

**Leaving the Nest: LGBTQ+ Youth Involvement in Supportive Social Media, and Effect
Over Time**

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Abstract

Numerous studies have outlined the benefits offered to LGBTQ+ youth by social media, in the absence of safe, supportive spaces in-person. Though many LGBTQ+ youth engage in social media to establish their identities and find solidarity, research about the ways in which resilience manifests in later adolescence and young adulthood following these experiences is relatively scant. Developing a greater understanding of the long-term effects supportive social media spaces can have on LGBTQ+ adolescents as they near adulthood carries implications for measures that can be implemented in schools and communities to supplement this engagement, as well as educating families and peers of LGBTQ+ adolescents about ways in which they can help their loved ones and acquaintances establish their identities and make connections with others who share their experiences. The Courage to Challenge Scale is tailored to the needs of LGBTQ+ individuals, specifically addressing the coming-out process and effects of support, while the Protective Factors for Resilience Scale evaluates the involvement of friends and family in LGBTQ+ individuals' in establishing a safe and supportive environment that contributes to resiliency. The development of resiliency over time as a response to these forms of support can be evaluated through this longitudinal study, which spans four years and follows participants through the adolescent period of development to young adulthood.

Leaving the Nest: LGBTQ+ Youth Involvement in Supportive Social Media

Numerous studies have outlined the benefits offered to LGBTQ+ youth by social media in the absence of safe, supportive spaces in-person (Craig et al., 2015). In areas where members of the LGBTQ+ community are discouraged from disclosing their identities, social media offers a place to connect without risk of discrimination; community solidarity serves as a particularly impactful bolster to marginalized communities' collective coping capabilities (Selkie et al., 2019). Though social media use is widespread amongst much of the adolescent population, it offers unique benefits for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth in opportunities to share, teach, and learn (Fox & Ralston, 2016) about their identities and experiences with others in an environment offering a level of protection that often cannot be found in adolescents' homes and communities.

Identity formation is a cornerstone of adolescent development (Bates et al., 2020). The struggles adolescents face in identity formation are compounded for LGBTQ+ youth, who must discover, label, and learn to express stigmatized sexual orientations and gender identities that may be met with discrimination from their real-life communities. With disclosure of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer identities carrying positive implications for emotional health (Bates et al., 2020), social media increases accessibility to "coming out," a key component of identity formation and emotional health alike for LGBTQ+ individuals (Fox & Ralston, 2016). In establishing an introspective understanding of their identity, LGBTQ+ youth also confront the question of how they will disclose this identity to others. Social media is noted for the opportunities it provides all adolescents to learn and practice socialization skills (Craig et al., 2014), and this is especially effective for LGBTQ+ youth, who may not have the chance to socialize according to their sexual and/or gender identities in real life.

In addition to establishment of identity, social media provides a platform for members of the LGBTQ+ community to share their lived experiences and seek education to further understand the meaning of their identities and ways in which they can be expressed (Fox & Ralston, 2016). For transgender youth in particular, being able to connect with others going through the transition process, whether through hormone replacement therapy, surgery, or both, provides a space in which they can learn more about accessing these services, as well as what to expect and how to maintain their health during their transitions (Selkie et al., 2019). LGBTQ+ youth may access traditional methods of education through social media, such as identity labels; education about social skills from peers and role models; and experiential education about the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals (Fox & Ralston, 2016). Additionally, those engaged in LGBTQ+ spaces in social media gain opportunities to share their lived experiences, allowing them to not only learn, but also to give back to these learning spaces as teachers.

While connecting with the LGBTQ+ community through social media, LGBTQ+ adolescents may often find immediate benefits for their emotional health. With online spaces representing a lesser risk of harm than in-person spaces, social media enables LGBTQ+ youth to reach out and open up to others online in ways they could not in real life (Craig et al., 2015), which is particularly important for psychological wellbeing for those who identify as LGBTQ+ (Cannon et al., 2017). Feelings of isolation stemming from difficulties finding face-to-face connections with other LGBTQ+ youth and community members are countered by consistent online interactions with other members of the community, even in the absence of connection to LGBTQ+ peers in real life. With social media serving as a reliable source of emotional support, transgender youth engaged in these spaces report feelings of affirmation and hope about their futures (Selkie et al., 2019).

As LGBTQ+ adolescents find benefits pertaining to their identity formation, mental health, and understanding of their identities through social media, these factors become protective against some of the distress they experience (Cannon et al., 2017; Fox & Ralston, 2016). The relationships these youth have made online are particularly potent, as community solidarity influences transgender individuals' mental health and identity establishment (Cannon et al., 2017). These relationships also serve as one of three pillars of the Courage to Challenge Scale's construct of resilience, alongside hardiness and supportive environments (Smith & Gray, 2009). With social media providing an avenue to access and maintain resiliency factors, as well as educating LGBTQ+ youth about coping responses to discrimination and connecting them to others with which they may find solidarity, the LGBTQ+ adolescents that engage in it are given the chance to find protective factors and a level of resiliency they may not have otherwise.

This study will explore the longitudinal effects of involvement in supportive social media spaces by LGBTQ+ adolescents upon resilience. A longitudinal approach to this study has been favored over a cross-sectional design due to its increased ability to account for confounding factors, which may be especially prevalent in marginalized populations. Assessment will begin between the ages of 13 and 15 and will end between ages 17 and 19. Participation will be restricted to adolescents who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, or any combination of these. My hypotheses are as follows: (i) that levels of resilience will increase over at least the first two assessment intervals and (ii) that amount of social media usage will be directly correlated to levels of resilience.

Method

Participants

This study will include a total of 150 participants identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, and who are between 13 and 15 years of age upon entry to the study. Participants also must report a minimum of 1 hour of social media involvement per week for the past 6 months. Participants will be recruited through outreach in LGBTQ+ social media spaces, as well as high schools and community programs supporting this age group. Including a minimum threshold for social media participation and specifying a period of at least 6 months of prior engagement controls for irregular social media engagement that may not adequately relate to resilience.

Measures

This study's independent variable is time. Participants will be assessed annually over the course of four years. Amount of social media usage will serve as a second independent variable, recorded during assessments on basis of frequency of visits and average time spent per week.

For the purposes of this study, resilience and hardiness as operationalized and assessed by the Courage to Challenge Scale (Smith & Gray, 2009) will serve as the dependent variable. The Protective Factors for Resilience Scale (Harms et al., 2017) will be used alongside the Courage to Challenge Scale during assessments and will evaluate participants' supportive environments and protective interpersonal relationships, a measure operationalized but not assessed by the Courage to Challenge Scale.

Procedure

To initiate this study, outreach in freshman and sophomore high school classes, school-based LGBTQ+ resources such as gay-straight alliances, community-based LGBTQ+ resources,

and prominent social media sites such as Twitter and Tumblr will be conducted. Participants will be screened to ensure their social media engagement meets the threshold and that they would enter the study in the appropriate age bracket. Informed adolescent assent and parental consent will be obtained. Assessments will be conducted in office or at participants' schools to ensure a neutral environment.

Participants will be tested a total of 4 times over the course of 4 years. Assessment will include all items included in the Courage to Challenge Scale (Smith & Gray, 2009), all items included in the Protective Factors for Resilience Scale (Harms et al., 2017), and two items measuring frequency and amount of social media access per week.

Strengths and Limitations

The four longitudinal intervals at which this study conducts its assessments occur regularly, ensuring that we are able to observe subtler nuances in development of the dependent variable over time. Initial screening of participants will control for factors besides social media engagement that may affect the dependent variable, such as a supportive in-person environment that negates the need for social media involvement.

Limitations of this study include the relatively narrow age bracket of participants; resilience is measured over the course of adolescence, rather than into adulthood, which affects needs and applications of resilience. Additionally, the measure administered to control for consistent social media involvement relies on participants' self-reporting and may be subject to bias (in fear of judgment for excessive social media usage) or subjectivity (e.g., if participants do not consider their engagement in lesser-known platforms to be in line with "social media").

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