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Considering technology-based ecological elements in lesbian, gay, and bisexual partnered relationships*

Markie L. C. Twist^a, Christopher K. Belous^b, Candice A. Maier^c and Melissa K. Bergdall^c

^aUniversity of Wisconsin-Stout, Menomonie, WI, USA and ^bUniversity of Nevada, Las Vegas, NV, USA;

^bDepartment of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Mercer University; ^cUniversity of Wisconsin-Stout, Menomonie, WI

ABSTRACT

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual-identifying (LGB) individuals and couples have a longer and more involved history of Internet-based technological engagement when compared to their heterosexual-identifying counterparts. Yet consideration to the way that technology influences LGB relationships is rarely addressed. The purpose of this study was to consider the role of technology-based ecological elements in LGB-partnered relationships. To do this, a sample of university students completed an online survey focused on gathering information on technology practices as part of a larger project. The majority of the participants reported that they were accessible via technologies, their technologies were affordable, and that sexting within one's primary relationship was acceptable to the highest degree. From these results, implications for LGB individuals and couples include the need for increasing awareness and mindfulness around the effects of the ecological elements, the need for addressing these ecological elements in relationships, and the importance of establishing clear definitions, rules, roles, and boundaries around what is problematic and helpful in relation to technology use in partnered relationships. Clinical implications for relational and family therapists, as well as sex therapists, are also discussed.

KEYWORDS

Bisexual; couple and family technology; gay; lesbian; mixed orientation relationships; online; technology; same-gender couples; same-gender relationships; same-sex couples

Technology-based devices like smartphones and tablets have allowed individuals to connect, form, and maintain relationships like never before. For lesbian, gay, and bisexual-identifying (LGB) individuals, this expansion of intimacy outside of the traditional constructs of family and home becomes especially salient as it has been made possible via new media and related technologies (Bacigalupe & Lambe, 2011; Grov, Breslow, Newcomb, Rosenberger, & Bauermeister, 2014). For instance, those who identify as part of the LGB communities have a longer history of online dating and use more variations of technology to communicate (Grov et al., 2014; Rosenfeld & Reuben, 2010; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Specifically, LGB-identified individuals have reported using the Internet

CONTACT Markie L. C. Twist  markietwist@gmail.com

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more often and for a longer length of time than their heterosexual counterparts for activities such as online shopping, blogging, social networking (Harris Poll Interactive; HPI, 2010), dating, forming relationships, cybersex, online pornography, sexual health information seeking, and finding sex partners (Groves et al., 2014).

As part of a marginalized group, LGB-identified individuals may find resources for communicating with potential partners to be difficult to access or absent in their offline and immediate communities (Kinkler & Goldberg, 2011; Lasala, 2006; McKie, Lachowsky, & Milhausen, 2015). Thus, technology can be seen as a useful tool in increasing connectedness to similar people and in creating an ever-expanding network of affirming social and familial relationships. Yet, the use of technology in relationships is not without drawbacks and challenges. Thus, research needs to be expanded to include how LGB persons are interacting in digital contexts, more specifically how LGB-identifying persons manage technology in their relationships¹ (Bergdall & Twist, 2016; Blumer, Bergdall, & Ullman, 2014; Hertlein & Blumer, 2013; Twist, Belous, Maier, & Bergdall, 2015; Twist, Bergdall, Belous, & Maier, 2017). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which LGB-identifying persons manage their relationships in the technological context, specifically in relation to managing the technology-based ecological elements (Twist et al., 2015; see Hertlein, Nakamura, Arguello, & Langin; and McArthur & Twist, this issue, for more information on managing technology-based ecological elements in relationships).

Literature review

Benefits associated with technology

The benefits of the use of technology in helping to form and maintain relationships are endless, especially for LGB-identified individuals. For instance, research has shown that up to 70% of couples who report meeting online were similar-gender couples, in comparison only 22%–30% of differing-gender couples report meeting online (Rosenfeld & Reuben, 2010; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Indeed, technology provides opportunities for couples to connect like never before, particularly in the context of long distance relationships (Hertlein & Webster, 2008; see Peterson & Twist, this issue, for more on the role of technology in a long-distance romantic relationship). Additionally, technology can build intimacy in relationships more quickly (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013) and help couples to find common interests more rapidly (Henline & Harris, 2006). Moreover, both the availability and visibility of partners (Blumer, Bergdall, & Ullman, 2014; Twist et al., 2017) in digital contexts creates an environment with increased accessibility to one another (McKie et al., 2015; Patterson, 2005).

Challenges associated with technology

Despite the benefits associated with technology usage in relationships, several challenges associated with technology have been documented in the literature, such as difficulties with time management, work-life spillover, out-of-control online behavior such as gaming, miscommunication, and online non-consensual non-monogamy (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013). In highlighting just a few of these challenges, we get an idea of the difficulties facing LGB-identifying individuals and relationships in the context of technology and new media.

The challenge of work-life spillover often intersects with the difficulty of managing time in one's personal and relational life (Chelsey, 2005). Indeed, as technology has made workers more accessible outside of work hours this has more often than not created an expectation of working outside of work hours and space, which can result in added competition for one's time in one's relationships outside of work (Harris, Marett, & Harris, 2011). Additionally, the use of communication technologies after work hours has also been associated with work-to-life conflict between the worker and their significant other (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2007).

The difficulties with work-life spillover may be more magnified for LGB-identifying employees. Indeed, various studies have shown that anywhere between 15%–43% of LGB persons experience some form of discrimination and harassment in the workplace (Burns & Krehely, 2011). The forms of discrimination faced can range from being passed over for promotions, being fired for one's sexual orientation, negative performance evaluations, verbal and physical abuse, and workplace vandalism (Burns & Krehely, 2011). Such perceived and actual threats in one's workplace may make one feel unsafe to say no or ignore communications occurring via technology outside of work hours. If there is the added threat of discrimination by being visible both offline and online about one's personal and romantic relationship/s, then this can create stress on one's work life, as well as one's personal life.

Online non-consensual non-monogamy, or what most people refer to as online infidelity or cheating (see Hertlein, Duley, Cloud, Leon, & Chang; Hertlein, Nakamura, Arguello, & Langin; McArthur & Twist; and Moyano, Sánchez-Fuentes, Chiriboga, & Flórez, this issue, for more on the role of online infidelity in romantic relationships), is a problem for many people in relationships, particularly as it is not uncommon for individuals in those relationships to disagree about what constitutes cheating in online environments (Twist, 2017). Indeed, in a recent study of 810 partnered adults (89% identifying as heterosexual²), 50% reported that watching pornography counted as cheating (Thompson & O'Sullivan, 2016). This means that while half of the participants believe watching online pornography was cheating the other half did not. So what constitutes non-consensual nonmonogamy? It would seem there is ambiguity (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013). Since more LGB-identifying individuals access online adult content or engage in sex-seeking behaviors in online environments, and have a longer history of doing so, in comparison to their heterosexual-identifying counterparts (Albright, 2008; Grov et al., 2014), it could be that LGB individuals and relationships have less ambiguity around online behaviors. For instance, in the clinical literature, gay couples often report considering pornography as merely a "fact of life" (Kort, 2009, p. 2). Indeed, in gay-identifying relationships, partners frequently discuss their pornography interests and use with each other without reported feelings of betrayal, dismay, anger, or being threatened (Kort, 2009). Instead, they view their and their partner's pornography viewing as an expression of having different sexual tastes (Kort, 2009).

Technology-based ecological elements

The degree to which technology offers benefits or challenges in relationships is not rooted in the technology itself, but rather how it is managed. The management of technology in relationships is a matter of considering the ecological elements that leave relationships vulnerable to technological harm if left unaddressed, or if attended to, help to foster

technological exchanges that are characterized by mutual respect, care, and ethical encounters (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013, 2015). Technology-based ecological elements are defined as any element related to technology that influences the structure and process of relationships (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013). Ecological elements consist of any component related to technology that influences its use within the context of coupled relationships (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013).

The ecological elements include: acceptability, ambiguity, anonymity, approximation, affordability, accommodation, and accessibility (Hertlein, 2012; Hertlein & Blumer, 2013, 2015; Hertlein & Stevenson, 2010). The technology-based ecological elements play out differently for different individuals and in different relationships because of the uniqueness of each person and each relationship. There are some helpful relational characteristics that can be considered when thinking about the role of the ecological elements in relationships. For instance, these elements not only affect the process of couple relationships, but are also affected by the different stages of a couple's lifespan as individuals structure their relationships through the use of technology. In addition to the existing stressors related to forming and maintaining a relationship in a heteropatriarchal (Hart, 1994) society (e.g. gay-related stress, Meyer, 1995), LGB-identified individuals face additional challenges related to ecological elements in their relationships such as accessibility, as well as anonymity, each with regard to safety considerations in being "out" online or what can be called "electronic visibility management" (Belous, Wampler, & Warmels-Herring, 2015; Bergdall & Twist, 2016; Twist et al., 2015; Twist et al., 2017).

In terms of the role of the ecological element of accessibility (or, the ease or difficulty with which one has opportunities to access technology on a daily and unlimited basis; Cooper, 2002), historically LGB individuals have met and continue to meet their dating partners through technology, because they have greater accessibility to potential partners in such environments (Groves et al., 2014; Rosenfeld & Reuben, 2010; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). Yet, greater accessibility coupled with less anonymity can leave individuals in the relationship, as well as the relationship itself, vulnerable to online threats such as potential non-consensually non-monogamous encounters, bullying, harassment, etc. Indeed, LGB-identifying individuals and relationships continue to exist in a society that marginalizes their identities and partnerships both offline and online, hence there is a need for them to practice visibility management in real life environments, and electronic visibility management in online ones (Bergdall & Twist, 2016; Twist et al., 2015; Twist et al., 2017). In this regard, LGB persons and partnerships at times may practice greater anonymity (for the ways in which people present themselves in any way they want online and are protected from being identifiable, see Hertlein & Sendak, 2007) in online environments than their heterosexual-identifying counterparts (Pew Research Center; PRC, 2013).

Ambiguity refers to the difficulty people have in defining whether online behaviors are problematic or not (Hertlein & Stevenson, 2010) – such as the ambiguity around what is considered cheating on one's partner in online environments, as discussed earlier. Approximation refers to the quality within which technology and new media approximates the real world (Ross & Kauth, 2002; Tikkanen & Ross, 2003). With the emergence of second wave digisexualities (see McArthur & Twist, this issue, to learn more about digisexualities) (e.g. virtual reality sex, sex dolls, etc.), the ability to approximate sex through online technologies has never been closer to offline sex in the real world (McArthur & Twist, 2016).

Accommodation refers to the greater opportunity for a person to act a certain way in real world contexts, but have a different persona when it comes to their online persona, behavior, and activities (Hertlein & Stevenson, 2010). For some, managing the ecological element of accommodation is seamless. In other words, their online and offline personas are aligned. For others, particularly those who are LGB-identifying, because of the frequent need to manage visibility of one's minoritized sexual orientation, most often due to safety reasons (D'Augelli, & Grossman, 2001; Lasser & Tharinger, 2003), managing the accommodation between one's online and offline personas can be more difficult (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013; Twist et al., 2017). This management of one's online persona is known as electronic-visibility management, or "e-visibility management" for short, and is a clear example of how individuals and partners have to consider and manage the ecological element of accommodation (Blumer, Bergdall, & Ullman, 2014; Twist et al., 2017).

Moreover, several considerations in regard to technology such as making decisions around the form of electronic communication to use once a couple establishes a relationship, sharing one's relationship status with family and friends via news feeds, and announcing major events (e.g. engagements, commitment ceremonies, weddings, etc.), are significant situations upon which to reflect within couple relationships (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013) and especially for LGB-partnered relationships. In considering such life events in online environments, the ecological element of acceptability can play an important part. Acceptability refers to the degree to which the use of technology and new media for various functions is deemed appropriate or inappropriate within a community, society, relationship, and/or by an individual (King, 1999). For instance, it may be acceptable, and even preferred, for one member in a partnership to announce their relational engagement on social media networks, but completely unacceptable for their partner to do so, particularly in LGB relationships where one person may be visible about their sexual orientation and relationship involvement, but the other may not be (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013; Twist et al., 2017).

Additional considerations include implications around power differentials within couple relationships. Power differentials in relationships often occur around with regard to gender, economics, class, and education (DeMaria, Weeks, & Twist, 2017; Twist & Murphy, 2017). For instance, the ecological element of affordability (the costs associated with technology, Cooper, 2002) may play a larger part in relationships in which there are differences in wealth or income (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013). If one of the partners makes more money and thus pays for the technology for others in the relationship, then it follows that they often wield greater power and control over what the other person does with technology, which can become problematic. For example, if the partner who does not pay for the technology enjoys online pornography, and wants a subscription to an online access portal to such content, they may have to go through the partner who pays for the technology in order to get such access, which the paying partner may deem accessible or not. Such technology-related dynamics when not discussed and managed can be harmful to the relationship and individuals within it.

From this review, it is evident that the rules, roles, boundaries, and ecological elements of technology impact the way couples manage and monitor decisions around these technologies once individuals have met in person, and in some cases even before offline introduction (e.g. online dating). Failing to address important aspects of the role of technology in one's relationships could ultimately be detrimental. Thus, the purpose of this study was

to explore the ways in which LGB-identifying individuals manage their relationships in the technological context, specifically in relation to managing the technology-based ecological elements (Twist et al., 2015).

Methods

Participants

A final sample ($n = 53$) of undergraduate students completed the survey. This population was selected due to the reported heavy use of the Internet and other technology-based practices in young adults (HPI, 2010; PRC, 2013). The detailed demographics of this sample are reported below, but in short, the sample included 27 (51%) bisexual, and 26 (49%) same-sex oriented persons. The mean age was 23, and the majority of the sample was female-identifying ($n = 38$, 71.7%), Caucasian ($n = 22$, 41.5%), and in a relationship with one person ($n = 23$, 43.4%).

Instrument

Participants completed an online survey hosted by Qualtrics, which was divided into five sections including: (1) Demographics, (2) Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS; Mohr & Frassigner, 2000), (3) Ecological Elements Questionnaire (EEQ; Hertlein & Blumer, 2013), (4) Family Adaptability and Cohesion Scale-IV (FACES-IV; Olson, 2011), and (5) Same-Sexting Practices Questionnaire (SSPQ; Blumer, 2012). For the purposes of the current study, we are reporting only our findings with regard to the EEQ (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013), as well as summarizing some of the relevant results from the SSPQ measure that relate to the ecological element of anonymity and were previously published (see Twist et al., 2017).

The EEQ is composed of two parts – the first part is focused on gathering general technologically based activities in relationships and consists of 36 questions, and the second part is comprised of 8 sections focused on gathering information regarding the way participants manage the ecological elements in their relationships and consists of 92 questions (see Hertlein & Blumer, 2013). The development of this questionnaire was rooted in relevant literature (see, Qian & Scott, 2007), the knowledge of the principal investigators, and the technological experiences of the student research team members who have similar demographic and contextual characteristics of the potential sample population. The student research team members consisted of eight master's level family therapy students (one man, six women, and one non-binary-identifying person) (see, Hertlein & Ancheta, 2014, Hertlein & Twist, 2017, and Shadid, Hertlein, & Steelman, 2015 for further detail of original student research team).

Reliability analysis of the first 36 questions of the EEQ, which are composed of like-structured Likert-type questions, resulted in a Cronbach's Alpha of .92, which is considered evidence for a high level of reliability. Additionally, in checking for stability, if any item of the scale were to be omitted, the reliability would decrease, providing further evidence of stability in reliability. The factor structure of this part of the scale, as computed through exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis, was stable at three factors – accounting for a majority of the variance. The three factors were clearly split between the

three main areas of interaction being assessed in the questions, text, email, and e-chat – with the specific items loading onto the same factors. This factor structure provides evidence of face validity and structural validity of the first 36 items for the EEQ. Reliability statistics cannot be computed for the remaining items of the EEQ due to the questions being of different non-complementary design to allow for comparison. However, face validity for the remaining items can be assumed as all questions were developed through empirically sound research and are obviously connected with the subject being studied.

Since the focus of the current study was on the ecological elements, the second part of the EEQ is the section upon which we are reporting. The eight sections of this part of the measure equate to questions focused on each of the ecological elements questions (see, Hertlein and Blumer (2013) Appendix A: Ecological Elements Questionnaire page 203 for the full questionnaire). In the affordability section there are nine questions including multiple choice, and Likert scale queries (where 1 = very affordable and 4 = very unaffordable). For the anonymity section, there are a total of 7 questions, primarily based on the work of Qian and Scott (2007), and including multiple choice, as well as Likert scale queries (where 1 = no photo and 6 = revealing photo)³. The sample of questions for the accessibility section include 18 Likert scale questions of two different scales (where 1 = not at all accessible and 4 = very accessible; and 1 = never and 5 = frequently). The accommodation section includes 9 questions with one fill in the blank and the remaining on a Likert scale (where 1 = not at all and 4 = to a high degree). Both the agreement and approximation sections consists of 4 questions each, and both are on a Likert scale (where 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree). The acceptability section consists of 40 Likert scale questions of two different scales (where 1 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree, and 1 = never and 5 = frequently). The ambiguity section consists of 4 Likert questions (where 1 = not at all and 4 = a lot).

Procedures

The current study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This survey study was conducted at a large, metropolitan university setting in the southwestern United States during the 2012–2013 academic calendar year. The survey was administered in undergraduate courses, primarily in the family studies minor in this university setting. The students were given the option of completing the survey for extra credit. Again, this population of study was selected due to the reported heavy use of the Internet and engagement in technology-based practices during this particular developmental stage – that of young adulthood (HPI, 2010; PRC, 2013), which is categorically the bulk of undergraduate college students.

Results

For the purpose of this paper, descriptive statistics and frequency data is being reported. Our sample included an overall 53 individuals, which included 27 (51%) bisexual, and 26 (49%) same-sex oriented persons. The mean age was 23. Participants included 14 (26%) cisgender men, 38 (72%) cisgender women, and 1 (2%) transgender person. Twenty-two (41.5%) people identified as Caucasian, 9 (17%) as Hispanic, 3(5.7%) as Black, 1 (1.9%) as

Chinese, 2 (3.8%) as Filipino, 1 (1.9%) as Japanese, 1 (1.9%) as other Asian, and 14 (26.4%) as one or more combination of these ethnicities or a different ethnicity not listed.

The sample was typically educated for the age range, with 44 (83%) having some college education, 7 (13.2%) having completed a college degree, and 2 (3.8%) having completed an advanced (higher than bachelor's) degree. All participants had at least a high school education. Of those who reported ($n = 43$), a majority of participants ($n = 29$, 67%) made less than \$30,000 per year. Only 7 (13.2%) of the respondents reported living alone, with a majority of people living with parents ($n = 17$, 32.1%), some with a partner ($n = 12$, 22.6%), or others (such as a roommate, $n = 14$, 26.4%). Only one participant reported living with children (1.9%), and two with a partner and children (3.8%).

Nine (17%) of the participants reported having had 0 partners for penetrative and/or oral sex, with the remainder having between 1 and 30 different partners. 19 (35.8%) reported having 0 one night stands, with the remainder having between 1 and 40. Of the participants, 19 (35.8%) reported being not in a relationship with anyone at the time of data collection, 23 (43.4%) reported being in a committed relationship with one person, 6 (11.3%) reported being in a casual relationship with one person, and 5 (9.4%) reported being in a committed relationship with more than one person.

Accessibility

Overall, participants reported feeling pretty accessible to very accessible ($n = 46$, 86.4%) to others in a digital or technological format; with only 7 (13.2%) reporting being not very accessible – none reported being not at all accessible. Most participants reported a high level of independence around technology with 60.4% ($n = 32$) reporting that they do not share any technology with another person in their household; 15.1% ($n = 8$) share a desktop computer, 20.8% ($n = 11$) share a laptop, none share a tablet, and only 3.8% ($n = 2$) share a phone. A vast majority of respondents reported that having a smartphone or cellphone increased a person's accessibility to sexual interactions ($n = 48$, 90.6%).

Affordability

Overall, the participants believed their Internet technologies (cellphones, Internet service, and computer maintenance) were affordable to very affordable to a high degree (cum. 46, 86.8%). Only 7 people, or 13.2% thought their services were unaffordable to very unaffordable. Cellphones were rated as the most affordable, ($n = 49$, 92.5% rating as affordable to very affordable), followed by Internet services ($n = 47$, 88.7%) and then computer maintenance ($n = 42$, 79.2%). 43.4% ($n = 23$) of participants paid for their technology themselves, with 37.7% ($n = 20$) having a parent paying for their services.

Anonymity

Based on our previous findings (see Twist et al., 2017) related to anonymity, roughly two-thirds of the participated were not anonymous (in other words they were “out”) about their sexual orientation online ($n = 32$, 60.4%). In addition, participants reported that it was extremely unimportant for their partners to be non-anonymous or “out” online ($n = 23$, 43.4%) or offline ($n = 21$, 39.6%), and a little less than half of the respondents

Table 1. Acceptability and Sexting.

Please indicate to what degree...	Not at all	Low degree	Somewhat	High degree
Is sending nude or semi-nude photos via phone, email or other electronic communication to a partner acceptable?	11 (20.8%)	6 (11.3%)	16 (30.2%)	23 (43.4%)
Is sending nude or semi-nude photos via phone, email or other electronic communication to someone other than a partner (friend, etc.) acceptable?	23 (43.4%)	18 (34%)	8 (15.1%)	4 (7.5%)
Is displaying oneself as nude or semi-nude photos in person to another acceptable?	18 (34%)	17 (32.1%)	13 (24.5%)	5 (9.4%)
Is requesting an intimate encounter from someone via text or web-based communication acceptable?	10 (18.9%)	18 (34%)	16 (30.2%)	9 (17%)
Is requesting an intimate encounter from someone via offline methods (in person) acceptable?	9 (17%)	8 (15.1%)	17 (32.1%)	19 (35.8%)

($n = 23$, 43.4%) reported that being non-anonymous online was extremely unimportant to their relationship satisfaction. In terms of experiencing negative reactions from people online because of their non-anonymity about their sexual orientation minority status, a majority of the participants reported infrequent such exchanges ($n = 42$, 79.2%), with only a small number of participants reporting a measure of frequent negative interactions ($n = 5$, 9.4%).

Acceptability

When asked about sexting, 73.6% ($n = 39$) reported that “people sext just to sext,” however, 96.2% ($n = 51$) believed that sexting is a way to move toward a sexual encounter with someone. 71.7% ($n = 38$) report that sexting within relationships is acceptable, and 83.1% ($n = 44$) believe sexting in college communities is acceptable. Overall, respondents agreed ($n = 41$, 77.3%) sexting in the United States is acceptable, but disagreed that it was acceptable to send nude or seminude pictures or other media to non-partners ($n = 41$, 77.3%) (see Table 1).

Most respondents agreed that a romantic online relationship with someone other than a partner is *not* acceptable ($n = 38$, 71.7%), and that online sex with someone other than a romantic partner is in fact physically ($n = 38$, 71.7%) and especially emotionally ($n = 47$, 88.7%) damaging to a relationship. This is in contrast to respondent’s belief that sex without love is okay ($n = 44$, 83%). In addition, participants reported being comfortable with and being able to enjoy casual sex with different partners ($n = 34$, 64.2%), and disagreeing with a requirement to have a long-term or serious relationship before sexual activity ($n = 41$, 77.4%). (see Shadid et al. (2015) for further reporting on the technology-based ecological element of acceptability in LGB-identifying and heterosexual-relationships.).

Accommodation

In terms of online representation, most participants ($n = 30$, 56.6%) reported having 0 avatars in online profiles. When asked about the identity they portray online versus their actual self, most reported that who they present as online is similar to who they are in the ‘real world’ to a somewhat or high degree ($n = 39$, 73.6%), with only 14 (26.4%) reporting having a low degree or identity not at all similar to their actual self. Partners of respondents were mostly aware of their online identities ($n = 35$, 66.1%), with people other than

partners also knowing of online personas ($n = 32, 60.4\%$). 45.2% ($n = 24$) of respondents thought their online personas could not be connected to themselves in real life, or connected to a low degree ($n = 12, 22.6\%$). Of those who thought they could be traced back to their real life, 37.7% ($n = 20$) thought their online personas could be traced back to their real lives to a high degree.

Approximation

Participants believed that they were able to express themselves most highly through email ($n = 29, 54.7\%$), instant messaging ($n = 37, 69.8\%$), and text messages ($n = 49, 92.5\%$) – and least able to express themselves with video games ($n = 12, 22.6\%$) – meaning that for these respondents, email was the most approximating online expression of self to real life expression of self. When asked about online sex being the same as in person sex, participants believed there was a difference, and that they were not the same kind of intimate interaction ($n = 32, 60.4\%$ endorsing a difference), which means that the participants did not see online sex as a true approximation of offline sex.

Ambiguity

When asked about how their relationship “rules” impacted their sexual connections with others online, participants reported that pictures were the most regulated, at 64.2% ($n = 34$). Friendships ($n = 32, 60.4\%$ reported “Not at all”), who they can talk to ($n = 29, 54.7\%$ reported “Not at all”), and presence online were all very minimally controlled in a relationship, while most do report that they will post their relationship status online ($n = 30, 56.5\%$) after an agreed upon time/level of commitment in the relationship (see Table 2). Regardless of the expressed rules about connections with others online while in a relationship, participants do tend to have more miscommunications and arguments via digital media such as texting. Indeed, they reported higher instances of arguing with partners via text messaging ($n = 43, 81.1\%$), which may be related to the ambiguous nature of text-based communications.

Discussion

The survey data reported in this paper outlined various ways in which LGB persons manage technological elements within their relationships and in creating sexual experiences. Text messaging was reported as the most frequent method of sexting with current and potential partners, and the way in which most respondents reported establishing plans for sexual encounters (see Courtice & Shaughnessy; Eleuteri, Saladino, & Verrastro; and Hertlein, Nakamura, Arguello, & Langin, this issue, for more on sexting in relationships).

Table 2. Rules or standards of online interaction established within partnered relationships.

	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	A lot
What pictures you can post online	19 (35.8%)	17 (32.1%)	6 (11.3%)	11 (20.8%)
The friends you can have on social networking sites	32 (60.4%)	7 (13.2%)	6 (11.3%)	8 (15.1%)
With whom you can communicate online	29 (54.7%)	8 (15.1%)	7 (13.2%)	9 (17%)
Your relationship status on your online profile	23 (43.4%)	4 (7.5%)	12 (22.6%)	14 (26.4%)

Furthermore, in established relationships, participants reported that they felt most comfortable sending and receiving sexually explicit messages between partners via text and picture messaging. This is in connection with the reported fact that all technologies (cell-phones, Internet service, and computer maintenance) are considered an affordable and reliable method of assessing potential partners. Participants also felt as though they themselves were very accessible to potential and current partners through technological mediums, which matches previous literature that LGB-identifying persons often meet and form relationships online (Groves et al., 2014; McKie et al., 2015; Patterson, 2005; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012).

Despite partners being technologically accessible to each other did not mean their technological usage was without ambiguity. Indeed, the majority of the participants reported that text messaging with each other led to more instances of arguing when compared with interactions in an offline context. Such arguments may be related to the dissonance in communicating through analog versus digital mechanisms, and the related ambiguity in understanding what is the intended context, inflection, and other nonverbal cues in each of these forms of communication (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). Respondents appeared to have less ambiguity around what they could share with others as individuals and about their relationship. Indeed, partners regulated the posting of pictures the most, but most did not regulate friendships online, or regulate with whom their partner could talk online, and over half of participants did not post about their relationship status until an agreed upon time/level of commitment in the relationship. Again, in alignment with the previous literature, respondents in the current study seemed to have a low degree of ambiguity in their relationships when it came to technological exchanges inside and outside of the relationship (Albright, 2008; Groves et al., 2014).

In this study, LGB individuals in relationships tended to have a higher, more explicit, understanding of what is expected and acceptable within the parameters of the romantic relationship. Perhaps this level of clarity leads to a sense of lucidity around what is acceptable in the relationship and not. Indeed, in our study, the majority of participants believed that sexting within a relationship was acceptable and did not believe that sexting someone other than one's partner was an acceptable practice (Shadid et al., 2015). Moreover, although about two-thirds of participants did not see online sex as an approximation of offline sex, three-quarters of the participants did agree that online sex with someone other than one's partner was damaging to one's relationship and was not acceptable.

Perhaps what was most interesting and contrary to some literature was that the majority (two-thirds) of respondents in the current study reported not being anonymous about their minority sexual orientation identity nor about their relationships (Twist et al., 2017). In addition, most reported that they had not experienced negative consequences in relation to their online visibility (more than three-quarters), which could be related to the age of participants (the mean age of participants in the current study was 23). Indeed, younger generations are experiencing more acceptance for their identities and relationships than many previous generations (Becker, 2012; Fingerhut, 2016; HPI, 2017). Relatedly, LGB-identifying persons in the current study also did not report a high level of accommodation in their online and offline personas; meaning that almost three-quarters reported that their online self and their actual self are congruent to a high degree.

Clinical implications

Through this study, we sought to expand upon clinical practices in working with LGB-identifying persons around management of technology-based ecological elements as individuals and within partnered relationships. What we learned was that the bulk of many LGB-identifying individuals are already aware of the ecological elements (certainly not in name, but in practice) and how to manage them with some success in their relationships. This could be related to the longer use of technology in relationships by the community (Groves et al., 2014; HPI, 2010), and relatedly their historical and ongoing need to, and relative expertise in, managing e-visibility issues as individuals and in relationships – issues such as cyberbullying, cyberstalking, etc. (see Eleuteri, Saladino, & Verrastro, this issue, for further information on managing online risks in adolescence).

Regardless, it is no less important for family and sex therapists alike to be aware of the ecological elements and how they can both positively and negatively influence LGB-identifying individuals and relationships (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013; Twist et al., 2017). In this vein, it is essential for providers to be able to discuss the influence of these elements on the relationship particularly given that, because of sexual orientation minorities' quantity and prolonged history of use of such technologies, they are no doubt part of their relationships (Groves et al., 2014). It may also be necessary for clinicians to contract with LGB partners around how to manage technology in their relationships or perhaps to re-contract as technology is constantly growing and changing (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013). Part of this contracting will include establishing or re-establishing clear definitions, rules, roles, and boundaries around what is problematic and acceptable regarding technology in the life of the relationship.

For instance, in the clinical and research-based literature it is noted that, on average, LGB-identifying partners tend to be more accepting of negotiated consensual non-monogamy in online and offline environments (Groves et al., 2014; Hauptert, Geselman, Moors, Fisher, & Garcia, 2017; Shernoff, 2006; Weitzman, 2006). This may mean that when contracting and recontracting with partners around the technology-based ecological element of acceptability, family and sex therapists need to be prepared for potential conversations around negotiating consensual non-monogamy in both online and offline environments. For many providers, however, non-exclusivity in partnered relationships challenges their own conception of what is healthy in romantic relationships (Hymer & Rubin, 1982; Shernoff, 2006; Weitzman, 2006), and relatedly they can present as being judgmental and pathologizing of consensual non-monogamy (Lehmiller, Hauptert, Ryan, & Schechinger, 2016; Weber, 2002; Weitzman, 2006). In other words, many providers are monogamist⁴ (Blumer, Haym, Zimmerman, & Prouty, 2014; Twist, Prouty, Haym, & VandenBosch, *in review*). Moreover, researchers have found that many clinicians lack the necessary knowledge of consensual non-monogamy to be helpful to clients who seek support in managing such rules, roles, and relational boundaries (Belous & Bauman, 2017; Blumer & VandenBosch, 2015; Twist et al., *in review*). Thus, what at first glance seems like a straightforward and clear clinical suggestion – attend to the technology-based ecological elements in LGB-identifying relationships – becomes much more challenging when the elements intersect with other aspects of some LGB relationships that therapists often lack the awareness, knowledge, and skills to effectively address.

Finally, as contextual variables will undoubtedly always play a part in any relationship, but particularly in LGB relationships, where partners tend to be of more diverse backgrounds (Rosenfeld & Reuben, 2010; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012), including in the current study, it is essential that family and sex therapists attend to how cultural variables influence technology use, as well as how technology plays out across these variables (Hertlein & Blumer, 2013). Family and sex therapists will also need to be aware of their own contextual variables and how these influence the way that they work with LGB individuals and partnerships. For example, one contextual variable to consider is the degree to which providers themselves value and attend to technology. Indeed, family therapists, on average, have been slow to address the role of technology in the lives of clients (Blumer & Hertlein, 2015; Twist & Hertlein, 2016), and when they have, some of the more established family therapists have tended to hold a more negative view (Blumer, 2015) – bordering on technophobia⁵ in some instances.

Another contextual variable to consider is how the cultural background of the therapist (e.g. gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, political affiliation, etc.) intersects with their level of support for LGB-identifying individuals and relationships (Green, Murphy, & Blumer, 2010; Green, Murphy, Blumer, & Palmanteer, 2009; Twist, Murphy, Green, & Palmanteer, 2006). This is particularly important to attend to as researchers have shown that when family therapists are high in their support for lesbian and gay human rights they tend to report greater comfort working with lesbian and gay individual, couple, and family client-systems (Green et al., 2009; Twist et al., 2006). If this is the case, then what are the demographic variables of family therapists that are associated with greater support for lesbian and gay human rights? Researchers indicate that those with: lower levels of engagement in religious practices, a political orientation that is more progressive, and those who are female-identifying are contextual variables that are linked to higher support for lesbian and gay client-systems (Green et al., 2010; Twist et al., 2006). This means that when working with LGB-identifying client-systems around management of the technology-based ecological elements, it is essential that family and sex therapists not only address their self-of-the-therapist concerns around technology in their lives, but also in clinically working with sexual orientation minorities.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to consider the role of technology-based ecological elements in LGB-partnered relationships using an online survey. Results indicated that a majority of the participants reported that they were accessible via technologies, that their technologies were affordable, and that sexting within one's primary relationship was acceptable. In addition, most participants reported being out online about their sexual orientation identities and relationships, and being congruent between their offline and online presentation of selves. The majority of participants also reported that they did not believe online sex approximated offline sex, and participants reported a low degree of ambiguity regarding how to interact how with technology and through technology in one's partnered relationships. Clinical implications include increased awareness around the effects of ecological elements, and a need to address these elements in relationships.

Notes

1. For the purpose of this study, couples/relationships/partnerships are defined as individuals who are in dyadic and/or multi-partnered relationships as data collected reflect both relationship structures. In the extra-researcher citations, the term “couples” is assumed to refer to dyadic relationships only, unless researchers overtly stated otherwise.
2. Thompson and O’Sullivan (2016) did not break down views of pornography and cheating for non-heterosexual-identifying participants.
3. The anonymity section of the EEQ is not being reported in the current paper, as the researchers believe that previously reported findings (see Twist et al., 2017) from the SSPQ are a more accurate measure of anonymity, and thus a summary of findings from this latter measure are provided.
4. Monogamism is defined as the dominant belief that the only legitimate relational orientation is that of monogamous and the only acceptable relationship form is that of monogamy (Blumer et al., 2014 ; Twist et al., *in review*).
5. Technophobia is defined as the fear or dislike of advanced technology or complex devices, especially computers (Brosnan, 2002).

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Notes on contributors

Markie L. C. Twist, PhD, is the program coordinator, with Graduate Certificate in Sex Therapy Program, and associate professor at the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Wisconsin-Stout, Menomonie, Wisconsin. They/She is also visiting associate professor, Couple and Family Therapy Program, at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Nevada.

Christopher K. Belous, PhD, an assistant professor at the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Mercer University.

Candice A. Maier, PhD, an assistant professor at the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Wisconsin-Stout, Menomonie, Wisconsin.

Melissa K. Bergdall, MS, is an adjunct professor at the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Wisconsin-Stout, Menomonie, Wisconsin.

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