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VIEWPOINT

LGBT cyberspaces: a need for a holistic investigation

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Cyberspaces provide many opportunities for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth to build social networks, share information, and become more informed about their sexuality without the risk of being 'outed'. Concurrently, however, there are a myriad of risks that problematize this positive narrative associated with these cyberspaces. There is a scarcity of scholarship in geographical literature about the risks related to youths' interactions with LGBT cyberspaces. To date, most of the available scholarship pertains to the beneficial outcomes related to cyberspaces. However, we propose that researchers need to critically investigate the unhealthy behaviors produced by cyberspaces. There are a variety of online communities and websites that provide inaccurate health information, and this could inform poor health decision-making by LGBT youth.

Keywords: Cyberspace; LGBT; youth; sexual health; online interactions; human-computer interaction

The growing acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth and related access to online safe spaces in North America is a great cause for excitement, yet we question whether geographers have been mindful of the potential dangers and risks associated with cyberspaces for these youth. Despite reports of unhealthy experiences for LGBT youth (e.g. Birkett, Newcomb, and Mustanski 2015) in physical spaces, there is a dearth of attention paid to online discussions of unprotected sex (i.e. barebacking) and conversations related to the spread of HIV. At the same time, there have been recent notable and important shifts in discourses around protective factors and positive cyberspaces for LGBT youth. For example, organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign, Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), and the Trevor Project have championed the need for safe spaces for LGBT youth (Pandya 2014). These organizations, along with incremental changes in social attitudes, have played a part in creating opportunities for interactions that were once thought unimaginable. Message boards, online resources, dating applications, and blogs are just some of the services that provide spaces for LGBT teens to share experiences.

Scholars have found that online spaces are especially important for LGBT youth (Boyd 2014; Downing 2013), as many of them provide a place for these youth to learn about their oftentimes marginalized identities through support forums, direct chat services, and applications that facilitate real-world meetings. However, despite the focus on the positive aspects of cyberspaces for

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LGBT youth, scholars sometimes overlook the potential dangers – such as misinformation and risks to personal safety – that can result from engagements in these online spaces.

This article is a critical response to the emerging scholarship that has explored cyberspaces in the everyday lives of LGBT youth. While we embrace the need for, and the progress related to, the paradigm shift from deficit-driven (e.g. a youth as at-risk with problems to be solved) to asset-driven (e.g. a youth's lived experience providing assets to well-being and health) research investigations, and positive youth development models (see Downing, 2013; Herek 2010; Mustanski 2011), we urge a holistic analysis into the potential dangers, drawbacks, and challenges of virtual spaces for LGBT youth. Here, we (1) recognize the need for the deeper understanding of how to improve the lives of LGBT youth by studying and highlighting safe spaces for education and networking, (2) demonstrate the need for a holistic analysis into online spaces by demonstrating some of the potential drawbacks associated with two of these spaces, and (3) provide future directions for the study of LGBT youths' interactions in the virtual world.

LGBT youth and social media

There is a growing interdisciplinary body of literature that examines the relations between social media, LGBT youth, and their lived experiences online (see Addison and Comstock 1998; Allison et al. 2012; Driver 2005; MacIntosh and Bryson 2008). Many of these studies investigate the ways LGBT youth incorporate social media in their daily lives (Veinot et al. 2013). Boyd (2014) suggests that cyberspaces are platforms for youth to be more open about their sexuality through the usage of avatars or other types of alternate personalities; these domains are important because – unlike their heterosexual peers who typically do not need to create alternate personalities – LGBT youth are oftentimes at risk and youth feel they must guard their sexual identities. That is, a privileged liminality between cyber and physical spaces exists for heterosexual youth, which is typically improbable at the same scale for many LGBT youth. Facebook, YouTube, Tumblr, and Reddit are common platforms where LGBT youth seek information and receive support (Magee et al. 2012; McDermott, Roen, and Piela 2012). These platforms help to discuss and fight stigma that is still pervasive throughout North American society (Boyd 2014).

The beneficial aspects of cyberspaces have been the main focus of contemporary scholarship. For example, some researchers have found social networks to be important in health decision-making for LGBT youth (Downing 2013; Mustanski 2011). Other research has described cyberspaces as platforms that can produce friendships and connections which otherwise may not be possible without the Internet (Bryson and MacIntosh 2010; Holloway and Valentine 2003; MacIntosh and Bryson 2008; Valentine, Holloway, and Bingham 2000). Yet, this scholarship does not talk about the risks and known dangers associated with these platforms to the degree that we believe is necessary.

The good and the ugly: cyberspaces for LGBT youth

The relation between LGBT youth health and cyberspaces is complex in nature. It is necessary for geographical researchers to acknowledge the importance of emerging connections between social media and the well-being of LGBT youth (MacIntosh and Bryson 2008). There are some significant health risks related to engaging with others on these sex and dating apps mainly for young men who have sex with men (YMSM), who oftentimes identify as gay or bisexual, but sometimes as straight. For example, recent studies on YMSM demonstrated that users of Grindr, a gay hook up application for Smartphones, reported high rates of barebacking (i.e. engaging in unprotected anal sex) compared to men not using the application (Beymer et al. 2014; Landovitz et al. 2013; Winetrobe et al. 2014). This is problematic because access to groups engaging in riskier sexual

activities may lead to increased exposure to other unsafe environments for YMSM. One study found the risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), such as syphilis, were reported to have increased due to unsafe behaviors initiated on hook up applications (Beymer et al. 2014). We acknowledge many factors compound these problems, including: easy access to Grindr or other hook up apps despite being younger than 18; the lack of comprehensive sexual education about the risks related with unprotected sex such as barebacking and/or not using a condom with strangers as YMSM, and access to online forums where barebacking has been presented as the ultimate form of intimacy (Dean 2009). Clearly, we need to know more about the risks of misinformation and unsafe circumstances related to some Internet material and social applications for LGBT youth.

Obviously it is problematic and overly simplistic to argue that cyberspaces are good or bad; instead, there are sources that can be either/both healthy or unhealthy for LGBT youth users. Now, we turn to two cyberspaces that illustrate our argument regarding the need for a holistic view into the safety of LGBT cyberspaces.

Two LGBT cyberspaces: a critique

Both Gay Teen Forum (GTF) and Barebacking blogs¹ may play a role in perpetuating and/or initiating unhealthy sexual, emotional, and bodily health issues for LGBT youth. Many LGBT youth visit these spaces for information about different aspects of their health or to build their social networks. Yet, the sites are paradoxical in nature: the spaces can be both beneficial and costly for the well-being of youth. Here, we consider these spaces as costly and problematic because they have the potential for promoting unhealthy behaviors. For example, most online forums and websites for LGBT youth are self-regulated and do not require a healthcare professional acting as a moderator (Bay-Cheng 2005). Additionally, many of these spaces lack diversity as they share limited perspectives on LGBT health issues (Boyd 2014).

Gay Teen Forum

GTF is an unmoderated online network for LGBT teens and young adults to chat and get advice on different aspects of their lives. Downing (2013) points out that a space like GTF provides access to worldwide support systems for LGBT youth that had not been imagined just ten years ago – this is valid and extremely important. However, Downing does not highlight the misinformation that teens are exposed to when browsing nearly all aspects of GTF. This forum is designed for youth to ask questions that are oftentimes uncomfortable to bring up in person – yet not so much when done online – in an anonymous manner. LGBT youth who are fearful of coming out (i.e. disclosing their sexual identities) for fear of losing friends and family are regular visitors to this website. In addition, youth can post questions or be spectators reading others' posts on different LGBT issues. Many gay and bisexual males are curious about sexual acts such as 'bottoming' (e.g. being penetrated in the anus), 'topping' (i.e. penetrating another in the anus), and other aspects of sex. Accordingly, GTF provides uncensored sex advice from other teens based on their experiences. We find these aspects of GTF potentially problematic. Many teens who respond to others' inquiries have little or no knowledge or experience about the process of LGBT sexual intercourse and many of these youth are not taught about sexual health in school (Connell 2005; Kohler, Manhart, and Lafferty 2008; Tooley 2005).

One highly read section in September 2015 on GTF was about bareback sex; many posts in this section by anonymous users provided inaccurate information regarding the risk of infection and time for seroconversion.² This led to some youth sharing rumors and misinformation about the latency period associated with HIV infection after barebacking. Some youth stated if they

tested negative for HIV after one-week post sexual encounter, then it was no longer possible to become infected. When in fact, for 95% of cases, the infection can be upwards of 34 days (Tooley 2010). Also troubling is a lack of discussion about the fact that STIs can be transmitted through bareback sex; these include, and are not limited to, chlamydia, syphilis, gonorrhea, hepatitis C virus, and human papillomavirus. Hence, some youth using these online networks as their main source of sexual health information may implement these incorrect ‘facts’ into their everyday health practices (Gray et al. 2005). These youth may not have other resources to corroborate whether or not this information is credible.

Bareback blogs

The GTF posts demonstrate that some YMSM are fascinated by the prospect of having bareback sex. Barebacking blogs perpetuate the willingness of some to disregard the known risk of HIV/AIDS and STIs to partake in unprotected sex (Dean 2009). There is a subculture within the gay community that has advocated for barebacking, and describes it as *the most intimate form of pleasure*. The risk of HIV and STIs, for some, has been described as an inevitable result of being a gay man who is sexually active (Dean 2008). Unfiltered and unmonitored discussions around such topics – like the inevitability of STIs – are pervasive in GTF and bareback blogs, to which youth are exposed without guidance, critical reflection, or proper education.

It is concerning that youth might be directed to these behaviors on blogs and chat services, especially when research has shown that sexual education programs in North American public schools do not prepare heterosexual – let alone LGBT – youth to understand their sexual health (Bauermeister et al. 2013; Gagahan et al. 2007; Kubicek, McNeeley, and Collins 2015). YMSM might not be fully aware of the sexual risks when viewing websites like GTF, which sometimes compares barebacking to smoking, being obese, or a variety of other potentially harmful self-inflicted activities without discussing the risk of HIV, the long-term health challenges with HIV medication, and the potential of becoming positive with AIDS. Thus, youth who frequent these types of sites may be misinformed and use the discussions as encouragement to partake in unsafe and unhealthy activities. Each of these spaces is problematic in various ways for LGBT teen health. There are indeed beneficial aspects for some of the information provided for youth online; however, are these outweighed by the risks of inaccurate information and the consequent negative impact on health and well-being?

Future directions

Given our review of the potentially negative outcomes of these cyberspaces, we believe scholars should (1) recognize these issues as important for geographers, since more LGBT youth engage with online spaces for health information due to the reduced social risk and/or stigma and (2) understand that LGBT cyberspaces are now more complex, accessible, and *risky*. Young people are increasingly using new forms of social media (often unregulated and unmonitored) and so are exposed to different forms of (un)healthy information. With little knowledge or informed exposure through most North American education systems, how can young LGBT youth differentiate between different information sources? Health risk and behaviors for LGBT youth do not emerge only from online debates and misinformation, yet we focused on these spaces because of the anonymity and unmoderated nature of forums, blogs, and apps that facilitate the spread of information with little opportunity for critical reflection or questioning.

To date, geographers have focused specifically on virtual and cyberspaces separately from the geographies of LGBT and youth geographies (Downing 2013; Gorman-Murray 2008; Kinsley 2014). We believe that geographers are behind other fields, such as public health and information

studies, regarding the discussion of LGBT youth, health, and cyberspaces. Research in other disciplines has focused on the health outcomes from the interactions that occur across cyberspaces. Furthermore, for YMSM, many cyberspaces provide increased access to risky activities, such as barebacking, which otherwise would be difficult to find as a YMSM in physical spaces (Dean 2008, 2009; Kubicek, McNealey, and Collins 2015; Landovitz et al. 2013).

We agree with Downing (2013) that further scholarship needs to be produced by geographers concerning LGBT youth and their interactions in cyberspaces. It is true that the cyberworld marks one of the few spaces where LGBT youth can 'safely' ask questions related to sexual identity and behavior. These youth will continue to do this because of the apparent safety that cyberspace offers (Magee et al. 2012). As we have argued, much of the health information offered in these spaces is potentially unhealthy. We urge more scholars to examine the risks of cyberspaces for youth. Our arguments are corroborated with Kinsley's (2014) call for geographers to reconsider and further engage with cyberspace scholarship – we extend these important points to the vulnerable population of LGBT youth. It is necessary for children's and youth geographers to actively engage in the types of issues experienced online by LGBT youth and relate it to young people's health and well-being.

Conclusion

The field of LGBT youth and cyberspaces is at an exciting crossroad for geographical research. It seems as though every few months there are new smartphone applications or websites that can be used to build further social networks for LGBT youth. It is important to consider how these platforms and networks can impact the health and well-being of such youth. It is necessary to do so, as LGBT youth typically rely on social networks as their main source of information (Veinot et al. 2013). Furthermore, these applications can facilitate circulation of unhealthy behaviors between young users (Gray et al. 2005). Thus, there is further potential for research concerning the role and outcomes associated with LGBT cyberspaces.

Are we going to continue talking about the importance of LGBT resources without acknowledging the inherent dangers and misinformation provided by them? And, how can we begin to address these issues as geographers and social scientists? This article is meant to act as a starting point for more critical scholarship; we hope other researchers will re-evaluate these issues pertaining to unhealthy outcomes and LGBT cyberspaces. We urge scholars to consider the potential health implications of using sex and dating applications and other cyberspaces that have fuelled the spread of misinformation. Geographers offer a unique perspective to enhance the understanding of these real life experiences of LGBT youth. As cyberspaces continue to become essential for sexual health education of LGBT, do we really want our youth stumbling across the blogs that condone unprotected anal sex? We think not. It is our responsibility to produce, critique, and promote scholarship regarding the up and downsides of social media and cyberspaces for LGBT youth.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. Gay Teen Forum: <http://www.gayteenforum.org/>; Popular bareback blogs: <http://iblastinside.com/>; <http://rawtop.com/sex/>

2. Seroconversion is the scientific term describing the period 1–2 weeks after initial transmission of HIV, and when the antibodies develop and become detectable. However, it can take upwards of 34 days to test as HIV-positive.

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