

# **SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS USE IN SUPPORT NETWORKS AMONG LGBTQ ADOLESCENTS**

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## **Background:**

Adolescents are avid users of social media and are often described as 'digital natives' due to their familiarity with technology. Social media is commonly used, with adolescents favouring Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. Social media facilitates peer support networks and can be helpful among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and/or queer (LGBTQ) individuals. In this study we sought to explore perceptions and experiences of LGBTQ adolescents' use of social media.

## **Methods:**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 61 adolescent participants over 18-months as part of a longitudinal mixed-methods project. Interviews were conducted at three time-points: baseline, midpoint, and endpoint. Thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data.

## **Results:**

Of the 61 participants, 51% (31/61) identified as LGBTQ, and 49% (30/61) identified as non-LGBTQ. Ages ranged from 15-17 years at baseline. LGBTQ Facebook groups were commonly used among this sample with the focus of connecting with other LGBTQ individuals. Social support was frequently sought and provided via group members to address psychological concerns including suicidal ideation in other members. To provide emotional support members would offer to message, call, and meet in-person with those seeking help. Social media provided participants who felt isolated a way to connect with like-minded people. Facebook groups, particularly larger groups experienced issues with members expressing anti-LGBTQ sentiment and racism. This encouraged users to leave and join smaller and moderated groups that discourage negative interactions. Non-LGBTQ adolescents used social media in similar ways but not for sexual identity support.

## **Conclusion:**

Social media offers a relatively safe environment for LGBTQ adolescents where they can connect with other LGBTQ individuals and seek support and information. This is valuable for those who are isolated from the LGBTQ community. Negative interactions remain an issue that can be detrimental to LGBTQ adolescents.

## **Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

None declared.