



It's my safe space: The life-saving role of the internet in the lives of transgender and gender diverse youth

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ABSTRACT

Background: Public awareness of Transgender and Gender Diverse (TGD) identities has grown significantly; however, acceptance and support remain elusive for many TGD youth. Resultant experiences of marginalization and stigmatization contribute to elevated rates of psychological distress and suicidality among TGD youth. Emergent evidence suggests that the internet may offer TGD youth safety, support, and community previously unavailable.

Aim: The primary aim of this qualitative inquiry is to engage in an in-depth exploration of the online experiences and processes which help protect against psychological distress and promote well-being among TGD youth.

Methods: Data were culled from a mixed-methods, online study of sexual and gender minority youth from across the United States and Canada which followed Institutional Review Board approved protocols. Participants for this study represent a sample ($n = 260$) of TGD participants aged 14–22 ($\bar{x} = 17.30$). Data were analyzed using Charmaz' grounded theory strategies.

Results: Data revealed that the internet offers TGD youth affirming spaces that, for the most part, do not exist in their offline lives. Online, TGD youth were able to engage meaningfully with others as their authentic selves, often for the first time. These experiences fostered well-being, healing, and growth through five processes: 1. Finding an escape from stigma and violence, 2. Experiencing belonging, 3. Building confidence, 4. Feeling hope, and 5. Giving back.

Discussion: The unique and innovative ways in which participants use online spaces to foster resilience offer important insights to inform affirmative practices with TGD young people.

KEYWORDS

Gender diverse; internet; qualitative study; resilience; transgender; youth

Introduction

Over the last decade, transgender and gender diverse (TGD) individuals have received growing public and academic attention in western society (e.g., Watson & Veale, 2018). Nevertheless, as a result of deeply embedded cisgender bias at personal, social, cultural and political levels, transgender affirming attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors remain the exception rather than the norm, conspicuously absent in the everyday lives of many TGD young people. The term transgender refers to individuals who experience their gender identity (how they feel) or gender expression (how they behave) to be incongruent or misaligned with their assigned gender at birth (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2014). The term

TGD will be used to be inclusive of non-binary transgender individuals who may identify as something other than a binary trans male or trans female, such as, gender fluid, gender non-conforming, genderqueer, or gender expansive (Grossman, Park, & Russell, 2016; Tebbe & Moradi, 2016). On the contrary, the term cisgender refers to individuals who experience their gender identity or gender expression as congruent or aligned with their gender assigned at birth.

TGD youth experience pervasive stigma, discrimination and violence in their homes, schools, and communities (Goldblum et al., 2012; James et al., 2016; Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2018; Witcomb et al., 2019), contributing to disproportionate rates of psychological distress. The lifetime

prevalence rates of depression in the TGD population range as high as 52%–54% (Dhejne, Van Vlerken, Heylens, & Arcelus, 2016), while the prevalence of depression among the general population is 16% (Kessler, Petukhova, Sampson, Zaslavsky, & Wittchen, 2012; Tebbe & Moradi, 2016). Suicide risk is particularly high within the TGD population. Data indicate that 82% of transgender individuals have considered killing themselves and 40% have attempted suicide (James et al., 2016). Within the transgender population, suicidality is highest among young people (James et al., 2016; Kuper, Adams, & Mustanski, 2018). For example, upwards of half of all TGD youth experience elevated suicidality (Haas, Rodgers, & Herman, 2014; Tebbe & Moradi, 2016). Particularly, alarming is data about the age of first attempt among TGD youth. The United States Transgender Survey (USTS) found that among respondents who had attempted suicide, more than one-third (34%) reported that their first attempt was at age 13 or younger. Thirty-nine percent (39%) reported that their first attempt occurred between the ages of 14 and 17, 20% reported that it occurred between age 18 and 24, with only 8% reporting that their first attempt occurred at or after age 25. In Tebbe and Moradi's study, 20.5% of TGD youth reported they would likely attempt in the future.

For decades, scholars and researchers have worked to understand mental health disparities, such as suicidality, among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning (LGBTQ) populations by exploring the potential impact of homophobic and transphobic contexts. In 2003, Meyer introduced the Minority Stress Model which asserts that LGBTQ individuals experience uniquely stressful events based on anti-LGBTQ discrimination and stigma and that the consequences of these stressors negatively impact both mental health and physical health (Meyer, 2003). Meyer further emphasized that negative health outcomes caused by the impact of stress may be chronic (Meyer, 2015). The model is conceptualized as a continuum of stressors ranging from distal (external events) to proximal (internalized socio-cognitions). Distal events are typified by discrimination, harassment and other everyday stressors (e.g., school bullying, family rejection). As a result of repetition and socialization, proximal

stressors may be more insidious as they become internalized cognitions of “homophobia, transphobia and expectations of rejection” (Meyer, 2015, p.210). Accumulating empirical evidence has found that minority stress contributes to disparate health outcomes, including suicidality, among TGD populations (Cohen-Kettenis, Owen, Kaijser, Bradley, & Zucker, 2003; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; 2007; Ybarra, Mitchell, Kosciw, & Korchmaros, 2015; Yunger, Carver, & Perry, 2004). As such, understanding disparate rates of suicidality among TGD youth within the contexts of their interpersonal and social environments is essential.

In addition to understanding suicidality among TGD populations through the lens of minority stress theory, recently TGD scholars (Grossman et al., 2016; Testa et al., 2017) have been giving attention to the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (Joiner, 2005). The major concepts of Interpersonal Theory of Suicide include the following three factors: the strong predictor of suicidal ideation due to lack of connection and isolation, *thwarted belongingness*; the intrapsychic manifestation of perceived incompetence, incessant self-criticism and self-hatred, *perceived burdensomeness*; and lastly the degree to which the individual has the *acquired capability* of committing suicide, which occurs over time as a response to increases in pain tolerance (Grossman et al., 2016; Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010). Specific minority stressors experienced among trans youth such as emotional, verbal, and physical rejection from family, peers, and other important individuals in their community networks (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Veale, Peter, Travers, & Saewyc, 2017) may exacerbate a growing sense of not belonging or fitting in anywhere (Grossman et al., 2016). In addition, pervasive experiences of marginalization, as well as, the potential mental health challenges that ensue, may also contribute to youth's feelings of being a burden to those they love. As a result of pervasive anti-transgender messaging at the interpersonal, social, and cultural levels youth may come to believe their family, friends, and/or community do not need or want them, or would be better off if they were dead (Grossman et al., 2016; Van Orden et al., 2010).

Sources of resilience

Despite being disproportionately exposed to a host of identity-based stressors, an increased risk for violence and victimization, and experiencing elevated suicidality, many TGD youth resist the urge to commit suicide and/or do not experience suicidality. Many scholars argue that this is a function of TGD youths' resilience. Resilience is a concept that describes the intrapsychic process of experiencing stress and adversity yet coming through the stressful event a survivor and often a survivor who in fact thrives (Meyer, 2015). Meyer theorizes (2015) that resilience is an integral and essential component of stress theories by suggesting that resilience exists in the face of stress and without stress, resilience would not exist. Research on TGD youth specifically finds resilience manifesting in a variety of unique and varied ways (Shelton, Wagaman, Small, & Abramovich, 2018; Singh, 2013)

Social support, a sense of belonging, and the ability to live authentically (i.e., live and be treated in a manner consistent with gender identity rather than gender assigned at birth) are key sources of resilience among transgender individuals (Austin, 2016; Austin & Goodman, 2017; Olson, Durwood, DeMeules, & McLaughlin, 2016). There is a growing body of research illustrating the positive impact of family support and acceptance on the well-being of transgender youth and adults (Fuller & Riggs, 2018; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010; Simons, Schrager, Clark, Belzer, & Olson, 2013). Similarly, a sense of social connectedness (belonging) has been associated with multiple dimensions of well-being (Austin & Goodman, 2017; Frost & Meyer, 2012). Testa, Jimenez, and Rankin (2014) found that connection with other transgender individuals was notably important for reducing psychological distress during early phases of transgender identity development.

The ability to live authentically as one's experienced gender is increasingly recognized as critical to well-being for transgender children, teens, and adults (Olson et al., 2016). In fact, empirical research consistently demonstrates the positive impact of social, medical, and legal transitions on mental health and overall well-being among transgender adults (Keo-Meier et al., 2015; Riggs,

Ansara, & Treharne, 2015). Recently, research has extended these findings to outcomes among children (Ehrensaft, 2016; Olson et al., 2016) and teens (Simons et al., 2013; Tishelman et al., 2015). Unfortunately, many transgender youth still do not find acceptance, support or belonging from their families, schools, or communities (James et al., 2016; Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2018; Veale et al., 2015).

Protective role of internet in the lives of trans youth

Emergent evidence suggests that access to the internet and a broad range of information and communication technologies (ICTs) represents a key source of resilience in the lives of TGD youth and adults (McInroy & Craig, 2015; Raun, 2015). ICTs may be used by TGD youth to navigate and develop identities, access resources, and engage with communities (Cipolletta, Votadoro, & Faccio, 2017). ICTs often enable authentic self-expression not possible offline (McInroy & Craig, 2015). Transgender youth often rely on ICTs for information and youth in crisis may turn to ICTs for support before social services (Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015). For example, vlogging (i.e., making diary-style videos) is transformational for transgender youth tracking their transition (Raun, 2015). Moreover, ICTs have community building capacity which allows trans youth to be less dependent on communities of location, instead offering access to online communities of shared interest and identity that can serve as networks of safety and support (McInroy, 2019). Despite emerging knowledge about the benefits of ICTs for TGD youth, much less is known about the specific online experiences that promote positive mental health among TGD youth. As such, the primary aim of this qualitative inquiry is to use grounded theory methodology to explore the emotional and interpersonal processes that promote TGD youth well-being via ICTs.

Methods

Parent study

Data for the current study were culled from Project #Queery, a mixed-methods, online study

of LGBTQ youth ($N=6309$) from across the United States and Canada (March–July 2016). Approval for the study was granted by the University of Toronto (Ontario, Canada) Research and Ethics Board. Recruitment strategies included: (1) targeted emails to agencies; (2) targeted social media outreach; and (3) paid social media advertising. The full study protocol is described elsewhere (Craig et al., 2017).

Participants

Participants for the present study represent the TGD sample of participants ($n=260$) who provided written responses to an optional survey item inquiring about the beneficial role of the internet in their lives. Participants ranged in age from 14–22 ($\bar{x}=17.30$). Nearly half of TGD participants (48%) selected multiple gender identity labels and over 75% of this sample identified selected a non-binary identity as at least one of their identity labels. A vast majority of participants (92%) spent 2+ hours online daily and they were particularly active on: YouTube (77%), Facebook (77%), Tumblr (67%), Snapchat (52%), and Instagram (48%).

Data analysis

Grounded theory strategies were used to guide the data analysis process. The first and third authors engaged independently in line-by-line coding, thematic coding, and constant comparison method of data (Charmaz, 2014). Focused coding was used to further elucidate some of the concepts that emerged during the early phases of data analysis. Theoretical sampling within the existing data, the grounded theory process of purposely seeking and exploring pertinent data to elaborate and refine emerging categories (Charmaz, 2014) was used to develop and differentiate distinct categories that were firmly rooted in the data. Clustering and diagramming were used to identify distinct properties associated with categories and themes, explore relationships among categories and themes, and eventually eliminate themes not sufficiently supported by the data. The authors engaged in memo writing throughout the analytic process to aid in self-reflection, bias checking, and the

development and differentiation of emergent themes. Later memos revolved around understanding the relationships among themes, particularly within the context of the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010).

Positionality and reflexivity of the research team

The first author is a white, cisgender, pansexual woman with a doctorate in social work, who identifies as an ally to the TGD community. She is intimately connected with the TGD community personally and professionally and has devoted the last 10 years of her career to engaging in transgender affirmative clinical practice, research, and education. The second author, who is the Principal Investigator (PI) of the parent study, is a white, cisgender, lesbian woman with a doctorate in social work. Her research, training, and clinical expertise revolve around promoting health and well-being among LGBTQ youth. She is committed to developmentally and culturally relevant research that centers the experiences of youth. The third author, a white, cisgender, heterosexual, woman is currently a doctoral of social work student, who has previous experience in qualitative research methods. She has limited knowledge of the TGD community, but is committed to engaging in research with diverse populations from a place of respectful curiosity which values the voices of participants. The fourth author is a queer, cisgender, white woman with a doctorate in social work, who was the coordinator of the parent study. Her research focuses on the online contexts of LGBTQ youth, and she has placed a sustained focus in her writing on the experiences and representation of TGD youth in those spaces.

Despite the authors' positive intentions and collective commitment to the TGD youth participants, we acknowledge the potential impact of research team's privileged racial, professional, gender, and adult identities, as well as our status as outsiders to the group being studied. Several steps were taken to clarify the researchers' stance in relation to participants, subject matter, and emerging findings. The first and third authors who engaged in data analysis activities maintained reflexive journals throughout the analytic

process where emotional and intellectual reactions, biases, and ideas in response to the data and emerging themes were recorded and examined. All members of the research team engaged in process meetings aimed at ongoing exploration and critique of emerging analyses, conceptual models, and various drafts of the manuscript. These processes helped the researchers distinguish between their own views and ideas and the findings coming directly from the data.

Results

Overall, the study yielded robust findings regarding the “life saving” impact of the internet for this Gender Queer/Gender Fluid youth: “There’s a supportive community out there online and they mean the world to me– they’ve saved my life.” Participants explicitly and implicitly shared the ways in which their internet engagement saved their lives:

When I was 16 I already knew I was trans. I had met a few other trans people but still felt very alone. I went online and found a community and answers to many questions. Seeing other pictures of guys who had transitioned really helped me to not feel lost and crazy. I knew that a transition was possible and that I had a few role models. I was able to direct my parents to internet resources as well which really helped them to understand that being trans was not just a mental illness or simply an adolescent phase. Having information and examples of other trans lives from the internet really saved my life.

-Trans Man

Analyses aimed at better understanding why and how being online served as a life-saving function for TGD youth yielded several important findings. Data revealed that the internet offers TGD youth an affirming space that, for the most part, does not exist in their offline lives. This affirming space allows TGD youth to engage with others as their authentic selves, often for the first time, creating a safe context which fosters processes of healing and growth as illustrated by the following participants.

The internet has had a huge impact on my (sic). throughout these years, it helped me find who I really am as cheesy as that sounds but it’s true. Social media has a huge part of it too. It helped me find my friends and has made me feel safe in many different ways and

I’d like to thank them, for never “judging” me and for making me feel like I am a part of something.

I went from some quiet forum sites to a few google image links, and before I knew it I ended up on youtube – the trifecta of trans people sharing their stories, activism, and transition results. And by god, they were beautiful. So damn beautiful, because no one could stop them from being who they were, and boy did they look happy. Not the fake kind of happy that I had always been, either...I was so tired, and seeing these kids on youtube was like my first breath of fresh air in over a decade of torment. I wasn’t alone.

-Trans Man

Themes in the form of five key socioemotional and interpersonal processes which contribute to healing and growth among TGD youth emerged from analyses: 1. *Finding an escape from stigma and violence*, 2. *Experiencing belonging*, 3. *Building confidence*, 4. *Feeling hope*, and 5. *Giving back*. This final theme seemed to occur at a later stage in the process which both resulted from participants’ healing, but also further contributed to it. Taken together our analyses suggest that for TGD youth, online spaces offer the opportunity to engage in curative socioemotional and interpersonal processes as their authentic selves, often for the first time. Through these experiences, described by participants as life-saving, they are offered opportunities to heal, grow, and thrive (Figure 1). Each of the key findings will be explicated below.

Finding an escape from stigma and violence

Data consistently revealed the ways in which youth turned to the internet to escape from various forms of victimization and its insidious effects as is revealed by the words of this participant who identifies as Non Binary and Woman: “Online communities and fandoms have been an escape from everyday life during sexual assault, depression, and suicidal thoughts and attempts.” Some participants were escaping from the rejection and marginalization in their own non-affirming homes, often describing their online relationships and spaces with words like “family,” “home,” and “community.” The following quotes illustrate the vital importance of the internet in the lives of TGD youth.

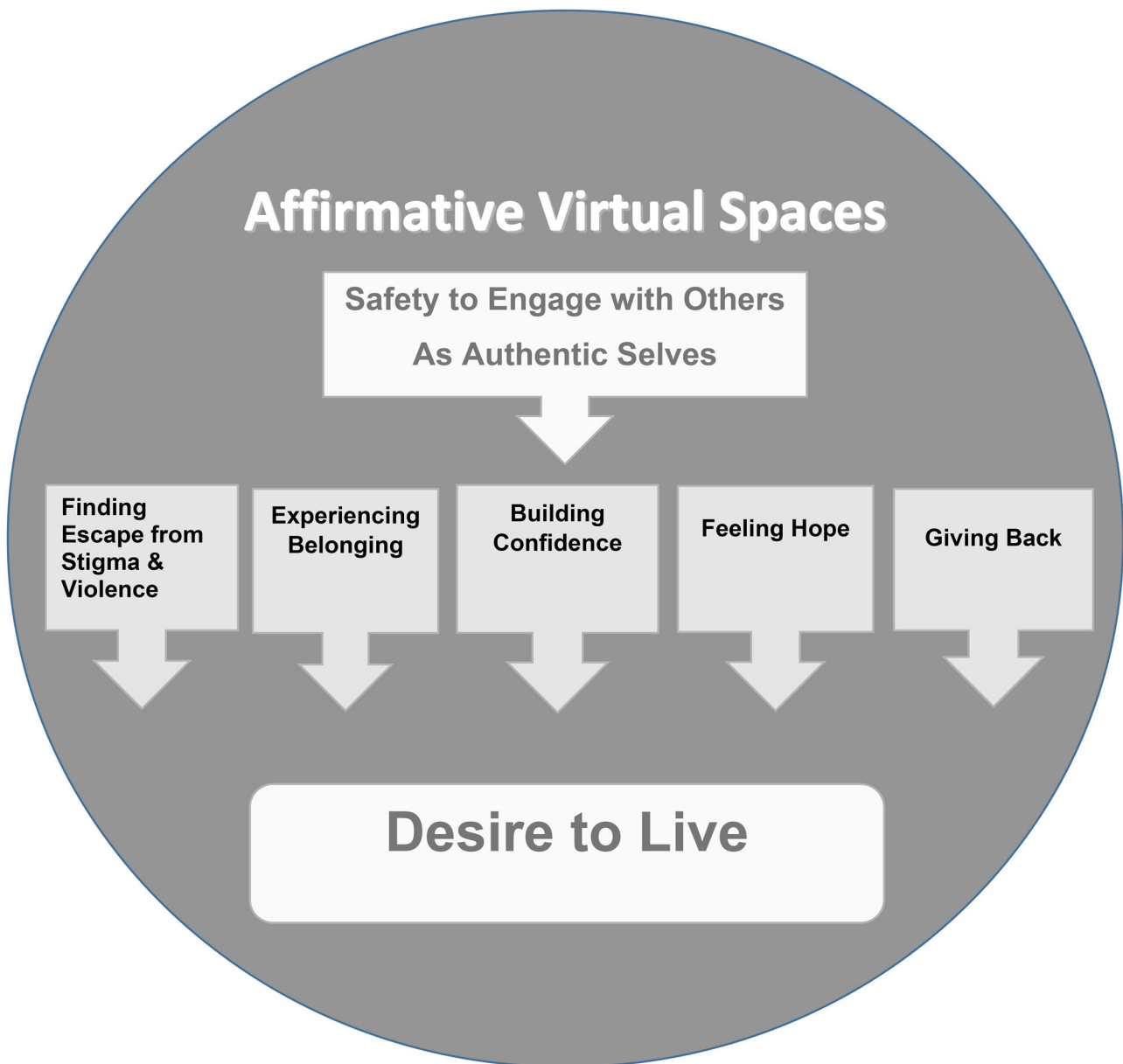


Figure 1. Curative socioemotional and interpersonal processes TGD youth experience online.

I lived at home with my abusive mother for most of my childhood, and when I was 17 I ran away from home. After graduating high school, I had nowhere to go so I moved around until I ended up with my grandparents who are pastors in a small town. When I moved in with them I was out to friends as transgender. I lived there for 4 months and was part of their church. They made fun of my presentation and called being homosexual a perversion and being transgender disgusting. In that bleak place where my friends were several states away, the Internet was my saving grace.

-Trans Man

I like knowing if I need someone, that they're there. Even though they're strangers, people I've never met.

They care about me, when my friends and family can't or won't. The internet opened my eyes to a completely new world, it showed me that not everything needs to be solved with me getting my face smashed, getting thrown, punched, hurt, abused, mistreated, etc. It showed me that there is more to life than poor judgement, that I have supports even when they don't know me. The experience holds us together, not blood or constant communication. The internet taught me what life really is.

-Non Binary Youth

Other youth describe the desire to escape from angry rhetoric and the fear of violence from strangers to a place of safety and support:

The internet and social media have pretty much changed my life. I live in a college town, so people are a little more accepting of gender and sexuality, but it's still close enough to the edge of the Bible Belt to get angry conservatives threatening violence. Aside from helping me understand terminology and making it easier to understand myself, social media has given me a more broad support network and a relative safe space. After all, it's one thing to be part of a group, but it's another to actually interact with said group. It keeps me from feeling isolated like I had in the past and it gives me something to hope for. Seeing how far others have come gives me courage that I can do the same. Sure, I don't take a very active roll online, but just knowing that people are out there makes me feel better.

-Non Binary Youth

Experiencing belonging

Youth narratives overwhelmingly recounted feelings of difference and disconnection in their offline worlds, as described by this Non Binary identified participant, "I have been harassed and bullied by classmates. Shoved into lockers, and beat with my own crutches. Why? Because I'm different. I don't define as a gender." that contrasted sharply with the sense of belonging and connection they experienced online.

Being from a smaller town, I've always felt like I didn't belong anywhere, but when I get onto my usual social media sights (sic) I feel like I've found somewhere I can be myself. I don't have to hide myself or make myself small, I can just exist as me and not have to worry about what others think. I see so many that are like me and so many I want to be like and it just inspires me and it's just so uplifting! Knowing that no matter where I go, there awaits a switch on this little device and I can just feel like I'm home. It gives me so much comfort and peace.

-Woman, Non Binary

For many participants, being online allowed them to experience a desperately sought-after sense of belonging that they could not get from their family or friends.

...During this time, my internet friends helped me. Turns out, most of them were queer in some way or another as well. One of them was transgender, and most of them were bisexuals or lesbians. Not going to lie, learning that made me feel so much better; these were people I looked up to, and here they were

accepting me and making me feel like I belonged, something my parents would never be able to do ...

-Non Binary Youth

I felt like I didn't have any friends to talk to. Around this time, I joined tumblr. It sounds silly, but it really has changed my life. It's my safe space. I've met other queer and trans people that struggle with the same things that I do, and I've been able to post about the issues I face without fear of being judged – in fact, I commonly experience the opposite. When I post about my issues, I get support. There are also a few blogs that I can send "asks" to in order to get advice. These have been really helpful. Before this, I had desperately floated around online chatrooms trying to find someone to talk with. Now, I finally feel like I have an actual home online. In my everyday life, I am the "other..." On tumblr, though, I feel normal. I'm surrounded by other people like me. And it's even better because they love the same things I do. They get through their problems in the same ways that I do – playing games, reading stories, watching TV shows/anime, reading manga, and getting lost in those worlds because our own world doesn't want us. We (my tumblr community) have all felt that way. Now we have a place where we can feel like the world DOES want us. When somebody is dealing with difficult things (e.g., queer identity, mental illness, suicidal tendencies, drug/alcohol abuse), the community comes to them and supports them. It can be a really beautiful thing.

-Trans Woman

Particularly notable is the way in which this participant moves from using "I" to using "We" as she explains the sense of belonging and community accessible to her and other trans people via Tumblr.

Building confidence

Participants' narratives detailed the ways in which their confidence arose and grew through online interactions and experiences. Some participants found confidence simply in their new-found opportunity to relate to themselves and similar others, as described by this non binary, gender queer/gender fluid identified participant, "Knowing a term for what I feel and being able to talk to others who identify the same makes me feel normal and gives me confidence to own who I am." Other participants, as illustrated in the following quote, attribute their confidence to

some of the deep relationships they were able to forge online:

...I used to pretend I was biologically male online to all of my friends. I used to get on webcam with my friends, still pretending I was cis. My best online friend at the time saw my breasts in one of my video chats, but pretended that she had not, and continued to treat me as a man without any further explanation. After coming out to my family I came out to her a few months later, she said that she had already known but loved me and respected whatever I wanted to identify as. Her friendship has helped immeasurably in my confidence and self love, and we still talk to this day.

-Trans Man

Importantly, many participants described the ways in which their online experiences boosted their confidence in ways that translated to offline experiences and an overall stronger sense of self:

...Being active online has even made me more confident offline – I feel that I've had more offline interactions with friends since I joined tumblr. Interacting with my friends online helps me feel stronger, and even when I'm offline and feeling like an outsider, I know that I have a place. It may just be online, but it means something to me, and that's what matters.

-Trans Woman

Feeling hope

Participant responses were overwhelmingly stories of hope. Participants describe the varied ways in which their online experiences helped them see their identities, lives, and circumstances in new, better, and more affirming ways:

Internet social media has shown me I am not alone, my struggle isn't something strange or unusual. It has shown me people with my issues can become successful, and can ultimately overcome these problems and be happy. Essentially social media has connected me with those who I feel a kin with, a kinship that otherwise I would have never had the opportunity to experience. Social media has given me hope.

-Trans Woman

Many participants, as illustrated in the following quotes, explicitly describe how feeling hope helped them identify reasons to live rather than die:

...For years I've been suicidal. But there was one YouTube account that made videos of performances of queer and other poetry slams. I loved it. It gave me some hope. Their words filled me with determination I never had. Then I wanted to do the same. This one YouTube account gave me hope and a passion. Now I hope some day my poetry helps someone like I was helped.

-Man, Woman, Gender Queer/Gender Fluid

The internet has been my support when I had none in real life, when I felt alone and isolated and wrong for being queer. They gave me hope that someday I would be accepted and that being this way didn't mean there was no way to function in society... Art and writing online has inspired me and given me a reason to keep going when not much else in my life would.

- Woman, Non Binary

Giving back

It became clear through participant narratives, that as they experienced their own healing and growth through positive online interactions, they had a deep desire to give back to others in similar situations, and this experience of giving back had profound effects on their own well-being. The power of giving back is aptly described by this youth:

I've never felt better in my life! I want to inspire more people to be themselves and to forget all the haters. Being able to make a difference is an amazing feeling! Even on a small scale, that's all I need.

-Man, Non Binary, Gender Queer/Gender Fluid

In addition, the following narrative illustrates one participant's emotional evolution and eventual desire to give back as well as the feelings of empowerment and purpose that arose as a result of giving back:

For a long time I was very angry about a lot of the things I had experienced it. The trauma and hate I had gone through for my gender and sexuality shaped a lot of my life and left me feeling very broken. I was really confused about who I was and needed some clarity. I turned to tumblr. I was already on the site for fandom purposes but I began searching out trans blogs. I began to see people who looked like me, reminded me of me, or experienced some of the things I did. I began to see people respond to hate and challenge a lot of things I had internalized about myself. Eventually, someone I followed and looked up

to posted an application to be a part of a trans outreach and counselling organization. At first I was too scared to sign up. But he posted again later on asking for more trans feminine people. I took that as a sign and submitted my application. They loved it and I started work with them immediately. I rose to become a leader in the organization and began to see the impact I was having on other trans kids. I keep a notebook of all the names I've talked down from suicide and that gets me through some difficult days. It also helped me in a way therapy never did. I was so distraught for so long because it felt like all of these terrible things happened to me for no reason. No I was using my experiences and the lessons I learned to help others. I couldn't change what happened to me, but I could prevent it from happening to them. And maybe, just maybe that's okay.

-Woman, Transwoman, Non Binary, Gender Queer/
Gender Fluid

Discussion

Although there has been mounting anecdotal and empirical evidence that the internet, broadly, has been instrumental in helping TGD youths and adults explore and understand their identities (McInroy & Craig, 2015; Raun, 2015), much less is known about the specific ways in which online engagement helps TGD youth cope, heal, and grow in spite of persistent minority stressors across family, school, community, and cultural contexts. This study sheds light on the ways in which TGD youth have used the internet and online spaces to find an alternative socioemotional environment in which they are able to present authentically as themselves and be accepted. Findings suggest that the ability to find belonging as their authentic selves appears to lay the foundation for youth to engage in developmentally appropriate self-exploration, social interactions, relationship building, and emotional risk taking crucial to well-being during adolescence and young adulthood. The vital importance of these experiences was underscored by the ways in which participants consistently referred to their online experiences with comments like “without it I would probably be dead,” “life-saving” or “my saving grace.” The vast number of responses explicitly or implicitly describing the life-saving nature of their online experiences is particularly compelling given that participants were not asked

about suicidality or mental health, rather they were simply asked to reflect on the role of the internet in their lives.

Using the Interpersonal Theory of Suicidality (Grossman et al., 2016; Joiner, 2005; Testa et al., 2017) as a lens for considering our findings offer important insights and potential targets for micro and macro level intervention. Participants' narratives offer a window into the stigmatizing and marginalizing experiences in their offline lives from which they were able to “escape” (albeit temporarily) via the internet. Online they were able to, find and engage with similar others, feel a sense of belonging, often for the first time. Within these spaces of belonging, youth were able to build confidence through positive interactions, as well as see others like themselves who were resilient and thriving, fostering their own sense of hope for a positive future. Importantly, participants' accounts suggest that as they gained confidence and hope, they began “giving back” by supporting other youth in the ways that had helped them. Participants' narratives suggest that giving back has a profound effect on them (e.g., *I've never felt better in my life*). Conceivably the experience of giving back is the antithesis of being a burden to others. As such, through their online experiences, youth were able to both find belonging and counteract feelings of burdensomeness, as well as, gain hope for a meaningful future, thus mitigating the key risks associated with the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010).

Limitations

There are noteworthy limitations to this study. Because this was an online study that collected data anonymously at a single point in time, researchers were unable to ask follow-up questions which may have further enhanced our understanding of the youths' online experiences. For instance, data suggest the curative effects of positive online experiences that suggest the possibility of post traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). However, this is a phenomenon we were unable to explore with this sample. Similarly, our study represents youth across a range of ages and developmental phases (14–22),

yet we are unable to ascertain whether youths' narratives are associated with specific developmental period in their lives. It will be important that future studies explore youths' online experiences using face-to-face or online interviewing methods that allow for a more in-depth exploration of some of the online experiences and processes illuminated our current study.

Implications

Study findings offer implications for practice and policy. It is critical that organizations and institutions committed to youth well-being (e.g., schools, foster care agencies, youth mental health, and primary care settings) center the needs and experiences of TGD youth. This requires that these organizations utilize existing resources (e.g., Human Rights Campaign's Welcoming Schools, Supporting and Caring for Transgender Children) to take explicit steps toward demonstrating a visibly affirmative stance for gender diversity that will help promote a sense of value and belonging among TGD youth. Moreover, as data consistently support the significant positive impact of family acceptance, and conversely, the damaging effect of emotional rejection for TGD youth (Fuller & Riggs, 2018; Tebbe & Moradi, 2016), a focus on helping caregivers become more affirming is essential. Finally, as participant narratives in this study underscore the troubling rates of suicidality among TGD youth, TGD specific risk factors must be addressed by mental health providers interfacing with TGD youth and their families. Emerging interventions represent best practices for intervening with both TGD youth (Austin, Craig, & D'Souza, 2017; Edwards-Leeper, Leibowitz, & Sangganjanavanich, 2016) and their caregivers (Austin & Craig, 2017; Menvielle & Rodnan, 2011) to reduce health disparities and promote well-being. In sum, study findings provide clear direction for offline spaces including families, schools, communities, and helping professionals: provide safe, gender affirming contexts for TGD youth to live, interact, socialize, and grow as their authentic selves.

Acknowledgements

We would like to extend our gratitude to the resilient transgender and gender diverse youth who shared their stories and experiences through Project #Queery.

Disclosure statement

The authors confirm that they: (a) have not entered into an agreement with the funding organization that has limited their ability to complete the research as planned and publish the results; (b) have had full control of the primary data; and (c) are willing to allow the journal to review their data if requested.

Funding

This work was supported by grant #498466 from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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