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**To cite this article:** Shelley L. Craig, Lauren McInroy, Lance T. McCreedy & Ramona Alaggia (2015) Media: A Catalyst for Resilience in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth, *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 12:3, 254-275, DOI: [10.1080/19361653.2015.1040193](https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2015.1040193)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2015.1040193>



Published online: 06 Jul 2015.



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## **Media: A Catalyst for Resilience in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth**

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*Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth have the potential for considerable resilience. Positive media representations may mediate negative experiences and foster self-esteem, yet the relationship between resilience and both traditional offline and new online media remains underaddressed for this population. This grounded-theory exploration of media-based resilience-building activities by LGBTQ youth (n = 19) indicated four themes that media use enabled: coping through escapism; feeling stronger; fighting back; and finding and fostering community. Data are embedded to evidence thematic findings and incorporate participant voices. The importance of considering the media within contemporary LGBTQ youth's ecological framework to capture their resilience is considered.*

**KEYWORDS** *Adolescents, homophobia, LGBT, representation, resilience, sexuality, technology, television, youth*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth disproportionately encounter harassment, discrimination, and victimization from both

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Received 17 March 2014; revised 24 September 2014; accepted 10 October 2014.

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peers and adults (Society for Adolescent Health and Medicine [SAHM], 2013). At least partly due to such experiences of stigma and violence, LGBTQ youth frequently struggle with mental and behavioral concerns such as depression, anxiety, substance use, and risky sexual behavior. LGBTQ youth are also more likely to self-harm, experience suicidal ideation, and attempt suicide than their non-LGBTQ counterparts—activities which have similarly been linked to experiences of victimization (Hatzenbuehler, 2011; Saewyc, 2011). As a result of these established vulnerabilities, research with LGBTQ youth in North America has focused predominantly on risk (Mustanski, Newcomb, & Garofalo, 2011; Russell, 2005). However, the majority of LGBTQ youth survive their adolescence despite the extensive challenges they experience (Craig, Austin, & McInroy, 2014; Saewyc, 2011). Research that creates a one-dimensional risk profile may be inappropriate and miss opportunities for understanding the role of resilience in the lives of contemporary LGBTQ youth (DiFulvio, 2011; Doty, Willoughby, Lindahl, & Malik, 2010).

### Resilience Theory

As a result of their minority status, LGBTQ youth must negotiate many stressful circumstances during an already-challenging developmental period of life: adolescence. Although ambivalence, poor health choices, and self-destructive behavior have been characterized as the primary reactions that LGBTQ youth have to stress and a lack of familial support, the importance of resilience as a potential response to adverse circumstances should not be overlooked (Scourfield, Roen, & McDermott, 2008). Resilience has been conceptualized as the ability to positively navigate through significant adversity or threat (Reaching IN, 2010), necessitating the presence of both risk and avoidance of risk, and involving the development of skills to adapt and buffer the negative outcomes associated with risk exposure (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Mustanski et al., 2011).

Resilience theory is consistent with an ecological theoretical approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), which posits complex and reciprocal interactions between individuals and their environment at multiple levels (e.g., interpersonal level, community level, cultural level). The ecological system is comprised of *microsystems*, which includes an individual's immediate social environment (e.g., family, school); *exosystems*, which link at least two settings, at least one of which indirectly impacts the individual's immediate environment (e.g., the relationship between home and the community) (Johnson & Pimplamp, 2008); *mesosystems*, which are the relationships between an individual's microsystems (e.g., the relationship between home and school); the *macrosystem*, the broad ideological and cultural framework

(e.g., beliefs and knowledge); and the *chronosystem*, which includes changes in the individual and environment over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1993; Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009).

Contextually focused strategies, such as an ecological framework, have increased the theoretical and conceptual strengths of resilience models (Luthar et al., 2000). When investigating a context with the presence of risks or the potential for adverse outcomes, it is essential that research assess factors that facilitate positive outcomes despite the presence of negative factors (Mustanski et al., 2011). For LGBTQ youth, exploration of their ecological context is critical because of the multiple subsystems impacting their experiences and the numerous sites of both potential marginalization and support (e.g., home, school, community) (Craig & McInroy, 2013; Morrison and L'Heureux, 2001). Thus, an ecological approach accounts for both the risk and resilience factors present in youth's lives.

A resilience framework addresses risk factors but is more focused on protective factors (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005) that may help facilitate positive outcomes (Mustanski et al., 2011). Resilience research focuses on the complex interactions among the many systems of a person's life that promote competent functioning under adversity (Masten, 2011). Numerous individual, relational, and contextual factors are associated with such competence, for example, emotion regulation, ego control, and intellectual functioning; a positive home environment; and the availability of supportive community resources (Bowes, Maughan, Caspi, Moffitt, & Arseneault, 2010). Resilience includes negotiation with the external world, involving initial perception and interpretation of threats and subsequent employment of resources to deal with the threats and to make meaning of the experience (DiFulvio, 2011; Reaching IN, 2010). Several components have been found to be critical in facilitating resilience in youth, including enhancing social and emotional support, improving connectedness, increasing self-esteem, and encouraging individuality and self-competence, as well as fostering a sense of power (Bell, 2001; Mustanski et al., 2011).

Literature has emphasized the need for increased attention to the "resilience mechanisms" (Doty et al., 2010, p. 1135) of LGBTQ youth. Identification of factors that have the potential to buffer negative experiences, such as positive media representations and support from one's minority group, are critical to understanding resilience (Kelleher, 2009). Masten (2011) recommends research directed at increasing knowledge on resilience, with specific focus on populations with identified vulnerabilities, such as LGBTQ youth. In particular, previous research has suggested that media—both traditional offline media (e.g., television, movies, print, music) and new online media (e.g., websites, social media, blogs, video sharing)—may function as important sources of support to facilitate the resilience of LGBTQ youth (Craig & McInroy, 2014).

## Media and LGBTQ Youth

Despite increasing representation in contemporary media, LGBTQ youth continue to be characterized predominantly by negative or one-dimensional portrayals in traditional offline sources of media (e.g., television, movies) (Evans, 2007; Farrell, 2006; Paceley & Flynn, 2012). Youth are underrepresented among LGBTQ characters, and the limited representations of LGBTQ young people are frequently characterized by instability, vulnerability, and victimization rather than resilience or self-efficacy (Davis, 2008; Fouts & Inch, 2005; Raley & Lucas, 2006). For example, there has been a recent, dramatic increase in attention to the issue of sexuality-based bullying in the news media, focusing disproportionately on negative or victimizing portrayals of LGBTQ youth. Further, this representation has been overwhelmingly limited to portrayals of seemingly gay, Caucasian males, with little attention to female or transgender LGBTQ youth or LGBTQ youth of color (Paceley & Flynn, 2012).

Still, it should be recognized that the overall increase in the representation of LGBTQ people (including youth) in media may have the potential to foster well-being in LGBTQ populations. Media, and the LGBTQ role models it provides, may positively influence identity formation and self-perception, as well as provide a source of both comfort and pride (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). LGBTQ youth utilizing new online media (e.g., websites, social media) have even greater access to a diversity of representations of LGBTQ people and are less bound to the stereotypical or limited representations available in offline media (Marshall, 2010). LGBTQ youth's active online participation may offer innovative avenues for fostering sexuality-specific community engagement, as well as enhancing social connectedness and support, thus facilitating their resilience (DiFulvio, 2011). Thus, exposure to media may be particularly influential for LGBTQ youth, as they may experience greater rejection and isolation, as well as less social support than their heterosexual counterparts (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009).

Media can also be considered a key component of the contemporary ecological framework for North American LGBTQ youth, as it is for all young people, as they individually contribute to the broader cultural system through sustained engagement (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). Before the advent of the Internet, Bronfenbrenner (1979) identified mass media and other existent technologies as traversing the boundaries of the ecological system between microsystems and exosystems. It has also been suggested that technology (and media) facilitates communication between the multiple domains (Logan, 2010) in which participants engage with others (e.g., home, school, community) as impacted by their various ecological contexts (e.g., gender, developmental stage, family background) (McHale, Dotterer, & Kim, 2009), thus recognizing that media also plays a role at the broader levels of the individual's environment (Kama, 2003; Johnson & Pupilampu, 2008; McHale

et al., 2009). At the macrolevel, media transmits cultural meanings and experiences (in both offline and online media) through characterological representations of identity and social location that socialize youth populations by creating and reinforcing behaviors, expectations, and meanings of cultural appropriateness (Berry, 2000; Kama, 2007). Thus, media can influence individual functioning and engagement at the microlevel as well as allow for the creation of a larger macrosystem of culture through active engagement in production and consumption of media.

Many studies also focus on the role of the subsystems in the access to and use of media by individuals (Johnson & Puplampu, 2008; McHale et al., 2009). A “cybersystem” (Martin & Stuart, 2011, p. 57) has been proposed: a microlevel, cyber-based ecological subsystem (which interacts with other subsystems) where individuals (particularly young people) engage and communicate in an environment of both risk and opportunity. However, while such a conceptualization addresses individual experiences in online media, it does not incorporate offline media. The media can be conceptualized as its own ecological subsystem—composed of both offline and online media, which are complexly interconnected and fluidly experienced by youth in the contemporary context—which facilitates or inhibits engagement within and between the other subsystems. Despite recent focus on LGBTQ youth resilience (Mustanski et al., 2011), investigations of the influence of the media on their well-being are less common in the scholarly literature.

This study aimed to describe the influence of the media on the resilience of LGBTQ youth. Specifically, two broad research questions guided the study:

**RQ1:** Does the media (both offline and online) inform LGBTQ youth’s sense of resilience?

**RQ2:** What specific role does new online media play?

## METHODS

This study used a grounded theory design to investigate the impact of media on LGBTQ youth in a large, metropolitan Canadian city. In-depth interviews ( $n = 19$ ) were selected to explicate the nuanced experiences of LGBTQ youth. For study inclusion, participants were required to (1) be 18 to 22 years of age, (2) identify as LGBTQ, and (3) be active users of traditional offline and new online media (using at least four specific offline media *and* four specific online media). The age range of and degree of media engagement by participants was selected to facilitate the greatest possible insight into LGBTQ youth media participation. Organizations serving LGBTQ youth assisted in recruitment through independent distribution of the research opportunity via social media, e-mail, and flyers. Participant recruitment took place throughout data collection (September to December

2011), continuing until theoretical saturation was achieved (Creswell, 2013). All participants completed a single interview and received a gift card for their participation.

Participants provided written informed consent in keeping with a University of Toronto Research Ethics Board protocol. Pre-interview written assessments provided important demographic information on the study population. Interviews were conducted by the primary investigator at a confidential location within the university setting, included audio and video recording, were between one and three hours in length, and utilized a semistructured interview protocol that was developed after a review of the literature and based on the approach of Charmaz (2014). Questions were open-ended to encourage rich description by participants of their experiences, knowledge, and perceptions of resilience in relation to media. Questions included: "Has the media impacted how you view yourself/feel about yourself? How do such messages influence your ideas of yourself as being powerless or powerful?" Probes were frequently used to further explore participants' initial responses.

## Participants

Participants used multiple media, and their ages ranged from 18 to 22 with a mean of 19.47 ( $SD = 1.22$ ). They identified as female ( $n = 9$ ), male ( $n = 6$ ), transgender ( $n = 3$ ), and gender-queer ( $n = 1$ ). Sexual orientation encompassed multiple categories and is further described in Table 1, along with other demographic and media use data. All participants were either currently or about to become students (at either the secondary or tertiary level). Some also worked (mostly part time). About half (47%) were still living with at least one parent. Participants' experiences with regard to emerging adulthood and parental support were complex; some participants were receiving more parental support (emotional and financial) while living away from home than others who still resided with their parents. To provide context for the emerging themes, the forms of online media, television shows and celebrities most often mentioned by participants are described in Tables 2, 3, and 4 respectively.

## Analysis

This study utilized grounded theory because it is simultaneously systematic and malleable and has been used in previous research with LGBTQ youth (Craig & McInroy, 2014). The iterative process of data collection and data analysis facilitates continual conceptualization, categorization, comparison, questioning, theorizing, and evaluation (Pidgeon & Henwood, 1996).

TABLE 1 Participant Demographics and Media Usage

Name	Age	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Race/Ethnicity	Education Level	Hours of TV/Week	Hours Online/Week
Jenny Nick	22	Young woman	Bisexual/queer	White/Jewish	Attending university	≥6	≥6
Andrew	19	Young man	Gay	White/Hispanic	Attending university	≥6	≥6
Tanya	21	Young man	Gay	White	Attending university	4–6	≥6
Nate	19	Young woman	Lesbian/queer	White	Completed high school	≥6	≥6
Marshall	19	Transgender man	Queer/pansexual	White	Attending university	≥6	≥6
Christine	19	Young man	Gay	White	Attending university	1–3	≥6
Gillian	19	Young woman	Lesbian	Mixed Race (Black/White)	Attending college	<1	≥6
Al	20	Young woman	Lesbian	White/Hispanic	Attending university	1–3	≥6
Jace	19	Gender-queer	Polysexual	White/Jewish	Attending University	1–3	≥6
Abbie	19	Transgender man	Straight/questioning	Black	Attending college	1–3	≥6
Teddy	19	Young woman	Bisexual	White	Attending university	1–3	≥6
Westley	21	Young man	Gay/queer	White	Attending university	≥6	≥6
Susie	19	Young man	Gay	White/Hispanic	Attending university	4–6	≥6
Christophe	19	Young woman	Bisexual	White	Attending university	1–3	≥6
Ami	18	Transgender man	Gay	White	Attending high school	1–3	≥6
Lanna	18	Young woman	Lesbian	Asian	Attending high school	1–3	≥6
	22	Young woman	Queer	Mixed Race (S. Asian/White)	Attending university	4–6	≥6
Gavin	18	Young man	Gay	White/Jewish	Attending high school	1–3	≥6
Sophie	20	Young woman	Lesbian	Mixed Race (Black/Asian)	Attending high school	≥6	≥6



TABLE 2 Online Media Mentioned by Quoted Participants

Online Media	Description
Blogs	A blog is an individual website where users create a personalized page and are able to post text, images, or video content, as well as follow other blogs and comment on other bloggers' (users') posts. There are numerous blogging platforms. Tumblr is particularly popular with sexual minority youth and young adults.
Facebook	Facebook (2004–present) is a social networking website. Users create an individual profile and add other users to their networks of friends. They are also able to send messages, like pages created by companies, organizations, or individuals, and participate in a variety of other activities.
Twitter	Twitter (2006–present) is a social networking website. Users subscribe to (or follow) other users and may be subscribed to (or followed) by others. Posts are typically in the form of 140-character text messages known as tweets. An @ sign precedes every username. Posts may be tagged by theme or topic using hashtags (words/phrases preceded by a # sign). There is a significant celebrity presence on the website.
YouTube	YouTube (2005–present) is a video-sharing website with user-generated content. Users upload, share, view, and comment on videos of various types.

Transcribed interviews were managed using Atlas-Ti 6.2. Seven independent coders employed the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and contrasted segments for commonalities and differences. Following descriptive naming using the methods of classification, major ideas were abstracted and compared to a larger taxonomy (Jaccard & Jacoby, 2009). Open and axial coding of categories led to the identification and ordering of concepts and themes, and eventually theorizing (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This structured approach to analysis was repeated until a conceptual resilience framework began to emerge. A series of intensive research team meetings led to a shared understanding of the theme meanings and high interrater reliability (98%) (Denzin, 1994).

Trustworthiness was promoted through prolonged engagement (the investigative team has considerable experience working with LGBTQ youth), peer debriefing (numerous formal and informal meetings by the investigative team), and thick description (accounts that present contexts of participants). An audit trail was also maintained to describe the research process and track research decisions. Finally, potential biases in the research team because of their sexual and gender identities, as well as previous experiences working with LGBTQ youth, was examined through the use of reflexivity and bracketing, consisting of debriefing after every interview. Finally, member checking was employed to minimize bias and enhance participant control through the distribution of a report of potential themes and sample quotes via e-mail to participants that was elicited during the analytic process (Padgett, 2008).

## FINDINGS

Participants articulated four major ways in which media was a catalyst for resilience by buffering discriminatory experiences. Media provided participants with opportunities for (a) coping through escapism, (b) feeling stronger, (c) fighting back, and (d) finding and fostering community. It is important to note that while the media facilitated these buffering effects, the process of accessing media by study participants may itself be an act of resilience. Said another way, marginalized youth that seek out supportive content despite the many negative messages they encounter are already taking a certain amount of initiative. The first two themes may be characterized as predominately passive absorption of selected media sources, while the second two themes could be considered more active engagement with media content.

### Coping Through Escapism

Participants identified that traditional offline media in particular helped them cope by allowing them to escape temporarily from stressors. Coping can be considered a response (either positive or negative) to stress (Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001). Participants frequently sought out media, sometimes media specifically created for LGBTQ audiences, to deal with content from popular media about LGBTQ youth they found stigmatizing, as well as to cope with the stress they experienced in their daily lives. Christophe, an 18-year-old gay transgender man, who had experienced significant family conflict, described his coping process:

... Sometimes watching *Queer As Folk* would become an escapist activity for me. ... I'm fine with [mainstream] shows; I watch them. But ... at a time when I was finding it hard to identify with straight characters, I would turn to *Queer As Folk* ... I think I finished the whole season before I came out as trans[gender], you know. I think just turning to some media is a form of escapism from the harsh reality that is the heteronormative, the heterosexist world that we live in.

Sophie, a 20-year-old lesbian woman, and Gavin, an 18-year-old gay man, respectively, also used offline media as escapist coping.

Yeah, I watch television all the time so I don't necessarily have to deal ... or just to forget everything.  
If it's comedy it usually helps ... [me to] forget about everything ... An escape, yes.

For LGBTQ youth, coping often includes risky health behaviors, such as substance abuse (SAHM, 2013). Thus, such media use, although perhaps

**TABLE 3** Television Shows Mentioned by Quoted Participants

Television Shows	Description
<i>Glee</i>	<i>Glee</i> (2009–present) is an American television show focusing on a fictional high school glee club in Ohio. The show has numerous sexual minority characters and deals with an array of youth and social issues. Particular themes related to sexual minority youth include sexual minority bullying, coming out, and familial and peer support/rejection.
<i>Queer As Folk</i>	<i>Queer as Folk</i> (2000–2005, 83 episodes) is a North American television show that chronicles the lives of a group of fictional sexual minority friends in Pennsylvania.
<i>Relic Hunter</i>	<i>Relic Hunter</i> (1999–2002, 66 episodes) is a Canadian television show that follows Sydney Fox, an archeologist and college professor known for her fighting skills, who seeks out relics around the world with her British sidekick, Nigel.
<i>Xena: Warrior Princess</i>	<i>Xena: Warrior Princess</i> (1995–2001, 134 episodes) is an American/New Zealand television show that follows Xena, a female warrior seeking redemption for past acts though helping other people, and her sidekick, Gabrielle.

avoidant, may also be considered positive in that there are not direct risks to the health of LGBTQ youth. Avoidant coping typically uses distancing and/or distraction as a response to stress (Elzy, Clark, Dollard, & Hummer, 2013), for which media consumption can be very effective. However, while avoidance has often been considered a risk factor, because it may increase psychological distress or poor adjustment in adulthood, it may actually be helpful when used appropriately (Harnish, Aseltine, & Gore, 2000). Some literature even indicates the measured use of avoidance may increase resilience among adults (Elzy et al., 2013).

### Feeling Stronger

For many participants, media helped them deal with the daily discrimination and struggles they experienced, which were generally connected to their LGBTQ identities. Media empowered them to feel stronger through positive story lines or visibility of resilient characters (see Table 3). Ami, an 18-year-old lesbian woman, had encountered homophobia and victimization in many areas of her life, and she talked about how these representations motivated her:

[In *Xena: Warrior Princess*] Gabrielle learnt to adapt to . . . life with Xena with all these people coming and attack Xena all at once, because she's like, you know, she was a warlord, right, who conquered the world or almost conquered the world. And like from Gabrielle being this innocent like village girl to fighting amazingly with a staff to fighting even more

amazingly . . . And like being able to fight and take care of herself and like things like that that in the media are like . . . positive to me. *And because of those things I've become stronger—maybe not in strength, but my inner strength and anyone else's inner strength, where you know how to stand up for yourself and you know how to fight and you know that it's right to fight for what you believe in and to never give up*, 'cause you keep trying, you know, like you're going to get through, you know, whether it takes ten years, five years, a year, even a month, okay, no, that's too short. But, well, you never know, but like no matter how long it takes you still . . . can overcome, you know, like, you still have that strength. And like that's what to me are some of the positive things that I've gotten off of the media, right? Even *Relic Hunter* . . . she'd kick ass.

Online media also seemed to provide an opportunity for youth to create a barrier between what they were experiencing in terms of discrimination and isolation, messages they received from the outside world, and what they consumed online. Jace, a 19-year-old transgender man who identified as straight/questioning, who had also experienced significant conflict in multiple areas of his life regarding his identities, spoke of the crucial importance of online media as suicide prevention during his adolescence:

Yeah, it has helped me, actually. Just the YouTube videos and stuff and Facebook have been really helpful. It's funny because my mom thinks that it was a trigger . . . "If the media wasn't there, you probably wouldn't be [transgender]," and all that. But I'm just like, you know, if it wasn't there, maybe I could have ended up dead. Just because it's . . . taken such a toll on me; there's nobody that I can relate to. It's like, what's the point of living. I just would have taken my life. But I find [online media] was really helpful. And it's gotten me to where I am today. And given me hope and given me something to look forward to and work towards, and actually strive to.

It has been suggested that youth are able to build skills during these online interactions that they will utilize during real-life experiences and scenarios. For example, research has found that practicing coming out online enables youth to come out more effectively in their offline life (Craig & McNroy, 2014).

Participants admired celebrity role models because they provided a certain sense of comfort and strength; they sought out information about these individuals and/or characters on all media platforms. Many celebrities were mentioned as providing participants with positive representations that they could emulate (see Table 4). Nick, a 19-year-old gay man, provided some examples of strong role models:

**TABLE 4** Celebrities Mentioned by Quoted Participants

Celebrities	Biographical Information
Anderson Cooper	Anderson Cooper is a journalist, author, and television host. He is openly gay. He is the anchor of <i>Anderson Cooper 360°</i> (2003–present), a television news show on CNN. His talk show <i>Anderson Live</i> (2011–2013) ran for two seasons.
Ellen DeGeneres	Ellen DeGeneres is a television host, comedienne, and actress. She is openly lesbian. She is the host of <i>The Ellen DeGeneres Show</i> (2003–present). In her television sitcom <i>Ellen</i> (1994–1998) her character came out as a lesbian, one of the first shows where a main character did this.
Lady Gaga	Lady Gaga is a singer and entertainer. She is openly bisexual. She has been an outspoken advocate on numerous sexual minority issues.
Madonna	Madonna is a singer, actress, and entertainer. She has been outspoken advocate on various sexual minority issues.

Ellen DeGeneres, Lady Gaga, Madonna. Anderson Cooper too, because he’s gay and he’s a news guy on CNN, and he’s a strong and positive representation that a gay man shouldn’t be talking about fashion and how to bake a perfect quiche, but he’s talking about the world affairs, you know. I love him . . . These celebrities make me feel powerful; they make me feel accepted; they make me feel like there’s a way out. They make me feel like, well . . . it’s not just how they make me feel; I know that I am powerful and I can change the world. And I think that it’s all thanks to . . . people like them.

Fighting Back

In contrast to the more passive forms of escapism and empowerment, participants stated that online media offered opportunities for more proactive coping, including challenging or “fighting back” against negative experiences. Participants used online platforms to actively create responses to situations that caused them stress in their daily struggles as LGBTQ youth. Online media also permitted them to comment on and create content in response to experiences of homophobia and transphobia. This is crucial because “resilience must investigate the ways in which youth interpret and adaptively respond to the discrimination . . . they may encounter as members of marginalized groups” (DiFulvio, 2011, p.1612). The development of effective coping skills is considered critical to resilience because it involves active engagement in problem solving and resource management (Bell, 2001), which can be seen in participants’ descriptions of ways they used online media after experiencing discrimination. Jenny, a 22-year-old woman who identifies as bisexual/queer, described how she used her blog to comment on and engage in conversations about negative representations of LGBTQ people she saw in media:

I take to my blog and I complain loudly and...[I]t's cathartic and when other people comment on my post and say, "I feel the same way"... I get to have conversations about these things. There's always the chance that someone is reading who hasn't thought about these things as much as I have and maybe they'll learn something.

Nate, a 19-year-old transgender man who identifies as queer/pansexual, also talked about his use of a blog to cope with the challenges he was experiencing and support his transition process:

To cope with [my transition] I started a blog...where I just like talked about how I was feeling shitty and talked about like depression and talked about all the hardship that I had to go through and not understanding and not having anyone to talk to so—because literally I could not cope with it. I could not cope with it in school, because I was not informed...I had no one telling me about the trans[gender] aspect of things.

Participants also noted that they used their online participation to fight back against homophobic things that they saw in media by posting their opinions. Nick talked about his use of Facebook to critique problematic mainstream media representations he saw and how he received support for his views from others:

If I watch something on TV that I don't like, I always like post it on Facebook and criticize it and everything. Yeah, I don't keep it to myself... If I post it on Facebook and other people...comment on that, I feel like I am spreading the message that something wrong is happening, and I feel like we're going to solve it in the future, you know, because I'm letting people know that something's happening.

The distance created by online communication may also help to buffer the negative content LGBTQ youth encounter and provide opportunities for personal advocacy. For example, insults may feel less threatening to youth who can respond to them from the safety of their homes. Encountering negativity online may actually allow young people to develop and practice skills such as buffering, deflecting, or resisting homophobia and heterosexism (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). For example, youth who engage in the increasingly popular medium of video blogging are aware that hostile and homophobic comments are common responses to videos containing LGBTQ individuals and/or content; these adolescents develop the skills to respond to both negative and positive feedback on the content they have created (Alexander & Losh, 2010). Nate emphasized the ability to respond to discrimination through online platforms and the sense of power it gave him:

When something comes up I can comment on it . . . Like if a celebrity says something homophobic, I can tweet them. You know they're going to see it, whether or not they reply to it or not, but that was not necessarily something that we could do before. So that has certainly given me power; it's given me power to comment, to fight.

Abbie, a 19-year-old bisexual woman, who described significant challenges with her childhood and coming-out process, including familial rejection, rewrites traditional media story lines to reflect more positive messages. This online reinterpretation is often in direct contrast to her experiences:

So I go to writing [online], and so I write down how I feel . . . Actually in stories I create what I want to know happen . . . it's re-creating something and making it into your own thing, but the catch is, in this thing that you've created there's no suicide because you're gay; there's only acceptance, only support. This happens in real life too, right?

Thus active engagement online, including reauthoring of story lines in media, allows LGBTQ youth a way to actively respond to environmental stressors and negative messages that they find empowering.

### Finding and Fostering Community

Participants articulated several ways in which they were able to use offline media to create a sense of shared experience and identity. In particular, television shows such as *Glee* are watched by many adolescents and provide fodder for conversations and connections. Sophie provided an example of this:

Yeah, I guess [media helps me connect] socially . . . You could always talk to someone . . . like, at my school, when I first went there, I had no idea, like, what to say to anyone and then I heard . . . someone talk about [*Glee*], so I was just like, "Oh, yeah, did you see that episode?"

Andrew, a 21-year-old gay man, also spoke about the sense of community shared viewership of media provided: "Lots of the queer people I know kind of watch the same things or consume the same media. . . . Yeah, it does give you a sense of community."

Participants stated that online media provided information that contradicted many of the negative messages they had received about LGBTQ identities. Much of this information came directly from other LGBTQ youth in the form of resource sharing and advice related to coming out (Alexander & Losh, 2010). The information they find online allows youth to seek out labels for their feelings without necessarily having to come out offline.

Jace spoke about how important this opportunity to access resources and community was for him when he feared for his safety in his offline life:

I was so fearful. I just thought that I would die if I walked outside my house. Somebody would see me and then they'd know me or whatever, and just kill me. So that was really stressful...[I coped] online. Like I spent so many hours online in high school just looking up different resources, and about trans[gender] people, and where to go for help sort of thing, and they had support groups and whatnot. So that kind of gave me hope.

Media allows LGBTQ youth to connect and deal with the stigma they experience from offline friends (who tend to be mostly heterosexual) and families, which could otherwise result in their increased isolation (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). Lanna, a 22-year-old woman who identifies as queer, pointed out that this sense of community has the potential to create feelings of support or connectedness: "I think the beauty of online sources is that it provides a way for you to connect to people. It's kind of like a platform to erase isolation or to alleviate [it], if you wanna say that."

Since for vulnerable youth factors impacting resilience include feelings of belongingness and a sense of connectedness to family, peers, and communities (Saewyc, 2011; SAHM, 2013), the communities fostered by online media may help them cope with the risk factors or stressors they experience. Connectedness has been linked with positive outcomes for adolescents, particularly when experiencing stress (DiFulvio, 2011). A sense of community has the potential to increase connectedness and reduce isolation and risky behavior, as well as permit LGBTQ youth to develop the confidence necessary to navigate the LGBTQ community (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). Jenny explained:

I think the Internet is a way to like *foster community* in people. People make their own communities there, and if you're not getting what you need in real life or out of other media, then you're going to turn to the Internet and make it yourself.

Participants also felt that the communities they found in online media were empowering. Representation of, and identification with, members of the minority group or vulnerable population to which one belongs usually enhances psychological well-being (Meyer, 2003). Gray (2009) found that LGBTQ youth explore and carve out spaces in online media to fashion their emerging LGBTQ youth identities and often circumvent traditional media messages while doing so. Youth who repeatedly counter negative messaging by differentiating themselves from such perspectives may characterize themselves as resilient, which could help them navigate successfully in the



future. Teddy, a 21-year-old man who identifies as gay/queer, spoke about finding empowerment and representation online, whereas he perceived offline media as lacking representation.

Moving away from [offline] media, more online media, it does create a sort of sense of empowerment. . . . *You easily find other people who are like you.* Whereas in real life doing so can be more challenging. *I think [online] media definitely has personally created a sense of empowerment.* In more [offline] media it is—news media especially—when queer people are mentioned or the subject of news media, it can be disenfranchising. Like, again, because the stories that are brought up . . . they're not generally positive. When they are positive like "gay marriage is legalized in New York," it's always tempered with "Oh and of course, you know, here are the legal cases immediately starting saying that, you know, this is unconstitutional." So, yeah, almost every time there's a victory represented, there's an almost immediate tempering of that victory.

Research indicates that social and community support is crucial to resilience in youth populations, generally promoting well-being, mediating stress, and contributing to self-efficacy (Brennan, 2008). Thus the community cultivated online could be considered an important component of resilience for LGBTQ youth.

## DISCUSSION

This study found that media, especially online media, may be a catalyst for resilience among LGBTQ youth. Media helped youth cope with discrimination and navigate the turbulence of adolescence and young adulthood as LGBTQ individuals. By enabling youth to "make meaning" of their prejudicial experiences (Wexler, DiFulvio, & Burke, 2009), an approach to minimize the negative impact of stigmatization (DiFulvio, 2011), this study found that media use may buffer some of the effects of marginalization, such as isolation or victimization. This buffering often occurs by providing LGBTQ youth mental and emotional relief through escapism into media or enabling LGBTQ youth to actively create meaning through their online activities. The youth who participated in this study identified that media contributed to their resilience, frequently against a backdrop of negative representation from offline media as well as conflict in their offline lives. Such content often motivated them to engage critically online. Youth who have developed the coping skills to repeatedly counter negative messaging by differentiating themselves from victimizing media messages may characterize themselves as resilient, which could help them navigate successfully in their social spaces. Participants articulated four major themes related to the use of media and resilience: coping

through escapism, feeling stronger, fighting back, and finding and fostering community.

Escapism or avoidance has been considered maladaptive (Steina & Rotheram-Burus, 2004)—an emotion-focused coping strategy compared to one that is problem-focused (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Escapist coping has also been associated with lower overall resilience and considered to be a form of procrastination (Walsh, 2011). Yet our participants seemed to use both offline and online media in a way to distance themselves from their stressful stigmatizing experiences and even pause to generate strength to fight back. As escapist coping has been found to be beneficial during the onset of stress, and active coping (reframing and activating social supports) to be beneficial after the stressful event (Harnish et al., 2000), this could be considered an important component of a healthy LGBTQ youth response.

Resilience also involves employing resources to interpret and create meaning (Reaching IN, 2010) despite experiences of social exclusion. The development of adaptive skills has been determined to be central to resilience, and many resilience-related skills are learned and incorporated best during an individual's youth (Finamore, 2008). A similar qualitative study that explored the resilience of 13 transgender youth of color found that despite experiencing racism and prejudice the participants were often able to use social media to assert their identities and counter negative representations (Singh, 2012). These findings have interesting connections to the potential of online media to foster resilience, as the Internet offers a foundation for collective activity (Hillier & Harrison, 2007).

Participants were engaging actively with the ecological subsystem of media, using their participation in both traditional offline media and new online media to mediate their negative experiences within other subsystems, such as microlevel instances of homophobia and macrolevel stereotypes of LGBTQ identities. Youth activism and a sense of collective struggle has been found to have a positive, even transformational effect on LGBTQ youth and provide opportunities to reconceptualize discrimination (Wexler et al., 2009). Online media permits youth to gain control and deepen their sense of well-being while experiencing marginalization. The active leveraging and harnessing of online media may be considered a resilient act itself, because youth engage with this subsystem of their own volition and often manipulate the media to fit their needs.

This collective media interpretation may serve to reduce the impact of discrimination. The resilience demonstrated by these participants was evident in the way that they both sought and created their own communities in reaction to oppression, facilitating a type of social connectedness that has been identified as central to resilience (DiFulvio, 2011). An ecological approach facilitates understanding of media-based communication

as cutting across multiple domains and being impacted by identity and individual context (Logan, 2010; McHale et al., 2009). As LGBTQ youth may lack the opportunity for offline support, youth community engagement may be facilitated through online communities where they share common interests and identities and interact regarding shared concerns, which promotes community resilience (Brennan, 2008). Supportive communities, such as those identified by participants online, are resilience promoting and can help youth reconceptualize struggles into triumphs, which can support positive outcomes for health and mental health (Wakefield & Hudley, 2007).

This study has several limitations. It was conducted in an urban setting with an established LGBTQ community in Canada and thus must be considered within that geosocial context. Participants comprised a relatively well-educated and affluent sample who had access to multiple media types and who were motivated to engage in this study. This study was intended to deepen understanding of LGBTQ youth who were frequent media users; thus findings are less relevant for youth engaging in more limited media use. The results are not intended to be representative of all LGBTQ youth but a reflection of study participants. Further, there was minimal exploration of intersecting identities (e.g., race and ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status). Future research should identify specific media mechanisms that influence resilience with youth in the context of multiple sources of marginalization. Further studies could focus on the particular underlying skills that LGBTQ youth learn while engaged online, as well as the ways in which their online engagement could contribute to their health and mental health. Finally, the ways that the use of online technologies by LGBTQ youth may complement services provided to LGBTQ youth may provide opportunities for further learning. Despite these challenges, this study found that media is a crucial subsystem in youth's lives and can be a catalyst for LGBTQ youth resilience and coping. Online engagement can aid them in making sense of the discrimination they experience in multiple life domains, thereby buffering the negative effects that may lead to poor health and mental health outcomes and fostering resilience.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the resilient youth who generously shared their experiences and insight with us.

#### FUNDING

This study was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Insight Grant (#491406).

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