

“Stuck in, Can’t Come Out”: Physical Distancing and YouTube Spaces for LGBTQ Adolescents’ Wellbeing

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Abstract

The pandemic has led to physical distancing measures put in place to minimize the spread of COVID-19, leading schools and community centers to close their physical locations. For many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals living with their family, their home can be considered harmful and unsupportive due to their family’s rejection towards LGBTQ identity. LGBTQ YouTubers can be a unique avenue to understand how they can use their social media presence to act as an online supportive system that parallel traditional offline supportive systems during the pandemic where offline supportive spaces are limited. The purpose of the study is to analyze online video platforms (ie. YouTube) and whether LGBTQ YouTubers can act as support systems for their LGBTQ community during the pandemic through video content creation. Four LGBTQ YouTubers that have created videos related to the COVID-19 outbreak were chosen and their video comments ($N_{\text{Video1}} = 147$; $N_{\text{Video2}} = 195$; $N_{\text{Video3}} = 238$; $N_{\text{Video4}} = 79$) were analyzed through content analysis. Results revealed the following categories: 1) Community support and engagement between the community and the YouTuber, 2) diverse coping strategies as a result of COVID-19, 3) community’s emotional experiences surrounding COVID-19, 4) community members’ use of diverse support types, 5) YouTuber authenticity and relatability to community, and 6) intersectional identity (e.g., disability, ethnicity) experiences. Emerging themes suggest LGBTQ YouTubers can be informal online social support systems that can parallel the physical connections and support lost due to COVID-19.

Keywords: lgbtq, netnography, social support, adolescent, young adult, content analysis

1. Introduction

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has led to worldwide changes in daily human routines and lifestyles. High schools, community centers and leisure spaces (e.g. coffee shops) have closed their physical locations or have varied rules and guidelines regarding limitations to their physical space (UNESCO, 2020). These physical spaces act not only as transactional spaces for tangible materials (e.g. coffee), but serve social purposes. Evidence has shown that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other (LGBTQ+) youth and young adults utilize physical spaces perceived to be safer [for marginalized populations] as spaces for social gathering and community bonding, which have been mentioned as welcoming, supportive, helpful, and offering a sense of belonging (e.g. Gender Sexuality Alliances [GSAs], LGBTQ+ community centers, local coffee shops (Davis, 2013; McInroy et al., 2019). Safe physical spaces such as GSAs, community centers and pride parades provide opportunities to foster connections and a sense of belonging with supportive adults, peers, and community members (Russell & Fish, 2016); offer a sense of safety to explore LGBTQ+ identity (Snapp et al., 2015); and decrease varying mental health risks (e.g. anxiety (Ioverno et al., 2016). In relation to public health guidelines as a response to the 2020 pandemic, physical distancing is a requirement in many countries around the world (Islam et al., 2020). While physical distancing guidelines were enforced, many physical spaces were also closed to control the number of people in proximity (Government of Canada, 2020). The closure of physical spaces led to a loss of physical/offline supportive social spaces where LGBTQ+ individuals can gather for social support, connect with other LGBTQ+ community members (Anderson & Knee, 2020), and engage in positive development (Green et al., 2020).

Another effect of the 2020 pandemic has been the requirement for self-isolation at home. For many LGBTQ+ youth, the home can be considered harmful and unsupportive, due to familial rejection towards their LGBTQ+ identity. Only one-third of LGBTQ+ youth experience parental acceptance (Katz-Wise et al., 2015), resulting in increased rates of depression and suicide, among other negative outcomes (Green et al., 2020). This is the case not

only for LGBTQ+ youth, but for LGBTQ+ individuals required to live with their families. This enforced living situation can result in intense and unrelieved contact in conjunction with the depletion of existing support networks (e.g. physical/offline community-based support networks) for families at risk (Usher et al., 2020). Therefore, the lack of physical/offline supportive social spaces and increased time spent confined within the home can lead to risks for LGBTQ+ youth and young adults' psychological wellbeing.

1.1 Sense of Belonging in a Community

Sense of belonging is defined as the quality of life based on an individual's perception and feeling that they matter to one another and to their group; a concept suggested by Maslow's hierarchy of needs as one of a human's basic needs (Maslow, 1943). Further, Hagerty defined sense of belonging as an individual's experience of their personal involvement in their environment or system (Hagerty et al., 1992).

Additionally, the extant literature surrounding sense of belonging ties critically to the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012) and one of its specific components, relatedness. Relatedness, or connection, can be synonymous with the concept of sense of belonging, as individuals have a fundamental need to belong and form strong and stable interpersonal bonds with others; an important determinant of psychological wellbeing and experiencing positive outcomes and satisfaction in life (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2012; Kitchen et al., 2015). Individuals who perceive high levels of valued involvement and fit (i.e. high sense of belonging) have reported better social and psychological functioning (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1996), including increased motivation; improved academic achievement, mental health, psychological wellbeing (O'Neal & Cotton, 2016) and self-efficacy (Raver et al., 2018); and decreased risk of externalizing and internalizing psychological maladjustment (Choenarom et al., 2005; O'Neal & Cotton, 2016)).

Particularly for LGBTQ+ individuals, a sense of belonging to a community is an important motivational and protective factor. As LGBTQ+ youth and young adults are at-risk for both social and emotional outcomes (e.g. depression, suicidality, low self-esteem, substance abuse, internalized homo/transphobia, homelessness (Painter et al., 2018; Russell et al., 2014)), due in part to their marginalized identity, LGBTQ+ individuals who have a community with which to learn to understand themselves in society, to disclose to, engage with and reach out to as a source of support, have reported improved psychological wellbeing, increased self-acceptance and higher self-esteem, as well as decreased depression, suicidality, and loneliness, among other risks (Kennedy & Dalla, 2014; Kosciw et al., 2015). The lack of physical spaces and self-confinement within LGBTQ+ individuals' home environments have limited their social opportunities to share, disclose with and feel connection with other LGBTQ+ individuals. Therefore, virtual spaces (e.g. YouTube) can be understood as possible spaces that act as social opportunities and available support systems in the virtual LGBTQ+ community; where LGBTQ+ youth and young adults can explore their LGBTQ+ identity, make authentic connections with other LGBTQ+ members, and access helpful resources and support from the community – all relevant tasks in fostering a sense of belonging, a basic human need (Maslow, 1943).

1.2 Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a theoretical framework to understand how different aspects of a person's identity might combine towards the creation of unique modes of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1989). Broadly speaking, in the context of LGBTQ+ identities, intersectionality highlights how different LGBTQ+ youth and young adults can have varied experiences of COVID-19 due to their other identities. For example, LGBTQ+ individuals can encompass other identities, such as having a disability or being part of an ethnic minority (person of colour [POC]). For LGBTQ individuals who have a disability, experiences with COVID-19 may be different to those who are LGBTQ-POC individuals. As such, applying an intersectional framework when understanding LGBTQ+ individuals' experiences can lead to results that represent a wider LGBTQ+ community as opposed a certain minority within the LGBTQ+ community (e.g. Garry, 2011). As identities interact and are intertwined in an individuals' experiences, applying an intersectional framework can provide narratives and themes that are more comprehensive, to capture diverse experiences from the LGBTQ community in their experiences with COVID-19.

1.3 The Use of Social Media during COVID-19

A solution for many individuals to work around issues with self-isolation and physical distancing can be through virtual spaces, such as social media. As youth and young adults increasingly utilize social media platforms and online forums to communicate with others (Mason, 2017), such online platforms can be a space for LGBTQ+ youth and young adults to seek social support and connection to a community during a time where physical connections are barred. Specifically, LGBTQ+ YouTubers or influencers, also known as vloggers (i.e. online role models), can promote a sense of belonging and connection (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011) through content creation

that allows them to interact and connect with their community.

For LGBTQ+ youth and young adults, having access to internet and a broad range of information and communication technologies (ICTs) represents a key source of resilience. LGBTQ+ youth and young adults report using ICTs to navigate and develop identities, access resources and engage with communities, as these spaces have been perceived as safer and often enable authentic self-expression not otherwise possible in offline spaces (Austin et al., 2020). However, understanding their sense of self in larger society and establishing a connection with others in the community can be understood as a critical developmental task and a basic human need for LGBTQ+ youth and young adults. Particularly for LGBTQ+ youth, disclosure of their LGBTQ+ identity is one of the most important developmental tasks to explore, overcome, and accept (Bates et al., 2020). Therefore, although the 2020 pandemic has enacted public health measures that attempt to minimize the spread of COVID-19 (e.g. physical distancing and self-isolation), it can lead to a negative impact on LGBTQ+ youth and young adults' mental health and wellbeing, depending on their level of access and support within their self-isolated environment and their methods for managing the loss of safe LGBTQ+ community spaces.

Influencers and their communities, as the alternative social support system, have shown to be capable of building an inclusive community with shared interests and identity, and can serve as networks of safety and support (Austin et al., 2020; McInroy, 2019). However, much of the literature surrounding the use of technology and social media platforms has been focused on the business and management sectors (e.g. the authenticity of YouTubers to sell products to their community (Cunningham & Craig, 2017). Considerably less is known regarding the use of technology through the lens of social and community support. Research, though sparse, has shown that online spaces such as YouTube and Facebook are effective in providing a safe space for LGBTQ+ youth to self-disclose issues of gender and sexuality (Lucero, 2017). A content analysis of YouTube comments from LGBT channels found 85% of the comments analyzed to be close and intimate, emotional and supportive, and based on common values shared by the LGBT community; on the other hand, 15% of the comments were coded as neutral or hateful towards the community (Nash et al., 2015).

This study can further the research on understanding the position LGBTQ+ YouTubers can occupy and the effects on their LGBTQ+ community members, to move beyond community bonding and understand the effects of community building as a source of support and a coping mechanism during COVID-19. As such, LGBTQ+ YouTubers can be an avenue to understand whether these digital systems can act as online supportive systems that parallel the offline, physical social support systems that have been physically closed due to COVID-19.

1.4 Purpose

Research surrounding the development of digital technologies and platforms is an emerging field regarding the expansion of LGBTQ+ youth and young adults' access to and connections with others, whereby these technologies and platforms help LGBTQ+ youth and young adults make authentic connections with self-representations of other LGBTQ+ people and ensure they are visible and connected as self-identified LGBTQ+ individuals. Specifically, the exploration of YouTube as a platform to connect LGBTQ+ people and foster a sense of community has been limited. Much of the literature analyzing LGBTQ+ YouTube videos has focused on understanding how the influencers and vloggers speak to their community, and how youth and young adults perceive the importance and authenticity of their influencers in speaking about critical topics, such as coming out as a journey of self-validation (Lovelock, 2019).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze current online systems that can act as support systems for LGBTQ+ youth and young adults to minimize mental health risks posed by COVID-19. Through understanding and examination of how the LGBTQ+ community interacts with LGBTQ+ YouTubers, this study reviews the unique mental health concerns for LGBTQ individuals resulting from COVID-19 and how they are coping with the effects of the pandemic. Additionally, the analysis sheds light on how the community members are engaging with each other and whether community engagement through virtual means can be understood as a form of community belonging and sense of connection during COVID-19. The analysis is undertaken through the lens of intersectionality to provide an understanding of how LGBTQ+ communities and their intersectional identities have influenced their personal experiences with COVID-19. The emerging themes shed light on LGBTQ+ YouTubers' abilities to parallel the physical connections and support lost due to COVID-19. Results from this study could improve understanding of the present situation and online LGBTQ+ social support systems (e.g. YouTube communities) to minimize the risk arising from a lack of physical supportive space or home environment where LGBTQ+ youth and young adults can experience an online safe space to explore their identity and connect with the online LGBTQ+ community, parallel to cancelled events or closed offline spaces (e.g. pride parades).

2. Method

2.1 Netnography

This study utilized netnography as the method of data collection. Netnography is a type of research used to understand issues in the online space, which Kozinets (2015) defined as an adaptation of traditional ethnography, but for online settings. With this definition in mind, depending on the openness of the community and topic of interest, netnography can either involve actively integrating the members of the community or passively monitoring and collecting community data and integrating gathered information, knowledge and ideas into a thematic model or process of understanding (Costello et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2015). Netnography is a relevant method to analyze social media platforms, such as YouTube, as the approach allows researchers to understand a community's attitudes and behaviors towards specific topics in a space that highlights an anonymous and cocreated discourse among its community members (e.g. LGBTQ+ YouTubers and their community interaction through video and comment interaction).

As the site for the study's data collection was the YouTube platform, a passive, more naturalistic and observational netnography approach was chosen to compile and analyze a large amount of textual data (e.g. comments) across the channels of multiple LGBTQ+ YouTubers. To facilitate a wider range of comparison of comments in the analysis of textual data, a passive netnography approach was chosen to understand LGBTQ+ YouTubers and their relationships with their community in providing a sense of social support during the 2020 pandemic.

Therefore, for this study, YouTube social media data, specifically comments from LGBTQ+ YouTubers on specific videos since the beginning of the 2020 pandemic (March 2020) were sought. As there were a large number of LGBTQ+ YouTubers possible to analyze, a diverse group of LGBTQ+ YouTubers were chosen to account for intersectional identities (e.g. ethnicity, gender identity/expression, disability, sexuality).

2.2 Content Analysis

Traditional content analysis steps can be broken down into the following (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017; Lasswell, 1968): 1) sectioning the text into meaningful units (while retaining the core meaning), 2) formulating codes from the meaningful units, 3) grouping codes into categories, and 4) creating themes to express the underlying meaning of the content and categories. Depending on the specific study's quality of collected data, grouped categories may be the highest level of abstraction. Due to the amount of qualitative information shared in the video comments and considering the purposes of this study, content analysis was an appropriate method to systematically transform the large amount of text into a highly organized and concise summary of key results. The comments were divided into categories through analysis and themes were identified by way of data abstraction, thereby manifesting latent meaning of the literal content from the comments.

Additionally, inter-rater reliability was established with another coder following the procedures outlined by Miles and Huberman (as cited in McAlister et al., 2017), whereby the first author and the other coder, a LGBTQ+ community member, independently coded a subset of each video's comments (10 comments per video or approximately 5-15% of the total comments) and checked for inter-rater agreement. Once the inter-rater reliability was at least 80% for each of the subset, both coders coded the rest of the video comments and discussed any disagreements between comments that were differently coded. The iterative process of discussing the codes produced field notes that were incorporated into the emerging themes.

2.3 Procedure

Four LGBTQ+ YouTubers who created videos related to the COVID-19 outbreak were chosen for the content analysis of the comments in their COVID-19 specific video ($n = 4$). At a 95% confidence interval (CI), comments were sampled to ensure a representative number per video.

2.3.1 Selection of LGBTQ+ YouTubers

To be as inclusive as possible of LGBTQ+ intersectional identities, four LGBTQ+ YouTubers were purposively sampled: 1) Tyler Oakley, 2) Jessica Kellgren-Fozard, 3) Ingrid Nilsen, and 4) Princess Joules. Nationality, ethnicity, LGBTQ+ identity and disability were considered to understand possible differences in the video content LGBTQ+ YouTubers create, their rhetoric in the videos, and the types of comments across the four communities. Table 1 depicts the demographics and intersectional identities represented in the different communities. Data were collected on June 21st, 2020.

Table 1. YouTuber demographics and intersectional identities

YouTuber Name	Age	Number of Subscribers	Channel started in (year)	Location	LGBTQ+	Nationality	Ethnicity	Health Condition/ Disability	Relationship Status
Tyler Oakley	31 (March 22, 1989)	7.2 million	2007	Jackson, Michigan	Gay	American	Caucasian	Depression	Single
Ingrid Nilsen	31 (February 2, 1989)	3.62 million	2009	Rowland Heights, California	Lesbian	American	Mixed (Caucasian – Norwegian/Asian – Thai)	N/A (Undisclosed)	Exclusive dating
Jessica Kellgren-Fozard	31 (January 25, 1989)	693,000	2011	Brighton, Sussex	Lesbian	English	Caucasian	Hereditary neuropathy with liability to pressure palsy, Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome causing deafness	Exclusive married
Princess Joules	27 (July 28, 1992)	549,000	2010	Vancouver, British Columbia	Transgender woman	Canadian	Asian – Vietnamese	Eczema	Single

2.3.2 Selection of LGBTQ+ YouTuber Videos Related to COVID-19 Outbreak

A range of COVID-19-related videos, published since March 2020, were chosen to attempt a representation of different topics and conversations occurring during the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak. Typically, the first video from each of the four YouTubers that explicitly discussed COVID-19 was selected. In cases where a similar video was already chosen to examine, the next video was chosen to cover video content related to diverse aspects of COVID-19 (e.g. COVID-19-related influences on mental health, daily life, dating, and coping strategies). Table 2 shows the video names and demographic information. Data were collected on June 21st, 2020.

Table 2. Chosen YouTuber videos relevant to COVID-19

YouTuber Name	Number of Subscribers	Video Name	Video Posted Date	Views	Total Comments (unhidden)	Comments (95% CI)
Tyler Oakley	7.2 million	“First Dates During Coronavirus Lockdown (Quarantine Day #52)”	May 5 th 2020	68,251	236	147
Ingrid Nilsen	3.62 million	“Life Update with My Girlfriend Ingrid Nilsen”	March 27 th 2020	221,406	394	195
Jessica Kellgren-Fozard	693,000	“This will make you feel better :)”	April 21 st 2020	59,299	621	238
Princess Joules	549,000	“Mental Health During Quarantine”	May 6 th 2020	9,387	98	79

3. Results

Through the lens of intersectionality, the four videos from the LGBTQ+ YouTubers resulted in six broad themes, as follows: 1) community support and engagement between the community and the YouTuber ($n = 587$), 2) community's emotional experiences surrounding COVID-19 ($n = 389$), 3) diverse coping strategies as a result of COVID-19 ($n = 217$), 4) community members use of diverse support types ($n = 189$), 5) intersectional identity (e.g. disability, ethnicity) experiences ($n = 68$), and 6) YouTuber authenticity and relatability to community ($n = 57$). Table 3 depicts the emerging themes, with frequency counts, across the four LGBTQ+ YouTubers' video comments.

Table 3. Frequency table of emerging themes across the four LGBTQ+ YouTubers' video comments

Emerging themes	Tyler Oakley		Ingrid Nilsen		Jessica Kellgren-Fozard		Princess Joules	
	N _{count}	N% relative	N _{count}	N% relative	N _{count}	N% relative	N _{count}	N% relative
<i>Community support and engagement between the community and YouTuber</i> ($n_{\text{total}} = 587$)	104	37.41%	180	31.09%	217	34.12%	86	36.75%
<i>Community's emotional experiences surrounding COVID-19</i> ($n_{\text{total}} = 389$)	63	22.66%	135	23.32%	139	21.86%	52	22.22%
<i>Diverse coping strategies as a result of COVID-19</i> ($n_{\text{total}} = 217$)	28	10.07%	55	9.50%	103	16.19%	31	13.25%
<i>Diverse support types for community members</i> ($n_{\text{total}} = 189$)	14	5.04%	75	12.95%	66	10.38%	34	14.53%
<i>Intersectional identity (e.g. disability, ethnicity) experiences</i> ($n_{\text{total}} = 68$)	3	1.08%	10	1.73%	45	7.08%	10	4.27%
<i>YouTuber authenticity and relatability with community</i> ($n_{\text{total}} = 57$)	7	2.52%	37	6.39%	9	1.42%	4	1.71%

3.1 Community Support and Engagement between the Community and YouTuber

10 codes emerged within this theme: 1) "Love to YouTuber and/or other community members" ($N_{\text{Quotes}} = 250$; 21.44%); 2) "Self-disclosure" ($N_Q = 241$; 20.67%); 3) "Showing support to YouTuber and/or community members" ($N_Q = 165$; 14.15%); 4) "Relatable with other community members and YouTuber" ($N_Q = 141$; 12.09%); 5) "Thankful" ($N_Q = 135$; 11.58%); 6) "Engagement with other community members" ($N_Q = 125$; 10.72%); 7) "Constructive responses" ($N_Q = 32$; 2.74%); 8) "Asking questions" ($N_Q = 29$; 2.49%); 9) "Sense of belonging with other community members" ($N_Q = 29$; 2.49%); and 10) "Request to the YouTuber" ($N_Q = 19$; 1.63%).

Community members across the four LGBTQ+ YouTubers mainly disclosed their own experiences during these times (comment on Tyler Oakley's video: "hey ty! here from twt, i'm well and safe, but i'm finding it hard to stay motivated and get up early and work, how do you do it?"); showing love and support to both the LGBTQ+ YouTuber and other community members (comment on Jessica Kellgren-Fozard's video: "I really love Jessica because she's not shy about her disability. I just really love that she thinks about it as something that makes her stronger. Also, I just love how vintage she is. It's so cute! ❤️"); and showing their gratitude to the LGBTQ+ YouTuber for speaking about their experiences during COVID-19 (comment from Princess Joules' video: "Thank you for talking about mental health during this time. I've been feeling really depressed and lonely lately but I'm glad I can still watch YouTube and the comments section connects us"); as well as to other community members for their support and care (comment on Ingrid Nilsen's video: "The way you guys speak on this issue feels so genuine and vulnerable. It makes me want to cry because sometimes I feel like people aren't taking a moment to really process how they feel and be honest and it makes me feel alone. I love you guys. You're both beautiful souls

[...]).

As several of the comments highlighted the power the community members felt when watching the LGBTQ+ YouTubers' videos, the community members in each LGBTQ+ YouTubers' virtual space demonstrated a sense of community and belonging. Comments such as: *"It's nice to have an online community to show your ups and downs it helps to center you in these times"* (comment on Princess Joules' video) further corroborate how these virtual spaces represent a social space for community members to foster connections during a time where physical distancing and self-isolation have been set in place. As evidenced, listening to the LGBTQ+ YouTuber made these community members feel connected and perceive a sense of enduring the pandemic together. One community member commented: *"Once I heard Tyler's voice, I was cured"* (comment on Tyler Oakley's video), highlighting the connection between the YouTuber and the community, and confirming a sense of support and belonging in experiencing the pandemic together, virtually. Many of the community members voiced their gratitude to the YouTuber for being there for them through the video content, for example: *"this made me happy. thx"* (comment on Tyler Oakley's video). Such gratitude demonstrates how video content creation has the ability to foster a sense of connection in a supportive system, whereby the LGBTQ+ community have confided in LGBTQ+ YouTubers and sought social support during the pandemic.

An interesting point regarding community support and engagement between community members and the YouTubers was the lack of hateful comments, commonly referred to as "trolling." This could be due to the virtual space the LGBTQ+ YouTuber has created, in that community members participating in these virtual spaces have a strong sense of camaraderie and cohesiveness, which simultaneously mitigates or prevents "trolls" from engaging in these spaces. Another explanation may be due to the fact that LGBTQ+ YouTubers attract a subset of community members who are open and understanding, as these YouTubers share their sexuality and gender identity and are explicitly part of the LGBTQ+ community. Future studies understanding the virtual spaces community members occupy with regard to LGBTQ+ YouTubers could explore reasons for the lack of haters/trolls, as commonly evidenced in past research on supportive virtual spaces (Klempka & Stimson, 2014; Nash et al., 2015).

3.2 Diverse Coping Strategies as a Result of COVID-19

12 coping strategies emerged within this theme. The coping strategies predominantly expressed by the community members were adaptive. This can be explained by LGBTQ+ community members' need to turn to their LGBTQ+ YouTubers to find comfort and support, as expressed in the other emerging themes (e.g. community support). The majority of the comments expressed by the community members highlighted an emotional-focused coping strategy, such that community members were "seeking emotional support", either through help from other community members or the LGBTQ+ YouTuber ($N_Q = 107$; 38.63%; comment on Tyler Oakley's video: *"Sometimes I feel like I'm useless and I need some love"*) or through their own disclosure of their coping experiences, for example, "self-care" ($N_Q = 54$; 19.49%): *"I broke down the other day as well it is necessary to let the feelings out I can relate thank you for being vulnerable"* (Ingrid Nilsen); "perspective change" ($N_Q = 36$; 13.00%): *"I needed this, I needed to know just getting by is good enough. It's hard to not feel just bad about till [sic] struggling with the same stuff as normal no matter what is going on but with zero of the support from outside due to covid so support being diverted [...]"* (Jessica Kellgren-Fozard); "hopeful" ($N_Q = 22$; 7.94%): *"I really hope, for all of us, that life does not return to normal, but instead, moves on to that which is significantly better [...]"* (Jessica Kellgren-Fozard); "positive self-talk" ($N_Q = 11$; 3.97%): *"I don't know why I started tearing up when she said, "Just getting by is good enough" I guess I just really needed to hear that today [...] I keep trying to remind myself that right now I'm doing the best I can"* (Jessica Kellgren-Fozard); "general – adaptive" ($N_Q = 11$; 3.97%): *"[...] it's been really hard. I'm getting by day by day, but at first it was very difficult for me"* (Ingrid Nilsen); and "learning something" ($N_Q = 2$; 0.72%): *"During this time, I'm learning Spanish since I never did it in high school"* (Tyler Oakley). The abundance of comments related to the seven adaptive emotional-focused coping strategies provides evidence for a virtual, positive space within LGBTQ+ YouTuber communities to share and discuss the different ways community members have been managing their emotions and experiences during COVID-19. The act of disclosing and sharing amongst the community lends itself to the importance of a virtual space, provided by the LGBTQ+ YouTubers, for disclosure and authentic connections that physical distancing and self-isolation may otherwise prevent.

Out of the 12 coping strategies, there was one that focused on "problem-solving" (workarounds during COVID-19; $N_Q = 16$; 5.78%). *"I'm dating someone since we can't meet in person we go on dates via Animal Crossing"* (Tyler Oakley) and *"I had a phone interview with my psychologist yesterday. Maybe it's available in your area too?"* (Jessica Kellgren-Fozard) were both comments that related to the adaptations community members made due to

COVID-19. These comments highlight the transition in moving away from physical spaces for leisure (e.g. in-person dating) and professional (e.g. health services) spaces, and how LGBTQ+ community members have been overcoming their COVID-19-related obstacles.

Regarding the negative coping strategies, all four were emotional-focused, showing that COVID-19 has negatively influenced the LGBTQ+ community members. Evidence of this includes “negative self-talk” ($N_Q = 9$; 3.25%; comment from Tyler Oakley’s video: “*I have no friends. I’m sick of life*”); “avoidance” ($N_Q = 5$; 1.81%; comment from Tyler Oakley’s video: “*It’s after 4:00 p.m and I still haven’t gotten out of bed...that’s how I’m handling day #50 something of quarantine*”); “general – maladaptive” ($N_Q = 3$; 1.08%; comment from Princess Joules’ video: “*The falling back to old habits is what I’m going through right now it’s tough*”); and “substance use” ($N_Q = 1$; 0.36%; comment from Tyler Oakley’s video: “*I’m not doing well [...] battled with depression since I was 22. Since then I relied on alcohol to get me through [...] I’m really struggling here because I’m not working right now and have too much time on my hands that I dunno if I can handle this and sorta don’t feel like I belong in the world anymore*”). The virtual space can therefore be understood as a place to disclose and talk through difficulties to foster a level of belonging and connection within the community’s virtual supportive systems, which result in part from the lack of physical, in-person support systems and avoidance of the realities of COVID-19 affecting physical surroundings.

3.3 Community’s Emotional Experiences Surrounding COVID-19

Seven codes emerged within this theme: 1) “*Positive emotions/feelings (self or other)*” ($N_Q = 143$; 31.78%); 2) “*COVID-19 specific negative event, emotions, and experiences*” ($N_Q = 129$; 28.67%); 3) “*COVID-19 specific positive event, emotions, and experiences*” ($N_Q = 107$; 23.78%); 4) “*COVID-19 related general comments*” ($N_Q = 51$; 11.33%); 5) “*Negative emotions/feelings (self or other)*” ($N_Q = 15$; 3.33%); 6) “*Misinformation about COVID-19*” ($N_Q = 4$; 0.89%); and 7) “*Indifference attitude towards COVID-19*” ($N_Q = 1$; 0.22%).

Many of the LGBTQ+ community members expressed the negative effects that the pandemic has had for them, relayed by one community member with the following comment: “*I have to work Monday which means leaving my house. Honestly I’m terrified*” (Ingrid Nilsen). However, what was most prominent was the community’s expressed positive emotions regarding their experiences, both related and unrelated to COVID-19. More than half of the comments (55.56%) from LGBTQ+ community members expressed positive experiences and feelings. For example: “*Thank you for talking about mental health during this time [...] I’m glad I can still watch YouTube and the comments section connects us*” (Princess Joules) reflects the positive experiences of the LGBTQ+ community members. Therefore, though there were instances where community members expressed negative feelings and experiences regarding their current situation with COVID-19, in general, there exists strong evidence for the use of virtual spaces in the LGBTQ+ YouTube community to foster to community member’s positive emotions and share experiences.

3.4 Diverse Support Types for Community Members during COVID-19

Five codes that emerged within this theme were: 1) “*Community support – general*” ($N_Q = 165$; 74.66%); 2) “*Community support – constructive responses*” ($N_Q = 32$; 14.48%); 3) “*Family support*” ($N_Q = 10$; 4.52%); 4) “*Romantic partner support*” ($N_Q = 8$; 3.62%); and 5) “*Peer support*” ($N_Q = 6$; 2.71%).

Although the focus of this study was on understanding the support virtual spaces can provide within the LGBTQ+ YouTuber community, there was evidence of community members mentioning other types of support to which they have access and connection. The majority of the comments mentioned how the community members themselves support each other, as evidenced by comments such as: “*Oh shit. Do you need help? I’m not sure how we can help but maybe a gofund me?*” (community member reply to another community member in Jessica Kellgren-Fozard’s video).

Family support was evidenced by comments such as: “*My grandma just sent me the link for this video. She saw the video it before I did. Not only do I have crush on you, so does my grandma. You’ve bewitched TWO GENERATIONS*” (Jessica Kellgren-Fozard) and “[...] *I just had a phone call with my sister and we had a heartfelt conversation*” (Princess Joules). Such comments highlight how certain LGBTQ+ community members have supportive family members they can trust and rely on. However, there was also evidence of non-traditional family support (comment on Jessica Kellgren-Fozard’s video: “*I’m in the same boat, although I do count my awesome cats as family*”) and family hostility (comment from Princess Joules’ video: “*I’m dealing with verbal abuse and other issues that have to do with my parents*”), which highlight the difficulties that self-isolation can have on family dynamics.

Interestingly, community members mentioned various peer support systems established during the period of

physical distancing, as evidenced by comments such as: “*Zoom has been great and just playing games with friends online and chatting have been great*” (Princess Joules). These comments reiterate the important difference between physical and social distancing, as community members can find ways to manage their support networks through virtual platforms.

An additional, unique support system that arose from one LGBTQ+ YouTuber, Ingrid Nilsen, and her community was romantic partner support. As both Ingrid and her romantic partner were featured in the video discussing their experiences during COVID-19 (i.e. an update video), community members connected and shared about their own support systems with their romantic partner, as evidenced by comments such as: “[...] *made me think of myself and my partner this week as we never ever drink at home but as treat I made us both a Margarita [...] and we felt so cheeky and happy drinking it as we couldn't have a date night out so we had one IN!!!*” (Ingrid Nilsen). This is considered to be another relevant support system impacted by COVID-19 in managing the tensions between physical distancing and virtual connections. Therefore, aside from community support through LGBTQ+ YouTubers' virtual community spaces, community members mentioned other support systems that they have access to and support systems they have difficulty managing and accessing.

3.5 YouTuber Authenticity and Relatability with Community

Aligned with previous research, authentic engagement was noted as critical in fostering a sense of belonging within the community (Austin et al., 2020; Lovelock, 2019). In this category, four relevant codes emerged: 1) “*Thankful to the YouTuber*” ($N_Q = 135$; 70.31%); 2) “*Authenticity with community*” ($N_Q = 49$; 25.52%); 3) “*Engagement with community*” ($N_Q = 5$; 2.60%); and 4) “*Engagement with community through the COVID-19 journey*” ($N_Q = 3$; 1.56%).

Members of all four LGBTQ+ YouTubers' communities appreciated the YouTubers' authenticity and relatability in the videos, which allowed those community members to disclose their own experiences and feelings regarding COVID-19. This reiterates the importance for LGBTQ+ YouTubers to be perceived as authentic, such that their community members can feel equally supported and safe to disclose their own experiences and connections. Evidence of this includes comment such as: “*Omg I just needed this, thank you for being you, this was amazing*” (Jessica Kellgren-Fozard).

As previous research has shown, spaces that are perceived as relatable, authentic and safe will make community members more likely to expend energy and effort in disclosing their own experiences and feelings, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and connection towards the LGBTQ+ YouTuber's community (Austin et al., 2020; Lovelock, 2019). Therefore, perhaps the authenticity and relatability of the LGBTQ+ YouTubers can, in part, explain why this platform represents a positive and open space for their LGBTQ+ virtual community and thus lead to virtual connections during times of physical distancing and self-isolation.

3.6 Intersectional Identity (e.g., Disability, Ethnicity) Experiences

Although not many community members explicitly disclosed their identities, three codes emerged related to group identities: 1) “*Disability*” ($N_Q = 34$; 50.00%); 2) “*LGBTQ+*” ($N_Q = 27$; 39.71%); and 3) “*Ethnicity*” ($N_Q = 7$; 10.29%).

Disability was prominent throughout Jessica Kellgren-Fozard's community, due to Jessica Kellgren-Fozard's intersectional identities. As mentioned in Table 1, she is married, has multiple disabilities, and identifies as a lesbian. The various identities connected with her community members were evidenced by comments such as the following: “*I have RA [rheumatoid arthritis] and currently my hips and knee are flaring, however, I had a hot shower, blow dried my hair, applied my favourite make up and Chanel perfume and I'm feeling pretty cute, even if it is just for me;*” (Jessica Kellgren-Fozard).

An interesting point that emerged from the disability code was the acknowledgement of coping strategies that community members with disabilities already used and experienced prior to COVID-19, and that their daily life experience had not changed much during COVID-19 due to the lack of access and the obstacles they had already dealt with, as evidenced by comments such as: “*My immune system decided to start attacking my retina so I'm partially blind in one eye [...] I also have a thyroid condition and other chronic health problems. I'm dealing with the pandemic scarily well lmao. I do think it's because [sic] most people haven't had to deal with medical issues/trauma before [...]*” (Jessica Kellgren-Fozard).

In terms of LGBTQ+ identity, relevant comments were seen across Jessica, Ingrid and Princess Joules' videos: “*I've come straight out of an online argument with a close minded wanker about whether gender fluidity is a real thing. I always tell myself don't get involved, just ignore it, but what do I go and [sic] do? The opposite*” (Jessica Kellgren-Fozard); and “*Yes Yes my Trans sister I been feeling the same way these few days dealing with this*

craziness, I can't Miss. Girl, Lol, just be strong my sister" (Princess Joules). Based on Jessica Kellgren-Fozard's light and humorous video content, the comments from her LGBTQ+ community expressed their adoration and love for her, as shown by the following examples: *"This will make you feel better' And I see good 8 minutes of a beautiful lady in classy lingerie. Yes, this bisexual girl can confirm the video title is NOT clickbait XD"*. Regarding Princess Joules' video content, LGBTQ+ identity was expressed primarily through the unique issues experienced by transgender community members. This was evidenced by the following comment: *"pleaseeeee make a video about your mental health during hrt (mood change, melancholy, breakdowns, inner growth) and your transition...it would be so helpful for young transgender people and u seem a very mature trans woman"*. The community connections in Princess Joules' video content interrelated with authentic concerns within the transgender community, both related and unrelated to COVID-19.

Ethnicity was only mentioned in Ingrid Nilsen's video, due in part to her identity as both an ethnic minority (as shown in Table 1) and identification as a lesbian. COVID-19 has brought up negative experiences for ethnic minorities via the xenophobia they are subject to (CDC, 2020), and this was similarly raised through Ingrid's video content and led to discussions in the comments. This subject was addressed in the following comments: *"Thank you for discussing the subtle and overt forms of racism that has arisen from this pandemic;"* and *"[...] Also, thank you for calling out the racism."* Xenophobic issues were not mentioned in the other LGBTQ+ YouTubers' videos or comments. Therefore, Ingrid's identity and video content made authentic connections with her community members, leading to a positive space to discuss and share sensitive concerns and experiences related to COVID-19.

4. Discussion

Virtual or e-leisure spaces have been shown to provide benefits to the community, including positive effects on psychological wellbeing, self-esteem and self-confidence; increased levels of perceived social support and social connectivity; and decreased feelings of loneliness and depression (Lizzo & Liechty, 2020). However, much of the literature surrounding netnography research and virtual spaces has been from the business and marketing perspectives (Cunningham & Craig, 2017). Therefore, by examining the interactions between LGBTQ+ YouTubers and their community members, this study can help to better understand how LGBTQ+ community members have been managing their COVID-19 affected lives and whether the presence of such online LGBTQ+ YouTube communities can act as a form of social support system to minimize the core risk caused by COVID-19.

4.1 Sense of Belonging

As comments from community members are anonymous, there can be no confirmation of the commenters' developmental age and LGBTQ+ identity. However, as all four LGBTQ+ YouTubers openly identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community (being gay, lesbian, and transgender), there is an assumption that those who participate and engage in the community discussion through the comments understand each YouTuber's LGBTQ+ identity. Additionally, based on the overwhelming number of positive comments and limited number of negative and hostile comments, the LGBTQ+ virtual community space can be interpreted as a safe space for the LGBTQ+ community members to socially connect with other LGBTQ+ individuals, disclose their experiences, and seek support.

Through the position of belongingness, the community support and engagement within each LGBTQ+ YouTuber's community showed a clear tendency to be open in disclosing experiences, how they are feeling and coping during the pandemic, and having this sense of belonging and relatedness with their community and the LGBTQ+ YouTuber. As shown by research concerning sense of belonging and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Hagerty, 1992), social connectedness is linked to minimizing feelings of isolation and other associated risks (e.g. depression, mortality). Therefore, the comments can be understood as evidence for the effects virtual spaces can have in terms of positive social outcomes (e.g. relatedness, sense of belonging, community support). As shown by the comments, LGBTQ+ YouTuber and their community can occupy their virtual space and foster social connections through dialogue interactions between the video content and comments, where LGBTQ+ YouTubers disclose different experiences related to the pandemic and where the community members respond, share, and relate to their video content. In the instances examined for this study, this disclosure has established a two-way communication where community members have repeatedly mentioned their gratitude to the LGBTQ+ YouTuber for discussing their experiences, of which some can be sensitive (e.g. mental health issues), in a virtual space that has shown to have positive social outcomes regarding belonging to a community, feeling heard, and undergoing the struggles and experiences together. As many of the comments revealed gratitude and deep feelings, whether positive or negative, and also showed a desire to support the LGBTQ+ YouTuber in question, it is evident how social connections can overcome some of the issues posed by physical distancing and self-isolation. Namely, the lack of physical connections due to physical distancing leading to negative social outcomes such as loneliness, depression, and

increased rates of mortality (Green et al., 2020).

Additionally, issues posed by self-isolation can result in increased chances of conflict, as mentioned by one community member who outlined how their family members were not respecting physical distancing and self-isolation rules, leading to familial conflict and tension. As such, this virtual space additionally acts a space to disclose negative experiences, where community members perceive being heard by their fellow community members and the LGBTQ+ YouTuber, as mentioned by many community members who reported joy and tears of happiness hearing others experiencing similar struggles and sharing the message that it is okay to not be productive and simply exist. The authenticity and relatability between the community and the LGBTQ+ YouTuber establishes a connection and sense of belonging for each community member to justify and understand that their emotions are normal.

4.2 Intersectionality

The four different LGBTQ+ YouTubers' identities and video content brought varied comments from the community members. The four YouTubers discussed pandemic-related topics relevant to their daily lives (e.g. weekly life update, dating experiences) and also specific topics surrounding mental health (e.g. one concerning self-care, with a humorous, light-hearted approach; one featuring serious discussion). Due to their intersectional identities as LGBTQ+ individuals – some with romantic partners, some with disabilities, and some as ethnic minorities – the community's comments reflected subtle nuance beyond the general support and engagement comments mentioned previously. Specifically, Ingrid Nilsen's video included her romantic partner, which led to two distinct intersectional comment groups: 1) comments surrounding the presence of a romantic partner to spend the pandemic with and rely on as emotional support and 2) comments that raised pandemic-specific issues and concerns related to ethnic minorities (e.g. xenophobia against people from China). The interesting point was the lack of similar discussions in the other three LGBTQ+ YouTubers' video comments, highlighting how each LGBTQ+ YouTuber's intersectional identity uniquely occupies the virtual space to create a space for discussing issues specific to their different identities.

This concept of intersectional identity playing a key role in the creation of the space was corroborated by both Jessica Kellgren-Fozard's and Princess Joules' video, where their approach to the video resulted in their community disclosing their disability-related or transgender-related experiences (e.g. community reported as dressing up as a form of self-care to adaptively cope (Jessica Kellgren-Fozard); unique transgender-specific appointments being cancelled due to the pandemic such as hormone replacements or orchiectomy (Princess Joules)). Therefore, the intersectional lens provided a more comprehensive understanding of how different LGBTQ+ community members have been experiencing COVID-19 and how their other identities (e.g. ethnicity, disability) play a role in their comments.

Although it is an assumption that everyone in the communities examined identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer, the virtual space community members have been occupying can be considered LGBTQ+ as it is a public space to interact with the LGBTQ+ YouTuber and their community. As such, those who are not specific to the LGBTQ+ identity can be considered allies (encompassed within the LGBTQ+ identity), as they have also been disclosing their feelings and personal experiences in a public, virtual space. As opposed to research highlighting evidence of community engagement that can be hateful towards other community members and foster virtual conflicts (Klempka & Stimson, 2014; Nash et al., 2015), the comments across all four LGBTQ+ YouTubers' communities were positive and supportive, highlighting how the different LGBTQ+ YouTuber's intersectional identities have led to connectedness and relatability with the community's intersectional identities (e.g. comments ranged across disability, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender identity/expression). Therefore, the immense number of positive comments where LGBTQ+ community members disclosed their feelings, experiences and coping strategies during the pandemic can be explained by the authenticity the LGBTQ+ YouTubers have in disclosing details of their lives, experiences and feelings, and by their intersectional identities, which lead to this strong sense of cohesion and relatedness amongst the community members and with the LGBTQ+ YouTubers.

4.3 Implications

Tying back to the purpose of this research, this study was interested in the analysis of online spaces acting as support systems for LGBTQ+ community members to minimize mental health risks posed by COVID-19. The results have illuminated how these community members have been engaging with their LGBTQ+ YouTuber's community as a form of coping strategy through the sense of belonging they establish within the community and disclosure of their feelings and experiences during COVID-19. Particularly, the implications from the results lead to preliminary evidence for the presence of such online LGBTQ+ social support systems as capable of providing a social support system that these community members may otherwise lack, in situations where physical distancing

and self-isolation have resulted in increased feelings of loneliness and struggle to stay connected with their peers. Through understanding the sense of belonging in the authentic relationship between the LGBTQ+ YouTubers and their communities' various identities, the disclosure of feelings from both sides and the experiences regarding the different groups' COVID-19 lifestyles as well as how the situation has affected them, parallels can be drawn with offline physical social support systems, where such social spaces offer both emotional and constructive support. Considering the accessibility of online social support systems and networking due to COVID-19 and the lack of physical, offline social support systems as a result of the many closures due to COVID-19, online social support systems, via informal channels such as YouTube, can be a possible option for LGBTQ+ community members to maintain social connections and disclose their feelings and experiences during COVID-19, where they otherwise may not have supportive family or peers, therefore minimizing social risks due to social isolation and loss of community (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2012; O'Neal & Cotton, 2016) and maximizing positive social outcomes (e.g. self-efficacy, positive mental health and psychological wellbeing; O'Neal & Cotton, 2016; Raver et al., 2018).

4.4 Limitations

As the study was limited to comments from the videos of four LGBTQ+ YouTubers, the findings from these communities may not apply to other LGBTQ+ YouTubers who may have different community populations. As different LGBTQ+ YouTubers produce video content that falls into varied niches (e.g. vlogging, beauty videos, prank videos), the different communities can show varying levels of community support, engagement, and inclusivity. As Doring and Mohseni (2020) showed, there have been instances where there are hateful and negative comments directed at other community members and/or an LGBTQ+ YouTuber. This can be due to the larger niche of video content that the LGBTQ+ YouTuber is producing (e.g. prank videos, beauty videos), which reaches a broader audience. Although the number of subscribed members varied across the four LGBTQ+ YouTubers, from 500,000 to 7.2 million, the comments were positive and supportive. There may be fewer positive and supportive comments on the channels of LGBTQ+ YouTubers with smaller subscriber numbers or a broader audience (due to their video content).

As the study analyzed YouTube comments, the demographic information of those writing the comments cannot be specified, due to the anonymity of posting comments associated with user-created accounts. As such, this study falls under an assumption that the community members understand each YouTuber's LGBTQ+ identity and that they accept that identity and are at minimum an ally of the LGBTQ+ community. However, there were some community members who self-disclosed their LGBTQ+ identity by mentioning their same-sex romantic partner, same-sex attraction to the LGBTQ+ YouTuber, or transgender-specific health appointments. Therefore, it is clear that there are LGBTQ-specific community members who engage with their community and the LGBTQ+ YouTuber. However, due to the level of anonymity, more specific conclusions pertaining to differences between allies and LGBTQ-identified community members cannot be made about each community member. Simultaneously, the level of anonymity on YouTube can provide an additional sense of security (Austin et al., 2020; Lovelock, 2019) in cases where community members do not feel safe enough to self-disclose their LGBTQ+ identity in their offline spaces. Therefore, the lack of demographic information, although meaning less specific results, can be countered by the fact that community members have this sense of safety and barrier from being "outed" by others should they be in a hostile environment (Austin et al., 2020; Lovelock, 2019).

4.5 Future Directions

To further the results from this study, semi-structured interviews with LGBTQ+ community members who engage with other community members and the LGBTQ+ YouTuber could provide the triangulation needed to 1) increase the validity of the emerging themes and 2) add other emerging themes that the emerging themes from the community members' comments did not raise. Incorporating semi-structured interviews could corroborate and provide more comprehensive insight into LGBTQ+ community members' perception and utility in such virtual spaces, to foster positive social outcomes.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews with the LGBTQ+ YouTubers can provide insight into how they use their platform to engage with their community. As Cunningham and Craig (2017) and other researchers in media research have shown, a YouTuber's authenticity is critical in fostering connections with their community. Through an intersectional lens and from a perspective of sense of belonging, understanding LGBTQ+ YouTubers' views in how their intersectional identities occupy their virtual space can provide insights into this relationship with their authenticity regarding their community members and its association in fostering a space for discussion and self-disclosure of personal feelings and experiences. This relates to Austin et al's (2020) study, which mentioned the power and role modelling influence that YouTubers have in their community.

As Merchant and Lurie (2020) showed, governments across the world have encouraged social media role models, including YouTubers, to spread the message of the importance of physical distancing and self-isolation during the pandemic. Subsequently, a question arises concerning the impact YouTubers have in using their virtual space to inform their community of the importance to follow public health guidelines. As LGBTQ+ YouTubers were creating content regarding the importance of mental health and self-care, and additionally providing day-to-day updates during COVID-19, understanding LGBTQ+ YouTubers' perspectives concerning their authority and position in affecting their community can provide insights into their reasons for fostering such a safe space to discuss and share experiences and the benefits they perceive in establishing a supportive and engaging community.

Lastly, as only four specific LGBTQ+ YouTubers were chosen, other LGBTQ+ YouTubers were omitted from the analysis. Purposive sampling was conducted to achieve a diverse sample by selecting a small number of LGBTQ+ YouTubers that encompassed varying identities and demographics. However, other aspects were not considered and could be further explored, including LGBTQ+ YouTubers with very small numbers of subscribers (< 500, 000) and those with identities beyond gay, lesbian, transgender, ethnicity, and disability. This could include LGBTQ+ YouTubers who identify as queer or gender non-conforming, as well as LGBTQ+ YouTubers who are different in terms of their video content niche (e.g. LGBTQ+ YouTubers that produce educational videos). These two aspects could provide further insight into whether community members similarly use the virtual space of the comments to seek support within their community and from the LGBTQ+ YouTuber. Future studies can broaden the sampling procedures to encompass YouTubers from various languages and regions, conducting a more comprehensive analysis of diverse video content types and interaction patterns.

5. Conclusion

COVID-19 is a world-changing pandemic that has influenced humankind globally. With many individuals experiencing effects from COVID-19, such as hospitalization, feelings of loneliness and frustration due to self-isolation and physical distancing (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020) and xenophobia (Taylor et al., 2020), the global population around the world has been receiving an abundance of information regarding the many adaptations and consequences people are subject to following. The various ways people are dealing with the problems that result from COVID-19 highlight the need to understand how different populations have been reacting to and dealing with the situation. As LGBTQ+ communities can be at risk for multiple concerns during COVID-19, such as not disclosing their LGBTQ+ identity in their household or losing access to LGBTQ+ community centers and other offline social spaces shared with their peers and community members, community members can experience a loss of social support systems, which themselves can be particularly important protective factors from many social-emotional risks (Green et al., 2020). LGBTQ+ community members have reported how their engagement with other community members and the LGBTQ+ YouTubers acts as support. The level of disclosure, gratitude, self-expressed tears of joy and overall positive emotions that LGBTQ+ community members have disclosed and the connection with other community members and LGBTQ+ YouTubers shows how, through an understanding of sense of belonging and intersectionality, the different LGBTQ+ YouTubers have established authentic connections with their community. These authentic connections have fostered close-knit communities, whereby members can connect with different intersectional experiences that go beyond their LGBTQ+ identity, while also tying in experiences of their disability and ethnicity identities and how these have interplayed during COVID-19. LGBTQ+ YouTubers can provide a possible avenue for LGBTQ+ community members to bond in a time where physical connections are limited. With the many virtual spaces opening on different platforms (e.g. Facebook Live, Instagram Reels, TikTok, YouTube, Twitch.tv), there are many opportunities for LGBTQ+ community members to connect with others who are geographically diverse but related in identity. The power of technology during these times can be a promising tool to overcome the social difficulties resulting from COVID-19. Ultimately, as we move beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, the incorporation of technology as a tool for community building and socialization may become increasingly important and relevant in people's day-to-day lives.

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