Experiences of U.S. LGBTQ+ Folks With Online Security, Safety, and Privacy Advice

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Queer and trans individuals face homophobic and transphobic harms when using digital tools.

npr

Sixty-four percent of LGBTQ social media users reported experiencing harassment and hate speech, a much higher rate than all other identity groups.

BBC

A senior US Roman Catholic Church official has resigned after allegations he had used gay dating app Grindr.

Where and how do queer individuals learn to protect themselves online?

Previous research on computer security and privacy advice has largely focused on general populations and topics.

What about advice specific to preventing and mitigating queer/trans harms on the Internet?

Our research questions:

1. Where do queer individuals in the U.S. **find advice** for supporting their online security, safety, and/or privacy?
2. What **barriers** prevent advice from being effective?
3. How do people's **other identities** impact finding and deciding on advice?

Methodology

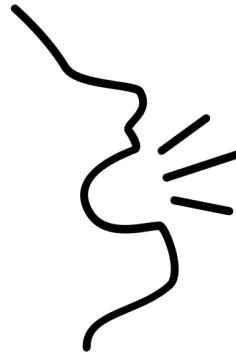# Interviews with 14 queer individuals in the U.S. in 2021.
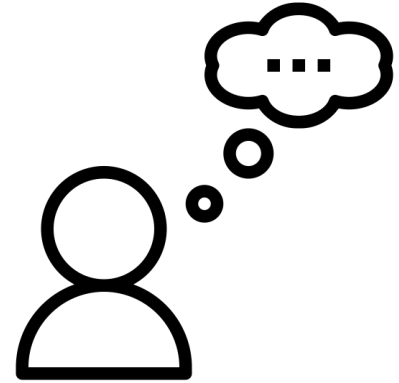
Interview questions

As related to **dating**, **sexting**, and **social media**

Finding Advice

Giving Advice

Evaluating Advice

Participants then responded to advice prompts

- We collected from online documents targeting queer security and privacy
- One example: use a private account

Ethical considerations

- Approved by the UW IRB
- No video was recorded
- Audio was deleted after we transcribed and anonymized interviews
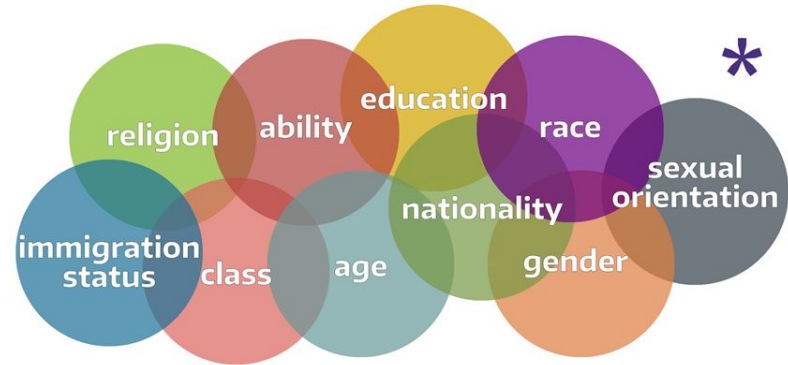- Followed trauma-informed best practices

We recruited diverse participants

Diversity across:

- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Age
- Race
- Socioeconomic status

(Detailed demographics in paper)

Identity & Intersectionality

religion ability education race sexual orientation nationality immigration status class age gender

*

*In addition to these examples, you may have other identities that are important to you.

https://tixstudent.uw.edu, BILGE, S., AND COLLINS, P. H. Intersectionality. Cambridge, UK: Polity (2016).

Author positionality

Some authors identify as queer or non-binary and others identify as straight and cis. The authors are East Asian or white.
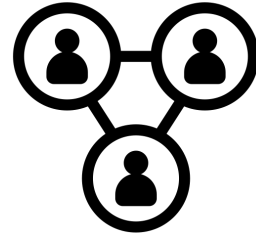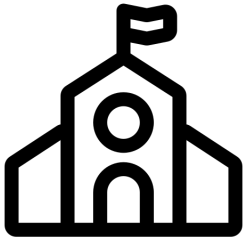
Results

Advice sources

Vocation or School

Online Search

Friends and Family

Advice sources

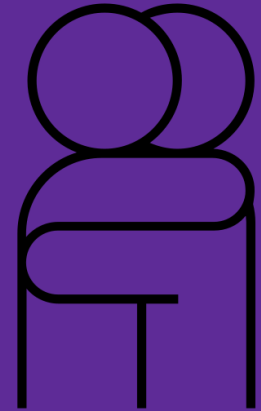Vocation or School

Online Search

Friends and Family

Participants turned to their <mark>queer community</mark>, who often had similar life experiences.

P4 (gay, white) turned to his trans men support group:

"It wasn't like we had a leader, but we all just sort of **compared notes** about what we were doing."

Key finding:
Emotional and community support was important.

P12 (lesbian, Black) after getting cyberbullied for posting LGBTQ topics on social media:

"[Turning to my queer cousin was] really beneficial. Yeah, I took [the advice] into consideration because I felt I had someone that **really cared about me** and that really **accepted me** for who I was."

Barriers to finding useful advice

- **Distrust** in advice source
- Advice becoming **out-of-date** as technology changes
- Sense of **futility** in adopting behaviors
- Solution couldn't be found online/**doesn't exist**
- **No language** for it
- Advice would **interfere with relationships**
- Advice would **interfere with income**

Barrier: advice would interfere with income

- P8 had their business Instagram duplicated by a scammer
- They didn't find "Make account private" useful, because they need their Instagram page to reach new customers

Key finding:
**Participants' other identities also affected how they navigate safety.**
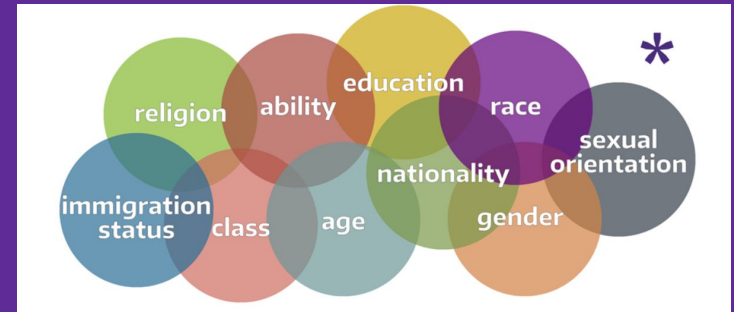
Identities participants mentioned include:

- Transitioning
- Activism
- Parenting
- Race
- Age
- Neurodivergence

P10 (queer, Black) on using a police app during a date if feeling unsafe:

"**The police start questioning me** about where do I live, am I homeless....[This incident] really ticked me off because, I'm gay, it's the [gay neighborhood], that's **supposed to be my community**."
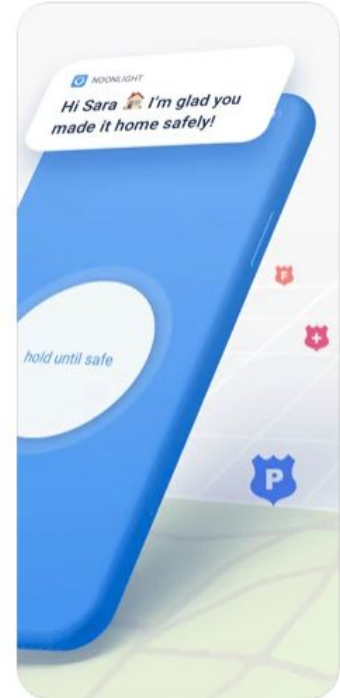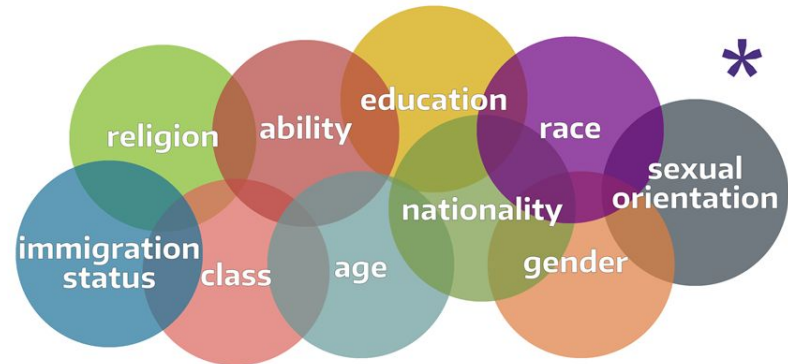
Discussion

There is no one-size-fits-all advice.

Takeaways for advice sources

- Communal learning can be effective
  - "Cybersecurity is more effective when it is communal…Discuss[ing] online threats and mitigations with members of a community makes it easier and less intimidating to take action"
- Provide emotional support with advice
- Documents should communicate credibility and **provide explanations**

Takeaways for security research

- Intersectionality as an analytical framework in usable security
  - Particularly when researchers want to understand the most vulnerable communities in a specific context
- Security is not just personal responsibility

Identity & Intersectionality

religion ability education race sexual orientation
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Security is not just personal responsibility

- Advice is limited to what an individual can change
- Also need more systematic **legislative changes** and **platform policy changes**

Legislative Changes

Platform Policy Changes

Conclusion

- We studied queer-specific online security, privacy, and safety advice through interviews with a diverse set of participants
- Key takeaways:

  Intersectional identities affect people's options for security, safety, and privacy behaviors

  Advice cannot be one-size-fits-all

Thank you!
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