

# Political Involvement through Technology for Sexual and Gender Minority Youth

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### Introduction

Participation in clubs, teams, school activities, and other forms of engagement in the community can be beneficial to the development of young people<sup>2</sup> and is related to positive outcomes including higher academic achievement, lower drug and alcohol use, and better psychological adjustment.<sup>3-5</sup> The growth of the Internet and social media technologies has resulted in even more ways to participate in different activities, including politics. For example, it is now possible to visit more political websites and organize political events. Some researchers have suggested that this development will allow greater participation for individuals who were previously excluded from the political process.<sup>6-9</sup>

Even though legal equality has much improved in the past decades, LGBT people still face legal prejudice and inequality in many instances.<sup>10</sup> Participating in politics can be one way for LGBT youth to be empowered and engaged as they strive for acceptance and equal treatment.

To gain an understanding of political involvement among youth, LGB youth were asked about their frequency of participation in various forms of online and text-based political activities. The questions were developed from qualitative focus groups, meant to serve as a needs assessment for the community, that were conducted during the survey development phase.<sup>11</sup>

In this report, we share how young people are using technology, including

## **Sexuality and Gender Identity: What's the Difference?**

Sexual orientation refers to a person's pattern of physical and emotional arousal toward other people.<sup>1</sup> 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.

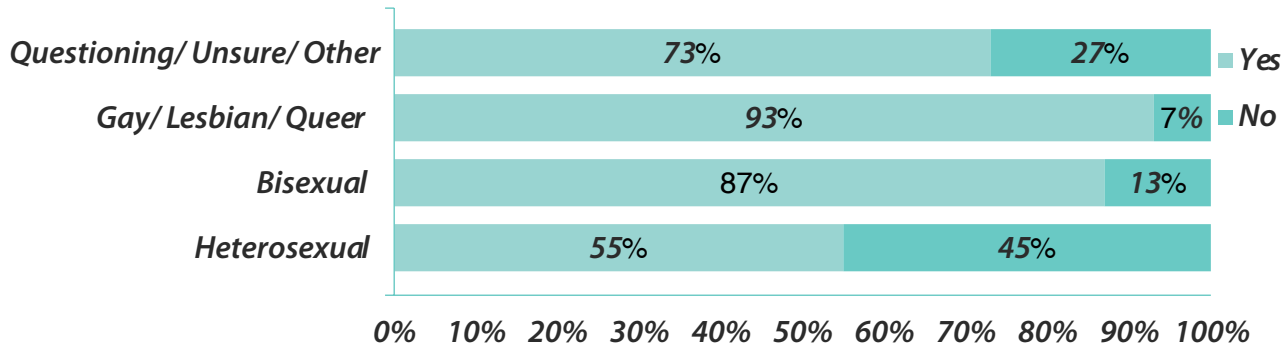
Gender identity is the way a person defines their gender (e.g., as being male, female, or something else). Transgender people identify as a gender different from their sex assigned at birth (i.e., what was originally on someone's birth certificate). Gender identity is not the same as sexual identity. 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.

## Using the Internet for Political Activities

More than 3 in 4 LGB youth have used the Internet to be politically involved in the past year, compared to just over half of heterosexual youth.

### Any online political involvement in the past year by sexual orientation



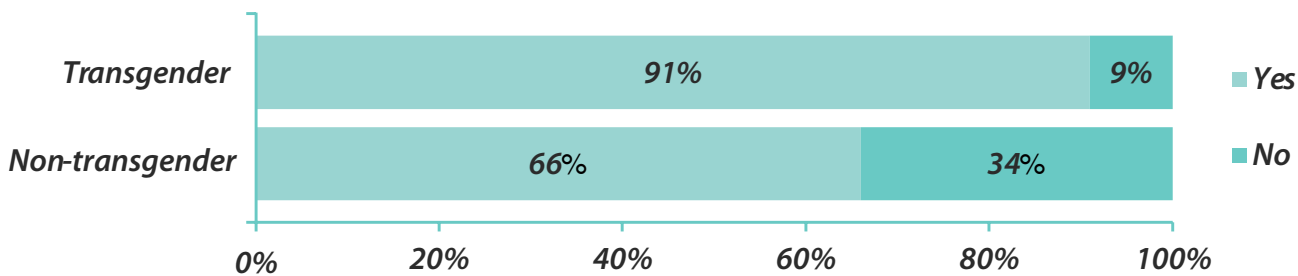
Overall, LGB youth were much more likely than non-LGB youth to be politically involved online. Youth were also asked about specific political involvement activities in which they were engaged online:

Online political involvement activity by sexual identity	Heterosexual (n = 3,380)	Bisexual (n=655)	Gay, Lesbian, Queer (n = 1,282)	QUO (n = 225)	p-value
<b>Used the internet to...</b>					
Support or get the word out about an issue or cause	25%	53%	57%	25%	< 0.001
Take part in an online community that supports an issue or cause	16%	40%	44%	19%	< 0.001
Write a blog post or comment on a blog about an issue or cause	24%	53%	56%	28%	< 0.001
Participate in or recruit people for a gathering, like a demonstration or protest	24%	53%	56%	28%	< 0.001
Express their social or political beliefs in some other way	24%	53%	56%	28%	< 0.001

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Nearly all youth reported using the Internet to express their social or political beliefs in some other way more often than any other behavior assessed. The second most commonly reported activity was to use the Internet to support or get the word out about an issue or cause and to take part in an online community that supports an issue or cause. Nonetheless, LGB youth were more likely than non-LGB youth to endorse engaging in every type of political activity about which we asked.

**Any online political involvement in the past year by transgender identity**



Transgender youth were also more politically involved online when compared to non-transgender youth. Involvement was evenly spread across the various political activities for both transgender and non-transgender youth, with all youth being least likely to participate in or recruit people for a gathering compared to other activities assessed. The biggest difference in online behaviors can be seen in the amount of youth who take part in an online community that supports an issue or cause: 31% more transgender youth engaged in this activity compared to non-transgender youth.

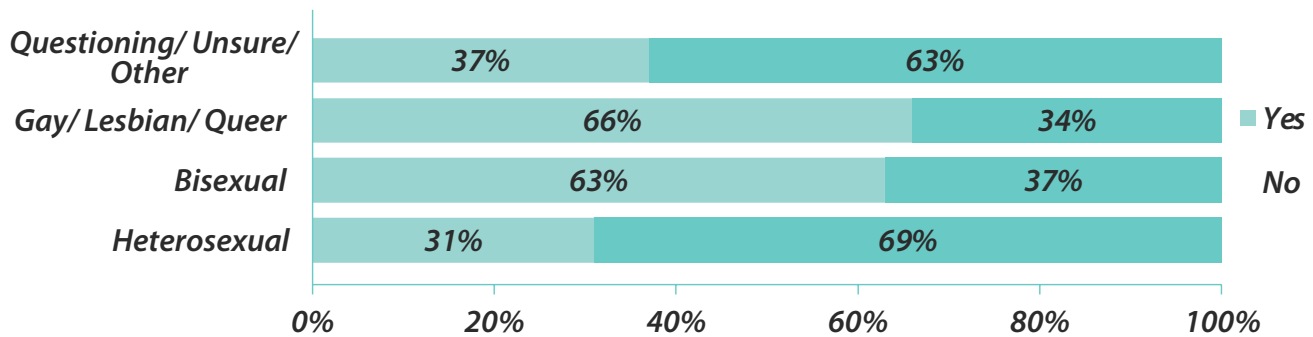
Online political involvement activity by transgender identity	Non-transgender (n = 5,100)	Transgender (n = 442)	p-value
<b>Used the internet to...</b>			
Support or get the word out about an issue or cause	25%	57%	< 0.001
Take part in an online community that supports an issue or cause	16%	44%	< 0.001
Write a blog post or comment on a blog about an issue or cause	24%	56%	< 0.001
Participate in or recruit people for a gathering, like a demonstration or protest	24%	56%	< 0.001
Express their social or political beliefs in some other way	24%	56%	< 0.001

## Using Text Messaging for Political Activities

Youth were also asked how often they had used text messaging in the past 12 months to be politically involved.

**LGB youth were twice as likely as heterosexual or QUO youth to have been politically involved in the past year via text messaging.**

**Any text message political involvement in the past year by sexual orientation**

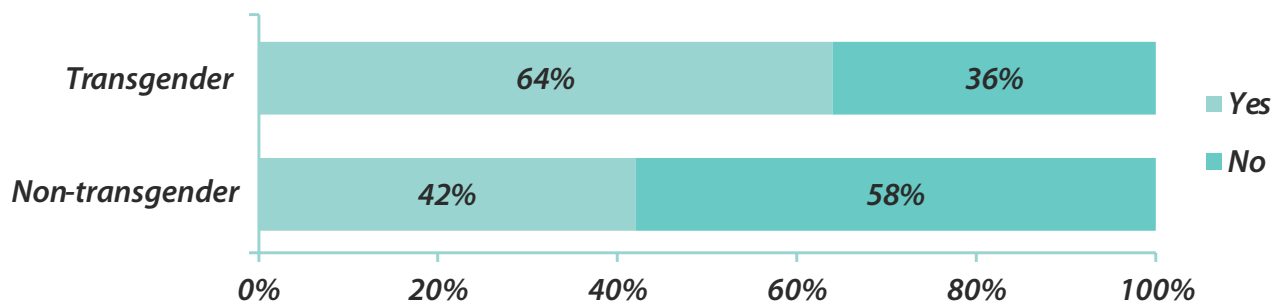


Youth who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer were significantly more likely to use text messaging to be politically active than other youth ( $p < .001$ ). More than half of these youth used text messaging to support or get the word out about a cause or issue and to express their social or political beliefs in some way. Two in five have used text messaging to participate in or recruit people for a political gathering. Heterosexual youth and QUO youth also reported using text messaging to be politically involved, but at about half the frequency as their lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer-identified peers.

Text-messaging based political involvement by sexual identity	Heterosexual (n = 3,380)	Bisexual (n=655)	Gay, Lesbian, Queer (n = 1,282)	QUO (n = 225)	p-value
<b>Used text messaging to...</b>					
Support or get the word out about an issue or cause	25%	53%	57%	25%	< 0.001
Participate in or recruit people for a gathering, like a demonstration or protest	16%	40%	44%	19%	< 0.001
Express their social or political beliefs in some other way	24%	53%	56%	28%	< 0.001

**Almost 2 out of 3 transgender youth participated in political activities using text messaging within the past year, compared to slightly more than 2 out of 5 non-transgender youth who did so.**

**Any text-messaging based political involvement in the past year by transgender identity**



Across the board, transgender youth were more likely to use text messaging for political activities compared to non-transgender youth. For example, 52% of transgender youth surveyed said that they had used text messaging to support or get the word out about an issue or cause, compared to 34% of non-transgender youth ( $p = 0.002$ ). When examining specific political involvement, non-transgender youth were most likely to use text messaging to support or get the word out about an issue or cause, whereas transgender youth reported using it more to express their social or political beliefs in some other way.

<i>Text-messaging based political involvement by transgender identity</i>	<i>Non-transgender (n = 5,100)</i>	<i>Transgender (n = 442)</i>	<i>p-value</i>
<b><i>Used text messaging to...</i></b>			
<i>Support or get the word out about an issue or cause</i>	34%	52%	0.002
<i>Participate in or recruit people for a gathering, like a demonstration or protest</i>	24%	42%	< 0.001
<i>Express their social or political beliefs in some other way</i>	33%	58%	< 0.001

### Summary

Many youth are using technology to be involved politically, and this seems to be especially true for LGBT youth. Indeed, more than half of adolescents surveyed have used the Internet or text messaging to foment some type of political activity. Presently, many issues related to the civil and human rights of the LGBT community have come to the forefront of American politics; these issues may particularly resonate with LGBT youth more than non-LGBT youth, possibly resulting in the difference in level of political involvement. It may also be that engaging in politics is an empowering and affirming way to surround oneself with like others, while striving to achieve a common goal. Future research should examine whether and, if so, how political engagement relates to wellbeing for LGBT and non-LGBT youth.



## References

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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](http://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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