

Indicators of Health Information Seeking Online for Gender Minority Youth

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GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network)
Crimes against Children Research Center

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Introduction

Over the past several years, the Internet and social media technologies have become ever more prominent in daily life, and this is especially true for young people. Anyone, at any time and from almost anywhere, can access a worldwide network of unlimited information. The anonymity of these online spaces may explain why youth commonly take to the Internet to search for sensitive health topics like sex, depression, and substance use.⁵ Because of their popularity, health information websites also have the potential to reach a vast number of youth and affect health behavior change.

Research findings suggest that LGBT youth are frequent and intense users of the Internet and social networking sites.²¹⁻²³ It is therefore likely that the Internet is also an important health information resource for young LGBT people.

Transgender youth are particularly likely to face mental and physical health disparities because of the lack of culturally relevant resources paired with marginalization, discrimination, and disenfranchisement.^{11,25} Indeed, many transgender young people face mental health disparities in part because of experiencing serious violence and victimization.^{25,26}

In general, youth often search online about mental health topics like drugs and alcohol abuse, suicide, or depression.⁵ Given the greater mental health burden borne by many transgender youth,^{27,28} they may be even more likely to use the Internet as an important mental health resource. The Internet may be a refuge where they can find information about the specific and frequently neglected health issues transgender individuals experience.

In this report, we examine health information seeking behavior by gender identity. Comparisons of youth by sexual identity are provided in Mitchell and colleagues' peer-reviewed journal article, which is available for free download;²⁴ as such, we will not duplicate findings here.

Sexuality and Gender Identity: What's the Difference?

Sexual orientation refers to a person's pattern of physical and emotional arousal toward other people.¹ Sexual identity is the way that a person defines their attractions. It is not the same as sexual behavior or sexual activity. Lesbian and gay people are attracted to persons of the same sex while bisexual people are attracted to persons of both sexes.

Gender identity is the way a person defines their gender (e.g., as being male, female, or something else). Transgender people identify as a gender different from their sex assigned at birth (i.e., what was originally on someone's birth certificate). Gender identity is not the same as sexual identity. For instance, transgender people, like non-transgender people, can have any sexual identity (e.g., heterosexual, gay, bisexual, etc.).

In this report, we use the acronym LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual) to refer to people whose sexual identity is anything other than exclusively heterosexual (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, unsure, and other). We use the acronym QUO to represent youth who reported questioning, unsure, or other sexual identity. We use transgender as an umbrella term to include anyone whose gender does not match their sex assigned at birth (e.g., gender nonconforming, gender queer). We use the acronym LGBT when referring to youth who are in either or both of these groups.

Compared to 56% of non-transgender youth, 86% of transgender youth searched for health information online in the past year.

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<i>Frequency of online health information seeking by transgender identity</i>	<i>Non-transgender (n = 5,100)</i>	<i>Transgender (n = 442)</i>	<i>p-value</i>
			<0.001
Every day or almost every day	1%	3%	
Once or a few times a week	4%	11%	
Once or a few times a month	16%	35%	
Once or a few times in the past 12 months	35%	37%	
Never in the past 12 months	44%	14%	

Youth were asked whether, in the past 12 months, they had searched online for health or medical information for themselves (not for other people they knew).²⁹ Significant differences were found among transgender and non-transgender youth ($p < .001$). Almost nine out of ten transgender youth said that they searched for health information online compared to just over one in two non-transgender youth. Transgender youth were more likely than non-transgender youth to have frequently sought health information online.

Youth were also asked follow-up questions about specific health topics that they have searched online, including sexual health information.

Sexual Health Information Seeking Online

Although school-provided sexual health education classes are the most common source of sexual health information for adolescents, most LGBT youth report that these methods do not sufficiently address (or often, do not address at all) their specific sexual health interests and needs.^{26,30} Again, this is particularly true for transgender youth, as their identities are even less frequently included in school-based sexual education.³¹ Given their difficulty accessing information related to their gender identity in most traditional settings, online spaces may be even more important in this regard for transgender youth compared to their non-transgender peers. For young self-identified transgender people, the Internet may open many doors to personally relevant resources that they may not have access to offline.³¹⁻³⁴

4 of every 5 transgender youth have searched online for sexual health information in the past year, compared to just over 1 in 3 non-transgender youth.

<i>Online sexual health information seeking by transgender identity</i>	<i>Non-transgender (n = 5,100)</i>	<i>Transgender (n = 442)</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Any online sexual health information	35%	81%	<0.001
Sexuality or sexual attraction	27%	72%	<0.001
How to have sex or sexual positions	23%	42%	<0.001
Condoms/ birth control	16%	33%	<0.001
HIV/AIDS or other STDS	9%	19%	0.003

When asked how often in the past year they had searched online for sexual health information,²⁹ more than twice as many transgender than non-transgender youth said they had done so at least once. Looking at the specific sexual health topics queried, the greatest difference appears to be about sexuality or sexual attraction: 72% of transgender youth used the Internet to search on this topic, while only 27% of non-transgender individuals did so within the past 12 months.

Nearly 4 in 5 transgender youth searched for non-sexual health information online in the past year, compared to 3 in 5 non-transgender youth.

<i>Online non-sexual health information seeking by transgender identity</i>	<i>Non-transgender (n = 5,100)</i>	<i>Transgender (n = 442)</i>	<i>p-value</i>
Any online non-sexual health information	60%	78%	<0.001
Fitness or weight issues	45%	47%	0.587
Depression, suicide, or anxiety	21%	63%	<0.001
Medications or their side-effects	20%	32%	<0.001
Drugs or alcohol	14%	20%	0.030
Violence or abuse	7%	16%	<0.001
Other	30%	22%	0.034

Transgender youth were significantly more likely than non-transgender youth to look for information about drugs or alcohol; violence or abuse; medications and their side effects; and depression, suicide, or anxiety. Searches for medication or drug topics could include information about transitioning (e.g. hormones and steroids) for transgender youth. Transgender youth (63%) also were three times as likely to search online for information related to depression, suicide, or anxiety compared to non-transgender youth (21%).

Summary

Searching online for health information was 30% higher among transgender youth compared to non-transgender youth within the past year. In accordance with this trend, 81% of transgender youth searched online for sexual health information compared to 35% of non-transgender youth in the past year. These results demonstrate that transgender youth may be more likely than non-transgender youth to use the Internet as a tool to access information about health, particularly if the information may be uncomfortable or unavailable to access in person.

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About CiPHR

The Center for Innovative Public Health Research (CiPHR) is a non-profit research organization in the United States centered on understanding the impact on and opportunities for adolescent health represented by new technologies. Our mission is to promote new and innovative methods that improve the health and safety of young people. We understand that if we are to affect young people, we must go to where they “are.” We believe a multi-pronged approach is necessary, with survey and epidemiological research alongside active youth intervention and prevention efforts.

About GLSEN

The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) is the leading national education organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all students. Established in 1990, GLSEN envisions a world in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. GLSEN seeks to develop school climates where difference is valued for the positive contribution it makes to creating a more vibrant and diverse community. For information on GLSEN’s research, educational resources, public policy advocacy, student organizing programs and educator training initiatives, visit www.glsen.org.

About CCRC

The Crimes against Children Research Center (CCRC) is the leading national research center on the epidemiology of crimes against children. It is well known for its comprehensive focus on a wide variety of crime exposures including child maltreatment, homicide, sex crimes, bullying, and property crime. It has conducted over a dozen national surveys of violence and victimization epidemiology including the groundbreaking National Survey of Children Exposed to Violence and Youth Internet Safety Study.

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