Online Social Networking Sites:

Meaning of SNS's to Gay Men from Non-Accepting Families

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Degree

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my Aunt Nell. Her unconditional love and acceptance of me gave me the strength and courage to live an authentic life. She has listened to me complain about the long hours of doctoral work to reach this point, reminding me to always see the progress made, and to be thankful of the opportunities in my life. She has been my rock, my foundation, my endless encourager, and my friend. For many reasons, I am forever grateful to her. This dissertation is dedicated to her.

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Abstract

The role of technology can be argued as changing the social landscape for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals. A 2009 survey of LGBTQ adults revealed over 70% of individuals self-reported using the Internet as their primary means of information seeking (Bond, Hefner, & Drognos). While traditional venues still exist for LGBTQ individuals in exploration of personal and sexual identities, the Internet serves as one distinguishing difference: anonymity. This study utilizes in-depth interviews, (N=15), to explore the experiences of gay men, from non-accepting families, who use online social networking sites (SNS) to reshape their perception of the world and of self. Findings indicate six emergent themes dominating gay individuals' usage of online social networking sites: (a) usage pertaining to curiosity, (b) involving social stigmatization, (c) coming out and imagined interactions, (d) accessibility and fear of rejection, (e) in relation to religious values, and (f) "I'm Gay:" Becoming LGBTQ, (see table 4.2). Narratives of the 15 participants paint a picture of SNS usage as an invaluable tool in the exploration and acceptance process of their being a gay individual, specifically in the context of having non-accepting families. The potential effects of gay individuals using online SNS include reduced internal conflict and expanded choice in exploring and defining their identity as well as an unintended effect of "Becoming LGBTQ."

Keywords: online social networks, lgbtq, internet

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Chapter 1

Introduction

"My father looked me right in the eyes and said get the hell out of this house! No son of mine is going to be a fag…"

(Quote from Eric, kicked out of his family home after disclosing his sexuality as gay).

Issues related to sexuality have become prominent in American culture and society over the past decade. With regards to homosexuality, the last two years have seen a queer revolution of sorts, as attention and national debate over topics of same-sex marriage and gay rights has been at an all-time high. In 2004, Massachusetts became the first state to legalize same-sex marriage (Benge, 2003). In the eight years between 2004-2012, the slow march towards equality saw same-sex marriage legalized in only nine other states, listed in order: California, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont, New Hampshire, New York, Washington, Maine, Maryland, and the District of Columbia (HRC, 2013).

Election day 2012 brought new milestones to the gay rights movement, as ballot measures in Maine, Maryland, and Washington state were passed by voters approving same-sex marriage; it had previously only been enacted through judicial or legislative processes. In Minnesota, voters also rejected an amendment to ban same-sex marriage, making it the first state to ever reject a proposed constitutional amendment that would prohibit same-sex marriage. These historic events marked the first win in 29 attempts, for same-sex marriage proponents at the ballot box.

In 2013 the positive shift continued, as seven states enacted laws legalizing same-sex marriage, almost matching the total of the previous eight years combined. They are listed in order: Rhode Island, Delaware, Minnesota, New Jersey, Hawaii, Illinois, and New Mexico

(Mullins, 2013). This led some activists to call 2013 "The year of the gay," or as Little suggests, "The gayest year in history" (2013, p.11).

The first four months of 2014 have seen the positive momentum continue as federal courts have ruled same-sex marriage bans unconstitutional in five additional states: Utah, Oklahoma, Texas, Virginia, and Michigan. Same-sex marriage is on hold in those states, pending appeal. Federal courts in 2014, have also ruled in favor of same-sex marriage in the state of Ohio, where a federal judge ruled same-sex spouses must be listed on death certificates; Kentucky, where a federal judge ruled the state must recognize out of state same-sex marriages; and Tennessee, where a federal judge ruled the state must recognize same-sex marriages performed out of state, but only those of the plaintiffs of the case.

Contextually, this timeline is important in recognizing the "unstoppable shift" towards equality that Little (2013, p.2) and others speak of. Recent 2014 rulings provide insight to the future of the gay rights movement in regards to same-sex marriage, as legal challenges to state sanctioned same-sex marriage bans have found success in traditionally conservative, red states: see Oklahoma, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Legal victories pertaining to same sex marriages were previously in traditionally democratic leaning, blue states, where ideology surrounding gay rights has been more favorable, or in federal court jurisdictions typically viewed as being politically slanted in more liberal ideology.

Towle (2014) points out the most recent ruling, Michigan's March 22, 2014 court decision striking down the state ban on same-sex marriage, was by Republican Judge Friedman, and was the 9th consecutive, republican appointed judge in three months to rule in favor of marriage equality for same-sex couples. Activists point to this and the Texas ruling by the conservative 5th Federal Circuit Court of Appeals as indication that marriage equality will

ultimately be the law of the land in all 50 states. There are currently 33 U.S. states with bans in place prohibiting same-sex marriage; five states where bans have been struck down, pending appeal, leaving 28 states with bans currently intact. Of those 28 states, lawsuits challenging the states' same-sex marriage bans have been filed in all 28, including Nevada and Oregon, whose Attorney Generals' have indicated to the courts they will not defend the states' bans in court, as they view them unconstitutional.

Not all attention has been positive or affirming views towards advancement of gay rights. As recent as 2012, voters in North Carolina amended the state's constitution to reflect that marriage is "between one man and woman" (Robertson, 2012, p. 2). In 2013, Oklahoma Republican Governor Mary Fallin chose to deny benefits to same-sex married national guard soldiers in the state, directly violating a presidential decree and Pentagon directive for states to issue equal benefits (Potts, 2014). Potts continues to say, when the threat of state funding was issued from the U.S. government, Fallin chose to deny benefits to all couples, including straight married couples, to avoid forced compliance with the same-sex directive. Faced with backlash from the state's citizens, Fallin eventually restored benefits to all couples and complied with the federal mandate (Potts, 2014).

In similar fashion in 2014, Oklahoma Republican lawmaker Mike Turner proposed a state bill to ban all marriages, after a U.S. Federal Court struck down the state's ban on same-sex marriage as unconstitutional. Turner says, "It's an attempt to keep same-sex marriage illegal in Oklahoma while satisfying the U.S. constitution" (Towle, 2014, p. 1). Also in 2014, the states of Tennessee, Arizona, Kansas, and Indiana attempted to enact "Religious Freedom Acts," legislation that would openly allow for discrimination based on sexuality, if one felt religiously compelled to do so (Bailey, 2014). Arizona's bill was met with such national backlash, led by

opposition from major corporations located within the state, that Republican Governor Jan Brewer eventually vetoed the bill after it was passed by the state's legislature.

Contextually, this brief history lesson of recent trends in the gay rights movement is important in laying the framework for understanding the experiences of the participants of this study. While issues related to gay rights and same-sex marriages have taken center stage, there is a hidden consequence; the unknown material affects these legal victories and ongoing conversations surrounding them, will have on the emerging identity and development of young gay individuals.

Research suggests gay individuals are coming out at a much earlier age (Grov, Bimbi, Nanin & Parsons, 2006; D'Augelli & Hershberg, 1993), citing cultural factors and increased acceptance as factors facilitating the disclosure of their sexuality as a gay individual. Now, more than ever, many gay youth find themselves emboldened and empowered by the positive view often illustrated in media towards individuals who choose to "come out."

They live in perhaps the most accepting period of American history towards gay individuals. They have no knowledge of Stonewall 69' or the march on Washington for gay rights in 1975. They lack the experiences and worldview that come with living in a contentious time in American history, a time where being gay was labeled as a mental illness and a crime (Coleman, 1987; Gross, 2001). There is no awareness of "Don't ask Don't Tell," no memory of Matthew Sheppard being beaten, his body dragged behind a pickup truck, all because of his sexuality. There is no knowledge of the history or the battles fought state by state to allow us to reach the current stage, where each week brings new federal court decisions, all pointing towards an evitable ruling by the United States Supreme Court on the constitutionality of same-sex marriage.

Today's gay youth are coming out at perhaps the very pinnacle of the gay rights movement. While today's gay youth lack historical context, their parents and family do not; their views on sexuality often shaped by decades of political framing and religious debates. When a gay youth comes out to his family, he may expect the warm, open embrace often highlighted in mainstream media. This isn't always the case, as seen in the opening quote from Eric, a participant in this study who shared his experience of coming out to his parents. Like many gay youth, he was unaware of the battles, stress, physical, verbal, and emotional abuse that would ensue, all because of saying to someone he loved, "I am gay."

The disclosure of one's sexual identity as gay, "coming out" has been identified as one of the most challenging developmental tasks for individuals who identify as LGBT (Savin-Williams, 2001; Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006). Stevenson (1988) found that prejudices and biases held by many parents do continue to have detrimental impacts on their gay children, as well as negatively affect their perceptions of and ability to be effective parents. This highlights the role of family acceptance of one's sexual identity to be incredibly important. Being openly gay, and accepted as such, has been shown to contribute greatly to one's psychological adjustment (Garnets & Kimmel, 1991), whereas non-acceptance from family can have grave negative consequences to the emotional and psychological development of the child (D'Augelli & Hersherberger, 1993; Strommen, 1989).

Purpose Statement

We have technology, finally, that for the first time in human history allows people to really maintain rich connections with much larger numbers of people. ~Pierre Omidyar

The Internet exists as a global system of interconnected computers. It has developed as a channel that enables an exchange of information, and by its' very nature the Internet allows dialogue and creation of social networking.

The Internet provides a veil of anonymity, and it often serves as a safe-haven for minority groups seeking refuge from judgment of a less accepting general society. This is especially true with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) community. The Internet allowed for the creation of online social networking sites (SNS), as safe venues for them to connect with other similar individuals; potentially revolutionizing the way LGBTQ individuals can explore and socially construct their identities.

New communication technologies like online SNS are conceptualized as tools for uniting people and ideas across distance, and the ascendance of SNS as vehicles for global connection of LGBTQ individuals is certainly worthy of examination. The impact of social media and SNS continues to reach outside the boundaries of the virtual, shaping our material reality with yet unmeasured effects. As a result, the need to understand the role of emerging social technologies on identity creation and management has never been more immediate. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered individuals (LGBT) and their symbolic messages, social identities, and norms have received curiously little attention in the psychological domains of SNS usage as a shaping force in identity creation and management.

This dissertation utilizes in-depth interviews and a grounded theory approach to offer in-depth analyses and exploration of the multifaceted and nuanced themes related to the experiences of gay men, from non-accepting families, who use online social networking sites (SNS) to

reshape their perception of the world and of self. It seeks to depict the intersectional dynamics of family life and sexuality, highlighting the emergence of SNS as a powerful tool in navigating and embracing the disclosure of their sexuality. It also serves to examine the function of SNS usage in the intricate dance with forces of repression and stigmatization, specifically in the face of family non-acceptance of one's sexuality.

Due to the effects of technology on the communication process, this area of research will continue to remain of high importance as studying SNS will allow better insight into how technology can shape the symbolic interaction of the communication process. There has been scant research on the implications of SNS, setting the stage for this study to advance both knowledge and theory, while expanding the ongoing communication conversation within both communication studies and LGBT studies. It may also help us better understand the ways in which gay youth, who have non-accepting families, are using new media technologies (SNS) as facilitators in the process of understanding, accepting, valuing, and disclosing one's sexuality.

Problem Statement

A review of relevant literature highlights the need to enhance theoretically based research related to gay youths' usage of online social networking sites, as existing research is antiquated and doesn't account for SNS usage. Prior research has examined online usage as a method for identity development in gay individuals (Donath, 1998; Aleman & Wartman, 2009; Wilson & Peterson, 2002), the use of the Internet for dating purposes among gay men (Gudelunas, 2005; Mowlabocus, 2010), as well as online spaces for sexual encounters among gay men (Campbell, 2004; Shaw, 1997). Existing research also highlights the use of the Internet as vital spaces of connection for LGBT individuals in rural areas (Gray, 2009).

A significant literature search however, found no studies that examined the usage of online social networking sites situated in the context of gay men from unaccepting families. Ryan, et al. (2010) notes the importance of acceptance as a predictive factor in identity development of gay individuals, while noting the role of family acceptance among LGBT youth has rarely been examined. The authors suggest extensive research has been conducted regarding the role of nurturing and supportive families and highlight findings that that suggest established, supportive family relationships appear to be effective barriers against major health risks and behaviors (Resnick, et al., 1997). While those studies exist, they are situated within the context of parental relationships with heterosexual children, and that only "a small number of studies have focused on the role of parent-adolescent relationships for lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth and young adults" (Ryan, et al., 2010, p. 205).

With family acceptance already a rarely examined area of importance, combination of SNS and family acceptance provides a unique opportunity for examination with this study. The importance is further strengthened when examining existing research that suggests a disproportionate number of LGBTQ youth are homeless (Pew, 2013) and that family rejection is the leading cause of homelessness among LGBTQ youth (Henderson, 2007). Ray (2006) highlights that according to numerous studies, over 50% of gay males receive a negative parental reaction when disclosing their sexuality as a gay individual. Even more alarming, according to the same studies, 26 percent of those coming out experiences were met with a parental demand that the gay youth leave the home (Ray, 2006).

Other studies show family rejection based on non-heteronormative sexual orientation to be interrelated with increases in suicide (Cochran, Sullivan, & Mays, 2003; D'Augelli, 2002; Eisenburg & Resnick, 2006; Meyer, 2003). Several studies found individuals who identify as

gay or bisexual, in comparison to those who identify as heterosexual, are more than four times as likely to attempt suicide over the course of their lifetime (Cochran & Mays, 2000, 2009; King et al, 2008).

Other studies examining gay youth from unaccepting families, highlight substance abuse problems (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2009; Ryan, 2009, Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009), victimization (Ryan & Rivers, 2003; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998), and non-accepted LGBTQ youth making overall poorer health choices (Russell, 2005; Wright & Leahey, 2000).

Given the negative consequences highlighted by existing research when coming out to non-accepting families, and the growing increase usage of online social networking sites, a unique opportunity exists to examine the meaning of these potentially vital spaces to LGBTQ individuals from non-accepting families.

It is also important to note the majority of studies examining online social networking usage, while notable, have employed only quantitative methods and have focused primarily on heterosexual users. Wilson and Peterson (2002) highlight the rise of interactive online communities and websites, credited to the rapid advent of the Internet, while Woodland (1999) suggests the increase in online communities and usage of SNS, while important for all people, is of particular importance to LGBT individuals. He notes the ability of SNS to foster virtual interaction among LGBT individuals in online spaces, where communication and interaction may have otherwise not occurred (1999). While this study is also timely situated within a period of appreciation of LGBT research, lack of research in the specific area of gay men from non-accepting families, also provides a perfect opportunity for this study to fill a gap in the existing literature.

In addition, further complicating the issue is that research surrounding gay identity development and usage of SNS varies greatly in focus and approach, and as noted by Yep (2003) is often silent within many academic disciplines. Yep observes that:

> Silences surrounding sexuality have been noted in many disciplines; the field of communication is no exception. Substantive conversations around issues of sexuality were absent for the first 61 years of the discipline's existence, but by the mid-1990s queer theory had directed attention to issues of sexuality and heterosexual privilege both in and out of academia. (p. 37)

Yep credits the rise of queer theory in the mid-1990's as creating awareness to issues of sexuality. This highlights another issue, as most LGBTQ research is situated within the critical approach of queer theory, which is problematic in that queer theory does little to explain the phenomena often studied by queer researchers. In fact, queer theory isn't really a theory at all; rather, it is an over-arching set of assumptions and preferred methodologies suggested for examining queer issues (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Sullivan suggests, "queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, and the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers" (2003, p. 43). This perhaps explains the absence of any real queer theory, and why a researcher examining "queer" phenomena must pull from theories originated from other paradigmatic approaches. This complicated approach to conducting research related to queer issues is evident in review of existing literature, as most literature pertaining to the topic of gay youth is situated solely in the critical approach to research.

Expanding the broader field of LGBT studies to include methodologies and theories that aren't from a critical paradigm may allow the study of LGBT issues to be perceived in a more

valuable way by the academic community– resulting in expansion of the field, particularly in regards to LGBT studies. This desire to move the field of LGBT studies forward is echoed by other queer researchers. Plummer suggests, "New languages of qualitative method benefit from new ideas that at least initially may be seen as opposition. This is how they grow and how the whole field of qualitative research becomes more refined" (2011, p. 197).

Examining the usage of online social networking by gay youth from non-accepting families expands the existing repository of literature, growing the field of both communication and LGBT studies. Situating the study within a non-critical framework also helps expand the field of LGBT studies by providing an additional approach that can be utilized in future research by others scholars seeking to examine LGBT issues. Furthermore, while there is no valued approach in conducting research, there are privileged perspectives. Positioning this study from an interpretative approach may generate increased visibility, enhance existing literature, and spark new ideas and generation of further research by scholars from all paradigmatic and methodological approaches.

Theoretical Assumptions, Context and the Role of Communication

Interpretative researchers operate under the most basic philosophical assumption that we can only know what we experience and the experience a person has includes the way in which the experience is interpreted (Merriam, 2009). Given the paradigmatic values attributed to context, it should be noted that this study was conducted and framed within the cultural and historical context of unprecedented awareness of LGBT issues and advancement of the gay rights movement. A cultural shift in ideology has sparked a "coming out" revolution of sorts, as many LGBT individuals find themselves emboldened and empowered with each increasingly positive shift, further highlighting their awareness and acceptance of self as a LGBT individual.

This presents a unique time and opportunity to observe and participate with research within the LGBT community.

This study takes an interpretivist, social constructionist perspective to study the phenomena of how gay and bisexual youth, from unaccepting families, utilize the Internet in seeking and developing personal relationships and social networks. This perspective allows a unique approach in exploring how they may use online social networking sites to shape their perceptions of self and develop their personal narratives as a gay individual who does not have the social support of their immediate family.

An interpretivist, social constructionist perspective is the appropriate paradigm of research because it helps illuminate the process of negotiating social identity through usage of online social networking sites, by showing how external influences such as communication and social networking sites can shape the lens of the participant, changing their perceived worldview.

Qualitative research is fundamentally, at the paradigmatic level, research that embodies the philosophy of social constructionism, which ontologically says reality does not exist in nature as a singular construct, rather multiple realities exist, and are socially constructed through an individual's unique experiences and interactions in the world. Epistemologically, those realities are subjectively meaningful (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) and this perspective allows and values the interpretation of humans in the co-creation of knowledge that flows naturally from the relationship of the researcher and participant -making it truly participatory research. Cresswell (2007) explains:

> In this worldview, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views….Often these

> subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically. In other words, they are not simply imprinted on individuals but are formed through interaction with others and through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals' lives. (p. 20)

These attributes are fundamental to an interpretivist, social constructionist perspective as they represent the core belief that the very foundations of knowledge in everyday life are subjective experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). In applying this perspective to gay men, from non-accepting families, and their usage of online SNS, one can better examine and understand the multiple ways in which meaning and sense making occurs as these individuals turn to the internet for social support in the absence of loving, accepting family members.

Fundamentally, the meaning exists within the socially constructed, multiple realities of the individuals, and because paradigmatically, the goal of qualitative research is not to seek generalizability, the experiences of the individuals can be truly examined and valued regardless of any similarities or differences noted in their unique, lived experiences.

Researcher

All research originates from a desire to learn more about a topic of interest to the researcher. We search for answers to our questions. We wonder why things are the way they are. We examine our curiosities. My sexual orientation is no surprise to those who know me, but that wasn't always the case. My identity development as a gay man has been shaped by many unique experiences. An abbreviated examination of those experiences highlights my positionality and explains my epistemological orientation to this dissertation study. Disclosure of these revelations are important in providing a clear understanding of the co-construction of findings of this study, as it is examination of my own experiences as a gay man, and curiosity around the usage of SNS that led to the exploration of this topic.

I often find myself wondering how different my own coming out process would have been if I had access to online social networking sites as a gay youth. Would I have come out sooner? Would I have coped more effectively with issues surrounding my sexuality? While those are questions I can't answer, exploration of others' experiences surrounding SNS can provide valuable insight into an area of personal curiosity, while providing significant impact to the field of study and existing repository of literature.

Growing up on a rural farm in Tennessee, I can recall around age 5 or 6 that I was different. I liked boys. I didn't have the terminology at the time to define it as being gay, or to even know what it meant. Don't mistake however, my lack of understanding terminology for confusion, as I was always aware of the person I was. I also knew it was wrong. How'd I know? No one ever asks a young boy if they have a boyfriend. It's always, "Do you have a girlfriend at school?" People tell you "Don't play with that doll, play with that truck." The expectations are set for you. You don't get a choice.

For a great deal of my childhood, my being "different" went unnoticed. I did boy things. I played in the dirt, and I liked cars and trucks. I played baseball, was a Boy Scout, played elementary and junior varsity basketball. I even tried out for the football team.

Junior High was different. Kids were mean. It was around that time I began to be bullied in school. One kid in particular, I still vividly see his face, would call me "Faggot" and "Queer" on a daily basis. He would throw me up against my locker and hit me. One day, he punched me in the nose, which resulted in a trip to the principal's office. He told him he hit me because I was gay. The principal laughed and sent me to detention for "instigating a fight." Soon after, I began withdrawing from school. I didn't want to play with other kids at recess. I thought about suicide a lot, and even wrote a note to my teacher that I was going to kill myself. That resulted in my

parents being called, and subsequent counseling, which helped with the bullying, but only intensified the feeling that being different was wrong. At home, things weren't much better. I remember my father yelling at me once, "Are you a fucking faggot?" There was no one to talk to, and I often felt alone.

Feeling desperate, I turned to my church pastor. Surely God could fix me. I was told that being gay was a sin and wrong, "If I chose that path I wouldn't be allowed to go to heaven when I died." He prayed with me, asking God to give me the strength to overcome my affliction. I remember that word specially- "affliction," like I had contracted a deadly disease that needed curing. For the next ten years I would pray daily asking God to please make me normal. Every birthday cake ended with blowing out the candles and making the same wish, "Please God let me not be gay." Eventually I quit praying all together.

Feeling desperate, I decided to focus my attention on academic success. The truth was, college would allow me to escape the confines and perceived prison walls of small town, rural America. No one in my family had ever attended college, so I would need a scholarship to make the dream a reality. In the face of adversity, I prospered academically, becoming one of the brightest and highest performing students in my school.

In high school, I learned to cover my sexuality exceptionally well. The bullying stopped. I had a girlfriend, had sex, and even asked her to marry me. In my desire to be normal, I tried my best to be everything that I wasn't. I was 18, and never had met anyone I knew was gay. My entire life had been spent in denial of the person I was, in feeling like I was a bad person, morally wrong, going to hell… and then, after receiving a full scholarship, I left home for college, eight hours and 500 miles away from home. Freedom at last!

I met the first openly gay person when I was 18. My first kiss and relationship would soon follow. With one toe in the water, I still covered my tracks and my sexuality well. I dated a cheerleader, was popular, and tried to do all the "right things." It wasn't until after graduation from college when I stayed in NC and moved to Charlotte, that I felt free to embrace my sexuality. I had gay relationships, went to gay clubs, did "gay" things, but I never told anyone I was gay. I hid in the closet. It wasn't until age 29 that I came out in a public setting. I was presenting my master's capstone, a video auto- ethnography about living an authentic life and I told my cohorts I was tired of hiding who I was, that I was gay. I received a standing ovation. I can't even describe that feeling, but I can only hope that every gay man has that defining moment in their life when they get the affirmation I received that night, and can proudly walk from the shadows of the proverbial closet into the light and peace that surrounds living an authentic life. It was only then that I recognized how my own attempts to convince myself to live a heterosexual identity had had considerable negative impact on my development as a gay man.

At 30, I came out to my great aunt who is 81, and like a second mother. In fact, this dissertation is dedicated to her. She told me she would always love me for who I am, and that nothing had changed. Just this year, at 32, I came out to my closest brother whose response was "I'm only mad because you felt like you had to wait until now to tell me."

I literally feel the emotion welling up inside as I write this, recalling my own unique experiences as a gay man. I think it is a powerful reminder of the importance of conducting research on this topic, and how these experiences matter. While usage of SNS wasn't an option for me until later in life, I often wonder if my own personal journey would have taken the same long, arduous path if I had the social support and access to social networking that is available to

today's gay youth. This study presents a unique opportunity to examine the experiences of others and the meaning they attribute to SNS usage in their own lives.

Research Question

Given that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds, this study seeks to better understand the meaning surrounding online social networking sites and their usage, for gay men. Crotty (1998) explains that meaning, however:

> Is not discovered. Meaning does not inhere in the object, merely waiting for someone to come upon it… Meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting. A qualitative researcher should be interested in (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences. (p. 43)

In seeking to gain a better understand of the lived experiences of gay men from unaccepting families, who use SNS, this study was guided by the following research question:

RQ1: What are the experiences of gay individuals, from non-accepting families, who use online social networking sites?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

LGBTQ use of online social networking sites and applications (SNS) is complex. This dissertation chapter examines literature that will help better understand and tell the multi-faceted story of gay men, from non-accepting families, who use SNS as a tool in identity formation, group membership, coming out, and self-acceptance.

Rudestam and Newton (2007) suggest a literature review provides "context for a study in addition to demonstrating why it is important and timely" (p. 62). Creswell (2007) suggests the use of a literature review in a qualitative study may be limited, and may not be exhaustive; rather it is serves as an overarching framework for the study being conducted. Charmaz (2006) situates the literature review of an interpretivist study as "an ideological site in which you claim, locate, evaluate, and defend your position (p. 162). Others like Glaser & Strauss advocate following a purist approach and delaying a survey of literature until after data analysis has been completed (1967). Glaser (1978) expands on that idea by suggesting review of literature prior to data analysis often results in creation of "received theory," or viewing of your data through the viewpoint of earlier ideas, and that a good literature review only sets the stage for defining the study at hand (p. 165).

Holding true to the paradigmatic commitments of an interpretivist approach, this literature review examines the sphere of LGBTQ, providing contextual insights into cultural and social expectations surrounding sexuality, queer vocabulary, and evolution of gay rights. Demonstrating importance and timeliness, statistics and research pertaining to bullying, homelessness, and suicide that plague gay youth will be examined. A deeper, richer exploration and application of material will occur with chapter three and four's findings and conclusion sections, as this study will then be situated within relevant literature, weaving a discussion of

applicable research throughout the findings of the study to better illuminate and understand the lived experiences of the participants. Situating the literature review within the paradigmatic reach of an interpretivist approach will allow insight into these areas, allowing a better understanding of the role of online social networking sites and applications in the lived experiences of gay men from non-accepting families, allowing one to better answer the research question of this study:

RQ1: What are the experiences of gay individuals, from non-accepting families, who use online social networking sites?

Below, relevant literature is explored:

Vocabulary

A lesson in vocabulary presents a unique introduction to a topic situated in LGBT studies, as many terms used in this study may be foreign to those outside the LGBTQ community. A list of LGBTQ terminology by Green and Peterson (2004) is included, with permission, in this study and is listed below. This list is in no means inclusive of the complete glossary of terms applicable to the LGTBQ community. Green and Eric's complete glossary of terms is included (see Appendix H). In addition, *An Ally's Guide to Terminology* by the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), is included with permission (see Appendix G).

Ally | A non-LGBT person who actively supports the civil rights of LGBT people.

Bisexual | A person emotionally, romantically, sexually and relationally attracted to both men and women, though not necessarily simultaneously; a bisexual person may not be equally attracted to both sexes, and the degree of attraction may vary as sexual identity develops over time.

Cisgender | Someone whose gender identity and assigned biological sex are not in conflict. Non-transgender.

Coming out | An ongoing process of becoming aware of one's sexual orientation or gender identity, accepting it, acting on it and sharing it with others.

Down-low | Slang term that refers to men who have sex with men but are either closeted or do not identify as gay. Most often associated with and has its origins in African American culture in the US.

Fag, Faggot | Pejorative term for a gay male.

Gay | A word describing a man or a woman who is emotionally, romantically, sexually and relationally attracted to members of the same sex.

Homo | Derogatory term for homosexual. Avoid.

Homophobia | Fear, hatred or dislike of homosexuality, gay men and lesbians.

Homosexual | (n. and adj.) A person who is attracted to members of the same sex. Of or relating to sexual and affectional attraction to a member of the same sex. Appropriate in medical or sexual contexts.

In the closet | Keeping one's sexual orientation or gender identity secret.

Lesbian | (n. and adj.) Preferred term for female homosexuals.

Lifestyle | An inaccurate term sometimes used to describe gays, lesbians and bisexuals. Avoid. There is no one gay lifestyle, just as there is no one straight lifestyle.

LGBT | An acronym referring collectively to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. In modern usage, the term LGBT is intended to emphasize a diversity of "sexuality and gender identity-based cultures" and is sometimes used to refer to anyone who is non-heterosexual instead of exclusively to people who are homosexual, bisexual, or transgender.

Living Openly | A state in which LGBT people are comfortably out about their sexual orientation or gender identity – where and when it feels appropriate to them.

Outing | Exposing someone's sexual orientation as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender to others, without their permission; in essence "outing" them from the closet. Outing someone can have serious employment/economic/safety/religious repercussions in some situations.

Partner | A term commonly used to describe an LGBT person's significant other / mate / spouse.

Passing | Describes a person's ability to be accepted as their preferred gender/sex or race/ethnic identity or to be seen as heterosexual.

Queer | An inclusive, unifying umbrella term for people who are LGBTIQQ, particularly used by teens and young adults. Historically, "queer" has been used as a derogatory word to demean LGBT people; non-queer people should not use it freely.

LGBTQQIAA Terminology

There are a multitude of acronym variations that reference the LGBTQ community. The most recent and inclusive at the time of this study is LGBTQQIAA. It stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queer, Questioning, Intersexed, Asexual, and Ally (Patton, 2014).

One has to move no further than the acronyms attributed to the community to see the complexity involved in an attempt to be inclusive. Drechsler (2003) provides an overview of the changing terminology within the community. What started as the "gay rights movements," gay being inclusive of the entire LGBTQ community, was changed to the gay and lesbian community. He then notes the changes to reflect GLB (Gay, Lesbian, & Bisexual), then GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, BiSexual, Transgendered), then LGBT, then LGBTQ (the inclusion of Q for Queer or those who question their sexuality), to LGBTQQ (Queer & Questioning – Queer in this instance becomes an umbrella term for anyone who is part of the community but doesn't identify as LGBT). We then see the adoption of LGBTQQI (I for intersex: internal sex is different from their biological sex), to LGBTQQIA (A for Asexual: identifying ambiguously with sexual orientation or gender). LGBTQQIAA is also seen (the additional A referencing Allies: those who are straight but support the gay rights cause (Drechsler, 2003).

Murphy, 2011, highlights the LGBT community as "one group, many colors," suggesting the spectrum of differences is what makes us who we are – a people marginalized based on sexuality. This is symbolized in the rainbow flag, the symbol of the LGBT community –"one group, many colors." Others argue this terminology is too complicated and serves as a divisive factor within the LGBT community (Drechsler, 2003). Drechsler suggests Queer as a unifying umbrella term that would allow the community to coalesce around each other and serve as an effective rally cry for the social movement. He does note however, in order for the group to come together and advance the movement, it will require willingness of people to label and identify themselves as "Queer" (2003).

Queer is sometimes referred to as an umbrella term that allows inclusion of any "non-straight positions" (Sullivan, 2003). Other times, it is synonymous with (LGBT), being Lesbian,

Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (Watson, 2005). That can be problematic, as current research utilizes "queer" as meaning questioning one's sexuality, adding questioning individuals to the LGBT group – making the umbrella term LGBTQ.

In this instance, being queer refers to a sub-group of the Queer group; while *queer* in general is seen as the creation and valuing of openness as related to sexuality, accomplished through deconstructions of what sexuality is (Doty, 2000). The very terminology is problematic to the advancement of the field as well as problematic to in/out group members. Sullivan (1995) poetically and powerfully describes queer as saying:

> Is he queer? Is a question that can mean a variety of things. In the mouth of a hostile heterosexual among his peers, it can be a form of a threat; among a group of homosexuals, it's a term of self-deprecation or friendliness. The words "homo" and "fag" and a slew of others are used interchangeably in the same way. It's a way in which one can assert one's identity and subvert it at the same time, to talk of the underlying fact of homosexuality while making light of its importance, seeing the humor of its otherness, and signaling by the use of the term that one is in friendly territory, among friends, within the "family"… It asserts a sense of community, without forcing anybody to be a part of it, and respecting those people who would rather maintain a compromised relationship with it. It is at ease with itself, a sophisticated product of a society with extremely complex ways of communicating with itself and with those outside it. (p.84)

Murphy (2011) takes a different approach, suggesting that coalescing under the term "queer" is problematic and acknowledges that there exists racism within the community. He states LGBTQQIAA is better because it allows people the freedom to identify independently. He suggests there exists a major injustice within the gay community from those in privileged

positions that fail to recognize the remaining subsets of the group (2011). This highlights in-group differences that will be examined in more detail in the findings of this study.

Avory (2012) suggests terminology is also important to outsiders of the LGBTQ community, and that correct usage of language is essential to developing a real understanding of LGBTQ issues. Avory also highlights items of concern for researchers conducting research within the LGBTQ community. For instance, Avory says researchers tend to "use the whole alphabet soup to refer to a specific population," and that the term LGBT should only be used to refer to those groups in combination, not individual subgroups of the community (2012, p. 1). She suggests the most important thing we can do is to accurately describe the subsets of a queer population correctly, saying:

> The queer population as a whole has been done a tremendous disservice because those of us in a position of privilege tend to ignore huge subsets of the population-particularly trans people, youth of color, homeless kids, etc. It is important to be clear and take note when you are making a statement…Define the subset clearly, then make your point. (p. 11)

Role of Theory in Qualitative Research

How research is conducted varies greatly based on methodological approach and paradigmatic assumptions, and is often defined by the language we use. Each approach, in terms of methodologies, paradigms, and language often mimics the current social climate and accepted research styles to which we ascribe. It would be difficult to engage in a quality study of queer issues without first reviewing the role of theory in a qualitative study, and a deeper examination of queer theory, specifically examining for function and fit within the study.

As a qualitative researcher ascribing to an Interpretivist paradigm, the role of theory in research is viewed differently from a quantitative, functionalist perspective. Most qualitative researchers adopt the rejection of the positivist conception related to concept and role of theory in research, instead favoring use of a theoretical description or pattern of evidence explanation (Hammersley, 1995). In an attempt to manufacture distance from a quantitative approach, the role of theory often takes on variable roles, is complex, and not well understood within a qualitative approach (Sandelowski, 1993). This can indeed be problematic, specifically when examining topics of queer theory, and will be addressed as part of this examination.

It is important to acknowledge my own commitment to an interpretivist paradigm as the paradigm of choice for the informing and guiding of my inquiry, and how prescription to that approach carries with it a basic set of assumptions on the nature of scientific inquiry, construction of knowledge, and role of theory within research. Specifically, this approach requires researchers to bracket prior assumptions and suspend any prior theoretical commitments (Mitchell & Cody, 1992). Ascribing to that perspective does not however, accept failure to develop theoretical sophistication, nor does it allow for ignoring existing scholarship that is relevant, as both are required for good qualitative research (Charmaz, 1990).

Queer Theory

The complexities of understanding the very nature of being "queer" leads one to an examination of queer theory as a potential guiding factor in conducting and examining research. One could mistakenly assume queer theory would be a set of theories used to predict or explain behaviors or relationships (depending on one's paradigmatic view), while adding heuristic value to the field of communication. Closer examination reveals that queer theory isn't really a theory at all; rather, it is an over-arching set of assumptions and preferred methodologies suggested for

examining queer issues (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Sullivan suggests, "queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, and the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers" (2003, p. 43). This explains the absence of any real queer theory; and why a researcher examining "queer" phenomena must pull from theories originated from other paradigmatic approaches.

Queer theory in North America first emerged in the mid-to late 1980s, mainly as humanities based response to what was viewed as a limited sector of gay and lesbian studies (Plummer, 2011). The foundation of queer theory, and the terminology itself is often attributed to the work of Teresa de Lauretis and Eve Sedgwick (1990), who suggested:

> Many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth century Western culture as a whole are structured—indeed fractured— by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century… and understanding of any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern Homo/heterosexual definition. (p.7)

At the heart of queer theory is the assertion that a radical stance pertaining to sexuality and gender must be sought. That approach must reject any fixed categories and view of normality (Sullivan, 2003). Even then, many queer researchers suggest the term "queer theory" is hard to define, and see the inability to define it as both a virtue of the study of queer theory, and a necessity when dealing with a set of assumptions that denies fixed categories, fixed identities, and normality (Watson, 2005).

Despite disagreement on what constitutes queer theory, queer researchers agree that certain themes highlight the assumptions of queer theory. Plummer, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln (2011) says queer theory is a stance in which:

> Both the heterosexual/homosexual binary and the sex/gender split are challenged. There is a decentering of identity. All sexual categories are open, fluid, and non-fixed. It offers a critique of mainstream or corporate homosexuality. It sees power as being embodied discursively… All normalizing strategies are shunned. Academic work may become ironic, is often comic and paradoxical, and is sometimes carnivalesque… The deviance paradigm is fully abandoned, and the interest lies in a logic of insiders/outsiders and transgression. (p. 201)

Historical review of queer theory highlights a set of assumptions rooted deeply and firmly in a critical perspective. There are implications for those guiding assumptions that highlight a distinct difference in the study of LGBT issues, and in the study of LGBT issues from a queer theory perspective and approach. Ascribing to the perspective and assumptions of, queer as a theory, limits the approach and scope of studying LGBT topics as situating yourself in a critical realm barters away the ability to approach queer topics from any vantage point other than critical.

With an examination and understanding of queer theory complete, it is important to note this study does not situate itself within the critical assumptions and approaches of traditional queer theory; rather it follows a grounded theory approach. Such an approach is the preferred methodology prescribed and accepted within the paradigmatic foundations of the interpretivist perspective.

Contextual History – The Gay Rights Movement

Bateson (1978) states, "Without context, words and actions have no meaning at all" (p. 15). With terminology and theory examined, a history of the gay rights movement provides key contextual information to understanding societal and cultural influences that affect gay men's recognition and acceptance of self as a gay individual. Examination in a historical context also highlights key recent turning points in the movement towards equality that demonstrate both the timeliness and importance of this study as it is situated historically at a very important time in the greater gay rights movement.

Cuomo (2007) emphasizes the importance of historical context in "dispelling false beliefs about lesbian and gay men, and establishing legislation that protects the rights of sexual minorities" (p. 75). Cuomo argues that most policies against gays and lesbians are homophobic in nature, and originate from a deeply rooted belief that gay individuals are undeniably and "categorically less morally valuable than others" (2007, p. 76). Cuomo also highlights the importance of historical examination, saying:

> Many public, cultural, and intimate spaces have been transformed (or at least are now informed) by a queer friendly revolution of sorts, but in other places oppressive sexual norms remain exceedingly powerful. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people experience greater comfort and freedom, but homo-phobic violence and vitriol are still quite common…Given the importance of sexuality in modern postmodern selfhood, and the fact that issues of difference and diversity are more widespread and heated than ever, it is not too dramatic to claim that greater understanding of American homophobia can provide key insights into the future of the movement" (2007, p. 77).

Author Michael Crichton (1977) is quoted as saying, "If you don't know history, then you don't know anything. You are a leaf that doesn't know it is part of a tree." This quotation nicely highlights the importance of understanding the history of a community you a part of. Hoffman suggests understanding LGBT history is important because it's history is not passed down generation to generation; because sexuality, unlike ethnicity, gender, or other visible characteristics isn't noted solely by looking at someone, therefore it must constantly be retold (2011).

Many active, open members of the LGBT community consider themselves well versed in the history and struggles of the movement, but in actuality know very little of the struggles faced by those who have paved the way before us. Highlighted below are some of the key dates in the gay rights movement. All dates until 2010 are as referenced in Boggan (2009) unless otherwise noted. Dates ranging from 2010-2014 are referenced from the Human Rights Campaign (2014).

Key Dates in the Gay Rights Movement

1924 | The first Gay Rights Organization was founded in Chicago. It was disbanded the same year due to political pressure.

1950 | The first National Gay Rights Organization was founded in Los Angeles.

1950 | "Lavender Scare" – a joint report was issued to Congress identifying gay individuals as "Perverts" and stated gay individuals posed a "significant threat to national security" due to a lack of emotional stability (Johnson, 2004).

1952 | The American Psychiatric Association labels being gay as a mental illness.

1953 | President Eisenhower issues Executive Order barring all gay individuals from working in the Federal Government.

1962 | Illinois becomes the first U.S. state to decriminalize homosexuality.

1969 | Stonewall Riots in Greenwich Village New York spark national attention.

1973 | The American Psychiatric Association reverses labeling being gay as a mental illness.

1977 | Anita Bryant and "Save Our Children Campaign" starts in Dade County Florida, setting off nationwide demonstrations.

1979 | 75,000 people march on Washington demanding Gay Rights

1980 | The Democratic Party becomes the first political party to embrace gay rights and part of their core party beliefs.

1993 | "Don't Ask Don't Tell" implemented in U.S. Military

1996 | "Defense of Marriage Act" (DOMA) signed into law

2000 | Vermont becomes first U.S. state to recognize civil unions

2003 | U.S. Supreme Court strikes down sodomy laws, legalizing homosexuality

2004 | Massachusetts becomes first U.S. State to allow same sex marriage

2009 | President Obama signs executive order granting same-sex benefits to federal workers

2010 | Under direction of President Obama, "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy is removed

2012 | President Obama becomes first sitting U.S. President to endorse gay marriage. Democratic party embraces gay marriage in national convention, President Obama becomes first U.S. President supporting gay rights to be re-elected to 2nd term, Tammy Baldwin becomes first openly gay individual elected to the U.S. Senate, Washington State, Maine, and Maryland all approve gay marriage by popular vote at the polls – marking first time even gay rights were won by popular vote, Minnesota voters vote down constitutional amendment that would ban gay marriage.

2013 | Minnesota, on the heels of defeating a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, pass gay marriage into law, Rhode Island and Delaware become 11th and 12th states to pass gay marriage, Defense of Marriage Act ruled unconstitutional by U.S. Supreme Court, Federal recognition of marriage is granted in states that currently allow same-sex marriage, Proposition 8 case is upheld by U.S. Supreme Court – Gay marriage returns to California. Gay marriage also becomes the law of the land in Hawaii, Illinois, and New Jersey.

2014 | New Mexico becomes the 16th state to pass gay marriage after the New Mexico Supreme

Court rules it discrimination to exclude gay and lesbian couples the right to marry. Federal courts strike down state constitutional gay marriage bans in Utah, Oklahoma, Texas, Virginia, and Michigan. Those decisions are currently stayed pending appeal. Addition partial rulings were handed down in favor of same-sex marriage in Ohio, Tennessee, and Kentucky.

Examination of the historical dates listed highlight a few key characteristics of the Gay Rights Movement. Many gay right's activist call 2013 the "Year of the gay" (Little, 2013), highlighting the monumental number of milestones for the gay rights movement. Goodwin (2013) calls it a "Landmark Year for Gay Rights," noting that a little over ten years ago, gay marriages weren't legal in any state, and in 2013 the number of states allowing gay marriages doubled from eight to 16.

Polling from the Pew Research Center highlights a shift in public opinion on the perception of gay men and lesbians. Charts from the Pew Research Center included in this study are maintained in their original format. The Pew Research Center "provides its research- free of charge- as a public service to policymakers, researchers, journalists and the general public, and encourages the use of our material in its original form" (Pew, 2013, p. 12). Polls from 2001 showed 57 percent of Americans opposed allowing gays and lesbians to marry, with only 35 percent favoring allowing gay and lesbians to marry legally (Pew, 2001). In 2013, the same polling showed a remarkable shift in public opinion, with only 43 percent of Americans opposed to allowing gays and lesbians to marry, with 50 percent favoring allowing gays and lesbians to marry legally (Pew, 2013).

Pew notes, “The rise in support for same sex marriage over the past decade is among the largest changes in opinion on any policy issue over this time” (Pew, 2013, p. 1). Pew also highlights the change in acceptance for gay individuals and for gay marriage is associated with the fact that many people now know someone who identifies as gay or lesbian.

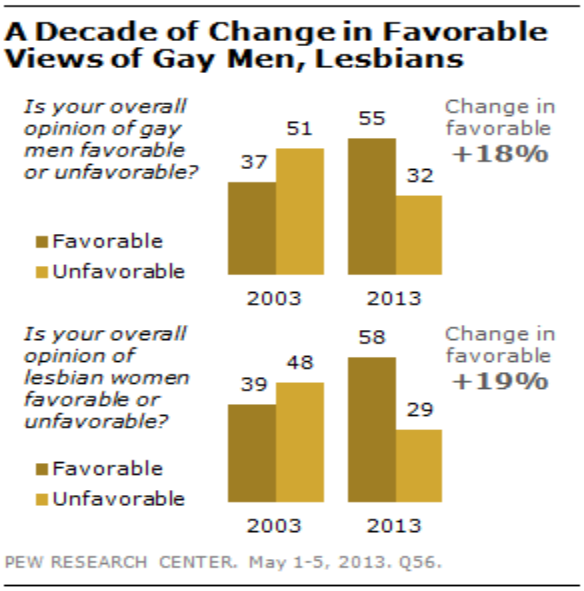


Figure 2.1. A Decade of Change In Favorable Views of Gay Men, Lesbians

This shift, now nearly nine-in-ten Americans, or 87 percent say they personally know someone who identifies as gay or lesbian. This is a 26 percent increase from 1993 polling that showed only 61 percent personally knew someone who identified as gay or lesbian. This is highlighted in the "Half Have 'Close' Gay Friends or Family" chart, used with permission from the Pew Research Center (2013). Examination of the history of the gay rights movement provides additional contextual value as it highlights an initial opposition to gay individuals and gay rights in this country from secular forces.

Half Have 'Close' Gay Friends or Family

Do you personally know anyone who is gay or lesbian?	Jun 1993 %	May 2013 %
Yes	61	87
No/DK	38	13
	100	100

Have close family members or friends who are gay or lesbian?	May 2013 %
Yes	49
No/Don't know	51
	100

How many people who are gay or lesbian do you know?	
A lot	23
Some	44
Only one or two	19
None/Don't know	13

Know any gay or lesbian people raising children?	
Yes	31
No/Don't know	69
	100

PEW RESEARCH CENTER, May 1-5, 2013. Q59-62. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding. June 1993 survey by NBC News/Wall Street Journal.

Figure 2.2. Half Have 'Close' Gay Friends or Family

The government was the entity telling a person that being gay was a crime, a sickness, and a mental illness. In 1952, the American Psychiatric Association labeled being gay as a mental illness, even though research at the time didn't support that claim (DSM, 1952). It would take 21 years until that decision was reversed. After the Lavender Scare in 1950, when gay people were labeled perverts and considered threats to national security by the U.S. government, Eisenhower in 1953 would sign an executive order barring gays from the federal government (Johnson, 2004). It would take 56 years until President Barrack Obama became the first president to issue an executive order granting rights to gay individuals and their partners in the federal government. President Obama would also appoint the first openly gay person as a member of his cabinet, making her the highest-ranking openly gay official in the U.S. government (Boggan, 2009).

History highlights 1962 as the year Illinois would become the first U.S. State to de-criminalize homosexuality. It would take a Supreme Court ruling in 2003, 41 years later, to strike down the remaining U.S. state sodomy laws. At the time, it was still illegal to be gay in 13 states (Boggan, 2009). Government policies like "Don't Ask Don't Tell" would stand for 17 years, sending the message that you can serve this country, risking your life to protect the ideals of our founding principles, but only as long as you stayed *in the closet*. The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) would also stand as the law of the land for 17 long years, denying legally married gay couples the nearly 1200 federal benefits allotted to same sex couples – solely on the basis of sexual orientation (Boggan, 2009).

History also highlights two monumental moments in the gay rights movement. The first is 1969, and the Stonewall Riots in Greenwich Village, NYC. Local police had harassed the gay bar for months citing a desire to decrease perversion in the community (Fejes, 2010). In 1969,

gay community members fought back in what would be historically remembered as the Stonewall Riots, a turning point in which LGBTQ people took a stand and fought back. President Obama in his 2012 inauguration speech cited Stonewall in the same sentence with Selma and Seneca Falls, highlighting gay rights as a battle for equality just like women's rights and the civil rights movement.

While Stonewall is often referenced as the place it all started, the advancement of the gay rights movement is often attributed to the year 1977, and a campaign by Anita Bryant and Jerry Fallwell dubbed, "Save Our Children" (Fejes, 2010). The battle was in Miami, Florida where Dade County had passed an ordinance granting gay rights. Bryant would assemble a campaign to overturn the ordinance by having it placed on the local ballot. They marched and protested under the rallying cry "Save Our Children," perpetuating the myth gay people wanted to corrupt children and make them gay too. The campaign was successful as the measure was struck down with over 70% of voter approval (Boggan, 2009). While the campaign may have won in Florida, it garnered national attention and was on the cover of every major newspaper. It served as a rally cry to gay individuals, who from New York, to Dallas, to California staged rallies, protests, and demonstrations across the U.S. The "SOC" campaign galvanized and mobilized the gay community in a way not even the Stonewall Riots could. It became the first time the gay community came together from coast to coast to demand equality. It culminated in 1978, when 75,000 people marched on Washington D.C. in a sign of solidarity for gay rights. While Stonewall must be remembered for its importance, it was Florida and the "Save Our Children" campaign that served as the catalyst for first bringing the gay community together.

The "SOC" campaign also serves as a turning point from secular opposition to gay rights to the battle being picked up by religious organizations (Fejes, 2010). In a 1984 speech, Jerry

Fallwell said “[homosexuals are] brute beasts… part of a vile and satanic system that will be utterly annihilated, and there will be a celebration in heaven.” That message of hate is still being spread by some religious organizations today.

Generational Shift

As noted by the Pew Research Center, the shift in public opinion polling on gay rights, and overall acceptance of gay and lesbian individuals was one of the largest shifts in public opinion polling of any issue over the last decade (Pew, 2013). With the history of the gay rights movement, and examination of secular forces as the guiding voices in the anti-gay movement, an examination of current settings adds to the rich value that contextual understanding brings to examining this study. It can be argued that millennials are leading the charge in the current shifting societal views towards sexuality. In a March 2013 Pew poll, 70 percent of millennials aged 18-32 supported same sex marriage, almost twice the percent of baby boomers whose support stood at 38 percent. Goodwin (2013) credits this generational gap in support to enhanced visibility, saying:

> Actress Jodie Foster, and NBA player Jason Collins, both formally came out as gay in 2013. But among many younger Americans, the idea of being in the closet itself is becoming increasingly antiquated. In California, high school students elected the nation’s first transgendered homecoming queen, and mainstream TV shows like “Glee” have depicted young, openly gay teens for years.

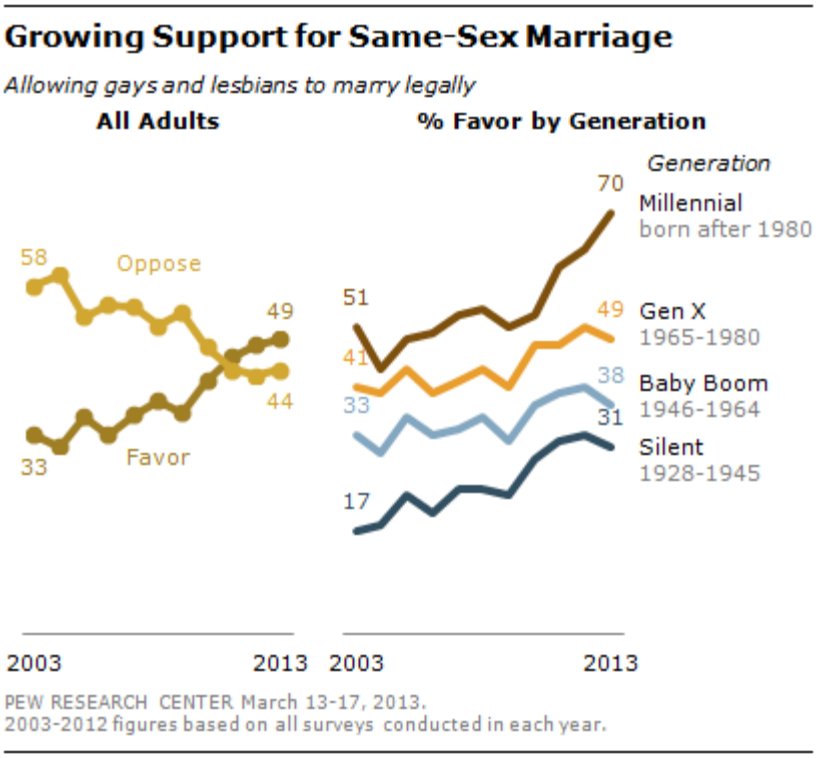


Figure 2.3. Growing Support For Same-Sex Marriage

This represents a stark contrast to the America of 40 years ago, where being gay would not have only ended your career, you would be labeled as having a mental disorder and a sickness. This was a time when "it [being gay] was almost universally considered an act of immoral depravity, and often a crime to boot" (Miller, 2012, p. 8). Miller recalls the time where being gay was a sociopathic personality disorder, and how society branded gay individuals as not only being sick, but being evil, "practitioners of perverse sex, not only seen as criminals, but as victims of mental illness" (Miller, 2012, p. 8). This view was being spread as early as the 1860s with Australian psychiatrist Richard Von Krafft-Ebing citing homosexuality as a "deviant" sexual practice, akin to necrophilia in his book *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Miller, 2012). Miller cites this book as a cornerstone of many sex-crime cases, and a guiding force in shaping the public concept of what it means to be gay (2007).

Understanding the history of the gay rights movement is important because it allows a contextual view of the issue. Geertz (1973) suggests contextualization is critical to developing a rich, thick description of the events we are studying. In the case of gay men, from non-accepting families, using SNS, it allows important insight into historically homophobic beliefs and practices, as well as highlighting the cultural shift seen in the current millennial generation of Americans.

The Pew Center indicates the millennial generation is the most supportive generation ever of gay rights (2013). Pew indicates a growing demographic gap; in 2003, millennials made up only 9% of the adult population, and 27% today (2013). The Pew research also shows an increase in seniors, referred to as the silent generation. Support increased in that category from 17 percent in 2003, to 31 percent in 2013.

The growing support for equal rights for gay and lesbian individuals continues to be an issue led by support among young adults age 18-32. With age discrepancies continuing to grow in numbers, momentum and support for gay and lesbian rights should continue on an upward, positive trend.

Partisan Shift in Ideology

Also at play in the cultural shift in attitudes about gay and lesbians, is the shift in political ideology. Traditionally, political figures have been divided along party lines, with the Republican Party strongly opposed to issues of equality, and the Democratic Party more likely show support (Goodwin, 2013). This trend can be seen when examining the historical history of the gay rights movement outlined above, specifically the Democratic Party's embrace of gay rights as part of their core party beliefs in 1980, and President Obama's embrace of the LGBTQ community (Boggan, 2009).

Until recent years, this issue was always seen in a partisan way, with no republicans openly in support of gay marriage or other gay right's issues, and few democrats openly voicing disapproval of the same issues. Shifts are now being seen along political lines, as seen in November of 2013 when seven Senate Republicans broke rank and joined the entire Democratic Caucus in supporting the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), which would make it illegal for someone to be fired based on sexuality (Goodwin, 2013).

In February 2013, more than 100 prominent members of the Republican Party signed a brief with the U.S. Supreme Court in support of a constitutional right to marry. Among those was Senator Rob Portman of Ohio, who announced his support for gay rights and marriage along with the declaration that his son had come out to them a year earlier, as gay. Portman became the first nationally elected member of the Republican Party to cross lines on this historically partisan

issue (Goodwin, 2013). In April 2013, Republican Senator Mark Kirk of Illinois became the second sitting national member of the Republican Party to favor gay marriage. In June 2013, Kirk was followed in support by Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska (Ball, 2013). All three indicated shifts in thought on the issue due to personally and closely knowing someone who identifies as gay or lesbian. A July 2013 Gallup poll suggests support of gay rights, specifically gay marriage, among U.S. voters who identify as Republican at less than 30 percent nationwide. The same Gallup poll shows nationwide support among U.S. voters who identify as Democrats at 60 percent.

One guiding factor that seems to allow people to set aside political affiliation and support gay rights seems to knowing someone who identifies as being gay. This is highlighted in Republican Senator Rob Portman's rationale for being the first national Republican to support gay marriage, in addition to individuals polled in a 2013 survey by the Pew Research Center entitled "Why People Have Changed Their Minds," used above with permission from the Pew Research Center.

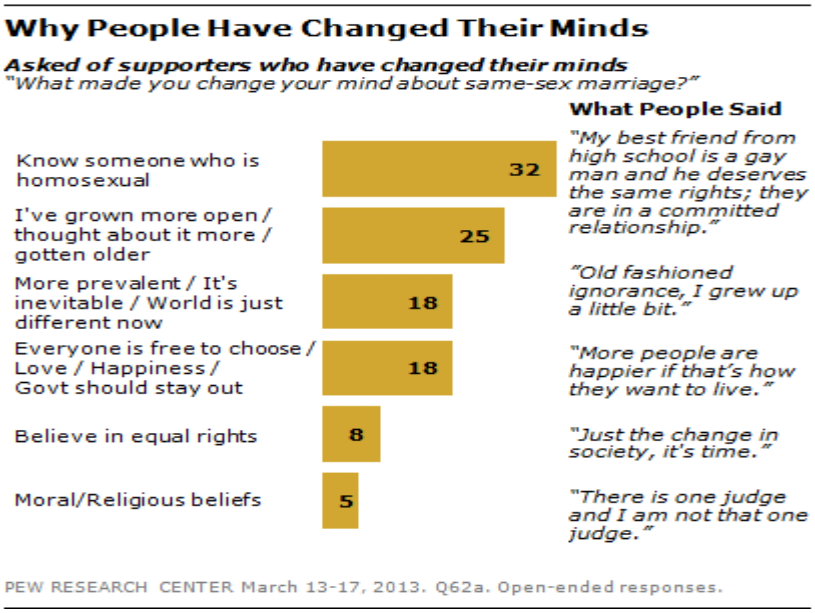


Figure 2.4. Why People Have Changed Their Minds

It is important to note that while many Americans are now more informed on what it actually means to be gay, the "queer friendly revolution" Cuomo (2007) discussed, has failed to reach many parts of America. In many places, staunch opposition to gay rights and homophobia still exists. In Oklahoma, where a federal judge recently ruled the state's ban on gay marriage was unconstitutional, Representative Mike Turner is proposing a bill that would prevent the state from legally recognizing any marriage (Towle, 2014). Citing Oklahoma's 2004 passage of a constitutional ban on gay marriage by 75% of the state's voters, he suggests Oklahomans would rather not have any marriages legally recognized, than to allow gay people the right to marry, saying, "It's a terrible day for Oklahoma that this has happened" (Towle, 2014, p. 1).

This follows the 2013 efforts of the Oklahoma Republican Governor to deny benefits to all Oklahoma National Guard soldiers, to avoid having to comply with a Department of Defense mandate allowing benefits to the families of legally married gay military personnel (Stern, 2013). Mission America's Linda Harvey, also from Oklahoma, took the opposition one step further saying:

> The infuriated "gays" are all closet heterosexuals; terrified someone will find out and blow the lid off this movement. The reality is, no one is a homosexual and everyone is a heterosexual. And those who have developed, fantasized and nurtured those "gay" feelings really don't like reality. It makes them want to attack. Or it makes them start vicious organizations like GLAAD, to make the lies seem real and respectable. (Potts, 2014, p. 2)

Religious Views

While generational and partisan shifts can be seen as accounting for some of the recent advances in positive public opinion towards gay and lesbian individuals, it is to be noted one primarily area that has seen relatively little change in attitudes – religious groups (Pew, 2013).

While Pew polling indicates overall public acceptance of homosexuality has increased substantially since 2001, 56 percent of Americans agree that "same-sex marriage would go against my beliefs," a shift down only 6 percent from levels seen 10 years ago (Pew, 2013). A 2013 Gallup poll indicates similar positions in regards to religious impact on views towards sexuality, with individuals who say they practice "no religion" indicating support of same-sex marriage at a 77 percent level (Gallup, 2013). According to the same survey, those who "Rarely/Never attend church," indicate support for same-sex marriage at 67 percent, while those who "Attend church weekly" indicating support at only 23 percent with 73 percent opposition (Gallup, 2013).

Majorities in Most Religious Groups Say Same-Sex Marriage Would Violate Religious Beliefs

Same-sex marriage would go against my religious beliefs	Oct 2003 Agree %	Oct 2003 Disagree %	March 2013 Agree %	March 2013 Disagree %	Change in agree
Total	62	33	56	41	-6
Protestant	70	26	67	32	-3
White evangelical	84	14	83	16	-1
White mainline	58	38	44	54	-14
Black Protestant	66	27	64	36	-2
Catholic	65	31	62	35	-3
White Catholic	69	27	70	29	+1
Unaffiliated	18	76	24	73	+6

PEW RESEARCH CENTER March 13-17, 2013. Q65a. Oct 2003 asked about "gay marriage."

Figure 2.5. Majorities in Most Religious Groups Say Same-Sex Marriage Would Violate Religious Beliefs

In a 2012 executive summary the Human Right's Campaign (HRC) highlighted a clear understanding of the religious issue, with a memorandum titled "The pro-LGBTQQIA movement has a RELIGION PROBLEM" (HRC, 2012). They state that in all the opposition to advancement of gay rights, religious opposition remained the strongest, saying:

> In all these, the primary voice and face of opposition to LGBTQQIA families is a religious one. Additionally, the primary anti-LGBTQQIA organizing strategies utilize language, culture, and strong networks of local religious congregations. In other words, the primary opposition to LGBTQQIA people and families is religious- in language, culture, strategy, and organizing (HRC, 2012).

Interestingly, the same executive summary indicates one of the most power positive forces in advancing the gay right's movement over the past five years is religion (HRC, 2012). HRC cites prominent religious figure's support of the equality movement, and the media coverage of that support as a powerful, positive force in the reshaping of ideas around equality and religion (2012). Indeed, equality activists are now championing support in religious arenas as the potential "game changer" in the gay right's movement (Ball, 2013). In a 2012 watershed moment for gay rights, Maryland voters passed a resolution in support of gay marriage with 52 percent of the vote, marking the first time gay marriage has been passed by popular vote (Linskey, 2012). Key to that victory was having the support of local religious leaders and advocacy within their communities and congregations, for marriage equality (Ball, 2013).

Equality activists are increasingly looking for religious support as a viable method of creating the energy needed to spark a real change in religious attitudes towards homosexuality. Indeed, changing the religious tone towards homosexuality may be the last step in moving the gay rights movement forward. Six months into his papacy, Pope Francis shocked the world and

the Roman Catholic Church, with his comments that the church had grown obsessed with gay marriage, among other social issues (Goodstein, 2013). He would later say that while the church has a right to express its opinions, it does not have the right to "interfere spiritually" in the lives of individuals who are gay, saying "If someone is gay, who searches for the Lord and has goodwill, who am I to judge?" (Thompson, 2013). This marks a stark contrast to a message of intolerance often seen within religious organizations. The impact of this change in tone should not be understated, as the Roman Catholic Church has over 1.2 billion members worldwide, and is the largest Christian church in the world. In addition, 31% of Americans indicate they were raised in the Catholic Church (Pew, 2012).

Gay Identity Development and 'Coming Out'

Review of literature has illustrated that homophobia is not a matter of individual personality. It's a pattern of cultural representation deeply engrained in the practices, discourses, and subjectivities of our society. The government was the entity telling people that being gay was a crime, a sickness, and a mental illness. Now, the fight is within religious battles. We live in a society that has and still says, being gay is synonymous with being less than. It takes time to overcome that.

Having an understanding of the historical context surrounding the treatment and labeling of homosexual individuals and the trajectory of the greater gay rights movement, literature will now be examined pertaining to gay identity development and the coming out process of gay individuals.

Rust (2003) identifies what is commonly referred to as *coming out,* as "the process by which individuals come to recognize that they have romantic or sexual feelings toward members of their own gender, adopt lesbian or gay identities, and then share these feelings with others" (p.

227). The sharing with others that one is gay or lesbian is an anxiety filled, fearful event that has the potential to negatively or positively impact the individual revealing their sexuality, in very powerful ways (Brierly, 2000; Ford, 2003, Wilchins, 2004). Coming out is not a singular event in a person's life; rather it is a process that takes place over and over again, throughout the life of a person, highlighting the fact that coming out is a complex, multi-faceted series of lifetime events (Bochenek & Brown, 2001).

A study by the Human Rights Campaign (2004) found that "coming out" for homosexual people, is a lifelong journey. Existing literature outlines the benefits of coming out, highlighting an increased sense of self-worth and value to the individual, resulting in an overall decrease in stress and anxiety (Hershberger, 1995). The taboo nature of this topic causes undue emotional distress to many LGBTQ individuals seeking to disclose their sexuality as part of their own coming out process. Lasser and Tharinger (2003) proposed the term "visibility management," to refer to the process of constant decision making by LGBTQ individuals, in making the determinations of whether to disclose their sexuality, to whom, and how. Lasser and Tharinger also suggest that "coming out" is an event, while "visibility management," is a complex process with strategic and continual implementation over the course of one's life.

In understanding *the closet*, one must first examine what constitutes being closeted. Rasmussen (2012) suggests, "A person may be considered closeted if they live without disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity. Alternatively, someone who declares his or her sexual orientation or gender identity publically may be construed as having *come out* (p, 144).

Coming Out

There are benefits to coming out. It is often attributed with a sense of empowerment among individuals who disclose their sexuality (Rasmussen, 2012). Boutilier (1994) says, "I

have found that the process of coming out, leaves no room for turning back. The experience has reaffirmed my personal commitment to challenging myself to face the worst of my fears" (p.141). Others reify the idea that coming out is a beneficial process, and while difficult, is likely to be beneficial in the lives of the individual (Teleford, 2003).

Coming out is not always a positive experience for the individual, as research has shown the existence of many difficulties and fears associated with coming out, especially for young people (Rasmussen, 2012). Teleford (2003) says:

> Pressures not to come out might be allied to a young person's racial or ethnic background, their family's religious affiliations, or to family threats- real or implied- regarding the withdrawal of financial support…Fears about being cut off financially seemed to be an important factor for the young person when deciding to come out. (p. 137)

While withdrawal of financial support is of concern to most LGBT youth, research suggests far more dire consequences sometimes associated with coming out. Halady (2013) highlights statistics from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) showing youth who identify as LGBT are four times more likely to attempt suicide, than youth who identify as heterosexual. Paul (2002) notes that while suicidal attempts are high in LGBT youth, incidences of suicide and prevalence of suicidal thoughts remain significantly higher in adults who identify as LGBT, in comparison to heterosexual adults. Cochran & Mays (2000, 2009) and Haas et al., (2011) identified individuals identifying as LGBTQ at a greater risk for suicidal tendencies than heterosexuals. A 2008 meta-analysis by King et al., further found in comparison to heterosexual men, gay and bisexual men are four times more likely to attempt suicide over the course of their

life. The same study also showed lesbian women more than twice as likely to attempt suicide over their lifetime (King et al., 2008).

The Suicide Prevention Suicide Center notes social stigma as a contributing factor to the elevated levels of attempted and actual suicide among LGBT individuals (2008). They state social stigma is faced by openly gay individuals as well as closeted individuals who are perceived to be gay, noting:

> This stigma often manifests itself in physical and emotional violence against LGBT people, as well as in discrimination by family, friends, community members, and employers. Fear of violence and discrimination leads to high levels of secrecy regarding LGBT identities and relationships, as well as a general unwillingness to disclose one's LGBT identity, which is commonly referred to as living 'in the closet.' (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2008)

Meyer (2003) provides a conceptual framework referred to as the minority stress model, highlighting health disparities that LGBTQ individuals face. The model indicates LGBTQ individuals experience chronic stressors such as homophobia, abuse, bullying, etc., that are specific to their LGBT identities. Meyer suggests those unique stressors have a cumulatively denigrating effect on the mental health of a LGBT individual (2003), which in turn can lead to depression and suicidal thoughts.

Bullying

In addition to social stigma, many gay individuals, specifically gay youth, face bullying (CDC, 2011). A recent increase in media attention due to the tragic and multiple accounts of gay youth committing suicide, due to bullying, has heightened focus on this area of concern. Multiple studies have examined the link between sexuality and bullying and have found that either being gay, or the perception of being gay by one's peers leaves LGBTQ youth particularly vulnerable

to bullying (Berlan, Corless, & Field, 2010; Williams & Connolly, 2003, Friedman & Koeske, 2006).

Similar studies have examined the impact of bullying and found it to be linked to risky health behaviors, depression, mental illness, poorer quality of life in comparison to those not bullied, and in some cases attempted or actual suicide (Carlyle & Steinman, 2007; National Center for Education Statistics, 2011; CDC, 2011). The CDC identifies students who are gay, bisexual, lesbian, or transgendered are five times more likely to miss school due to feeling unsafe because of bullying, with 28 percent of those students feeling forced to drop out (2011).

A 2010 cross longitudinal study of 28,000 eighth, 10th, and 12th graders in Massachusetts found that 14 percent of eighth graders, 11 percent of 10th, and nine percent of 12th graders said they had been bullied within the past month for being gay, or being perceived as gay (Patrick, 2013). In line with the 2011 CDC statistics of LGBTQ youth attempted suicides, 26 percent of the male students bullied for being gay, or perception of being gay, reported strong anxiety and thoughts of suicide within the last year, in comparison to only 8 percent of those not being bullied (Patrick, 2013).

An additional 2010 cross longitudinal study of 32,000 teenagers across 34 counties in Oregon, titled: *The social environment and suicide attempts in lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth*, found that LGBTQ teenagers were 32 percent more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (Hatzenbuehler, 2011), with that number increasing among gay teenagers who indicated they lacked a supportive social networks at home or school.

The It Gets Better Project is a nationwide organization that focuses on LGBT bullying and spreading a positive message of hope through shared experiences of LGBT narratives and story telling. By having LGBT individuals spread a message of hope: “It Gets Better,” the

organization strives to combat the negative effects of bullying in the lives of LGBTQ youth. They offer an information sheet of statistics (n.d.).

Some examples include:

- 9 out of 10 LGBT students have experienced harassment at school.
- LGBT teens are bullied 2 to 3 times as much as straight teens.
- More than 1/3 of LGBT kids have attempted suicide.
- LGBT kids are 4 times as likely to attempt suicide then our straight peers.
- Gays and lesbians are the most frequent victims of hate crimes
- An estimated 40% of homeless youth identify as being LGBT
- Approximately 28% of gay and lesbian youth drop out of school due to bullying
- Gay students hear anti-gay slurs as often as 28 times a day, with faculty intervention occurring in only 3% of those cases.
- LGBT youth with “highly rejecting” families are 8 times more likely to attempt suicide than those whose families accept them.
- 27% of gay teenagers have ran away from home or moved away due to conflict with family members over their sexual orientation.

Family Acceptance of Sexuality

With suicide rates proven to be significantly higher among LGBTQ youth, and supportive social networks shown to reduce those rates (Hatzenbuehler, 2011), family acceptance of sexuality becomes an area of extreme importance. Research by The Family Acceptance Project has shown that "parental acceptance, and even neutrality, with regard to a child's sexual orientation" can bring down the attempted suicide rate of LGBTQ (2011). Research also demonstrates the greatest fear LGBTQ youth have is disclosing their sexuality to their families (Floyd & Stein, 2002; Savin-Williams, 1998; Santrock, 2005).

Fears of family rejection are not unfounded, as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), one of the largest LGBT advocacy groups in the United States, issued a report in 2012 showing that slightly over half of all male youth who identify as gay, receive a negative response when coming out to their families.

The importance of family acceptance is also highlighted in a 2009 study on family acceptance of sexuality, "Supportive Families, Healthy Children" conducted by the Ryan Family Acceptance Project. Results of the study not only found significantly higher levels of lifetime suicide attempts when level of family rejection was high, but also higher levels of illegal drug use, and higher levels of HIV infection. These results are demonstrated in the graphs below, used with permission by the Ryan Family Acceptance Project, 2009.

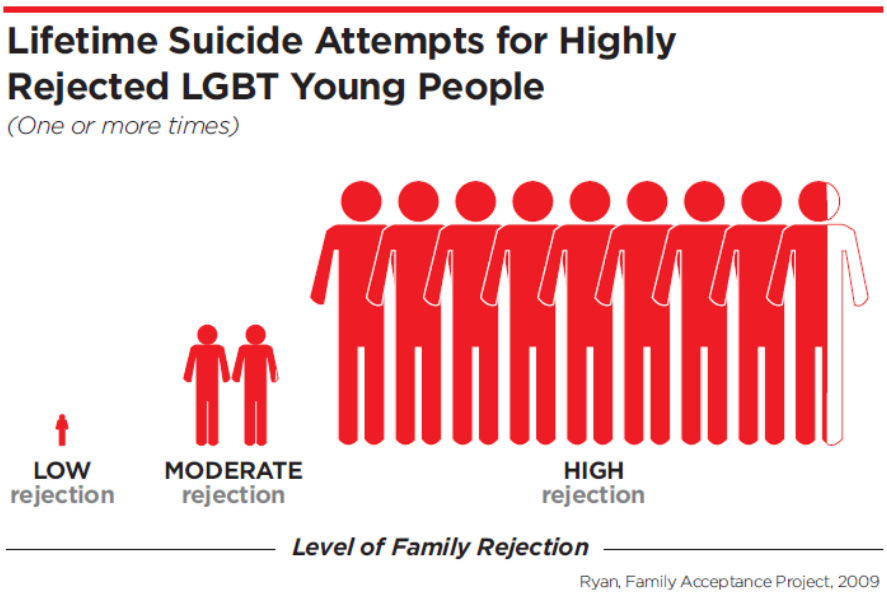


Figure 2.6. Lifetime Suicide Attempts for Highly Rejected LGBT Young People

Increased risk for substance abuse was also seen in LGBT youth from non-accepting families in a McCabe et al., (2010) study. Earlier research conducted by McKirnan & Peterson (1988) also found the stresses of being a LGBT sexual minority led to increased vulnerability to substance abuse as many gay individuals turned to drugs and alcohol to help cope with the stressors of being an LGBT individual. An additional study by Schwartz and Meyer (2010) found those vulnerabilities to be increased when LGBT individuals lacked social support from their families and environment.

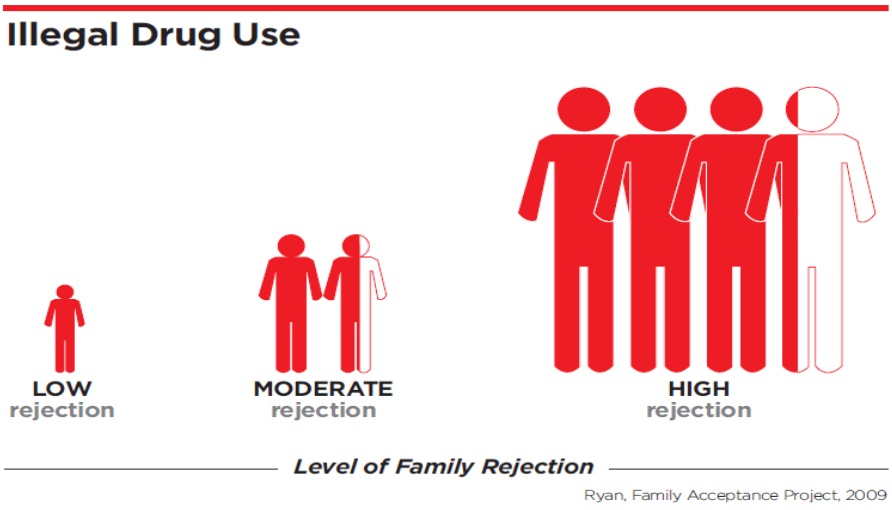


Figure 2.7. Illegal Drug Use

Citing the lack of scientific support for the role of family acceptance as a predictive factor in the health of LGBT young adults, Ryan et al., (2010) conducted a quantitative study of 245 subjects and found family acceptance was indeed a predictor for LGBT individual's health, specifically with regard to self-esteem, social support, and general health status. They found evidence to support the claim that LGBT young adults with accepting families had lower levels of depression, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Ryan et al., 2010).

A further study by Huebner et al., (2009) examined 224 white and Latino self-identified gay, bisexual, and lesbian individuals aged 21 to 25, and found higher rates of family rejection were significantly associated with poorer overall health outcomes. Their study found individuals with family rejection of sexuality to be 8.4 times more likely to having attempted suicide, 3.4 times more likely to have used illegal drugs, 5.9 times more likely to have reported depression, and 3.4 times more likely to have reported engaging in unprotected sexual intercourse (Huebner et al., 2009). The authors of this study indicate what many other studies have also shown - there is a clear connection between family support/rejection of sexuality, and overall health outcomes of a LGBT individual.

Home

An examination of literature for this study would not be complete without looking at concepts of "home." Williams (2013) defines home as:

> A simple word with many definitions. It changes its meaning a lot through the course of a lifetime. It starts out being where you grew up, where you and your family lived. It was a place where you could feel safe and make memories; memories of birthday parties, family gatherings or simply a dinner with your family. Usually a warm and concrete idea

growing up, then, sooner than you think, it is time to leave the comfort of this place. (p.14)

With studies like the 2010 Williams Institute highlighting family rejection due to sexuality, as the top reason LGBT youth become homeless, it is important to note that home is not always a safe place of refuge, where one, like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz constantly yearns, "I just want to go home, I just want to go home again;" or as Maya Angelou poetically stated, "The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned." The truth is, home is not always a safe place with fond memories and it is not always a place of unconditional love and acceptance as Williams defines it.

Home for many LGBT individuals is a place of tortuous emotional, mental, verbal, and sometimes physical abuse, as a result of a family member's rejection of their sexuality (Dija, 2010). In a 2006 study, Ray suggests, "Over 50% of gay males experienced a negative parental reaction when they came out" (p. 16). Ray continues by saying that over 26 percent of those gay youth were asked by a family member to leave the home once they disclosed their sexuality (2006). The 2009 Ryan Project for Family Acceptance highlights family conflict over sexuality as the number one reason gay youth become homeless, with Ray (2006) also highlighting family conflict over sexuality initiated with the disclosure or coming out of the gay youth to their parental units.

LGBT Youth Homelessness

"A responsible adult doesn't leave a child sleeping on a subway grate at night" (Lew Fidler, New York City Councilmember speaking on LGBT homelessness, 2012). One of the more significant findings of existing research pertaining to family acceptance and rejection of LGBT youth based on sexuality are the statistics pertaining to LGBTQ youth homelessness.

Examination of existing literature reveals that LGBT youth seem to be disproportionately impacted by homelessness, with few resources available to protect them.

A 2012 study by the Williams institute examined surveys from 354 agencies between October 2011 and March 2012 and found that 40 percent of their homeless clients identified as being LGBT. Of particular concern, the studies showed the highest percentage of LGBT youth were homeless because they "ran away because of family rejection of sexual orientation or gender identity" (Ford, 2012). Sixty-eight percent indicated they had experienced some form of family rejection due to their sexuality, and more than half indicated they had been victim to physical and/or emotional abuse by someone in their family as a result of their sexuality (Ford, 2012).

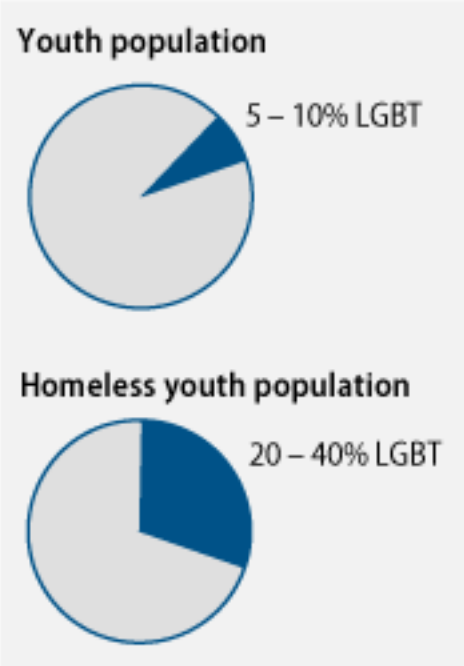


Figure 2.8. Disproportionate LGBT Homeless Youth Population

In some instances, LGBT youth who face non-acceptance at home choose to run away or leave, while others find themselves forced out. "Throwaway youth, runaway youth, and homeless youth" are other terms that can be applied to the population of homeless LGBT youth. The National Resource Center for Domestic Violence put out a *Runaway & Homeless Youth and Relationship Violence Toolkit* (2013) in which they define runaway and homeless youth as:

> While there is no single definition of the term "runaway youth" or "homeless youth," they include youth with unstable or inadequate housing, i.e., youth who stay at least one night

> in a place that is not their home because they could not stay at home, ran away from home, did not have a home, and/or stayed at a shelter, outdoors, in a squat, a car or public transportation, under a bridge, or in a temporary arrangement with another person (i.e. couch-surfing). These two groups also include "throw away" youth (defined below) and may include other vulnerable youth populations, such as current and former foster youth and youth with mental health or other issues.

They also discuss LGBT youth who experience family rejection due to their sexuality and are kicked out. They call these individuals “throwaway youths,” and define them as:

1) A child who is asked or told to leave home by a parent or other household adult, without adequate alternative care being arranged for the child by a household adult, and with the child out of the household overnight; or
2) A child who is away from home and is prevented from returning home by a parent or other household adult, without adequate alternative care being arranged for the child by a household adult, and the child is out of the household overnight (NRCDV, 2013).

Homelessness is just one of many issues LGBT youth experience when suffering from family rejection based on sexuality. Used with permission from the Williams Institute, the Top five reasons LGBT youth leave home chart is shown below:

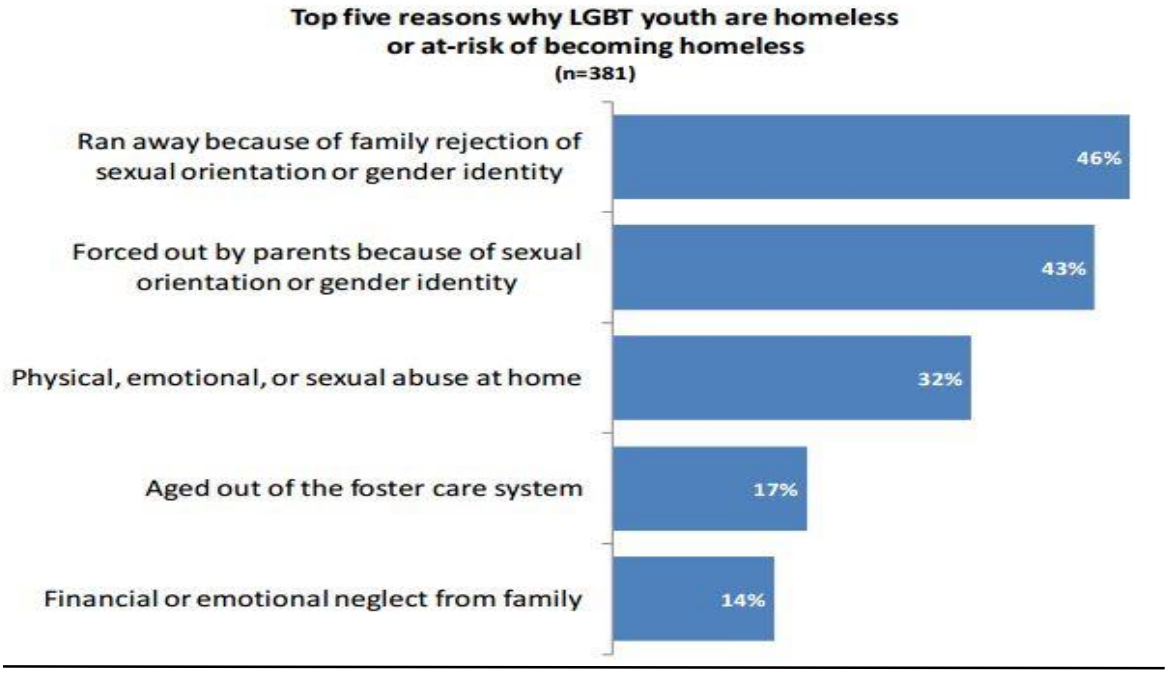


Figure 2.9. Top Five Reasons Why LGBT Youth Are Homeless

With historical context and an overview of the shift in public opinion of gay and lesbians provided, literature will now be reviewed examining online environments in relation to this study.

We Met on the Net

In its most recent update, the website worldinternetstats.com estimates that as of March 2012 there were over 2,405,518,376 billion estimated Internet users worldwide. That number is equal to 30% of the world's total population. What is even more significant is the fact that those estimates reflect a percentage increase of 566% over the last decade. As Internet usage continues to increase, so does the opportunity for individuals to use the Internet as a method of seeking and developing relationships. Parks and Roberts (1998) found that over 93.6% of Internet users reported using the Internet for online relationships, with over 26% of those relationships being romantic in nature. In fact, online relationships are now very common (A: E, 2006; W.L, & G, 2005). A 2002 Nua Internet Survey found the average Internet user "Spends over 70% of his or her time online building personal relationships, including online friendships, sexual partnerships, and romances.

Sexual Orientation and the Internet for Online Relationships

While existing research offers some cues as to why individuals are utilizing the Internet for online relationships, little research has been conducted regarding non-heteronormative sexual orientation and Internet usage. Sexual orientation may affect the frequency that individuals use the Internet for online relationships because it is an effective outlet for gay men and women seeking to overcome the stigma of homosexuality (M &B, 1998). Cooper, McLoughlin, and Campbell (2000) suggest Internet usage among LGBT individuals is higher than heterosexual individuals for the creation of social networks, relationships, as well as sexual activities and

behavior. Internet dating may be more important to LGBT individuals due to the limited social venues available to them as part of a marginalized group. For people who are marginalized, the Internet has the capacity to remove barriers often associated with the analog world. Factors such as age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geographic location are diminished by the usage of the Internet (H, K, & H, 2001).

The Role of Technology

The role of technology can be argued as changing the social landscape for LGBTQ individuals. A 2009 survey of LGBTQ adults revealed over 70% of individuals, while exploring their sexuality, reported using the Internet as the main means of information seeking (Bond, Hefner, & Drognos). Within the study, participants noted their belief that the Internet and computer-mediated communication (CMC) was one of the most important factors in allowing them to shape their sexual identities (2009). The role of technology can also be attributed to creating new social venues, online environments, in which LGBTQ individuals can talk freely about their sexuality. Brown, Maycock, & Burns suggest the unique appeal the Internet has to gay men exists because of the limited social venues they have in which fears of reprisal are diminished (2005). It is important to note while traditional venues still exist as outlets for LGBTQ individuals to form personal relationships, the Internet serves as one distinguishing difference: anonymity without fear of reprisal (Benotsch, Kalichman, & Cage, 2002).

These examples highlight the role the Internet plays for LGBT individuals who are utilizing online social networking sites to seek and develop personal relationships. As communication technologies continue to rapidly change the way we utilize online applications, the role of the digital space will only grow in importance. This study seeks to examine the meaning of SNS to gay individuals, from non-accepting families, and how that environment

helps them make sense of their sexuality, while shaping their reflection of world and of self. It seeks to understand the experiences of coming out from the perspective of the gay individuals themselves. It seeks to understand the meaning they have constructed around the usage of online social networking sites; that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world as a gay individual. It will be guided by the following research question:

RQ1: What are the experiences of gay individuals, from non-accepting families, who use online social networking sites?

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter will examine the methodological approaches utilized in this study. It is fitting to start with a quote from Gurwitsch, (1979) acknowledging the very act of conducting research illustrates non-neutrality:

> Living in the world of daily experience, I am normally not a disinterested observer, still less a theoretician, but rather an actor who pursues certain aims and goals and tries to accomplish his objectives. The world in which I find myself is not given to me, at least not primarily, as a field of observation that I survey in an attitude of neutrality. On the contrary, in my very pursuing my goals and objectives I am involved in whatever interests I have to further. Because of this involvement, I do not simply belong to society at large, I occupy a certain place and position within it as a member of the profession I have chosen, of the subgroup into which I was born, and so forth. The vantage point of my position within society is the result of the whole history of my life. It is due to the circumstances, partly imposed on me, partly chosen by me, which in the course of my personal history have contributed toward making me become what I am. (p.121)

One way to understand the nature of why gay individuals, from non-accepting families, use online social networking sites is to focus less on implications associated with the online context and more emphasis on examining and exploring the meanings they construct around their usage of SNS. To better explore the meaning constructed around usage of online social networking sites on the development and maintenance of relationships and with self, an in-depth qualitative study of 15 participants who self-identify as gay individuals was conducted.

Guba suggests “Trustworthiness” is the most important criteria for gauging quality research within the interpretivist tradition (1987). Patton (2002) identifies rigorous methods, credibility of the researcher, and “a fundamental appreciation of qualitative inquiry” as three important elements of ensuring credibility of qualitative research (p.552). In the spirit of Guba and Patton, strategies for promoting trustworthiness and credibility have been implemented in both the study and the construction of this methodology section; outlining a detailed account of the key decision points, procedures, and methods utilized.

In an effort to show the high level of integrity and ethical stance of the researcher, special attention is given to ensure openness and transparency around the way this study was conducted. Extensive detail is outlined in how the sample was selected, data collected, location of data collection, usage of interview guide and probing questions, data analyzed, and items like member checks being completed to ensure accuracy. Additional consideration is also given to show a process of demonstrating reflexivity- “the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the human as instrument” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 183). To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, special emphasis is given to even the minutest of details such as the attire of the interviewer when collecting data. While these strategies are in no means inclusive of all that could be used, the strategies employed greatly enhance the study’s rigor, and indeed such disclosure and detailed openness increases both levels of confidence and overall trustworthiness of this study.

Grounded Theory Approach

An interpretive approach to research and theory use is flexible, inductive, and uses emergent methodologies given the paradigmatic commitments (Charmaz, 2006). Theory use may be upfront as a theoretical lens for the study, or it may come at the end as a method for

explaining observed or recorded behavior. Interpretative research may also be void of theory, as some in the paradigm reject theory use as "a rejection of positivism" and methods embraced by the functionalist perspective (Charmaz, 2006, p 16).

The most common use of theory within the interpretative paradigm is the use of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Glaser & Strauss suggest that grounded theory isn't a specific theory, rather an emergent methodology that allows the data to "speak for themselves." Interpretative researchers using grounded theory will follow prescribed methodologies of the paradigm. This includes entering the research with no commitment to a particular theory, and allowing themes and categories to arise from the data being collected from the research participants. A researcher will employ methods like direct participant observation, or long interviews.

A grounded theory approach requires the researcher to analyze data after each participant interview, in an attempt to uncover themes and categories. Applicable theories may also emerge as theories that aid in understanding or explaining the phenomenon. This step is repeated after each participant, and the categories, themes, and theory is revised until the researcher reaches a point of saturation or redundancy, a point where no further interviews or observations yield any new data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theory is then used as a tool for explaining or understanding the phenomenon of interest. It is an inductive approach; subjective by nature, and embracing of the emergent methodologies prescribed by the interpretive paradigm.

Participant Selection

As recommended for qualitative research (Eisenhardt, 1989; Glaer & Strauss, 1967), a theoretical sampling technique was applied rather than a random sampling approach. Reflective of the interpretative paradigm, the goal of the researcher is not to capture a representative sample that can be generalized to the gay population as a whole; rather the goal is to gain a better and

deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied. Thus the most appropriate sampling strategy is non-probabilistic. The most common sampling strategy, and the one utilized for this study, is purposeful (Patton, 2012). Guided by the assumption the researcher wants to discover and understand meaning around a particular phenomenon, a sample must be selected that will allow the researcher access to those from which the most can be learned (Chein, 1981). Patton (2002) suggests:

> The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling. (p. 240)

The first step in purposeful sampling is the determination of selection criteria for participants of the study. LeCompte and Preissle (1993) suggest a researcher "create a list of the attributes essential to the study and then proceed to find or locate a unit matching the list" (p. 69). For this study, it was essential that participants identify as being gay (first criterion) to ensure that each understood the cultural identification key to this study. Second, each had to be active users of computer-mediated communication, (CMC) specifically online social networking sites or applications (SNS). They had to have at least one immediate family member who was not accepting of their sexual orientation (a third criterion); and they had to be within the age range of 18-32 (fourth criterion).

With criterion for selection determined, a snowball, or network sampling technique, was employed. This strategy involves the selection of a few key participants, who having met the criterion for selection refer you to other participants who also meet the selection criteria (Merriam, 2009). It is demonstrated by Patton (2002) who says, "By asking a number of people

who else to talk with, the snowball gets bigger and bigger as you accumulate new information-rich cases" (p. 237).

Participants

A total of 15 participants were interviewed in this study because their narratives could be used to create a thick, rich description (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) of the shared experiences of gay men who utilize online social networking sites. In *The Long Interview*, McCracken (1998) recommends a minimum sample size of eight as being sufficient. Following the commitments of the paradigm, additional interviews were continued until saturation and redundancy was reached. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest, "In purposeful sampling the size of the sample is determined by informational considerations. If the purpose is to maximize information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units; thus redundancy is the primary criterion" (p. 202). For this study, redundancy occurred around participant eleven. Four additional interviews were conducted as a product of the snowball sampling technique producing additional willing participants. Given the hard to reach nature of the sample being sought, additional interviews were conducted with those participants, resulting in further confirmation that this study had reached both saturation and redundancy as defined by Lincoln and Guba.

The snowball sample started with two initial participants contacted at a LGBTQ outreach center on the campus of a large, southeastern university. Face to face interviews were then set up and conducted at a later date and time. At the conclusion of those interviews, the participants were asked for referrals of individuals who met the criterion of the study. Interviews were conducted with individuals identified from original participants. That process was repeated until over a two-month period, like a "snowball" gaining steam as it rolls down a hill, the original

participants grew from two, to a total of 15 who matched the criterion for selection previously outlined.

Out of the 15 participants, all identified in terms of sex and gender as male, and all self-identified their sexuality as gay. Twelve participants were currently residing in the state of Tennessee. The remaining participants currently reside in the states of Alaska, North Carolina, and Virginia, for a total of four current states of residences. An important distinction, as evidenced in the findings of this study, notes the difference in current location of state residence and the states where the participants were raised. The participants were raised in eleven different states, spreading across a wide area of the country. Five were raised in Tennessee, with the remaining eleven raised in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Utah, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Ages of participants ranged from 18 to 32 with most being in their early 20's. Their online experience (that is, the amount of time they indicated they had spent actively using LGBTQ - specific online social networking sites) varied from three to fifteen years. Table 3.0 below shows a summary of participant information. Note, pseudo names are utilized to protect confidentiality of participants.

Table 3.1 Summary of Participants

Participant	F2F/Phone	Member Check	Length of Interview	SCLOC	SLWR	Age	Triangulation
EricX1	F	M	36:51	Tennessee	Tennessee	21	Facebook
AndrewX2	F	---	47:18	Tennessee	Georgia	18	---
MarkX3	F	---	32:12	Tennessee	Ohio	23	---
ColeX4	F	M	24:26	Tennessee	Tennessee	20	---
JohnX5	F	---	32:05	Tennessee	Minnesota	23	---
DerekX6	F	---	33:11	Tennessee	Utah	25	---
DustinX7	F	M	46:16	Tennessee	Tennessee	23	Facebook, Twitter
DrewX8	F	---	24:40	Tennessee	Maryland	21	---
MatthewX9	P	---	29:07	Virginia	West Virginia	24	---
TimX10	F	M	56:07	Tennessee	Tennessee	18	Facebook, Journal
IssacX11	F	---	43:12	Tennessee	Tennessee	22	---
ScottX12	F	---	1:01:54	Tennessee	Florida	32	Facebook, Twitter
CoreyX13	F	M	39:27	Tennessee	Alabama	29	---
LanceX14	P	---	36:23	North Carolina	Virginia	31	Facebook
NathanX15	P	M	56:11	Alaska	North Carolina	29	Facebook, Twitter

Note: SCLOC. is an abbreviation for State of Current Location; SLWR. is an abbreviation for State Location Where Raised

Data Collection Methods

This study utilized semi-structured interviews to seek a better understanding of the experiences of the gay participants, from unaccepting families, who use online SNS. Dexter, (1970) defines an interview as a conversation, but a "conversation with a purpose" (p. 136). Patton (2002) adds, "The researcher wants to find out what is in and on someone else's mind" (p. 341). Patton explains:

> We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe….We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meaning they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. (pp. 340-341)

Due to the fact that observing the behavior of the participants as they engage in usage of SNS in their private lives, or how they interpret the world around them, wasn't possible, interviews were both a necessary and appropriate method of data collection for this study. The goal of this research is to understand how these individuals see the world as a gay person who uses SNS. As a researcher whose goal is in understanding meaning in the lives of the participants, the method of interviewing is one of the most important tools available in reaching our goal of understanding. McCracken suggests interviewing allows us, as researchers, to access the "Mental Constructions" and "Logical Scaffolding" of our participants (p.22). In other words, through a carefully designed interview, we can gain a better understanding of how people create meaning in their lives.

Following the Interpretive perspective, interviews were structured using a flexible interview discussion guide which allows for a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the participant, and does not force them down a checklist of rigid pre-set interview questions. The interview protocol included questions pertaining to participants' demographics, personal relationships, online usage of social networking sites, as well as a generic question allowing the participants the freedom of discussing any other information they felt relevant to better helping me understand why gay individuals use online social networking sites.

Careful consideration was given to question preparations and probes, and to the creation of a discussion guide that allowed a flexible dialogue flow without the use of leading questions. Multiple questions and yes-or-no questions were also avoided, as those types of questions can be problematic in seeking good data (Patton, 2002). Merriam (2009) suggests good interview questions are "those that are open-ended and yield descriptive data, even stories about the phenomenon" (p. 98). With the goal of eliciting descriptive and detailed data, the following types of open-ended questions were used (A complete Interview Discussion Guide can be seen in Appendix D):

- Tell me about a time when you used the Internet to find information about what it meant to be gay?
- What was it like for you when your family expressed they didn't accept you being gay?
- Give me an example of a time you came out to a family member as gay?

Probes, or follow-up questions were also utilized, as suggested by Patton (2002). Used as a way of clarifying and seeking elaboration and more detail, the following types of probes were used:

- What do you mean?
- Tell me more about that….
- "Walk" me through that experience….
- Give me an example of that…
- How did that make you feel?

Following is a short excerpt from an interview conducted for this study with a participant about when he knew he was gay. Note the use of open-ended questions to elicit detailed and descriptive data, as well as the use of probes, or follow-up questions used to gain a better understanding of his experiences.

(Excerpted from Interview with ParticipantX15, 2013)

Interviewer: Tell me about when you first knew you were gay.

Respondent: I've always known. I'd go back as early as 6 or 7 at least.

Interviewer: Always known? Tell me more about that.

Respondent: You know, like little boys would get in trouble for kissing girls and running away on the playground. I was always attracted to the boys I was playing with. I wanted to run up and kiss them, and run away. I always knew it was wrong but I've always had the attraction there. I knew my best friend was cute and I enjoyed his company. I was a child but I didn't know what that really meant at the time, but I've always known.

Interviewer: You say you knew that it was wrong? What do you mean?

Respondent: I was in church my entire life and I would say, without exaggeration I'd be at church 4 times a week. I was also in private Christian school, so I was getting bible lessons every day. I was always taught the traditional God made man, then God made woman to be with the man. I always knew it was supposed to be a man and a woman. Based on my upbringing, I knew that it wasn't right based on what I was hearing.

Interviewer: How'd that make you feel?

Respondent: Broken, I felt broken, like there was something wrong with me….

With the interviews, consideration was also given to the awareness that people naturally disclose information in different ways and the discussion/interview guide was purposefully flexible to allow for various styles of disclosure. Being mindful of these differences, as well as my own verbal style as an interviewer was important in understanding potential influences on the behavior and disclosure of the participants. For instance, for each face-to-face interview, consideration was given to several components to assure positive interviewer and respondent interaction. Interviewer attire was purposefully selected and consisted of khaki pants and a casual polo shirt, coupled with a dress shoe. Professional attire in this setting would contribute no additional value, and may actually have manufactured unnecessary distance between participants and the interviewer. Business casual attire was deemed the most appropriate given the participant's age range (mostly college age) and location of interviews (on-campus setting).

Of the 15 participants, 12 face-to-face meetings were arranged and interviews conducted, while the remaining 3 interviews were conducted over the telephone. No incentives were offered in either the face-to-face or telephone interviews. Interviews averaged 43 minutes; ranging from 26-102 minutes in length. Of the 12 face to face interviews, one was conducted outside in a public green space on the university campus grounds, ten were conducted in a private, on-campus office of the researcher, and one was conducted at a coffee shop located in the on-campus library of the university. All face-to-face interviewees signed a consent form agreeing to participate in the study. The interviewees via phone consented verbally on a recorded phone call, while also consenting to participant via an electronically signed e-mail. Those emails were printed and stored with the additional hand signed consent forms.

Data Analysis

Following a grounded theory approach, each interview was audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and then checked back for accuracy against the original audio files. In 14/15 interviews conducted, 14 were transcribed within 48 hours of completion of the interview. The remaining interview was transcribed within 96 hours of completion of the interview. F5 transcription software, in addition to a transcription foot pedal, was utilized to provide line numbering, time stamps, and data marking as each audio file was transcribed.

Below is an excerpt that highlights the formatting used for each interview transcript. Identifying information is always at the top, with line numbering and time stamps added automatically by the F5 software program down the left-hand side of the page as the transcription occurs. Single line spacing is utilized, with double spacing used with each change of speaker. Additional margin space was left on the right side of each page to allow for notes or codes as the transcripts were analyzed.

(Excerpted from Interview with ParticipantX9, 2013)

#00:09:42# *Interviewer*: You say you knew it wasn't accepted. How did you know?

#00:09:45# *Respondent:* Just other people saying stuff and how they would act.

#00:09:49# *Interviewer:* Tell me more about that.

#00:10:16# *Respondent:* Well, I know that at a very young age my dad's wife- my step mom she would call me sissy and gay some times and like, (short pause/hesitation) in like the most disgusted way you know. It would make me feel really really bad and she'd say it with no restraint. I was a very very young child and didn't really know. You know, adults are supposed to be the heroes and examples for the children, and here I was being treated like crap.

#00:11:10# *Interviewer: How'd* that make you feel?

#00:11:13# *Respondent:* It was difficult to deal with that criticism. I did have feminine tendencies. It made me develop this fear of rejection. My family would make comments towards someone else that is or may be gay, or flamboyant, and they'd make jokes and laugh about it, so it was something that was very bothersome. I didn't want to be that or reveal that, because they were the ones you loved, so I just wanted to keep it a secret cause you knew it was something that they'd never accept.

#00:12:23# *Interviewer:* Do you recall when you first identified that you were gay?

#00:12:25# *Respondent*: I think I was 13.

#00:12:29# *Interviewer:* Can you recall that experience?

#00:12:31# *Respondent:* Yeah. I can remember being at home during the summer and I had a computer and I was looking at porn. Regular porn (emphasis in voice) and I realized that these feelings I had for guys. The porn sparked my interest even more. That was when I really started knowing. I didn't call it gay though. I just knew I was different.

To protect confidentiality of the participants, while following the required IRB protocol, original audio recordings were securely deleted once each transcription was completed. All interviews transcripts were labeled with pseudonyms to preserve the integrity of the research process, while also ensuring the preservation of confidentiality.

The transcribed audio interviews were first read several times so that familiarity with the lived experiences of the participants could occur. This allowed a better understanding of context related to the experiences of the participants and would later be of great value in the interpretation of meaning related to those lived experiences. Next, transcripts were used to identify themes across the different interviews. Patterns, themes, and theory arose after the first few interviews. Revisions occurred with each new participant interview until saturation ended the process of data collection.

A technique of data reduction that allows the data to be transformed into "meaningful data" was then applied (Patton, 2002). Data reduction involves: "Selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming raw data to make it useful" (Romano et al., 2003, p. 221). Data reduction was used to examine the personal narratives as described by the participants.

Van Manen's (1990) process of visualization was then employed to analyze the data in a way that allows themes and categories to emerge. Van Manen (1990) defines a theme as the "focus or point of a passage; articulating something particularly essential or revealing about the experience described" (p. 21). A recurring theme is a pattern that is demonstrated across the experiences of several people (Si, 1993). Lastly, the interviews were organized based on major themes that were discovered.

Visualization

In analysis – a qualitative researcher must analyze data in a truly qualitative method that allows the findings to be representative of our participant's lived experiences, not our interpretation of those experiences. For this study, visualization was used. Visualization consists of carefully naming themes to better allow the researcher to draw conclusions. A process for thematic visualization was followed. Van Manen suggests, thematic description and naming should:

> (a) reflect an understanding of the participant's meaning, (b) reflect the researchers' openness to reflecting the social reality of the phenomenon, (c) be clear, so that participants can recognize and relate to the researchers' interpretations, (d) reflect a careful use of language, and (e) make the phenomenon accessible to nonparticipants. (p. 74).

Reflexivity

With qualitative research the goal is not objective measurement from afar, rather the interviewer becomes the tool – the primary research instrument for data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009). The interviewer as the instrument is the ideal means of data collection as humans are able to be reflexive, adaptive, and immediately responsive (McCracken, 1998; Merriam, 2009). Other advantages include the ability of the researcher to expand his or her understanding of the participant's experiences through the observation of verbal and nonverbal communication, checking with respondents for accuracy of his or her interpretation, and the ability to have the participant expand on interesting or unusual responses (Creswell, 2007).

The interviewer as the instrument does have potential biases and shortcomings, and it is important to identify and monitor them as to how they may shape the interpretation of data

collected (Merriam, 2009). Peshkin (1988) highlights that one's biases or subjectivities "can be seen as virtuous, for it is the basis of researchers making a distinctive contribution, one that results from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected" (p. 18).

Reflexivity is "the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, the human as instrument" (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 183). It is important to note, as a gay man, my lived experiences within the gay community impact the ways in which I make sense of my environment, and how I ascribe meaning to words, actions, and events in my own life. The lens in which I see the world has been shaped by my interactions as a member of the LGBTQ community. This should not be viewed as an encumbrance to producing quality, rigorous, academic research; rather as a tool that allows a deeper level of understanding and sense making from the narratives of other gay individuals. In this instance, being gay is an attribute that enhances the clarity in which meaning making can occur.

In addition, being a member of the overall LGBTQ community affords me entry into the gay community that may not be afforded to a hetero-normative researcher. Reflective in the snowball sampling technique, gay and bisexual individuals may be more willing to participate, and refer others, in a study conducted with a gay researcher. Gay individuals may also feel comfortable in recalling and sharing deeper narratives of their lived experiences with an "insider" who better understands the struggles and experiences of a gay individual. As a self-identifying gay man, the study of an "in-group" topic presents a unique set of challenges and inherent tensions. Plummer (2011) describes the early years of his research by saying:

> I was coming out as a young gay man and finding my way in the very social world I was studying. More recently, such straightforwardness has come to be seen as increasingly problematic. Indeed, there was always a tension there: I just did not always see it. (p.196)

Plummer's comments indicate uneasiness with queer individuals studying queer topics, suggestive that reflective of the nature of qualitative inquiry, there are innate tensions that a queer researcher must address. Plummer references this as naturalistic intimate familiarity, but adds that while impartiality may be doubted, "why would one even bother to do research were it not for some wider concern or value?" (p. 198).

Trustworthiness

Guba (1981) suggests that while many interpretivist scholars do not use terminology like reliability and validity in the interpretive approach, the same concept is applied and called "Trustworthiness". Guba suggests it is the most important criteria for gauging quality research within the interpretivist tradition (1987).

Credibility

Noting trustworthiness and its importance, Guba (1981) suggests credibility is the most important attribute and that it deals with verisimilitude: Does the research make sense? Does it seem real? He suggests the greatest thing to increase credibility is ensuring the voice of the participant, not the voice of the researcher, is reflected in the research.

As a researcher, who is also a member of the LGBTQ community, a member check is always conducted to ensure emergent themes and sense making is reflective of the lived experiences of the participants, not my own. This ensures the highest level of rigor in analyzing and describing the lived experiences of the participants. Maxwell (2005) says:

> This is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have of what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your own biases and misunderstanding of what you observed. (p.111)

In this study, a member check was completed using six participants for a total of 40 percent of the participant group. The member check consisted of the first and last participant, and every other third participant: (Participant X1, Participant X4, Participant X7, Participant X10, Participant X13, and Participant X15). Participants were asked if the interpretations of their lived experiences were accurately mirrored in the themes that were derived from the transcriptions. All six participants indicated agreement with the themes and descriptions that were derived. As a result, no modifications to the themes were made.

Triangulation

Another method to enhance trustworthiness in a qualitative study is to employ a triangulation method in data collection (Flick, 2007). The most common form of triangulation involves using multiple sources of data to confirm findings that emerge from the data (Merriam, 2009). For this study, interviews were the main method used for data collection. A triangulation technique was used with six of the fifteen participants as an additional point of entry for unobtrusive observation around usage and meaning of online social networking sites.
This involved crosschecking data collected through interviews with documents relevant to the phenomenon of interest; in this case the use of a personal journal, Facebook, and Twitter accounts of six participants. The cross checking of data from these additional sources increases trustworthiness and credibility of the study, or as Wolcott (2005) writes, “increases the correspondence between research and the real world” (p. 160). Not all of the participants used

social media, or wished to grant access to observing their usage of those accounts. Additionally, some participants indicated they did not wish to share additional personal documents, such as journals, etc. Table 3.3 highlights the methods used for triangulation.

Table 3.2 Triangulation Data Collection

Participant	Triangulation Method Employed: Analysis of Participant's:
EricX1	Facebook
DustinX7	Facebook, Twitter
TimX10	Facebook, Journal
ScottX12	Facebook, Twitter
LanceX14	Facebook
NathanX15	Facebook, Twitter

Note: Pseudo names are used to protect participant confidentiality

Data Collected Through Triangulation

Examination of Facebook pages allowed an additional point of data collection for five participants, supplementing participant interviews. In order to become a Facebook member, individuals must create a profile. Participant profiles are interactive, allowing those they have allowed access, to "not merely to look at, but also to respond to, the life portrayed online" (Rosen, 2007, P. 15). Rosen also suggests that profiles are portraits and snapshots of an individual's life. Since participants are using Facebook to post information that represents them as individuals, it serves as an intriguing point of data collection for gay men who utilize online social networking sites. Aleman and Wartman (2009) present online communities as spaces where "identity can be performed," making Facebook pages a great source for information rich data as participants post content as representations of self (p.27).

Examination of Twitter accounts allowed an additional point of data collection for three participants, allowing an additional point of data collection in addition to interviews and Facebook. Like Facebook, Twitter requires users to create a profile and to set varying levels of access to information they post in the online setting. It serves as another online venue where "identity can be performed" through the posting of user generated content (Aleman & Wartman, 2009, p. 27).

Lastly, one participant gave access to an e-journal, in which they had chronicled their coming out process as a gay teen. While not interactive, this journal provided valuable insight into the coming out process for this individual, including their usage of online social networking sites. Narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and document analysis (Merriam, 1998) techniques were employed to analyze the text and pictures that participants had posted to their Facebook, Twitter accounts, and journal, allowing for consideration of context and support of the coming out process, and identifying as a gay individual. Pink (2006) says:

> Any experience, action, artifact, image or idea is never definitively just one thing but may be redefined differently in different situations, by different individuals and in terms of different discourses…any image or representation is contingent on how it is situated, interpreted and used to invoke meaning and knowledge that are of ethnographic interest. (p. 19)

These supplemental sources represent additional information that was used to enhance meaning making and understanding of why and how gay men use online social networking sites. As a method of triangulation, they also enhance credibility of both uncovered themes, and the overall study.

Confirmability

Guba suggests confirmability deals with the objectivity of the researcher; while complete objectivity is not sought in the interpretive approach, an attempt to bracket biases should be made. Prior to the start of this study, a strategy of peer examination was used. This consisted of an examination or review of thoughts by a research colleague, to assess my anticipation of findings, so those biases could be noted and steps taken to ensure they were bracketed. This was extremely engaging and useful as this one-hour "interview" highlighted a key recurring element/theme of geographic location. By engaging in peer examination, this pre-conceived notion that geographic location could be a guiding factor in the findings was bracketed.

Special consideration was given with creation of the semi-structured interview guide to ensure no prompting questions were utilized that may lead participants to discuss geographic location as a factor in their usage of SNS. Consideration was also given in ensuring open-ended questions were used that allowed the participant freedom to expand on their own unique experiences.

The interview guide was also adjusted to ensure "why" questions were avoided as they may lead to false speculations about casual relationships (Patton, 2002). Additionally, the overall process, findings, themes and analysis were discussed with multiple individuals; people with expertise in qualitative research. This occurred at several academic conferences including the 2013 National Communication Association Conference, the major national conference for the field of this study, in addition to informal meetings with LGBTQ members at the 2013 UT LGBTQIA Seminar, as well as faculty members overseeing this process and study.

Emergent and Flexible

A key condition of a qualitative study is that it is emergent and flexible, with the researcher responsive and open to changing conditions of the study (Merriam, 2009). This study initially set out to examine the experiences of both gay and bisexual men who use online social networking sites. Early in the data collection process it became apparent the difficulty of finding openly bisexual men, in the geographic south, who were willing to participate in this study. Only one was found, resulting in a participant pool of 16 conducted interviews. The experiences of that individual were unique due to their sexual desires with both women and men, and an inability to find other individuals who met the study's criteria in addition to being bisexual, led to the narrowing of the study to examine only gay men. This is reflective of the nature of qualitative research and how the design is emergent and flexible to the changing conditions of the study in progress (Merriam, 2009). Bogdan and Biklen (2007) suggest researchers force themselves to make decisions that narrow the study. They say:

> You must discipline yourself not to pursue everything… or else you are likely to wind up with data too diffuse and inappropriate for what you decide to do. The more data you

> have on a given topic, setting, or subjects, the easier it will be to think deeply about it and the more productive you are likely to be when you attempt the final analysis. (p.161)

Future studies may include looking at individuals who only identify as bisexual and examining their usage of online SNS, but for the purposes of this study, the study was narrowed to allow a deeper understanding of the experiences of gay men. A summation and overview of the research process is illustrated in figure 3.4

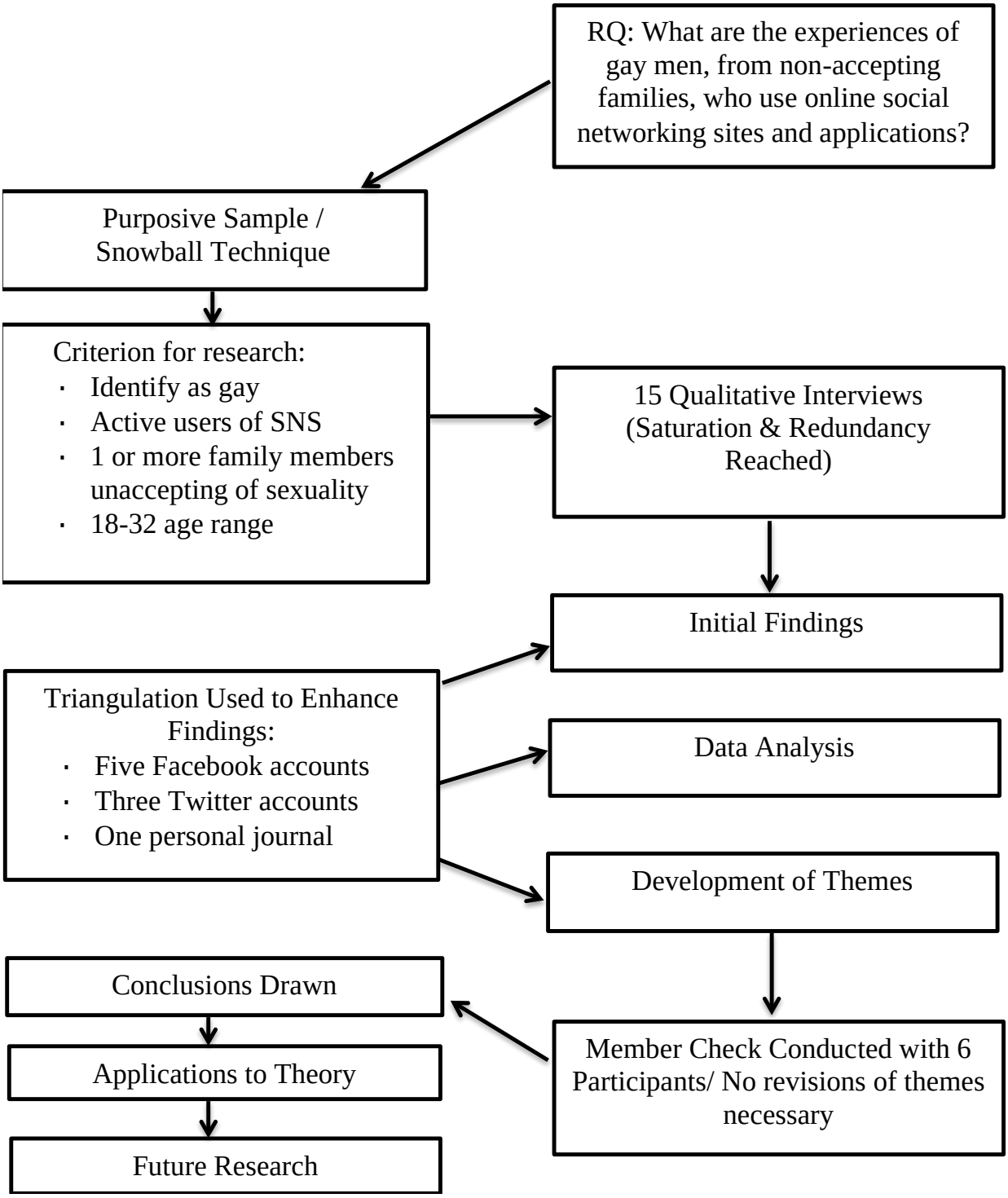


Figure 3.3. Overview of Research Process

Chapter Four

Findings

It is taken for granted by me that my fellow men perceive the world and act within it at their places and positions as I do at mine and that, like me, each of them has his own 'biographically determined situation' given to him and to him alone. Yet we all live in one and the same world. My fellow men see the same things I see, though they see them differently, from different perspectives.

(Gurwitsch, 1979, p. 122)

This chapter examines the stories and personal discourses of the fifteen individuals who agreed to be part of this participatory research study. Their responses are situated in a grounded theory research approach, and are in response to the research question posed by this study: "What are the experiences of gay men, from non-accepting families, who use online social networking sites?"

This chapter starts with a review of thematic categories and comments of participants illustrating the six major themes that emerged from the data. The interviews, notations, and examination of supplementary items, using a triangulation technique to examine participants' usage of SNS sites such as Facebook and Twitter, have contributed to these discourses. Through careful thought, constant revision, comparison, and reflection upon the data, an initial twenty-four concepts were produced. Those concepts were reduced further into twelve broad themes, and after further reduction, into the final six themes presented in this study.

Analysis of the fifteen narratives revealed significant findings regarding gay individuals' usage of online social networking sites. Saldana's (2012) process of code mapping was utilized, allowing six major themes to emerge from the data, separated into two categories: direct usage, and unintended effects. Both categories and themes are woven throughout the narratives of the participants, governed by an overarching, and always-present theme of SNS usage and shared

experiences (see table 4.1). Pseudo names are used to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Table 4.1 (Final Iteration: Coding of Categories and Themes)

Overarching Theme: Shared Experiences	
Category One **Direct Usage: 1a, 2b, 4d, 5e, 7g**	Category Two **Unintended Effects: 1a, 6f**
1a) Social Stigmatization - Pre- Coming Out - Post- Coming Out - Lifetime Coping 2b) Usage Pertaining to Curiosity 4d) Accessibility & Fear of Rejection 5e) Coming Out & Imagined Interactions 7g) In Relation To Religious Values	1a) Social Stigmatization 6f) “I’m Gay:” Becoming LGBTQ

Participants described their experiences related to online social networking sites as: (a) usage pertaining to curiosity, (b) involving social stigmatization, (c) coming out and imagined interactions, (d) accessibility and fear of rejection, (e) in relation to religious values, and (f) “I’m Gay:” Becoming LGBTQ, (see table 4.2).

Table 4.2 Summaries of Six Major Themes From Participants' Narratives

Name of Theme	Example Statement	#X Present
Usage Due to Curiosity	"What's funny about it is when you get curious about stuff sometimes; you'll log into a site and form a profile so you can check stuff out. You know? Sometimes you just want to know who's out there."	15/15
Involving Social Stigmatization	"(8 second pause) hmmm… I identify as gay."	12/15
Coming Out & Imagined Interactions	"I thought about it every night. I had this plan in my head of how it would all go down. I talked to my friends online a lot about it. I asked them what happened when they had told their parents."	15/15
Accessibility and Fear of Rejection	"It's a lot safer talking to people there, you don't have to wonder if they will accept you because of your sexuality. On there, we're all the same."	15/15
Religious Values	"At first I wasn't comfortable with being gay, but two years ago, a little bit over two years ago, I accepted it. I came from a religious background so I knew that I wouldn't be accepted by my family, so I just stayed in the closet, with the door shut and just had a little peephole looking out into the gay world. That's how it was for me."	13/15
"I'm Gay:" Becoming LGBTQ	"Going online lets me talk to other people like me. I find it easier to be me in real life after telling people on there (online) that I was gay."	15/15

Direct Usage of SNS

Usage Due To Curiosity

This theme refers to the desire of the participants to use the Internet and LGBTQ online social networking applications in an attempt to fulfill curiosities that were often hidden or forbidden from their family and friends. This is the most direct and surface level theme that arose from the research data. Participants described a broad range of usage based on curiosity. Usage varied from exploration of what it meant to be "gay" or "different," in the words of Eric, to romantic relationships and friendships, to exploration of sexual desires and setting up face-to-face meetings and sexual encounters with other gay individuals.

Isaac recalled being "around age 11 or 12" and knowing that he liked other boys in his class. He tells the story of how he would search the Internet for what it meant to like other boys, and how the term gay popped up in his searches:

> I knew it meant that I liked guys; I just didn't know why it was happening. Once I had a term for it, I would do searches for why I was gay. It only confused me more. As I got older I ran across a gay chat room on Aol. It took me two months to work up the courage to actually enter the chat room.

When prompted to expand and share his first experiences in using a gay chat room, Isaac recalls having conversations with others and how he would ask them the following questions:

> "Are you gay?"
>
> "How do know?"
>
> "When did you know?"
>
> "What made you gay?"
>
> "Are you going to try and change?

The last question prompted significant and interesting dialogue that will be discussed in a later section pertaining to stigma. What was evident with Isaac was the extreme fear he had that other people would find out he was gay, and how he would clear the history on the computer three or four times to ensure there was no trace for his parents to find. His curiosity was less with accepting himself as a gay individual, but curiosity of if he could change his sexuality. His curiosity was stronger than the overwhelming fear he had, so strong that he would sneak through the house at night after his parents were asleep, so he could use the family computer in the living room to chat with "other people like me."

Cole shared similar experiences pertaining to curiosity and if he could change his sexuality. He describes going online to gay chat sites and looking for other people who "were like me." He says:

> I wanted to see if there was any description that I fit to. Were there other people who were just like me? Was there anything that I could say, oh yeah, that fits me too? Maybe as a way I could change it, or work around it, or better understand it and better cope with it.

Not all of the participants approached SNS usage and curiosity from the same perspective. John describes being brought up in a family atmosphere that encouraged self sufficiency and independence:

> It was a big part of my upbringing that you look for answers yourself. There was an encyclopedia in the house. There was Ask Jeeves. There was information that was available from usually more credible sources than my parents were qualified to answer. You were supposed to look for answers first and if you needed clarification, then you came to them. The idea was to be self-sufficient.

Matthew recalled similar experiences pertaining to curiosity when he was age 12 or 13. He spoke of an overwhelming curiosity of "what it all meant" and discussed looking up "gay" on the computer in his school's library. Like Isaac, he too ran across listings for online social networking sites in the form of gay chat rooms. He says:

> I would look it up in our school's library. Uh, and once I figured that out I would start, well I would go onto Aol messenger and I would go into the like gay chartrooms and (long pause) like talk to people.

When he was prompted to expand on his first experiences using SNS, he says:

> It really scared me. Being that age and not really knowing your identity and then you have this world where guys are just trying to show their dicks on a camera and (laughing) here I am a southern boy, wasn't looking for that. I wasn't raised in any sort of manner like that, so that gave me issues. It scared me so bad I stopped doing that.

When asked about the next time he visited a gay chartroom he laughingly said two weeks. When prompted to explain why, he explained:

> I couldn't just not go back. I needed to know. I had questions I wanted to ask. I didn't have anyone I could ask. I didn't know anyone who was gay, so this was my only chance to see what this all meant. To see what it was like to be with another guy.

Derek also discussed a time when he was fourteen and used online SNS to examine curiosities about being gay. He says:

> I would spend countless hours every night talking to guys online about being gay and trying to get information, basically ways of knowing if you were gay. I was looking for

> some magical test that would definitively tell me if I was gay or not. I also looked for general information, stuff like if anyone they know, knew they were gay. It was big for me, especially coming from a conservative background, there wasn't anyone I could talk to about it. It was my only resource.

When Nathan used the word curiosity to explain one of the reasons he uses online social networking sites for LGBTQ individuals, he was asked to further explain what that means for him. He says:

> What's funny about it is when you get curious about stuff sometimes; you'll log into a site and form a profile so you can check stuff out. You know? Sometimes you just want to know who's out there.

Nathan was then asked to tell to me about a time he used an online social networking site because he was curious. He described meeting a young college guy for casual sex:

> I had only had sex with like two guys and I was still really curious so I went online to this site called Manhunt; my friend had told me about it. I made up a profile and put up a picture of my cock and in like ten minutes I had found someone. Seriously, you can be on for like ten minutes and have an address and phone number. I wanted sex and it was incredibly easy to accomplish.

Cole also recalled experiences of using a social networking application on his smart phone to meet other gay guys for friendship and for casual sex. He discussed the need for finding gay friends after arriving at college, and also in having curiosity about sex.

He explained how he had never had sex before coming to college and how easy it was for him to find other guys using SNS on his mobile phone. He says:

> I came from a rural area where there weren't any brick or mortar gay places that I could find other gay guys. I would use the Internet, which can supply both umm, a sense of community and anonymity. And then, when I got to college I used grinder for casual sex, and so, that's been... (Short pause) yeah, it's had its use in that regard.

Social Stigmatization

Social stigmatization is a theme that ran parallel to curiosity. Often, the process of understanding what it meant to like other guys, *to be gay*, started with a curiosity surrounding what many participants identified as "*being different*." While initial online social networking usage started with a curiosity of what it all meant, it progressed for each individual, at different speeds, into usage for conversation, friendship, romantic relationships, and sexual encounters. While online SNS filled a need for curiosity, it also served as a sounding board for dealing with and overcoming the stigma that most began feeling as they slowly started to accept being a gay individual. Lance says:

> I didn't have to deal with feeling like I was a bad person until I actually somewhat accepted that I was gay. Then all of a sudden, I had to deal with. If I known that was the natural process: learning- accepting- dealing with everyone's shitty feelings that I am a bad person because of who I am, I would have waited a hell of a lot longer to even go there in my own mind. In some ways, I wish I hadn't even found gay chat sites until I was much older.

The theme of stigma refers to the extreme pressure that participants feel to fit into the normative values our society places on sexuality. This theme is derived from a deeper level of

meaning, interpreted from the narratives of the participants and is representative of social influence at play in the lives of these gay individuals as they sought to explore their identities. Online SNS usage pertaining to stigma is a multifaceted theme that, for these participants, involves pre- "coming out," external stigma from family and society, SNS usage to overcome stigma after they came out and were met by non-accepting family members, and lastly, SNS usage in overcoming the stigma that was and will forever be present in their lives.

Pre – "Coming Out" Stigma

Stigma was present before any of them labeled themselves as "*different*" and ultimately "*gay*." Dustin recalls how his original curiosity led him to conduct Internet searches and visit gay chat sites as he, "tried to figure out what it all meant." When prompted to expand on how it made him feel when he would find information, he said:

> Even then, I knew it was wrong. Even when it wasn't porn, when it was news, it was always news about the AIDS epidemic. This was the 90s. Even my earliest memories was that there was something killing gay men and so I knew that it was wrong and I knew it was a deadly sin to be a gay man. I didn't understand the concept you know, of what was killing them, but you remember; somehow it was implanted in my mind that something was killing the gay people and I somehow thought that would happen to me (laughing). I remember thinking about that a lot. I decided I wouldn't be gay, because I didn't want to die of AIDS.

Andrew recalls being a young teenager, before coming out, and hearing a conversation between his parents about one of his dad's best friends from college:

> They were talking about one of my dad's friends, one of his groomsmen, one of his best friends from college. He's now a professor at a big time university, and he's now out as

> being gay. A very successful man who does research in early childhood psychology. I remember my dad telling my mom, like; did you know he was gay? Blah blah blah. And apparently my mom didn't and she went on and on about how it was wrong that he is allowed to do research with kids, that a gay man should never be left alone with kids. So you know, it was one of those things that reinforced the idea with me that being gay was something that was a very bad thing to be.

Corey talked about spending a lot of time with his grandfather and how his favorite phrase was "That's queer as a three dollar bill." He told a story of how he asked his grandfather one day what it meant to be queer, and his grandfather laughed and said, "Don't worry, there's none of them around here." He recalls how that comment has stuck with him for years and how it haunts him to think how his grandfather, now deceased, would feel if he knew that he was "one of them." In that instance, the stigma is something that is deeply rooted and continues to shape his perspective of self-worth as a gay man.

Andrew recalls growing up in an old coal-mining town near the West Virginia border. He remembers being 12 or 13:

> Being at my grandmother's house, and there was a guy on television talking about all the same feelings I had, being attracted to the same sex, and then he started talking about all the issues he faced, with harassment and things. I remember my grandmother saying like that's so gross, and I was like, ok, well what I am is not good, so let's keep that one under my hat (laughing).

Corey talks about the stigma being perpetuated by other gay men using online SNS, and how they inadvertently built on the fears he already had:

> I would talk to guys online who would call themselves discreet. I didn't even know what that meant at first. They like guys but don't want anybody to know about it, and if they do anything with a guy sexually, then it has to stay under the radar. They only want to be with other discreet guys because they know if they are both discreet then they both have equal amounts to lose if anyone else found out. It's like an unspoken rule of the closet; you don't disclose someone else's business. It may be the first thing a discreet guy says when you message him online. They usually say like, are you out bro? If you say yes, then they won't talk to you. They only want to talk to other discreet guys.

Corey went on to talk about how this made him feel even worse about being gay. Not only was his family suggesting being gay was wrong, other gay guys were suggesting it was wrong. As a result, he felt the need to be "discreet" for several years before finally becoming more comfortable in identifying as a gay individual.

In many instances, the stigma participants felt pre- "coming out" was intense enough to force many to remain hidden in the closet for a number of years. In most instances, participants indicated SNS usage as a successful way of coping with the fears and stigma they felt as a gay individual in the early stages of acceptance and coming out. Online SNS provided a safe venue where they could ask questions and learn from the shared experiences of others. For most, SNS usage helped push themselves forward in wanting to disclose their sexuality to those in their analog lives. Those findings will be presented in a later theme. It is important to note however, that in some cases, as with Corey, online SNS initially perpetuated the already present and

deeply rooted fear and feeling of stigma that only made it more difficult to come out in face-to-face settings, and to accept oneself as being gay.

Coming Out & Imagined Interactions

Coming out and imagined interactions is purposely placed between "Pre-Coming Out" stigma and "Post-Coming Out" stigma categories, due to the specific usage of SNS by gay individuals to aid in the coming out process to their families.

Mark talked about how he had known since age eleven that he was gay and how the process of coming out started for him at an early age. He says, "Most of my close friends knew by the time I was thirteen or fourteen. I came out in school, just not at home." When asked why he didn't come out to his parents first, he suggested there were several factors at play, including the military background of his father. "I didn't feel like he'd accept me. I thought I might even get kicked out the house. I just didn't know what would happen," said Mark. I asked Mark to talk further about why he eventually chose to come out and how he planned to approach the topic with his parents. What became apparent was the process of coming out to his parents, unlike the often spontaneous disclosure to friends, was a detailed and very carefully planned event, that for Mark, and many of the participants, included the usage of SNS as a tool in the planning process.

Mark talked at length of how he planned for over a year to come out to his parents. He explained the process in our interview:

> I thought about it every night. I had this plan in my head of how it would all go down. I talked to my friends online a lot about it. I asked them what happened when they had told their parents. I heard some pretty bad stories about kids getting kicked out. One guy told me his dad literally beat him and his mom had to call the cops. I was scared but most of the stories were good ones. Most of the time it all worked out.

Mark went on to discuss how he would lay awake in his bed at night and go over the scenario time and time again in his head. This process of imagined interactions was a common theme among participant's narratives. In fact, all of the participants expressed they engaged in imagined interactions with regards to disclosing their sexuality to their immediate family. Mark discussed how he would go online and "tell the guys hey, this is what I'm thinking of saying and they'd be like, yeah that sounds good." He sought affirmation from others, through SNS usage, that his well-crafted plan of disclosing his sexuality would end well:

> They would ask me stuff, like has your mom or dad ever said this? Have they ever asked you about a girlfriend, stuff like that? They sort of helped me see that my parents probably weren't totally clueless, so that helped a lot. I also knew they'd be there for me to talk to if things didn't go well. I knew I wasn't going to be alone.

Mark's memory of coming out to his mom and dad was fresh on his memory, even though it took place four years earlier. He recalled the experience of coming out, saying:

> It was really nerve-wracking. We were like on our way home. It was like really late. It was dark, and we were almost up the driveway and I told them I needed to talk to them when we got inside about something. When we finally got everything put away from grocery shopping, I told them I was gay and my mom was like we already knew (laughing) and that was pretty much the end of it. My mom hugged me and said she loved me, my dad said it was ok he guessed (hint of non-acceptance he would further explain later).

In the recollection of his story, Mark was very clear that the conversations he had using SNS were "huge reasons I was able to come out when I did." It was through the shared experiences of others he was able to build up the courage to tell his family.

Drew shared similar experiences and discussed about having imagined interactions for a number of years before finally coming out to his family. He used SNS as a method of building his courage and for the creation of a safety net in the event his parents didn't take it well. He says:

> I talked to other people online about how I might be coming out to them (parents). They told me that they had told their mom about me and she said if they kicked me out then I could come and live with them. So, I had that as a safety blanket. I was really scared about what might happen so my friend's mom made me call her and have the cell phone on in my pocket when I told them.

Eric also turned to online SNS for reassurances in planning his coming out to his parents. He talked about doing search after search about "coming out" and how he would talk to people online about their own coming out processes:

> I know a lot of what I read was really scary. Most of the people I talked to online had pretty good experiences, but I couldn't get the bad thoughts out of my head. I know a lot of what I read now is very happy but back then it wasn't. It was a lot of stories about people getting kicked out of their houses and stuff. I told myself I wasn't going to come out to my parents because of the things I had heard, so I decided to keep it to myself.

I asked Eric, who had already disclosed that all his close friends knew he was gay, why not tell his parents. His explanation was a common reasoning among the participants of this study:

> Friends are easier to lose and find new ones. Mine's all about who I'm going to have in my life. It's like selfish, but friends are easier to replace. You can't replace family. You can move past family not accepting you, it's hard- but you can still do it. If they choose not to be a part of your life because of who you are, you can't ever replace that void.

The narratives of the participants all painted a picture of imagined interactions that would occur, for some, over a period of years. Each had carefully crafted plans on how and when to disclose their sexuality to their immediate family and friends. Even the most carefully crafted plans are sometimes foiled as Lance spoke of his ex-boyfriend calling his parents after their breakup and telling them he was gay. He says, "he outed me, it wasn't really my decision," and spoke in length about the hate he carried for years after having "that moment" stolen from him.

Isaac had similar imagined interactions that didn't quite go as planned. He discussed how he had planned for over a year to tell his family at Christmas:

> I told my brother on Christmas Eve. He was hanging out with his soon to be wife and she was lying on top of him cuddling. I thought to myself, well he isn't going to beat me up with her here (laughing). He was like, ok, but I don't have to like anyone you bring home! We both laughed and that was it. The next day at Christmas dinner, he was like, Isaac don't you have something to tell us? And I was like, what? And he was like oh I don't know, maybe that you're gay? And I was like (pause) I like guys, and my dad, he was like do you have a bf? And I was like no, and he was like, have you had sex? And I was like OMG maybe, and he was like we'll you're using condoms right? I was just stunned by my dad's reaction. It was just like nothing to him. My mom stared forward the entire time and said nothing. She was focused. That's not how I had envisioned coming out.

Isaac says he's glad his brother forced the issue as, "it kept me from chickening out," and says while it didn't go as planned, the conversations he had with others on SNS allowed him to be more comfortable in the situation.

Post- "Coming Out" Stigma

Post- "coming out" stigma refers to the usage of online social networking sites by gay individuals as a method of relational maintenance, healing, and self-acceptance after coming out to non-accepting family members. While individuals turned to SNS as a method for dealing with stigma before coming out, SNS usage has been indicated as even more significant to participants after they came out and were met with non-acceptance from someone they loved and cared about.

Dustin recalls how after months of consideration, talking to other people online about it, and planning, he decided to come out to his father and stepmother together over dinner:

> At first, neither of them said anything. Then my dad said it would be ok and he changed the subject. It was only a few weeks later though that my stepmom started calling me sissy, and like in the most disgusted way you know. It would make me feel really really bad and with no restraint, understanding I was a young child. You know, adults are supposed to be the heroes and the examples and here I was being treated like crap.

When prompted to explain how he dealt with those feelings he spoke of how he would go online every day and talk to his friends. They would encourage him to "hang in there" and that "It would be ok." Eric says, "I can't really tell you how much it helped to know that someone cared about me and that they had been there too." Matthew shared a similar experience of SNS usage as a coping tool to his family's non-acceptance of his sexuality. In the sixth grade he told a fellow student he was gay. She went and told the teacher, who subsequently called his parents. He says:

> I got into mounds of trouble. I had to go through counseling. It was awful. I remember that time in my life. It was oh God, please take this away from me, please remove this from me. It destroyed my father. I was his only son. It was just awful.

When asked what happened next, Matthew shared how his school principal set up therapy between him and another teacher:

> The teacher didn't want to know who I was. He agreed to counsel me, but he never wanted to know who I was. I was to write letters, type letters and never sign them. If he was to find out who I was, I was to be expelled from school. It was something that my parents agreed to. He made me watch a movie. I remember the name of the movie. He would have me read bible verses and we did this for like three months.

Matthew continued to share his story as he discussed the specifics of this therapy arrangement:

> The movie, it was wings of an eagle, under my wings, something like that. It was a Christian movie. I remember the VHS tape. I can still see the image in my head. It was a man who was gay on Castro Street in San Francisco and how he was diagnosed with AIDS. He was now married and running an outreach center to convert homosexuals. I had to watch it and write a report on the movie. Every bible verse the guy quoted in the movie, I had to write 100 times.

When asked how that made him feel, Matthew responded:

> I got kind of turned on because there were guys kissing (laughing). At the same time, I did it because I had to because I knew I was going to get expelled from school. I felt humiliated by who I was, like something was wrong with me. My mom told me they prayed for me every day that I could get over my sickness. My sickness... (Long pause) like something was wrong with me. Man that still hurts.

Matthew talks about how this process of writing letters about his *sickness* and reading bible verses continued for around three months until he received a final letter from the teacher:

> He wrote a letter and says, I'm getting the feeling from your last few letters that you don't want to talk about this anymore. Is this something that you are over or is this something that you have basically realized your ways and you are straight now? I wrote back very simply that I wish this whole thing would go away. I said whatever I could to make it end. That was the last letter I ever sent. I found out later my parents had gotten copies of every letter (sigh).

Matthew continued to speak of how his parents ignored the topic for years and how his dad took a unique approach to show his disdain:

> I remember him buying me a set of tools one time and telling me that real men have tools. This was after the instance at school and it was the only thing that ever made me think that he was targeting it in conversation. He said the only reason why he bought it for me was that real men have tools, but we've never addressed it. I don't own a damn tool to this day (laughing).

When asked how his usage of SNS changed after the experience of being outed to his parents, Matthew was very specific in his belief that it was online social networking sites that gave him the strength and courage to continue living. He spoke of severe depression, withdrawal, and how he often thought of killing himself:

> I finally decided I was going to do it. I got my father's loaded gun out from under their bed and was going to shoot myself, but then I didn't want them to have to see that. Even though it was their hate of what I was, I didn't want to do that to them. I put the gun back and talked to my friend Brian online. Brian was from Kentucky and his parents were like

> mine. He told me we could both run away together if it was that bad, but to please not kill myself. He said if I did, he wouldn't have anyone to care about him, and he'd kill himself too.

The words "hate of what I was" struck me and I asked Matthew what he meant. He viewed being gay as: "the monster inside me," and now age 29, still views being gay as something inherently wrong with who he is as a person.

Andrew, age 18, tells the story about telling his parents he was gay. He says, "Their religious views kept them from accepting me. They looked me right in the eyes and told me I couldn't be this way, that God wouldn't allow it." Andrew recalls a few nondescript weeks passing before:

> My mom told me I needed to pack some clothes that I was going on a trip for a few months. I asked where and she wouldn't tell me. I didn't know what was going on. She took me the airport and there were people waiting to take me on the plane. She just kept crying and telling me that God would fix me.

Andrew ended up at a reparative gay therapy facility in California. He was 17, and recalls spending the next three months with no contact with his family, friends, or anyone he knew. He says:

> We spent every day learning about why it was wrong to be gay. We were told that God loved us and we could overcome this. We watched video after video of people who were gay and now were straight with a wife and kids.

When asked how that made him feel, he calmly laughed and said:

> I felt stupid. They weren't going to change me. I didn't want to change me. We had all these rules we had to follow. Only one guy in the bathroom at the same time. You could

> never have your shirt off around another guy. Here we were all 14-17 year old horny teenagers, rooming together and they think they were going to turn us straight? (Laughing).

Andrew was sent back to his parent's home in Georgia where for the first few months his parents never asked anything about his time in California or his sexuality. He discussed how life seemed almost normal. He was trying to finish high school, and had started talking to a new guy online that he really like. Then one day, his dad found gay chat sites in the history of his computer:

> They came into my room and asked what this was all about. I said what is what about? And they said they knew I was visiting gay sites. They asked me if I was still gay and told me think long and hard before answering that question. I looked them right in the eyes and said yes I'm still gay! (Emphatically stated). They told me I had to leave the house because I couldn't be there with my younger brother and sister if I was gay. The next day, I was out on the street. I was 18 and didn't have anything except some money my mom gave me and my cell phone. After a few days at a friend's house I took a bus down to (city name omitted for confidentiality) and that's how I got here. I had a friend I had met online who lived here and he told me I could come here.

When asked to clarify, Andrew discussed how he had met another gay guy on an online SNS and how he was living temporarily on his couch. He described how complicated it was because "he's discreet and doesn't want his straight college friends to know. They just think I'm a friend crashing from out of town." Andrew continued to discuss how the situation started ok but has gotten worse, as his presence makes the other closeted guy uncomfortable and he's been asked to leave after being here for a few months. Andrew says:

> I don't have any money. I don't have any family. My mom calls every few weeks to make sure I'm still alive, and I've begged her to let me come home. She says I can't as long as I'm choosing to be gay. I just don't know what to do.

Andrew continued to say how he was using his iPhone to talk to other gay guys online as a method of coping with the stigma and experiences of essentially being homeless. He says he may have found a guy who is willing to let him stay with him, but quickly mentions, "It's essentially a sex for rent kind of thing. He's an older guy, but I really don't care anymore." I switch from researcher to concerned bystander and give him money for a few meals and the number to some local contacts I had, in an attempt to help him find a safe place to stay.

Andrew's story highlights usage of social networking sites as both a coping tool and method of creating potentially lifesaving connections with similar individuals, especially in post coming-out situations when family members are non-accepting of their sexuality. It also highlights the negative predatory aspects that aren't often discussed with SNS usage and gay youth. Those aspects will be examined in the discussion section of this study.

Matthew and Andrew's story of using SNS as a method of dealing with stigma and shame post-coming out is not unique. It was a story told time and time again, each seemingly more heartbreaking than the last. Tim's story is one I will never forget. Since interviewing him for this study, it has been a shaping force in my own life. Tim is a young, 18 year old male who identifies as gay. He recalls knowing he was gay around age nine. His story highlights how embracing SNS and his identity saved his life. Tim was a foster child, and had been living with a foster family since age six. At age twelve, they were in the process of completing his adoption after his biological mother's parental rights were terminated by the state. Ironically, it was SNS usage that led to Tim being outed to his family. He recalls having posted "I'm here and I'm

queer" on his Facebook page, saying, "It was supposed to be set to where just my friends could see it, not my mom." His mom asked him, "Are you really?" to which he was honest and said yes. He recalls her saying it was ok and that she still loved him, but "We need to keep this from your dad." Tim explains that a few weeks went by and someone from church had told his dad:

> After church my dad asked if I was a queer. I said no, I'm just gay. He yelled no son of mine is going to be a fucking queer and locked me in my room. The next day the police came and took me away. I didn't know what was happening. They took me to a juvenile home for delinquent boys where I learned a week later that my parents had cancelled my adoption.

When asked how that made him feel, Tim recanted how he immediately attempted suicide by cutting his wrists. He was found and taken to the hospital in time to save his life. He was then placed in a mental ward for three weeks before being sent to yet another home for juveniles. He attempted suicide again; this time with pills, saying:

> No one wanted me. Nobody cared. They just let me go, like some trash being thrown away. I went to peninsula (mental hospital) six or seven times in a six-month span. I finally broke through and stopped feeling suicidal. Got what was bothering me off my chest. The fact that people wasn't accepting me and finally got out and got placed back in another foster home until I turned eighteen and moved back home with my bio mom.

I asked Tim what had changed that allowed him to feel ok, and he spoke in length in about going online to talk to other gay youth, and how he journals in an online journal (that he shared with me for this study).

He talked about how he would use his iPod and the free Wi-Fi of a nearby restaurant to sneak online while at the juvenile home for boys. He says:

> I just went as I could and snuck on the Internet where I'd talk to other people about it. Basically just talking to people about different stuff and how society would feel about me. I talked to people about suicide and they helped me. I could only have quick conversations so I didn't get caught but that stuff kept me going. If I didn't have that, I don't think I'd chose to be here anymore.

Tim says those conversations online helped him tremendously; saying, "I felt needed in a sense. I felt better about who I was." I asked Tim, in closing, to define to me what family is. He said, "Somebody who loves you. Somebody who accepts you for who you are." Tell me who you have that you identify as "family," I asked. His response shook me: "No body, [sic] I ain't got no body." Tim's story and experiences are powerful reminders of the real hardships many gay youth face when they are met with non-acceptance of their sexuality from the people they know and love. For me, Tim's story took me from viewing suicide, depression, hopelessness, and homelessness as items read about in LGBT research publications, to being flesh and blood right in front of me. Its affect on my life, one I will discuss in closing, has been profound.

Ever-Present Stigma

The usage of SNS as a method of coping with, and overcoming stigma, has been shown in what I define as the emergent categories of pre-coming out and post-coming out phases. For the participants of this study, SNS proved to be valuable tools in those phases, and it proves to be a continuing positive force and tool in dealing with the stigma that is, and will forever be present in their lives as gay individuals.

Dustin talks about how there is an innate stigma "built into being gay" and that you can see it even in the search and presentation of gay related social networking sites. He says:

> You know when you go to AOL chat rooms; you have to go all the way to the very bottom of the page. At the very bottom there's a link that says romance, then at the bottom of that page you find the "*gay*" category.

While many seem unaware of the latent message seen in small things like the location of chat links, they are aware of the greater stigma placed upon them by what Cole calls, "the rest of the world." He discussed at length how he was constantly aware that he was "someone that most people didn't agree with or understand." He spoke of being hopeful for a day where gay people don't have to deal with everyone else looking down upon them. This keen sense of awareness that stigma was omnipresent and would be continual through the rest of his life, was something not all participants were ok with. It was present during interviews- and presented itself in the form of hesitation, long pauses, laughing, heads looking down at the ground, and arms crossed when asking questions about how they identify in terms of sexuality. The enthusiasm that many had in sharing their stories was dampened when I asked, in closing, if there was anything they wish their families would understand about them being gay. A sense of shame and feeling of heaviness was palpable in the room. They looked away. Audible sighs could be heard. Dustin says:

> I want them to know I'm normal. I wish everyone just knew we are all normal. We get up just like they do. We put our clothes on the same way. We live. We laugh. We love. We hurt. We cry. We mourn for the loss of people who choose to live a life without us in it, simply because we're gay. We are fucking normal! There's nothing wrong with us.

Lance echoes a call for being viewed as normal, while highlighting recent shifts in attitudes. He says:

> Yeah, the summer between high school and college I spent the entire summer alone, finding myself. It was way annoying. I never found any answers. It was horrible (laughing) because being gay wasn't acceptable until like five years ago, so like before that it felt like people were just bashing it. In movies it was bad. In books it was bad. Now there's parades and shit. Whatever, I'm not really like that. I don't care about that though. I just want to find a guy I love and have kids and stuff. I want to have the most normal life I can. I want to be normal: Wife, two kids and a dog -but with a man.

He goes on to note the generational differences seen within his own family and why he thinks his kids will live in a different, more accepting world:

> I told my parents first and they were like, we don't understand it but will always love you as our son. My grandmother shit a brick. She went to church and prayed for me for like a month straight. She still asks me when I'm home for breaks if I have a girlfriend yet. The last family member I told I was gay was my seventeen-year-old brother. I said (name removed for confidentiality), hey bro I just want to let you know that I'm like, gay. He said, "ok cool, I gotta go though. I'm meeting this chick in like 30." It's a different generation you know. One day, all the old people are going to die (laughing) and there won't be anyone left except people who could care less about who I love.

Corey talked in length of how he has become more accepting of his self over time. He thinks "the positive shift in cultural views towards gays" has been important in his own recognition of self as a gay man. One of the things he still deals with is the stigma that others place on him:

> I'm always waiting for that but. Ya know, other people look at me and are like, oh Corey's a nice guy, he's smart, attractive, funny (pause) and then they always add and yeah, he's gay. Like what does my sexuality have to do with it? It's been hard for me

> accepting myself because I know that people will always use that (being gay) against me. I get so tired of hearing people talk about the gay lifestyle. I truly don't understand it. What is so wrong about who I am? You get to run to the courthouse and marry someone you've known for ten minutes and divorce next week. I spend five years of my life with someone I love, who happens to be the same sex, and yet my relationship is the deviant one?

An awareness of ever-present stigma was present with all participants. Every participant recounted events in the last year where they felt they had to hide their sexuality in order to not be viewed negatively from people they didn't know. John talked about going to a job interview and being asked if he was married. Drew recounted the awkwardness of having to be introduced as "a friend" to his boyfriend's friends. Each has learned to cope with the stigma in different ways, but each continues to rely on online social networking sites as venues to help cope with the stigma. It's "the ability to talk to someone else who understands it," says Scott. When asked how many times a day he visits a gay specific SNS, Scott says first laughs, then hesitates, before saying, "probably four of five times (long pause), yeah four or five I'd say." Even in his answer he feels shame, and for no reason other than his sexuality.

Accessibility and Fear of Rejection

This theme reflects a level of deeper meaning with the participants, and stems from all fifteen previously having negative experiences in disclosing their sexuality in a face-to-face environment. Those experiences shaped their lives as gay individuals, instilling fear of rejection and making it difficult for most to meet other gay individuals in face-to-face settings. Their narratives paint a portrait of SNS usage as an invaluable tool in mitigating the fear of rejection when meeting other individuals for personal relationships. It also highlights the ease of use and

accessibility that SNS brings to a gay individual. Lance says, "It's a lot safer talking to people there, (online) you don't have to wonder if they will accept you because of your sexuality. On there, we're all the same." Mark describes telling his mother that he was gay for the first time:

> I told my mom face-to-face that I was gay and she started crying, and then said it was probably just a phase. When I told her it wasn't a phase she pulled out the whole do you want to heaven or hell card. That was disgruntling. It hurt, and it kept me for a long time from telling anyone else that I was gay. It's just much easier not to tell people.

Corey, who had a similar negative experience in coming out to someone face-to-face, explains why he now prefers the online environment for developing personal relationships:

> It's scary if you're out somewhere, say like a party and you see someone you think is cute. You may want to go and flirt with them but in the back of your head you don't know for sure if they are gay or like guys, or if they may be homophobic; so with the apps and online stuff it's just really easy cause you automatically know because you don't have that fear of being shot down or something. You know they like guys.

Dustin, when asked why he chose an online site versus meeting someone face-to-face at a party, school, or other venue he replied:

> It's just not that easy. You can't walk into a party and see that someone is gay. Even if you could, there's just so much more you can see online. Just log on, look through the pics and you can find someone you are attracted to. Most of their profiles have several pics, so you can usually see them shirtless and see if you'd even want to have sex with them. Their profiles have everything you would want to know, how tall they are, weight, eye color, hair, cock size, if they're cut or uncut, and what they're into sexually. A lot of times I just like going on and seeing what's out there. I'm just curious. Now sometimes

> my curiosity does get the best of me and I wind up having some fun (laughs out loud) but it's all good.

Andrew echoed the sentiment of SNS usage for social connection by saying:

> There is no gay wristband, no stamp on the hand, or secret symbol you all wear to let others know you are gay. There's very little effort required to download an application on your phone or to sign up on a website with a username. At the end of the day, if you want to shut it down, you can shut it down. But to get up the courage to go out to a gay bar and be put into that scene, having no experience especially if you have nobody to go with you, is (short pause) requires immense more courage to do.

Tim speaks to both accessibility and rejection, calling online social networking sites a form of the Underground Railroad. He feels using those helps him, even to this day, deal with rejection:

> It's like the Underground Railroad, a secret society, secret way for (hesitation and deep breath) gays to communicate without rejection, but also without the difficulty of having to find out if that person's gay or straight. Being that the majority of society is straight, you'd be spending most of your time getting turned down. It just makes it easier and is pretty much where gay communication lies today.

The notion that accessibility plays a role in the lives of some gay individuals is evident by the narratives of several participants. This was present in the narratives of the participants who were born and raised in rural areas. Drew, a participant from a rural area in the southeast, explains the benefit of turning to online social networking sites:

> What I have found is that it helps people in rural areas where they may not have real brick and mortar gay places they can go to find like-minded individuals, so they turn to

> the internet, which can supply both a sense of community they need as well as a degree of anonymity if they need it.

Eric, raised in a rural area in the Northeast echoes that by saying:

> I think it (online) gives them a safety net to be able to talk about stuff when they may not have anyone they can talk to in person. Not only can they now talk to people, they can have sex too. Doesn't matter if you're in the boondocks of Arkansas or somewhere in the desert, now you can find it.

Interwoven throughout the narratives of all the participants is a commonality of fear of being rejected. Someone they loved, or liked had previously rejected all fifteen, in a face-to-face environment. This rejection carried over into their lived experiences and hindered their desire to further disclose their sexuality to others. The online environment diminishes this fear because they know if someone is online at an LGBTQ website, than they must be a part of *the group*.

Context is important in understanding the meaning of these narratives. One might assume people who are shy turn to the Internet as a way of meeting others due to fear or awkwardness of meeting others face-to-face. Of the 15 participants, 13 identified as being socially outgoing, and extroverted. Only two identified as introverted. When asked early in the interview to talk about meeting new people, Eric said, "I am very outgoing and it's not hard for me to introduce myself. It wasn't hard for me to meet new people when I came here." Mark says, "I'm the quid essential social butterfly (laughs out loud), I somewhere along the lines learned how to make new friends pretty easily. Kevin says, "I would say 90% of the time I have no problem meeting someone. I have never met a stranger and I have no problem going up to someone and introducing myself." Even Nathan, who identifies as being introverted stated, "Well, I tend, being somewhat of an introverted person, I'm not… I don't consider myself a

social butterfly for say, but I don't have too many qualms meeting new people. It's gotten easier to socialize as I've gotten older."

This context is extremely important in developing a deeper level of meaning. The participants are not shy, socially awkward individuals. They are people who are outgoing, socially confident individuals who have few difficulties in developing personal relationships face-to-face. The awareness of context here is key in understanding that these participants are not turning to the Internet and SNS because they have an innate sense of shyness or fear of meeting people. In fact, they have no issues meeting people in their daily lives. This is critical in understand the latent meaning hidden in their narratives. The use of online social networks for development of personal relationships stems from the ability to use them as a method of mitigating the risks and fears they often associate with rejection in face-to-face settings.

Religious Values

The last theme in the category of direct usage is religious values. Much like the three part theme of stigma, SNS usage pertaining to religious values can be seen in the same three manners: pre-coming out, post-coming out, and ever-present. Cole says:

> At first I wasn't comfortable with being gay, but two years ago, a little bit over two years ago, I accepted it. I came from a religious background so I knew that I wouldn't be accepted by my family, so I just stayed in the closet, with the door shut and just had a little peephole looking out into the gay world. That's how it was for me.

Cole's quote highlights religious values as a cause for extreme trepidation in his perception of his family's acceptance or non-acceptance of him based on sexuality. He talked in great detail about how he hid his sexuality from age twelve to seventeen before finally coming out to his

mom. His concerns were well founded, as his mother was "less than pleased with my being gay." He says:

> My mom immediately started crying and leaned against the kitchen counter with her hands in her face. It was the most horrible feeling ever. I went to hug her and she pushed me away. I said mom, it's ok, and she was like no it's not! You're not going to go to heaven. You're not going to go to heaven. You're not going to go to heaven. She said it like four times in a row. She ran to the bedroom and got the bible and started reading scripture. It was like she was trying to do an exorcism on me.

In the theme of coming out and imagined interactions, I recall Eric's story of using SNS to prepare to come out to his mom and dad. His concerns were well founded, as his mother also took the news of his sexuality poorly. He says:

> Her first response was less than pleasurable. She said nothing and just walked away. The next day she came to my room and she told me that she never wanted to meet anyone I ever dated, that I shouldn't be able to have kids because it would be horrible on the children to have two fathers, (pause/hesitation and audible sigh) and that the bible says it's wrong and all this other stuff, and I was like bitch you don't even go to freaking church! Don't be like trying to throw the bible on me right now (laughing). I was like crying hysterically and my dad hugged me and told me to go stay with my grandmother until we could get my mom figured out. She was the only one, out of everyone I ever came out to, that was the only person to give me any shit.

Eric talked about how he stayed with his grandmother for about a month until his dad said it was ok for him to move back home. His dad told him, just don't talk about it, and everything will be ok. Eric says the next few years were filled with his mom forcing him to go to church and

talked about how on Easter Sunday she forced him to go to the alter and have the pastor pray for him. He called it, "a heavy black cloud that hung over me until I left to go to college." I asked Eric how he would consider his relationship with his mom now, and he talked about how he had used her own argument to make a strong statement of his own worth as a gay individual. He says:

> It's really good. My parents got divorced two years ago. When they got divorced my mom started dating around. I told her, just so you know I don't ever want to meet anyone that you date. I was like, I think it's wrong that you and dad made vows to be together and you should have stayed together because that's what the bible says. I think that got her wheels turning. She's now supportive of me. She'll talk to me about my boyfriend and stuff going on in my life. We're really good now. We talk at least three times a week.

Cole and Eric, along with a majority of the other participants indicated religious values as a cause of tremendous concern in their pre-coming out planning. They spoke of the many conversations they would have with others via SNS about how others had dealt with the religious influences and pressures when coming out to their families. They also continued those conversations via SNS once they came out, and used those relationships as valuable coping tools when they were met with non-acceptance from family members on the basis of religious values.

Nathan discussed the extreme religious opposition his mother had after he disclosed his sexuality as gay. "She said she'd still love me, but she wasn't sure that God could," he said. He talked about how religious values continue to affect their relationship as mother and son; saying, "She always says she's praying for my affliction, and how running off to Alaska to live isn't going to heal me." Nathan talked about how that message makes him feel "broken" and how he's

not sure he will ever feel completely happy as a gay person. He discussed how his entire family uses religion against him:

> My partner of two years was over from Scotland visiting me for the summer and I took him to meet my sister. He was standing on the front porch of my sister's house. I said, (name omitted) I have someone I want you to meet, and he was like 12 feet away from her in the house. She said, Nathan I can't. It was basically her saying she can't support that. She said it was a sin, it was something she couldn't support. She couldn't even let me know she supported me because she felt like God was judging her at that moment. They'll never meet anyone that I'm with, and I can't even begin to tell you how that makes me feel.

Religious influences were clearly at play in the lives of many of the participants. What was particularly interesting was how many of the individuals identified as being strongly religious prior to coming out, and how the usage of SNS helped them come to terms with the fact that they can be gay and be religious at the same time. Andrew discussed the stigma he felt as a child and how he dealt with the struggles of being a Christian and being gay:

> I remember I would lay in bed at night and pray. I would be like ughhh please God, make me straight. I'll do anything if I don't have to go through this. Now, I thank God for making me gay. If I wasn't gay, I'd be working in a coal mine back in my hometown. It allowed me a new direction. I gotta look at the positive.

Scott and Derek discussed how after years of abandoning their personal faith, they used SNS to search out churches that were open to gay members and how they decided, as adults, they would seek out people of faith who embraced them. Tim and Corey had similar experiences, as both identified having "grown up in the church" and how they felt for years that they had to choose

either to be gay or to be Christians. Tim talked about having sex with a girl in the hopes that it would make him straight. Corey, like Matthew, would say the same prayer every night for a decade, until finally deciding, “God wasn’t listening.” Corey still hasn’t reconciled his issues of faith and sexuality and suggests, “It’s just going to take time.”

Chapter Five

Discussion

To understand why someone behaves as he does you must understand how it looked to him, what he thought he had to contend with, what alternatives he saw open to him; you can understand the effects of opportunity structures, delinquent subcultures, social norms, and other commonly invoked explanations of behavior only by seeing them from the actors' point of view (Becker, 1970, p. 64).

This chapter serves as a discussion follow up to the findings presented as part of this study. First, this chapter begins with examination of a powerful and unintended effect of social networking site usage by gay men- a latent theme of what I call, "I'm Gay:" Becoming LGBTQ. Next, I present a visual presentation and discussion of "What does this all mean?" otherwise referred to as "*the so what question"*, examining the deeper impact SNS usage has on the lives of the individuals who participated in this study, and practical implications that may exist within the LGBTQ outreach community.

This is followed by a discussion of the perceived impact of this study on theory. First, it focuses specifically on how existing theory can be applied to account for the findings presented in chapter four. Lastly, I discuss a level of abstraction and my suggestion that Self-Categorization Theory can be expanded to account for gay men's usage of SNS to bridge the gap to in-group membership within the broader LGBTQ community.

Unintended Effects of SNS Usage by Gay Men

"I'm Gay:" Becoming LGBTQ

"I'm Gay:" Becoming LGBTQ refers to the ability of participants to utilize online social networking sites as a method of unknowingly identifying and developing an identity as a member of the greater LGBTQ community. In listening to their narratives, it seemed a burden had been lifted once they were able to tell others they were gay. While all fifteen participants

indicated that they were "*out*" to most others in terms of their sexuality, they all indicated their acceptance of self as a gay person, and then of portraying that self to others, all started in an online environment. Mark says, "Going online lets me talk to other people like me. I find it easier to be me in real life after telling people on there (online) that I was gay."

This theme occurred in the narratives of all fifteen participants. It is shown best by Eric who said, "Going online mitigates the fear. There's not much to worry about because you know the other people online are gay. It's much easier to talk to someone you know who is like you." Nathan says, "Well, it's weird. In real life you don't know what someone's sexual preference is, but online, well you presume the folks on those application are gay, so in that sense you know." The theme continued in the narrative of Lance who said, "When you're not out to everyone, it's just easier to meet there (online) because you don't have to worry about someone finding out. They're just like you."

Several participants directly relate their online disclosures as effecting their level of acceptance of their sexuality in their analog lives, and their narratives seem to weave a common story: one in which the online environments provided safety in disclosing their sexuality to others who were "*like them*," which over time, allowed them to be more comfortable in disclosing their sexuality to others in a face-to-face environment. The act of telling someone for the first time they were gay, for these participants, all occurred in an online setting; with that snowballing into being more and more comfortable with accepting and disclosing their sexuality in their analog lives. This again has significant implications as their narratives are grounded in a socially constructed reality, one in which they interpret through communication, what reality is (Littlejohn, S., & Foss, K., 2005). As they utilize online social networking sites they are

essentially reshaping their perception of self and as a result, their identities, and subsequent realities are changed.

The theme of stigma was examined and refers to the extreme pressure that participants feel to fit into the normative values our society places on sexuality. This theme is derived from a deeper level of meaning, interpreted from the narratives of the participants and is representative of social influence at play in the lives of the individuals as they sought to explore their sexual identities. They are constantly faced with making the choice of being true to how they view themselves and with conformity. Conformity can be defined as yielding to the pressures of the mainstream group, otherwise known as majority influence (Crutchfield, 1955). With the participants, the desire to fit in, and to conform to a social role (heterosexual), must be balanced with the exploration of self within the greater LGBTQ community. When asked, in terms of the LGBTQ community, how they identify, only six of the participants responded immediately that they were gay.

This quick response indicated a certain level of comfort that allowed them to respond without hesitation. This level of comfort was not present in the remaining nine participants. In fact, their responses were marked with hesitation and doubt. When asked how they identify, Mark responded after an eight second pause, “Hmmmm, I identify as gay.” His body posture immediately went from a relaxed state to arms crossed, and a more defensive posture. The question clearly made him uncomfortable. When Eric was asked how he identified, there was again a delay that was not present in his answering of other questions, followed by a laugh, three-second pause, and then the statement, “I am gay.” When Nathan was asked, he responded, “I identify as me.” When asked what that means to him, he said, “I’m not gay. When I first came out I said I was gay, but then I didn’t like being classified that way, so I’m not gay (5 second

pause), what was the question again?" When asked to expand on not being gay he replied, "Well I am gay, but you know what I mean. I just don't like other people calling me gay." Corey responded to the same question by saying:

> Um, so that's, um, I'm not a huge fan of labeling myself because I think sexuality is kind of fluid. So, when asked in this context, I suppose most people would consider me through my life to be bisexual, but if I'm with a girl other people are going to see me as straight, if they see me with a guy they are going to think of me as gay. I have no problem with either of those.

The surface level interpretation of these comments reflects how the participants view their own sexuality. A deeper level of meaning can be seen in context of their body language, posture, and change in tone of voice when responding. It is reflective of a desire to fit in and be accepted within our society. C.S. Lewis hypothesized that the desire to fit in and to be accepted into a group is a natural humanistic desire (1953). In this instance, the narratives and nonverbal communication of the participants suggest they are concerned with labeling themselves as a member of a non-heterosexual group, perhaps the result of the natural desire to fit in. The hesitations of the participants reflect a deeper understanding of the phenomenon that is occurring here; the moment they label themselves as part of the LGBTQ community, they are essentially acknowledging they will never be a part of the heterosexual "*group*" our society views as acceptable. As Eric said best, "Once you start telling people you're gay, you can't really go back later and say I was just kidding, I'm not really gay."

This has huge implications for LGBTQ individuals as normative values on sexuality in our society implies it isn't ok to be gay; therefore participants have this ingrained into their way of thinking. Only the six participants, who also identified as being completely "out" in terms of

their sexuality, answered this question without hesitation and without any change in their body language, posture, or tone. The fact that these changes in behavior were present is illustrative of a desire to fit in. The very act of labeling themselves as something outside of the accepted normative values of our society regarding sexuality was difficult for the participants. Laughter, pauses, and silence were common initial reactions.

Four participants indicated they previously identified as bisexual, but now consider themselves to be gay. The desire to be labeled bisexual also demonstrates a desire to fit into accepted values regarding sexuality. Bisexuality is viewed as a much more accepted position versus homosexuality, leading one participant to recall himself as bisexual at one point in his life, even though he had never had any sexual experiences with women, only men. This is indicative of normative conformity where a person yields to group pressure in an attempt to fit in (Man, 1969). In this instance, the participant chose to "straddle the fence" as a way of maintaining a foot in both the heterosexual (normative) group, and the LGBTQ (non-normative) group. For this participant, it was "comforting" and may be explained by his fear of being rejected by either group. For another participant, "straddling the fence" only complicated things. Mark said:

> I tried straddling the fence for a few years and it just didn't work. I felt confused, and I was always trying to hide my gay life from my straight friends, and my straight life from my gay friends. I look back now that I am out and I think, wow, I really did waste those years of my life. None of them were really my friends, because none of them really knew who I was.

Nathan also expressed issues regarding conformity and identification, defined by Kelman (1958) as attempting to conform to the expectations of a social role. He described a time in his life

where he chose to live life as a closeted gay man because he "didn't want to hurt his mom." When asked to further explain what he meant, Nathan responded:

> Mom always talked about how she wanted grandchildren and how she couldn't wait for me to get to married. All through college she would always ask if I was dating anyone and I would say I was focusing on school. Sometimes I'd take a friend home who was a girl just so my mom would leave me alone. When I graduated college, I ran out of excuses not to have a girlfriend. It terrified me. She eventually quit asking… My dad has known for years, but we both agreed it would be best if we just didn't tell her.

In the case of Nathan, Kelman's role of identification and conformity is strongly at play. He is so afraid of hurting his mom that he lives a secret life, which is ultimately affecting his level of happiness in his own life, what he calls "my own misery." Why endure such personal "misery"? It's simple, the pressure to conform to the expectations of a social role, set by his mother throughout his entire life, outweighs any perceived benefit he has towards rejecting the normative expectations and social roles and openly exploring his identity within the LGBTQ community.

Interestingly, the role of conformity in the life of a LGBTQ individual is not entirely negative. Man (1969) expanded on the definition and components of conformity set forth earlier Kelman (1958) to include two new levels of conformity: Informational and ingratiational. Informational conformity involves conforming to a group when a person lacks knowledge and turns to the group for guidance (Man, 1969). In the case of LGBTQ individuals, this may be the first step in bucking the normative values of society regarding sexuality and accepting and embracing their role as a LGBTQ individual. This is demonstrated when a LGBTQ person turns

to another LGBTQ person when they have questions, fears, or concerns that they need addressed. They turn to the "group," which in this case is the non-normative LGBTQ community, as a method of information seeking.

Man identifies this as often leading to internalization – where a person eventually accepts the view of the group and adopts them on an individual level (1969). They then compare their behavior and social interactions to the new group, in this case, the LGBTQ community, versus the normative group. This was seen woven throughout the narratives of all of the participants. Mark says, "I didn't know anyone who was gay in real life so I went online." Nathan referred to a time in which he developed an online friendship with another teenager so he could talk to "someone who understood what life is like for me."

The role of online social networking sites and applications is instrumental in this process as it allows a venue for LGBTQ individuals to meet other similar people. Shaw (1997) referenced the Internet as revolutionizing the game for LGBTQ individuals by offering new virtual spaces they could utilize to meet other people. LGBTQ individuals were no longer relegated to dark, shady gay bars as the only space available for meeting other LGBTQ people. The value of the online space is shown in the research of many others, including Sociologist Diane Wysocki (1998) who examined the social element aspect of the Internet and found that it has had a powerful effect on social life and modern society. She suggests the Internet has allowed users to expand their social networks, find friends, prospective life partners, and even have sexual encounters. The power of online social networks is seen in Eric's profound statement:

> Without the Internet, I'm not sure I'd ever stepped foot out of the closet. If it hadn't been for a few great people I talked to online, I wouldn't have ever taken

> the first step towards being openly gay. They told me it was ok and that I'd be fine. I trusted them. I don't know why, I just knew they'd been in my shoes and they'd done it before. They supported me and that made me feel like it was all going to be all right.

Deeper examination of the narratives of these fifteen participants demonstrates a hidden, yet extremely powerful effect of social networking usage; what I call "I'm Gay:" Becoming LGBTQ. None of the participants described usage of SNS as a method of "Becoming LGBTQ," in fact; usage of SNS for most was very specific and direct.

It started out of simple curiosity and examination of what it meant to be gay or "*different*." From curiosity, usage became targeted in that most participants utilized SNS as a valuable tool for dealing with stigma, in what I break down into three specific stages: pre-coming out, post-coming out, and ever-present. During this stage, these individuals utilized SNS as a way of getting ideas on how to come out, safety-nets for if things went wrong, safe spaces for conversation about how to cope in the face of non-accepting family, and venues for connection with other like-minded individuals. This direct usage allowed the individuals a way of "working through it all," as described by Lance.

While these individuals were using SNS for very direct and specific needs, there was an unintended side effect of SNS usage that was hidden and subtly working in the background. I contend the usage of SNS provided a backdrop and overarching theme of shared experiences, which allowed the individuals to grow and develop an identity as a gay individual. Many described having no gay friends in real life and that their experiences with other gay individuals existed solely in the online space of SNS. Nathan recalled the first time he talked to another gay person via SNS and says:

> It was awesome in the regards you could see people who were in cities near you. There was this gay person in Shelby, the next town over and I remember being like oh my god! There's a gay person in Shelby and I'm talking to them right now (emphatically said). To see that there were a lot of us out there and we had a way to talk to each other was just unbelievable to me. There were so many of us in North Carolina, in my state, and I remember that for the first time it made me feel that maybe I wasn't broken. How could it be wrong, if there were so many of us?

The usage of SNS in the case of Nathan was a critical turning point in his identity development as a gay individual. For the first time in his life, the feelings of shame and of being broken, was countered with the idea that maybe, just maybe, it was ok for him to be gay.

Derek recalls how he started using SNS as a closeted, and very discreet individual, and how before he accepted his sexuality he actively avoided any situation in which other people might view as him being gay. He says:

> I didn't want a correlation between them and me that might have tipped someone off that I might be gay too. I was terrified that anyone might think that. Once I became ok with myself, it no longer mattered so I wasn't afraid to talk to people and meet people from online.

I asked Derek to tell me about what had changed that allowed him to be comfortable with being gay. His response, "I really don't know, I just thought these people weren't bad people anymore, they were like me." I contend Derek is a perfect demonstration of how it was the shared experiences, and conversations that made him unknowingly become more and more comfortable with his sexuality, ultimately reaching

the point where he proudly identifies as a gay man and part of the LGBTQ community. I examine theory to support this later in this discussion section.

Drew had a similar set of experiences, and was very candid how online SNS usage gave him the courage to tell other people face-to-face. He says:

> It was a secret I had been carrying around for a long, long time. Once I finally came out; for me, it was always like, even the first person I told it became a weight pulled off of me and every person beyond that it became that much easier to tell, to the point that it's nothing to me to you know, if someone looks at me and is like are you gay? I'm like, yeah. It doesn't bother me at all.

Looking back on his years as a gay youth using SNS, Dustin referred to his usage of SNS as "freeing" and key to his own growth and acceptance of self as a gay person. He says:

> Initially, you just feel like wow, there are people I can talk to here (SNS) about this stuff. There's people who get it, right? You can talk about the things that umm are on your mind. You can let your guard down. I mean to say the words, that boy is cute, that's a big thing. To use that pronoun, it takes a bit of courage, and well, time to say that stuff. Even with straight friends now, it takes time for them to get comfortable with the fact that you're gay. So to have folks that you can just chat with and say those kinds of things is really kind of freeing. Looking back, I think it was really important in terms of me accepting myself a bit.

Corey also shared similar views, in reflection of his usage of SNS. He says:

> To go and be able to say, this is what this means. To be able to ask questions, to be able to hear other people's experiences, (pause/hesitation) because there's no, when I was growing up, there was no role models. There were no out people on

> TV. No gay characters on TV. There was nothing, so you feel tremendously alone and isolated and thinking this is happening to me, and no one else around me. I think having those people there (SNS) helped me be able to know that there are other folks out there, and that I was not alone.

I asked each participant to tell me about the first people they ever told they were gay, and they each said it occurred in the setting and space of SNS. For some, it was very subtle at first. They were disclosing without thinking about it. Someone would ask them via SNS, are you gay? And they'd respond, like Drew in saying, "Yeah I'm gay." John called it "a unifying factor, something that everyone had in common there (SNS)." He says:

> Everyone there is the same. They may not know it or think it at the time, but they are all the same. They either have thought about coming out, have come out, or they didn't come out yet, for whatever reason. There's always that commonality, always that unifying factor.

That relatively small disclosure of saying "I'm gay" highlights a greater ripple effect, and how disclosing their sexuality online helped facilitate a process of self-acceptance and disclosure in their analog lives. The shared experiences and understanding of what it meant to be gay, the direct and indirect usage to cope with stigma and non-acceptance from people they loved, all served as layers in the process of "Becoming LGBTQ." Over time, the layers added up to where it allowed participants to be more assured and comfortable in disclosing and living their lives as a gay individual.

In identifying and accepting one's sexuality as a gay individual, the usage of SNS also changes. Dustin says:

> Now it's less of me talking to people about issues of coming out, and me going online now to just talk with people that I know aren't going to judge me. I was talking to one of my good friends last night online. He had never seen a drag show and I was like, how has any gay guy not ever seen a drag show?! (Laughing). I told him we had to go.

Dustin's narrative shows the changing role of SNS, now that he is living as an openly gay man. He uses SNS to maintain friendships with people who helped him through the coming out process. He also uses it to learn and embrace ideas specific to culture of the LGBTQ community, in this instance, going to a drag show.

Scott shared his experiences using SNS and how in the beginning he was very specific in who he would talk to, and about what topics. He says:

> I saw myself as a guy who would have sex with men, but wouldn't identify as being gay. I didn't see myself as being friends with those people, whatever those people are. As I got older and talked to other people like me, I realized we had a lot more in common than I thought.

Cole adds, "You have to accept it (being gay) for yourself." He says:

> You got to be able to say, "I'm Gay." You have to be able to say that out loud and feel pretty comfortable with it. To say it out loud means you're authentic about it. I think you need to be able to acknowledge it, I think you need to be able to talk about it. I think you need to be comfortable with the fact that you're going to have to come out a lot in different situations across your life.

Scott and Cole's experiences highlight usage of SNS as a tool that, through shared experiences, allowed him to go from viewing gay people as "*those people*" to gay people

as individuals who were just like him. Like many of the others, they couldn't pinpoint the change in attitudes or how it even occurred; however, I feel the usage of SNS and shared experiences played a vital role in the quiet, personal transformations that allowed them to "Become LGBTQ."

Why It Matters: A Level of Abstraction

Below, in figure 5.1, I provide a visual representation, through a level of abstraction from the narratives of the fifteen participants of this study, of the meaning of social networking sites to gay individuals from non-accepting families. Through examination of the personal narratives, and artifacts presented, the participants of this study, found themselves "trapped," as expressed in the words of Eric. Figure 5.1 illustrates how they often felt isolated and alone, trapped in a process that consistently ended with silence and the non-disclosure of their sexuality. For instance, within the box represented, a vicious cycle often played over and over again in the lives of the young men who took part in this study. In the presence of non-accepting family members, and the ever-present stigma of a heteronormative society, they would seek out information any way they could. They would engage in a process of risk negotiation with themselves, often weighing the pros and cons of coming out to others, or embracing an identity as a gay person or member of the LGBTQ community.

All indicated an attempt to cover their sexuality, or to pass. Passing is a term that indicates one's ability to "pass" as a straight person, unless they otherwise choose to disclosure their sexuality (Green & Peterson, 2006). Covering is taking the appropriate steps, whenever necessary, to hide their sexuality from others (Green & Peterson, 2006). The stigma of cultural norms, expectations, and non-accepting family members, led to

resistance to embracing and accepting an identity as a gay individual. All indicated living with a persistent level of fear that others would discover their sexuality. In the background of the visual representation, you see four items: family rejection, cultural norms, religious influences, and fear of the unknown. These four items are purposely depicted in the background of the circle to indicate powerful forces ever present in our society that may affect gay men in disclosing their sexuality. As shown, the culmination of these various forces led to the silencing and non-disclosure of sexuality of the participants in this study. This cycle, absent the usage of SNS, repeated itself time and time again in the lives of the participants.

Participants indicated that without online social networking sites, the contact they had with other gay individuals was limited, and in most cases, non-existent. Various factors contributed to that, including accessibility, as some were in rural areas. It is important to note however, that even participants who indicated being raised in more metropolitan areas, indicated without the usage of SNS, their contact with other gay individuals was limited and virtually non-existent. In the case of these individuals, they were aware gay people existed, and may have even identified people within their local communities as people "*like them*," however they were not going to risk communicating with them due to the overwhelming fear of accidental self-disclosure, or "guilt by association," as Eric described it.

In this representation you will also notice the LGBT community is outside the box that represents the process of accepting and disclosing one's sexuality. This is intentional as participants indicated they were aware the LGBT community existed, however; they had no desires to be a part of the community, and often viewed individuals within the

LGBT community, as foreign, very different types of people in relation to how they viewed themselves. This is a process of othering, and is consistent with existing literature pertaining to the coming out process of gay individuals (De'Augeli, 1994).

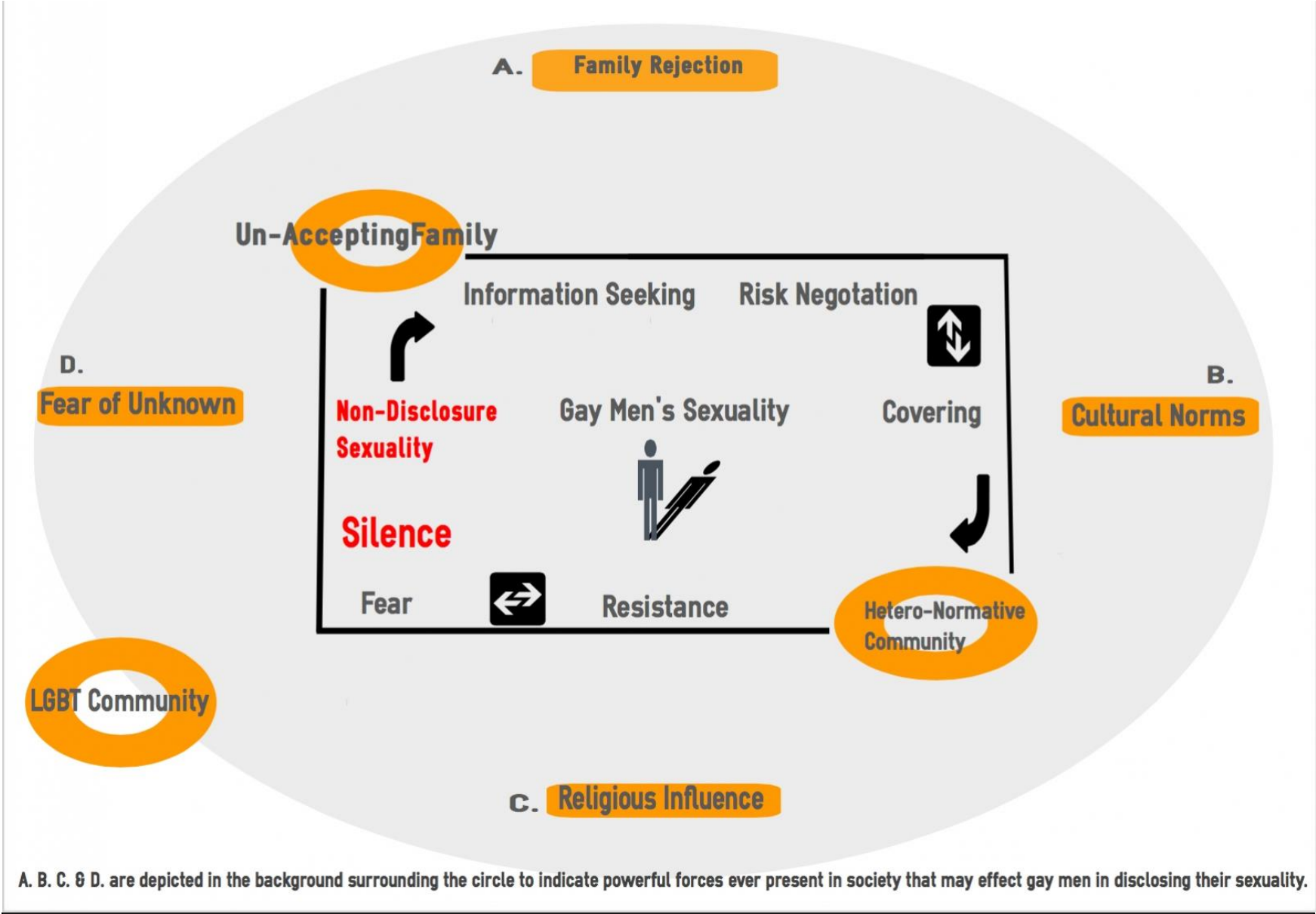


Figure 5.1. Resistance to Disclosing One's Sexuality as Gay: Absent the Use of Social Networking Sites

Figure 5.2 highlights the same process but this time includes the usage of online social networking sites. At play are the same four, ever-present external influences: family rejection, cultural norms, religious influences, and fear of the unknown. The presence of SNS changes the process of self-awareness, acceptance, and disclosure of sexuality. In the absence of SNS, participants found themselves "trapped" in a cycle perpetuated by fear. They lived their lives hidden in the closet. Once SNS was introduced into the equation, the participants became aware that other people like them existed. Not only did they become aware they existed, they were able to have conversations with these individuals. They were able to learn and grow from the shared experiences of other gay men who as Andrew said, "had walked in my shoes."

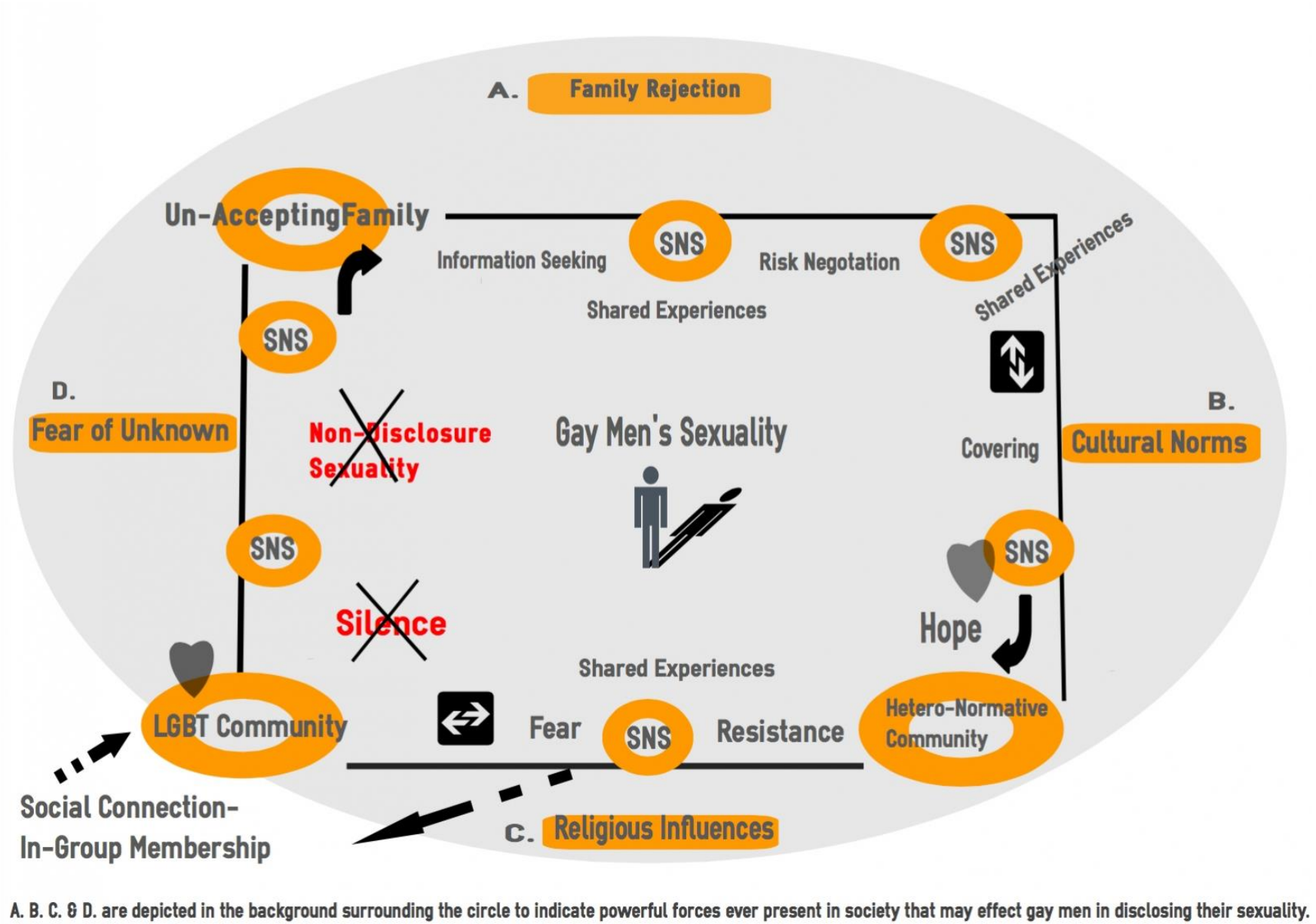
As represented in the visual graphic, I feel the presence of SNS served as a mitigating force in the fear and stigma that often consumed the lives of these individuals. Previously, without usage of SNS, they would engage in information seeking activities and processes of risk negotiation. They would balance the pros and cons of disclosure before ultimately succumbing to the pressures of non-accepting family members and the cultural norms and expectations of a heteronormative society. This resulted in the non-disclosure of sexuality and silence highlighted in red in figure 5.1. When SNS was introduced in the lives of the participants, specifically when individuals faced stigma and treatment from non-accepting family members, the whole equation changed.

The process of information seeking and risk negotiation remained the same, but the presence of SNS allowed them to engage in conversation with others who had shared similar experiences in their own lives. This sounding board, and social support system allowed the participants to re-evaluate and re-negotiate the risk involved with disclosing their sexuality to others, and living their lives as a gay individual. The hearts within figure 5.2 illustrates this.

When cultural norms, and other influences began to exert influence over the individual, they would simply return to the SNS and use the friendships formed within those venues as sounding boards for advice on what to do. It was here, through the shared experiences with other LGBTQ individuals, that a message of hope arose. This message of hope was present in the narratives of all fifteen individuals as they each indicated a common theme of, "It gets better" within their SNS conversations and relationships. Seeing that other people like them were able to overcome the obstacles and adversity, to become happy, fulfilled individuals living authentic lives as gay people, was extremely powerful to them all.

It is my suggestion the constant use of SNS allowed the participants to overcome the fear, resistance, and external influences of non-accepting family members and cultural expectations and norms of a heteronormative society. This led to the disclosure of their sexuality as a gay individual and rejection of silencing in their own lives.

Another important aspect of SNS usage is that in this model the LGBT community is part of the circle of awareness. Unlike the representation where SNS was absent, participants indicated they actively sought out engagement, conversation, and activity with the LGBT community. Many sought out activist groups, or support groups and joined those communities in real life. All indicated a change from simple curiosity, to the embracing of an LGBT identity. All indicated using SNS to meet gay people in real life, and the formation of friendships and romantic relationships. Some explored sexual experiences through the use of SNS. In all instances, SNS usage served as a catalyst for self-acceptance and embrace of being a gay person.



A. B. C. & D. are depicted in the background surrounding the circle to indicate powerful forces ever present in society that may effect gay men in disclosing their sexuality.

Figure 5.2. Use of Social Networking Sites in Overcoming Resistance to Disclosing One's Sexuality as Gay

This relationship between SNS usage and acceptance is what I posit as an unintended effect of using SNS. None of the participants set out to use SNS as a tool for embracing self-acceptance and what I coin, "Becoming LGBTQ," however; all ended up seeing themselves as active, proud members of the LGBTQ community. What started as usage due to simple curiosity, turned into sharing of personal experiences with real life changing benefits. Also interesting is the changing role of SNS over time. As Corey says:

> It's gone from you know, learning about what it means, and a curiosity thing, to seeking out exactly what you want. You can look for a particular thing. It's kind of the same ideas, over time you get better at it. You become a veteran and it kind of becomes second nature. Now you're not spending time complaining about what your family thinks about you, or talking to people about what it means to be gay, as you are spending time trying to satisfy it, or expand it.

Drew also highlights changing usage as he says:

> Now I don't have to talk to people about what their experiences were when they came out and stuff. Now, I just use it to meet new friends and for relationships and stuff. When I moved here for college I didn't know anyone and I used it as a safe space for meeting other people who were gay.

I asked Drew to tell me about conversations he had with other closeted people, now that he was openly gay. He replied:

> Yeah, every now and then someone will hit me up online and they'll be all shady and stuff. They'll ask me if I was out, and I'll be like yeah. They always talk about how it scares them and they'll talk about their family and stuff. I always tell them it'll get better and that it will be ok.

That theme seemed to ring true to the lives of all the participants of this study. In examination, they all recognized the role that SNS had played in their own lives as a gay individual, and were all more than willing to pay it forward in helping others in their own journeys.

It is within that "pay it forward" mentality, I think lays the greatest strength of SNS usage by gay individuals. Gay rights activist and the first openly gay city supervisor of San Francisco, Harvey Milk, was quoted saying in a speech entitled "That's What America is, in November of 1978:

> Gay brothers and sisters…You must come out. Come out… to your parents… I know that it is hard and will hurt them but think about how they will hurt you in the voting booth! Come out to your relatives… come out to your friends… if indeed they are your friends. Come out to your neighbors… to your fellow workers… to the people who work where you eat and shop... Come out only to the people you know, and who know you. Not to anyone else. But once and for all, break down the myths, destroy the lies and distortions. For your sake. For their sake. For the sake of the youngsters who are becoming scared by the votes from Dade to Eugene.

Milk's speech in 1978 was in response to California Proposition 6, a ballot initiative that would have banned gays and lesbians from working in California's public schools (Grindley, 2012). Anita Bryant, who organized the successful "Save Our Children" campaign in Miami that would go on to galvanize the LGBT community nationally, headed the proposition. Proposition 6 started with overwhelming public support and many feared the ballot initiative would easily pass. Opposition of the proposition would become the first major nationally fought battle of the gay rights movement. Surprisingly, as the votes came in on November 7th, 1978, the proposition was defeated with an overwhelming 58% of the public vote. Milk would give a speech that night

where he is famously remembered for his lines, “If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet shatter every closet door.” Twenty days later, Milk would be assassinated in his City Hall office.

Milk’s message to Californians in 1978 still rings true to this day. His message of coming out was central to gay individuals understanding that people can easily hate an idea – in this instance, being gay, but it’s much harder for people to hate a person. Milk called on all gay people to come out to “only the people they knew”, knowing that if every gay person would come out of the closet, every person would know someone who identifies as gay. If people can see “*being gay*” not as an abstract ideology, but as someone they know and love, their daughters and sons, their friends, their family, their neighbors, the gay rights movement would be over. Milk sought to personalize the fight. It is my assertion that is what SNS usage has done in relation to the current momentum seen in the gay rights movement, specifically with recent advances in same-sex marriage.

2013 Research from the Pew Internet Association found the percentage of people who indicated they personally knew someone who is gay or lesbian had increased 26% since 1993, and was at 87%. Not coincidental, Pew and others note over the last decade, an increase in public opinion on same-sex marriage, now at an all-time high of 59%, was the largest increase in polling percentages of any social issue over that time period. One could reasonably deduce from the prolific amounts of polling information, that as the percentage of people who identify as personally knowing someone who is gay or lesbian increases, so does public opinion of other issues important to gay individuals, like gay marriage and work place protections. This rings true to Harvey Milk’s speech in 1978 against California’s proposition 6, and the premise that people will not willfully discriminate against people they know and love, regardless of their sexuality.

Half Have 'Close' Gay Friends or Family

Do you personally know anyone who is gay or lesbian?	Jun 1993 %	May 2013 %
Yes	61	87
No/DK	38	13
	100	100

Have close family members or friends who are gay or lesbian?	May 2013 %
Yes	49
No/Don't know	51
	100

How many people who are gay or lesbian do you know?	
A lot	23
Some	44
Only one or two	19
None/Don't know	13

Know any gay or lesbian people raising children?	
Yes	31
No/Don't know	69
	100

PEW RESEARCH CENTER, May 1-5, 2013. Q59-62. Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding. June 1993 survey by NBC News/Wall Street Journal.

Figure 5.3. Half Have 'Close' Gay Friends or Family

So what does all this have to do with social networking usage? Research conducted around the coming out processes of gay youth has indicated that gay individuals are coming out at earlier and earlier ages (Grov, Bimbi, Nanin & Parsons, 2006; Cianciotto & Cahill, 2003; Denizet-Lewis, 2009). While many factors may be at play in their overall awareness and willingness to disclose their sexuality at earlier ages, it is having a profound effect on the greater gay rights movement and is seen in the positive shifts surrounding public opinion of LGBT individuals. As more people come out as gay, the more people will indicate they have close gay friends or family; the more positive the shifts will be seen within cultural norms and expectations; leading to lowered stigma surrounding being gay – resulting in more and more gay people feeling the freedom to *come out*. The cycle will repeat itself and grow every generation, until being gay is no more an issue than skin color or gender, ultimately leading to a complete dismantling of the proverbial gay closet.

SNS usage by the participants in this study served as a valuable tool in the exploration, acceptance, and disclosure of their identity as a gay person, highlighting the key role SNS usage

may play for others in similar situations. It was through the shared experiences of others, via SNS, many found their identity and voice, ultimately "Becoming LGBTQ." This awareness and acceptance, made possible by SNS usage, only adds more voices to the ever growing chorus of people choosing to say: "I'm Gay." The cycle continues, only larger now.

Application and Expansion of Existing Theory

"Is a given grounded theory the only answer to a research question? Absolutely not. A grounded theorist makes choices like any other researcher" (Stern, 2009, p. 61).

Direct Usage of SNS by Gay Men

For this study, a grounded theory approach was utilized to allow the data to speak for itself with findings emerging from the narratives of the participants. Interpretation of the data allows for a theoretical lens to emerge from the findings – in this case, specifically Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), as a theory that enhances interpretation of these discourses in regards to the first category of direct usage of SNS by gay men from non-accepting families. Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch (1974), developed (UGT), suggesting people use media based on the psychological needs that motivate them to engage in certain media usage behaviors. UGT says people are goal-oriented in their actions and patterns of behavior, and they actively seek ways of fulfilling their needs and desires (1974).

The behaviors of the participants are supported by the Uses and Gratifications approach. Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch (1974), developed the Uses and Gratifications theory that postulates people use media based on the psychological needs that motivate them to engage in certain media usage behaviors. The Uses and Gratifications theory says people are goal-oriented in their actions and patterns of behavior, and they actively seek ways of fulfilling their needs and desires (1974).

While this theory was originally developed to examine mass media consumption, it can be applied nicely to the realm of CMC, as other researchers have previously identified a broad range of gratifications people can gain from mediated-communication contexts (McGuire, 1974). As a result, it has been used to study outcomes of communication within virtually all settings, such as the Internet (LaRose & Eastin, 2004; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Song, LaRose, Eastin & Lin, 2004); and new media technologies (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996).

Research reflects the Uses and Gratifications Theory in regards to LGBT individuals seeking online personal relationships. Walther (1997) argued individuals use CMC to deliberately seek out new relational partners. Shaw, (1997) also states the Internet has become vital space for communication of LGBT individuals, saying it is a vital space for the creation of gay relationships. Shaw also notes the importance of the Internet to LGBT individuals by citing how the elements of "fear, intimidation, age, and geographic isolation" affect LGBT's ability to interact with other LGBT individuals in their real lives (p. 31, 1997).

What is incredibly interesting is how these participants utilize LGBTQ online social networking sites as a method of fulfilling their curiosities, whether that be sexual in the case of Nathan, or for more intimate reasons in the case of Mark who recalled a time he used an online social networking site that led to dating a guy for over a year. At the core of their usage is the use of the Internet to fulfill a desire or need, and then how they use those experiences to shape their perceptions of the world and of self, ultimately helping them making sense of their sexuality.

Participants described the ease in which meeting other guys online can occur and that sometimes it simply is a way of seeing other people like them exist. Some participants use the

sites to fulfill sexual curiosities, while others like Mark use them to fulfill curiosities about what other gay men are like. He says,

> "It's easier now. You can just flip on a computer and go online and see that other people like you exist. You can ask them what it's like to be gay, or to have sex with a guy and they'll tell you. You don't have to risk going out to a gay place where your friends or someone might see you. I'd never risk my friends finding out, so if I'm curious I'll just go online."

Uses and Gratifications Theory can help us understand why and how LGBTQ individuals seek out media to satisfy personal needs. As a need based approach, UGT is centered on the individual and his or her understanding of communication media. UGT differs from more traditional media effect theories by shifting the approach away from the effect that media has on people, to asking, "what do people do with media" (Lin, 1996, p. 117). It makes the assumptions that individuals are not passive consumers of media, rather they take on an active role that allows specific targeting and usage of media to fulfill individual goals such as satisfying personal needs, seeking companionship or social connections, acquisition or expansion of knowledge, or even as an escape from reality (Blumler, 1979).

Unlike other mass communication theories that focus on the effect of media on a passive consumer, UGT and its assumptions of an active media consumer is grounded in five key assumptions. Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch (1974) explain the assumptions. First, UGT assumes individuals are goal oriented in their consumption and use of media. Second, UGT assumes the act of linking a need and gratification rests with the active consumer of the media. This allows choice. Third, the media that individuals actively consume is competing with other items that provide need satisfaction. Fourth, individuals are self-aware when it comes to their usage and

consumption of media, and that awareness results in an ability to provide researchers with a clear picture of their use and consumption (1974). Lastly, judgments and propositions of value can only accurately be assessed by the audience that consumes and uses the media (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Application of UGT and its five key assumptions allow us to analyze the participant's discourse in a way that highlights the active use of technology to fill a desire to meet other LGBTQ individuals, while highlighting their awareness of use as well as active choice to utilize SNS over more traditional venues of meeting LGBTQ individuals.

Unintended Effects of Using SNS

Self-Categorization Theory

Self-Categorization Theory is a social psychological theory developed by John Turner and colleagues that seeks to describe how people perceive them and others, as part of a group (Hornsey, 2008). The socio-psychological tradition is rooted in the study of people as social beings, and theories in this tradition usually have tenants that focus on cognition, personalities, social behavior, perception, and psychological variables (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011).

At first glance, a theory rooted in such a tradition might seem out of place with regards to expanding the theory to account for phenomenon of interest with LGBT individuals. Deeper examination however, suggests Self-Categorization Theory is both a good fit paradigmatically and is also high in explanatory power and heuristic value. SCT is such a good fit paradigmatically that it is listed as an appropriate theoretical framework for qualitative researchers in the text *Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative Research* (Anfara & Mertz, 2006).

Given the commitments theories have to their paradigmatic origins, a gap exists in bridging the connection between a post-positivist born theory and application in an interpretivist setting. To bridge this gap, the atmosphere of the social psychology field of the late 1960s and

early 1970s must be examined. That time is coined as the "crisis of confidence" in social psychology, specifically with discussion of inter-group relations (Elms, 1975, p. 143). Researchers of that time criticized the social psychology field for lacking a broader approach in regards to constructs (Hornsey, 2008). Hornsey says social psychology researchers of that era lacked seeing "big picture constructs such as language, history, and culture in favor of intrapsychic and interpersonal processes" (Hornsey, 2008, p. 204). Those criticisms led to the development of theories that focused more on the human element – specifically Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

Hornsey suggests that SIT and SCT theories were born of this era of "crisis of confidence" and that "what emerged was an ambitious and far-reaching cluster of ideas that were pitched as an antidote to the overly individualistic and reductionalist tendencies of existing theories of intergroup relations" (2008, p. 205). The result of this is the theories of Social Identity Theory and the closely aligned Self-Categorization Theory; more closely resemble theories of the sociocultural tradition than theories of the pre 1960's, 70's socio-psychological tradition (Reicher, 1987).

This distinction is significant as it allows SCT to more easily align with the paradigmatic assumptions and methodologies of the sociocultural tradition. Within communication theory, sociocultural tradition and approaches posit that reality is not objective; rather it is socially constructed, specifically as a method of interacting within groups, culture, and communities (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Additional, Littlejohn and Foss suggest identity formation, as established through social group interaction, cultural roles, and the community, is a key area of focus (2011). Furthermore, they suggest that sociocultural researchers tend to place importance on the role of context and culture, and this results in focusing on a smaller aspect of the situation,

while recognizing the overall holistic importance of the situation to what happens with interactions at the micro level (2011).

Paradigmatic fit is key to SCT and the ability to expand it into issues of LGBT studies. SCT more closely aligns with the assumptions and methodologies of qualitative research, specifically the idea that "the understanding of participants' own accounts is an essential first step in any attempt to explain their behavior, but also that these accounts must in some sense form the key element or foundation of any explanation" (Hammersley, 1995, p. 58). Becker, 1970 also supports the notion of understanding the participants. Becker says

> To understand why someone behaves as he does you must understand how it looked to him, what he thought he had to contend with, what alternatives he saw open to him; you can understand the effects of opportunity structures, delinquent subcultures, social norms, and other commonly invoked explanations of behavior only by seeing them from the actor's point of view. (p. 64)

Tenants of Self-Categorization Theory

SCT and SIT share most of the same methods and theoretical assumptions, primarily because they both arise from the same theoretical and ideological perspectives. As a result, some researchers now merge the two theories into what they call the 'social identity perspective' (Hornsey, 2008). However, there are key differences as SCT was developed to counter perceived shortcomings within SIT, and it is SCT that this researcher feels can best be adapted to areas of LGBT studies, especially in-group relationships.

SCT proposes a self-categorization process that characterizes identity as occurring at varying degrees of inclusiveness (Hornsey, 2008). SCT suggests three levels of self-categorization pertinent to self-concept and identity. The first level is called "the superordinate

level of the self as human being (or human identity)" (Hornsey, 2008, p. 208). Hornsey identifies the second level of self-categorization as "the intermediate level of the self as a member of a social in-group as defined against other groups of humans (social identity)" (2008, p. 208). Lastly, the third group is defined as "the subordinate level of personal self-categorizations based on interpersonal comparisons (personal identity)" (Hornsey, 2008, p. 208). SCT suggests as salience occurs in one area of self-categorization, salience in the other areas declines (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000).

SCT posits that context plays a role in self-categorization, and given the varying possibilities for creation of social identities, that self-categorization results as a function of both fit and accessibility (Oakes, 1987; Oakes, Turner, & Haslam, 1991). Fit is a unique application of SCT and refers to perceptions reflecting the social reality of the individual, otherwise examining if perceptions of fit are reflective of real world differences (Hornsey, 2008).

Fit is further broken down into comparative fit and normative fit. Comparative and normative fit are functions of what SCT refers to as the meta-contrast-ratio – the principle that self-categories form in ways that maximize interclass differences and intra-class similarities (Hornsey, 2008). SCT, again showing paradigmatic alignment closer to the sociocultural tradition, highlights that context is key, and realities dynamic, stating the process is always defined from the perception of the perceiver (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000).

High levels of comparative fit suggest that individuals perceive high levels of inter-category differences and low levels of intra-category differences (Hornsey, 2008). In other words, a perception exists that the people "in the group" are more like the individual than the people "outside the group." Normative fit refers to the perception of group membership and social behavior, and if it is in line with stereotypical expectations (Hornsey, 2008). As

mentioned prior, accessibility is also a key component of SCT. According to the theory, accessibility effects the likelihood of category self-categorization. Categories are less or more likely to be selected based on their accessibility, with categories chronically accessible if people have a motivation to use them or if those categories are "frequently activated" (Hornsey, 2008, p.208).

Lastly, in review of the literature, depersonalization is highlighted as a cornerstone, and key difference of SCT over SIT. SCT researcher Hornsey suggests:

> People cognitively represent their social groups in terms of prototypes. When a category becomes salient, people come to see themselves and other category members less as individuals and more as interchangeable exemplars of the group prototype. The prototype is not an objective reality, but rather a subjective sense of the defining attributes of a social category that fluctuates according to context. (p. 209)

Adaption to LGBT Studies

Review of Self-Categorization Theory highlights key tenants that may be applied to LGBT studies, specifically in-group relationships and why individuals choose to self-categorize, or identify as a member of the LGBTQ community. SCT may be applied in such a way to highlight reasons why individuals may identify as being gay or lesbian, but be hesitant to self-identify with the greater LGBTQ community as a whole.

SCT posits that context plays a role in self-categorization, and given the varying possibilities for creation of social identities, self-categorization results as a function of both fit and accessibility (Oakes, 1987; Oakes, Turner, & Haslam, 1991). This is a particularly interesting tenant that may be applied to LGBT studies and how individuals perceive "fit" within the LGBTQ community. Specifically interesting is the reference of SCT that perceptions reflect

the social reality of the individual and application of those perceptions to real world differences (Hornsey, 2008).

When applied to LGBT studies, comparative and normative fit may be utilized to explain unwillingness to identify as a member of the broader LGBTQ community. The explanatory value of SCT would highlight when interclass differences, in that instance, are maximized, while intraclass similarities are minimized. In other words, LBGTQ individuals may find themselves more "similar" with people who don't classify themselves as LGBTQ, than similarities shared with individuals who classify themselves as LGBTQ. If the similarities within group aren't present, or they are minimized, SCT would suggest an individual would be unlikely to self-categorize, or identify as a member of that group. Again, keep in mind that self-categorization may or may not be in line with real world differences, as SCT highlights that context is key, and realities dynamic, stating the process is always defined from the perception of the perceiver (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). Using application of SCT, future research in this area is warranted and could center on perception of individuals who consider themselves gay or lesbian but who are unwilling to self-categorize within the LGBTQ community.

Additionally, the tenant of accessibility can also be applied to LGBT studies. SCT posits that accessibility affects the likelihood of category self-categorization and that categories are less or more likely to be selected based on their accessibility, with categories chronically accessible if people have a motivation to use them or if those categories are "frequently activated" (Hornsey, 2008, p.208). Application of SCT is applicable to LGBT studies and again warrants future research that is high in heuristic value. SCT may help explain why individuals from rural or conservative areas may not self-categorize as in-group members of the LGBTQ community with the frequency of individuals outside those areas. If frequency or exposure to LGBTQ group

members were limited, SCT would assume the individual would be less likely to self-categorize based on the tenant of accessibility. The tenant of normative fit may also be utilized here, especially if stereotypes in rural or conservative areas highlight a view of LGBTQ individuals that is different from real world perceptions. Since SCT highlights self-categorization is always defined from the perception of the receiver (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000), conservative and rural stereotypes could be shaping the self-categorization process of LGBTQ individuals.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

Limitations

For this study, the initial search for participants was for individuals that identified as being gay or bisexual, however only two bisexual individuals were found who were willing to participate in an interview regarding their experiences as a bisexual person. Identifying and recruiting participants who identify as bisexual is more difficult and sensitive in nature than finding participants who identify as being gay. Many identify as queer, or questioning, and do not turn to outreach centers or disclose their sexuality openly, as they are fearful of others finding out. This poses a problem when trying to identify individuals for the purposes of an in-depth interview. Even if identified, as two were for this study, they often refuse to participate, as one person canceled scheduled interviews on three separate occasions before finally saying they just weren't comfortable meeting and discussing the topic. The fear is often so great, that in the case of the individual being recruited for this study, they simply decided the risks of disclosure and meeting was too great.

As often the case, discreet, or deeply closeted individuals only want to communicate with other closeted individuals. An openly gay individual has nothing to lose by being "*outed*;" whereas, closeted individuals view themselves as having a lot to lose- hence the reason they only speak online with other individuals who identify as closeted. This poses a great challenge in recruited participants willing to speak about their lived experiences as a gay, bisexual or queer individual. Future examination may focus on more hidden participants within the LGBTQ community such as bisexual or queer individuals, as more research is needed within these sub-groups of the greater LGBTQ community.

Implications for Future Research

The findings from this study suggest the Internet and SNS serve as a place for acceptance, disclosure, and formation of personal relationships for LGBTQ individuals. LGBTQ individuals may use the Internet and online social networking sites as a way of reducing fear of rejection in their own lives. Future research may examine more specifically the multiple contexts examined in this study: acceptance, disclosure, and embracing of one's own sexuality. An exploration of the intersectionality of sexual identity and subthemes seen in this study can also be explored in greater detail; examining characteristics that could impact and be looked at separately for impact on personal experiences, such as: religious affiliation, racial identity, socioeconomic status, and political orientation. Greater detail will better highlight the role of the online environment as a space of great importance for LGBTQ individuals.

Future research may also examine the perspectives and experiences of coming out from the vantage point of the parents. Existing research from this perspective suggests when a child comes out, their parents often go through a five-stage process similar to grief that includes shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). As Matthew says in discussing coming out to his parents, "I understood it was a process of acceptance for them." Garnets & Kimmel (2003) refer to this as the death of the heterosexual fantasy. Existing literature in this regard focuses heavily on quantitative methodology and may benefit from a qualitative approach that examines the unique experiences of the parents.

Also present within the narratives of many participants of this study, is how their sexuality becomes what they call "the family secret," and how they are often asked by someone in their immediate family to withhold telling others they are gay in an attempt to reduce stigma

brought to the overall family. This presents another interesting area for examination where little existing research has been conducted.

Lastly, with increased disclosure, at earlier ages, there is the potential for negative, unintended consequences like increased stigma occurring over a longer duration. Given the importance of family acceptance in the development of one's identity as a gay individual, rejection and non-acceptance from one's family may produce unwanted feelings of guilt, and stigmatization leading to increased risks for suicidal thoughts, illegal drug use, and the making of poorer overall health choices. This rejection from loved ones, from one's family, may result in internalized homophobia, and can have lasting effects on a gay individual well into their adult years. Existing research (Kemer, 2013) highlights:

> LGBT people who were bullied in school or by family, for example, tend to internalize a stigmatized identity at an early developmental stage and may grow into adulthood struggling with feelings of shame and anxiety. (p.2)

This provides an opportunity to do further research with adults who identify as having non-accepting families as gay youth, to see if there is indeed a residual effect of that rejection in their lives as adults. Are they able to articulate concerns and fears as an LGBT person as an adult? Does the stigma and non-acceptance carry over into their romantic relationships or professional lives? The exploration of these questions will provide additional key insight into the ongoing and important conversation.

Final Thoughts

This paper sought to depict the intersectional dynamics of family life and acceptance of sexuality, highlighting the emergence of SNS usage by gay youth as a powerful tool in navigating disclosure and maintenance of their sexuality. Findings highlight SNS as an

invaluable asset in the intricate dance with forces of repression in the face of family non-acceptance, as many participants viewed usage of SNS as defining moments in understanding their own sexual identities. It highlights SNS as being central to their emergence as proud, openly gay men.

The research in the area of sexual communication is clear in regards to the benefits of open, clear communication between LGBTQ youth and disclosure to their parents. LGBTQ youth who have clear, open channels of communication with their parents or guardians, in relation to their sexuality, have been shown to make better health choices in regards to sexual partners, engaging in safe sex practices, and regularly testing for sexually transmitted diseases and HIV. In addition, the benefits are two-fold as research suggests they also have better and more fulfilling relationships with their parents, and they in turn are more comfortable embracing their sexuality and identity as an LGBTQ person.

It is clear that the Internet and LGBTQ online social networking sites have changed the ways in which LGBTQ individuals are able to communicate and meet other similar individuals. The ramifications of this are significant. No longer are gay men and women forced to live in secrecy- hiding who they are, and having few venues of meeting others like them. In today's world, relationships with other LGBTQ individuals: conversation, friendship, dating, or casual sex, is only a mouse click away. The playing field has been equalized. LGBTQ individuals can now meet others with the same ease and frequency of their heterosexual counterparts. Participants in this study all revealed a greater depth of happiness and content in their personal lives once they started the process of coming out. For all 15 participants, that process started online.

These findings are significant, because if online social networking sites serve as a catalyst for fulfillment for LGBTQ individuals, then online SNS may indeed serve as the missing piece that helps close the gap of bias, intolerance, and hatred that is often exhibited upon LGBTQ individuals as they transition "*out of the closet*." In today's digital age, we are surrounded by communication technology and this is significant for the LGBTQ community and the advancement of LGBTQ issues. Before the advent of the Internet, LGTBQ individuals had to risk being outed, losing family and friends, possibly a job and socio-economic status – just to meet someone else like them at a gay bar. They had to physically venture out of their homes in order to meet LGBTQ people. As a result, society's views on being gay didn't change. It remained a stigma because people were afraid to be openly gay. Men and women remained closeted until their 40s, 50s, and sometimes their entire life – going to the grave having never felt the freedom and happiness that comes with openly being your true self.

The truth is, the Internet and SNS have changed that. It has helped reshape the realities of countless people. It has given voice to the voiceless, and at times, as seen with several participants of this study, has served as a lifesaving intervention and method of overcoming the suicidal tendencies that often plague gay youth. It has served as a catalyst for change as demonstrated in the "surge of openly gay youth who are coming out in hundreds of thousands and disclosing their homosexuality with unprecedented regularity" (Mehra, p. 93, 2005). Gay youth are now coming out at a much earlier age, no longer relegated to living a life consumed by hiding in fear in the proverbial "*closet*." As a result, society has taken notice. It has no choice, as LGBTQ individuals are using the Internet and SNS to reshape their identity and find their voice, sending a clear message to the world: It is ok to be gay. Together, the narratives of this study's participants show us how online SNS provide more than entertainment and must be

considered part of the ongoing dialogue and expansion of queer history as well. Their stories highlight narratives that paint a portrait of people struggling for identities of worth, dignity, and of acceptance, and how their usage of SNS helps give purpose to their own lives. SNS usage helps bring them out of the proverbial closet and into the light of living their own authentic truths.

Tammy Baldwin, the first openly gay U.S. Senator elected in 2012 says, "There will not be a magic day when we wake up and it's now ok to express ourselves publicly. We make that day by doing things publicly until it's simply the way things are." We must be visible. The more gay youth know it's ok to be who they are, the more visible they will be, and at earlier stages in their life. As Hoffman (2009) says, "The problem is not being gay; it's breaking the silence, acknowledging it, forcing it into the cultural discourse" (p.22). People are coming out earlier and earlier and it is forcing changes in the way people view being gay. It's easy to hate the idea of someone being gay; it's harder to hate when that idea is your son, your daughter, your brother, your sister, or your friend.

As seen with the participants of this study, SNS usage has served as an invaluable tool in breaking the silence in their own lives. The significance of this should not be understated, as it's much easier to live in the closet, than to embrace and openly identify an identity as a gay individual. Most of the individuals in this study attempted to isolate sexuality from other orders of life: spirituality, family, work life, etc. This was because they viewed their sexuality, absent of SNS usage, as very little of who they are. Rejection of "Becoming LGBTQ" wasn't an attempt to deny their sexuality, per se; they simply want to be known for other, more defining characteristics. They often chose to stay in the closet, because the closet was safe. The moment they identified openly as "*gay*," they automatically became part of the co-marginalized and

greater conversation pertaining to what it means to be a *gay* person. They spent large portions of their life contesting and negotiating the label of "*being gay*" as they were aware those labels would then be used by others to assess their character and reputation. In isolating their sexuality they were able to reject a status that would subject them to marginalization, unaware of how this constant battle with self, could affect their overall happiness as well as affect a shift in societal views of the very "status" (being gay) they so often sought to reject.

SNS usage allowed a rejection of this ideology, providing a platform to deconstruct the very notions of what it means to be gay, leading participants to critical examine the notion of "*coming out*," "*the closet*," and of being – *gay*. Thus, SNS becomes one way in which gay individuals learn about non-heteronormative sexual identities, and depending on the conversations, may provoke developmental dissonance in coming out or staying in the closet. Furthermore, "*coming out*" is a way of life rather than a moment in time, and continued usage of SNS may assist in a communal maintenance of "*the closet"* as gay individuals utilize SNS across various contexts for the remainder of their lives, reaffirming their identity as gay individuals, while connecting together as a cohesive minority group with a strong sense of community and a powerful, evolving political agenda.

In closing, perhaps this research will expand the field and literature of both communication and LGBT studies, adding to the ongoing dialogue and expansion of queer history as well. Perhaps it will generate new research, spurring others to examine and expand on similar issues. It might be used to facilitate changes in programs and outreach policies of LGBT centers, potentially impacting gay youth in very real, material ways. While these are all great endeavors in their own right, perhaps the greatest accomplishment is that in simply sharing their stories, the participants of this study received some sense of affirmation, some greater

acknowledgment they are a person of worth, of dignity and mostly, that they are loved; and in sharing their stories, both their lives, and the lives of those who read this are impacted in a positive way.

For the individuals identified within this study, a personal shift towards self-acceptance has been enhanced by the usage of online social networking sites and communication technologies, as many whose lives have been dominated by the fears associated with living in the perpetual closet, ever reluctant to find their voice, are now embracing their own personal truths. Goltz (2009) says:

> The future, for queers, is always a harder path of pain and struggle—a homophobic cautionary tale to prevent children from deviating from heteronormative trajectories of marriage, child, and inheritance. Discursively, the story has been, it gets worse, much worse for the queer. This essentializing master narrative does not specify its condemnation with regards to race, class, nation, or ability. LGBTQ people are people without futures—doomed peoples.

As more gay individuals embrace a life of authentic truth and choose to come out, the more parents, the more children, the more siblings, the more friends, the more neighbors, the more co-workers know or love someone who is gay. The more people who identify as knowing someone who is gay, the more optimistic we can be about the further acceptance of LGBTQ people as part of the everyday fabric of peoples' lives, because few people favor discrimination against those they know and love, every gay person who comes out of the closet helps swing the pendulum of positive change forward in the treatment of gay individuals and the fight for equality, creating a social environment increasingly more hospitable to gay individuals. This inevitably results in more gay individuals feeling free to come out of *the closet*. This social

dynamic is powerfully reinforcing, enhanced by online social networking usage, and unlikely to ever be reversed.

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Appendices

Appendix A

THE UNIVERSITY of TENNESSEE
KNOXVILLE
Office of Research & Engagement
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)

1534 White Ave.
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
865-974-7697
fax 865-974-7400

October 11, 2013

IRB#: 9302 B

Title: Online Social Networking Sites: Meaning of SNS's to Gay and BiSexual Men

Richard T. Curry
Communication Studies
293 Communications Building
Campus – 0324

Eric Haley
Advertising & Public Relations
476 Communications Building
Campus – 0324

Your project listed above has been reviewed and granted IRB approval under expedited review.

This approval is good for a period ending one year from the date of this letter. Please make timely submission of renewal or prompt notification of project termination (see item #3 below).

Responsibilities of the investigator during the conduct of this project include the following:

1. To obtain prior approval from the Committee before instituting any changes in the project.
2. If signed consent forms are being obtained from subjects, they must be stored for at least three years following completion of the project.
3. To submit a Form D to report changes in the project or to report termination at 12-month or less intervals.

The Committee wishes you every success in your research endeavor. This office will send you a renewal notice (Form R) on the anniversary of your approval date.

Sincerely,

Brenda Lawson

Brenda Lawson
Compliances

Enclosure

FORM B APPLICATION

All applicants are encouraged to read the Form B guidelines. If you have any questions as you develop your Form B, contact your Departmental Review Committee (DRC) or Research Compliance Services at the Office of Research.

FORM B

IRB # _____

Date Received in OR _____

THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

Application for Review of Research Involving Human Subjects

I. IDENTIFICATION OF PROJECT

1. **1. Principal Investigator:**
   Richard T. Curry
   Doctoral Candidate
   School of Communication Studies
   College of Communication and Information
   293 Communications Building
   Knoxville, TN 37996
   931-625-6663
   rcurry4@utk.edu

   Faculty Advisor:
   Eric Haley, Ph.D.
   Professor
   School of Advertising and Public Relations
   College of Communication and Information
   476 Communications Building
   Knoxville, TN 37996
   865-974-3048
   haley@utk.edu

2. **Project Classification:** Doctoral Dissertation

3. **Title of Project:** Online Social Networking Sites: Meaning of SNS's to Gay and Bi-Sexual Men

4. **Starting Date:** Upon IRB Approval

5. **Estimated Completion Date:** 08/01/2014

6. **External Funding** ***(if any):***

   - **Grant/Contract Submission Deadline:**
   - **Funding Agency:**
   - **Sponsor ID Number** ***(if known)*****:**
   - **UT Proposal Number** ***(if known):***

II. PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this research project is to identify, from the perspectives of gay and bi-sexual young adults, the meaning of online social networking sites and applications, and how online social networking sites are integrated into their social lives. The benefits of this study are theoretical and practical, and will further expand knowledge in the field of queer theory and research.

III. DESCRIPTION AND SOURCE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

A sample of participants will be selected from the LGBTQ Outreach Center on campus. True to the nature of qualitative research, no set number of participants is identified; rather the study will recruit participants to the point of analytical redundancy and saturation. The only criteria of selection are that participants must identify as being gay or bi-sexual. No other criteria are required. All participants will be 18 years old or older. The participants will be identified from administrative contacts of the LGBTQ Outreach Center. The researcher will work with the center director to obtain a list of potential participants. From this initial list of study participants, the researcher will initiate preliminary email and telephone communication with potential candidates to inform them of the nature and purpose of the study and to request their participation. Upon scheduling an interview for a later date, the participants will be asked for recommendations of other potential participants that meet the criteria. The researcher will inform participants that no compensation or incentive is being offered for participation in the project, and that participation is completely voluntary, and can be terminated at any time, without penalty or recourse, at the request of the participant.

IV. METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Data will be collected for this study through in-depth interviews that will offer a humanistic and constructivist perspective. Each semi-structured interview will last

approximately one hour. Interviews will be audio recorded and tapes transcribed as soon as possible. The principle investigator will be the primary, principle transcriber for the audio recordings. Transcribers may also be utilized through the Office of Research. In the event transcribers are used, they will complete a Transcriber's Pledge of Confidentiality (Appendix C). The sample script of interview items will consist of grand tour questions and additional more-specific prompt questions. Anticipated responses will offer qualitative descriptions to context for implications to be drawn from the results of the study. The researchers will take several precautions to ensure a quality qualitative study. The interview guide is designed in a manner that guides the discussion to ensure that key points are addressed while simultaneously allowing the flexibility among participants to extrapolate on details that they deem relevant to the topic.

V. SPECIFIC RISKS AND PROTECTION MEASURES

There are minimal foreseeable risks of participation. Participants may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. In the event that a participant chooses to leave the study early, his responses will not be included in the data analysis for this project.

To ensure confidentiality, several protocols will be addressed. All participants, as well as the researcher, will sign consent forms and confidentiality agreements (see below). The statement includes information with anticipated time length of an interview, confidentiality statement, brief description of the project and contact information in case participants have any further questions. With the permission of each participant, the interviews will be audio recorded using an electronic voice recorder to ensure an accurate analysis of the data. Audio recording is important to the process because note taking will not provide the accurate and detailed information in-depth qualitative interviews are intended to elicit. Further, direct quotations from the transcripts may be used in the data analysis; audio recording will ensure accurate quotations for this purpose.

Consistent with a grounded theory approach, transcription of audiotapes will occur immediately on the same day of the initial interview. The audio recordings will not include identifying information and will only be transcribed by the principle investigator. To protect privacy of the participants, immediately after transcription is completed, audio recordings will be securely deleted off the electronic recorder by formatting the hard drive. Standard disk utility software, utilizing 256-bit AES encryption -the highest level of encryption possible, will be utilized to format the hard drive of the audio recorder. This method of securely erasing audio files ensures protection of privacy since potentially personally identifiable information (e.g. telephone and email) is being used to contact potential participants. Even if a permanent record of interview date and time exists via email that is associated with a participant's name, any potential electronic time stamps on the audio recording that may connect the participant to the email record, will be permanently erased once secure 256-bit AES encryption

is utilized to format the hard drive of the electronic audio recorder after transcription occurs.

Audio recordings/transcriptions of each interview will be kept in a secure location and locked within the departmental offices of the faculty adviser:

Eric Haley, Ph.D.
School of Advertising and Public Relations
College of Communication and Information
476 Communications Building
Knoxville, TN 37996

Data analysis conducted from the transcriptions will not refer to a person by name or in a manner that implicitly suggests the identity of a specific participant. Pseudonyms will be utilized as an additional method of protecting the privacy of participants.

VI. BENEFITS

With no anticipated risks of participation, the benefit of this study is to contribute to knowledge of queer theory. The data from this study will be part of publications submitted to communication journals in an effort to broaden our understanding of how gay and bi-sexual individuals utilize online social networks.

VII. METHODS FOR OBTAINING "INFORMED CONSENT" FROM PARTICIPANTS

Consent forms containing a complete description of the nature of the study will be discussed with all participants, who will be provided with a copy of the consent form for their own records. The researchers will discuss the consent forms with each participant, answer any questions, and then ask for a signed copy of the form. Language used in the informed consent procedure is understandable to the participants. The study will proceed only if signed consent is given. During this process the researcher also explain the steps that will be taken to ensure confidentiality to the participants.

Once participants have been recruited and agree to schedule an interview, they will be asked to review and sign a consent form. Physical copies of the informed consent form will be kept for three years in a locked cabinet within the offices of the faculty advisor, stored separately from the transcripts to ensure identifiers from the consent form cannot be linked to audio transcriptions. No interviews will take place until a consent form has been returned to the investigator.

VIII. QUALIFICATIONS OF THE INVESTIGATOR(S) TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Richard Curry is a doctoral candidate in the College of Communication and Information and has taken several 600-level doctoral courses on qualitative research and methodology, including advanced qualitative methods II under the direction of Co PI and dissertation chair Dr. Eric Haley. Curry has extensive experience with qualitative in-depth interviews and existing relationships with the LGBT community. Researcher has also earned a certificate of completion for IRB/Human Subjects Research and certificate of completion for Responsible Conduct of Research through the University of Tennessee Office of Research.

Dr. Haley, professor, has extensive experience with qualitative in-depth interviews and other forms of qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. Haley is the professor of record for advanced qualitative methods II for the College of Communication and Information and is the dissertation committee chair for the investigator, Richard Curry.

IX. FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT TO BE USED IN THE RESEARCH

The researcher will conduct the interviews using a digital recorder to record the interviews. In an effort to maximize participant comfort level and confidentiality, Each interview will be conducted in a setting selected by the participant, but will occur on the University of Tennessee campus, including but not limited to private rooms in the university library or LGBTQ Outreach Center. Rooms utilized in the library are located in public spaces, but are in essence private – due to the fact that the rooms have doors that close and provide audio sound blocking. This will maximize participant confidentiality as only the principle investigator and participant will be present in rooms during the interviews. It is also important to note that private rooms in both the university library and LBGTQ Outreach Center are regularly utilized by students and therefore, the presence of researcher and participant utilizing those rooms will not draw unwanted attention to the interview, therefore additionally protecting the confidentiality of the participants.

X. RESPONSIBILITY OF THE PRINCIPAL/CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR(S)

The following information must be entered verbatim into this section:

By compliance with the policies established by the Institutional Review Board of The University of Tennessee the principal investigator(s) subscribe to the principles stated in "The Belmont Report" and standards of professional ethics in all research, development, and related activities involving human subjects under the auspices of The University of Tennessee. The principal investigator(s) further agree that:

1. **Approval will be obtained from the Institutional Review Board prior to instituting any change in this research project.**
2. **Development of any unexpected risks will be immediately reported to Research Compliance Services.**

3. **An annual review and progress report (Form R) will be completed and submitted when requested by the Institutional Review Board.**

4. **Signed informed consent documents will be kept for the duration of the project and for at least three years thereafter at a location approved by the Institutional Review Board.**

XI. SIGNATURES

ALL SIGNATURES MUST BE ORIGINAL. The Principal Investigator should keep the original copy of the Form B and submit a copy with original signatures for review. Type the name of each individual above the appropriate signature line. Add signature lines for all Co-Principal Investigators, collaborating and student investigators, faculty advisor(s), department head of the Principal Investigator, and the Chair of the Departmental Review Committee. The following information should be typed verbatim, with added categories where needed:

Principal Investigator: Richard T Curry

Signature: [signature] **Date:** 8/28/2013

Co-Principal Investigator: _____

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Student Advisor (if any): Eric Haley

Signature: [signature] **Date:** 8/28/2013

XII. DEPARTMENT REVIEW AND APPROVAL

The application described above has been reviewed by the IRB departmental review committee and has been approved. The DRC further recommends that this application be reviewed as:

[ ] Expedited Review -- Category(s): _____

OR

[ ] Full IRB Review

Chair, DRC: Carlene White

Signature: Carlene White **Date:** 9/26/13

Department Head: Mike Wirth

Signature: [signature] **Date:** 9/27/13

Appendix B

Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT
Meaning of Online Social Networking Sites to Gay and Bi-sexual Individuals

INTRODUCTION
You are invited to participate in a research project on the meaning of Online Social Networking Sites to Gay and Bi-sexual Individuals. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you can withdraw from the interview at any time. By signing this form you are stating that you are at least 18 years old or older.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY
The interview will be audio recorded and the recordings will be securely deleted once the audio interview has been transcribed. The study records will be accessed only by the researcher and will be kept strictly confidential in a locked office of the researcher's faculty advisor on the campus of The University of Tennessee. The interview will take approximately one hour.

RISKS
There are no anticipated risks of participation in the study and you will receive no compensation or incentive for participation in the research project.

BENEFITS
The benefit of this study is to contribute to knowledge of queer theory. The data from this study will be part of publications submitted to communication journals in an effort to broaden our understanding of how gay and bi-sexual individuals utilize online social networks.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The information in the study records will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless participants specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link participants to the study.

CONTACT INFORMATION
If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,) you may contact the researcher, Richard Curry at rcurry4@utk.edu or 931-625-6663. He can be reached by mail at School of Communication Studies, 293 Communications Building, Knoxville, TN, 37996-0343.

Protocol sent to Research Compliance Services for final approval on (Date) : _____

Approved:
Research Compliance Services
Office of Research
1534 White Avenue

Signature: _____ Date: _____

For additional information on Form B, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer or by phone at (865) 974-3466.

Appendix C

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today and for participating in this study. There are no right or wrong answers; I am simply looking to explore people's individual experiences regarding this topic.

So let's get started. Tell me a little about yourself. What's your name, how old you are, where you are from, etc.

What are your plans for Thanksgiving? (open ended question, may elicit conversation or family) Opens up conversation.

Tell me about your family? Or friends? (follow up to above question)

How do you identify (Gay, Bisexual, Questioning) Are you out?

Tell me about the environment of your relationships – how do you interact? With family, friends, dating, do you ever use Skype, email, instant messaging, etc. in those relationships? (CONTEXT).

Tell me about your use of social networking sites? (Different sites, how do you use, when do you use, are other activities going on when you use)

Tell me about meeting new people, for personal relationships. (What's it like, would you share a few experiences, where and when did this occur)

Tell me about a time you used a social networking site to seek out a personal relationship? (What happened, would you mind sharing an experience or two, how do you feel, what do you think when using)

Why did you use an online site versus meeting someone at a party, school, etc.?

What else would you like to tell me that may better help me understand why LGBTQ individuals use online social networking?

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

_____ Participant's initials (place on the bottom front page of two-sided consent forms)

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed you data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

Appendix

Dear Rick,

You have been granted one-time only permission to reprint the graphic from the report entitled, "Growing Support for Gay Marriage: Changed minds and Changing Demographics" mentioned in your email below. Please be sure to credit the information as follows:

* Pew Research Center
* (the title of the source being used)
* (the date the material was issued)
* (the website address of the report)

Sincerely,

Cheryl Elzey
Administrative Manager
Pew Research Center
1615 L St., NW, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 419-3675
(202) 419-3699 - fax
www.pewresearch.org

-----Original Message-----
From: Curry, Rick (Rick Curry) [mailto:Richardcurryt@utk.edu]
Sent: Wednesday, January 22, 2014 2:17 PM
To: Cheryl Elzey
Subject: Re: Submission: Permissions

Hi Cheryl,

Here is the attachment as both a pdf and word file.

Best,
Rick

On 1/22/14, 1:10 PM, "CElzey@PewResearch.org" <CElzey@PewResearch.org> wrote:

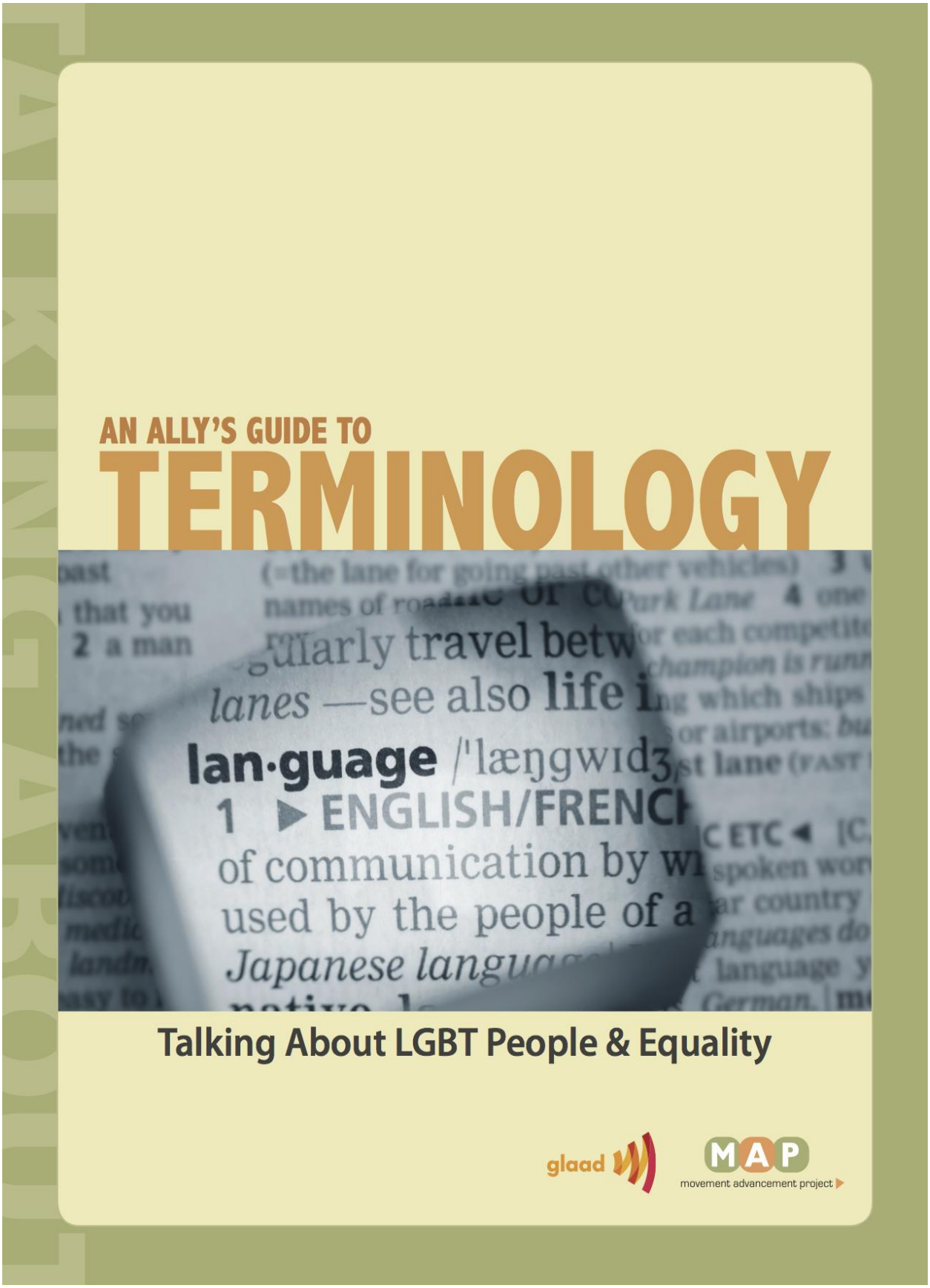
Dear Richard,

I am unable to access the document you attached. Can you resubmit in another format? Once I am able to review I will consider your request.

Sincerely,

Cheryl Elze

Appendix E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used by the people of a
Talking About LGBT People & Equality
glaad
MAP
movement advancement project

INTRODUCTION

The words we use to talk about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people and issues can have a powerful impact on our conversations. The right words can help open people's hearts and minds, while others can create distance or confusion. For example, the abbreviation "LGBT" is commonly used within the movement for lesbian, gay, bi and transgender equality, but it can be confusing and alienating to people who don't understand what it means (for many media and mainstream audiences, the term *gay and transgender* is more accessible without being overwhelming).

Designed for new allies who want to support LGBT Americans but often face an array of confusing terminology and language, this short guide offers an overview of essential vocabulary, terms to avoid, and a few key messages for talking about various issues. The **Talking About LGBT Issues** series, available online at www.lgbtmap.org/talking-about-lgbt-issues-series and www.glaad.org/talkingabout, provides additional recommendations and resources.

GAY, LESBIAN & BI

Terms to Use	Usage Examples	Terms to Avoid	Explanation
• **gay** (adj.) • **lesbian** (n. or adj.) • **bi** (adj.) • **bisexual** (adj., if needed on first reference for clarity)	"gay people" "gay man/men" "lesbian couple" "bi men and women" "He is gay." / "She is a lesbian." / "He is bi."	• "homosexual" • "same-sex" • "gay" (n.) (as in, "He is a gay.")	*Gay* is an adjective, not a noun; it is sometimes used as a shorthand term encompassing gay, lesbian and bi sexual orientations (though not transgender people or gender identity). Also, while many lesbians may identify as gay, the term *lesbian(s)* is clearer when talking only about a woman or women. Anti-gay activists often use words like "homosexual" to stigmatize gay people by reducing their lives to purely sexual terms.
• **being gay**	"She talked about being gay."	• "homosexuality" • "lesbianism" • "That's so gay." (a hurtful slur)	Talking about a person's "homosexuality" can, in some cases, reduce the life of that person to purely sexual terms. Talk about *being gay* instead. The term "lesbianism" is considered pejorative.
• **orientation** • **sexual orientation** (on first reference, if needed for clarity)	"a person's orientation" "Sexual orientation can be a complex topic. A person's orientation is…"	• "sexual preference" • "gay lifestyle" • "homosexual lifestyle" • "same-sex attractions" • "sexual identity"	The term "sexual preference" is used by anti-gay activists to suggest that being gay is a choice, and therefore can be changed or "cured." Similarly, the term "gay lifestyle" is used to stigmatize gay people and suggest that their lives should be viewed only through a sexual lens. Just as one would not talk about a "straight lifestyle," don't talk about a "gay lifestyle."
• **gay and transgender** • **lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender** (if needed for clarity)	"laws that protect gay and transgender people"	• "LGBT" (when talking with those who are unfamiliar with the issues or not yet supportive)	Reference sexual orientation and gender identity when talking about issues pertaining to both. (See **Transgender** on the next page for more information.) The abbreviation "LGBT" can be confusing and alienating for those who are unfamiliar with the issues or not yet supportive—though it is essential when talking to LGBT and strongly supportive audiences. Use the term that allows your audience to stay focused on the message without creating confusion about your intended meaning.
• **openly gay**	"She is openly lesbian." / "He is openly bi."	• "admitted he was gay"	The term "admitted" suggests prior deception or that being gay is shameful.

TRANSGENDER

The term *transgender* refers to people whose gender identity (the sense of gender that every person feels inside) or gender expression is different from the sex that was assigned to them at birth. At some point in their lives, transgender people decide they must live their lives as the gender they have always known themselves to be, and often transition to living as that gender.

Terms to Use	Usage Examples	Terms to Avoid	Explanation
• **transgender** (adj.)	"transgender person" "transgender advocate" "transgender inclusion"	• "transgendered" • "a transgender" (n.) • "transgenders" (n.) • "transvestite" • "tranny"	*Transgender* is an adjective, not a noun. Be careful not to call someone "a transgender." Do not add an unnecessary "-ed" to the term ("transgendered"), which connotes a condition of some kind. Never use the term "transvestite" to describe a transgender person. The shorthand *trans* is often used within the LGBT community, but may not be understood by general audiences. Always use a transgender person's chosen name. Also, a person who identifies as a certain gender should be referred to using pronouns consistent with that gender. When it isn't possible to ask what pronoun a person would prefer, use the pronoun that is consistent with the person's appearance and gender expression.
• **gender identity** • **gender expression**	"Everyone should be treated fairly, regardless of gender identity or expression."	• "sexual identity" (the correct term is *gender identity*) • "transgender identity" (use *gender identity* to refer to a person's internal sense of gender)	Not everyone who is transgender identifies that way; many transgender people simply identify as male or female. Also, note that *gender identity* (one's internal sense of gender) and *gender expression* (how a person outwardly expresses their gender) are not interchangeable terms.
• **transition**	"She began transitioning last year."	• "sex change" • "sex-change operation" • "pre-operative" / "post-operative" • "pre-op" / "post-op"	*Transition* is the accurate term that does not fixate on surgeries, which many transgender people do not or cannot undergo. Terms like "pre-op" or "post-op" unnecessarily fixate on a person's anatomy and should be avoided.

OVERVIEW: TALKING ABOUT EQUALITY FOR LGBT PEOPLE

Effective conversations about LGBT issues frame those issues in authentic, emotionally compelling ways that resonate with people's values.

When conversations about equality are rooted in the common ground we share, it's difficult to cast LGBT people as being "other," "different" or "not like me." It also makes it more difficult for Americans to ignore or dismiss the harms and injustices that LGBT people face.

When talking about equality for LGBT people:

- **Use the language of common values, beliefs, hopes and dreams.**
- **Make it about people and their stories, not policies.**
- **Remind people that LGBT people are everyday Americans who live ordinary lives. Gay and transgender people are neighbors, coworkers and friends who also walk the dog, mow the lawn, shop for groceries, etc.**

For example: *"This is about everyday Americans who want the same chance as everyone else to pursue health and happiness, earn a living, be safe in their communities, serve their country, and take care of the ones they love."*

For more information, see Talking About LGBT Issues: Overall Approaches, available at www.lgbtmap.org and www.glaad.org.

Terms to Use	Usage Examples	Terms to Avoid	Explanation
• **fairly and equally** • **fairness and equality**	"Everyone should be treated fairly and equally." "She supports fairness and equality."	• "rights" • "civil rights" • "gay rights"	"Rights" language is generally unpersuasive with most audiences, and civil rights comparisons can be especially alienating to African Americans.
• **intolerance** • **rejection** • **exclusion** • **unfairness** • **hurtfulness**	"This is the kind of exclusion and intolerance that divides our community." "Rejection by one's family can be the most hurtful of all."	• "hate" / "haters" / "hatred" • "bigot" / "bigots" / "bigotry" • "prejudice"	Avoid highly charged, argumentative terms like "hate" and "bigotry," which are likely to alienate people. Instead, use language that is measured and relatable to create empathy and a sense of how rejecting attitudes and actions hurt LGBT people.
• **anti-gay activists** • **far-right activists**	"the hurtful rhetoric of anti-gay activists"	• "religious extremists/ extremism" • "anti-gay Christians"	Avoid language that unfairly paints an entire religious tradition or denomination as being anti-gay or extremist.

TALKING ABOUT MARRIAGE & RELATIONSHIP RECOGNITION

In conversations about marriage for gay and lesbian couples, it is important to:

- **Focus on the values of marriage and what marriage is about: loving, committed couples who want to make a lifelong promise to take care of and be responsible for each other, always.**
- **Use stories to illustrate how the denial of marriage hurts gay couples and makes it harder for loving, committed couples to take care of and be responsible for each other.**
- **Talk about the importance of being the type of person who cares about others and who opposes putting committed gay couples in harm's way, which is what happens when they are denied the ability to marry.**
- **Avoid getting distracted by opponents' rhetoric (such as misleading claims about "redefining marriage" or the notion that gay people are a "threat to marriage") by keeping a clear focus on the values of marriage and how the denial of marriage hurts gay couples.**

For more information, see Talking About Marriage & Relationship Recognition, available at www.lgbtmap.org and www.glaad.org.

Terms to Use	Usage Examples	Terms to Avoid	Explanation
• **marriage** • **exclusion from marriage** • **denial of marriage**	"Excluding loving, committed gay couples from marriage makes it harder for them to take care of and be responsible for each other."	• "gay marriage" • "same-sex marriage"	Gay couples and straight couples want to marry for similar reasons, and they seek to join the institution of marriage as it currently exists. Just as it would be inappropriate to call the marriage of two older adults "elder marriage," it is inappropriate to call the marriage of a lesbian or gay couple "gay marriage" or "same-sex marriage." If additional clarity is needed, use *marriage for gay* (or *gay and lesbian*) *couples*. Also, while the term "marriage equality" can be helpful when talking with those who are supportive of marriage for gay and lesbian couples, it can create confusion and barriers to understanding for other audiences. When possible, simply talk about *marriage*, without qualifiers or modifiers.
• **love, commitment, responsibility, promise** • **taking care of the one you love**	"Marriage is about love, commitment, responsibility, and a lifelong promise two people make to take care of each other and be there for each other, always."	• "marriage rights" • "marriage benefits"	There is sometimes a misperception that gay couples only marry for "rights" and "benefits." To avoid this, focus on the values of love, commitment and responsibility that gay couples bring to marriage, and the importance of a couple being able to take care of and be there for each other. Also, focus on how gay and straight couples alike share similar hopes and dreams for marriage. But instead of taking shortcuts by using phrases like "exactly the same" or "just the same," spend time exploring the common ground and values (like commitment, responsibility and love) that we share.

Note: These approaches for talking about marriage can also be helpful in talking about other forms of relationship recognition, such as domestic partnerships or civil unions. However, note that in many states that allow domestic partnerships, gay couples have been barred from a dying partner's bedside and denied the ability to say goodbye to the person they love. That just doesn't happen when a couple is married, and it's one of the reasons why marriage matters to gay and straight couples alike.

TALKING ABOUT NON-DISCRIMINATION LAWS

When talking about non-discrimination laws that protect LGBT people from being unjustly fired from their jobs, remind people of our common, shared values:

- **Fair and equal treatment, for everyone** (*"All residents should be treated fairly and equally by the laws of our city/state."*)
- **The importance of hard work and the chance to earn a living** (*"All hardworking people in our city/state, including gay and transgender people, should have the chance to earn a living and provide for themselves and their families. Nobody should have to live in fear that they can be legally fired for reasons that have nothing to do with their job performance."*)

For more information, see Talking About Inclusive Employment Protections and Talking About Transgender-Inclusive Non-Discrimination Laws, available at www.lgbtmap.org and www.glaad.org.

Terms to Use	Usage Examples	Terms to Avoid	Explanation
• **employment/ workplace/housing protections**	"This law protects high-performing workers from being unfairly fired just because they're gay or trans-gender."	• "rights" • "employment/ housing rights"	Talking about "rights" in this context can make people think about opponents' false claims about "special rights." It can also make people resistant to the idea of non-discrimination protections.
• **treating people fairly and equally**	"All residents of our state should be treated fairly and equally."	• "fighting discrimination"	There is a difference between referring to *non-discrimination laws* (a term that accurately describes these kinds of laws) and talking about "fighting discrimination," which is generally unpersuasive and can lead to polarized, partisan reactions.

TALKING ABOUT OPEN MILITARY SERVICE

When talking about open military service:

- **Focus on how open military service—and ending the Don't Ask, Don't Tell ban—supports a strong national defense.**
- **Talk about the shared values that open military service—and military service itself—embodies.**

For the latest updates on the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell, visit Servicemembers Legal Defense Network (www.sldn.org).

For more information, see Talking About Ending Don't Ask, Don't Tell, available at www.lgbtmap.org and www.glaad.org.

Terms to Use	Usage Examples	Terms to Avoid	Explanation
• **open military service (or open service)** • **gay (or gay and lesbian) service members/troops/ personnel**	"Strong majorities of Americans support open military service for gay and lesbian personnel."	• "gays in the military" • "soldiers" (when broadly referring to the troops)	The term "soldiers" applies only to personnel serving in the U.S. Army. Use *service members, troops, personnel* or *military personnel* to describe those serving throughout our nation's armed forces. Also, note that Don't Ask, Don't Tell and its repeal do not apply to transgender people, who remain barred from service by other regulations.
• **service, duty, courage, sacrifice, patriotism, honor, integrity**	"Open military service is about serving one's country with honor and integrity."	• "rights" • "equality"	In conversations about military service, talk about the ideas and ideals that Americans associate with our nation's armed forces. Don't talk about "rights" in conversations about open military service, which is really about service, duty, courage, sacrifice, patriotism, honor and integrity.

TALKING ABOUT PARENTING & ADOPTION

When engaging in conversations about adoption and parenting:

- **Focus on the best interests of children, using the language of everyday family life.** Emphasize how caring LGBT parents can provide children with the love, stability, protection, security and guidance they need to succeed.
- **If talking about a proposed ban on adoption by gay parents, focus on three key points:**
  1. Adoption decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis based on what is in the best interests of the child.
  2. Experienced child health and social service authorities should make adoption decisions.
  3. All mainstream child authorities and peer-reviewed research on parenting support adoption by gay parents.
- **Remember that research shows that children of gay parents do just fine.** There's a large and growing body of peer-reviewed research that examines outcomes for children raised by gay parents. This research consistently concludes that being raised by gay or lesbian parents has no adverse effects on children, and that kids of gay parents are just as healthy and well-adjusted as other children. Also, nearly every credible authority on child health and social services (including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Child Welfare League of America) has determined that a person's orientation has nothing to do with the ability to be a good parent.

For more information, see Talking About Adoption & Gay Parents, available at www.lgbtmap.org and www.glaad.org.

Terms to Use	Usage Examples	Terms to Avoid	Explanation
• **adoption by loving, caring parents** • **adoption by gay (or lesbian and gay) parents** • **two moms, two dads**	"We shouldn't prevent kids in need of forever homes from being adopted by loving, caring parents who happen to be gay."	• "gay adoption" • "adoption by gay couples" • "adoption by same-sex parents"	Always keep the focus on loving, caring parents. Talking about *parents* rather than "couples" helps emphasize what adoption means to kids—the chance to find a forever home with loving parents.
This is about: • **the best interests of children** • **taking care of and providing for children** • **providing children with love, security, stability, and loving, forever homes** • **making adoption decisions on a case-by-case basis based on the best interests of the child**	"This is about creating safe, stable homes for children. It's about making sure that they have the loving, nurturing environment that allows them to thrive and succeed."	• "rights" • "adoption rights"	Parenting and adoption are about providing security, love and protection for kids. Discussions about parenting and adoption should not focus on "rights"—but rather on how loving, caring LGBT parents can provide children with the love, stability, protection, security and guidance they need to thrive and succeed.

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ABOUT THIS SERIES
This is one in a series of documents on effectively talking about LGBT issues, also including: Overall Approaches, Marriage & Relationship Recognition, Inclusive Employment Protections, Inclusive Hate Crimes Laws, Adoption & Gay Parents, Ending Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Talking About LGBT Equality with African Americans, Suicide & LGBT Populations, and an Ally's Guide to Talking About Transgender-Inclusive Non-Discrimination Laws. For downloadable versions, visit www.lgbtmap.org/talking-about-lgbt-issues-series or www.glaad.org/talkingabout. © 2011 Movement Advancement Project (MAP).

TALKING AROUND

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Appendix F

LGBTTSQI Terminology

By Eli Green & Eric N. Peterson Available
online at Trans-Academics.org, 2006.

A few notes about these definitions:
Each of these definitions has been carefully researched and closely analyzed from theoretical and practical perspectives for inclusiveness, cultural sensitivity, common usage, and general appropriateness. We have done our best to represent the most popular uses of the terms listed; however there may be some variation in definitions depending on location. Please note that each person who uses any or all of these terms does so in a unique way (especially terms that are used in the context of an identity label). Asking people for further information and/or clarification about the way in which they use the terms is encouraged. This is especially recommended when using terms which we have noted that can have a derogatory connotation.

Ag / Aggressive – A term used to describe a female-bodied and identified person who prefers presenting as masculine. This term is most commonly used in urban communities of color.

Agendered – Person is internally ungendered.

Ally – Someone who confronts heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, heterosexual and genderstraight privilege in themselves and others; a concern for the wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex people; and a belief that heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are social justice issues.

Androgyne / Androgynous – Person appearing and/or identifying as neither man nor woman, presenting a gender either mixed or neutral.

Asexual – Person who is not sexually attracted to anyone or does not have a sexual orientation.

BDSM: (Bondage, Discipline/Domination, Submission/Sadism, and Masochism) The terms 'submission/sadism' and 'masochism' refer to deriving pleasure from inflicting or receiving pain, often in a sexual context. The terms 'bondage' and 'domination' refer to playing with various power roles, in both sexual and social context. These practices are often misunderstood as abusive, but when practiced in a safe, sane, and consensual manner can be a part of healthy sex life. (Sometimes referred to as 'leather.')

Bear: The most common definition of a 'bear' is a man who has facial/body hair, and a cuddly body. However, the word 'bear' means many things to different people, even within the bear movement. Many men who do not have one or all of these characteristics define themselves as

bears, making the term a very loose one. 'Bear' is often defined as more of an attitude and a sense of comfort with natural masculinity and bodies.

Bare-Backing - Practicing anal sex without using a condom.

Berdache - A generic term used to refer to a third gender person (woman-living-man). The term 'berdache' is generally rejected as inappropriate and offensive by Native Peoples because it is a term that was assigned by European settlers to differently gendered Native Peoples. Appropriate terms vary by tribe and include: 'one-spirit', 'two-spirit', and 'wintke.'

Bicurious – A curiosity about having sexual relations with a same gender/sex person.

Bigendered - A person whose gender identity is a combination of male/man and female/woman.

Binding – The process of flattening one's breasts to have a more masculine or flat appearing chest.

Biphobia - The fear of, discrimination against, or hatred of bisexuals, which is often times related to the current binary standard. Biphobia can be seen within the LGBTQI community, as well as in general society.

Bisexual – A person emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to males/men and females/women. This attraction does not have to be equally split between genders and there may be a preference for one gender over others.

Bottom - A person who is said to take a more submissive role during sexual interactions. Sometimes referred to as 'pasivo' in Latin American cultures. Also known as 'Catcher.' (See also 'Top'.)

Bottom Surgery – Surgery on the genitals designed to create a body in harmony with a person's preferred gender expression.

Bug Chaser – A person who actively seeks to have HIV positive sex partners.

Butch – A person who identifies themselves as masculine, whether it be physically, mentally or emotionally. 'Butch' is sometimes used as a derogatory term for lesbians, but it can also be claimed as an affirmative identity label.

Catcher – See 'Bottom.' This term may be considered offensive by some people.

Coming Out – May refer to the process by which one accepts one's own sexuality, gender identity, or status as an intersexed person (to "come out" to oneself). May also refer to the process by which one shares one's sexuality, gender identity, or intersexed status with others (to

"come out" to friends, etc.). This can be a continual, life-long process for homosexual, bisexual, transgendered, and intersexed individuals.

Cross-dresser – Someone who wears clothes of another gender/sex.

D&D – An abbreviation for drug and disease free.

Discrimination – Prejudice + power. It occurs when members of a more powerful social group behave unjustly or cruelly to members of a less powerful social group.
Discrimination can take many forms, including both individual acts of hatred or injustice and institutional denials of privileges normally accorded to other groups. Ongoing discrimination creates a climate of oppression for the affected group.

Down Low - See 'In the Closet.' Also referred to as 'D/L.'

Drag - The performance of one or multiple genders theatrically.

Drag King – A person who performs masculinity theatrically.

Drag Queen – A person who performs femininity theatrically.

Dyke – Derogatory term referring to a masculine lesbian. Sometimes adopted affirmatively by lesbians (not necessarily masculine ones) to refer to themselves.

Fag – Derogatory term referring to someone perceived as non-heteronormative.

Fag Hag – A term primarily used to describe women who prefer the social company of gay men. While this term is claimed in an affirmative manner by some, it is largely regarded as derogatory.

Femme – Feminine identified person of any gender/sex.

Femme Queen – A term used to describe someone who is male bodied, but identifies as and expresses feminine gender. Primarily used in urban communities, particularly in communities of color and the New York City ballroom communities.

FTM / F2M - Abbreviation for female-to-male transgender or transsexual person.

Gay – 1. Term used in some cultural settings to represent males who are attracted to males in a romantic, erotic and/or emotional sense. Not all men who engage in "homosexual behavior" identify as gay, and as such this label should be used with caution. 2. Term used to refer to the LGBTQI community as a whole, or as an individual identity label for anyone who does not identify as heterosexual.

Gender – One's expressions of masculinity, femininity or androgyny in words, persons, organisms, or characteristics.

Gender Binary – The idea that there are only two genders – male/female or man/woman and that a person must be strictly gendered as either/or. (See also 'Identity Sphere.')

Gender Cues – What human beings use to attempt to tell the gender/sex of another person. Examples include hairstyle, gait, vocal inflection, body shape, facial hair, etc. Cues vary by culture.

Gender Diverse– A person who either by nature or by choice does not conform to genderbased expectations of society (e.g. transgender, transsexual, intersex, genderqueer, cross-dresser, etc.). Preferable to 'gender variant' because it does not imply a standard normativity.

Gender Expression – A person's choice and/or manipulation of 'gender cues.' Gender expression may or may not be congruent with or influenced by a person's biological sex,

Gender Identity – A person's sense of being masculine, feminine, or other gendered.

Gender Normative – A person who by nature or by choice conforms to gender based expectations of society. (Also referred to as 'Genderstraight'.)

Gender Variant – A synonym for gender diverse. 'Gender diverse' is preferred to 'gender variant' because variance implies a standard normativity of gender.

Genderfuck – The idea of playing with 'gender cues' to purposely confuse "standard" or stereotypical gender expressions, usually through clothing.

Genderqueer – A gender diverse person whose gender identity is neither male nor female, is between or beyond genders, or is some combination of genders. This identity is usually related to or in reaction to the social construction of gender, gender stereotypes and the gender binary system.

Genderstraight—See 'Gender Normative.'

Getting / Being Read – How a person's gender is perceived by a casual observer, based on gender cues / expression. (e.g. a butch woman being perceived as a man). Sometimes refers to a transperson being perceived as transgender, another gender than what they wish or chose to perceived or as their biological sex.

Hankie Code - A system that uses colored handkerchiefs and placement to symbolize preferences in sexual behavior and practices. Used primarily in the gay male leather community, this system is designed to help quickly locate potential sex partners with compatible interests.

Hermaphrodite—An out-of-date and offensive term for an intersexed person. (See

'Intersexed Person'.)

Heteronormativity—The assumption, in individuals or in institutions, that everyone is heterosexual, and that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality and bisexuality.

Heterosexism – Prejudice against individuals and groups who display non-heterosexual behaviors or identities, combined with the majority power to impose such prejudice. Usually used to the advantage of the group in power. Any attitude, action, or practice – backed by institutional power – that subordinates people because of their sexual orientation.

Heterosexual Privilege –Those benefits derived automatically by being heterosexual that are denied to homosexuals and bisexuals. Also, the benefits homosexuals and bisexuals receive as a result of claiming heterosexual identity or denying homosexual or bisexual identity.

HIV-phobia – The irrational fear or hatred of persons living with HIV/AIDS.

Homophobia – The irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals, homosexuality, or any behavior or belief that does not conform to rigid sex role stereotypes. It is this fear that enforces sexism as well as heterosexism.

Homosexual – A person primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same sex.

Identity Sphere – The idea that gender identities and expressions do not fit on a linear scale, but rather on a sphere that allows room for all expression without weighting any one expression as better than another.

In the Closet – Refers to a homosexual, bisexual, transperson or intersex person who will not or cannot disclose their sex, sexuality, sexual orientation or gender identity to their friends, family, co-workers, or society. An intersex person may be closeted due to ignorance about their status since standard medical practice is to "correct," whenever possible, intersex conditions early in childhood and to hide the medical history from the patient. There are varying degrees of being "in the closet"; for example, a person can be out in their social life, but in the closet at work, or with their family. Also known as 'Downlow" or 'D/L.'

Intergender – A person whose gender identity is between genders or a combination of genders.

Institutional Oppression – Arrangements of a society used to benefit one group at the expense of another through the use of language, media, education, religion, economics, etc.

Internalized Oppression – The process by which a member of an oppressed group comes to accept and live out the inaccurate stereotypes applied to the oppressed group.

Intersexed Person—Someone whose sex a doctor has a difficult time categorizing as either male or female. A person whose combination of chromosomes, gonads, hormones, internal sex organs, gonads, and/or genitals differs from one of the two expected patterns.

Leather: See 'BDSM'.

Lesbian – Term used to describe female-identified people attracted romantically, erotically, and/or emotionally to other female-identified people. The term lesbian is derived from the name of the Greek island of Lesbos and as such is sometimes considered a Eurocentric category that does not necessarily represent the identities of AfricanAmericans and other non-European ethnic groups. This being said, individual femaleidentified people from diverse ethnic groups, including African-Americans, embrace the term 'lesbian' as an identity label.

Lesbian Baiting - The heterosexist notion that any woman who prefers the company of woman, or who does not have a male partner, is a lesbian.

LGBTTSQI – A common abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, Trans, two spirit, queer and intersex community.

Lipstick Lesbian – Usually refers to a lesbian with a feminine gender expression. Can be used in a positive or a derogatory way, depending on who is using it. Is sometimes also used to refer to a lesbian who is seen as automatically passing for heterosexual.

Male Lesbian—A male-bodied person who identifies as a lesbian. This differs from a heterosexual male in that a male lesbian is primarily attracted to other lesbian, bisexual or queer identified people. May sometimes identify as gender diverse, or as a female/woman. (See 'Lesbian.')

Metrosexual - First used in 1994 by British journalist Mark Simpson, who coined the term to refer to an urban, heterosexual male with a strong aesthetic sense who spends a great deal of time and money on his appearance and lifestyle. This term can be perceived as derogatory because it reinforces stereotypes that all gay men are fashion-conscious and materialistic.

MSM – Men who have Sex with Men.

MTF / M2F – Abbreviation for male-to-female transgender or transsexual person.

Oppression – The systematic subjugation of a group of people by another group with access to social power, the result of which benefits one group over the other and is maintained by social beliefs and practices.

Outing – Involuntary disclosure of one's sexual orientation, gender identity, or intersex status.

Packing – Wearing a phallic device on the groin and under clothing for any purposes including: (for someone without a biological penis) the validation or confirmation of one's masculine

gender identity; seduction; and/or sexual readiness (for one who likes to penetrate another during sexual intercourse).

Pangendered – A person whose gender identity is comprised of all or many gender expressions.

Pansexual – A person who is sexually attracted to all or many gender expressions.

Passing – Describes a person's ability to be accepted as their preferred gender/sex or race/ethnic identity or to be seen as heterosexual.

Pitcher – See 'Top.' This term may be offensive to some people.

Potato Queen - A gay man who prefers white sexual or romantic partners. This term should be used with caution as it is considered derogatory by some.

Polyamory – Refers to having honest, usually non-possessive, relationships with multiple partners and can include: open relationships, polyfidelity (which involves multiple romantic relationships with sexual contact restricted to those), and sub-relationships (which denote distinguishing between a 'primary" relationship or relationships and various "secondary" relationships).

Prejudice – A conscious or unconscious negative belief about a whole group of people and its individual members.

Queer – 1. An umbrella term which embraces a matrix of sexual preferences, orientations, and habits of the not-exclusively- heterosexual-and-monogamous majority. Queer includes lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, Trans-people, intersex persons, the radical sex communities, and many other sexually transgressive (underworld) explorers. **2.** This term is sometimes used as a sexual orientation label instead of 'bisexual' as a way of acknowledging that there are more than two genders to be attracted to, or as a way of stating a non-heterosexual orientation without having to state who they are attracted to. **3**. A reclaimed word that was formerly used solely as a slur but that has been semantically overturned by members of the maligned group, who use it as a term of defiant pride. 'Queer' is an example of a word undergoing this process. For decades 'queer' was used solely as a derogatory adjective for gays and lesbians, but in the 1980s the term began to be used by gay and lesbian activists as a term of self-identification. Eventually, it came to be used as an umbrella term that included gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people. Nevertheless, a sizable percentage of people to whom this term might apply still hold 'queer' to be a hateful insult, and its use by heterosexuals is often considered offensive. Similarly, other reclaimed words are usually offensive to the in-group when used by outsiders, so extreme caution must be taken concerning their use when one is not a member of the group.

Rice Queen - A gay man who prefers Asian sexual or romantic partners. This term should be used with caution as it is considered derogatory by some.

Same Gender Loving – A term sometimes used by members of the African-American / Black community to express an alternative sexual orientation without relying on terms and symbols of European descent. The term emerged in the early 1990's with the intention of offering Black women who love women and Black men who love men a voice, a way of identifying and being that resonated with the uniqueness of Black culture in life. (Sometimes abbreviated as 'SGL'.)

Sex - A medical term designating a certain combination of gonads, chromosomes, external gender organs, secondary sex characteristics and hormonal balances. Because usually subdivided into 'male' and 'female', this category does not recognize the existence of intersex bodies.

Sex Identity – How a person identifies physically: female, male, in between, beyond, or neither.

Sexual Orientation – The desire for intimate emotional and/or sexual relationships with people of the same gender/sex, another gender/sex, or multiple genders/sexes.

Sexual Reassignment Surgery (SRS) – A term used by some medical professionals to refer to a group of surgical options that alter a person's "sex". In most states, one or multiple surgeries are required to achieve legal recognition of gender variance.

Sexuality – A person's exploration of sexual acts, sexual orientation, sexual pleasure, and desire.

Spivakian pronouns—new terms proposed to serve as gender-neutral, third-person, singular, personal pronouns in English. These neologisms are used by some people who feel that there are problems with gender-specific pronouns because they imply sex and/or gender. (See last page of this handout for usage table.)

Stealth – This term refers to when a person chooses to be secretive in the public sphere about their gender history, either after transitioning or while successful passing. (Also referred to as 'going stealth' or 'living in stealth mode'.)

Stem – A person whose gender expression falls somewhere between a stud and a femme**.** (See also 'Femme' and 'Stud'.)

Stereotype – A preconceived or oversimplified generalization about an entire group of people without regard for their individual differences. Though often negative, can also be complimentary. Even positive stereotypes can have a negative impact, however, simply because they involve broad generalizations that ignore individual realities.

Stone Butch / Femme / Queer– A person who may or may not desire sexual penetration and/or contact with the genitals or breasts. (See also 'Butch' and 'Femme').

Straight – Another term for heterosexual.

Straight-Acting – A term usually applied to gay men who readily pass as heterosexual. The term implies that there is a certain way that gay men should act that is significantly different from heterosexual men. Straight-acting gay men are often looked down upon in the LGBTQ community for seemingly accessing heterosexual privilege.

Stud — An African-American and/or Latina masculine lesbian. Also known as 'butch' or 'aggressive'.

Switch – A person who is both a 'Top' and a 'Bottom', there may or may not be a preference for one or the other. Also known as "Versatile"

Top — A person who is said to take a more dominant role during sexual interactions. May also be known as 'Pitcher.'

Top Surgery - This term usually refers to surgery for the construction of a male-type chest, but may also refer to breast augmentation.

Trans - An abbreviation that is sometimes used to refer to a gender diverse person. This use allows a person to state a gender diverse identity without having to disclose hormonal or surgical status/intentions. This term is sometimes used to refer to the gender diverse community as a whole.

Transandrogyny – A gender diverse gender expression that does not have a prominent masculine or feminine component.

Transactivism- The political and social movement to create equality for gender diverse persons.

Transfeminine – A gender-variant gender expression that has a prominent feminine component.

Transgender – A person who lives as a member of a gender other than that expected based on anatomical sex. Sexual orientation varies and is not dependent on gender identity.

Transgendered (Trans) Community – A loose category of people who transcend gender norms in a wide variety of ways. The central ethic of this community is unconditional acceptance of individual exercise of freedoms including gender and sexual identity and orientation.

Transhate – The irrational hatred of those who are gender diverse, usually expressed through violent and often deadly means.

Transmasculine - A gender-variant gender expression that has a prominent masculine component.

Tranny Chaser - A term primarily used to describe people who prefer or actively seek transpeople for sexual or romantic relations. While this term is claimed in an affirmative manner by some, it is largely regarded as derogatory.

Transition – This term is primarily used to refer to the process a gender diverse person undergoes when changing their bodily appearance either to be more congruent with the gender/sex they feel themselves to be and/or to be in harmony with their preferred gender expression.

Transman—An identity label sometimes adopted by female-to-male transsexuals to signify that they are men while still affirming their history as females. Also referred to as 'transguy(s).'

Transphobia – The irrational fear of those who are gender diverse and/or the inability to deal with gender ambiguity.

Transsexual – A person who identifies psychologically as a gender/sex other than the one to which they were assigned at birth. Transsexuals often wish to transform their bodies hormonally and surgically to match their inner sense of gender/sex.

Transvestite – Someone who dresses in clothing generally identified with the opposite gender/sex. While the terms 'homosexual' and 'transvestite' have been used synonymously, they are in fact signify two different groups. The majority of transvestites are heterosexual males who derive pleasure from dressing in "women's clothing". (The preferred term is 'cross-dresser,' but the term 'transvestite' is still used in a positive sense in England.)

Transwoman-- An identity label sometimes adopted by male-to-female transsexuals to signify that they are women while still affirming their history as males.

Two-Spirited – Native persons who have attributes of both genders, have distinct gender and social roles in their tribes, and are often involved with mystical rituals (shamans). Their dress is usually mixture of male and female articles and they are seen as a separate or third gender. The term 'two-spirit' is usually considered to specific to the Zuni tribe. Similar identity labels vary by tribe and include 'one-spirit' and 'wintke'.

Versatile – See 'switch.'

Voguing – A specific style of dance that was popularized in the New York City ballroom community. The movie "Paris Is Burning" documents the evolution of this dance style and related community.

WSW – Women who have Sex with Women.

YMSM - Young Men who have Sex with Men.

YWSW – Young Women who have Sex with Women.

Ze / Hir – Alternate pronouns that are gender neutral and preferred by some gender diverse persons. Pronounced /zee/ and /here,/ they replace "he"/"she" and "his"/"hers" respectively. (See usage table on the last page of this handout.**)**

Gender Neutral Pronoun Usage Table:

	Subject	**Object**	**Possessive Adjective**	**Possessive Pronoun**	**Reflexive**
Female	She	Her	Her	Hers	Herself
Male	He	Him	His	His	Himself
Gender Neutral	Ze	Hir	Hir	Hirs	Hirself
Spivak	E	Em	Eir	Eirs	Emself

How to pronounce gender neutral pronouns:

Ze	Hir	Hirs	Hirself	E	Em	Eir	Eirs	Emself
/zee/	/here/	/heres/	/hereself/	/ee/	/em/	/air/	/airs/	/emself/

Examples of how to use these pronouns:

She went to her bedroom.
He went to his bedroom.
Ze went to hir bedroom.
E went to eir bedroom.

I am her
sister. I am
his sister. I
am hir sister
I am eir
sister.

She shaves herself.
He shaves himself.
Ze shaves hirself.
E shaves emself.

This terminology sheet was created by Eli R. Green (eli@trans-academics.org) and Eric N. Peterson (eric.peterson@ucr.edu) at the LGBT Resource Center at UC Riverside 2003-2006, with additional input from www.wikipedia.org and many kind people who helped us create and revise these definitions. This sheet is always a work in progress so please be sure to check TransAcademics.org for updated versions. Please feel free to alter, use or pass on as needed but be sure to give credit to the original creators. Any updates or corrections can be submitted to eli@transacademics.org. Thank you. ☺

Vita

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