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Search engines and the sex education information practices of LGBTQ+ youth

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Abstract

Online resources are vital to the health information practices of LGBTQ+ youth, especially when finding information related to sex education topics. As LGBTQ+ youth use the internet, particularly Google Search, to meet their sex and sexual health information needs, it is important to understand both the information practices related to this unique search experience and how the affordances of this particular search engine impact the information seeking process. The goal of this project is to study the online information practices of LGBTQ+ youth when searching for sex education information, specifically perceptions of and interactions with search engines. Using semi-structured interviews, we ask LGBTQ+ youth to discuss their information practices related to sex education information and use Google Search to answer sample questions related to sex and sexual health. In this work in progress poster, we discuss our theoretical framing, methods, and preliminary results.

KEYWORDS

health information, LGBTQ+ youth, sex education

1 | INTRODUCTION

Information related to sex and sexual health for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) youth is a vital resource for understanding their own bodies, but this information is scarce and difficult to find. For example, comprehensive sex education is absent from most school curriculums in the United States (SIECUS, 2020). LGBTQ+ youth additionally are less able to rely on family, friends, and medical professionals as possible sources for this information due to perceptions of stigma related to gender and sexuality and potential resulting safety concerns. These factors create a situation in which LGBTQ+ youth struggle to access relevant information about sex and sexuality. This often leads LGBTQ+ youth to the Internet in an attempt to meet their information needs (Charest, Kleinplatz, & Lund, 2016; Mitchell, Ybarra, Korchmaros, & Kosciw, 2014). But how is this population interacting with the Internet to meet their information needs? Our research questions for this project are: (a) How do LGBTQ+ young adults use online resources to address their sex education information needs? and (b) How does the unique search experience of Google Search, particularly user expectations and perceptions of search algorithms, impact the information practices of LGBTQ+ young adults? We use interviews to understand the information practices of LGBTQ+ youth and the unique search experience of finding relevant sex education information.

1.1 | Literature review

An information practice approach (Savolainen, 2007) to understanding the unique search experience of LGBTQ+ youth seeking relevant sex education information requires considering not only individually-situated search experiences, but contextual factors that impact search behavior, motivations, access, and other components of the search process. The marginalization faced by many LGBTQ+ youth is necessary context for LGBTQ+ youths' sex education information seeking, as demonstrated by several studies (Charest et al., 2016; Holstrom, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2014). Previous research found that limited availability of health information and distrust between patients and providers were the most commonly cited barriers to sexual and gender minority youth accessing relevant health information (Rose & Friedman, 2019). Peers, romantic partners, and online media are preferred sources of sex education information due to lack of applicability from school curriculum and uncertainty with medical providers (Haley, Tordoff, Kantor, Crouch, & Ahrens, 2019). Research focused on both sexual and gender minority youth identified isolation, stigmatization, and lack of information as three main factors driving this population to the internet for their information needs (Steinke, Root-Bowman, Estabrook, Levine, & Kantor, 2017).

Search engines, and the algorithms that drive these systems, directly impact the information practices and information access of those seeking information. Users of information retrieval systems experience a tension between wanting accurate answers quickly and wanting to have a sense of control in directing the search process (Bates, 1990). In the case of LGBTQ+ users and online search engines, this tension between user and system becomes particularly relevant if users feel unable to direct the search process and retrieve relevant health information. User perceptions of search algorithms can change their interactions with them (Beer, 2017). In the case of search engines, this manifests in how users define search criteria, scan the pages, change search terms, and ultimately decide if their information needs are satisfied. To understand how LGBTQ+ youth use search engines in their information practices related to sexual health, we specifically explore LGBTQ+ youths' conceptions of search engines and impacts on their abilities to find relevant health information.

2 | METHODS

We use semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ+ youth ages 14 to 24 to explore their information practices related to sex and sexual health. First, we ask participants about their past sex and sexual health information seeking experiences including specific sex education resources and past search strategies. Using the think aloud method (Kuniavsky, Goodman, & Moed, 2012), participants then answer sex education related questions using Google Search while discussing search strategies and evaluations of results. We use initial open coding of transcripts to establish themes in the data followed by axial coding to understand connections between these themes (Charmaz, 2014).

2.1 | Preliminary results

Internet search allows LGBTQ+ youth to meet sex education information needs that might not be met elsewhere such as in school or at home. Our qualitative analysis will result in increased knowledge of LGBTQ+ youths' information practices when seeking sex education information. Additionally, participants' specific interactions with the Google search interface and observations of participant search behaviors will reveal LGBTQ+ youths' perceptions of online search algorithms and the contextual factors motivating this group's online search for sex education information. Preliminary results from our early interviews indicate that presentation of search results and informational cues related to each result, like resource URL, directly impact how LGBTQ+ youth interpret results and decide whether or not to modify search strategies and search terms. Early interviews also indicate a preference for meeting sex education information needs through online message boards and other community forums over sources from healthcare providers and LGBTQ+ health-related nonprofits. Online forums provide LGBTQ+ youth with sex-related information from other LGBTQ+ people and their lived experiences. However, many participants recognized that peer-based resources were only preferable because they were unable to receive relevant sex and sexual health information from healthcare providers, families, and sex education instruction in schools. In our continued interviews, we will further explore resource types and understandings of reliability and credibility when evaluating search results.

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