

LGBTQ+ youth face increased anxiety amid COVID-19 pandemic

August 18 2021, by Hannah Stevens and Karen Nikos-Rose

While a life-altering pandemic has caused a substantial uptick in anxiety and depression symptoms among adults and children alike, LGBTQ+ youth have turned to peers in anonymous online discussion forums for support. New research from the University of California, Davis, suggests these LGBTQ+ teenagers—who already experience disproportionate levels of psychological adversity—exhibited increased anxiety on the popular r/LGBTeens subreddit throughout 2020 and the start of 2021.

With physical isolation leading to an increase in reliance on digital communication, LGBTQ+ youth used this forum to express [emotional distress](#) related to LGBTQ+ discrimination, personal struggles with sexuality, [romantic relationships](#) and more.

"While researchers and [mental health](#) professionals have closely monitored the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on [mental health conditions](#), few have taken a deep dive into the LGBTQ+ youth population specifically," said Hannah Stevens, a doctoral student in communication and lead author of the paper. It was published today published in *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance*.

Researchers in the Department of Communication analyzed nearly 40,000 subreddit posts—a forum dedicated to a specific topic on the website Reddit—from LGBTQ+ youth. They uncovered trends in anxiety, sadness and anger communicated within the messages.

This research revealed that while anger and sadness remained consistent

following the start of the pandemic, anxiety increased significantly. Further analysis linked this trend to 10 key conversation topics: attraction to a friend, coming out, coming out to family, discrimination, education, exploring sexuality, gender pronouns, love and relationship advice, starting a new relationship, and struggling with mental health.

Stevens said the combination of these factors, and limited in-person social interactions outside of the home, have resulted in LGBTQ+ youth turning to online support over the past 18 months. "The raw, emotional messages analyzed through this research reveal eye-opening insights into the most prevalent concerns in their daily lives."

The study compared the evolution of conversation topics in the r/LGBTeens subreddit to conversations among the larger population of teenagers. Researchers also plotted the changes in LGBTQ+ emotions over time, which found an unprecedented increase in overall negative emotion during the 2020-21 time period.

"By understanding the root causes of anxiety in LGBTQ+ youth, [mental health professionals](#) can better tailor the intervention tactics they employ," Stevens said. "Ultimately, this will result in better mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth."

More information: Hannah R Stevens et al, Natural Language Processing Insight into LGBTQ+ Youth Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Longitudinal Content Analysis of Anxiety-Provoking Topics and Trends in Emotion in LGBTeens Microcommunity Subreddit, *JMIR Public Health and Surveillance* (2021). [DOI: 10.2196/29029](https://doi.org/10.2196/29029)

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