

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

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

STAR Conference
May 5th, 2023

1

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*

2



Definition, prevalence, and impacts of OV

3

Defining online victimization

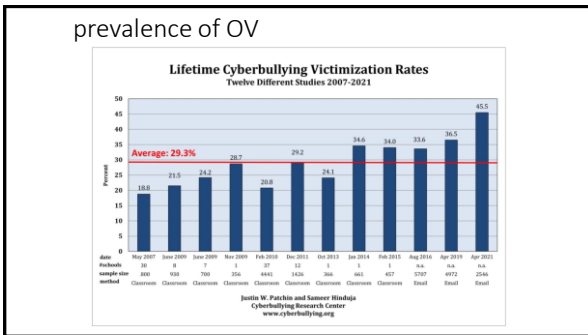
Online victimization is defined as, “**hurtful comments, images, or behaviors that inflict harm in online spaces.**”
– Tynes, Rose & Williams, 2010

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.

4



5

Rates among marginalized youth

- Racial/ethnic minority youth
 - Daily diary study of 602 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. to 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
 - 25% of girls ages 15-17 receive unsolicited explicit images and 9% have explicit images of them shared without their consent (Pew Research Center, 2022)

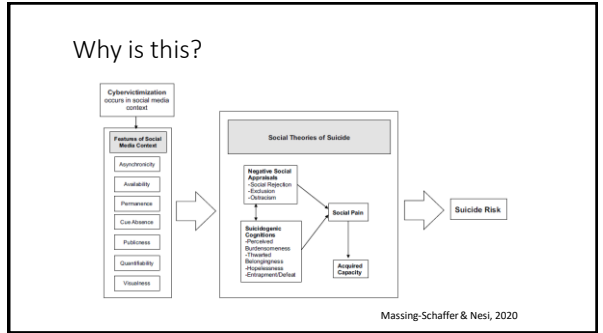
6

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)

7



8



9

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)

American Foundation for Suicide Prevention

10

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 analysis
- Recorded, transcribed, & conducted qualitative description analysis
- Data collection focusing on:
 - Contextualizing and categorizing OV experiences
 - Understanding perceived mental health impacts
 - Priorities for prevention programming

11

Results: online verbal harassment

- All youth in the sample experienced some form of verbal harassment.
 - Comments that invalidated their identity (N=10)
 - 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/targeted:
 [He] called me the F slur a million times.

Others were indirect/nuanced
 [They were] kind of vague 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.

12

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]

13

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 sad. Then sometimes some of the dudes will message us, message me, and they'll be like 19. Even after that, I say I'm 16, they will still continue to ask for inappropriate sexual favors.

14

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 were like, "Hey. So, I heard you're trans. Are you on hormones?," and all this stuff. And it really hurts because I don't really want to do hormone stuff and I won't because I have parents who wouldn't support that probably... And she was also trans and she was like, "You're not actually trans." That really was just twisting the knife.

15

Results: mental health impacts

- Nearly all youth viewed OV as a factor that exacerbated existing mental health symptoms (N=18).

"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."


- Youth reported OV contributed to:
 - 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

16

Results: priorities for prevention

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

17



Flourish

Next steps

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

18



19

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 www.commonsensemedia.org
- Internet Matters www.internetmatters.org
- Trevor Project How to Be An Ally www.thetrevorproject.org

20

priorities for prevention

Coping skills

- SPARC-Life** created an expansive list of brief coping skills that can be used after OV occurs. <https://sparlife.pitt.edu>
- Right To Be** created guides for self-care when experiencing OV and another for when witnessing OV. <https://righttobe.org>
- Now Matters Now** teaches skills for responding to distress and suicidal thoughts through a series of brief videos of youth with lived experience. <https://nowmattersnow.org>

21

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. <https://righttobe.org>
- The Center for Countering Digital Hate** has a "Don't Feed the Trolls" guide for what to do when targeted by online hate. <https://counterhate.com>
- Trevor Project** has a guide for protecting your wellbeing on Instagram. www.thetrevorproject.org
- 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. <https://cyberbullying.org>

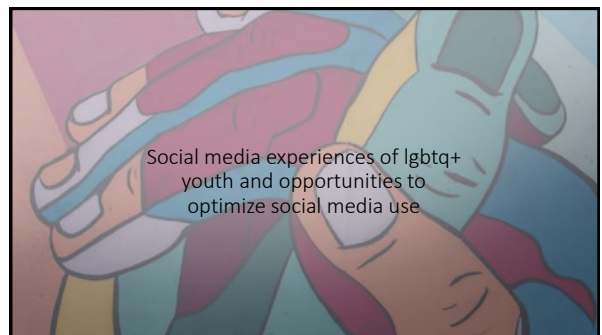
22

priorities for prevention

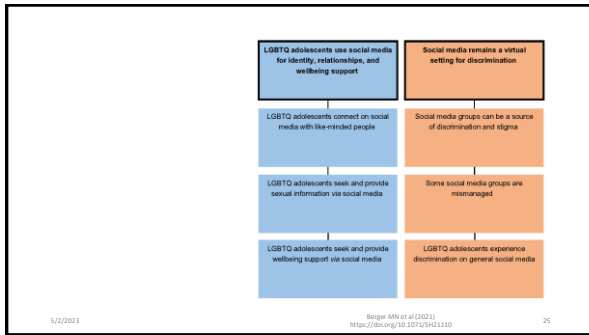
Help-seeking

- Crisis Hotlines**
 - 988 (call/text 988)
 - Crisis Textline (text HOME to 741741)
 - Trevor Project (1-866-488-7386 or text START to 678678)
 - Trans Lifeline (Call 877-565-8860)
 - Call Blackline (Call or text 800-604-5841)
 - What to expect: <https://www.sparlife.pitt.edu/what-expect-when-you-call-hotline>
- Hotlines for OV**
 - Safe2Say: 1-888-SAFE2SAY www.safe2saypa.org
 - Cyberbullying Prevention Hotline: Call 1-866-716-0424
- Online support groups for LGBTQ+ youth**
 - Q chat <https://www.gchat.space>
 - LGBT National Help Center moderated chatrooms <https://www.lgbthotline.org/youthchatrooms>
 - Trevor Space <https://www.trevorspace.org>

23



24



25

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**

5/2/2023 Caglianik PD and Ward M (2016) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2016.07.051> 26

26

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

Table 2. Social Media Platform Characteristics.

Platform	Description	Year Released
Amino	Platform featuring standalone, user-generated communities to discuss specific interests. Users can scroll through content, post, message privately or in public that scrolls and see posts from their following list [13].	2014
Archive of Our Own (AO3)	Noncommercial and nonprofit central hosting site for transformative fanworks such as fanfiction and, in the future, other transformative works such as fan art, fan videos, and public [14].	2007
Discord	Chat platform with user-generated topics (servers) [15].	2015
Facebook	Connects people with friends, family, acquaintances, and businesses from all over the world and enables them to post, share, and engage with a variety of content such as photos and status updates [16].	2005
Instagram	Photo-sharing application that lets users take photos, apply filters to their images, and share the photos instantly on the Instagram network and other social networks [17].	2010
Pinterest	Photo-sharing social network that provides users with a platform for uploading, saving, and categorizing "pins" through collections called "boards". Boards are typically organized by theme [18].	2010
Reddit	Social news site that contains specific, topic-oriented communities of users who share and comment on stories [19].	2005
Snapchat	Allows users to send and receive time-sensitive photos and videos known as "snaps", which are hidden from the recipient once the time limit expires (snaps and videos still remain on the Snapchat server). Users can add text and drawings to their snaps and control the list of recipients which they send them [19].	2011

5/2/2023 Karam S et al (2022) <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.192315611> 27

27

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

Table 2. Cont.

Platform	Description	Year Released
TikTok	Highlights short-form looping videos that can also have musical overlays [11].	2016
TrevorSpace	An online community for LGBTQ+ youth ages 13 through 24 to receive advice and support from peers [6].	2008
Tumblr	Microblogging platform that allows users to post text, images, video, audio, links, and quotes to their blog. Users can also follow other blogs and repost other users' content to their own blog [16].	2007
Twitter	Real-time social network that allows users to share 140-character updates with their following. Users can favorite and retweet the posts of other users, as well as engage in conversations using @ mentions, replies, and hashtags for categorizing their content [16].	2006
YouTube	Video sharing website to watch online videos. Users can create and upload their own videos to share with others [17].	2005
Yubo	Social media app allowing users create a profile, share their location, and flip through images of other users in their area. Users can either scroll through the current livestreams or browse individual profiles by swiping right on profiles they like and left on profiles they don't [16].	2015
Yout	Semi-anonymous social networking app where users share their feelings without the fear of a negative backlash. Users voice their opinions to a supportive community [19].	2013

5/2/2023 Karam S et al (2022) <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.192315611> 28

28

LGBTQ+ youth and wellbeing support via social media

Emotional	Informational	Appraisal
Sense of belonging to a community	LGBTQ issues, news, representation	Feelings of validation
Anonymity helps in sharing experiences	Learning about LGBTQ and intersecting identities	Affirming support of "likes" and positive comments
Helpful with offline concerns and it reduces feelings of isolation	Learning about relationships, sex, sexual health, gender affirming care	Compliments on appearance and 'passing' (gender diverse youth)

5/2/2023 Selkie E et al (2020) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2019.08.011> 29

29

What feels supportive for LGBTQ+ youth on social media?

Connecting with LGBTQ Groups

- "There's a lot of good support groups on [Reddit], specific to certain people. Many kids there. . . you can post, people will give you advice, or support. I go to a couple sub-reddits that are for [bisexual] teens who are looking for support"

(Emily, 19, bisexual, cis female)

Positive representation

- "LGBTQ accounts with funny content make me smile, lift me up and I know that there are people out there rooting for me who wouldn't want me to give up"

(Adora, 17, lesbian, cis female)

5/2/2023 Escobar-Vera et al (2022) <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.906695> 30

30

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)

5/2/2023 Escobar-Vivira et al (2022) <https://doi.org/10.3389/ijgm.2022.926905> 31

31

Given the importance of social media for LGBTQ+ youth,

Can we assist them to curate safer and happier social media spaces?

Are there strategies or resources?

5/2/2023 32

32

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

Van Hook et al. (eds.), Families and Technology, National Symposium on Family Issues 9, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95540-7_9 Kawanishi et al (2022) <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijgm130215011>

5/2/2023 33

33

Engaging with balance

<p>Active engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content creation: texts, tiktoks, DMs, etc. • Develop/maintain connections 📌 • Allows creativity to flow 📌 • Arguments, fighting 🗨️ • Addictive patterns prioritizing interactions online vs. offline 🗨️ 	<p>Passive engagement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content watching, reading, and reacting to (e.g., liking) • Allows privacy and safety 📌 • Low effort 📌 • Self-conscious to interact with others 🗨️ • Doomscrolling 🗨️
--	--

5/2/2023 34

34

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

5/2/2023 35

35

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

5/2/2023 36

36

Resources for teens: 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



5/2/2023

37

37

Resources for teens: CenterLink

- <https://www.lgbtcenters.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

5/2/2023

38

38

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

- <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

5/2/2023

39

39

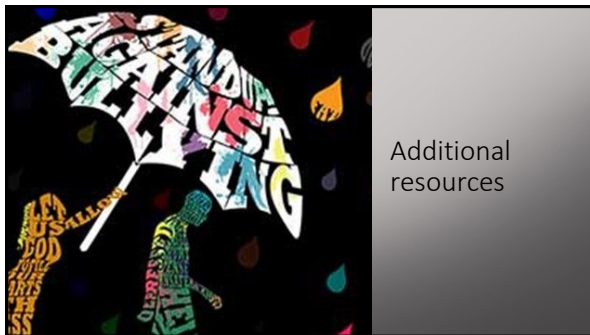
Resources for parents, guardians, and educators: Teens and Media Toolkit

- <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.

5/2/2023

40

40



41

resources

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

42

Resources

- The Trevor Project: (Crisis intervention and suicide prevention resources for LGBTQ young people) 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/
- Anti-Defamation League: (Resources, education and support to combat anti-Semitism, bigotry, discrimination and injustice, includes resources for bullying and cyberbullying) www.adl.org
- Safe2SaySomething: (Youth violence prevention program run by PA Attorney General. Support, resources and anonymous tip/reporting line) www.safe2saypa.org 1(844)saf2say/723-2729

43

resources

- ACLU: (Bullying and protected class issues): www.aclu.org
- Education Law Center: www.elc-pa.org
- Center for Safe Schools PA: (Bullying prevention resources and education/trainings) 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/>

44

resources

- OnGuardOnline: (FTC's free online tips and resources for parents and educators) www.consumer.ftc.gov
- Bark: (App that monitors text messages, YouTube, emails and 30 social networking apps) www.bark.us
- Common Sense Media's 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

45



46