

Growing up gay in a digital world: A double-edged sword for sexual minority young men in England

Aims

The study aimed to identify opportunities and concerns that the digital world has presented for sexual minority young men in England, growing up as adolescents between 2010 to 2015.

Key Findings

- Analysis of participants' accounts of their experience indicated there were both opportunities and concerns raised through the digital lives of this group of young people.
- Participants described how digital settings provided spaces to explore their sexual attractions. They also provided ways of finding some recognition and validation of new feelings in more open and liberal settings, especially if gay sexuality was not acknowledged or affirmed elsewhere. Young men also found the means to reach out to connect with others like themselves.
- Less positively, participants critiqued the overwhelming and prescriptive nature of the sexual content they encountered online. Accounts described the way representations of gay sexuality were narrow and hierarchical. They also expressed misgivings about location-based dating apps.
- Experiences of this small group indicate possible issues with adult-oriented digital spaces and a need to represent minority sexuality in more positive and diverse ways. Sexual minority male youth who still face marginalisation may need targeted support, with additional care to reach out to Black Minority Ethnic, working class, disabled and trans young men.

Policy Context

The improved rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people over the past twenty years has been significant, including the right to register same-sex relationships in marriage (Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act, 2013). The *British Social Attitudes Survey* notes a trend of improving attitudes towards same-sex relationships. In 2017, 64% said they are not at all wrong, which was up from 47% in 2012 (Clery, Curtice, & Harding, 2017).

Community-based research in the UK shows, however, that sexual minority young men think discrimination against gay men is still common (METRO Charity, 2014) and they continue to face homophobic prejudice at school (Bradlow, 2017). Unsupportive school experiences and

victimisation have been shown to correlate with suicidality among some LGB young people (Rimes et al., 2017). Gay and bisexual men experience worse sexual health than their peers (Health Protection Report, 2017). Data from the third British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (NATSAL 3) show that, compared to men who have sex exclusively with women, men who have sex with men in the UK have higher levels of substance misuse, treatment for depression in the past year and long-standing illness/disability/infirmity (Mercer et al., 2016).

Connected to these concerns of physical and mental health, since 2010, life in the UK has also been shaped by the austerity policies and resultant cuts to the provision of public services, including youth work resources (The Children's Society, 2017). This is pertinent because there have been less resources available to support young people in mainstream settings, as well as reduced capacity for targeted services such as those for LGBT young people.

Methodology

This study applied thematic analysis, using a deductive approach to examine data collected from an online focus group and in-depth interviews with nine sexual minority young men aged between 19 and 21 years old, who all grew up in England. Participants were invited to share retrospective accounts of their teenage years, equating to a period of approximately 2010–2015.

Background

In England over the last two decades, social attitudes towards minority sexuality have improved, but some teenage boys and young men who are attracted to men continue to face homophobia and report poorer health than heterosexual peers. The digital world has integrated previously distinct online interactions together with experiences in person, with consequences for how adolescent sexuality is encountered and explored. The new possibilities of evolving digital interactions need consideration for young gay men.

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