

**The influence of social media on self-acceptance in queer youth**

Elia Nerlich

Faculty of Behavioural Management and Social sciences, University of Twente

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1<sup>st</sup> supervisor: Kim Tönis

2<sup>nd</sup> supervisor: Mirjam Galetzka

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### **Abstract**

Self-acceptance is an important construct that has been shown to positively influence well-being in queer people, which face high rates of discrimination and mental health issues. Relevant in this context is social media, which has shown to provide queer youth with knowledge, representation, and support. This study investigates social media as an influence of self-acceptance, as well as the moderating effect of real-life social support, using Spearman correlation analyses and PROCESS moderator analyses. A differentiation was made between time spent on social media and exposure to queer content, e.g., in blog posts, videos, and art. 1144 participants on the queer spectrum were included in the analysis via a cross-sectional survey. A weak relationship was found between exposure to queer content as an aspect of social media and self-acceptance, which was slightly higher for transgender than for non-transgender participants. Additionally, real-life social support correlated with self-acceptance, but no moderating effect was found. This shows a potential of social media as positive influence on self-acceptance and general mental health in queer youth, as well as reinforcing the importance of social support.

*Keywords:* queer, youth, transgender, self-acceptance, social media, social support

### **The influence of social media on self-acceptance in queer youth**

The mental health and well-being of queer (LGBTQ+) individuals is one of the focal points of gender and sexuality related research. Queer is an umbrella term for individuals that are not heterosexual or cisgender (cisgender being someone whose gender identity corresponds with their gender assigned at birth (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)). Even now, the queer population is faced with higher rates of mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression and substance abuse, compared to heterosexual and cisgender individuals (Borgogna et al., 2019; Calzo et al., 2017; Grinshteyn et al., 2022; King et al., 2008; Parodi et al., 2022; Wittgens et al., 2022). Moreover, especially adolescents are more prone to suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts and suicidal as well as non-suicidal self-injury (Batejan et al., 2015; House et al., 2011; Pellicane & Ciesla, 2022; Testa et al., 2017). These mental health outcomes may at least partly be attributed to minority stressors. Among others, fear of discriminatory violence was shown to be related to anxiety in sexual minority youths, while experience of gender and sexual minority stressors and discrimination was correlated with suicide attempts and self-harm in queer minorities (Grinshteyn et al., 2022; House et al., 2011; Johnson et al., 2019; Testa et al., 2017). The aim of this study is to investigate one factor that may mediate the detrimental effects of a queer identity on mental health.

#### **Acceptance from Others**

There are various factors that have shown to influence and moderate the relationship between queer identity, minority stressors and mental health, including personality and character strengths such as hope, perseverance, and social intelligence (Antebi-Gruszka et al., 2020). Above all, acceptance from parents and other family members has been a prominent focus of queer research as a significant predictor of mental health outcomes (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001; Johnson et al., 2019; Katz-Wise et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2010). Lack of family acceptance is correlated with poor mental as well as physical health, negative attachment styles and depression (Katz-Wise et al., 2016; Ryan et al., 2010). Showing support, however, especially as a parent, has shown to have a great positive impact on queer people and on their self-esteem, in contrast to the self-loathing queer individuals from bad family situations report (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001) and facilitates disclosure to others (Elizur & Mintzer, 2001).

Inside of the queer community, experiences of discrimination and stigma can differ depending on one's identity. Particularly trans people tend to face higher rates of discrimination, prejudice, and bias than cis queer people from the general population as well

as close others (Drabish & Theeke, 2022; Su et al., 2016; White Hughto et al., 2015). These negative attitudes and lack of support can lead to mental health consequences such as substance abuse, eating disorders, depression, low self-esteem and poor coping capabilities in the trans population (Drabish & Theeke, 2022; Su et al., 2016). Additionally, stigmatization can negatively affect treatment in health care and employment, as well as through cultural norms and laws (White Hughto et al., 2015). Due to this, the trans community struggles with high rates of suicidal behaviour, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Testa et al., 2017; White Hughto et al., 2015).

### **Self-Acceptance**

In contrast to the acceptance of others, self-acceptance has also been recognized as an important influence on mental health for both the general and queer population (Macinnes, 2006). Overall, self-acceptance refers to one's satisfaction with oneself and includes awareness of one's strength and weaknesses (Shepard, 1979). It has long been subject in psychological theories, among them as necessity for self-actualisation in humanistic psychology (Hoffman et al., 2013) and has linked to higher psychological well-being and self-esteem (Chamberlain & Haaga, 2001; Plexico et al., 2018).

Specific to queer minorities, the concept of "self-acceptance of sexuality" has been identified, defined as acknowledging and being comfortable with one's identity (Camp et al. 2020). This acceptance is further suggested to be attained by embracing one's identity and rejecting internalized queerphobia (e.g., homophobia, transphobia) as well as connecting and participating with the queer community. As such, it has been contrasted with concepts such as internalized heterosexism and is supposed to be negatively influenced by minority stressors (Camp et al., 2020; Meyer, 2003). Others mention concepts such as (positive) gay identity which are similarly defined and share traits with self-acceptance of sexuality, such as the embracing of community and identity (Fingerhut et al., 2010; Rostosky et al., 2018).

Research regarding the self-acceptance and mental health of queer individuals has shown that it contributes to positive mental health (Camp et al., 2020; Fingerhut et al., 2010). Queer people that accept themselves show fewer depressive symptoms (McCarthy et al., 2014) and less psychological distress (Woodford et al., 2014). Moreover, a positive *queer identity* was significantly related with higher self-esteem and life-satisfaction (Luhtanen, 2002), as well as more secure attachment in close relationships (Elizur & Mintzer, 2001). A positive queer identity additionally appears to improve resilience against various minority stressors such as perceived stigma and heterosexism (Fingerhut et al., 2010; Woodford et al.,

2014). However, evidence indicates that self-acceptance is generally lower among the queer community compared to non-queer individuals, which makes it a starting point to improve well-being (Camp et al., 2020; Riggle et al., 2009).

### **Social Media**

Social media has become more relevant especially in the recent years as influence on mental health and well-being, both in psychology and other disciplines. Research has shown both positive and negative sides of communities on social media for the general population. Multiple studies have shown that social media use correlated with a number of mental health issues, among them depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, and suicidal behaviour (Bekalu et al., 2019; Marchant et al., 2017; Rassmussen et al., 2019; Sadagheyani & Tatari, 2020; Woods & Scott, 2016). Especially prolonged use to the point of addiction and use of social media at night appears to exacerbate these negative influences in addition to other effects such as poor sleep quality and fatigue. Additionally, it is relevant to note that the impact of social media seems to be mediated or significantly influenced by factors such as emotional regulation and perceived stress (Rassmussen et al., 2019; Woods & Scott, 2016).

However, other lines of research show positive effects of social media and online communities. Routine social media use was connected to higher mental well-being and flourishing by connecting people and increasing social capital (Ellison et al., 2007; Shah et al., 2021). The internet has also been indicated as a tool to provide health information, to find communities to support and express oneself, among other functions (Marchant et al., 2017; Sadagheyani & Tatari, 2020). A study by Coyne et al. (2020) suggests that the time spent on social media alone causes no individual changes in depression and anxiety, suggesting that other factors are important to explain the relationship between social media and mental health. Overall, constant and obsessive use of social media and high investment appear to be factors detrimental to mental health, while regulated use and positive communities can benefit it, showing the potential of social media to increase well-being.

### **Social Media and Self-Acceptance**

Beyond these general influences of social media, it also provides a platform for subcultures and minorities. As many other individuals, queer people have turned to social media not only to seek out information, but also to find community and acceptance (Berger et al., 2021; Craig et al., 2021; Pullen, 2014). In a qualitative study by McInroy et al. (2019), queer youths have suggested that participation in online communities helps them to feel

supported by others and safe in expressing themselves. Further, social media could promote coping with discrimination, may reduce effects of marginalization and increase resilience through its community and escapism aspects (Craig et al., 2015). In fact, these spaces may not have to be specifically created as online LGBTQ+ communities to provide these effects. A study by McInroy and Craig (2019) revealed that queer youths also value online fan communities as a space to be authentic and more self-accepting towards themselves. However, most studies so far are qualitative and based on interviews with a limited number of queer individuals.

Social media platforms appear especially important for queer people in situations and places in which they face high rates of discrimination in their daily life and/or struggle to receive support. In places such as China, Zimbabwe and Malaysia, social media is an important platform for activism and information in an otherwise intolerant country (Bao, 2021; Mhiripiri & Moyo, 2016; Tuah & Mazlan, 2020). For queer people of colour and migrants, online platforms provide a way to connect with people with the same background and build an intersectional identity (Dhoest, 2018; Singh, 2013). Further, in rural areas, for example in the American Midwest, social media is a vital tool for queer individuals to gather information and find a community they would likely not have otherwise (Hardy, 2019).

### **The Current Study**

Social media, when used safely, appears as a promising channel to foster self-acceptance in queer youth, and could therefore reduce detrimental effects of minority stressors and improve well-being in the queer population. Recent research has shown that queer adolescents and adults do use online communities in this way, but so far there appear to be no quantitative studies on this topic. The current study aims to provide more data and gain further insights in this manner, which could further cement the importance of social media, and investigate additional variables which affect its relationship to self-acceptance.

The main hypothesis that this study will investigate is that increased social media use correlates with higher self-acceptance in queer youth. Along with this, two other hypotheses will be included in the analysis. Firstly, social media use is expected to have a higher correlation with self-acceptance if the individual interacts with queer online content more regularly. Contact and exposure to queer people is assumed to be an aspect of increased self-acceptance, and as such, if social media use affects self-acceptance, it will be more pronounced if the individual is surrounded by queer content more regularly.

Secondly, social media use is expected to have a higher correlation with self-acceptance if the individual lack real-life social support. Support from friends and family about one's identity presupposes acceptance but goes further to include being open to talk about the person's successes and worries. Here, a differentiation is made between real-life support and online support, as support from people on social media may be one of the aspects contributing to higher self-acceptance and can be part of its positive influence. Queer people that lack social support tend to have lower self-acceptance than those that do and may benefit more from the advantages social media brings.

Additionally, it will be investigated whether there is a difference in the effect of social media and real-life social support between trans and non-trans individuals. It is expected that trans people receive less social support and rely more on social media use (leading to a higher correlation between self-acceptance and social media use).

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

This study included 1360 total responses from participants that were recruited via two social media platforms (Tumblr and Reddit) and Exaltio, an association for LGBTQ+ students and youth in Enschede, as well as snowball sampling. Students at the University of Twente could also join via the Test Subject Pool BMS (SONA) System of the University of Twente and gained credits for their participation. The study was active only from 25.03.2022 to 30.03.2022, quickly gaining participants primarily via Tumblr. Inclusion criteria were that the participants fell on the queer spectrum, were between 16 to 29 years old and completed the majority of the survey. Several participants had to be excluded because they did not give consent (N=3), did not answer items needed for analysis such as how much time they spent on social media or more than one item concerning e.g. social support (N=186), or did not meet inclusion criteria (N=23). Further, four participants were excluded as their reported daily hours spent on social media was considered unlikely (20-23 hours). Consequently, 1144 participants were included in the data analysis.

All included participants in the study are between 16-29 with a mean age of 20.94 ( $SD=3.72$ ). The study includes individuals of 62 different nationalities, the most common being American (49%), German (7.3%), English (7%), Canadian (5.9%), Dutch (3.2%) and Australian (3.1%). Most participants were non-binary (49.8%), followed by female (31.7%), male (10%), and gender-questioning (8.5%) participants. Among those that were non-binary, the most common additional label used was agender (6.6%), followed by genderfluid (4.9%)

and genderqueer (3%). 44% of participants identified as transgender. Participants were able to select multiple labels for their (sexual and romantic) orientation: 53.3% identified on the asexual-spectrum and 43.2% on the aromantic-spectrum; 46.3% identified as queer, 40.5% as bi-/pansexual, 18% as homosexual, and 0.8% as heterosexual. 8.7% were still questioning and 8.6% input an additional orientation; for example, about 21 participants specified that they were a lesbian, some specified their asexual/aromantic orientation (demisexual/-romantic, abrosexual, grey-ace/-aro etc) or added their romantic orientation (biromantic, homoromantic, panromantic etc), and a few participants used micro-labels (viramoric, diamoric, finsexual, cupiosesexual etc).

## **Design**

The study used a cross-sectional survey with a correlational design. The survey was created as an online self-report questionnaire in Qualtrics.

## **Procedure**

Prior to data collection, this research was approved by the University of Twente Ethical Committee of the BMS Faculty. After having agreed to the consent form (see Appendix A), participants filled in the demographics. Afterwards, they were presented by three different set of questions concerning self-acceptance of queer identity, real-life social support, and social media use. In the end, participants were thanked for their participation and debriefed. The debriefing included more information about the specific hypothesis made and investigated through the study (see Appendix B). Completing the study was estimated to take around 5-10 minutes.

## **Measures**

### ***Demographics***

This survey gathered demographic information regarding the participants age, nationality, sexual and/or romantic orientation, and gender identity (including if the participant identified as transgender). As not all sexual and romantic orientations are exclusive (Galupo et al., 2015), participants were able to select multiple options for this question. Further, as it is difficult to account for all identities and labels, an optional text entry box was added for this item as well as to the “non-binary” answer of the item concerning gender.



### ***Self-Acceptance of queer identity***

To measure self-acceptance, an adapted version of the Self-Acceptance of Sexuality Inventory (SASI) was used (Camp et al., 2022). The scale has ten items which can be split into two subscales – self-acceptance of sexuality and difficulties with self-acceptance of sexuality – with five items each that are measured on a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). In order to compute one universal score, the items of the second subscale are reverse-coded. Adjustments were made to the scale to expand its application to all forms of queer identity by replacing all mentions of “sexuality” with the word “identity” (e.g. “I accept all parts of my identity”). An explanation of the word “identity” was included when presenting the items.

The SASI showed satisfactory internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.94$ ) and test-retest reliability ( $ICC = 0.90$ ) (Camp et al., 2022). Further, there was evidence of a good construct validity, as shown by significant correlations ( $p < .01$ ) with outcome measures such as sexuality self-esteem ( $r = .71$ ), internalized heterosexism ( $r = -0.61$ ), and general self-acceptance ( $r = 0.36$ ).

### ***Real-life social support***

Data on real-life social support was gathered through the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS). The scale has three subscales measuring support from family, friends and a significant other and is measured on a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). To better fit the purpose of this study, the items measuring support from a significant other were reworded to measure support from groups such as youth organisations, support groups and other (queer) organisations.

The MSPSS was shown to have good internal reliability ( $\alpha = .84-.92$ ), as well as strong factorial validity and validity for the *family* and *significant other* subscale (Zimet et al., 1990). Additionally, a further study proved a high internal consistency and utility of the scale (Canty-Mitchell & Zimet, 2000).

### ***Social Media Use***

Social media use was measured in two dimensions. Firstly, two items about the time spent on social media were used, the first which asked about the number of days spent on social media a week, the second of which asked for the average number of hours spent on social media a day. Secondly, exposure to queer content was assessed using two different items. The first item is reverse-coded and phrased as “I rarely interact with people that are queer on social media”. The second item reads, “I encounter a lot of queer content on social

media sites". Both items are measured on a five-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree).

### **Data Analysis**

The data was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 27. Firstly, the mean scores for self-acceptance of queer identity, real-life social support and exposure to queer content were computed. For real-life support, individual variables for the subscales of *support from family*, *support from friends*, and *support from groups* were additionally created, as well as a variable only combining *support from family* and *support from friends*. This decision was made as not all participants are part of a group and the variable *support from groups* may heavily influence the overall score. Then, in order to examine the sample characteristics, means and standard deviations for the variables self-acceptance of queer identity and real-life social support, as well as the variables relating to social media use were calculated. In preparation for correlation analyses, the assumptions for using a Pearson correlation were tested. The assumption of normality was found to be violated according to the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for all outcome measures.

To test the first hypothesis, the Spearman's correlation coefficient between time spent on social media and self-acceptance was calculated. Time spent on social media was measured in average hours spent on social media per day. Further, a bivariate correlation coefficient was calculated between self-acceptance and exposure to queer content.

In testing the second hypothesis, a Spearman's correlation coefficient between real-life social support and self-acceptance was first examined to confirm the assumption that higher social support correlates with higher self-acceptance. Then, a two moderation analyses were performed using the "PROCESS" macro v4.1 for SPSS, model number 1 (Hayes, 2013). In both, real-life social support was included as moderator with self-acceptance as the dependent variable, however, the first analysis investigated time spent on social media as independent variable and the second exposure to queer content.

When testing the third hypothesis, an independent t-test comparing means was first conducted in order to investigate if the self-acceptance, real-life social support, and social media use differs significantly between the two groups ("identifies as transgender" and "does not identify as transgender"). Then, as in hypothesis 1, the Spearman's correlation coefficients between time spent on social media and self-acceptance, as well as exposure to queer content and self-acceptance were calculated with a split-group design.

## Results

### Descriptive Statistics

For the variables of self-acceptance, time spent on social media, exposure to queer content and real-life social support (including subscales), means, standard deviations and minimum and maximum values were calculated, which can be found in Table 1.

All variables measured on a 5-point Likert scale have a mean that lies on the higher end of the scale, especially so exposure to queer content ( $M=4.45$ ) and self-acceptance ( $M=4.00$ ). All subscales of real-life social support range between  $M=3.00$  to  $M=4.00$ , with the overall score being  $M=3.36$ . Participants on average spent about 4 hours ( $SD=2.58$ ) on social media per day, with a wide range of none up to 18 hours a day.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive statistics*

	M	SD	Min	Max
Self-acceptance	4.00	0.75	1.10	5.00
RLS Support*	3.36	0.92	1.00	5.00
...from family	3.00	1.21	1.00	5.00
...from friends	4.00	1.10	1.00	5.00
...from groups	3.09	1.52	1.00	5.00
...from family + friends	3.50	0.91	1.00	5.00
Time on Social Media (hrs/day)	4.09	2.58	0	18
Exposure to Queer Content	4.45	0.75	1.00	5.00

\*RLS Support = Real-life Social Support

### Hypothesis 1

As shown in Table 2, no significant correlation was found between time spent on social media and self-acceptance ( $r = .013$ ,  $p = .665$ ). However, a weak but significant positive correlation was found between exposure to queer content and self-acceptance ( $r = .144$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Due to this, only one part of hypothesis 1, which predicted that social media use correlates with higher self-acceptance, is supported. Additionally, a weak correlation exists between time spent on social media and exposure to queer content ( $r = .135$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**Table 2***Correlation Matrix for Social Media Use and Self-Acceptance*

	1	2	3
Time on social media	-		
Exposure to queer content	.135***	-	
Self-acceptance	.013	.144***	-

\*\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (two-tailed).

**Hypothesis 2**

The base assumption of hypothesis 2, that real-life social support correlates with self-acceptance, was tested using a bivariate correlation analysis (see Table 3). The correlation was found to be statistically significant ( $r = 0.158, p < .001$ ). The subscales *support from family* and *support from friends* show similar values, while there is no significant correlation for *support from groups* ( $r = 0.057, p = 0.054$ ). Excluding groups, the correlation coefficient between *support from family and friends* and self-acceptance was higher than when including all three subscales ( $r = 0.210, p < .001$ ).

**Table 3***Correlations between real-life support and self-acceptance*

	<i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
RLS Support	.158	.000
...from family	.168	.000
...from friends	.212	.000
...from groups	.057	.054
...from family + friends	.210	.000

To investigate the hypothesis that real-life social support acts as a moderator between social media use and self-acceptance, two moderator analyses were conducted using PROCESS (see Table 4). Firstly, the interaction between time spent on social media and real-life social support was found not to be statistically significant ( $B = -0.011, p = .185$ ). The conditional effect of time spent on social media on self-acceptance are significant at values of the moderator real-life social support ( $p < .05$ ) at levels  $-0.922, 0.0000, \text{ and } 0.922$ . Similar results were present for the sub-scales for real-life social support, except for *support from family and friends*, which reached an almost significant p-value ( $B = -0.017, p = .0501$ ).

**Table 4***Real-life social support as moderator between time spent on social media and self-acceptance*

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
RLS Support	-0.011	0.008	.185
...from family	-0.011	0.007	.105
...from friends	-0.010	0.007	.154
...from groups	0.001	0.006	.829
...from family + friends	-0.017	0.009	.050

Further, the interaction between exposure to queer content and real-life social support was found not to be statistically significant ( $B = 0.010$ ,  $p = .735$ ). The conditional effect of exposure to queer content on self-acceptance are significant at values of the moderator real-life social support ( $p < .05$ ) at levels  $-0.922$ ,  $0.000$ , and  $0.922$ . Similar results were present for the sub-scales of real-life social support. In sum, there appears to be no moderating effect of real-life social support on the relationship between social media use and self-acceptance (see Table 5).

**Table 5***Real-life social support as moderator between exposure to queer content and self-acceptance*

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
RLS Support	0.010	0.031	.735
...from family	-0.035	0.023	.130
...from friends	0.008	0.026	.761
...from groups	0.027	0.019	.162
...from family + friends	-0.020	0.031	.519

**Hypothesis 3**

In an independent t-test, trans individuals were found to have significantly lower scores of real-life social support in all subscales except *support from groups* (see Table 6). Further, they spent significantly more time on social media and were exposed to more queer content. There was no significant difference in self-acceptance.

**Table 6***Independent t-test comparing transgender and non-transgender participants*

	Trans (N=503)		Non-trans (N=505)		t-test		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i> (1006)	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Self-Acceptance	4.05	0.73	4.02	0.74	0.80	.423	.050
RLS Support	3.22	0.93	3.52	0.89	-5.28	.000	-.332
...from family	2.73	1.16	3.30	1.19	-7.56	.000	-.476
...from friends	3.88	1.19	4.11	1.00	-3.45	.001	-.217
...from groups	3.06	1.53	3.17	1.51	-1.14	.256	-.072
...from family + friends	3.31	0.90	3.70	0.86	-7.18	.000	-.452
Time on Social Media (hrs/day)	4.33	2.64	3.82	2.51	3.13	.002	.197
Exposure to Queer Content	4.45	0.60	4.05	0.79	9.09	.000	.573

No significant correlation was found between time spent on social media and self-acceptance for both trans ( $r = -.017, p = 0.703$ ) and non-trans participants ( $r = .019, p = 0.667$ ) (see Table 7). As in the first hypothesis, a weak but significant correlation was found between exposure to queer content and self-acceptance for both groups, which was slightly stronger for trans ( $r = .150, p < 0.01$ ), than non-trans participants ( $r = .142, p < 0.01$ ). Additionally, the correlation between time spent on social media and exposure to queer content was only significant for non-trans participants ( $r = .214, p < 0.001$ ), not for trans participants ( $r = .056, p = 0.209$ ). These results support the assumption that trans people receive less social support, but there is only a small difference in the effect of social media.

**Table 7***Correlation Matrix for Social Media Use and Self-Acceptance of trans and non-trans participants*

	Trans (N=503)			Non-trans (N=505)		
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>
Time on Social Media (hrs/day)	-			-		
Exposure to Queer Content	.056	-		.214***	-	
Self-acceptance	-.017	.150**	-	.019	.142**	-

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

\*\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (two-tailed).

## Discussion

This study shows that there is a positive correlation between social media and self-acceptance of queer youth. However, this relationship does not seem to depend directly on the time spent on social media sites, as there is no significant correlation between the two variables. Instead, how an individual uses social media and the content one encounters can positively influence well-being – in this case, exposure to queer content correlates with higher self-acceptance. These discoveries tie in with existing findings relating the effect of social media on mental health, as positive and negative influences of social media appear to depend on how social media is used. People benefit from the information and the social connections gained through social media (Ellison et al., 2007; Shah et al., 2021), while social-comparison and emotional investment can have negative consequences (Rasmussen et al., 2019; Woods & Scott, 2016).

Due to this, it is possible that the most important aspect of social media leading to increased self-acceptance is the connection and information exchange between queer youth. In the study by Craig et al. (2015) these core concepts can be found in the testimonies of different queer individuals, reporting how easy it is to find “other people who are like you” (Craig et al., 2015, p. 269) that share your views and support you, as well as information that counteracts the negative stereotypes still present today. When representation and support in real-life is lacking, social media provides young queer people with a network of peers and role-models who can answer questions about different identities and encourage experimentation (Berger et al., 2021). Especially for minorities that experience stigma social media can be an important source of comfort and education.

Further, no evidence was found for a moderating effect of real-life social support on the relationship between social media use (neither time nor exposure to queer content) and self-acceptance. Nonetheless, real-life social support was shown to independently and positively impact self-acceptance. This is consistent with other studies showing the importance of support and acceptance from friends and family for queer people (Elizur & Mintzer, 2001; Ryan et al., 2010) as protective factors against mental health issues such as suicidal ideation, substance abuse and depression. Among the three subscales, support from friends in particular was the strongest predictor of self-acceptance and participants tended to receive the most support from them ( $M=4.00$ ). This could be because queer youth are able to choose friendships with people that accept them, which further increase in significance when traditional support from family is not consistent (Galupo, 2015). Additionally, peer support

has shown to be very important for young people's well-being, especially when they have a distant relationship to their parents (Birkeland et al., 2014).

While this disproves the hypothesis made about the effect of real-life social support, it suggests that social media can be beneficial to queer teens regardless of the social support they are already receiving in real life. Social media can provide community, but it is difficult for online friends to be present for important moments in real-life, especially when there is a large distance between friends. However, at the same time this does not mean that social media is useless when social support is already existent. Because exposure to queer content and real-life social support appear to be independently significant variables, social media could provide additionally support even with an existing support system. This may be due to the great amount of information and positive representation beyond one's real-life network (Berger et al., 2021).

Lastly, there was only a slightly increased correlation between social media and self-acceptance for trans youth. However, as expected, there was a marked difference in the real-life social support trans participants receive compared to their cisgender counterparts, but surprisingly no significant difference in their self-acceptance. The findings relating to social support fit with existing literature showing that trans people experience a high degree of stigma and discrimination in all aspects of life (Drabish & Theeke, 2022; White Hughto et al., 2015), even compared to other non-trans queer people (Su et al., 2016). Even if they are not openly transgender towards their family and friends, research has shown that simply appearing to be gender non-conforming can increase victimization from peers as well as parents (Katz-Wise et al., 2016).

Considering the lack of support trans people evidently experience, it reveals the importance of promoting transgender tolerance and acceptance in today's society. However, as there appeared to be no significant difference in self-acceptance of trans and non-trans participants, the question arises which additional factors influence and explain this finding. Trans individuals may have found other sources of support outside social media and their immediate support system or mediate the detrimental effect of minority stressors in other ways.

In conclusion, while not all hypotheses were confirmed, the results suggest that both social media and real-life social support are important aspects contributing to the self-acceptance of queer youth. It is possible that the most important component of both is the acceptance of and connection to other people, either through direct support or other queer people expressing themselves and showing pride in their own identity.



## Limitations and Future Research

This study faces a number of limitations which may have affected the results. A large majority of the participants of this study were recruited via social media, which reflects in the fact that most participants spent a lot of time on social media sites. Additionally, they often encountered queer content and people, with a mean of  $M=4.24$  in the corresponding variable (out of the maximum score of 5). As only few respondents are low social media users, data for those on this end of the spectrum is missing and could have influenced the results. This should be considered for future research into this topic by taking measures to recruit participants with both high and low social media use. Moreover, the study used a newly constructed and untested scale to measure exposure to queer content, which can impact the reliability and validity of the findings, as well as the strength of the correlations. Future studies can improve in this regard by spending more time on constructing and validating a fitting scale.

Further, this study chose to use identity in general as a construct, including sexual or romantic orientation as well as gender identity. However, it is possible that queer people feel different in terms of self-acceptance about different aspects of their identity. They may have figured out and accepted their sexual orientation but are now questioning their gender identity and feel more conflicted about it. Further studies could be conducted further investigating self-acceptance concerning different aspects of one's queer identity, both in combination with the effect of social media and without.

Similar limitations also apply to the construct of real-life social support, as family and friends may be more or less supportive concerning the different aspects of an individual's life. People may be more accepting of, or even more willing to overlook, an orientation that is not heterosexual than a different gender identity or expression, as shown by the higher rate of discrimination trans people face (Su et al., 2016). Parents may even be overall supportive of a child, except for their queer identity, which further affects the answers given by participants. To address this issue, further studies in this area may benefit from clarifying these questions and possibly using separate scales for general support, support for one's orientation and support for one's gender identity.

Beyond these limitations, strengths of this study include the high number of participants, which were engaged and supportive of the research. Various participants provided additional feedback and ideas after participating, which made it possible to catch mistakes or misunderstandings early, as well as informing possible points of interest for further research. Participants additionally were varied in their nationality as well as identity. Further, investigating multiple variables made it possible to gather further evidence for

existing findings concerning social support, as well as providing first insights into the number of relationships that influence self-acceptance and with-it mental health in queer youth.

Various further questions and possible lines of research have additionally opened up during this research. While this study has only viewed social media use and communities in general, there are many subcultures even within the general queer community. For example, there are groups of people who act exclusionary towards other queer individuals, such as towards bisexual, trans or asexual people for not “belonging” in the community (Berger et al., 2021; Betts, 2021). Further, there are transgender groups who are excluding other transgender people for not being “trans enough”, such as individuals who are gender non-conforming or not planning to medically transition (Selkie et al., 2019). Due to this, it could be investigated how belonging to such different groups may affect self-acceptance, as well as other mental health issues.

Moreover, variables investigating different groups or moderation effects could be added. While this study has only focused on queer youth in general, it is possible that there are differences in different age groups as well as the older queer community. It is also not clear how much time participants relatively spend consuming queer content or talking to queer peers, and whether higher self-acceptance may lead to more contact with queer content, leading to a reciprocal relationship. Additionally, variables such as self-control and emotional investment, which have been connected to mental health outcomes of social media in other studies (Rasmussen et al., 2019; Woods & Scott, 2016), may have an effect on the relationship between self-acceptance and social media.

Overall, the study presents a promising line of research, supported by the large number of participants and interactions between multiple variables. As only weak correlations have been found, the study could benefit from a replication or an adapted study to confirm or contradict the results, as well as other angles and research methods. It is further possible to create constructs tailored to this specific line of research which take into account the nuances and possible misunderstandings previously mentioned.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Informed Consent**

#### **Purpose and Procedure**

You are being invited to participate in a research study titled “The influence of social media on self-acceptance in queer youth”. This study is being conducted by Elia Nerlich from the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences at the University of Twente, as part of a Bachelor thesis.

The aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between social media use and self-acceptance of one’s queer identity and will last approximately 5 minutes to complete. The study focuses on individuals that identify as queer and are between **16 to 29** years old. If you do not meet these requirements, please do not participate.

In this questionnaire you will be presented with a series of questions relating to your acceptance towards your own identity, your social media use, as well as a few questions about social support you receive in real life. Further, you will be asked about your age, nationality, gender identity and orientation, in order to investigate how these factors may additionally influence the relationship between social-media and self-acceptance. There is no risk associated with the study beyond the chance that some items may make you feel uncomfortable to think about.

#### **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

Your responses will be strictly anonymous; no information about your identity will be collected or retained. The information you provide will not be disclosed to third parties, and they will be aggregated with the responses of other participants and examined for hypothesized patterns. Your anonymous responses will be used for scientific research into various aspects of positive psychology. Anonymous data from this study may be stored in an online repository and shared publicly to adhere to best practices in scientific transparency.

#### **Contact**

For further information about this study and your rights as research participant, you can contact the researcher, Elia Nerlich, via the email address [removed].

**Participant Rights and Consent**

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to decline to participate, refuse to answer any individual questions, or withdraw from the study at any time without the need to give any reason.

Clicking "I agree and consent to participating in this study" indicates that you have been informed about the nature and method of this research in a manner that is clear to you, you have been given the time to read the page, and that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

- I agree and consent to participating in this study
- I do not agree to participation in this study

## **Appendix B**

### **Debriefing**

Thank you for taking part in my study!

As explained at the start of this survey, the purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship between social media use and self-acceptance in queer teens. Specifically, the study hypothesizes that social media use, when paired with interaction with queer people, increases self-acceptance, and that this relationship is more prominent when the individual has little to no support offline.

Thank you for your help and the decision to participate in our study. If you know of any friends or acquaintances that are eligible to participate in this study, we ask that you do not discuss it with them until after they have had the opportunity to participate. Prior knowledge of questions asked during the study can invalidate the results. We greatly appreciate your cooperation.

For further information about this study, you may contact the researcher, Elia Nerlich, [removed].

Thank you again for your participation.