

# 8 Marginalized and Understudied Populations Using Digital Media

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The current generation of adolescents were born into an omnipresent digital world in which offline and online societal and cultural contexts can influence one's developing sense of belonging and identity. Rapid technological advancements, such as widespread adoption of smartphones, streaming technologies, and online influencers, have changed the way adolescents have been primed and groomed to adapt to the shifting environment. As the field of digital media and social technologies continues to grow, the attention to digital divides becomes less about access to digital technologies and more about how young populations use these technologies in healthy (or unhealthy) ways. By 2013, the vast majority of youth had access to the Internet, including Black (92%), Hispanic (88%), and even youth in low-income neighborhoods (89%; Madden et al., 2013). However, the scholarly reporting of cultural, racial, and economic differences in digital media use typically covers access to the Internet, mobile phones, and favorite social media sites rather than how youth from different marginalized groups actually use technology.

To date, most research has been conducted on White and college samples (Zhang & Leung, 2014). This further deepens the knowledge gap (or a "second-level digital divide"; Hargittai & Hinnant, 2008) in understanding how overlooked populations, such as racial-ethnic minorities, sexual and gender minorities, and other vulnerable adolescent populations, may be not only accessing digital media in different ways but also using and repurposing them to subvert the dominant mainstream narratives. Unlike the mainstream media of the 20th century, this socially networked age of the 21st century provides users opportunities to co-construct their identities in the same social

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and entertainment environments as where they receive their commercial media programming (Manago, 2015). Since most US-based studies have focused on White or college-based samples to understand social media use (but see Chapter 7 for discussion of cultural differences across the world), there is a silencing of voices that exemplify the diverse identity factors among understudied subgroups of our youth's digital worlds (Stevens et al., 2017). This chapter will discuss the role of digital media on marginalized identity development during adolescence, risk and resilience experiences of social media within these understudied adolescent groups, and challenges and future directions in researching the experiences of these subgroups.

Much like the mainstream televised media messages that dominated past generations, the ever-evolving landscape of digital media is a persistent source of societal messages for adolescents to digest – from unacceptable and acceptable behavior to peer and family relationships to gender and sexual roles to stereotypes and values (Mayhew & Weigle, 2018). Two major developmental tasks for adolescents aged 10–24 are exploring intimacy with others and developing stable personal, social, and collective identities that incorporate gender, racial/ethnic, sexual, moral/religious, and political components (Subrahmanyam et al., 2006). In the sections below, we will explore the role of social media in developing marginalized identities pertaining to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, homelessness, and disability. Because the emergent development of marginalized identities such as sexual orientation (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2013) or race/ethnicity (e.g., Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014) more often developmentally crystalizes in later adolescence and into emerging adulthood (ages 18–24), there is a limited understanding in the literature on how these identity explorations and formations prospectively develop in early and mid-adolescence (ages 10–17), often relying on retrospective accounts (e.g., Charmaraman, Grossman, & Richer, 2021). Many of the studies in this chapter illustrate the experiences of older youth to shed some light on how tweens or teens may have similar experiences. The less common studies that focused on younger teens and tween experiences are highlighted whenever available.

### **Role of Digital Media in Development of Marginalized Racial-Ethnic Identities**

One form of identity that becomes an integral part of the adolescent developmental period is racial and ethnic identity formation. This particular identity formation is stratified into periods of *exploration* and *commitment* (Phinney & Ong, 2007; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014), all of which are considered a point of cultural strength contributing to minority youth resiliency (Masten & Reed, 2002). Early (ages 10–13) and mid-adolescence (ages 14–17) is a key period for the exploration of racial-ethnic identity prior to commitment,

which occurs during development in conjunction with heightened priorities of social impact, connectedness, and autonomy (Williams et al., 2014). Theoretical research has positioned racial and ethnic identity as an internalized feeling of belonging to a particular racial-ethnic group and is thought to be formed in later adolescence and young adulthood (Phinney, 1990; Yip et al., 2006). Compared to children's conceptions, adolescents' notions of race and ethnicity are more abstract and complex, which is marked by a heightened group consciousness perspective (Quintana, 1994). It is worth noting for this chapter that in the context of the United States, racial and ethnic minorities are individuals who identify as non-White.<sup>1</sup> There are unique histories (e.g., slavery, internment and incarceration, segregation) tied to the individual subgroups of racial and ethnic minorities in the USA, which contribute to the upbringing and identity formation of young people today. With these histories being told and readily accessible in the era of the Internet, exposure from an earlier age of these perceptions is bound to influence the development and well-being of children and teens.

While adolescence is a salient time for exploring racial-ethnic identity, it is a complex process that involves the influence of nested ecologies surrounding an adolescent, such as family (more proximal), school, community, and political climate (more distal) (Charmaraman & Grossman, 2010; Spencer et al., 1997), all of which also influence youth outcomes. One might consider the ubiquitous use of technology, especially social media, among young people as an additional digital ecology that has become a larger part of the processes in racial-ethnic identity exploration. The dominance of digital media exposure and social media use in adolescence across all races and ethnicities (Anderson & Jiang, 2018) has potential consequences, both negative and positive, for youth exploration of what it means to be a person of color in their communities and its effects on mental health.

### **Risk for Racial-Ethnic Minority Youth**

Racial-ethnic differentiation inherently creates opportunities for discrimination and negative stereotypes of minoritized groups to become perpetuated through digital media, which is a well-documented stressor and risk factor for poorer outcomes (Berry, 2000; Trent et al., 2019). As offline risk factors are shown to be mirrored online (Przybylski & Bowes, 2017), discrimination on digital media, and especially social media, has increased stress during an already dynamic time of development. Racial-ethnic discrimination online comes in many forms and may include racial slurs or jokes, negative stereotyping such as "criminals" or "thugs," body shaming of skin tone or body figure, and even threat of harm, simply due to racial-ethnic profiles. Tynes and colleagues (2020) conducted the first study of its kind to investigate the mental health implications of online discrimination among Black and Latinx adolescents (6th–12th grade) over time. This novel study reveals that increases in

experienced individual and vicarious online racial discrimination among Black and Latinx adolescents increases risks for higher levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms. Uniquely, older Black adolescent males were more likely to report high exposure to online discrimination at a younger age with decreasing discrimination over time compared to Latinx adolescent males. Yet, those who experienced high and stable vicarious online discrimination and those who were exposed to high levels of individual racial discrimination online at an early age experienced worse psychological outcomes over time, regardless of gender. This example shows the distinct experience of racial-ethnic online discrimination risks of Black and Latinx adolescents. In our work at the Youth, Media, & Wellbeing Research Lab, we demonstrated that Black and Latinx adolescents (5th–9th grade) adopt social media younger than their White peers, further exposing them to behavioral health difficulties such as sleep disruption due to screen content they were exposed to (Zhai et al., 2020).

Much like the historical contexts of racial-ethnic discrimination against Black and Latinx populations in the USA, individuals of Asian heritage have been subjected to severe historical discrimination (Gee et al., 2009). Despite having the highest reported accessibility to the Internet and social media (Spooner, 2001), Asian American youth still remain underrepresented in the literature around digital media and well-being. Asian Americans are often subject to stereotypes such as the “model minorities,” “honorary Whites,” or even the perpetual foreigners (Kiang et al., 2013, p. 1714), which may have damaging effects on the racial-ethnic exploration among youth. For instance, Asian Americans in later adolescence (18–24 years) are more likely to be cyberbullied compared to White or Hispanic counterparts (Charmaraman et al., 2018). At the same time, Asian Americans are the least likely to report negative occurrences on social media in order to reduce “losing face” and maintain a positive image to the external world. Studies have demonstrated that Asian Americans experience stigma and shame when it comes to their mental health problems and treatment (Surgeon General, 2001; Wang et al., 2020), with cultural stereotypes implying that seeking professional help is a sign of weakness, lack of self-discipline, or may cause shame to the family name (Uba, 1994). Thus, it is unsurprising that Asian American youth would withhold their emotional turmoil from the public eye on social media platforms.

A more recent example of Asian Americans feeling targeted is through the current implications of the global pandemic, which has caused a rapid resurgence of hate and racial profiling among the Asian American communities (Croucher et al., 2020). According to the Integrated Threat Theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000), this poses a realistic threat and generalized out-group stereotypes of this given event has driven the increases in discriminatory behaviors against Asian Americans, specifically Chinese Americans. Asian American adolescents are among those with highest access to the Internet and social

media that leads to early exposures to these racial-ethnic discriminations online. There is emerging evidence indicating that a strong racial-ethnic and/or immigrant identity can protect against the negative effects of online harassment and depression in early adolescence (e.g., Hernandez & Charmaraman, 2021).

Indigenous and Native American adolescents are heavy consumers of digital media (Rushing & Stephens, 2011) but are also a population vastly affected by mental health problems such as substance abuse and suicide (Park-Lee et al., 2018). Racial-ethnic identity exploration among current Indigenous youth is often met with an internal conflict of relating immediate relevant experiences with historical cultures and traumas (Wexler, 2009, p. 272) that contributes to outcomes of well-being. Among Indigenous adolescents, it has been shown that perceived discrimination and historical oppression of Native American populations have been strong indicators of poor mental health outcomes such as alcohol abuse and depression (Cheadle & Whitbeck, 2011). Taking into consideration that offline discrimination is likely to be transferred online (Przybylski & Bowes, 2017), it can be hypothesized that exposure to racial-ethnic discrimination on digital platforms such as social media may also amplify the risk of poor mental health outcomes among Indigenous adolescents. Yet research remains extremely limited in the digital media domain for the population and should be further explored.

### **Resilience for Racial-Ethnic Minority Youth**

As the counternarrative to risks, there is a growing body of literature focused on protective mechanisms of social technologies for youth of color. Among a cohort of racial-ethnic minority adolescents (i.e., Black, Latinx, Asian, and multiracial), research has shown a stronger sense of racial and ethnic identity centrality among Black and Latinx adolescent females showing greater identity centrality compared to males (Charmaraman & Grossman, 2010). This is consistent with the theoretical groundwork of the phenomenological and ecological framework (PVEST) that has been applied to race and ethnic identity formation (Spencer et al., 1997). A scoping review by Williams and Moody (2019) uses the PVEST framework to understand the role of identifying as a Black and female youth and its impacts on well-being in the digital age. Young Black girls are among the highest consumers of social media, and their identities are being supported in ways that are mirrored among other non-Black youth, such as elevating self-esteem and peer affirmations. But because of a long-standing history of stereotypic media portrayal of the young Black female (e.g., nurturing, aggressive, hypersexualized), these messages and stereotypes have translated onto social media that makes identity exploration increasingly complex. This exemplifies that exposure to an online space helps to amplify marginalized youths' voices, but also amplifies the

systemic issues surrounding the Black community today that plays a significant role in racial identity exploration.

A developmental consideration during adolescence is the prioritization of social connectedness, and this connectedness through shared heritage, culture, and histories can be strengthened by digital connection. Despite the systemic risk factors related to race and ethnicity that exist in the USA, there is a shift in focus away from deficit-based approaches and toward recognizing the assets and strength within these communities, especially among young people, which help them thrive in a difficult system. In terms of combating the isolation that many adolescents feel, our Youth, Media, & Wellbeing Research Lab demonstrated that Black and Latinx youth aged 11–15 were more likely than White and Asian adolescents to join online groups that made them feel less lonely and isolated (Zhai et al., 2020). These online communities included group chats on Snapchat, House Party, WhatsApp, Discord, anime fandom, and sports or hobby-related groups. In addition, Black youth preferred YouTube video content that was about relationships or friendships, whereas Latinx youth were more likely to seek opportunities to learn how to cope with stress and anxiety and to use social media to stay in touch with family and relatives compared to White youth.

Another powerful example of racial-ethnic based online communities is the *Black Twitter* culture that erupted in 2015. This online culture was a profound way that millions of Black community members came together to share experiences, but more importantly to create a form of resistance to the marginalization that has long-standing impacts to justice and well-being in the Black community (Florini, 2014). A more recent study highlighted that Black adolescents are among the vast users of these online spaces to increase their social capital, but also to facilitate connections to such identity-based communities while amplifying their voices and representation online (Borough et al., 2020).

Latinx adolescents often feel the need to suppress the expression of their culture on social media due to potential discrimination or not enough affirmation (e.g., “likes”) compared to when they post more “Americanized” cultures like Thanksgiving or Christmas holiday posts (Borough et al., 2020). Despite this finding, Latinx adolescents still sought out positive aspects of expanding social capital on social media platforms that supported the prospects of job and education opportunities, which is an important factor tied to identity and well-being outcomes for this marginalized group. Another example of the strength in racial-ethnic identity in the digital age for Latinx youth is ethnic identity exploration, such that expressing higher levels of connectedness to the culture via the exploration of their identity is a protective factor against problematic externalizing and internalizing behaviors related to online racial-ethnic discrimination (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2015).

There are still limited accounts of research that emphasize the opportunities and experiences of Asian American and Indigenous adolescents’ racial-ethnic identity exploration, especially during early (ages 10–13) and mid-adolescence

(ages 11–17), and the role that social media and other digital ecosystems play in this process. In a mixed-method study among older adolescents (ages 18–25), Asian Americans reported using social media as a way of seeking out social support during difficult times in more privatized online channels, which is thought to be a way of navigating the stigma around mental health and impression management that reigns as a priority in many Asian cultures (Charmaraman et al., 2018). Recent findings in response to the rise in racism among Asian Americans have shown online spaces to be a space of demonstrating comradery and resistance to such discrimination, similarly seen in *Black Twitter*, thus preventing harmful outcomes (Abidin & Zeng, 2020). While this work has yet to be shown in the adolescent developmental period, this is another exemplar of the power of collective racial-ethnic identity in an online community.

Among Indigenous youth and resiliency online, while empirical work is vastly minimal, the work of an online space *WeRNative* to support Native teens exemplifies the unique affordances digital media can have to support the identities and well-being with a greater reach than before (Rushing et al., 2018). To support Indigenous youth during a conflict in ethnic identity, there is an opportunity for digital technologies to bridge the gaps between historical contexts and current experiences to enhance the connection to the heritage of Indigenous communities. Work with Indigenous youth in content creation to address health literacy via digital media (e.g., videos) shows that this not only promotes healthy behaviors, but is also a mechanism to address stressors related to culture and ethnic identity (Stewart et al., 2008). Indigenous teens and emerging adults have taken to social media as a means for creative expression of the Native racial-ethnic identity and solidarity, which is said to be a way of reconnecting with the heritage and reaching a broader population of youth in this community (Monkman, 2020; Noor, 2020). Such strength in racial-ethnic identification among a high-risk group of youth is imperative for support of well-being, and the expanded reach and social capital that social media provides can be vastly beneficial for developing Indigenous adolescents.

It is evident that there are risks associated with online discrimination exposure for youth of color, yet there are vast opportunities through social capital, connectedness, and empowerment that youth of color experience with social technologies. Mirroring of risks in online and offline environments can be taken into consideration when building a digital ecosystem that supports diverse groups of adolescents during this time of identity development.

### **Role of Digital Media in Development of Sexual and Gender Minority Identities**

For a subset of youth, referred to in this chapter as LGBT+,<sup>2</sup> processes of identity formation and development during adolescence center around sexual orientation and gender. In this context, identity development

is understood as the process by which an individual attaches labels and meaning to their experiences of sexual attraction and gendered existence (Gordon & Silva, 2014; Robertson, 2013). Among social scientists, sexuality and gender are understood as social constructions; much like race, rather than manifesting in the individual as innate biological traits, they are influenced by the social forces that define normative and nonnormative behaviors (Gordon & Silva, 2014; Robertson, 2013). For instance, an adolescent attempting to articulate a minority sexual orientation might be deterred from doing so by *compulsory heterosexuality*, the set of societal norms that presume and dictate heterosexual behavior and identity (Robertson, 2013). Sexual identity development is a highly variable process, but integration of a sexual identity with other aspects of the self is often signified when individuals become comfortable with others knowing their sexuality, actively disclose their identity to others, or engage with the broader LGBT+ community (Rosario et al., 2008). Gender identity is often developed through intrapersonal processes, and alongside other aspects of gender-related experience, including gender presentation and self-image. While gender norms are often even more rigid than those pertaining to sexuality, the ability to express one's gender identity both internally and to an external social world has positive associations with well-being (Kuper et al., 2018). Although young adults often face significant interpersonal consequences when they express marginalized sexual and gender identities, group identification can also be a source of protection and well-being for LGBT+ youth (Scroggs & Vennum, 2020).

Since the Internet's early days, digital media has provided LGBT+ users with spaces to gather, construct identity, and share content with one another. In many respects, various niche online communities today constitute "queer cultural archipelagos" (Ghaziani, 2014, p. 137): concentrated areas that, some argue, have replaced gay bars and "gayborhoods" as safe spaces for those who identify as LGBT+ (Cavalcante, 2019). As this migration online occurs, LGBT+ adolescents are being exposed to these digital spaces – and simultaneously helping to construct the cultures that define them. One study found that LGBT+ adolescents as young as 13 years old, on average, spend more time online than their heterosexual, cisgender counterparts (Palmer et al., 2013). Another study, although it did not find differences in time spent online and excluded transgender youth from its sample, was able to show that sexual minority youth aged 18–24 tended to use the Internet differently than heterosexual youth, expanding their activity across a greater variety of social networking sites and engaging more purposefully in identity development online (Ceglarek & Ward, 2016). While existing scholarship has begun to examine the ways in which LGBT+ young adults navigate cyberspace, LGBT+ youth, especially those under 18 years old, are still a critically understudied population. Research on the ways transgender youth navigate social media remains especially rare.



Often, the ways in which LGBT+ youth learn about themselves and their communities online are directly related to identity development. This type of online engagement may take many forms, including *traditional learning*, in which users seek out information about identity-related terminology and then apply these to their own experiences; *social learning*, in which users observe and identify LGBT+ role models on social media; *experiential learning*, which involves active participation in the online LGBT+ community, especially through the use of dating apps; and *teaching others*, which occurs when LGBT+ individuals use social media platforms to provide others with information on LGBT+ issues, including experiences with coming out (Fox & Ralston, 2016). While each of these processes allow LGBT+ youth to better define their personal, social, and collective identities, this digital learning also incorporates an understanding of the stressors that LGBT+ youth may face when they actively express and practice their gender and sexuality online.

A commonly used term used to discuss social networking's impact on LGBT+ youth well-being is *context collapse*: a phenomenon that occurs when the individual, by sharing content on a social media platform, exposes that content to a variety of different audiences, some of whom may not respond positively (Fox & Ralston, 2016; McConnell et al., 2018). For LGBT+ youth, this conflict is particularly salient, since people they know in various social contexts may have drastically different levels of awareness about their sexuality or gender identity. Context collapse can therefore profoundly impact the ways in which young LGBT+ people navigate disclosure and the coming out process. Coming out itself has complex associations with well-being; while it can positively influence the lives of LGBT+ youth in certain relational contexts, in other contexts it can limit identity formation or negatively impact mental health (McConnell et al., 2018, p. 3).

Many LGBT+ individuals seem able to circumvent some of the difficulties associated with context collapse by dividing their online activity between a variety of social media sites. DeVito et al. (2018) argue that for LGBT+ users, social media activity should be conceptualized as an ecosystem, that is, users are able to manage their self-presentation by targeting content to different audiences on different platforms, in addition to the use of privacy controls within one platform. Examining interactions on specific platforms allows researchers to define some of the key characteristics of the LGBT+ adolescents' online ecosystems. For instance, on Facebook, a platform where users primarily interact with people they already have relationships with offline, LGBT+ youth seem to subscribe to the *lowest common denominator* model, in which they tailor identity presentations toward whichever audiences are most likely to express disapproval toward them (McConnell et al., 2018). Tumblr, meanwhile, has had success engaging young LGBT+ users, which is often attributed to its features that enable LGBT+ youth to connect to others in the LGBT+ community with minimal threat of exposing their identities, such as anonymity and the privileging of content sharing over content creation (Cavalcante, 2019).

As LGBT+ youth come of age on the Internet, social media provides a space for them to cultivate personal, social, and collective identities. In some cases, this process occurs as learning, primarily positive interactions that allow individuals to practice being LGBT+ in relative safety and connection with others. However, LGBT+ participation online coexists with the awareness that nonnormative experiences of sexuality and gender may incur negative social responses. This danger forces LGBT+ youth to navigate coming out and expressing identity with care, manifesting in differential usage of social media platforms, which itself can affect adolescent well-being.

### **Risk for Sexual/Gender Minority Youth**

Existing scholarship on LGBT+ populations' activity online has identified the Internet as a space where youth can be exposed to harassment, discrimination, and other forms of bullying that may be easier to perpetrate in online spaces. Multiple studies have found that LGBT+ youth are more likely to be harassed online than non-LGBT+ youth (Palmer et al., 2013; Ybarra et al., 2015). Cyberbullying is perpetrated against LGBT+ youth in a variety of ways, including *verbal victimization*, *relational victimization*, and *electronic actions*, all of which are often combined with in-person harassment (Varjas et al., 2013). These distinctions highlight the variety of modes through which the cyberbullying of LGBT+ youth can occur, including sexual harassment, the use of slurs, purposeful social exclusion, and the targeting of social media content using viruses. It is also notable that, in a sample that did not include gender minority youth, several instances were identified in which the LGB adolescents interviewed were themselves perpetrators of bullying, including online verbal harassment (Varjas et al., 2013); this finding complicates the assumption that sexual minority youth are solely victims in their online interactions.

The effects of online harassment include increased depression and suicidality among LGBT+ youth (Schimmel-Bristow & Ahrens, 2018), dangers that are especially salient given that LGBT+ youth are particularly vulnerable to cybervictimization, since revealing their experiences to parents may mean that they risk coming out or losing access to digital technologies (Cooper & Blumenfeld, 2012). However, it is possible that the role of cyberbullying in LGBT+ adolescents' digital landscape may be shifting. Data collected in the fall of 2019 by our Youth, Media, and Wellbeing Lab, for instance, found no difference between the amount of heterosexual and sexual minority youth who reported experiencing cyberbullying online. Our sample included children under 13, of which 25% experienced nonheterosexual attraction (Charmaraman, Hodes, & Richer, 2021). However, there are several indicators that sexual minority youth today may experience more social isolation online than their peers do. These youth tended to have fewer friends on social media, and were less likely to use social media to engage positively with

friends, including sharing content that was comedic or that they enjoyed. They also were less likely to be friends with family members, peers, or acquaintances on their social media networks, indicating that the links between in-person and online communities may be weaker for LGBT+ youth than other adolescents. Sexual minority youth also reported feeling isolated more often than heterosexual youth. Therefore, there is reason to be concerned that even when young LGBT+ populations are not directly attacked online, they still experience victimization via structural exclusion from the heteronormative social circles that make up their real-world contacts.

As a consequence of context collapse, LGBT+ youth also often find themselves at heightened risk when they share personal information online. Our Youth, Media, and Wellbeing Lab found that sexual minority youth were less likely to have private settings on their social media accounts (Charmaraman, Hodes, & Richer, 2021), and Varjas et al. (2013) discussed sexual minority teenagers' willingness to share personal information with those they talked to virtually as a possible drawback of online activity. Panizo (2018), in a study of teenagers aged 14–19 in Spain who identified as gay, also noted the recurrence of anecdotes in which teenagers' disclosure of their sexual orientation online was discovered by relatives, forcing them "out of the closet indirectly and involuntarily" (p. 67). While these results are open to further interpretation, they do imply that LGBT+ youth place themselves at higher risk when sharing information about themselves through digital media due to the stark division that sometimes exists between their expression of identity online and offline.

Finally, Youth, Media, and Wellbeing Lab data shows that sexual minority youth report seeing more content related to self-harm on social media and are more likely to have actually attempted self-harm (Charmaraman, Hodes, & Richer, 2021). These sexual minority youth were also found to have higher depressive scores. These findings are in line with concerns about the potential of specific sites, like Tumblr, to foster dangerous subcultures that correspond with social isolation and poor mental health outcomes (Cavalcante, 2019).

### **Resilience for Sexual/Gender Minority Youth**

Despite its documented risks, digital media use often provides numerous ways for LGBT+ youth to build resilience. Many forms of online resilience-building are closely related to the process of identity formation. Hillier and Harrison (2007) were among the first to argue that internet communities constitute *safe spaces* for LGBT+ youth who face hostile environments at home or school. In their study of same-sex attracted Australian youth aged 14–21, they assert that in digital spaces, anonymity and the lack of geographic boundaries provide the ideal practice ground for constructing coming out narratives, engaging with a communal gay culture, experimenting with nonheterosexual intimacy, and socializing with other same-sex-attracted youth. Sexual minority youth have been found to perceive their online friends as significantly more

socially supportive than their in-person friends, and LGBT+ youth are more likely to have friends they only know online. Despite the finding that youth across sexual and gender identities feel relatively safe online, researchers note that strong online social support still does not appear to reduce the likelihood of online or in-person harassment and victimization (Ybarra et al., 2015). The Youth, Media, and Wellbeing Lab also found that sexual minority youth they surveyed were more likely to join an online group in order to reduce social isolation or feelings of loneliness (Charmaraman, Hodes, & Richer, 2021), which similarly implies that LGBT+ youth have been able to engage with social media networks in supportive and fortifying ways.

Hillier and Harrison (2007) also note that accessing resources pertaining to sexual orientation, sexual health, and sexual identity can be a critical form of internet use for same-sex-attracted youth, a utility that is echoed in other studies of LGBT+ adolescents. Fox and Ralston (2016) reported that participants used online resources to educate themselves about terminology related to sexual orientation and gender identity, to learn about gender transition, and, in a crossover with their offline context, to identify LGBT+ spaces in physical proximity to them. The Internet can also be a useful tool to identify LGBT+-friendly physicians, therapists, and other care providers (Schimmel-Bristow & Ahrens, 2018).

A final form of resilience-building, also with its roots in identity development, is the use of online platforms as springboards for LGBT+ activism. Education nonprofit GLSEN reported that LGBT+ youth aged 13–18 were about twice as likely as non-LGBT+ youth to participate in civic engagement activities, and 77% had been part of an online community in support of a social cause (Palmer et al., 2013). Connection to online community fosters *sexual citizenship*, which occurs when one's politicized identity prompts one to engage in social activism (Robards et al., 2019). Thus, social media often serves as a tool for LGBT+ youth to communicate about social issues that impact them, and allows them to build strengthened connections to both their immediate and virtual communities.

Ultimately, it is clear that despite the potential of facing victimization, LGBT+ youth wield considerable agency in their online interactions. Much of the time, their vulnerabilities coexist with a demonstrated ability to navigate digital space, in ways that positively supplement or contrast with their offline environments.

### **Role of Digital Media in the Development of Other Marginalized Youth Identities**

In this section, we explore how digital media influences the identities, risk, and resilience of youth from other marginalized backgrounds, ranging from those living in disadvantaged neighborhoods to homeless and neurodiverse youth.

In the case of youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods, Oldenburg (1989) argues that high levels of poverty, decreased employment prospects, and the lack of safe gathering spaces without threat of violence or drug activity lead to a problem of place. These urban youth often have a dilemma of geographic identity – at once proud and connected to one’s neighborhood but needing a third space to feel safe and secure to hang out. Soukup (2006) articulated a “digital third space” wherein online communities are key to developing one’s neighborhood identity and can be located within a local geographic area, allowing participants to be fully immersed in a computer-mediated environment contributing to a sense of connectedness and sense of refuge.

Homelessness is often an invisible identity that is intentionally hidden from outsiders such as classmates at school or future employers (Whitbeck & Hoyt, 1999). The majority of research on the digital media use of homeless youth focuses on health information seeking (Eyrich-Garg, 2010) and less on social connections with others. Prior research on nonhomeless youth suggests that having a cell phone in one’s possession increases feelings of safety and security while on the move, and merely owning a cell phone makes youth feel socially connected (Wei & Lo, 2006). This may be a particularly salient part of homeless youths’ identities – having a lifeline to a networked world may be more critical to maintain those connections they most value.

Prior research has demonstrated that social media has provided people with intellectual disabilities an opportunity to express their preferred personal and social identities (Caton & Chapman, 2016), which may include reflections on their identities as neurodiverse, but also serves as an online space where they can be just like everyone else. For instance, in a study with people with Down syndrome, online profiles were places to be vocal about their thoughts, feelings, and needs (Seale, 2007). Studies have shown those with intellectual disabilities publicize their disability in blogs, even when these online venues provided space to focus on other aspects of their lives (McClimens & Gordon, 2008). Other research has observed that some individuals with intellectual disabilities prefer to not mention the label of intellectual disability in an online profile, providing a chance to escape the identity stigma associated with these disabilities (Löfgren-Mårtenson, 2008).

### **Risk of Other Marginalized Youth**

Adolescents from lower-income households have been found to spend on average an hour and a half more on screens than their higher-income peers (George et al., 2020). They are also more likely to be passively viewing content and less frequently using screens for research and learning (OECD, 2016). In the new digital divide of remote learning (Odgers & Robb, 2020), lower-income households not only have less digital access but also fewer adults who can scaffold digital support, which is critical given the increased risk for mental health symptoms.

In a study by VonHoltz and colleagues (2018), individuals who do not have easy access to the Internet, such as may be the case with youth experiencing homelessness, demonstrate the need to be more purposeful when using public computers. For instance, using the Internet for social media is limited when other basic needs are not being met, such as housing, food, and unemployment. When youth do not have easy access to health care or resources to understand their health ailments, they turn to the Internet to self-diagnose, often finding the terminology and sheer volume of information to be too complex. In terms of being connected with others online, young homeless women have been found to be less likely to stay in touch with friends and less likely to post public messages, signaling a weaker social network to rely on and a greater likelihood of social isolation (Guadagno et al., 2013).

Prior research on social technology use among adolescents with physical or intellectual health conditions, such as autism spectrum disorder, have focused on their unique challenges in understanding social situations and managing peer relationships. This can lead individuals with disabilities to turn to technology as a less threatening way of interacting with others (Davidson, 2008). Unfortunately, having a noticeable or visible disability increases the chances of being a victim of cyberbullying, particularly for those who use the Internet more frequently and are already bullied in person (Kowalski et al., 2016). People with intellectual disabilities have also been found to disclose more personal information about themselves and photos online, increasing the potential for financial, sexual, and personal safety threats (Holmes & O'Loughlin, 2014). Adolescents with a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have been shown to not only be likely victims but also perpetrators of cyberbullying peers. Those with ADHD who were victimized reported higher incidents of loneliness and lower levels of self-efficacy and social support compared to nonvictims (Heiman et al., 2014).

## **Resilience of Other Marginalized Youth**

Digital media and mobile technology access may be especially difficult for homeless youth who are also at increased risk for behavioral and mental health problems associated with substance abuse and violence, compared to housed youth (Rice et al., 2005). Despite the barriers, studies have dispelled the myth of a digital divide for homeless youth, such that around 85% of the homeless population access the Internet at least once a week and 62% of homeless youth had a cell phone, mostly related to instrumental purposes, such as looking for jobs or staying connected with social workers trying to track them down (Rice et al., 2011). Besides using their personal devices, homeless youth are accessing the Internet through social service agencies (60%), public libraries (54%), and internet cafes (14%) (Pollio et al., 2013). Only 9% of homeless youth indicated that they did not have a social media profile (Young & Rice, 2011). Rice and colleagues (2011) found that homeless

youth are most likely to stay in touch via cell phones with friends they knew before they were homeless, followed by siblings, parents, and street-based peers, which underlines the critical social network that friends can provide for these youth. Besides studies on digital access and seeking health-related information, there is limited research examining what homeless youth actually communicate about on their social media sites. These studies have found that youth discussed both risk-taking behaviors such as having sex with someone they met online or drug use, but also prosocial discussion topics such as school, family, work, setting goals, and even their homelessness (Barman-Adhikari et al., 2016).

Studies focused on youth with intellectual or socioemotional disabilities are almost always centered on cyberbullying and the promise of technology-facilitated interventions (Schimmel-Bristow & Ahrens, 2018), rather than how these young people use social media in resilient ways. A recent review suggested that potential benefits of social media use in young people with intellectual disabilities include increased opportunities to make and maintain relationships, decreased loneliness (Kydland et al., 2012), increasing self-confidence and self-esteem through learning new technical skills, and having fun (Caton & Chapman, 2016).

## Challenges and Future Directions

### Moving Beyond Differential Access

Researchers have recently made a call to action on moving away from quantity of time spent on digital technologies, and more toward understanding the quality of experiences online that may have larger impacts to youth well-being (Ito et al., 2020; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). In doing so, the research will be able to provide evidence for how the most pervasive forms of digital media in the current moment is impacting the lives of adolescents, especially those who are marginalized and understudied. In the case of youth who are homeless, access to digital technologies (e.g., mobile phones and public computers) and being able to keep in touch with loved ones is a primary concern for both the research participants and the researchers who study them. However, little is known about which social media platforms are being accessed by this vulnerable population and for what purposes, how often, etc.

### Hard to Reach and Hidden Subpopulations

Racial-ethnic identity formation during adolescence is met with many challenges and opportunities in the digital age, especially among the growing diversity in the population. While we have only scratched the surface of the

possible implications that this identity development process can have in online and social media spaces, there is still much to be explored. A major challenge that research has going forward is accounting for the wide range of races and ethnicities within the USA, and accounting for bi- and multiracial-ethnic identities. There are also many approaches to mapping out the racial-ethnic identity development during this critical period of adolescence, and prior research has had a stronger focus on the identity commitment during late adolescence and young adulthood (e.g., college samples). As digital media and social media adopters are becoming younger at a rapid rate, we must further explore how the pervasive nature of constant exposure and use affects racial and ethnic identity development in the earlier stages of adolescence. Parents and educators might consider discussions with youth from marginalized backgrounds to prepare for biased language and to arm them with the tools to be proactive with learning about and/or establishing their social identities online.

Despite the fact that some youth may identify as LGBT+ at ages as young as 9 (Calzo & Blashill, 2018), research about LGBT+ adolescent behavior online is extremely limited for populations under 18 years old. Information about the digital media use of LGBT+ children under 13 years old is virtually nonexistent, and the Youth, Media, and Wellbeing Lab's data is among the only to date that include children in middle school. Much of the existing research also fails to include transgender youth in its samples, or frames its analyses of this population as secondary to findings about LGB individuals. Thus, future research on LGBT+ social media use has an opportunity to focus on each of these vulnerable populations. As children gain access to social media earlier in middle school, and even in late elementary school, information about how they begin to develop LGBT+ identity or learn about gender and sexuality can provide important context for parents and teachers. Transgender youth, meanwhile, face unique barriers to positive identity formation throughout their developmental years (Palmer et al., 2013); therefore, research devoted to the mental health impacts of transgender digital media use, especially as compared to other members of the LGBT+ community, is a valuable area for future exploration.

Adolescent development may also be compounded with intersectional identity formations. In a diverse mixed-method study of adolescents and young adults aged 12–25, Charmaraman and colleagues (2015) found that girls and women of color participated in more online blogs and were more likely to report revealing their stress on social media compared to both White and male participants. The unique issues faced by LGBT+ youth who are racial minorities or have other marginalized identities are also understudied, such that race overlaps with terms used and content posted about sexuality (e.g., Wargo, 2016). More expansive qualitative and mixed-method research is necessary to understand how particular experiences of sexual orientation and gender are racialized differently online. GLSEN also suggests that lack



of internet access for LGBT+ youth living in rural areas merits future investigation, since many of these adolescents are already isolated from any form of LGBT+ community (Palmer et al., 2013).

### **Social Media Site Affordances/Hindrances**

As noted in earlier sections, it is shown that collective online spaces for interactive and passive use such as social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok) have proven to be a space of racial-ethnic empowerment for young people and a way to promote the social capital needed to support well-being during adolescent development. Despite the dark side of the online ecosystems related to racial discrimination and injustices in the algorithmic makeup of these social media spaces, there are vast opportunities for these tools to be utilized to support historically marginalized racial and ethnic youth to navigate and build their identities to promote mental well-being. For instance, Facebook conspicuously does not allow users to define their race on their profiles, but users can display their cultural background through their photos or interests. The opportunities must also be promoted by the industry by deviating away from a color-blind and utopic cyberspace approach, which often further perpetuates the visual classification of other and hampers empowerment of cultural identities (Grasmuck et al., 2009). More collaborative research with tech industry user experience teams will improve evidence-based decisions around marginalized youth who are primary users of these apps.

LGBT+ activity on newer social media sites, and the ongoing evolution of these communities' online presence, also provide fertile ground for future research. For instance, the video-sharing app TikTok has experienced a surge of popularity among adolescents and corners of the app are primarily devoted to LGBT+ social support and resource sharing (Carey, 2020; Ohlheiser, 2020). At the same time, several sites, including Tumblr and YouTube, have received criticism for implementing guidelines that, while intended to prevent youth from seeing pornographic content, restrict access to LGBT+ media and resources (Romano, 2019; Sybert, 2021); these actions could significantly impact LGBT+ engagement on these platforms. Simpson and Semaan (2020) have detailed the affirming yet fraught relationship many LGBT+ users form with TikTok specifically, and the platform's potential for *algorithmic exclusion*. Finally, certain platforms provide researchers with the opportunity to gather data that is more representative of LGBT+ populations, as demonstrated by Salk et al. (2020); their methodology, in which transgender youth were recruited via targeted social media advertising, has exciting implications for investigators committed to more effectively understanding the unique factors that impact LGBT+ young adults' digital media use.

Across all of the marginalized populations in this chapter, there are untapped research avenues regarding identity work in online spaces. It is worth recognizing, like many other vulnerable youth communities, offline risk

factors such as bullying, victimization and behavioral problems spill over into online spaces, which reinforces heightened risks for negative experiences on social media. It is critical that researchers and technology developers recognize the potential amplification of risks tied to one's identity of being a part of this particular vulnerable adolescent population (Odgers, 2018). Moving beyond the deficits-based discourse, future research and practice can capitalize on assets-based and empowerment approaches to positive minority youth development in digital spaces. Being a member of a group that is overlooked or faced with discrimination can galvanize individuals with a sense of purpose, tackling a mutual goal of collective sense-making and more authentic visibility, which, in turn, can promote healthy youth development (Wexler et al., 2009). Partnerships with educators, families, clinicians, and the sociotechnical industry can further increase understanding about how to design inclusive online environments and circumstances that can lead to a digital ecosystem that ultimately supports identity development and emotional well-being.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Race categorization is largely a social construct that is linked to the history of segregation and racism of non-White individuals in the USA. Ethnicity is more often considered as a point of identification with individuals' heritage, traditions, and in many instances, language spoken. Currently, race and ethnicity are viewed interchangeably as social constructs and continue to be a part of historic and persistent disparities, especially among minority youth. The racial-ethnic identity among minority adolescents is increasingly fluid and has yet to be well understood, but remains a critical component to the experiences of development and well-being. Diversity within the USA continues to grow as youth under the age of 15 who identify as a racial-ethnic minority (e.g., non-White) are now emerging as the majority of youth populations (US Census Bureau, 2019).
- <sup>2</sup> A wide range of terminology is used to refer to individuals who do not identify as either heterosexual or cisgender, especially in the context of academic research. In this chapter, we use the acronym *LGBT+* to describe the unique ways that these populations interact with digital media. *LGBT+* highlights the specific identities *lesbian*, *gay*, *bisexual*, and *transgender*, while also acknowledging that many other experiences of sexuality and gender are considered nonnormative. In addition to the more general term *queer*, other studies shorten the acronym to *LGB* or use the terms *same-sex attracted* and *sexual minority* to specifically discuss sexual orientation. We note these differences to contextualize the variety of terminology that appears in this chapter. When discussing specific studies, we use the terms the authors have chosen, but use *LGBT+* to describe the general population in question.

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