

Common Tales: Young Queer Women's Use of the Internet and Digital Technology for Sexual Health Information Seeking

THE PROJECT

We conducted a community-based research project to understand more about young queer women's needs and experiences with finding sexual health information through the Internet and other types of digital technology. This included three focus groups with a total of 18 queer women between the ages of 16-29 in Toronto, where we asked questions about what types of technology they used, what sexual health information they looked for online, their positive and negative experiences with online sexual health information seeking, and their suggestions for change.

This community factsheet is for young queer women and outlines some of the recurring themes and most consistently discussed issues that came up in the focus groups. We hope that sharing these will help validate your experiences and offer insight into the varying perspectives of your peers.

REASONS FOR USING ONLINE RESOURCES

The most common reasons for using online resources to access sexual health information were **convenience and privacy**. Many of the participants recognized these sources as being the first step in a multi-faceted process. They also highly valued the potential for anonymity when using digital technology. Finally, **negative experiences with healthcare professionals, or a fear of such experiences**, also acted as a key motivator.

"I think online, and, because you're more individual, you can create that safe space for yourself, and kind of limit how much you want to put out, whereas in public, you have to kind of estimate how safe you're gonna feel, in a sense, or how safe that space is for you to either take that pamphlet or take a library book or something like that, I think. So maybe that's why we feel more that the internet is more approachable."

"Convenience? First and foremost, I can access that kind of information from my home, or, if I'm on my phone, and if I have data, then anywhere else really... It can also be very daunting, especially when you're younger, to go to a doctor about these kinds of things... especially if your GP happens to be incredibly heteronormative, which can really suck... Having these kinds of websites and stuff is just like a lot more approachable and more anonymous, which can also be a little bit reassuring depending on what you're looking up."

Another recurring theme was that of the desire for **validation and exploration** - which online resources allow.

"The information that you find on the internet might not always be factual, but the information you're looking for might not always be factual, it could be more experiential... especially when you're having questions or concerns about your own sexual identity, like it can help to realize that other people are going through something similar, and it kind of normalizes that experience."

SEXUAL HEALTH NEEDS

Many of the participants talked about the **lack of information and safer sex tools**, other than condoms. Specifically they recognized the **confusion surrounding when and how to use dental dams and gloves**. Participants also discussed a general culture of ignorance or neglect among women who have sex with women around the risk and benefits associated with these tools.

"I remember hearing a lot about dental dams in the course of my sex ed experience in school and also in the my own reading as a kid, and I've never, well, I've met like two people in my whole life who had like mentioned using them. But I remember hearing about it a lot."

Otherwise, the main topic of discussion was the **consistent lack of sexual health information for young queer women**. Participants spoke of needing to 'translate' information meant for cisgender, heterosexual health needs, and the **consistent presence of biphobia**.

"There's not a lot of information online about like, queer women, dating, or like, non-binary people dating, or like sex with that, or it's like what the stats are on like, STIs even, in terms of... being informed, it's really hard when our populations aren't as extensively even like thought about, and so we end up doing this funny little like translating from hetero, translating from monogs, translating all of these experiences into like, what does this mean for me, so like, yeah, I think like, it can help, especially in terms of like support and validation to go to spaces with people who have experienced things that you have, right?"

"In some ways it's really easy, because I am bi, and I do sleep with straight men, so there's plenty of information available there. But, there's not, I mean, and there's some, but not enough, information for women who sleep with women... people don't really want to talk about the fact that there are people who sleep with both or more than one gender... I don't know if I have an actual increased risk for STIs or whatever because I do that, but, you know, I've been told by certain people that if I do, it's my own fault, and, you know, because I've been with men."

Many of the participants discussed ways in which **the Internet facilitated their understanding of their own sexual identity**, which was emphasized as an aspect of their sexual health. This took place through interacting with others, as well as reading about sexual identity information posted online.

"In [a] giant ABCs of LGBT kind of master-post I found, it kind of differentiated between romantic attraction, aesthetic attraction, and sexual attraction...because you can find someone aesthetically attractive without being sexually attracted to them.... Those are other, just little ways of describing, like, how you identify as far as your sexuality goes that I found so helpful, not only in, like, being comfortable with my own identity, but articulating that to the people that I was close with. So. Kudos, Tumblr."

"One day I actually just typed into Google, "What does it mean if you aren't attracted to anyone specifically but you're just attracted to everyone?" [laughing] It was like the vaguest sentence I've ever written in my entire life, and like the term pansexual came up, and I read it, and I was like, Oh my god! Like this is the thing I've been looking for forever!"

NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE EXPERIENCES

Two of the biggest concerns the participants expressed were the need for a connections to a queer community in order to access information and support and the need for a base knowledge of information literacy in order to navigate technological resources.

Information Literacy

“I think maybe the biggest problem, outside of... the vernacular, or in-group coding, is that most people don’t have a lot of training in information literacy... I think there can be just as valuable, if not more so because of its accessibility, information in a blog post by a layperson than as... in a peer-reviewed paper... It just depends, it’s difficult because...a lot of this stuff that may be more... verified or peer-reviewed or trustworthy is behind a paywall, and the freely available stuff, you’re sifting through stuff that is really just, SEO [search engine optimization], and, useless...so for me...the difficulty is in the information literacy and access.”

Anti-Oppression Approaches

In this approach, sexual health information can be relevant to young queer women’s whole selves, and intersecting identities.

“I start thinking about things [with] a queer lens, or like I try to think about things... from an intersectional lens...there’s certain terms, or certain words, or certain ways of...talking about things, and then I notice that if...that’s not part of how [sexual health information] is written, then I’m like, uhhh, or if it’s like, we’re all like giving examples where they’re you know...heteronormative examples, I’m also like uhhh?”

“I also like learned about anti-oppression politics through queerness... or through...sexual health justice or whatever, or sexuality justice, like that definitely is where I learned about...just kind of thinking about where you make assumptions, and how you make assumptions, and judgment calls and how those become embedded in the way you talk to people or the ideas that you have of folks, and so that was definitely very positive.”

Gender Neutral Presentation of Information

Young queer women talked about how they appreciated gender neutral presentation of information, both in terms of not adopting heterosexual, cisgender perspectives as well as in the context of having more neutrally styled sexual health apps.

“Specific to apps, there’s one I discovered recently... it’s kind of a period tracker app, but it also like helps with knowing when you’re most fertile, when to expect [laughter] hormones...it’s fantastic, because it’s not really gendered, which I find really awesome.”

“At the clinic I work at we have a really great pamphlet that’s talking about...no matter how you identify like how important paps are, and no matter who you’re having sex with, or who or what you identify as, having paps are really important for cervical health.”

Access to Multiple Perspectives

Young queer women appreciated having access to many different perspectives when searching for sexual health information online, which helped them understand their own needs and experiences within a wider context. They also recognized that their needs have not, and will not stay the same as they deal with changing life circumstances.

“What I like about most social media too, is that you get different opinions from different people...it’s like really nice to hear what people have to say, and it helps you form your own opinions as well.”

“A variety of different ways to reach out to people is important...different people are different people, and you’re...looking for different things depending on the stage of life you’re in.”

Representation

Participants discussed how positive sexual health information seeking experiences included instances of feeling like they were represented within the information, or they identified with the author(s) in ways that validated their identities and experiences.

“If I’m looking for something where I’m like, also just kind of looking for a form of validation, like sometimes if someone had written a blog post about it, or there’s like there’s like a comments section and someone was like, “This weird thing happened! Like, am I normal?!” Then that makes me feel like, like that’s like a form of validation in itself, and I think that’s super important.”

“I find that sometimes like it’s not even just like about information, it’s about affirmation. It’s about whether or not you are that thing, and sometimes you just have to like sit there and like, again, sit, and then find something that just is like, you are okay, because you are you, like sometimes you just need that.”

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