Perceptions of Acceptance and Inclusion: the Influence of Legislation and Media on LGBT Student Identity and Embeddedness

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Abstract

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students are at increased risk of suicide ideation and attempt and are disproportionately affected by negative health outcomes associated with social exclusion (Meyer, 2003; Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2008; CDC, 2014; CDC, 2016). The social environment of LGBT young people, including the nature and presence of media outlets, is a key component of their feelings of exclusion or inclusion and associated suicide risk (Hatzenbuehler, 2011). This underlies the advice from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that LGBT youth require a safe, supportive and inclusive environment in which it is critical they are protected from bullying, victimisation and harassment. As this environment becomes increasingly digitised and LGBT identities are defined by mediatisation, there is great potential for health promoters, educators and legislators to make meaningful progress in harm reduction. New media has begun to address the significant differences in how young white straight men conceptualise the masculinity, and therefore social status, of their gay peers. Until this process is more widely embraced, young LGBT people will continue to face health and social challenges with often life-limiting consequences.

Keywords   Lgbt, Suicide, Media Representation, Heteronormativity

1.   Introduction and background

Educators, researchers, and policy makers need to acknowledge that we know next to nothing about the quality of young LGBTQ people's lives before we can even begin to contribute to meaningful strategies for supporting them… the data we arm ourselves with, even the universally cited statistics on higher suicide rates among lesbian and gay youth, perpetuate a rudimentary, generic picture. But we have no idea what daily life is like for the average LGBTQ-identifying teen (Blog entry from M. Gray, a senior researcher at Microsoft Research New England, 2012).

In 2016 the CDC published the first nationally representative study of LGBT high school students, which found 42.8% of LGBT students had seriously thought about suicide and 29% had attempted it. Compared with the national US average of 4.6% (Haas et al., 2014) and the average for heterosexual students of 6.4% (CDC, 2016) the findings add clarity to the existing longitudinal data that identifies suicide amongst adolescents as one of the three leading causes of death (CDC, 2016a). Although the influence of historic, religious and politically biased homophobic social rhetoric (Miceli, 2005) in the US significantly contributes to elevated risk for LGBT young people, changes in the legislature (Human Rights Campaign, 2016), education policy (Wald et al., 2002), and the media contribute to LGBT communities becoming increasingly visible and embedded in society. Such changes however do not address the inherent role suicide plays in US mortality or its disproportionately high representation amongst white men, who are 3.5 times more likely to take their own lives than any other group defined by any demographic descriptor (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2016).

In 2014 I led a small pilot research project with higher education students in the US and UK, exploring experiences of gay-straight alliances[1] (GSAs) and LGBT inclusion at university. We asked questions about how safe gay students felt on campus alongside recognition of high-profile media campaigns that placed heterosexual gatekeepers as their supporters and protectors. Students indicated they were happy with heterosexual spokespeople leading campaigns aimed at inclusion and suicide prevention, although the need for such campaigns was questioned in light of recent broader social equality. This presents an interesting counterpoint: gay students are often bullied and catalysed to suicidal thoughts by ubiquitous straight male prejudice and historically have formed their own support systems. The new trend for suicide prevention campaigns to frontline heterosexuals repositions gay students as a peer group to be defended and protected as they are incorporated into wider student communities.

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1   The term, and this paper, uses "gay" and "straight" in lieu of "homosexual" and "heterosexual" in line with the vocabulary most commonly used by US universities and US public health authorities.

2. Sexuality, normalisation and advertising media

For LGBT young people, online media channels have become integral to the "coming out" process and to their wider socialisation with peers (Craig and McInroy, 2014). This has occurred as the representation of LGBTs, particularly gay men, has become increasingly normalised in advertising media, television shows and the news media. Brands such as Budweiser, Absolut, IKEA and Southwest Airlines have long tailored their print advertising to reflect readership demographics, including in the depiction of gay men, albeit most commonly only in the gay press. Despite the awkward and contentious integration of LGBT legitimacy and rights into mainstream American discourse, advertisers recognise they typically have comparatively high levels of disposable income and an above-average level of education (DeLozier and Rodrigue, 1996; Gates and Newport, 2012), a key factor highlighted by Stonewall, an equality lobby group, in their workplace guide to marketing to gay consumers (2012).

Although such representation may contribute to the positive reinforcing spirals model proposed by Slater (2007), such representation is limited in scope if it is confined solely to the gay press. Advertising media marginalisation is becoming less common in the UK, where brands such as Lloyds Bank and John Lewis include elements of overt LGBT representation in their marketing and corporate strategies. Stonewall encourages increased LGBT representation in mainstream media, particularly in advertising as a strategy to increase the visibility of diversity and in recruitment advertising to attract new talent. *Marketing Week*, a marketing and strategy analysis publication, found young people entering professional work actively seek out organisations that explicitly promote inclusion and acceptance of diversity because this represents the social world in which they have grown up (Rogers, 2016; Tesseras, 2016). Notably in the UK, where inclusive marketing is more prevalent, there is a significantly lower suicide rate than the US amongst LGBT groups and young people, although young men remain disproportionately at risk (Office for National Statistics, 2016). It is therefore reasonable to assume that although the US have slowly moved to afford basic rights to LGBT citizens, the persistent lack of normalised visibility in mainstream media contributes to the prevailing invisibility of their social spheres.

The representation of gay men in advertising media has been shown to contribute significantly to self-empowerment and self-identity despite the overwhelmingly heteronormative environment in which such media exists (Searle, 1995; Tsai, 2011). Whether such media contributes meaningfully to concepts of inclusivity, or whether it serves to reinforce cultural stereotypes and constructs is of on-going concern (Aldoory and Parry-Giles, 2005; Allen, 2007). There is precedent for understanding the perception of branding and representation of targeted media by specific socio-cul-

tural groups (Martens, 2010), and for judging the level of embeddedness a media campaign has had in identity (Hartley, 2002; Farvid and Braun, 2006). Such research indicates that audience perception is often more easily influenced by imagery than by prevailing social norms (Kates, 1999; Trussler and Marchand, 1997; Oakenfull et al., 2008; Oakenfull, 2013), suggesting persistent and mundane LGBT representation may contribute to improved societal acceptability and better health outcomes.

3.   Digital media as a double-edged sword

The exponential increase in young people's reliance on digital media for daily living, communication and research (Flanagin and Metzger, 2008) has occurred in parallel with an increase in "cyber-bullying", a social phenomenon whereby young people are targeted through electronic media that causes marginalisation and reduced self-esteem. This correlates with CDC findings that 28% of LGBT students reported being the victim of bullying through digital media, compared with 14.2% of their straight peers (2016). This poses a perplexing problem. In general, media use and its integration into the lives of young people is considered to be a good thing (McLeod, 2000; Slater, 2007; Flanagin and Metzger, 2008; Ohannessian et al., 2014; Shehata, 2016). More than simple improved representation, young LGBT people report positive influences on their self-realisation and development of identity and associated feelings of pride when the media portrays positive role models (Gomillion and Giuliano, 2011). Cyberspace offers LGBT people often marginalised by gay media, which commonly seeks to homogenise the image of gay men and women, an environment in which they can affirm their beliefs, desires and self-image (Campbell, 2014). Bullying, harassment or victimisation enacted through digital channels therefore holds particular influence and potential to harm.

Recent trends by suicide prevention organisations to capitalise on the success of LGBT commercial marketing (Witeck-Combs, 2012) have led to a series of international prevention efforts typified by inclusion-based digital media campaigns focused on building cohesion in college environments. Concurrently, a portfolio of legislative changes in the US and the UK has given LGBT people new ground in equality and civil rights. The uses of mass media and social marketing in health drives are well established (Zainuddin et al., 2013; Bakan, 2016). Both streams share the aims of persuasive behaviour change and to get attention within a pre-defined public sphere by exploiting brand awareness and the promise of a better life. However promoting the populist, gendered imagery so preferred by advertising and news media (Hanke, 1998; Coltrane and Messineo, 2000; Harrison, 2008) with urgent messages of inclusion, social equity and suicide prevention represent a new emergence of the burgeoning mediatisation of health promotion and education for young LGBTs.

Aside from CDC advice regarding inclusivity programmes (CDC, 2014), the principal response of community-leading organisations to suicide has been to use digital media to engage LGBT youth with the intent of promoting inclusion in their environmental spheres. In response to a series of suicides amongst young gay men in 2010, three high-visibility digital media campaigns, *Straight But Not Narrow* (SBNN), *Give A Damn!* and *It Gets Better,* launched in the US. All three campaigns used online media channels as their mode of access and delivery, established discursive online communities and had elements of celebrity representation. SBNN and *Give A Damn!* intentionally sought overt representation from straight men as their spokespeople, particularly men who were easily recognisable from entertainment media by young people.

3.1   When (digital media) prevention efforts do not prevent

Despite 613,000 pledging to work towards ending LGBT victimisation as part of *It Gets Better* (Northwestern University, 2016), criticism from academic and sociosexual experts and media commentators targeted the campaign's " [...] *passive, impractical, homogenizing and exclusionary*" nature (Goltz, 2013: 135). Goltz (2013) argues the campaign was intended to bridge historic but persistent gaps between LGBT young people and the older generation, which typifies the perception that older gay men are fixated on their younger counterparts to an extent that contributes to suicide risk throughout the lifespan (Corey, 1998, Gross, 2001, Goltz, 2010). Ryan (2010) argues that the (mis)representation and false embeddedness of gay men at the centre of the campaign significantly undermines its ability to help improve quality of life. The campaign was created by a gay man, himself a highly visible media spokesman with an international media presence. Critics of the campaign cite his own relative privilege as being counterproductive to the impact of the media, mainly because he has not acknowledged any close experience of depression or suicide ideation himself; therefore he is unable to connect with those at risk in a meaningful way (Veldman, 2010). The critics fail to acknowledge the realignment of white gay men with the privilege afforded their straight peers and friends, endorsed by modern society, through a gradual increase of gay representation in mainstream television programmes (Shugart, 2003). Shugart argues that as LGBT people have become more embedded in popular media, straight men have accepted the legitimisation of LGBT identities, specifically those with whom they can most closely relate; often other white men.

As the increasing representation of LGBT identities continues to permeate media outlets and legal systems become more protective towards their rights, there has not been a correlation with improved mental health or reduced suicide risk.

Mustanski et al. (2016) found LGBT students experienced escalating victimisation throughout their school years to the point that 24.2% ended formative education with diagnosable depression and 15.3% with posttraumatic stress disorder. Conversely, the increasing visibility and normalisation of LGBT people in the media is correlative with an increasing number of Americans who are willing to identify themselves as such. Gallup, a research organisation, surveyed 120,000 Americans in 2012 and found 3.4% identified as LGBT (Gates and Newport, 2016). Young people between the ages of 18 and 29 were over three times more likely to openly identify as LGBT.

This suggests that while gay youth are becoming more confident in expressing themselves or living openly, the associated increased media and social representation has failed to manifest itself with improved long-term health outcomes. While young gay people demonstrate relatively high levels of resilience to protect themselves from bullying and harassment (Russell et al. 2009), our lack of understanding of translatability of LGBT representation in the media into reality continues to apply insurmountable pressure. This is of particular note amongst white men who inherit the societal privilege demonstrated by most patriarchal Western societies. Writing in a 2016 editorial in *The Guardian*, a UK newspaper, Hackman cites changing concepts of previously unchallenged heterogeneous masculinity as particularly difficult for men to accept. One interviewee states: "[...] *because of* [a] *sense of entitlement* [...] *you are brought up understanding there is an inherent favourable bias towards men, and that is taken away, it isn't easy*". This confusion and uncertainty, increasingly felt amongst straight men as their gay peers experience a more equal place in social structures, has equated to emerging media-driven visibility of, and research into, how men establish and maintain relationships. News and digital media outlets, aside from those with extremist political slants, will continue to develop the normalisation of LGBT representations in the public sphere. It is important that education establishments and legislators contribute to this trajectory, not least because we know that where young people with diverse and fluid sexual identities exist in a common social environment, they thrive (Vásquez et al., 2014). This significantly undermines the claims of American far-right groups that young gay men are unhealthy and dangerous influences on their straight peers. Indeed, the profound and inherent social scripts that young people use to explore their sexual identity (Silva, 2016) and the wider discourses (Foucault, 1978) they use to explore relationships are defined by cultural constructs of the time in which they exist (Katz, 1995). Media, particularly news media, should capitalise on this to ensure LGBT people are firmly embedded in critical discourse.

4. Case study

In 2010 Tyler Clementi, a student at Rutgers University, killed himself by jumping from a bridge. This followed an incident in which his dormitory roommate secretly filmed him in a sexual encounter with another man and streamed it live using the university's digital media service. The news media response was swift and damning. Schwartz (2010) wrote in the *New York Times*, "*Tyler Clementi may have died from exposure*". Clementi's roommate was an Indian national. The American press, which had made little more than muted concern about previous white gay male suicides, demonstrated racial overtones as it sought to hold the individual to account. Writing in *New American Media,* Roy (2012) identified the trial of Clementi's roommate as an indictment of a broken immigration system more powerful than the failure of the authorities to do anything about bullying. Interestingly, little information had been published about the perpetrators of other cases of bullying, the explication being that as the bearers of white straight male privilege, they had the right to exert power over those with less social currency. As a non-white foreign national, Clementi's roommate, although straight, was considered to be a lower-class citizen on the social strata that defines and structures the mediatisation of LGBT identity constructs (Whitcomb and Walinsky, 2013).

The use of heterosexual spokespeople, particularly straight men, in high-profile campaigns aimed at improving social inclusion for LGBT youth and reducing isolation and suicide risk is reflected in the proliferation of GSAs in US educational settings. Such groups are intended to foster a safe and inclusive environment for students with different sexual identities and to provide a framework from which to reduce social exclusion. Whereas public health campaigns aimed at improving the health of LGBT people typically present an exclusive visualisation of the target group, GSAs and the messages of SBNN and *Give a Damn!* instead shift focus to the acts and responsibilities of heterosexual allies who are presented as community gatekeepers with the ability to reduce homophobia amongst male-dominated heteronormative community groups. The gay-straight paradigm this represents could signify a new model of inclusion, focusing on the importance of heterosexuality in the prevention of gay student suicide. Such a paradigm seeks to reconcile the social and structural divisions present between gay and straight individuals through the increasing acceptance that sexual identity, while an intrinsic element of the life course experience, is a combination of humanistic constructs that are fragmented depending on theoretical framework through which they are viewed (Hammack, 2005).

5.   Going forward

New scenarios of media engagement and education inevitably rely on new frameworks to develop them and new strategies to deploy them. The complex relationship between media and vulnerable groups, particularly those in education, becomes increasingly important. Yet there is evidence that new frameworks, strategies and approaches, when delivered with rigour, can generate significant lasting change. This includes in response to specific events such as suicides that fundamentally change the social structure of an institution, such as that of Tyler Clementi's death. In 2012, Rutgers University had provided specialist training to 130 gay-straight allies, provided student housing especially for LGBT students and was awarded the maximum possible rating from a national student equality rights group (Kaminer, 2012). Change, particularly multidisciplinary change embedded in social discourse, constructs and media representation, needs to begin to prove its worth in quantifiably better health for LGBT youth.

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Biography

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