers) and instrumental/aggravated reasons (e.g., obtaining something or relational aggression by exploiting the sexual nature of the sexts) (Bianchi et al., 2016). A sizeable minority of adolescents report engaging in sexting (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2017), and sexting more broadly, is increasingly understood by many adolescents as a normative part of sexual behavior (Lippman & Campbell, 2014).

In terms of understanding the potential risks associated with sexting, important distinctions occur with respect to consent (Strasburger et al., 2019). Consent becomes an issue when individuals report feeling coerced or pressured into sending sexts, when they receive unwanted sexts, and when individuals forward a sext 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 SGMY are more likely to report feeling coerced into sexting than cisgender and/or heterosexual youth (Van Ouytsel et al., 2020, 2021). Sexual minority youth, conversely, were not more likely to forward a sext sent to them by another person compared to heterosexual youth (Van Ouytsel et al., 2021), and transgender youth were not more likely to engage in other types of non-consensual sexting behavior than heterosexual and

cisgender youth (Van Ouytsel et al., 2019). Research also suggests that sexual minority youth may be more likely to be threatened regarding the unwanted circulation of their sexual material than heterosexual youth, but are not more likely to have this material circulated (Gámez-Guadix & Incera, 2021). These findings suggest the importance of future work focusing on issues of consent in assessments of sexting among SGMY.

Pornography use. Another online sexual behavior among adolescents that has received significant attention is the use of pornography (Bóthe et al., 2019; Grubbs & Kraus, 2021). Indeed, pornography use among SGMY has already been the specific focus of a published systematic literature review (Bóthe et al., 2019). Similar to concerns regarding sexting, the broader conversation around pornography use among adolescents tends to reflect 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 behavior (Grubbs & Kraus, 2021). 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 SGMY, such as the role of pornography use in exploring and affirming sexual identity and sexual education and exploration. Furthermore, using pornography is quite common, with the majority of adolescents having viewed pornography by early adolescence, and approximately half of adolescents using pornography at least weekly (Bóthe et al., 2020). Rates of pornography use vary dramatically based on the samples used and the ways in which pornography use is measured, and as such, reliable estimates of pornography use among SGMY are not available (Bóthe et al., 2019). A growing body of literature suggests, however, that while cisgender gay and bisexual boys are not significantly different from 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 (Bóthe et al., 2020). Research is unclear as to whether SGMY are more likely to engage in problematic pornography use (i.e., use characterized by compulsivity, intensity in trying to access pornography, and emotional distress; Bóthe et al., 2019). Still, given the pervasive use of pornography among youth in general, more research is needed to further understand the motivations for, and patterns of use, particularly among SGMY.

Finally, a growing body of research has examined the longitudinal associations between adolescent pornography use and relevant relational outcomes such as aggressive behaviors (Dawson et al., 2019; Kohut et al., 2021; Waterman et al., n.d.), sexual permissiveness (Martyniuk & Štulhofer,

2018), and sexual behaviors (Milas et al., 2020; Vandenbosch et al., 2018). Findings regarding the consequences of pornography use, however, are mixed. Given the potential for pornography use to be higher among SGMY, longitudinal research is needed to examine if potential associations between pornography use and individual outcomes are similar among these populations when compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers.

Online Risks for SGMY

As is the case for adolescents in general, online contexts can also serve as contexts for risk for SGMY youth. Here, we focus on two major sources of risk being cyber victimization and sexual solicitation.

Cyber-victimization. Cyber-victimization refers to victimization occurring via digital media or technology (Abreu & Kenny, 2017) and includes, but is not limited to, types of victimization that are similar to 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, but occurring in online contexts. The factors that make online environments unique from offline contexts (i.e., persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability of online victimization; Livingstone & Smith, 2014) may explain why earlier work suggests that cyber-victimization may have a small but unique impact on adolescent mental health accounting for other forms of victimization (Gini et al., 2018).

Minority stress theory suggests that the primary explanation for the well-established mental health and wellbeing disparities between sexual minority and heterosexual populations, including adolescents, is stigma and the consequences of stigma associated with these identities (Meyer, 2003). Despite being initially developed to focus on sexual minority populations, this theory is also relevant for explaining health disparities between transgender and cisgender communities (Reisner et al., 2015). The centrality of discrimination and victimization for understanding disparities between SGMY and their heterosexual and cisgender peers has led to a substantial literature on victimization within these populations (Poteat et al., 2009; van Beusekom et al., 2016). This body of knowledge includes a focus on the role of cyber-victimization with one existing review addressing cyber-victimization experienced by SGMY (Abreu & Kenny, 2017).

Variation in cyber-victimization measurement, as well as rapid evolution of virtual victimization contexts, makes it difficult to assess rates of cyber-victimization among SGMY. Despite the difficulty associated with measuring cyber-victimization, research suggests that SGMY consistently report higher levels of this type of victimization compared to heterosexual and cisgender peers (Abreu & Kenny, 2017; Cénat et al., 2015; Escobar-

Viera et al., 2018; Ybarra et al., 2015). Understanding cyber-victimization may be particularly important for SGMY because, in addition to experiencing this type of victimization at higher rates, SGMY who experience cyber-victimization may have worse outcomes than their heterosexual and cisgender peers with regards to suicidality (Cénat et al., 2015), depression (Garaigordobil et al., 2020), and eating disorders (Pistella et al., 2019). These findings parallel a larger literature suggesting more serious psychological consequences for sexual and gender minority individuals compared to heterosexual cisgender individuals following victimization experiences (Paquette et al., 2019; Roberts et al., 2010)

Existing research highlights significant barriers that prevent SGMY from reporting cyber-victimization (Abreu & Kenny, 2017). Specifically, youth report fears of losing their electronic devices, encountering disbelief, experiencing retaliation from their bully, and getting outed in the process of disclosing their bullying experience. Intervention approaches designed to address experiences of cyber-victimization need to contextualize how these fears may limit youths' likelihood of disclosing or getting help in light of their cyber-victimization experiences.

Sexual solicitation. Sexual solicitation refers to when youth are approached by individuals online to engage in sexual behavior either on or offline (Wolak et al., 2008; Wurtele & Kenny, 2016) and speaks to concerns about online sexual predators. While all youth can experience sexual solicitation, limited research suggests that certain groups of sexual minority youth, such as bisexual adolescents, are more likely to be sexually solicited online than heterosexual youth (Rice et al., 2015). Research similarly suggests that compared to their heterosexual peers, sexual minority youth may be more likely to receive unwanted sexual attention online (Gámez-Guadix & Incera, 2021). Although experiences of online sexual solicitation have not been extensively documented among SGMY, many of the risk factors associated with unwanted online sexual solicitation, including higher levels of family conflict and histories of abuse (Wolak et al., 2008; Ybarra et al., 2007) may be more prevalent among SGMY (Craig et al., 2020; Russell & Fish, 2016), suggesting the importance of future research in this area.

While online sexual solicitation can have serious consequences for the health and safety of adolescents—one study found that 25% of youth who were solicited for sexual activity online reported being extremely distressed or frightened by these solicitations (Madigan et al., 2018)—research addresses popular myths about the sources and contexts for this kind of provocation. Older research on this topic indicates that 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 those individuals who are soliciting them (Wolak et al., 2008). The extent to which these findings are also true for SGMY youth have yet to be explored, and more research is needed to understand the extent to which SGMY are vulnerable to sexual predation online.

Limitations to the literature

A major limitation of the literature examining the online contexts of SGMY is that it does not typically assess how intersecting social locations (e.g., race, socioeconomic status, ability, religion, citizenship, language, etc.) influence youth experiences. Older research suggests that social inequalities, such as racialized status and class, shape access to and/or use of online contexts (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006). These other identities condition the day-to-day experiences of SGMY (Conron et al., 2018; Mallory & Russell, 2021), suggesting the importance of considering how interlocking identities shape outcomes. To start, existing research strongly suggests that racialized youth experience specific challenges (e.g., excessive discipline) across a variety of contexts, including at school (Skiba et al., 2002; Snapp, Hoenig, et al., 2015). And while there has been some specific research on the online contexts of racialized SGMY (Böthe et al., 2019), it is important to acknowledge that very few of the studies we looked at had the statistical power to examine differences in the experiences of SGMY across racialized groups, and little qualitative research has focused on the online experiences of racialized youth in particular. More specifically, future research should explore the online experiences of specific subgroups of racialized SGMY, such as Two-Spirit adolescents, who have not typically been the focus of virtual space research.

Second, socioeconomic status is also important for understanding the online contexts of adolescents. Indeed, higher socioeconomic status has been associated with greater access to online spaces, frequency and time spent online, and online skills and internet self-efficacy (Livingstone & Helsper, 2010). Constant changes in the ubiquity of internet use suggests the importance of further research in this area for understanding how socioeconomic status shapes access to and use of online contexts for SGMY, as well as youth more broadly.

Improving the online environment for SGMY

While more research is needed, several clear directions have already been identified for creating safer online spaces for SGMY. Given the interplay between online and offline contexts (Ash-Houchen & Lo, 2018), making online spaces safer for SGMY involves making their offline spaces safer, such as increasing the presence of supportive adults while decreasing incidents of discrimination and violence. While researchers emphasize the novel challenges posed by online settings for adolescent

development in general, they caution against seeing online spaces as being radically distinct from offline environments (Livingstone & Smith, 2014; Nesi et al., 2018; Peter & Valkenburg, 2011). Said another way, online activities should not be perceived as occurring in foreign and uncharted areas, but rather as an extension of in-person contexts where adolescents seek out: information, socialization, support, sexual and romantic partners, and entertainment. Families, schools, and youth themselves have unique roles to play in terms of improving online spaces for SGMY.

Families. Families can play an important role in supporting safer offline and online environments for SGMY (Abreu & Kenny, 2017; Boniel-Nissim et al., 2020; Overbeek et al., 2018; Snapp, Watson, et al., 2015; Tomić et al., 2018). Research on this topic emphasizes the importance of creating open, direct, and honest conversations about media use with youth. Communication is especially important, given that as individuals progress through adolescence, monitoring and supervising online activity becomes increasingly difficult. Developing these types of long-term positive relationships are likely to be more important for helping SGMY navigate online contexts than any short-term intervention. Given the ubiquity of online activity, research supports the importance of focusing on the elements of the online environment that pose dangers for adolescents, rather than painting all online interactions as hazardous. For instance, some older research suggests that youth are much more likely to experience cyber-victimization on social network sites than to be solicited by strangers, while solicitation from strangers occurs more frequently in chatrooms or through direct messages (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2008). Given the older technology modalities addressed by this research, it is clear that more work is urgently needed in this area. Parents and other concerned adults may be better advised to be aware of how youth in their care are spending time online, and to discuss the particularities of each of these activities, rather than trying to oversee all online interactions.

Potential tools for promoting communication regarding online environments are family media agreements, or documents in which adolescents and their caregivers discuss and reach consensus on the kinds of online behaviors that are expected (*Family Media Agreement | Common Sense Media*, n.d.). These types of agreements can provide a useful tool for discussing the kinds of activities that are expected of adolescents. Conversely, families should keep in mind that these types of agreements ought not be used to replace the creation of an open dialogue. Specifically, parents need to be aware of how punishment associated with technology use can create barriers for youth discussing negative online experiences with their families (Abreu & Kenny, 2017). Even if youth are distressed by

online experiences, research suggests that they may be less likely to seek help if doing so will limit their online access. These types of findings suggest the importance of considering how potential punishment for involvement in prohibited online activities may leave youth more vulnerable to negative outcomes and ultimately underscores the importance of warm and consistent communication around technology use.

With regards to sexual behavior more specifically, families can play an important role in how adolescents explore their sexuality online. Research suggests that adolescents, and SGMY in particular, wish that there was more support for parents and educators to learn about their specific sexual health needs (Narushima et al., 2020). These findings suggest the important role that families have in helping youth navigate sexuality online.

Schools. Schools can also play an important role in educating youth about online environments. Indeed, while it is often assumed that all youth are experts in virtual 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 (Livingstone & Helsper, 2010). More specifically, given the role that schools frequently play in health education, these institutions can play a vital role in helping SGMY navigate sexual health information online. Including information from these types of sources, helping youth to identify accurate and appropriate online health information, and providing websites where youth can find relevant and accurate content are ways that educators can make online spaces safer for SGMY.

Multiple school-based interventions have been developed to address cyber-victimization among adolescents in general and show modest efficacy in reducing both victimization and perpetration (Ng et al., 2020). To date, no interventions have been tested for efficacy among SGMY, although researchers have suggested that peer-to-peer interventions may be particularly appropriate for this population and encourage future studies in their area (Abreu & Kenny, 2017). Within the school context, being able to identify faculty and staff who will receive disclosures in a positive manner, who will believe youth, and who will not punish them for their experience, may help youth come forward when they experience online victimization (Abreu & Kenny, 2017). Feeling connected to an adult at school has been shown to be protective against the negative impacts of cyber-victimization among lesbian, gay and bisexual youth (Duong & Bradshaw, 2014).

Youth. SGMY are active participants in using online spaces, and can play a critical role in improving these spaces for themselves and their peers. Online, SGMY can network with each other, communicate about events,

and develop tools for addressing inequalities that they see in their schools and communities (DeHaan et al., 2013; McInroy et al., 2019). Furthermore, adult-led organizations, such as the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN) and the Gender and Sexuality Associations Networks/Queer-Straight Alliance network have supported youth in these kinds of activities by providing online resources for youth and their allies trying to organize within their communities.¹

Part of making online spaces safer is ensuring that online sources are accurate, appropriate, and appealing to youth. Websites designed to disseminate information to SGMY need to be informed and/or created by or in collaboration with youth from sexual and gender minority communities. Research is only beginning to explore the value of peer-to-peer interventions addressing constructs such as sex education and anti-bullying efforts more broadly (Sun et al., 2018; Yeager et al., 2015), and these approaches should inform the development of youth-based sources for information online.

While online contexts open up new opportunities for community engagement and activism, SGMY with racialized identities may need specific resources in terms of engaging in activism, as they may lobby for change based on many of their minoritized identities (Pender et al., 2019; Santos & VanDaalen, 2018). Creating safer spaces involves acknowledging the complexities of activism for many young people, as well as understanding the incredible work of youth themselves in improving their online environments.

Conclusions

The risks posed by online contexts for youth in general, and SGMY youth in particular, are a concern for researchers, families, community members, educators, and youth themselves (Grubbs & Kraus, 2021; Livingstone & Smith, 2014). In understanding how to make online spaces safer for SGMY, we need to acknowledge that these spaces increasingly reflect an extension of the methods adolescents use to accomplish their basic developmental tasks, including learning about themselves, making friends, and exploring their sexuality. Online spaces, however, are not without risk. More research is needed to develop prevention and intervention strategies to help SGMY circumvent and cope with these experiences. It is also important to acknowledge how online spaces overlap with offline spaces. Youth in safe and supportive offline relationships will be better positioned to ask for the help they need when they feel unsafe in online spaces. Furthermore, an important aspect of making spaces safer for

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

SGMY is to provide media training that is sensitive to their needs, which does not exclude or ignore their specific experiences and interlocking identities, and provides youth with the tools they require to evaluate the quality of information and the types of risks associated with different online behaviors. Finally, we also need to acknowledge the role of SGMY in creating their online spaces, and the importance of developing resources that support youth in online contexts.

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