

University of South Dakota

USD RED

Honors Thesis

Theses, Dissertations, and Student Projects

Spring 2018

Exploring Media Use Among Sexual Minorities

Amy Trivedi

University of South Dakota

Follow this and additional works at: <https://red.library.usd.edu/honors-thesis>

Recommended Citation

Trivedi, Amy, "Exploring Media Use Among Sexual Minorities" (2018). *Honors Thesis*. 32.
<https://red.library.usd.edu/honors-thesis/32>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, and Student Projects at USD RED. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Thesis by an authorized administrator of USD RED. For more information, please contact dloftus@usd.edu.

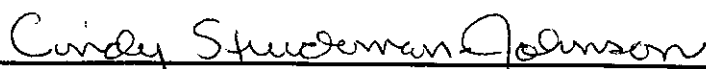
Exploring Media Use Among Sexual Minorities

by Amy Trivedi

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the
University Honors Program

Department of Psychology
The University of South Dakota
May 2018

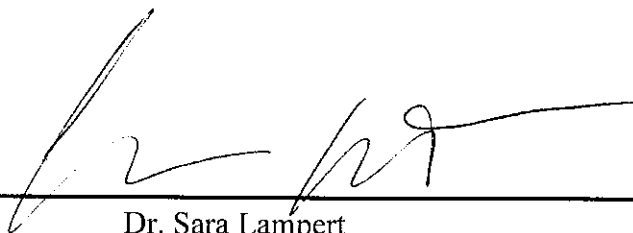
The members of the Honors Thesis Committee appointed to examine the thesis of Amy Trivedi find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.



Dr. Cindy Struckman-Johnson Professor
of Psychology
Co-Director of the Committee



Dr. Harry Freeman
Professor of Counseling & Psychology in Education
Co-Director of the Committee



Dr. Sara Lampert
Assistant Professor of History

ABSTRACT

Media Use Among Sexual Minorities

Amy Trivedi

Directors: Dr. Cindy Struckman-Johnson, Ph.D, MA, BA
Dr. Harry Freeman, Ph.D, MS, BS

Many adolescents turn to media outlets to search for more information on the experiences they are going through and what they are feeling. For many adolescents, media, specifically social media, seems to provide a safe space for them to openly express their feelings and to connect with others who may be encountering the same experiences as them. Media especially plays a large role in the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and asexual (LGBQA) adolescents. LGBQA youth likely turn to media to help define and solidify their sexual orientation and to read other's life stories. Currently, there is very little research that exists focused on the media use of sexual minorities. Given that media use may serve a central role in helping youth who are forming their sexual minority identities, this study may shed light on important processes that help youth form positive identities during this developmental period. This study aims to provide further research on how sexual minorities use media to determine and define their sexual orientation and how their media usage is affected by their sexual orientation. Participants, ages 18-27, took part in an hour-long interview to determine how they used media and online communities to understand and define their sexual orientation and how their media usage was affected by their sexual orientation. The information provided by the participants was then looked over and analyzed using the constant comparative method to further understand how sexual orientation and media usage are related.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Identity Development Models	1-4
2. Minority Stress	4-5
3. Media Use for Sexual Minorities	6
4. Literature Review	7-8
5. Methods	8-10
6. Results & Discussion	10-13
7. Conclusion	13-15
8. Appendix A	16-17
9. Appendix B	18-19
10. Appendix C	20-25
11. References	26

Exploring Media Use Among Sexual Minorities

Adolescence is a very critical period when it comes to identity development and identity formation. This is the period of life in which individuals try to discover and solidify their identities and they become more autonomous (Adelson, 1980). Identity formation can be stunted if adolescents grow up in an environment in which they are not able to experience personal growth, they are controlled by their parents or guardians, or if they feel as if their environment prevents them from fully expressing their true selves. Identity development and the effects of unsuccessfully overcoming each stage is demonstrated by Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development and James Marcia's identity statuses of psychological identity development based off of Erikson's theory (Anderson, 1993). Both Erikson's and Marcia's models of identity development are important to examine because sexual minority identity is commonly developed during this stage of life.

Identity Development Models

Of particular relevance to the proposed study is Erikson's fifth stage of psychosocial development, identity versus role confusion, which occurs during adolescence (Anderson, 1993). During this stage, "successful identity formation results in increased devotion, faith, and fidelity in the relationship between oneself and others. Whereas an overabundance of identity results in a maladaptive tendency toward fanaticism, a lack of identity results in a sense of discontinuity and role confusion. An extreme sense of role confusion results in repudiation (diffidence) (as cited in Anderson, 1993, p. 1980). Adolescents, during this stage, will question themselves and try to answer the question: "who am I?". If they are successful in developing their identity during this stage then they will have a strong sense of their identity. If they have too strong of an identity then they will show extreme zeal and enthusiasm. If adolescents unsuccessfully develop their

identity, then they will experience role confusion and experience difficulties in developing their sense of self. Adolescents that have role confusion will most likely struggle to solidify their identity during adulthood; they may reject themselves and feel extremely uncertain about themselves

James Marcia extended Erikson's theory and developed four identity statuses of psychological identity development: identity diffusion (refers to those who have no clear identity and have not begun to search for one), identity foreclosure (those that take on the identity that has been parentally chose for them), identity moratorium (refers to those that are currently struggling with their identity and are going through an identity crisis), and identity achievement (refers to those that have a clearly defined identity that they are committed to) (Marcia, 1980). Adolescents that are going through identity foreclosure have assumed the role that society or their parents want them to take so they have not had to go through the process of trying to figure out their identity. This may lead them to have an identity crisis later in life if they realize that they do not exactly align with who their parents want them to be. Those that are in the stage of identity moratorium are currently going through an identity crisis, but they are actively searching for and exploring different commitments and choices (Marcia, 1980).

Both of these models of identity development show how crucial this stage of life is for adolescents. This is the time of their lives in which they need to explore various options in life and build their character in order to develop their identities and to be autonomous. Encountering roadblocks during this stage of life will cause an identity crisis and this crisis or role confusion may likely carry on into adulthood. Sexual minority identity is most commonly developed during the identity development stage, so this stage is especially important for LGBQA youth who need to feel comfortable expressing themselves.

Sexual minorities' identity development stages may be different due to the fact that they have to form a minority identity which may not always be easy. Cass' Model of Homosexual Identity Formation, developed in 1979, lays out six stages – later condensed to four – during which people develop a self-identity and become a fully integrated version of themselves (Cass, 1979). During the time before Cass developed this model, there were very few studies on how sexual minorities developed their identity. Cass believed identity formation was a developmental process and involved interactions between the individual and the environment (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). During the six stages, people will realize that there is a difference between their behaviors and those of others, they will recognize that their identity is now considered a minority status, they will learn to accept their identity, they exhibit feelings of pride towards their identity, and then they will synthesize their public and personal image and develop a sense of self (Cass, 1979).

There were a few studies done examining Cass's model; they found that identity development stages are not quite as linear as Cass's model was depicting. Cass's model cannot be used to generalize the whole population. According to Sophie's (1986) and Horowitz' and Newcomb's (2002) work, gay males and lesbian's development patterns do not fit in the linear model; they may skip some stages or they may not go through the stages in sequential order (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). Other researchers developed models with stages that closely resembled Cass's stages. Chapman and Brannock (1987) developed a five stage model with their stage 3 being similar to Cass's. Kahn (1991) found that lesbians were able to relate to Cass's model; in the early stages, they would have difficulty identifying as a lesbian and then as they receive acceptance, especially from family members, they move on to the identity synthesis stage (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014).

The first couple of stages of Cass's model apply more to adolescents and the later stages more to adults. Even with all of the cultural changes that have happened in recent years, adolescents still will experience the coming out process (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). So, in this way, Cass's model is still applicable to adolescents. Cass's model is also applicable when there are strong heteronormative beliefs in the environment. "If heteronormative and homonegative beliefs and attitudes are still prominent in the environment, utilizing aspects of the Cass model may be helpful to understand the identity development of gay males and lesbians within the community" (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014, p. 240).

Minority Stress

Another model that helps to explain how identity development may be affected is Ilan Meyer's minority stress model. Meyer names four sources of social stress that sexual minorities may experience: discrimination, expecting prejudice and discrimination, concealing or disclosing sexual orientation, and internalized homophobia. Studies have shown there to be a link between these components of minority stress and negative mental health outcomes (Meyer, 2003). Adolescents may have a hard time disclosing their sexual orientation to those around them because they may fear being rejected, discriminated against, or because they have internalized these negative beliefs about sexual minorities. This may lead to sexual minorities developing anxiety, depression, stress, or low self-esteem.

Religion may also play a role in minority stress. Adolescents that grow up in a religious community may not learn that there are different options available to them in terms of sexual orientation. They may experience cognitive dissonance because their own feelings of their identity do not line up with what they are being taught by their religion. This may lead to internalized homonegativity and expectations of prejudice or discrimination. Matthew Thaxton

conducted a study in 2016 to determine the relation between religiosity and internalized homonegativity (Thaxton, 2016). Thaxton recruited 265 participants from Abilene Christian University and LGBT+ groups from around Abilene, Texas. The number of participants was later condensed down into 33 participants who self-identified as sexual minorities. The participants took an online survey and were asked to fill about an Internalized Homonegativity Inventory and The Religious Commitment Inventory. The data was then analyzed and a significant correlation was found between religious commitment and internalized homonegativity and a significant correlation was also found between internalized homonegativity and depression (Thaxton, 2016).

According from the participants reports in Thaxton's study, "it was observed that participants reporting increased religious commitment had more negative views regarding the morality of homosexuality, lower rates of personal gay affirmation, and higher rates of personal homonegativity" (Thaxton, 2016). Those that had increased faith in their religion before discovering and defining their sexual orientation may not want to accept their newfound orientation because they are taught from such a young age that there is only one orientation that they could possibly be; when they discover that their own orientation does not align with that, they may feel shame at how they are feeling. If people in religious communities had other sources to turn to which can provide affirming information on the different sexual orientations, they might not feel as much personal homonegativity.

As is shown by the studies on identity development mentioned throughout this paper, forming one's identity and feeling comfortable in one's own skin can be a difficult process for both sexual minorities and those who identify as heterosexual. One factor that should be considered in the process of identity development is social media.

Media Use for Sexual Minorities

The presence of social media has increased in the past few years and we are seeing more and more adolescents join social media sites early in life. Social media is becoming a popular means of escape among adolescents; they are provided with a degree of anonymity which in turn provides them with a buffer to distance themselves from reality (Berman et al., 2015). The increase in online communication is decreasing face-to-face interactions which may cause adolescents to distance themselves from real world relationships (Berman et al., 2015). The lessening of real world relationships is not healthy for adolescents that are going through identity development. According to Berman et al.,

communication technology may be one contributing factor to an increase in identity disruption and distress, both directly, with the ease with which one can create false identities, extreme identities, and identities disconnected from reality; and indirectly by disrupting the quality of social relationships, through which identity issues are often explored and resolved . . . [a] preference for using technology over direct face to face or voice to voice interpersonal communication may yield stronger associations with negative identity and relationship outcomes. (Berman et al., 2015, p.82)

The more time that adolescents spend online, the more likely they will be to experience an identity crisis and existential anxiety. Disconnecting from reality will not lead adolescents on the right path to figuring out who they are and gaining autonomy.

Identity development during adolescence, identity development for LGBQA youth, and the effects of social media all help to determine how adolescents use media (including online communities) to determine and define their sexual orientation and how sexual orientation might affect social media usage.

Literature Review

In Gomillion and Giuliano's (2011) article examining the relationship between media role models and LGB identity, they surveyed 126 LGB individuals who reported their role models and inspiration for coming out and for their identity and they provided information on how media influenced their self-realization. Gomillion and Guiliano then conducted in-depth interviews with 15 LGB members who reported that media role models gave them a sense of comfort, pride, and inspiration (Gomillion and Guiliano, 2011). From this study, they concluded that LGB role models in media are influential to the self-realization of people's own LGB identity and they helped adolescents during their coming out process. Ellen Degeneres is one of the more popular role models for coming out due to Ellen having the courage to come out in such a public manner. Ellen has been a "source of guidance" for many people during the coming out process. Some people will use those role models to gauge friends or family members' reactions and thoughts and then determine if their own sexual orientation would be taken positively or negatively. Although there are some media role models whom people can look up to, there are not enough representations in media, overall. Media representations of LGBQA characters is very limited therefore people have a limited availability of role models to look up to. It is important that media increase LGBQA representation so adolescents that are currently going through identity formation and the coming out process will have role models to look up to.

Bond et al. (2009) discuss the critical role the internet plays in the development of sexual minorities' identities. They believe that the internet now serves as a primary source of information for LGBQA adolescents. The internet helps adolescents to put a label on how they are feeling and what they are feeling. Those that have used internet discussion groups during sexual identity formation have been found to have greater self-acceptance and a lower rate of

disclosure to their friends and families (Bond et al., 2009). The anonymous nature of the internet made adolescents feel comfortable and provided an escape for them (Bond et al., 2009). Once these adolescents felt comfortable enough and felt the desire for openness, they would disclose their sexual identity to their family; this would typically happen past the point of self-realization. Adolescents preferred the acceptance they gained from the internet and this caused them to quench their desire to disclose their identity to their family and friends (Bond et al., 2009).

Although Bond et. al's research shows how the internet might help adolescents feel safer in terms of coming out, there is not enough to show how else adolescents may use media to help define and solidify their sexual orientation and how their media usage may be affected by their sexual orientation. The purpose of this study is to increase people's awareness of how much adolescents rely on media, especially social media, during identity development and the dual relationship between identity development and media use.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants ages 18-27 were interviewed about their own experiences using media during adolescence and how their media usage may have changed. The interview focused more on popular social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. Although the participants had retrospectively recalled their experiences, their account of their experiences are not as prone to memory errors, rather participants are more likely to bias their experiences by forward telescoping – reporting the timeline of events closer to the time of the interview (Antonucci et al., 2011). Participants were recruited from the University of South Dakota and the surrounding community. After consenting to the study, participants were given a brief demographic form to complete. Participants were free to skip any question they did not wish to answer. After the

demographic form was completed, the interview began. The interview typically lasted half an hour and was semi-structured. The interview was audio recorded so that it was able to be transcribed afterwards in order to analyze the data from the interview. Throughout the interview, participants were free to skip questions as well. Participants were able to end their participation at any point in time. Participants were given aliases as to remain anonymous.

Measures

Demographics. Participants were asked basic demographic questions, such as age, race, sex assigned at birth, gender, and age of coming out (See appendix B for demographic form).

Interview

Participants were asked about their social media and internet usage during the identity development stage (around age 12-18). Participants were asked what they researched about how they were feeling, what online communities they became a part of, what personal experiences they came across, and if their “research” made them feel more positive or negative about their own identity. They were also asked about how their social media and internet usage changed after they were able to determine and develop their sexual orientation. (See appendix A for interview protocol).

Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed afterwards (See Appendix C for interview summaries). The transcripts were checked for accuracy and, following this, the audio recordings were deleted. In the transcripts, all identifying information was removed and the participants were given aliases. Following this, the information was analyzed using the constant comparative method to identify the main themes related to the research question of the dual relationship between identity development and social media use for LGBQA individuals in their

adolescence. The constant comparative method of data analysis is a standard technique of content analysis used in social research. This method is used for analyzing data to form a grounded theory (Glaser, 1965). During the initial analysis of the data, codes – basic features of the data – were generated using open coding and axial coding. Once all of the coding was done, themes were generated. Themes are broader than codes and they encompass different codes. After the themes were identified, each theme was clearly defined and then related back to the theories mentioned earlier.

Results & Discussion

A total of four main themes were generated during the analysis. The first theme is Religious Restrictions. Three out of the five participants – Betty, Angela, and Max – mentioned how they did not come to learn about sex or the different sexual and gender orientations until after they stepped away from their closed-off, religious community. Religion seemed to be a barrier between them and their learning and solidification of their sexual orientation. Betty, Angela, and Max mentioned that in a religious community, one is taught about being straight and no other options are ever mentioned. Once they either stopped being religious or stepped away from their religious community, they were able to receive information on the LGBTQA+ community and find that they do not identify as straight. Those same participants expressed how beneficial it is for adolescents who live in a closed-off, religious community and are going through the identity development stage to turn to media and online communities. As Betty noted, it is important to “give children a chance to realize you can feel differently before your religion is embedded into your brain”. It is also beneficial for adolescents to see that there are other people out there who may be feeling the way they are and it is important for them to see the diversity of people.

Having these other sources of information to turn to outside of their religion may have lessened the participant's experiences of personal homonegativity and minority stress. They received the chance to connect with others going through a similar situation and to have people tell them that what they are feeling is okay to feel. This led them to better understand and to better accept their own sexual orientation.

The second theme is Positive, Informational Research. All of the participants stated that they knew their sexual orientation label before they started to research their sexual orientation. Their research consisted of looking up specifics as to why their sexual orientation is what it is, what exactly their sexual orientation means, other people's personal accounts, and information on the LGBTQIA+ community. All five of the participants stated that their research on their sexual orientation and the LGBTQIA+ community helped them come to terms with their sexual orientation. Angela stated, "[social media] made me feel more comfortable questioning the different labels and feeling okay with my identity." Their research also helped them to build confidence with coming out to their family and friends.

All five participants mostly came across content online which they found affected their identity development positively. The content they came across gave them hope for a brighter future. They all acknowledged that it is not difficult to come across content online that may affect people negatively so adolescents should express caution when browsing for information. Any demeaning content that the participants did come across, were not directed towards them, but were just comments about the LGBTQIA+ community, in general.

The third theme is Online Support System. It is extremely important during this stage of life to have people to talk to and to open up to. Many adolescents can find a support system online and they can find "out" media personalities to look up to. Tumblr, especially, has a large

LGBTQIA+ community presence. Sam and Angela have noted that Tumblr contains a vast array of information and experiences from other people. It is very possible to find many people to relate to and to support you on this social media site. Angela stated that it was positively impactful for her to read other people's experiences. It was helpful for her to see that she was not alone in her own feelings and experiences. Having that online support system can mean a lot to adolescents that do not quite know how their friends and family may react to their sexual orientation. Also, as Bond et al. found in their research, those that have used online communities during sexual identity formation have been found to have greater self-acceptance (Bond et al., 2009).

The fourth theme is Media Usage Changed After Coming Out. After coming out, all five participants noted a change in their media usage. They became freer with what they posted on social media, what pages they liked on social media, and what kinds of comments they would make. As David stated in his interview, he had no more fear of outing himself to others. He is now able to comfortably use his social media. The other participants now use social media to read news about the LGBTQIA+ community, to find safe spaces, and to support friends who are also in the LGBTQIA+ community. They are now more open with their identity on social media without any fear of discrimination or hate. Feeling positive about their sexual identity and having a support system helped them to not hold back and worry about how others will react to their social media usage.

The participant's interviews also provided insight into how their identity development relates to Cass's Model of Homosexual Identity Development. All five participants experienced the first stage, Identity Confusion, where they questioned their feelings and noticed they felt differently than their peers. The five participants skipped stage two in which one feels as if they are the only person feeling that way and they try to rationalize their feelings. They all had turned

to media at that point and realized that there are others out there going through similar situations. Stage three in which they come to tolerate their sexual orientation was also skipped by all five participants. They all came to accept their sexual orientation and fully form their identity soon after researching it on the internet and turning to media. Identity Pride, stage five in Cass's model, was shown by all of the participants after they determined their sexual orientation and after they came out to their family or friends. They started supporting members of the LGBTQIA+ community on social media sites and started immersing themselves in LGBTQIA+ culture. Stage six, Identity Synthesis, has been reached by all participants. They have all fully accepted their identities and it has become an integral part of themselves.

Conclusion

The four main themes found – Religious Restrictions, Positive, Informational Research, Online Support System, and Media Usage Changed After Coming Out – provide us with more information as to how adolescents going through the identity development stage will use the internet and social media to define and determine their sexual orientation and also, how their media usage changes after defining and determining their sexual orientation. Having resources, such as the internet, social media, and online communities to turn to helps adolescents gain more of an understanding of not just the LGBTQIA+ community, but also themselves. The internet and social media helps them find acceptance from others and helps them find a support system that is greatly needed during that stage of life. If adolescents find a solid support system on the internet, these resources may prevent adolescents from experiencing minority stress. These resources may also help adolescents successfully go through the identity development stage without experiencing an identity crisis. While this study may have some limitations, this study also provides us with some insight as to what may be discovered in future research on this topic.

Limitations

The study that was conducted had a small sample size which lead to low generalizability. Solid conclusions were not able to be drawn based off of the content of only five interviews. Some participants were not able to accurately retrospectively recall information. Some had trouble recalling the exact timeline in which events occurred and around which ages they had their experiences. This study also focuses solely on sexual orientation and does not include any information on gender orientation. Both gender and sexual orientations are important to understand and more information could have been presented if the study focused on both. There was also a lack of existing research on this topic which put some restrictions on my knowledge of this topic and made it slightly difficult when conducting my own research study.

Future Research

For future research on this topic, gender orientation should be included along with sexual orientation. It would be beneficial to learn what sorts of resources are used to discover and define gender orientation. Not much is currently known about all of the different gender orientation labels so more research would educate people and help them to understand the LGBTQIA+ community better. Future research should also carefully define the sexual minority groups that are the focus of one's study. This study did not include asexuality in the interview definition, but one participant was asexual. Third, a larger sample size should be used; this would ensure accurate deductions and correlations are able to be made. Fourth, the interview questions could go more in depth. With some questions, the participants held back on giving more in-depth information. They were not pushed into revealing more so as not to cross a line. Lastly, future research should focus on all forms of media and not just social media. This would provide more information on media role models and LGBTQIA+ media representations. Adolescents may not have access to the internet

during the identity development stage of their life and instead they may turn to television shows or books to look for role models. It is important to fully understand what resources sexual minorities may use during adolescence.

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Introduction

Thank you for volunteering for this interview. As was mentioned in the flyer that you saw for the study, the focus of today will be on understanding the relationship between media, internet use, online communities, and identity development. This study will focus on these two central questions: **Has social media, the internet, and online communities influenced your understanding of your sexual orientation? Has your sexual orientation influenced your social media or internet usage?**

Before we get started with the interview today, there are a few logistical things to take care of. First, I'd like to just confirm a couple of things. Can you tell me how old you are? And, how would you describe your sexual orientation?

[If participant does not meet the inclusion criteria] I'm sorry, but it looks like you do not meet the criteria we have for the interview. As was mentioned on the flyer, participants need to be between the ages of 18-27 and identify as a sexual minority. Thank you for coming in today though and I appreciate you taking the time to learn more about the study. [This ends the process for individuals who do not meet criteria for inclusion].

[If participant meets inclusion criteria] Great, thank you for sharing that with me. I just wanted to confirm that you met the criteria for the interview. Now, we can move on to the informed consent that I will go over with you. [Participant will be provided the informed consent document and this will be reviewed with the researcher, who will then answer any questions that arise.]

Next, I have a demographic form for you to fill out. [Participant will be given the demographics form to complete.]

Tape Recorder Instructions

If it is alright with you, I would like to record our conversation. The purpose of this is so I am able to get all of the details without having to take long pauses to write down all of the information you provide. I assure you that this whole conversation will remain confidential and will be deleted once it is transcribed. And, during the transcription, I will remove any identifiable information that you share, so the transcript won't include your name or anyone else's or anything else that would identify you.

So, like I mentioned, in this interview, I am interested in how social media, internet use, and online communities relates to your sexual orientation identity and vice versa. I am interested in

any information you have to share that relates to your experiences of this topic. You are the expert on your experiences and I hope you will feel comfortable sharing your experiences with me. Anything relating to this situation would be really interesting to me, as well.

Prompts

- Can you describe the time when you first started questioning your sexual orientation?
 - How old were you? How did this come about?
- Did you have to look up/research what you were feeling through the internet?
 - If yes: Can you tell me about what type of things you looked up and where?
 - If no: Where else did you turn to for information about LGBTQ people?
- When did you first turn to social media or online communities?
- Did social media/online communities help you solidify your sexual orientation?
 - If so, how did it help you solidify your sexual orientation?
- What positive/negative experiences did you come across online?
- Did you find that reading other people's experiences helped you feel more positively about your sexual orientation?
- Did "researching" your sexual orientation make you feel more comfortable with your sexual orientation/did it help you come to terms with your sexual orientation?
- Did you use any other sort of media (ex: movies, tv shows, books, magazines)?
- Did your social media usage change after you discovered and defined your sexual orientation?
 - If so, in what way?
- Do you think it is beneficial for adolescents going through the identity development stage to turn to media and online communities?

Credibility Questions

- Is there anything that we haven't discussed that feels relevant to your experience? If so, can you describe it now?
- Do you have any feedback for me regarding this interview process? Is there anything that you might like to have been done differently or that you think might be helpful with future interviews? If so, do you think this kept you from describing any part of your experience? If so, can you describe it now?

APPENDIX B

Demographics Form

Participant ID #: _____

1. How old are you? _____
2. What is your race? _____
3. What is your ethnicity? _____
4. What sex were you assigned at birth, on your original birth certificate?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
5. What is your gender identity? _____
6. What label best describes your sexual orientation? _____
7. What best describes your employment status?
 - a. Employed full-time
 - b. Employed part-time
 - c. A full-time student
 - d. Unable to work for health reasons
 - e. Unemployed
 - f. Other: _____
8. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? If you are currently enrolled, please mark the previous grade of highest degree received.
 - a. Elementary and/or junior high
 - b. Some high school to 12th grade
 - c. High school graduate - high school diploma or equivalent
 - d. Some college credit, but less than 1 year
 - e. Technical school degree
 - f. One of more years of college, no degree
 - g. Associate degree
 - h. Bachelor's degree
 - i. Master's degree
 - j. Doctorate or professional degree (e.g., PhD, MD, JD, DDS)
9. What is your current gross annual income (before taxes)?
 - a. Less than \$10,000
 - b. \$10,000 - \$19,999
 - c. \$20,000 - \$29,999
 - d. \$30,000 - \$39,999
 - e. \$40,000 - \$49,999
 - f. \$50,000 - \$69,999
 - g. \$70,000 - \$99,999

h. More than \$100,000

10. How old were you when you came out to yourself? _____

11. I am out about my sexual orientation to:

- a. No one
- b. A select few people
- c. Some friends only
- d. Some friends and family
- e. Almost all friends and family
- f. All friends and family

12. What types of social media and online communities are you a part of?

- a. Facebook
- b. Twitter
- c. Tumblr
- d. Reddit
- e. Instagram
- f. Other:

APPENDIX C

Interview Summaries

Participant #1: David

David first started questioning his sexual orientation around 11 or 12 years old, but he had always known that he was sort of different. David was already somewhat familiar with what it meant to be gay, but he still had to do some research on the specifics. David mostly researched the reasoning behind being gay and researched what exactly was going on with him. He also used the internet to find celebrities and media personalities that were already “out”. David first turned to social media and online communities in high school, but took part in these online communities privately. He had found it helpful to talk to people going through similar situations. David also loved watching tv shows, such as Glee and Will and Grace which included LGBTQA characters; these tv shows provided diverse positive representations to look up to.

David was quick to solidify his sexual orientation without the help of research. The research he conducted did help him put a name to what he was feeling, helped him come to terms with his sexual orientation, and helped him realize that it was okay to feel the way he was feeling. While searching the internet for information regarding the LGBTQA community, David came across more uplifting and affirming personal accounts than discouraging personal accounts. If he did come across harmful comments or posts, they were not directed towards him. Before coming out, David watched videos of coming out stories that had unhappy endings to help him prepare himself for when he would come out. Hearing these dispirited stories made David feel nervous for his own experience, but not to the point that it held him back from coming out. Overall, David said that “there were ten times as many positive coming out videos than negative videos . . . and watching those helped me to build confidence and to come out”

After coming out, there was a change in David's social media usage. He was not afraid to "like" pages on Facebook related to the LGBTQA community and he was able to freely comment on posts without the fear of outing himself. After coming out, David felt more comfortable and free with his media usage.

Participant #2: Betty

Betty first started questioning her sexual orientation around 19 years old, but as a child she did have moments where she felt some attraction towards girls. Betty came from a very religious family so she felt as if she was repressed into being straight and this led her to never questioning her sexuality as a child. After she stopped being religious is when she started to question her sexual orientation. Betty did not have to research what she was feeling because she had friends that were in the LGBTQA+ community so that is where she received all of her knowledge. Betty said that turning to social media was a big turning point in her life. Social media helped her realize that it is fine to be something other than straight. Betty felt that social media really helped her to solidify her sexual orientation because she could meet people in the same position as her and people she could relate to. For Betty, social media was a security blanket because she could come out to someone that lived far away without the fear of being judged.

Betty, like David, came across more uplifting personal accounts online than she did disheartening personal accounts. Everyone was very supportive online and any demeaning comments she came across were not directed towards her. Reading other people's promising personal accounts made Betty look forward to her future. It made her strive to have a happy ending similar to what she would see online. Betty's friends also helped Betty feel more

comfortable with her sexual orientation. Overall, social media and her “research” had a very positive impact on Betty.

After coming out, Betty used her social media more freely. She was able to make jokes on Twitter because she knew that not a lot of people would react to it or even see her tweets. Betty had to keep her Facebook more “calm and collected” because she is friends with a lot of her Catholic family on Facebook and she is not out to all of her family.

Participant #3: Sam

Sam started questioning their sexual orientation when they were around 12 years old. They had first learned about homosexuality through the internet and from a tv show and then around 13 years old is when they started noticing their own attraction towards girls. Sam did not have to research what they were feeling; they had come to their own conclusions about their sexual orientation. Sam also turned to social media, mostly Tumblr, to learn about different sexual and gender orientations. Sam’s experience on the internet helped solidify their sexual orientation. Their “research” helped them realized that there is a plethora of other options besides being straight. Social media also helped Sam feel more comfortable questioning the different labels and their own identity.

After discovering and defining their own sexual orientation, Sam’s social media changed only slightly. The defining of their sexual orientation affected the type of content they consumed; they began to look for things on social media related to the LGBTQA community and Sam also started searching for safe spaces online.

Participant #4: Angela

Angela started questioning her sexual orientation around the age of 18 or 19. Before that, Angela lived in a very religious, closed off community so she did not have any knowledge on the

different orientations. Angela had never found it to be weird that she did not experience any sexual attraction, but when she started college is when she realized that she did not feel the way others were feeling. Angela did not learn the term “asexual” until her third year of college and after realizing her sexual orientation is when she turned to online communities and social media. After learning the term “asexual”, Angela learned everything else about asexuality from the internet. Angela described her search of others experiences as “fruitful”. Tumblr contained many users’ personal accounts which helped Angela learn more about her sexual orientation.

Angela came across more affirming personal accounts online than invalidating. People online, especially on Tumblr which has a large LGBTQA+ community, tend to be supportive of each other. Angela found that reading other people’s personal experiences helped her to feel more positively about her sexual orientation. It helped to see that other people were having similar experiences as her. It was also helpful to read the vast variety of experiences. When asked if the internet made her feel more comfortable with her sexual orientation, Angela said “for sure, I wouldn’t have been able to define my sexual orientation without social media”.

Participant #5: Max

Max started questioning his sexual orientation around 14 years old. One day, he was watching an SNL skit featuring a gay couple and he realized that he kind of liked that concept. Max went to a Christian school until 8th grade so he was not aware that there were other sexual orientations besides straight. Max did not have to research what he was feeling on the internet; he learned most of the information from overhearing other people’s conversations throughout middle school and he was able to piece together the rest of the information. Max turned to social media and online communities after he already figured out his sexual orientation. Max used the internet to look at online forums, to take “are you gay?” quizzes, and to look at LGBTQA+ pages

on Facebook. Before turning to media, Max was already aware of his sexual orientation, media and online communities just forced him to acknowledge that he knew.

Like the other participants, Max came across more affirming content online than he did invalidating. The little negative content that he did come across did not affect him too badly because he knew that his sexual orientation would not be a problem with his family. The positive content he came across was one of the biggest factors in Max feeling confident with coming out to friends and family. Reading other people's promising stories felt like a pep talk to Max and the stories assured him that he could do it too.

After solidifying his sexual orientation and coming out, Max followed every gay and LGBTQA+ page he could find on Facebook and Twitter so he could stay up to date on gay culture. Max also became more open with his identity on social media. He was able to freely post on social media without facing much backlash. Overall, Max felt that turning to media was extremely beneficial mostly because there was not a thriving gay community where he grew up.

As is shown by all five interviews, media proved to be a significant factor when discovering and coming to terms with their sexual orientation. The participants turned to media and online communities to learn more about their own sexual orientation and the LGBTQA+ community, in general. They all acknowledged that even though they all came across mostly positive experiences online, it would not be difficult to stumble across negative experiences. Adolescents should express caution when searching the internet for information on the LGBTQA+ community. The participants also expressed that having a good support system, whether from family, friends, or cyberfriends, played a key role in feeling positive about their sexual orientation.

At the end of the interviews, all participants were asked if they believe that it is beneficial for adolescents going through the identity development stage to turn to media and online communities. The answer was unanimous. They all agreed that media is helpful and hugely important. Having a support system and that outreach helps adolescents feel like they are not alone and they have people to relate to. Online, you can find many people that are experiencing the same feelings you are which helps adolescents to not feel as if what they are feeling is wrong. Also, media and online communities is important in learning about different sexual orientations. Growing up in a closed off, religious community is tough on adolescents who do not feel the way that they are told they should feel. Having the internet to turn to is an important step in discovering and defining themselves.

REFERENCES

- Adelson, J. (1980). Identity in adolescence. *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*, 111.
- Anderson, L. (1993). The relationship between Marcia's ego identity status paradigm and Erikson's psychosocial theory. *All Graduate Theses and Dissertations*, 9-11.
- Antonucci, T.C., Calzo, J.P., Cochran, S.D., & Mays, V.M., (2011). Retrospective recall of sexual orientation identity development among gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults. *Developmental Psychology*, 47(6), 1658-1673.
- Berman, S., Cyr, B.A., & Smith, M., (2015). The role of communication technology in adolescent relationships and identity development. *Child and Youth Care Forum*, 44(1), 79-92.
- Bond, B.J., Drogos, K.L., & Hefner, V., (2009). Information-seeking practices during the sexual development of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals: the influence and effects of coming out in a mediated environment. *Sexuality & Culture*, 13(1), 32-50.
- Cass, V.C., (1979). Homosexual identity formation: a theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 219-235.
- Giuliano, T.A., & Gomillion, S.C., (2011). The influence of media role models on gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58(3), 330-354.
- Glaser, B.G., (1965). The constant comparative method of qualitative analysis. *Social Problems*, 12(4), 436-445.
- Kennedy, D.A., & Oswalt, S.B., (2014). Is Cass's model of homosexual identity formation relevant to today's society?. *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, 9, 229-246.
- Marcia, J.E., (1980). Identity in adolescence. *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*, 109-137.
- Meyer, I.H., (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129(5), 674-697.
- Thaxton, M. (2016). Religiosity and internalized homonegativity: the effect of religious conservatism on depression in sexual minorities. *Digital Commons @ ACU, Electronic Theses and Dissertations*, 7-13.