Understanding and Responding to Mental Health Impacts of Online Victimization Among Marginalized Youth

Candice Biernesser, PhD, LCSW
César Escobar-Viera, MD, PhD

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agenda

1. What is it?
   Brief overview of current research on prevalence and impacts of online victimization (OV) for marginalized youth

2. How is it experienced? What do we do about it?
   (a) OV experiences of LGBTQ+ youth and opportunities for prevention
   (b) Social media experiences of LGBTQ+ youth and strategies for optimizing social media use

Defining online victimization

Online victimization is defined as, "hurtful comments, images, or behaviors that inflict harm in online spaces."
– Tynes, Rose & Williams, 2010

Definition, prevalence, and impacts of OV

Draws upon criteria for cyberbullying:
- Willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices

And criteria online discrimination:
- Denigrating or excluding individuals or groups on the basis of their identity through the use of symbols, voice, video, images, text, and graphic representations

Adaptations: Harm may be experienced in one incident or repeatedly over time across domains related to the most salient aspects of the physical self, including appearance, gender, and race.

prevalence of OV

Rates among marginalized youth

- Racial/ethnic minority youth
  - Daily diary study of 662 Black adolescents conducted between March – November 2020 found 1 in 2 experienced online racial discrimination (Del Toro & Wang, 2023)
  - Increase from 2 in 5 youth experiencing online racial discrimination

- LGBTQ+ youth
  - Rates of OV are estimated to be 3x higher among LGBTQ+ vs. non-LGBTQ+ youth
  - Almost half of LGBTQ+ youth report OV with highest among those who are younger, trans, Indigenous, and multiracial (Trevor Project, 2021)

- Girls
  - Cis-gendered teen girls are more likely to experience OV, especially online sexual harassment
  - 23% of girls aged 15-17 receive unsolicited explicit images and 9% have explicit images of them shared without their consent (Pew Research Center, 2022)
Impacts of OV

• OV has a number of deleterious impacts:
  • Academic declines, e.g., reduced grades & attendance
  • Internalizing symptoms of depression & anxiety, lowered self-esteem, self-hatred
  • Drug & alcohol use
  • Loneliness
  • Stress
  • Suicidal ideation and behavior

OV is most strongly associated with stress and suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Kowalski et al., 2014). OV has been robustly associated with suicidal ideation, attempts, plans, and non-suicidal self-injury. (Nesi et al., 2021)

Why is this?

OV experiences of LGBTQ+ youth and opportunities for prevention

Qualitative interview study with LGBTQ+ youth who experienced OV

• Conducted a qualitative interview study with LGBTQ+ who had past-year OV experiences and lifetime history of suicidality to inform the development of a suicide prevention intervention
• Funded by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

• Research Team:
  • Candice Biernesser (PI)
  • Tina Goldstein (Faculty Mentor)
  • César Escobar-Viera, MD, PhD (Co-I)
  • Emma Win (Project Coordinator)
  • Morgan Rose (Research Assistant)
  • G Spangler (MSW Intern)

Study methods

• Sample: 20 LGBTQ+ adolescents were recruited from across the US using Instagram & Facebook Ads
  • 13-18 years old (average 15.7 years)
  • 40% Black, Asian, Multiracial and/or Hispanic
  • 75% both gender and sexual minority youth
  • 80% endorsed suicidality in the past-year and 45% in the past-month
• Recorded, transcribed, & conducted qualitative description analysis
  • Data collection focusing on:
    • Contextualizing and categorizing OV experiences
    • Understanding perceived mental health impacts
    • Priorities for prevention programming

Results: online verbal harassment

• All youth in the sample experienced some form of verbal harassment.
  • Comments that invalidated their identity (N=1)
  • Stereotypical communication (N=10)
  • Homophobic/transphobic comments (N=9)
  • Rejection and exclusion (N=6)
  • Rumor spreading (N=4)
  • Misgender or deadnaming (N=3)

Some comments were direct/harsh:
[He] called me the F slur a million times.

Others were indirect/nuanced:
[They were] kind of subtle posting, so like when I came out as non-binary, there was only one person who really came up to me and was talking to me about stuff in a hateful way.
Results: online physical threats

- A quarter of youth experienced online physical threats (N=5).
- Multiple were realistic threats of physical harm from a peer-known in-person.
- Some experienced death threats, which one adolescent described as “typical” for LGBTQ+ teens.

Threats were sometimes an escalation of verbal harassment.

There have been threats to my dad’s temple and to my school that are related to the comment like, ‘You’re not a true Jewish space if you allow queer people.’ And I think that one’s really difficult for me.

(Situation escalated to violent threats requiring police involvement)

Results: online sexual harassment

- Online sexual harassment was experienced by 15% of youth (N=3), all of whom identified as female.
- Receiving unsolicited nude images.
- Unwanted sexualized comments and requests, predominantly from strangers.
- Grooming.

Youth normalized their sexual harassment experiences:

There’s a whole channel in the server for kind of sharing the DMs that we get… There’s a lot in there and it’s just like, sometimes someone will share a DM message, image, and say (to me, it) it doesn’t even affect me—it’s OK, they will still continue to ask for inappropriate sexual favors.

Results: who initiated OV

- OV was initiated by:
  - Peers (N=12)
  - Strangers (N=10)
  - Close friends & family (N=4)
  - Others within the LGBTQ+ community (N=2)

While OV from others within the LGBTQ+ community was less common, it was impactful.

They just went like, ‘Hey, so I heard you’re trans. Are you on hormones?’ and all this stuff. And it really hurt, because I didn’t really want to do hormone stuff and wasn’t trans… I have parents who wouldn’t support that already… And she was like trans and she was like, ‘You’re not actually trans.’ That really was just twisting the knife.

Results: mental health impacts

- Nearly all youth viewed OV as a factor that exacerbated existing mental health symptoms (N=18).
  - Suicidal thoughts or behaviors (N=16)
  - Symptoms of depression (N=15)
  - Symptoms of anxiety (N=9)
  - Poor self-esteem (N=4)
  - Shame or self-hatred (N=4)

Durations of impact varied between brief & long-term.

“I think they contributed a lot [to suicidal thoughts]. I mean, there was also a lot of other stuff going on within family, but just that they triggered that entire just downward spiral.”

Results: priorities for prevention

- Safe Space: Youth wanted a space they could go to that felt safe, validating of their identity, and discrete (avoiding outing to parents).
- Help-seeking: They desired connection with other LGBTQ+ youth and options for help for youth with varied levels of parental support & acceptance.
- Coping skills: They pointed to need for coping skills that are individually meaningful to them & uplifting right after OV occurs.
- Education: Youth wanted education on how best to respond to OV, especially for weighing options between confrontation and assistance.

Next steps:

Developing Flourish – a digital suicide prevention intervention for LGBTQ+ youth who have experienced OV.
priorities for prevention

Safe Space

Foster active, supportive discussion
- Active discussion > restriction at reducing incidence of media-related risks (Chen & Shi, 2018)
- Recognize negative aspects of social media in balance with positive aspects (AAS, 2019)
- Discussions should be developmentally appropriate
  - younger adolescents may need guidance on appropriate media use
  - older adolescents may need someone to listen & offer support

Create space for youth to feel comfortable opening up
- Most youth do not disclose OV, but are more likely to when a trusted adult is perceived as reasonable and responsive
- LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to open up when a trusted adult is supportive of their identity

Helpful Resources
- Common Sense Media
  website: www.commonsensemedia.org
- Internet Matters
  website: www.internetmatters.org
- Trevor Project How to Be An Ally
  website: www.thetrevorproject.org

priorities for prevention

Coping skills

SPARC-Life created an expansive list of brief coping skills that can be used after OV occurs.

Right to Be created guides for self-care when experiencing OV and another for when witnessing OV.

Now Matters Now teaches skills for responding to distress and suicidal thoughts through a series of brief videos of youth with lived experience.

priorities for prevention

Education

Right to Be has guides for responding to online harassment a “digital safety kit” for security account privacy, and social media safety guides across platforms.

The Center for Countering Digital Hate has a “Don’t Feed the Trolls” guide for what to do when targeted by online hate.

Trevor Project has a guide for protecting your wellbeing on Instagram.

Cyberbullying Research Center has a variety of tips for parents, teens, and providers as well as a comprehensive list of options for reporting on social media.

priorities for prevention

Help-seeking

Crisis Hotlines
- Safe2Say: 1-888-SAF2SAY
  website: www.safe2say.org
- Cyberbullying Prevention Hotline: Call 1-888-715-0424

Online support groups for LGBTQ youth
- Q Chat: https://www.qchatroom.org
- LGBT National Help Center moderated chatrooms: https://www.lgbthotline.org/youthchatrooms
- Trevor Space: https://www.trevorspace.org

priorities for prevention

Social media experiences of LGBTQ+ youth and opportunities to optimize social media use
LGBTQ+ youth connect on social media with like-minded people

**Most frequent motivation**
- Communicate with friends
- Make new friends
- People with similar lived experience
- Find romantic relationships
- Sometimes these imply long distance connections / relationships

**Lived experience: intersecting identities**
- Race
- Rurality
- Disability
- Ethnicity

**GOAL?**
- Community participation

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**LGBTQ+ youth connect on social media with like-minded people**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Year Released</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TikTok</td>
<td>High-quality, high-quality videos that are also lower-cost. [15]</td>
<td>2019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>No limiting policies that allow users to create a wide variety of messages with their following. [15]</td>
<td>2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>Provides a platform for users to share personal stories and experiences with others. [16]</td>
<td>2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reddit</td>
<td>Provides a platform for users to share personal stories and experiences with others. [16]</td>
<td>2005</td>
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<tr>
<td>Table</td>
<td>Provides a platform for users to share personal stories and experiences with others. [16]</td>
<td>2015</td>
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</tbody>
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**LGBTQ+ youth and wellbeing support via social media**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Approval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of belonging to a community</td>
<td>LGBTQ+ issues, means, representation</td>
<td>Feelings of validation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymity helps in sharing experiences</td>
<td>Learning about LGBTQ+ and interesting identities</td>
<td>Affecting support of &quot;likes&quot; and positive comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful with offline concerns and it reduces feelings of isolation</td>
<td>Learning about relationships, sex, sexual health, gender affirming care</td>
<td>Complements on appearance and &quot;passing&quot; (gender diverse youth)</td>
</tr>
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What feels supportive for LGBTQ+ youth on social media?

Content from people with shared experience

• "I relate more to suggestions from people that are in a rural community or have been in one. Whereas if they're from a more accepting area, it's harder to use their advice."
  (Jackson, 19, bisexual, trans male)

Joining groups and communities

• "Snapchat groups. Those people I know and I'm friends with. Even though we're spread out, we'll go to the group and we'll message, ask how their day's been."
  (Grant, 16, gay, cis male)

Dealing with negativity on social media

• Maintain awareness about “negativity bias”
  • Proclivity to focus on and learn from negative information
• Several tools
  • Filtered lists: create groups of favorite contacts
  • 'Take a break' or 'mute' contacts who post negative content
  • Unfollow / Unfriend
  • Block
  • Let the algorithms work for you:
    • Feed it with content that makes you feel safe and happy

Engaging with balance

Active engagement
• Content creation: texts, tiktoks, DMs, etc.
• Develop/maintain connections
• Allows creativity to flow
• Arguments, fighting
• Addictive patterns prioritizing interactions online vs. offline

Passive engagement
• Content watching, reading, and reacting to (e.g., liking)
• Allows privacy and safety
• Low effort
• Self-conscious to interact with others
• Doomsscrolling

Connecting with actual allies

• Strong online friendships:
  • Those maintained offline also (accountability)
  • Those with a possibility of becoming offline in the future
• Acknowledge that social media may
  • Be used to meet others that teens may not have access to because of where they live and what people is like in there
• Encourage teen to use social media to
  • Stay connected with those who are the closest
  • Consistent online interactions with these
  • Aim to a mix of online and offline friends

Tailoring consumption

• Evidence on screen time:
  • Mixed, inconsistent
  • Up to two hours daily seems reasonable
  • Both active and passive engagement count!
• Encourage teen to
  • Focus only on platforms that make them happier
  • Delete, deactivate, they don’t enjoy
  • Remove accounts they don’t use much from their phone
Resources for teens: imi Guide

- [https://imi.guide/](https://imi.guide/)
- imi is a free, digital, evidence-based mental health tool for LGBTQ+ teens.
- Coping skills
- Stories from real LGBTQ+ teens
- Resources to affirm queer identities
- Resources for mental health

Resources for teens: CenterLink

- [https://www.lgbtqcenters.org/](https://www.lgbtqcenters.org/)
- International nonprofit and member-based association of LGBTQ centers
- LGBTQ centers provide essential services, promoting growth, wellness, and connectivity in their communities
- Especially useful for rural-living LGBTQ youth

Resources for teens, parents, guardians, and educators: Social Media Test Drive

- [https://socialmediatestdrive.org/](https://socialmediatestdrive.org/)
- Developed by
  - Cornell’s Social Media Lab
  - Common Sense Education
- Social Media TestDrive prepares young people for the online world through experiential learning in a simulated social media environment

Resources for parents, guardians, and educators: Teens and Media Toolkit

- [https://actforyouth.net/adolescence/toolkit/teens.cfm](https://actforyouth.net/adolescence/toolkit/teens.cfm)
- Developed by
  - ACT (Assets Coming Together) for Youth Center for Community Action
  - New York State Department of Health
  - University of Rochester
- Readings, statistics, reports, digital safety and citizenship training and simulations.

Additional resources

- Cyberbullying Resource Center: (Resources for teens/youth, parents and educators) [www.cyberbullying.org](http://www.cyberbullying.org)
- StopBullying.gov: (Tips and resources for teens, parents and educators) [www.stopbullying.gov/cyberbullying](http://www.stopbullying.gov/cyberbullying)
- GLSEN: (Resources for teachers and allies to create safe learning environments for LGBTQ students) [Homepage | GLSEN](http://www.glsen.org)
Resources

- The Trevor Project: (Crisis intervention and suicide prevention resources for LGBTQ young people) [www.thetrevorproject.org](http://www.thetrevorproject.org)
- PACER’s National Bullying Prevention Center: (Resources and support for parents of children with disabilities, as well as, information regarding bullying and cyberbullying) [www.pacer.org/bullying/info/cyberbullying/](http://www.pacer.org/bullying/info/cyberbullying/)
- Anti-Defamation League: (Resources, education and support to combat anti-Semitism, bigotry, discrimination and injustice, includes resources for bullying and cyberbullying) [www.adl.org](http://www.adl.org)
- Safe2SaySomething: (Youth violence prevention program run by PA Attorney General. Support, resources and anonymous tip/reporting line) [www.safe2saypa.org](http://www.safe2saypa.org) 1(844)saf2say/723-2729
- ACLU: (Bullying and protected class issues): [www.aclu.org](http://www.aclu.org)
- Education Law Center: [www.elc-pa.org](http://www.elc-pa.org)
- Center for Safe Schools PA: (Bullying prevention resources and education/trainings) [www.safeschools.info](http://www.safeschools.info)
- PA Bullying Prevention Consultation Line: (Support and resources for student, parents and school personnel) 1(866)716-0424
- American Association of Suicidology: [https://suicidology.org/](https://suicidology.org/)

resources

- OnGuardOnline: (FTC’s free online tips and resources for parents and educators) [www.consumer.ftc.gov](http://www.consumer.ftc.gov)
- Bark: (App that monitors text messages, YouTube, emails and 30 social networking apps) [www.bark.us](http://www.bark.us)
- Common Sense Media’s Ultimate Guide to Parental Controls: [https://www.commonsensemedia.org/blog/parents-ultimate-guide-to-parental-controls](https://www.commonsensemedia.org/blog/parents-ultimate-guide-to-parental-controls)
- AT&T Secure Family: (App that tracks location, limits screen time and filters web and app use) [www.att.com](http://www.att.com)

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING!

LUBBERTCL@UPMC.EDU
ESCOBARVIERACG@UPMC.EDU

43

44

45

46