The Black at the End of the Rainbow: Online Discrimination Among LGBTQ African Americans

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Abstract. Both the LGBTQ and African-American communities are marginalized and at greater risk of both online and offline discrimination when compared to the non-LGBTQ and non-black communities; yet little is known about the LGBTQ *and* African-American intersectional community's online experiences with discrimination. Extant literature indicates that this discrimination has negative consequences on mental health and identity. In this literature review, we present a synthesis of the existing research at the intersection of these identities to inform how online community-based sites and social media platforms serve as both spaces of victimization, as well as environments of support. Altogether, we found that past research has primarily focused on these communities separately, and the research that exists about African-Americans in the LGBTQ community mainly studies the intersectionality of these identities offline and information seeking behaviors around HIV. Our literature review indicates that further research is necessary to study the online experiences of these online users and the potential effects on mental health.

Keywords: Online Discrimination, LGBTQ, Black/African American, Online Experience

1 Introduction

Individuals from minority groups such as African Americans or members of the LGBTQ community frequently rely on the internet for support that may be difficult to find offline. Members of both of these communities face greater risk of both external discrimination and internalized stigma, which can lead to emotional distress, mental health issues, and behavior modifications [1–3]. While there are bodies of research that focus on the online experiences of African Americans or members of the LGBTQ community, less work exists that examines the experiences of individuals who are members of both communities. In this poster, we present a literature review identifying

the patterns in existing research around these groups to understand the discrimination against this group, and how members navigate these experiences.

2 Methods

Following the work of other scholars exploring marginalized user experiences [4], we conducted a semi-structured literature review to understand the state of current research on these groups' experiences. We began by developing a word bank, consisting of key terms we used to search for existing research. Our word bank contained two sections: demographic (representing the population) and negative online behavior (representing their experiences). In existing literature, "black" and "African American" were used interchangeably, therefore we also used these terms interchangeably. Additionally, not all research uses the term "LGBTQ," so this term was also broken down into its constituent terms. Table 1 shows examples of terms that were used. Articles were found through several university databases, and the scope of databases was not limited. Our process evolved in two phases: 1) the intersectional population (where research was limited) and 2) each group individually. We conducted phase two upon realizing the lack of literature concerned with black and LGBTQ experiences in order to capture a fuller picture of extant research.

Table 1. Example Search Keywords

Demographics	Online Behaviors
LGBTQ	Online support
MSM[1]	Discrimination
Sexual/Racial Minority	Homophobia
Black/African American	Racial/Racism

3 Findings

From our literature review, we identified research that addressed the experiences of people who were both black and LGBTQ. However, the body of work concerned with that group was undersaturated, leading us to identify themes in these populations separately. In identifying these themes, we use intersectionality as both a theory and an analytical framework to learn about the experience of people with multiple marginalized identities. This approach allows us to study how our population understands their own identity development and how each aspect of their identity is affected by others [5].

[1] Men who have sex with men.

3.1 Experiences of the Black and LGTBQ Community

A central theme in research at the intersection of these identities is the difference in what can be hidden or altered by the individual and what is evident to others. In the daily lives of black men, the black portion of their identity is the most visible and the one with the greatest consequences: “I don’t think about being gay for long stretches of the day, but I can never forget about being black in this country.” [2]. People have the ability to pass as non-LGBTQ, and frequently experience pressure to do so. Pastrana [6] found that perceived family support was the greatest predictor of outness, which was twice as likely as the next: the significance of sexual orientation, and the level of connection to the community. The connection to community may be influenced by racism from the non-black LGBTQ community, which in turn may occur online.

Research focusing on black LGBTQ experiences online often centered on information seeking and risk-taking behaviors related to HIV [7]. Other work focused on community building and factors that inform black LGBTQ people’s engagement with online communities. Gray examined the experiences of black lesbian women in Xbox Live communities, noting the pseudonymous nature of the space provided a degree of protection not found in anonymous or less pseudonymous communities [8]. Gray’s work points to a tension between the need for community when offline support is not available, and the risks involved in finding that community online. While the protection enabled by anonymous or pseudonymous platform design is apparent, this sort of identity management may not be available in the places that supportive communities exist, leaving questions about other best practices when it comes to designing protective factors to prevent harassment in online spaces.

3.2 Experiences of the LGBTQ Community

Research suggests that gay men are at greater risk of sexual prejudice than lesbian women and bisexual men, and in study of 12 men who disclosed online, 11 said they had experienced homophobia before coming out, while four out of 12 reported receiving negative reactions to their disclosure [9]. Online disclosure of sexual preference or gender identity is a fairly common occurrence, particularly on Facebook, where 6 million Americans came out between February 2014 and October 2015 [9]. Disclosure may be linked to future discrimination, but research has yet to explicitly focus on the connection between these experiences online. Research has noted that LGBTQ youth faced increased rates of bullying, with 12% of respondents reporting they had been victims of in-person bullying, and 4% of respondents indicating that they had been victims of bullying online in the past year [10]. Despite the existence of discrimination on the Internet, LGBTQ users feel safer and are more likely to have online-only friends, and rate these friends as more supportive than offline friends [10]. However, rate of victimization is not reduced by this support. Since LGBTQ members find support online, these platforms can be used to facilitate such support and become buffers against the consequences of discrimination, something not yet studied in black LGBTQ contexts.

3.3 Experiences of the Black Community

Racial discrimination was more readily prevalent, which either reflects a greater focus on the racial identity than sexual orientation identity, or reflects the difference between the explicitness of racial identity and ambiguity/concealment of sexual identity. For instance, racial discrimination online is facilitated by "black" names. People who were presumed to be black based on their name in an email were less likely to get an email back from someone who was selling a home and are more likely to receive ads about criminal history on their web browser [11, 12]. In reaction to racial discrimination based on name and other forms, research indicates that discrimination against African Americans can potentially lead to the development of mood and anxiety disorders [3]. However, a potential buffer against discrimination is a greater sense of self-esteem and ethnic identity [13]. While the black communities are being discriminated against online, they are also using each other to gain support to rise above it. In African-American youth, it was shown that those who interacted with other African Americans in an online setting in a non-discriminatory way were found to have increased empathetic social skills [14].

4 Discussion and Implications

Our literature review indicates that being both black and LGBTQ is an entirely distinct experience that has not been sufficiently addressed by research. Walker, Longmire-Avital, Golub, & Kazak suggest that being black and LGBTQ is not the summation of being black and being LGBTQ, but a new experience altogether: "The experiences of emerging adult Black gay and bisexual men move beyond their individual experiences as Black, gay, men, but hold a particular location at the intersection of all three." [10]. Harmful offline behaviors are evident against the black LGBTQ population, and although not physically, such behavior can translate online and have equally significant consequences. Black LGBTQ users' intersecting identities place them at an increased risk for discrimination and stigma, which in turn can lead to negative mental health occurrences. Thus, our literature review contributes an understanding of how research has approached the intersection of black and LGBTQ identities, and their experiences with and navigation of discrimination, and identifies gaps in knowledge about the black LGBTQ online experience. Rectifying the gaps in knowledge presented here might enable designers to create online spaces that mitigate the dangers that sensitive minority groups such as black LGBTQ users face, and promote inclusiveness for communities online.

5 Summary

The findings we present in this work contribute to the goal of designing more inclusive spaces by creating a framework of knowledge that future research might incorporate and build upon in addressing African-American LGBTQ online experiences.

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