

# Chapter 5

## The Digital Development of LGBTQ Youth: Identity, Sexuality, and Intimacy

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### ABSTRACT

*We use a developmental tasks framework to guide the exploration of digital media and the development of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. Since digital contexts are ubiquitous, it is clear that youth use them in the service of developmental tasks such as formation of identity, pursuit of intimacy, and development of sexuality. Research suggests that LGBTQ youth use digital media more often than their peers, likely due to the challenges they face. At the same time, electronic peer-victimization and sexual health are concerns since LGBTQ youth are more likely to be at risk. Drawing on extant research we will show that digital media use is associated with stigma-related stressors and risks while concurrently offering opportunities for healthy development. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research that should help bolster our understanding of how digital contexts may predict the development and well-being of LGBTQ youth.*

### INTRODUCTION

Emerging adulthood is believed to be a distinct developmental period, although that uniqueness may vary as a function of culture (Arnett, 2006). Nevertheless, there is a high degree of affinity for digital media among most emerging adults regardless of where they live (Brown, 2006; Arnett, 2014). This may be because digital media can help in dealing with developmental tasks such as identity formation,

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expressing autonomy, as well as exploring relationships (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013). According to a Ipsos/Google survey, emerging adults are essentially always connected and that 92% of them often use more than one device at a time (Google, 2012). One cross-sectional survey showed that nearly 100% of emerging adults in the U.S. reported that they used the Internet with some regularity (Jones, 2002). More specifically, another study found that emerging adults reported spending about 3.5 hours a day on the Internet, often via social media (Padilla-Walker, Nelson, Carroll, & Jensen, 2010). Additionally, they report spending at least 45 minutes a day using digital devices such as smart phones (Jacobsen & Forste, 2011). There has been considerable research done on emerging adults and digital media in general, but few studies have examined specific groups.

Much of the research concerning lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth is specific to older adolescents as well as emerging adults (e.g., 16-24), and therefore we use the term youth to encompass this broader age range. Survey data suggest that LGBTQ youth are even more likely to use digital media than non-LGBTQ peers (GLSEN, CiPHR, & CCRC, 2013). However, it is not especially clear why LGBTQ youth use digital media more often and whether this use is related to their development and well-being. The research on LGBTQ youths' digital media use has also yielded mixed and inconsistent results. Some findings suggest that digital media use may leave LGBTQ youth at heightened risk for peer victimization or poor sexual health (Cooper & Blumenfeld, 2012; Bolding, Davis, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2007), whereas others indicate that digital media may enable them to develop in a healthy and educated manner (Magee, Bigelow, DeHaan, & Mustanski, 2012; Mustanski, Greene, Ryan, & Whitton, 2014). Moreover, despite the increased risk of exposure to threats such as electronic peer victimization (i.e., cyberbullying), LGBTQ youth are more likely than their peers to report using digital media for peer support, health information, and civic engagement (GLSEN, CiPHR, & CCRC, 2013).

Given these polarized findings, it is important to explore how digital media may predict the development and well-being of LGBTQ youth, topics that have not been thoroughly addressed in the literature. These limitations are magnified by the notion that adolescence and emerging adulthood are critical transitional phases when well-being may be tenuous (Steinberg, 2008; Arnett, 2000). To address these shortcomings, this chapter describes the role of digital media in the lives of LGBTQ youth. Specifically, we start by exploring the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ youth as that offers insights into how digital media may be unique for this population. Next we present the developmental framework guiding the chapter, followed by a discussion of the role of digital media as youth deal with the key developmental tasks of exploring identity, coming to terms with their sexuality, and pursuing intimacy. This developmental framework offers a useful way to conceptualize and synthesize the extant literature on LGBTQ youth and digital media. Our synthesis suggests a modest, albeit beneficial, theoretical foundation for future work to be built upon. Finally, the conclusion identifies gaps in the literature, as well as future directions for research and program design.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Unique Challenges Faced by LGBTQ Youth**

To understand the relation between LGBTQ youths' digital media use and well-being, we begin by examining the stigma, health disparities, and unique developmental challenges that they face (Mustanski, Birkett, Greene, Hatzenbuehler, & Newcomb, 2014). In particular, LGBTQ youth are exposed to stress-

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