

WORD IS OUT: THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES
DURING THE COMING OUT PROCESS

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Rachel Ann Sauerbier
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DEDICATION

*For Michael and all of the rest
who are just finding
their voices*



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ABSTRACT

WORD IS OUT: THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES DURING THE COMING OUT PROCESS

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The purpose of this research was to explore how and why social networking sites are used by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) individuals during the coming out process. Thirty-two in-depth interviews were conducted and analyzed using a combination of grounded theory methodology and content analysis. The research indicated LGBTQ individuals turn to social networking sites when there is a lack of social support in their immediate family or among friends and to maintain their sexual identity long-term. Interviewees reported useful and frustrating attempts to create their own meanings of sex, sexuality and gender on social networking sites and viewed the sites as somewhat useful, but not ideal, for coming out which all preferred to do face-to-face. Social networking sites were used by interviewees predominantly for the purpose of social play and social understanding, in accordance with media system

dependency theory. Interviewees also described how they used social networking sites to alleviate tension and resolve conflict surrounding personal, relational and communal identity gaps reinforcing Hecht's communication theory of identity. Perceptions of being monitored electronically on the sites and a general lack of trust of privacy settings greatly influenced how they were used by interviewees. But perhaps the most compelling findings were interviewees' accounts of using social networking sites as a protective and therapeutic prosthetic body while negotiating the emotionally and sometimes physically harmful process of coming out.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

“All young people, regardless of sexual orientation or identity, deserve a safe and supportive environment in which to achieve their full potential.”
Milk, n.d.

The struggle for equal rights in America has a long and storied past with African Americans and women at the forefront of these historical efforts and who are featured predominantly in historical accounts of the struggle. Less attention has been paid in popularized accounts of our nation’s history to the many other marginalized groups that continue to fight for equal rights today on the basis of race, class, gender, and sexuality. In particular, the United States has borne witness to a heroic effort from its lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) citizens as they fight for equal rights and protection under the law. It is not just a fight for equality, but a fight for voice, visibility and relevance. Recent events have brought LGBTQ community concerns to the national stage in the form of a series of terrible tragedies. From August, 2010 to September, 2010 four LGBTQ youth committed suicide after being harassed, bullied and/or teased because of their perceived homosexuality (Turnbull, 2010). Unfortunately, this is an all too common experience. According to McKinley’s (2010) article in the *New York Times*, nine out of ten LGBTQ teenagers experience some form of bullying because of their sexual identity while in high school. Even though this number seems high, the

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) reports that this number has remained relatively unchanged over the past decade (Turnbull, 2010). This rash of suicides caused by the bullying of LGBTQ youth, has created an outcry for change.

In response to the current trend of LGBTQ youth committing suicide, journalist Dan Savage created the “It Gets Better” project (It Gets Better, 2010), which allows people from around the world to post videos of encouragement to alleviate the despair that accompanies bullying and harassment. There have been almost 10,000 videos posted to the It Gets Better web page and YouTube. The range of support has been immense, everyone from ordinary citizens around the world, to celebrities like Neil Patrick Harris, to President Obama have recorded and posted their own words of encouragement to the LGBTQ youth who may be experiencing bullying. Every video posted for the project focuses on one central theme: It gets better.

This multimedia response to a tragic occurrence within the LGBTQ community highlights several of the different aspects that have become central to the experience of sexual identity negotiation. There are now 22 states in the union that have laws against harassment. Fifteen of those states have specifically outlawed bullying based upon sex or sexuality (Turnbull, 2010). Slowly over the past 40 years, the LGBTQ community has gained more rights and equality in society. As a result of a country and a culture that is becoming more understanding, LGBTQ youth are coming out at younger ages than we have seen previously. The LGBTQ community has gained more visibility in society, but with increased visibility comes higher, and more dangerous, stakes.

Members of the LGBTQ community experience a unique process unlike any other during the formation of their sexual identity. Most LGBTQ individuals will have to

“come out of the closet” at some point of their lives—thereby announcing their sexuality to the world at large. Until recently, the admission of one’s homosexuality brought harsh judgment and condemnation from society. Even though acceptance of the LGBTQ lifestyle is on the rise, the act of coming out can still be a daunting proposition for those faced with this process.

Communication technology adoption, use and innovations continue to skyrocket with many LGBTQ members utilizing these new tools to help facilitate their coming out process. Throughout the 20th century and now into the 21st century, members of the LGBTQ community have used various forms of communication technology—from books to the Internet—to gain access to society at large. The use of social networking sites (SNS) such as MySpace, Facebook and Downelink in particular has increased exponentially (boyd & Ellison, 2008) and will continue to do so as Millennials and Generation Y come of age. SNS provide a unique experience for individuals to negotiate their identity in a virtual environment. By initially negotiating one’s sexual identity virtually, one can examine the different aspects of their identity without having to actually enact them in public.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how and why LGBTQ individuals use SNS during the coming out process. Young people who are trying to grapple with their sexuality historically have turned to alternative channels of communication to explore their sexuality without fear of harassment or harm. The remainder of this thesis is divided into five chapters: Chapter II provides a brief overview of the history and background of

media use by the LGBTQ community. Chapter III reviews relevant literature related to queer theory, gender, identity, and media theory. Chapter IV details the methods that will be used in the current study. Chapter V examines the findings from the data collection and answers the research questions. Chapter VI goes into a discussion about the findings and also details the limitations and future implications of the research.

In order to understand why and how the LGBTQ community uses specific forms of media for sexual identity formation and exploration, I preface the study with the following examination of the evolution of media use by the LGBTQ community. The examples foreground modern day SNS use in the coming out process by first examining how different channels of media have been used for similar purposes throughout the 20th century. By providing this historical example of media use by the LGBTQ communities, I hope to situate the present study in a larger historical context and ultimately inform the questions that guide it.

CHAPTER II

HISTORY AND BACKGROUND OF
MEDIA USE BY THE LGBTQ
COMMUNITY

The evolution of tolerance and understanding of LGBTQ members in society can be seen in various media artifacts over the past 125 years. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, being gay was considered morally, ethically, and socially abhorrent. There were, however, numerous instances where subversive homosexual texts and films were tolerated by the public at large. Oscar Wilde is one of the most famous authors whose books and short stories often featured a subversive, homosexual undertone. Even though his writing was tolerated in Victorian era England, he, however, was charged and imprisoned for committing homosexual acts. During his imprisonment for practicing homosexuality, Wilde penned *De Profundis*, a text that was considered extremely dangerous because Wilde compares the sexual sins of the homosexual to the sexual sins of the heterosexual and finds that there is no difference between the two (Godwin, 2008). This is an early incident in modern time where an argument was given on the equality between homosexuality and heterosexuality.

The early 20th century also brought the controversial writers known as *the women of the left bank*. The group was comprised of almost two dozen women, including Djunta Barnes, Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas and Edith Wharton (Benstock, 1987). The

women of the left bank often wrote about controversial topics, one of which was sexuality. Their writings were some of the first to explicitly explore the nuances of sexuality and to point out that—at the time—there may have just been the gender binary of men and women, but that the realm of sexuality and sexual identity was much more complex (Benstock, 1987).

One novel to come out of that time period that has left a lasting impression is Radclyffe Hall's *the Well of Loneliness*. It was published in 1928, and immediately banned in the United Kingdom. The book was also the center of several lawsuits in the United States because of its "obscene nature" of two women living together as lovers, though the most obscene scene in the book comes in reference to their lovemaking and simply states: "...and that night they were not divided" (Hall, 1928, p. 313). While there are no explicit sexual scenes in the book, it was groundbreaking in that it accurately portrayed two women and their struggles with their sexual identities and relatively *normal* lives living together as lovers. The importance of these literary contributions goes beyond the dangerous subject matter they were discussing; it also served as beacons for LGBTQ individuals at the time. These manuscripts gave LGBTQ people hope that they were not alone, or sick, or damned to a life of solitude.

One of the most unlikely outlets of representation for the LGBTQ community were pulp fiction novels, specifically, lesbian pulp fiction novels. Lesbian pulp fiction was most popular in the 1950s and 1960s (Foote, 2005). The original intended audience for this sub-genre of pulp fiction was heterosexual men, however, it found an audience—that in contemporary times seems obvious, but at the time was subversive and almost totally unintended: lesbians. One of the most widely heralded pulp fiction novels for

women by women to come out of the 1950s and 1960s was *Beebo Brinker* by Ann Bannon (Nealon, 2000). Beebo Brinker is a recurring character throughout several of Bannon's novels. In the titular piece about her lesbian heroine, Bannon practically provides a step-by-step process on how to manage being a lesbian in a society that does not yet tolerate it. The book also becomes a critique of how lesbian pulp fiction novels were being used at the time: as objects of identification and representation for their readers. At one point, the book gives a meta-narrative of this phenomenon:

‘I read a book once,’ she said clumsily. ‘Under my covers at night-when I was fifteen. It was about two girls who loved each other. One of them committed suicide. It hit me so hard I wanted to die, too. That’s about as close as I’ve come to reality....’ (Bannon, 1962, pp. 49-50)

Bannon's book was different in that it did not end with Brinker either committing suicide because of the unhappiness being a homosexual presumably brought, nor did it find Brinker “reforming herself” and marrying a man. *Beebo Brinker* was one of the first novels that showed being homosexual was not tantamount to a life of sorrow.

By the early 20th century, LGBTQ individuals were also able to find images of themselves in film. Russo (1987) chronicled the portrayal of gays and lesbians in film from the 1890s to the 1980s in his seminal work, *the Celluloid Closet*. Russo was credited for making the following wry observation about the filmic portrayal of gays and lesbians: “Hollywood, that great maker of myths, taught straight people what to think about gay people... and gay people what to think about themselves” (Friedman & Epstein, 2001). His observation was made to highlight that much of the film industry's portrayal of the LGBTQ community has been negative; by painting gay men as sissies and lesbians as mannish and dangerous. For many LGBTQ individuals, these were the

only references they had to who they were in relation to the society at large. However, for many of them, bad representation was better than no representation at all (Russo, 1987).

Slowly, the print and images of LGBTQ individuals started to change. These changes coincided with an increase in visibility for the LGBTQ community in society as a whole. This visibility came in the form of people like Harvey Milk, who very publicly served as a city representative for San Francisco, and it also came from brave filmmakers and writers who were no longer willing to portray the LGBTQ community as either victims or villains, but rather just as people. These breakthroughs can be seen in the 1970s and 1980s through films like *Cabaret*, *Making Love*, and *Lianna* and in books like *Annie on My Mind*, *the Color Purple* and *the Lost Language of Cranes*. Finally, LGBTQ individuals in society had positive examples of the community they were a part of. However, the issue was whether or not these texts and images were readily available to them.

In the 1990s, the way LGBTQ individuals found information about themselves and their community radically changed: the Internet became readily available to the public at large. Now, LGBTQ individuals who were seeking out information could join bulletin board services like 420chan.org, or find lists of books and movies about LGBTQ issues. The Internet opened up a myriad of possibilities for the LGBTQ community. Not only could information be sought out, but it could also be generated by those who were able to write code and maintain websites. Now, LGBTQ individuals who are coming to terms with their sexuality could use the Internet for guideposts (Gray, 2009). Until recently, the information people sought out about alternative sexualities was static and the flow of information was asymmetrical. These individuals were able to

absorb the information they were seeing, but there were not many options for them to comment on or change the information they found. That has changed, however, with the advent of SNS. SNS give LGBTQ individuals a dynamic platform where the flow of information can be carefully controlled by them personally. This gives LGBTQ individuals the ability to seek out information that will best represent and be most beneficial to them, rather than having to search for pieces of themselves within static texts.

A lot has changed in the past 125 years for the LGBTQ community. The evolution has been drastic, from the Victorian Era where it was illegal and punishable by jail time to be homosexual, to the middle of the 20th century where LGBTQ books were written in code or double entendres, to the modern era where the LGBTQ community is very visible and relevant in today's society.

CHAPTER III

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature review will be broken down into five sections. The first section will begin with a review of queer theory. Next, sex, sexuality and gender is examined, followed by identity theory. Finally, literature on media theory will be reviewed.

Queer Theory

It is widely recognized that DeLauretis coined the term “queer theory” in her 1991 article “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities.” In that article, DeLauretis outlines three criteria required for the study of queer theory: the rejection of heterosexuality as the standard for which all other forms of sexuality are measured; the way that race greatly informs sexual subjectivities, and; attending to gender in such a way as to call into question the way that gay and lesbian studies are viewed as one uniform entity. The mere idea of queer theory gave it enough power to make it an important tool for critical scholars looking to explore and explain phenomena within the social world that the sub-categories of critical theory (like feminist or race) would not be able to answer completely. What is important to note, however, is that queer theory is not actually a theory at all, but rather it is a set of criteria a scholar should keep in mind while examining a situation or phenomena. Queer theory’s inability to be tested and validated is actually one of the reasons why it is such a strong and widely used framework. The fact

that it asks the scholar to constantly question the normativity of a situation means that the moment queer theory becomes replicable, it loses its strength as a critical framework. This does not mean, however, that the usage of queer theory has been irrelevant to the study of communication. In order to understand how queer theory has been used in contemporary academia, one must first understand exactly what the term “queer” encompasses.

The concept and definition of the word queer is complex. Often, the word is used negatively, to describe someone or something that is “not normal,’ or, more specifically, not heterosexual” (Dilley, 1999, p. 457). In the past 20 years, however, the gay and lesbian community has reappropriated the term to become synonymous and interchangeable with the terms *gay* and *lesbian* (Dilley, 1999). As the gay and lesbian community reassigned meaning to the word “queer,” the concept of “queer” was also being refashioned. Dilley stated that this new definition of queer “is not about a lack of something (a lack of heterosexuality)...but a presence of something: a desire for same-sex experiences, a position outside of the normal trope of daily life that affords perspectives apart from the norm” (p. 458). This new definition expands queer beyond a term that is used to identify those who are “not heterosexual”; it has become a term that also encompasses political and personal ideologies. In using this definition of queer, Hanson (1999a) states, “The very word *queer* [emphasis added in original] invites an impassioned, and even angry resistance to normalization” (p. 4). The research conducted in this study will be done adhering to two of the aforementioned definitions of queer: one, that queer is interchangeable with the terms gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, and;

two, that queer is not just an identity, but can also be a political and ideological state of mind.

Much of the recent research using queer theory has looked at the “queering” of different channels of media throughout modern history. For example, Savoy (1999) looked at the queer reading of Doris Day’s performance in *Calamity Jane*. Hanson (1999b) gave a critical queer reading to the genre of female vampire movies. Padva (2004) used queer theory to examine the new age of queer adolescent films. The key to giving an artifact a queer reading is to look into the excess and examine that which cannot be easily justified with heteronormative explanations. A lot of the contemporary research being done with queer theory does not even attempt a nuanced reading of a seemingly “straight” artifact, but rather, many are using just the tenets of queer theory as prescribed by DeLauretis.

Since the mainstream adoption of the Internet in the early 1990s, many scholars have looked at it with a queer lens. Bryson (2004) looked at how queer women are using the net, and how it is different from the straight female and male counterparts. Ashford (2009) used queer theory to examine online sex groups. Bryson, MacIntosh, Jordan and Lin (2006) examined the use of computer mediated communication (CMC) and how it created tools for identification and mediation in both the virtual and real worlds for queer women. Their research found that the ability to create identities via the Internet and social networking has become increasingly complex because of the integration of “the online world” with the “offline world.” The Internet and various sites located therein provide a rich research ground for queer theorists— this is because it

provided a fertile ground for those who identify as queer to create friendly spaces and find like people in the world.

The remainder of this study will be built upon the foundation of queer theory. Because this research is interested in how young members of the LGBTQ community use social networking sites (SNS) during sexual identity formation, it is key to keep in mind the three tenants put forth by DeLauretis: heteronormativity will be questioned, the influence of racial issues will be held in the forefront and the idea that gay and lesbian issues will never be thought of as a simple “one size fits all” solution. If used properly, queer theory can help to open up discussions and explanations on phenomenon previously disregarded by the heteronormative majority within the academic discipline. Specifically, for this study, using queer theory will provide a framework for examining how members of the LGBTQ community use SNS during the coming out process.

Sex, Sexuality and Gender

Within the realm of communication studies, much of the work done regarding sex, sexuality and gender has relied upon stereotypes of what constitutes a man and a woman (Canary & Emmer-Sommers, 1997). Also, literature reveals that the notions of sex, sexuality and gender are drawn along parallel lines that reflect a very heteronormative viewpoint (Canary & Emmer-Sommers, 1997; Dindia, 2006). Some of the most prominent theories within the communication discipline, like expectancy violation theory (EVT) were conceptualized with very traditional, narrow viewpoints on what the definition of a man and a woman are (Burgoon, 1983). This overarching viewpoint also presumes that styles of communication differ drastically between a man

and a woman. For example, when conceptualizing EVT, Burgoon (1983) stated: “We had noted sex differences before, but the finding here of different nonverbal reactions to male versus female customers corroborated other research that has found many sex differences in nonverbal communication patterns” (p. 96). However, this statement presumes that gender is static and unchanging. Not only that, it also presumes that gendered differences are so different that it can be taken into account for communication differences and/or measured. However, Dindia (2006) found that “sex or gender accounts for about 1% of the variance in communication variables” (p. 6).

The discrepancy between these two studies points toward a larger issue in regards to sex, sexuality and gender and how communication scholars are approaching the subject. It seems there is an assumption that these three variables are dependent upon one another. However, it is important to note they are mutually exclusive. Just because an individual is born a woman does not automatically presume that she is also both feminine and attracted to the opposite sex. Because of this faulty assumption, much of the research done to date on gender or sex communication has been toward a heteronormative point of view, thereby marginalizing any individual within society who does not fit within the narrow assumption of what sex, sexuality and gender are.

Gender and sexuality are often stereotyped against sex (Dindia, 2006). These stereotypes are socially constructed and reflective of the society of its origin. For example, within the United States, the perception of communication differences between men and women are quite large. Dindia (2006) found that within the United States, “(g)ender stereotypes are pervasive in this culture-more pervasive than racial or ethnic stereotypes (p. 13). One only needs to look at the common term “opposite sex” to

understand how men and women have been constantly portrayed as exceedingly different from one another. There is the overwhelming presumption that sex, gender and sexuality are static, being points on a line that are permanent and immovable. In the 1940s, Alfred Kinsey came up with the controversial concept that sexuality is not an either/or choice, but rather lies on a continuum (Kinsey, 1948). His famous heterosexual-homosexual scale conceptualized an individual's sexuality as ranging from zero to six, with zero being absolutely heterosexual and six being absolutely homosexual. What made Kinsey's work so controversial was that he found most people do not rate as a zero or a six, but somewhere in between. In his original research, Kinsey found that 46% of men and 6% to 14% of women had experienced both heterosexual and homosexual encounters (Kinsey, 1948, p. 656; Kinsey, 1953, p. 488). Despite this groundbreaking research conducted in the 1940s, there is still a presumption that men and women communicate differently and there is no room for a middle ground.

This proves to be very troubling for members of society who fall anywhere beyond the zero on the Kinsey heterosexual-homosexual scale. The bombardment of messages and images from contemporary media are sharpening the distinction between men and women and it is confusing for many people trying to discover their own sexual and gender identities, leaving them searching for alternative channels of information. The Internet and SNS are channels that allow for "gender bending" and other explorations of sexuality outside of the traditional forms of media and communication (Ross, 2010). SNS add extra layers of nuance and control through features like photos, newsfeeds, and status updates selected by the user that the Internet does not inherently provide. This capability

to gender bend is facilitated by SNS assumptions no longer based solely on physical appearance but can be controlled and/or altered as each individual sees fit.

This study proposes that sex, sexuality and gender be treated as completely different, mutually exclusive concepts. Furthermore, these constructs are also to be treated as influential predictors and/or equally influencing of communication behaviors.

Coming-Out

The ability to come-out has become increasingly easy within the last 30 years. As more and more activists within the LGBTQ community (Harvey Milk, Cleve Jones, Phyllis Lyon, Del Martin) demanded equality by increasing their visibility, the general tolerance of non-heterosexuality also increased. In 1997, when both Ellen DeGeneres and her fictional sitcom counterpart came out of the closet, it seemed to open the floodgates of acceptance for the LGBTQ community (Dow, 2001). Even though the corresponding backlash meant that DeGeneres' sitcom did not last past the next season, it did pave the way for shows like *Will & Grace*, *Queer as Folk* and *the L Word* (Dow, 2001).

Over a decade after DeGeneres' very public coming out, the world in which young members of the LGBTQ community are coming out into has evolved into a vastly different place. Even though the threat of announcing one's non-heterosexuality does not carry the same penalties it did half a century ago—including its illegality throughout the United States—the act of coming-out is still often fraught with emotional, psychological and unfortunately physical danger (Hegna, 2007). More and more, LGBTQ youth are turning to the Internet and media as guideposts during their coming out process (Gray, 2009). Using the Internet and various media to act as facilitators of one's identity helps

LGBTQ people negotiate and understand their own sexuality without having to make any public announcements.

The concept of coming out has received an increased amount of attention in the last decade (Nicholas, 2006). Some articles look at the actual coming out process (Chirrey, 2003; Denes, 2008); some look at the complexity of coming out at the workplace (King, Reilly & Hebl, 2008); and still others look at media's influence upon the coming out process (Gray, 2009). There is, however, a large gap in the research regarding how younger LGBTQ people—like those of the Millennial generation and Generation Y—use social networking sites (SNS), like Facebook, MySpace and Twitter, to help form their sexual identities.

Most of the research done to date has looked at Internet usage and the coming out process as being almost passive on the part of the person coming out. Instead of looking at it from the point of view that young LGBTQ people are exposed to “queer images” on websites and this activity helps form their identity, the purpose of this study is to find out how people are actively using SNS as a channel of communication to come out, and therefore start to shape and manage their sexual identity and relationships.

Social Networking Sites and Sexual Identity

Social Networking Sites (SNS) have permeated almost all aspects of the online experience. SNS have become a global phenomenon (Sauerbier, 2010). Acquisti and Gross (2006) define an SNS as “as Internet community where individuals interact, often through profiles that represent their public persona to others” (p. 2). boyd and Ellison (2008) narrowed down the definition and outline three criteria a website must

meet for it to be considered an SNS: “(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211). Some of the most popular websites that meet these criteria are Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and Twitter. For many people, the use of an SNS has become part of their daily routine (boyd & Ellison, 2008). What makes SNS unique from other forms of media is the ability of the user to not only form online communities, but SNS also provide users with “...email, instant messaging, music, file sharing, video sharing, games and other services” (Brown, 2010, p. 36). The most important function of an SNS, however, is the most obvious: as a platform to host and encourage social interactions amongst its users. As the usage of SNS increases, so does the research looking at how SNS has affected communication, social relationship and identity.

One of the most interesting by-products of SNS are the effects they have on gender representation. DeAndrea, Shaw and Levine (2010) examined language usage on SNS and found that even when individuals tried to suppress their gender identity, their language would often betray them. Their research helped to prove that gender is embedded into how individuals use language and not just their non-verbal cues (DeAndrea et al., 2010). Bryant (2008) found that heterosexual Facebook members created profiles that fell along gendered stereotypes. She also found that all of the participants used images and language to establish and confirm their heterosexuality (Bryant, 2008). Wang, Moon, Kwon, Evans and Stefanone’s (2009) research found that individuals are more likely to accept friend requests from people of the opposite sex they perceive to be more attractive based upon their profile picture. They also found that

individuals are more likely to accept a friend request from someone with no profile picture than from someone of the opposite sex they feel is “unattractive” (Wang et al., 2009).

Taraszow, Aristodemou, Shitta, Laouris and Arsoy (2010) outlined the most common ways individuals are using SNS, including finding friends, dates and jobs; networking or looking for new acquaintances; extending one’s network; sharing information, photos, videos and music; getting updates from friends, and; sending messages privately and posting public testimonials (p. 82). One of the most important ways individuals are using SNS is to reconnect with existing friends or meet new people they would otherwise not be able to connect with (Taraszow et al., 2010). Geographical divides are no longer an issue with SNS (Livingstone, 2008).

The ability to extend one’s social network beyond the boundaries created by geography has proven to be especially salient in the LGBTQ community. Often times, young LGBTQ members experience a sense of isolation within their own community when first coming out (Fraser, 2007). SNS provide an avenue for them explore the LGBTQ community at large. These sites also allow LGBTQ youth to construct their sexual identity in a “safe place.” LGBTQ individuals have been turning to the Internet for guidance on negotiating their identity well before the advent of SNS.

Gray (2009) studied how young LGBTQ individuals used the Internet to construct their sexual identity. She specifically looked at how youth in rural areas look for exposure to the LGBTQ culture and people within it because this population is not available to them where they live. Dahl (2008) also explored how LGBTQ youth are using media and the Internet when there are no other resources available for them. Some

communities might offer clubs and groups for LGBTQ individuals, but often, these groups cater to people 21 and over. As the Internet increasingly becomes a multimedia, fully interactive experience, young LGBTQ individuals are turning to SNS as a form of everyday engagement with other queer youth (Dahl, 2008).

SNS have changed the way people communicate with one another. More time is spent on SNS than on any other kind of site online (Sauerbier, 2010). SNS are offering more and more services to their users, and these users are adopting this communication technology in new and innovative ways. SNS profile pages allow more and more people to explore the different facets of their identity, like their sexuality, in a relatively safe and private manner.

Identity Theory

Central to the articulation of one's identity is the articulation of our sexuality. Based upon Hecht's Communication Theory of Identity (CTI), there are four different loci of identity: personal, relational, enacted, and communal (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004). The four loci of CTI are interdependent, a change in one usually triggers a change in all. For example, the recognition of one's homosexuality will cause a change in self-perception, a change in relationships, a change in performance of identity, and a change in the collective memory of a given group. Even though the change of identity can be seen as coming from the personal locus, it creates a ripple effect throughout the other loci.

Personal Identity

The first locus of identity in CTI is personal identity (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004). “*Personal identity* [emphasis added in the original] is an individual’s self-concepts or self-images” (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 266). This locus of identity is equivalent to intrapersonal communication or how the person sees themselves internally. Personal identity is basically an internal process that is unfettered by the feedback of the external world. In terms of sexuality, personal identity can be seen as the discovery of one’s own sexual identity and how one internalizes or makes sense of this aspect of their identity.

Enacted Identity

The second locus of identity is enacted identity (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004). “*Enacted identity* [emphasis added in the original] is an individual’s expressed or performed identity” (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 266). The locus of enacted identity is different from the locus of personal identity because it is more performance based. Personal identity is the “self-talk” the individual engages in with themselves, whereas the enacted identity is the identity they project to the outside world. This locus of identity can most commonly be seen during the coming-out process in the LGBTQ community. When an individual is first coming-out, they are, in essence, learning to enact their identity. Within the realm of social networking sites (SNS), like Facebook and MySpace, the locus of enacted identity is particularly significant. SNS provides a platform for individuals to enact their sexual identities where there is less threat and/or fear of physical repercussions.

Relational Identity

The third locus of identity is relational identity. According to Hecht and Jung (2004), there are four levels of relational identity. The first level details how the individual internalizes their sense of identity based upon how they are viewed by those around them (Hecht & Jung, 2004). The second level describes how the individual develops a sense of identity based upon her relationship with others. The third level explains how the different facets of one's own identity act in relationship to one another. Finally, the fourth level states that a relationship within itself can be a type of identity (Jung & Hecht, 2004). The relational locus of identity can prove to be the most difficult to maneuver for an LGBTQ individual who is coming-out. This locus of identity is complex and requires a tremendous amount of negotiation. Hecht (1993) states that "Identity as Relationship shares the assumptions of Identity as Enactment, although this time the focus is on mutual or relational aspects" (p. 80). In other words, while similar to an individual externally enacting identity, relational identity is the result of the day-to-day interactions with other people.

Communal Identity

Finally, the fourth locus of identity is communal identity. "The communal layer transcends individuals and is a characteristic of a group or a collectivity" (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 267). The communal locus of identity is particularly salient to individuals who are new to the LGBTQ community. It is through the interactions of the group that a sense of what it means to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered or queer is formed. Within the LGBTQ community, the necessity for "like-minded" people is critical. The

communal identity locus is just as critical as the personal, enacted and relational loci when forming one's sexual identity.

The loci of identity are not mutually exclusive. They are interdependent; the conceptualization of one is dependent on the others. However, this means that a person may find themselves in the difficult task of reconciling identity loci that do not match one another. During the coming-out process, an individual is faced with the task of negotiating the four loci of identity, which can sometimes lead to what Jung and Hecht (2004) called "identity gaps." "Identity gaps are defined as discrepancies between or among the four frames of identity" (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 268). The total number of identity gaps that can exist according to Jung and Hecht (2004) are 11. Jung and Hecht (2004) argued that because no two person's experiences are alike, identity gaps are unavoidable.

The Prosthetic Body

In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Warner (2002) described the concept of the prosthetic body. This concept posits that an individual will use an object—like anonymous blogs or a profile page on an SNS—to "put themselves out in the public realm" without fear of public rejection or danger to their physical body. By allowing their SNS profile page to represent themselves, LGBTQ individuals are letting the profile "take the beating." According to Warner (2002), there is an inherent risk involved with being a member of a counterpublic—which is what the LGBTQ community is considered. The use of artifacts by the LGBTQ community to enter the public sphere or to establish themselves as a social movement did not begin with the usage of SNS.

Risk and the Prosthetic Body

Risk is a key concept in regards to the public sphere. For Arendt (1958), risk is critical for achieving *aretē*, or excellence in the public realm in ancient Greece. She stated that "...whomever consciously aims at being 'essential,' at leaving behind a story and an identity must not only risk his life but expressedly choose... a short life and premature death" (Arendt, 1958, p. 193). By exposing one's self to grave mental, emotional and physical harm, one can achieve immortality. Arendt (1958) based this achievement of excellence on the ancient Greek society, where she references Achilles, one of the heroes of Greek mythology. This concept of risk, however, is not something that has translated well to the modern public sphere and society.

Warner (2002) gave a very different perspective on risk and the public sphere. When one is a constituent of a counterpublic, their mere membership in that counterpublic creates risk. Not because it is the price of achieving greatness like Arendt implied, but "a counterpublic maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status" (Warner, 2002, p. 119). As a member of a counterpublic, if one presents themselves to the public at large, the mere fact that they are viewed as a subordinate presents a risk. The by-product the risk of entering the public sphere a member of a counterpublic could experience included, on one end of the spectrum, invisibility and lack of representation, voice and authority; on the other end of the spectrum, violence against a person for their "otherness." Fraser (1992) expanded upon the lack of representation and voice when talking about subordinate members of a counterpublic trying to gain access to the larger public sphere. Fraser (1992) stated: "Even the language people use as they reason together usually favors one way of seeing

things and discourages others. Subordinate groups sometimes cannot find the right voice or words to express their thoughts, and when they do, they discover they are not heard” (p. 119).

The risks involved in being a member of the LGBTQ counterpublic is one of the reasons why various forms of communication technology use amongst this group became so popular. It was not until the last 25 years that LGBTQ individuals were positively represented in the public sphere. For LGBTQ members of society, artifacts like pulp fiction novels, films and magazines—to name a few— gave them a sense of representation in the public realm.

Self-Abstraction

Communication related to identity formation and articulation, especially among at-risk counterpublics, was made all the more difficult in the public sphere by normative practices dictated by heterosexuals. Habermas (1962) argued that to be a member of the public sphere, one must be able to participate in rational/critical discourse. One of the requirements for participating in rational/critical discourse is to be considered an equal amongst all in the public realm. One of the ways this is achieved is by self-abstraction, also known as “bracketing.” Warner (2002) stated that bracketing meant that “to be properly public required that one rise above, or set aside, one’s private interests and expressive nature” (p. 40). As innocuous as the notion of bracketing sounds, it required that people bracket that which made them different from those who could participate in rational/critical discourse; specifically, affluent, white men (Fraser, 1992). This misogynistic take on what is required for rational/critical discourse made the act of bracketing for women, people of color and those with so-called “deviant behaviors” near

impossible. Unable to bracket, those minorities in society are unable to equally participate in the public sphere, therefore, their voices are never fully heard. Warner (1992) stated that “an assertion of the full equality of minoritized statuses would require the abandoning the structure of self-abstraction in publicity” (p. 400).

Having an SNS profile page act as a prosthetic body is more than just circumventing risk or allowing it to take the beating in the way artifacts like lesbian pulp fiction acted, however. Ross (2010) examined how women use the Internet for “gender bending.” She argued that the Internet gives the unique experience of stripping away the gender cues afforded by traditional face-to-face interactions. By being able to negotiate what gender means to an individual without having their bodies and voices giving powerful non-verbal cues, the LGBTQ person can fluidly explore alternatives to the gender that their sex defaults to. This concept, in regards to gender bending on the Internet, was first explored by Turkle (1995). Turkle examined how gender ambiguity occurs within the world of online role playing games (RPG). What she found was that an individual’s “cyberspace” gender constructions did not necessarily match their “real life” gender construction. Rheingold (1993) questioned the authenticity of a person’s Internet gender, believing that interactions that occur face-to-face and in real time will carry more weight in regards to actual social interactions. McGerty (2000), however, pointed out individuals are able to transform parts of themselves almost as easily “in real life” as they are able to online. This would seem to be true for members of the LGBTQ community while they are forming their sexual identity. For many members of the community, it is not only about what it means to be “gay” or “bisexual” or “transgender” but also how those roles as a sex, a sexuality and a gender should be enacted.

SNS and other forms of user generated content (UGC) online give LGBTQ youth the ability to negotiate the use of language that allows them to express their sexuality (Del-Teso-Craviotto, 2008). In regards to the physical body, and having it's representation of gender and sexuality removed, LGBTQ individuals can learn how to assert their sexual identity verbally. This proves to be salient when many LGBTQ individuals have reported the necessity to continually assert their non-heterosexuality to friends and family members (Denes, 2008). For many members of the LGBTQ community, it is necessary to learn how to "talk like a homosexual" because it is a default in modern society to presume one's sexuality is heterosexuality (Kitzenger, 2005; Land & Kitzenger, 2005). The Internet, and more recently SNS, have allowed members of the LGBTQ community to negotiate this aspect of their sexuality in private, without fear of repercussions.

Haraway (2006) argued in her *Cyborg Manifesto* that the construction of "(g)ender, race or class-consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism" (p. 122). The issue she brings up is that with so many competing terms to explain the same concept, like woman, that it is difficult, if not impossible, to create a "fully formed identity" for ourselves and for the groups we belong to. So not only is an individual struggling with what it means to be a woman personally, for example, but they are also struggling with what sort of "membership" that title affords them. Groups like the feminist movement have experienced issues of what feminism even means, with women of color and of minority sexualities challenging the notion of what it means to be a woman in the United States (Rakow & Wackwitz, 2004). The in-fighting within

minoritized groups causes tension—not only because of the inability to come up with a universal conception of what being a member of what that minority means, but also because of the resistance that minority group might be feeling from the public-at-large. This is a concept that transfers well to the identity building that LGBTQ experience during the coming-out process. While it has lessened in contemporary times, the stigma of being a labeled a homosexual in society is still very prevalent. The media’s attention on gay issues like equal rights, harassment and bullying, just to name a few, have made many LGBTQ youth fear for their safety during their coming out process. The availability of the Internet to explore our sexual identities, causes individuals to live their lives as cyborgs. In this state, individuals are partially organic, living in the real world and partially “plugged-in” to the Internet, just as Haraway predicted. This ability to quite literally “plug-in, turn-on and tune-out” allows LGBTQ individuals the freedom to negotiate their identity without fear of physical repercussions.

Media System Dependency Theory and the Electronic Panopticon

Even though the use of SNS creates risk for the LGBTQ community, the ability to control the information flow and subsequent interactions make it a more attractive form of media. The built-in mechanisms for controlling SNS information provide a unique form of protection that other forms of media and face-to-face interaction cannot provide. The duality this protection creates is a unique experience of being both the voyeur and exhibitionist.

SNS and the Electronic Panopticon

Several social science and communication scholars have looked at the panopticon metaphor in regards to information dissemination (D'Urso, 2006; Foucault, 1977; Kitto, 2003). D'Urso (2006) in particular, looked at how the panopticon can be used as a psychological tool within organizations. In effect, the management of a company creates the illusion that employees are constantly being watched—over e-mail, voice mail, instant messaging, surveillance cameras, etc.—and this effect causes the individual to create their own psychological prison (D'Urso, 2006). The concept of the panopticon was originally created by Jeremy Bentham in 1791 (Foucault, 1977). The panopticon was a prison design where the guard tower could see all cells at once, but the prisoners could only see the guard tower (Tyma, 2007). This arrangement gave the illusion of power and discipline: if the prisoner can only see the guard tower, then it is presumed that the guard tower will see everything the prisoner is doing, even if they cannot. The mere prospect of being constantly watched maintained the prisoners' good behavior, not unlike LGBTQ individuals constantly monitoring their SNS profiles. Based upon the panopticon prison design, Foucault (1977, 1980) created the panopticon metaphor, which expresses that a select few who are in positions of power will define and control the behavior of those under their rule by using the same deception a panopticon prison model uses. Even though there is no immediate threat to an individual who does not follow the rules of those in power, the perception of being watched and punished is enough to keep people following rules.

In response to the panopticon metaphor is the information panopticon which dictates that “an individual can be both the observer and the observed” (D'Urso, 2006, p.

288). Botan (1996) studied how technology is used to control employees by giving the impression of being constantly monitored by management. Creating an *electronic panopticon metaphor*, Botan (1996) suggests that the use of communication technology to monitor work can be just as effective as an actual, physical layout of a panoptical building. For example, if an employee is constantly under the assumption that his e-mail is being monitored by management, he will not send personal e-mails on that account (Botan, 1996). A key element that is essential for a panoptic arrangement to be effective is that the individual being watched needs to know they are being watched.

This metaphor has been adapted outside of the workplace. Specifically, Tyma (2007) applied the electronic panopticon metaphor to examine the usage of MySpace. The panopticon metaphor is relevant to the exploration of SNS because surveillance becomes multi-faceted. As Tyma (2007) indicated, there are multiple levels of surveillance: First, the actual gatekeepers of the SNS; the individual themselves are observers of their friends, and; the friends act as observers of the individual. Second, the act of surveillance is no longer one-way, but it is constantly changing so that an individual can be controlled by the presumed surveillance by others as she is simultaneously creating the illusion of controlling others by the individual's observance of them. This point could prove to be especially salient for members of the LGBTQ community because it could inhibit their openness with information on one hand, but on the other, they can use a SNS to make sure that they control what information they release and who they are releasing it to.

Media System Dependency Theory

Media system dependency theory (MSDT) was developed by Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur (1976) to describe the relationship between audiences, media and the larger social system (Pierce, 2009, p. 99). Media system dependency theory can be defined as a “relationship in which the capacity of individuals to attain their goals is contingent upon the information resources of the media system” (Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach & Grube, 1984). In other words, the more likely a specific form of media will help the audience attain their goal, the more likely the audience is going to use it and therefore become dependent on it. In order to understand an individual’s dependence on media systems, a typology of the different dependency dimensions was created. There are six different dimensions within the media dependency typology: social understanding, self-understanding, action orientation, interaction orientation, solitary play, and social play (Meadows, 2010, p. 53). Meadows (2010) offered the following definitions for each:

Social understanding is learning about the world around you, while self-understanding is learning about yourself. Action orientation is learning about specific behaviors, while interaction orientation is about learning specific behaviors involving other people. Solitary play is entertaining yourself alone, while social play is using media as a focus for social interaction. (p. 53)

MSDT has been widely used since its inception to examine the multitude of media systems and communication technologies available to audiences today.

MSDT has been used to look at the flow of information across a multitude of different media systems. Numerous studies have looked specific kinds of information flow in regard to television systems (Aalberg, van Aelst & Curran, 2010; Baldwin & Barrett, 1992). MSDT has also been used to look at the assimilation of information by specific minority groups. Witkin and Ball-Rokeach (2006) examined the efficacy of

general health campaigns amongst the Latino population in the Los Angeles area. Their research found that the Latino population had strong connections to information from media that was specifically tailored to their cultural group. Hestroni (2008) examined Arab and Jewish adolescents' dependency on media for information about sexuality. The study found that Arab adolescents found electronic media to be more useful than their Jewish counterparts. Morton and Duck (2000) studied media dependency and social identity of gay men and their safe sex practices. Morton and Duck (2000) found that, consistent with media system dependency theory, gay men who were more dependent on the specific channels of media where safe sex campaigns were found were more likely to practice safe sex.

The theory has also been extensively used to study Internet and World Wide Web usage. Tustin (2010) looked at the usage of the Internet for health information seeking by cancer patients. The research found that patients who were unsatisfied with their doctor were more dependent on Internet health sites. Jung (2008) examined how the environment in which the individual uses the Internet affects how they use the Internet. If an individual has a computer and Internet access in their home and work, they will use the Internet to access a wider array of information than an individual who only uses the Internet at home or at work (Jung, 2008). Riffe, Lacy, and Varouhakis (2008) conducted a study which found that 30-50% of their respondents "valued the Internet more than magazines, books, or friends or families as a source for in-depth information" (p. 1).

When the theory was first conceptualized in the 1970s, the state of media systems was very different than it is today. Specifically, the interdependency between the audience and many media systems was considered asymmetrical, meaning that

“individuals have goals that are contingent on the information resources of the media, but media system goals are not directly contingent on the resources of any particular individual” (Ball-Rokeach et al., 1984, p. 5). In other words, the information provided by the media system affected the individual within the audience more than the information provided by an individual would affect a media system. However, this unbalanced flow of information is changing. Ball-Rokeach et al. (1984) stated that:

Structural dependencies, or the interdependent relations between the media as a social system and other social systems, set the structural boundaries of media action and thus shape the flow of information that individuals may come to depend upon. (p. 5)

As communication technologies allow for access by a wider audience to non-traditional forms of media (e.g., Internet, SNS, UCG, interactive television) (Murdock, 2010), individuals within the audience are able to not only control the flow of information they are receiving from different media systems, but they are also able to shape the actual information itself. This point becomes incredibly salient when looking at specific media usage by the LGBTQ community. For example, rather than depending on mainstream media’s portrayal of the LGBTQ community on television, LGBTQ individuals are able to seek out information that is more accurate *to their experience*.

By specifically looking at the preceding literature, I have posed the following three research questions in regards to SNS usage by LGBTQ individuals during the coming out process:

❑ RQ1: How do SNS allow LGBTQ individuals to create their own meanings of their sex, sexuality and gender?

□ RQ2: How do members of the LGBTQ community use SNS to negotiate identity gaps while forming their sexual identity during the coming-out process?

□ RQ3: How does the perceived control of information by LGBTQ individuals influence their use of SNS during the coming out process?

CHAPTER IV

METHOD

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited in two ways. First, members of college Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) and LGBTQ campus groups, in addition to LGBTQ interest groups at professional communication associations were contacted via email, professional listservs, e-newsletters and in person with an invitation to participate in the study. Snowball sampling was used as a second method of interviewee recruitment. As Babbie (2007) states: (snowball sampling) “is appropriate when the members of a special population are difficult to locate...” (pp. 184-185). By using snowball sampling, I was referred to individuals who were either just coming out or questioning their sexual identity. Participants were encouraged to refer a friend whom they thought would be interested in completing the study.

The use of both purposive and snowball sampling yielded 32 interviews consisting of 12 individuals who identified as male, 17 who identified as female, two who identified as “other,” and one who identified as a male to female (MtoF) transgendered person. Out of these 32 interviews, there were 14 who identified as gay, eight who identified as lesbian, five who identified as bisexual, three who identified as queer and one who identified as other. The age range of the individuals who participated in this study was 18-30. The age range was specifically chosen because it encompasses both

“Generation Y” and the “Millennial” generation. People within these two generations have been shown to use communication technology more than their older counterparts (comScore, 2010). By using participants with ages ranging from 18-30, the use of multiple communication technologies (e.g., cell phones, computers, social networking sites) can be expected to be more frequent than older generations.

Procedure

After acquiring IRB approval, face-to-face interviews were arranged and an interview questionnaire was created on Survey Monkey for online interviews. All study participants completed an informed consent form detailing the purpose of the research and ensuring their confidentiality.

The face-to-face interviews were semi-structured and included all questions from the interview schedule. Additional probing questions tailored to the specific participant were also included as needed. This allowed for better exploration of the unique experience the participants have during the coming-out process and the negotiation of sexual identity. The interviews that were conducted via the Survey Monkey questionnaire did not allow for probing, however, each participant was urged to contact the researcher if they had additional information to share.

Each face-to-face interview were conducted at a location that was convenient for the participants. The interviews were also audio recorded and immediately transferred as an MP3 file to a password protected computer. Each interview was scheduled to last approximately one hour, with the shortest lasting approximately 20 minutes and the longest lasting one hour, 20 minutes. At the end of the interview, face-to-face participants

were encouraged to continue the discussion via e-mail and phone calls. Participants were notified that they might be contacted again for follow up and/or clarification and that any information collected after the initial interview would be used in this study.

Instrumentation

The creation of the interview schedule was informed by the concepts that were explored in the literature review. The interview consisted of five topics with 27 open-ended questions and two “clearinghouse” questions at the end. The five topics covered in the interviews were: *Coming out*; *sexual identity*; *technology*; *using technology to come out*, and; *using technology to form sexual identity*.

Questions from the interview schedule section *Sexual Identity* were included: “How do you sexually identify yourself (gay, lesbian, bi, straight, queer, questioning)?,” and; “Do you think someone’s sexual identity is static (does not change) or fluid (can be constantly changing)?” The interview schedule section *Coming Out* included questions such as: “Tell me about your coming out experience. Who was the first person you told?,” and; “Did you actively come-out, meaning you told people first, or did someone ‘out’ you?” The questions about *Technology* were informed by the literature review on SNS and the electronic panopticon. Some of these questions include: “What technology do you use the most to communicate with friends and family (e.g., Internet, phone, face-to-face)?,” “Do you feel it is safer to share personal information about yourself on an SNS than to tell people face-to-face?,” and; “Do you have social networking profiles (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc)? If yes, which social networking sites (SNS) do you use?” The questions in the interview schedule sections *Using Technology to Form Sexual*

Identity and Using Technology to Come Out were informed by the literature review on coming out, SNS, Hecht's communication theory of identity and media richness theory. Some of the questions include: "Do you feel it is safer to come out on a social network than it is to use other methods of communication (e.g., phone, face-to-face, etc)? Why or why not?;" "When you were learning about your sexual identity, did you use SNS to find people who identified with the same sexuality? In other words, did you try to look for people "like you" online?," and; "Did you post your sexual identity on an SNS before "officially" coming-out? Why or why not?" (See Appendix A for interview schedule).

Analysis

A selective transcription method was used to transcribe the interviews, generating 164 single-spaced pages of data. The goal of this research was to explore how SNS contribute to the formation of gender and sexual identity; how and why LGBTQ individuals use SNS during their coming out process, and; how the perception of control affect the use of SNS during the coming out process. Because this research was exploratory in nature, the data was analyzed in two ways. First, given the small number of studies designed to explore the coming out process and the relative difficulty of examining identity gap negotiation with social-scientific methods, qualitative methods enabled the researcher to obtain layered accounts of this phenomenon in service of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory is appropriate for exploratory studies. By using grounded theory, the different themes apparent in the data can emerge organically, unfettered by the framework of a theory not suitable for the data

collected. Or, in the case of this study, accounting for readings of identity gaps and media use negotiation that cannot be captured by CTI or MSDT.

The interview transcripts were analyzed qualitatively using grounded theory analysis. The entire data set was first read through its' entirety to gain familiarity with it. Then, theoretical memoing was conducted to include early ideas about potential codes or themes and the extent to which identity gaps overlapped or were discrete. Theoretical memoing includes early ideas about potential themes or categories, how existing themes or categories might relate to one another and existing theory, and early impressions about the direction of the entire project (Glaser, 1978; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Ultimately, five separate readings of the 32 interview transcripts yielded theoretical memos related to the following topics: identity gap creation; the use of SNS to alleviate identity gaps; the prosthetic body; the panopticon, and; the creation of sex, sexuality and gender online.

Then, to answer research question two, a deductive approach was used, employing Hecht's communication theory of identity and media systems dependency theory as frameworks to understand how SNS are used during the coming out process. A content analysis was done to examine what identity gaps were being reported by the participants and how these individuals were using SNS to alleviate them through their specific media use. The theoretically meaningful unit of analysis (Krippendorff, 1980) were interviewees' descriptions of tension or conflicts related to sexual identity gaps.

When coding the interviews, media profiles were also created for each interviewee (See Appendix B). These media profiles detailed the following: whether or not the individual had specified their gender online; whether or not they were outed online; if their SNS profiles are set to private, and; whether or not they have their sexual

identity posted on their profile. These media profiles were also used to code what MSDT typology an individual was using to alleviate a specific kind of identity gap. The creation of media profiles helped examine how SNS were used to negotiate identity.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

The findings section will be broken into three sections. First, the findings of research question one examining the use of SNS during the formation of gender and sexuality will be discussed. Then, the results for research question two investigating the use of SNS to alleviate identity gaps created during the coming out process are detailed. Finally, the findings for research question three are explained which explored the influence of perceived control on the usage of SNS during the coming out process.

It's Facebook Official: The Creation of Gender and Sexuality

Research question one asked the following: How do SNS allow LGBTQ individuals to create their own meanings of their sex, sexuality and gender? In order to answer this question, the interviews were analyzed inductively using the grounded theory approach first advanced by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Using grounded theory, there emerged two major identity creation categories for LGBTQ individuals: internal identity creation and external identity creation. The remainder of this section will be divided into three parts: the first will examine how individuals use SNS to internally create their sexual identity; the second will examine how individuals use SNS to externally create or represent their sexual identity. Finally, the limiting and exclusionary aspects of the framing mechanisms provided by SNS will be identified.

Internal Identity Creation

One use of SNS for LGBTQ individuals was for internal identity creation purposes. By having access to millions of people from around the world on SNS, LGBTQ individuals have a wide variety of resources to help create meaning through their experiences as a gendered, sexual being. For many of the respondents, using SNS and UGC was a way for them to figure out who they were and what being gay means for different people. SNS gave them initial information about how to act as “gay people.” For example, one participant said the following in regards to using UGC to find out “what she was:” “I looked on YouTube and watched documentaries, or I mean videos of transgendered people like just—kind of looked the definitions up to find out like you know, “I know I am not straight...”

For LGBTQ individuals in small towns or rural areas, being able to connect with people outside of their physical social circle helped to expand their knowledge about what it meant for them to be gay or transgendered or questioning and how other people in the world like them were able to live and adapt:

I used to search and see which LGBTs or LGBs that were in the community, I didn't even know what transgender was until I was like a sophomore in high school. Yeah, I did it quite frequently and every so often if I am bored I still will. Downelink was really cool for that, actually...I have searched for trans men. I usually search for trans men more often than not that for other lesbians and queers because I am fascinated with that group of individuals and sometimes I try to connect to try to find out how they came to form their gender identity...

The ability to find a wide array of individuals within the LGBTQ community not only helped many of the participants internally create the meaning of what it means to be a sexual minority, but it also gave them the communication tools to understand how they are supposed to act as a sexual minority.

The dynamic nature of SNS permits individuals to not only passively gather information about their sexuality, but also to actively learn how to create their sexual identity. The broadcasting nature of SNS allowed many of the participants the ability to not only assert and reassert their sexual identity to their friends, family and colleagues, but also allowed them to assert and reassert it to themselves. One participant expanded upon this:

I mean people—if you do post it and people aren't really sure if you're a lesbian, but you post that you're a lesbian, having other people confirm—it's like trying to convince other people by trying to convince yourself, you know what I mean?... You know, if I tell you I am going to get an A on this test, I am trying to convince myself by trying to convince you that I am going to get an A on this test.

This issue of convincing oneself by convincing other was echoed by another individual in regards to telling her family:

Well when I had a MySpace, I kind of bounced back and forth from bisexual to straight, 'cause like, my family was on there and I was kind of scared for them to see it. And well, I was thinking I have to be okay with it, so like if I'm okay with it, I have to hope that other people will be too. I did notice that I would change it every once in a while, back and forth and I don't think this is on my Facebook at all.

The issue that was articulated by those interviewed is the public and communal nature of SNS works as a “double-edged sword” for those who are learning to create their sexuality. Specifically in regards to Facebook, while it does allow for more lateral exploration of their sexuality, the broadcasting nature of the medium also makes it difficult to explain their status choices to their friends at large. For example, one respondent said the following in regard to changing his “interested in” status:

And I remember when I did it. It used to say “interested in women” and I changed it about two years ago to say nothing and the minute I changed it I started getting comments or messages: “why did it get changed?” Because it broadcasts that it gets changed...And so you know, a lot of times my response would be, you know, to

make the decision to just tell them that I decided to change a lot of things on my profile and that was one of the things that I changed and lie to them.

While SNS allow individuals a relative amount of freedom to internally create their sexual identity, it seems that the experience needs to come with a *caveat emptor* in that it may seem like SNS can let an LGBTQ individual learn to internally create their sexuality in private, it is actually broadcasting and creating a record of an individual's creation process. This seems to be the trade-off for being granted access to a larger community with more diverse representations of gender, sex and sexuality.

External Identity Creation. One of the most basic functions of SNS is to allow an individual to externally create who they view themselves to be. Using the categories provided on the site under one's profile, a person can start to construct their sexuality in a virtual, online setting. Also, the ability to change one's identity can be as easy as a click of a button. One respondent talks about this:

I think I remember putting bisexual and then putting lesbian and then going back to bisexual and then back to straight and then "not sure" because I had MySpace at the time and they had "not sure." So I went back and forth quite a bit. And I definitely had it on there before I told most of my friends, so if you look, you can see it.

SNS are unique in that it is up to the individual to control what is on their profile and when it gets changed. There is more freedom to explore what it means to be a sexual minority, with something as simple as changing from "gay" to "straight" to "bisexual" and back again. There is not the usual societal pressure to look and act a certain way within the virtual platform. Another respondent expounded upon this:

My social site does have my sexuality in there. At this age, I don't care what society thinks about me and my sexuality. If I listened to society I would have become a depressed human being who needs to follow standards instead of doing who I want to be. Also, I am open about it because I am a Resident Advisor in the Residential Halls and if a GLBT resident sees that I am gay they might feel more comfortable

talking to me about issues than someone else. It is also nice to have someone to relate to.

For this individual, the ability to create their sexuality on an SNS not only gave them an alternative form of protest over how society views the LGBTQ individual in general, but also allows other people to seek him out during the formation of their own sexual identity. By externally creating their sexuality on a SNS, LGBTQ individuals are giving others the opportunity to explore how to look and act like a gay person.

Another frequently cited usage of SNS as an external creation tool was to find out how one is supposed to look as a gay person. Those who were first coming out and trying to create their own meaning of gender and sexuality are able to not only passively look for pictures of other LGBTQ individuals, but also be able to actively talk with others if they so desire. One respondent talked about the relief she felt when she discovered via SNS that she did not have to fit into the butch/femme binary that lesbians are often forced into:

...you're going to run across more people who don't fit into butch/femme or butch specifically because I think it's something that happens a lot and I know I did it. I thought I had to be a baby dyke and then I was like: "I'm not really a dyke at all." And it was kind of a relief to not have to be that, I could just be whoever I wanted.

During the coming out process there is peer pressure for LGBTQ individuals to select an identity or identifiers from an array of choices within the gay community. There is pressure to pick a gender, pick a sexuality and within that sexuality, to pick a "style." As one respondent put it, "It's just, in this day, in this time period people are like: 'Okay, second question. First, are you male or female? And second what's your sexual orientation?'" LGBTQ individuals are almost required to be "butch" or "femme" or a "top" or a "bottom." The ability to externally create one's gender and sexuality on a SNS

is limited because the choices on these sites are framed as if sexuality was a static thing, marked by discrete changes at different points in time. As one woman explained in regards to her sexuality:

I think it's fluid, I think—especially with lesbians—I think it's far more fluid than a gay man. I think it could be hormonal, I think it could be different things. I mean I don't know the exact reasons, but I feel more like a woman is apt to love other people for who they are rather than what's between their legs.

The issue that arises from this statement is that SNS, like Facebook, base their categories for framing and identification not on how people view themselves, but on what is in between their legs.

SNS have created a platform which exposes LGBTQ individuals to a wide array of choices in regard to how they could act or how they can look as sexual and gender minorities. Ironically, however, while the platform allows for the freedom of exploration, the actual sites themselves are limited and exclusionary in their attempts to allow for the creation of sexual and gender identity in LGBTQ individuals.

Square Pegs in Round Holes

Even though there are categories available on SNS for LGBTQ individuals to explore and name their sexual identity and gender, the framing that SNS like Facebook allow was viewed as constricting by several interviewees. One participant who filled out the questionnaire online sums up their frustration with SNS, specifically Facebook, and how it limits the ability to express how gender and sexuality is formed by individuals:

Yeah-- it tells me I'm supposed to be either attracted to men or women... creating a binary I don't agree with. Many times, we're asked to identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgender, Queer, Straight or Questioning. Those aren't the only options... and unfortunately, we find whatever is closest in an effort to be better understood. That's why I'm the asshole who answers "other" to every

question regarding my gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation. I don't have to fit into a box.

As both LGBTQ individuals and society become more comfortable with alternative sexualities, the limitations of not only the “boxes” provided, but also the stereotypes that are placed on and adhered to by the LGBTQ community are being challenged more vociferously. This was explained by one participant who was not satisfied with the framing choices provided for her specifically by Facebook:

Honestly, because the boxes that they allow you to check on Facebook aren't accurate for how I identify. I don't necessarily identify as female, I don't necessarily identify as male, there's no other box in there, there's no nothing box. And there is no queer, there is lesbian or attracted to women or attracted to men or both, so it's not to hide it, it's just it doesn't feel like it is appropriate.

This sentiment was echoed by another participant, but she also concedes the necessity for labels, even within the LGBTQ community:

...there's no way of getting around labels, but like... it's just a really confusing subject. I think that people just put those stereotypical, like, “oh, lesbian, so you have shorthair and you have to wear Vans.” I do it to, like, yesterday when I was trying to find Sasha a girlfriend, or like, we were just looking for girls she'd be interested in, it's like I know ways, things to look for, we put that view on ourselves, which kind of sucks, but how else are we supposed to find each other?

It is interesting to note here that there is a certain frustration with the labels that are placed upon the LGBTQ community by this individual, but they nevertheless admit to not only tolerating them, but grudgingly accepting them as markers for identification. There seems to be an acknowledgement of these “labels” limiting properties, but simultaneously an acknowledgement of their requirement by the community.

This point of labels is taken further by another respondent who calls into question the need to lump the categories of sex, sexuality and gender into one group instead of giving each of them their own proper categories:

...they do intersect at certain times, but I do know that they are very separate things. Queered networking sites for some odd reason encompass transgender and gender queer individuals. LGBTQ really should be LGBQ and then gender outliers. Yeah, so I used social networking sites to identify myself as far as sexual identity is concerned and then also gender identity to some extent.

For many of the respondents, they both agreed that gender and sexuality were fluid, and to put a name on them like “woman” or “lesbian” or “transgender” was not only limiting, but also exclusionary. As one respondent put it:

I don't like labels. I mean, I am not interested in boys in any way, but I don't like lesbian, it irritates me. Because I feel like it's a—I feel like it's used as a noun instead of an adjective and that annoys me, I don't feel like a person is *A* gay or *A* lesbian or whatever. You wouldn't say a man is a gay, you would say he *IS* gay, an adjective, so it should be an adjective and people use lesbian as a noun...I also feel like it's constrictive, I guess? You have to identify a certain way and be a certain thing and I don't feel like that's positive for anyone...A label comes with a lot of things attached to it, a lot of meaning and I don't feel like that is good for anyone...

As this individual alluded to, there seems to be a whole set of rules and perceptions attached to certain words. Because of the ideographic nature of words like lesbian, gay and bisexual, more individuals that identify with an alternative sexuality are choosing terms like “queer” and “genderqueer” because they are strategically ambiguous enough that meanings for them can be constructed by each individual themselves. One respondent explained it as such:

...I realized that there were more than just the lesbian, gay and bisexual categories, that queer is an actual identity. It's more inclusive, I can be a queer and be gender queer at the same time. I am just attracted to other people, I'm not necessarily heterosexual or homosexual. The fluidity of gender and sexual orientation fits into queer for me.

Unfortunately, SNS are slow to adopt this way of thinking about sex, sexuality and gender, so many LGBTQ individuals who are using the sites for identification purposes are poured into “one size fits all” molds provided by the SNS.

The framing provided by SNS is not perfect. There is, for every act of inclusion provided by SNS, an automatic act of exclusion. Within their terms like “gay,” “lesbian,” “interested in women” or “interested in both,” there are instances for identification, but mostly they are terms that try to regulate and norm the nebulous fluidity of sex, sexuality, and gender. However, because SNS do provide a dynamic platform for helping to create one’s internal and external meanings of sexual and gender identity and finding social support and community, these labels and restrictions are tolerated by the LGBTQ community.

Filling the Identity Void via SNS

The second research question asked the following: How do members of the LGBTQ community use SNS to negotiate identity gaps while forming their sexual identity during the coming out process? This question was intended to look at sexual identity formation and the findings reveal a multi-stage process of forming, exploring and maintaining one’s sexual identity. To answer this question, first I will break down how the question was examined using Hecht’s CTI and MSDT. Then I will go over the four most common types of identity gaps/media typologies that occurred in this question. Finally, I will examine how the prosthetic body was used in addition to the six different media system dependency typologies.

Schema of Identity Gaps Against Typologies

Each identity gap was simplified down to three major components: whether or not it was a primarily personal identity gap, a relational identity gap, or a communal identity gap. Overwhelmingly, LGTBQ individuals turned to SNS to alleviate the tension

of a gap that was part of their enacted identity. For example, one individual turned to SNS after experiencing a personal/enacted identity gap to help to come to terms with being transgender: "...it's a way to be out there and relieve the stress of 'yes, I am this way, and no I cannot to this publicly.'" Because a lot of the issues that LGBTQ individuals experience come from the enactment of their sexuality, each identity gap category was simplified to the major facet of identity the gap was affecting. This was then cross-referenced with the six different typologies of dependency outlined in MSDT. By doing this, the data revealed that not only are LGBTQ individuals turning to SNS to alleviate identity gaps experienced in more traditional forms of communication, but it also examines how and why exactly individuals are using SNS to alleviate these identity gaps. For example, the following individual was able to alleviate a personal identity gap by using SNS for self understanding:

When I was first coming out, I was very confused about what I should look like and how I should act because I was a lesbian. Having a MySpace profile gave me the freedom to interact with other lesbians that showed me that there is no "one size fits all" way that a lesbian should look or act. It was because of that that I am more comfortable transversing the continuum between androgyny and femininity. I can feel just as damn sexy in combat boots as in a pair of knee high stilettos if I want to now.

Specifically, she was able to gain knowledge about how she could "act as a lesbian" by using SNS to gain personal information about her experience. Please see Table 1 for the complete list of frequencies and examples of each schema of identity negotiation via media dependency.

Overwhelmingly, there were four different media typologies/identity gaps that were used more often than the others. Those were: social play/personal identity gap ($f = 16, 50\%$), social play/relational identity gap ($f = 12, 37.5\%$), social understanding/

Table 1

Media Use Typologies/Identity Gap Frequencies

| Media Use Typology | Frequency (f) N=32 | Example |
|---|-----------------------|---|
| Social Understanding Personal Identity | f = 11 (34%) | I kinda wanted to see if my family would notice, what they would say, plus it was like a sly way of coming out, so like “oh hey, there is this, by the way.” |
| Relational Identity | f = 5 (15%) | Yeah, you know, I think it could help, I think it could be an initial “in” when you don’t know anybody, because it can kind of connect you with somebody that you wouldn’t have met otherwise, but once you meet, I don’t feel that there is any other use for that. I mean I have a bunch of lesbians that I met the group on my Facebook... |
| Communal Identity | f = 5 (15%) | I would say that I believe strongly that it helps you form community, which might help you form identity. And I can even think of an example of that. I have a friend who I have met in the last six months who was telling me how she has known since high school that she was bi, she was in a relationship with a boy for four years and at some point during that relationship, she realized that she really wasn’t attracted to men, she just happened to be in a relationship with one and didn’t really want to give up on that. There was some social reasons for that, but she wasn’t ready to give up on that. They ended up breaking up and that was when she was like “sweet, I’m free to be gay now.” And I would say for her, the amount of social networking she does greatly contributes to her ability to form identity, because that’s how she found people who were like her and she’s quite active in the community now and she probably posts more stuff to Facebook than any of my other friends and a lot of it is queer oriented. |
| Self Understanding Personal Identity | f = 11 (34%) | Yeah. You can kind of like get to know like, as far as like when I first came out I was like kinda unsure, you know like, like, if they were like different than regular girls, like they had different personalities *laughing* I wasn’t sure... |

Table 1 (Continued)

| Media Use Typology | Frequency (<i>f</i>) <i>N</i> = 32 | Example |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Self Understanding (cont.) | | |
| Relational Identity | <i>f</i> = 2 (6.25%) | But as far as coming out, using other media outlets, I mean I came out to friends on the phone, I came out via e-mail, but a lot of it was over Facebook, honestly, messaging or MySpace messaging, back and forth with friends. Because I was actually grounded for quite a while after I came out, so it's not like I could go do the face-to-face coming out with my friends. |
| Communal Identity | <i>f</i> = 3 (9%) | Yeah. Well, one, it allows you access to a larger community, a larger variety of identities and also it allows you to have interactions and communications with individuals that you wouldn't have had interactions with otherwise. If I hadn't met certain people, I wouldn't know as much about myself as I do now because learning about their sexual orientations has helped me learn about mine and if it weren't for the Internet, I wouldn't have had those interactions. |
| Action Orientation | | |
| Personal Identity | <i>f</i> = 2 (6.25%) | You know, it's not something that once you start you can stop and it's not something that once you start you can hide. I think the gay community, just because it's not themselves who is being changed, but who they're after as far as their social interactions and encounters, they actually have a lot easier of a time navigating—whether it's social networking or in person. You know, that's a change of who they date, it's not a change of who they are as much and so I think for them, it is a little easier to do it broad spectrum, whereas the trans community seems to start real heavy in the closet using social network sites and particularly sites like 420chan.org image boards to get out there, even though nobody in their actual life because they only do it in their bedroom. |
| Relational Identity | <i>f</i> = 0 | |
| Communal Identity | <i>f</i> = 0 | |
| Interaction Orientation | | |
| Personal Identity | <i>f</i> = 4 (12.5%) | Yeah, it gave me the chance just to talk and just to say whatever I wanted to. And also, it gave me the chance to be sexual in a word format. It allowed me to get porn sites. |

Table 1 (Continued)

| Media Use Typology | Frequency (<i>f</i>) <i>N</i> = 32 | Example |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| Interaction Orientation (cont.) | | |
| Relational Identity | <i>f</i> = 8 (25%) | I was looking to date someone when I first got here and then I decided to throw that out the window and I just wanted to hook-up basically. But this past year, I decided that if I was going to be serious about it then I needed to change certain aspects so I really altered my profile on Adam for Adam so that it really says my intentions. I've gotten to the point in my life that, yeah sure I can hook up but I need to move beyond that if I am going to look for something real. I went ahead and revamped my profile... |
| Communal Identity | <i>f</i> = 0 | |
| Solitary Play | | |
| Personal Identity | <i>f</i> = 0 | |
| Relational Identity | <i>f</i> = 0 | |
| Communal Identity | <i>f</i> = 0 | |
| Social Play | | |
| Personal Identity | <i>f</i> = 6 (18.75%) | Them mostly, like I've never had problems with complete strangers looking it up and having issues with that. I've actually had lesbians from out of state look at my profile and know that I'm gay, but I'm not really sure how. Yeah, they're just really good at it and they'll e-mail me and be like "when did you come out?" And I'm like "I haven't, please don't put that on my profile!" |
| Relational Identity | <i>f</i> = 12 (37.5%) | We met each other the first time in a bar, but my boyfriend actually used a gay chat service to track me down about five months after that first meeting. I was 6'4," a 21 year old named Eugene, and lived in a relatively small town. He didn't have a hard time of it. |
| Communal Identity | <i>f</i> = 16 (50%) | Yeah. I checked Craigslist before I was "out" out. I checked out the Craigslist "women seeking women" thing all the time to try to find people, cause I didn't really know any gay people, like, well I did, but they moved. |
| Prosthetic Body | <i>f</i> = 22 (68.75%) | I think in some instances it is actually safer to come out on a social network because you don't have the same kind of risk involved if you do it face-to-face or over the phone. There sometimes is actual, physical risk involved with coming out in person, but when you do it over something like Facebook, you don't have to worry about someone beating the shit out of you. They can say hateful things and you can block them. That is about the extent of damage someone can do if you come out to them over social networking. |

personal identity gap ($f = 11$, 34%) and, self understanding/personal identity gap ($f = 11$, 34%). Each of these will now be examined in detail.

Social Play/Communal Identity Gap. The typology/identity gap that came up most frequently was the social play/communal identity gap with a frequency of $f = 16$ (50%). First, a communal identity gap occurs when there is any aspect of an individual's personal, enacted or relational identities are in conflict with their communal identity. According to Jung and Hecht (2004), the "communal layer transcends individuals and is a characteristic of a group or a collectivity" (p. 267). This gap frequently occurs when an individual feels there is "no gay community" available. This could be caused by location, personal ambivalence toward their sexuality or because of pressures from their social circle to act a certain way. For example, one individual said the following in regards to finding an LGBTQ community within his fraternity network: "I connected with fraternity brothers from other chapters through Facebook in a group for us 'bromos' as we say. It's pretty interesting because there are a collection of bromos from all walks of life, all age groups and different upbringings, etc."

Often, members of the LGBTQ will turn to SNS to engage in "social play" in order to alleviate this kind of identity gap. As Meadows (2010) stated, "social play is using media as a focus for social interaction" (p. 53). This can be seen as a leisure seeking activity, but for many LGBTQ individuals, it is also how they are able to build a community when none is readily available to them.

Many of the LGBTQ individuals talked about using SNS to find actual, physical community groups in their area. For example, one individual stated the following when she started coming out as a lesbian:

I was like “where’s the lesbians at?” Cause all I was finding was gay men stories and I was like “Evan, where the hell are all the lesbians?”...I was like “Dammit! I need to join the GSA.” He’s like “okay.” I was like, “I need to find me some homos!” And I found me some homos, went to a big old gay party, BELONGED, and I just had to come out the very next day.

Because of the rural area this person was living in, she was able to utilize SNS to find the Facebook page of the gay-straight alliance (GSA) of the community college she was attending. The use of SNS to find a gay community in a specific area was not only used by people who were just starting to come out of the closet, but also by those who had moved to a new area and were trying to establish a sense of community. For example, one respondent stated the following in regards to using SNS to find community in a new area:

Especially since moving to the southwest recently, my wife actually found a lesbian and queers group. And they meet up every single Friday, so, we ballsed up and we went and we met a group of people and it felt awkward, because it was like going on a blind date with a bunch of strangers but it was the best thing that we could do. We’d been out there nine months and didn’t meet anybody, we’d gone to lesbian bars but we couldn’t find anybody, and now a couple months later we’ve got a great group of friends, great support group. So without Facebook, we probably would not have been able to find this group.

As this person stated, often times, it is difficult to find the LGBTQ community in certain parts of the country. By searching for groups on SNS, LGBTQ individuals are able to connect with people they might not have been able to otherwise.

Another reason why some LGBTQ individuals turn to SNS for social play to alleviate a communal identity gap is because of their own ambivalence toward their sexuality. This could be because they belong to other communities that are against homosexuality or because they are still grappling with their non-heterosexuality. For

example, one respondent talked about using SNS to find the LGBTQ community in her area because she was raised in a very traditional, Christian household:

I had a friend...create a second MySpace for me, and I went and friended a whole bunch of people to talk to about it 'cause I didn't know like, in there anyone near me that I can talk to or should I just keep e-mailing these people and I actually made a couple of really good friends over doing that, just because you know, they'd come out and they were really supportive and they told me about their experiences and how they, how their families had reacted and then how their friends reacted. How it is in other states and things like that.

Due to her complete inability to confide in the social support group comprised of her church, family and childhood friends, she ultimately turned to the social play aspect of SNS to alleviate the communal identity gap she was experiencing. This inability to find community in a traditional, face-to-face fashion was not only caused by the lack of support offered by social groups already in place in a LGBTQ individual's life. For some of the individuals interviewed, their own issues with their sexuality caused them to turn to SNS to find community. For example, one respondent replied:

Yeah, I was a heavy troller of MySpace when I was first actively coming out. After I had broken up with my first girlfriend, and I was feeling more confident with my sexuality, I used both Friendster and MySpace (which was new at the time) to find other lesbians in the area.

By having a SNS to engage in social play with, members of the LGBTQ community are able to alleviate communal identity gaps as they encounter them.

Social Play/Relational Identity Gap. The second most frequent typology/identity gap reported by respondents was the social play/relational identity gap with a frequency of $f = 12$ (37.5%). A relational identity gap is created when the personal, communal and/or enacted identities of an individual are in conflict with their relational identity. This can often occur when friends or family members do not agree

with or understand an individual's non-heterosexuality. For example, one respondent said the following when talking about the difficulties of coming out to her family:

My older brother is extremely homophobic, extremely. He's made some comments that have prevented me from outing myself to him and out of respect for my mother because when I first came out—when she first called me out—on being gay, the first thing she said is: "Don't expect me to tell your family." And I'm like: "Okay, I'll respect your wishes as long as you respect me and don't kick me out of the family, I'll respect your wishes."

As was mentioned previously, the social play typology of MSDT explains how individuals use media for social interaction (Meadows, 2010). For LGBTQ individuals, there are a number of reasons why they use SNS for social play to alleviate a relational identity gap. One of the most common reasons why individuals turned to SNS to alleviate a relational identity gap was to find dating partners. Several of the respondents specifically talked about using SNS to find dating partners in their area. For example, one respondent replied: "After my first girlfriend and I broke up, it was the first time that—I mean I lived in a place that I didn't know anybody, even though I lived in the bay area, I had a hard time meeting people, so I used MySpace."

Echoing this response, another individual explained why she turned to SNS to help alleviate a relational identity gap and tried to meet people to date and for friendship and solidarity:

Meeting people is really hard when you live in a smallish place, and I think it's hard when you are super busy, I think it's hard in the bay area because you meet people—the thing with online dating is that you can kind of—even though it's creepy and weird—you can also kind of suss people out a little bit. I am probably not going to—for me—be with somebody I meet at a bar at 1AM, because I am not really at a bar at 1AM. You know, I don't want that lifestyle. We're probably not going to click. So online, you can meet people, that you might not have met any other way, other than community events—which again, is something, obviously we're trying to get Stonewall to be bigger, but it's hard... I think it's hard for

anyone, gay or straight, to meet someone awesome in person when you are at work all the time.

Because of the strain of everyday life coupled with the almost non-existent LGBTQ community in many regions of the country, more LGBTQ individuals are turning to SNS to find people, as the previous respondent stated, that they might not have met otherwise.

SNS not only helped LGBTQ individuals search for other people “like them” in their area, it also helped some of the respondents connect with people they had met briefly in real life. One respondent specifically talked about this:

We met each other the first time in a bar, but my boyfriend actually used a gay chat service to track me down about five months after that first meeting. I was 6’4,” a 21-year-old named Eugene, and lived in a relatively small town. He didn’t have a hard time of it.

Another interviewee talked about how people from her college classes and hometown used SNS to contact her:

...I would get girls from classes in college (or some even from my hometown) who upon finding out about my sexual orientation, would send me messages admitting that they were questioning their own sexuality and felt like they couldn’t tell ANYONE, but felt comfortable enough to talk to me about it and ask me questions.

For this person, and several others, SNS gave them the ability to not only seek out new relationships, but to also rediscover old relationships from the past.

The usage of SNS as social play to alleviate relational identity gaps was not only used for the recreational purposes of finding a date, partner or old friend, however. For many of the participants, they turned to SNS for social support when there was none from their friends and family in real life. For example, one respondent said the following:

But also chat rooms going into it was more a social thing, too. Just talking to people than anything else, because a lot of times when I got home, I’d go right upstairs. The upstairs was my area, I had my room, my bathroom and across the hall from me was an empty bedroom that had the computer area in it and really I was the only

one that used it. So it was actually my escape, just to get away. There were other things going on too, downstairs... it was my mom and her boyfriend, now her husband. They're way better, but the house we lived in...it was almost like— obviously without the horror aspect of it—but almost like the Amityville horror where the things that it did to you... I had a lot of emotional trauma in that house, to be quite honest.

When this person was coming out they were using the nascent technology of SNS and chat rooms to not only build relationships he was unable to find within his home, but to also escape the “horror” that was his home. Another person talked generally about SNS and communication technology and how they helped her when her family did not approve of her sexuality:

Technology does work. It does help. It did help me in a couple different ways...As far as what happened with my dad freaked me out, but you know, it happens, it's good, it's getting you out there. It was helpful, it was my little life saver, as far as keeping in contact with people that would—like if I ever had a bad experience, I would be like, “I need to talk to someone who's going to make me feel better about it right now...”

For many of the people interviewed, the ability to use SNS as an outlet for social play to alleviate relational identity gaps was, as the previous respondent put it, “a life saver.” SNS created a new platform within which LGBTQ individuals could not only find new people to start friendships and romantic partnerships with, but to also just find people who would give them the one-on-one support they were lacking from their “real life” relationships.

Social Understanding/Personal Identity Gap. The third most frequently reported typology/identity gap was the social understanding/personal identity gap with a frequency of $f = 11$ (34%). As Jung and Hecht (2004) explained, a “*Personal identity* [emphasis added in the original] is an individual's self-concept or self-images” (p. 266). Often times, these kind of identity gaps come up when an individual is still trying to

articulate internally what it means to be an LGBTQ individual. For example, one respondent articulated this gap as the following:

...but at that time I didn't think I could be gay because I didn't fit into the stereotype I had in my head of being gay, so I didn't fit into the butch stereotype. I like wearing skirts, I like having long hair and wearing make-up, so I figured, "well, I can't be gay."

One way LGBTQ individuals try to alleviate the tension caused by a personal identity gap is to use an SNS for "social understanding." As Meadows (2010) stated: "Social understanding is learning about the world around you" (p. 53). There are several reasons why members of the LGBTQ community use SNS as a social understanding tool to alleviate a personal identity gap.

One of the most common reasons to use SNS as social understanding tools to alleviate the tension caused by personal identity gaps was to understand that they were not the only people in the world who were feeling the way they are feeling and that there is a community available to them. For example, one individual talked about using SNS to find a community so that he could better understand what he was experiencing internally:

I think it makes people see that there are other people, who even if you are from a small, rural town, and you may feel like you are the only one in your high school, you may see that, even join the Gay People Association and you may see that there are more people in your area that are gay or are having the same struggles as you so you can kind of connect and make you feel better about yourself because you know other people are having this problem and... it's kind of a comfort, you know.

For this individual, the use of a SNS to gain social understanding helped him find community and express his sexuality more comfortably. For other individuals, the controlled anonymity of SNS gave them a lateral freedom to explore their personal identity and how that fit into the larger LGBTQ community. This usage of SNS was stated as such by one participant:

I think it does because I think it allows for a chance for exploration that, especially if you don't want to do it with someone else, you can do it with yourself... which is a good thing because it creates a sense of privacy. It's also not a good thing because it doesn't allow for social exploration, in that a lot of times on the Internet, what you get a lot of is sex. Which is unfortunate, but there are glimmers of hope, diamonds in the rough where you do talk to an individual where they're just about who they are...

It is interesting to note, in regards to the previous passage, that this individual also understands the dangers of using an SNS anonymously to expand one's social network.

The exploration of one's own personal identity, and the negotiation of the tensions that were caused when their personal identity was in conflict with other facets of their identity were also done just to find resources. For the individuals mentioned above, using SNS for social understanding helped them specifically connect with people. Some of the other participants, however, merely used SNS to gather information on resources. For example, one respondent simply stated: "...I did look for resources (especially in college when Facebook became active)." One of the unique aspects of SNS is the ability to actively or passively gather information. There are the people who actively seek out other individuals like them to help discover who they are, and then there are those, like the individual above, who use it in a passive fashion, just to gather information about what it meant for her to be gay. The coming out process can be an extremely confusing time. Utilizing SNS for social understanding can be a cathartic process for those who are trying to understand who they are. One respondent explained it as such: "Yes because without being able to talk to people who are like me or who support me, I would have had difficulty accepting myself and learning about other people. Having the easily accessible support system helps me." Overall, whether it was done actively or passively,

LGBTQ individuals use SNS to understand what it means for them to be gay and how to function as a member of the community.

Self Understanding/Personal Identity Gap. The fourth most frequently reported typology/identity gap reported was the self understanding/personal identity gap with a frequency of $f = 11$ (34%). As was mentioned previously, the locus of personal identity is how a person sees themselves internally (Jung & Hecht, 2004). When there are tensions created by identity gaps between personal identity locus and the relational, enacted and/or relational identity loci, LGBTQ individuals will use SNS for self understanding. Meadows (2010) stated that "...self understanding is learning about yourself" (p. 53). The two major ways LGBTQ individuals interviewed used SNS for self understanding and personal identity negotiation was for better understanding of what it meant to be a gay person and to build confidence.

The first major way that LGBTQ individuals used SNS for self understanding was for better understanding of what it meant to be gay. For one individual, they turned to SNS to literally understand how she was supposed to act now that she had realized she was a lesbian: "...you can kind of like get to know like, as far as like when I first came out I was like kinda unsure, you know like, like, if they were like different than regular girls, like they had different personalities. I wasn't sure..."

Because she had little to no exposure to how lesbians are supposed to act, think or even *be*, she turned to SNS to understand how she was supposed to be as a gay woman in the world. This was also echoed by another individual who had turned to more traditional forms of media, like books and television, before turning to the Internet and SNS for guidance on how to be a gay woman:

...I would say that I feel like the Internet, for me—due to my age—was crucial to my coming out process and just understanding what was happening to me. Not that the Internet was new, but the Internet was just sort of getting going about the time I was coming out and that was a really positive thing for me, I was isolated, and you know, at 17, 18, 19, the only gay people—I didn't know anyone who was gay. I can't think of knowing or at least anyone who was out, so the only sort of role model that I had was Ellen DeGeneres and I don't even know how I stumbled upon that but I remember googling Ellen and finding websites that were dedicated to Ellen and then all of the sudden that was a community that was on the Internet and that was a place to go to for media, like entertainment that was from the community...

The Internet and specifically SNS have given LGBTQ individuals a unique opportunity to search out information that is more representative of the way they feel. Instead of finding themselves looking at images and reading stories that may not reflect their own feelings and experiences, members of the LGBTQ community are able to access SNS to find a wider array of representation. This can lead to better understanding of their sexuality and can also create more confidence during the coming out process.

Another primary reason why LGBTQ individuals are using SNS for self understanding to alleviate the tensions caused by personal identity gaps is for confidence building. By having the relative anonymity of SNS, many of the participants were able to explore who they were as gay people and gain confidence on being able to enact their sexual identity. For example, one individual said this in regards to SNS usage: "...I am also more confident on my Facebook and my MySpace, I think, like I was like 'okay, you don't know me, so I don't give a damn if you think I'm retarded for writing this so whatever!'" This confidence was echoed by another individual who was able to enact her personal identity in a small, but significant way by changing her sexual identity and preference on her SNS profile: "...changing it to say 'women' was liberating. Before I hadn't let that part of my profile show." Gaining confidence for many of the individuals

was a gradual process, and SNS provided a platform for them to be able to control how much information they put on the Internet and how much information they took in. For example, one respondent explain his usage of SNS when he was first learning about his sexual identity:

It was interesting because I would definitely use, before I got Facebook, my MySpace, my seventh and eighth grade and earlier in high school, to really see, you know, I'd explore people's pages in the city and then try to find people like me, but you know, Downelink, when I first, I first got my Downelink when I first came out and it was interesting because not a lot of people knew that I was out at that point and it was more and more—I was finding more and more people like me, finding people who were like “I can't come out because of this” or “I can't do this because of this. But I want to be.”

The Internet, and more specifically SNS, allow individuals to freely explore their sexuality. Whether it is done for social reasons or self exploration, SNS are useful tools to help alleviate the identity gaps that are created in an LGBTQ individual's “real life.” One specific usage for SNS that is not conceptualized within MSDT is that of using social media as a prosthetic body.

The Prosthetic Body. One oversight of MSDT is the usage of media, specifically SNS, as a prosthetic body – to protect the user from physical and/or psychological harm. Because MSDT was conceptualized during a period of time where media usage was mostly a one-way, sender/receiver model, the theory was not conceptualized to allow for the notion that people may use media as a therapeutic prosthetic body to shield them from hurtful responses.

The concept of the prosthetic body was first introduced by Michael Warner (1992). This concept posits that an individual will use an object—like anonymous blogs or a profile page on an SNS—to “put themselves out in the public realm” without fear of

public rejection or danger to their physical body. This concept was brought up by the vast majority of participants in the study ($f = 22$, 69%). The usage of an SNS as a way to judge the reaction of people from a distance was often reported. For many interviewed, SNS allowed them to “try out” their sexuality. It can be considered the “dress rehearsal” for their actual coming out in the real world.

Within the transgender community, the necessity for a prosthetic body was considered incredibly important, especially when “transitioning” from one gender to the other. One individual responded:

...so for a lot of people, early on, I think sites like 420chan, an anonymous web board, or MySpace, where you can post false profiles are great places to do it because it lets you build some of that confidence that you need to pull it off. If you are a nervous ninny, you are not pulling off walking into a bar dressed with tits, it just isn't happening. It's going to be seen, it's going to be noticed, it's going to be a problem. I don't know why it's going to be a problem, but you are going to make it a problem just by being that nervous.

In the previous passage, this individual talks about creating a false profile to better explore both their gender and their sexuality. The creation of “false profiles” came up with several respondents:

For probably a little over a year, actually I had a false name and everything. I didn't... I told them after I started talking to them, you know, “that's actually not my name. It's just so that when my parents or when my family, if they ever look up my name, they won't see this one.” But yeah, I had it for a good year and a half, I think.

Another individual also talked about making a false profile on a SNS, however she did not create it with the intent to explore her sexuality, but rather to keep her sexuality hidden from her family:

...my mom was never on social media before, but recently, within the last year, she asked me why I didn't have a Facebook page, because she couldn't find me because it's set on private. So I went and got a new Facebook page, that's just for my family

that I left off my sexual orientation, but I have family members on that, whereas on my own Facebook, it says I am married to a woman, it says I am interested in women. I have real me and then I have family me where certain things are omitted.

This individual was unique in that she was one of the only respondents who created a fake profile that actually was fake. In other words, she had a fake profile presenting herself as straight that did not actually represent who she was as a gay person. It is interesting to note, however, that many of the respondents who talked about creating false profiles actually had their true identity on their fake profiles and their fake identity on their “true profiles.” The irony of this situation never came up with any of the individuals.

Creating false profiles was not the only reason why individuals used SNS as a prosthetic body. Many respondents used SNS profiles in the way that Warner originally conceptualized the prosthetic body: to protect the individual from physical, bodily harm. The act of coming out is still wrought with danger for many people today. As the bullying of LGBTQ individuals increases, many of them are turning to SNS as a buffer from having to express their sexuality in public. One individual expressed this by saying the following:

...it's much easier to say that you're gay on Facebook or MySpace other than in person. 'Cause you've got these people who you can see hate gay people and you can see their expressions and you can see how their attitude is and you are more likely to, if they don't like it, they can kick your ass right there...But on MySpace or Facebook, oh, what's the harm they're going to do? Like write an e-mail that says “you're going to hell?”

An SNS literally protects the individual from the psychological, emotional and physical harm that is a reality for many LGBTQ members who are going through the process of

coming out. This came up numerous times from a majority of the respondents. For example, one individual replied:

I think in some instances it is actually safer to come out on a social network because you don't have the same kind of risk involved if you do it face-to-face or over the phone. There sometimes is actual, physical risk involved with coming out in person, but when you do it over something like Facebook, you don't have to worry about someone beating the shit out of you. They can say hateful things and you can block them. That is about the extent of damage someone can do if you come out to them over social networking.

As the use of SNS as a prosthetic body helps to remove the physical danger involved with coming out, more LGBTQ individuals are better able to form their sexual identity without fear of harm. Several of the participants, however, understood that using a SNS as a prosthetic body was not just something they could utilize, but it was also something that other people could utilize for harmful purposes.

One of the negative aspects of using SNS as a prosthetic body is that not only are LGBTQ individuals using it as such, but so are many people with malicious intent. One respondent talked about this in regards to information others put up on SNS for transgendered people:

...with social networking sites, the right answers aren't filtered out, so that it's just the right answers. You get a lot of wrong answers. And I think it does some damage in the community, especially like the gay community and the trans community, you know, the medical advice, it can be very toxic to them as well.

This individual warns specifically of the misinformation about hormone treatments and other medical procedures needed during the "transition" process that can be supplied by people who will not have to face the consequences of posting it. Another respondent speaks directly about this when talking about how and where to come out:

I think it's safer to do it face-to-face just 'cause people can be a lot meaner over the Internet and stuff and they don't have to deal with it. You know, just like when it

comes to face-to-face, if they see that they are hurting your feelings, like, I don't know. I guess it's just like if you see you are hurting a person, then you don't want to, but if it's like over the Internet, you don't see that you're hurting that person, so it's like a computer. It's like they can't see if I am crying or not.

While there were several individuals who warned against other people exploiting the prosthetic body aspect of SNS, overall most people found using SNS as a prosthetic body to be a positive and therapeutic tool in their overall coming out process.

Remote Control: Information Regulation Via SNS

Research question three asked the following: How does the perceived control of information by LGBTQ individuals influence their use of SNS during the coming out process? Specifically, this question addresses the perceived control (or lack thereof) an LGBTQ individual feels they have when deciding how and when to share personal information via an SNS. Two different categories emerged from the interviews in the process of grounded theory analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1976): the control and flow of information on a SNS and the perception of privacy versus being watched. Specifically, when going through the data, words like *control*, *privacy*, and *being watched* were identified and noted as overarching themes throughout the narratives. By noting the repetition of these key words and phrases, the following themes emerged: the perception of control and the electronic panopticon. The remainder of this section will explore each of these emergent themes in turn.

The Perception of Control

Out of the 32 interviews, 10 people specifically talked about the necessity to control the flow of information on their SNS profiles. Overall, there were two main

reasons why individuals wanted to control the flow of information: one, because of the permanent nature of the Internet and SNS, and; two, to control or manage how they are perceived by other people.

The first reason why the individuals interviewed wanted to control the flow and content information on their SNS profile page was because of the permanence of the medium. There was the perception by some that as soon as something is written online, it can be accessed by anyone, anywhere at anytime. One respondent explained this in regards to sharing personal information, like their sexual identity, on a SNS:

I prefer in person, because that person, you can be like “they’re lying.” No, on the Internet you can be like, “I have proof, look at the e-mails.” It’s crap. You can find it somewhere, someplace. It’s on at least 12 computers at any given time and somebody’s reading it.

This was echoed by another individual who used a much more colorful analogy to highlight the seriousness of information on the Internet: “...if it’s on the Internet then it’s there permanently. It’s there forever, it’s worse than a fricken tattoo. Tattoo you can have removed, eventually. It hurts but you can have it done.” For these interviewees, there is also the underlying issue of trust that concerns them. There is a question for these people of whether or not they can trust the people they have added as friends on their SNS profiles. During the coming out process, the ability to control who finds out when is critical. As a result, many people will not use SNS to actually come out, but rather will use it to gather information that makes it easier for them to come out in person. As one respondent put it: “...you can’t control the flow of information and who sees it, and where it goes from there in comparison to in person.” For some of the people interviewed, the permanence of information on the Internet made it difficult for them to

share details of their sexual identity online. Talking about their sexual identity in person, however, was easier because the information they provide is transient and can be denied if need be.

The second reason why individuals wanted to control the flow of information on their SNS profile pages was to manage their image in the eyes of those around them. By setting profiles to private or being very particular about what exactly they post on a SNS, the individuals interviewed were able to maintain separation between their public and private lives and to create specific personas based upon what events were occurring in their lives. As one individual stated: “Although SNS were not meant to be private, I want to be able to connect with people while not having everything I am, do, like be broadcasted to people I am not close to.”

This is an interesting statement because it almost implies that in order for SNS profiles to be completely representative, there would almost need to be multiple profiles for each individual. In other words, there would almost need to be a profile for one’s family, a profile for friends, a profile for work and a profile for school.

Beyond this need to fracture the different selves of one’s identity into different profiles, there is also the desire to appear a certain way. Because of this, some of the individuals interviewed had removed their sexual identity from their profiles or actually made their profiles completely private. One individual interviewed talked about why she made her profile private after having it public for years: “I want to run for office next year and also I don’t think that my business necessarily needs to be everyone else’s business.” While this person was afraid that her personal life, including her sexual identity would jeopardize her student council campaign, some respondents merely felt

that a widely broadcasted platform like SNS were not appropriate for the kind of person they are and the way they prefer to communicate with close friends and family. One respondent listed out her specific reasons for identity maintenance:

1. I don't usually censor my language with people I'm comfortable with and so I don't want people that don't really know me to think of me as something I'm not (I'm very sarcastic at times. I know it's kind of backwards logic but just let me go with it). 2. There are creepers out there! 3. Spam. 4. I can be very political, particularly about the gay rights issues...and obviously, that gets to be a touchy subject.

As SNS create a giant melting pot of friends, family, co-workers, school cohort members, church groups, etc., the ability to control not only the how the information is delivered, but also what kind of information gets disseminated becomes paramount for those trying to negotiate their sexual identity. Because controlling this information online becomes harder, some people, like this individual, abandon SNS altogether for telling people about their sexuality: "I'd rather tell them in person because it's my preferred means of communication. It allows me to control the flow of information regarding my life and to be as explicit as I chose to be." SNS are dynamic in that even though an individual might not use them to broadcast their sexuality to the world at large, they can still be used to gather information about coming out and being a sexual minority.

SNS and the Electronic Panopticon

The looming spectre of the unknown watcher is the one of the major regulators of content on SNS. Out of the 32 participants in this study, 19 ($f = 59\%$) reported seeing SNS as an electronic panopticon and that influenced what they did and did not post on their profile pages. As Botan (1996) predicted, in order for SNS platforms to work as electronic panopticons, those using an SNS need to believe that they are

indeed being monitored. This was confirmed by several respondents when they were asked if their SNS profile pages were private and why. Some of the answers were simple, for example, this individual keeps her profile private because of her suspicion her parents are watching her page: “Yeah I think they (parents) do. I think they monitor it.” However, the perception of a SNS working as an electronic panopticon is more complex than worrying about one’s parents hacking into a profile page.

From the data, Tyma’s (2007) outline for how individuals are using SNS was corroborated. Briefly, he outlined that often times the gatekeepers of the electronic panopticon are not unknown persons, but are one’s friends, family members or known persons. For example, this individual talks about keeping her profiles private because of her job: “...my profiles are set to private because I don’t want my students seeing my “private life.” It is pretty obvious when you see my profile that I am gay and that is not something I want my students to go creeping around looking for.”

The ability to hide one’s profile from both employers and other people was echoed by other respondents also, with one individual pointing out the “worst case scenario” for putting your sexual identity on a public profile: “No it is not safer to come out online, particularly with public profiles, as it can create a publicly recorded basis for discrimination.” For the people interviewed, controlling the privacy settings on their SNS profile pages encompassed more than keeping information from the known threat, but also from those unknown people loitering around their pages with malicious intent.

The notion of people specifically “creeping” around SNS profiles for insidious purposes came up numerous times for various participants. In response to whether or not

her profiles were set to private, one respondent simply stated: “I set it so because I would like to know who views my profile instead of some stranger or ‘creeper’ looking at it.”

Another person elaborated on this further:

I just don’t want creeper people to come find me, and like know a whole bunch of stuff about me, and also, I’d rather know who’s my friend. I would rather have them request me and go through that whole thing and actually know that person before they know my whole life. Because on Facebook you can, people put their phone numbers on and their everything, and it’s just that I don’t want to, I don’t need people that I don’t know to know that.

Another person stated it very simply: “Just because weird people have added me when it wasn’t set to private, so I would like to keep my privacy.”

Tyma (2007) also discussed how an electronic panopticon is different from the original conceptualization of the panopticon because the surveillance is no longer one way, but rather an individual can act as both the watcher and the watched simultaneously. For one participant, the implications of whether or not the information that is shared on SNS is safe became clear to him when he was looking at the profiles of younger family members:

I think to an extent it is because I know I use my Facebook to try to—if I lost my phone or something like that, you know I need to get somebody’s number, you know it’s nice to have their contact information on their Facebook. But, like I said, to a certain extent, it’s a little, I mean, I didn’t get really into—it didn’t really hit me until my little cousins who are like in seventh and sixth grade got their Facebooks and I saw on theirs like their e-mail addresses, their phone numbers all of that other stuff, and it didn’t really even click in my mind how bad that was until I saw them have it on there, and I immediately changed and took my phone number off of it and things like that because you really don’t know who can be looking at it.

There is the misperception by some about SNS that because it can be accessed from the privacy of one’s home, then there is little danger involved with sharing the intimate

details of one's life. The unfortunate reality is that there are very few forums in the world today that are more public than SNS. As one individual put it:

It's really personal, I mean there's time where—I was just up on my Facebook last night and I don't actively Facebook stalk people to see what's going on and but the news feed just allows me to do that and you know, one of my friend's who's been with his boyfriend for a long time and they just changed their statuses to “being in an open relationship” and I was like “open relationship?” You know, and it just really lends itself to knowing every aspect of your life, because once you set it up, any little thing you decide to change it gets broadcasted.

For those trying to negotiate their sexual identity online, the possibility of the unknown person judging them creates undue pressure. Not only do they have to worry about their parents or friends finding their SNS profile page, but they also have to worry about that “unknown person” looking at their information and using it for malicious purposes.

The fear of profiling because of information shared on SNS was also a point of concern for some participants. For one respondent, the unknown individual sitting at a computer, looking at their profile took on “big brother-like” characteristics:

But, I think that is one of the dangers of social networking sites is that you really don't know who is on the other end of that, you know, the FBI just recently came out that if they expect you of shit, your new friend might be the FBI, undercover, and they don't have to tell you.

While this is actually true in a sense (Lardner, 2010), the FBI does not randomly add people to try to catch them committing criminal acts. However, the important aspect to note is that their tactics work perfectly as an effective panopticon. Even though most people will never be “friended” by the FBI, the mere possibility of it makes people restrict what is on their profiles and what they choose to share with other individuals.

Generally speaking, a majority of the respondents were skeptical about not only the security and privacy features on SNS, but also whether or not their profiles were

being monitored by a third party. Because of this, some of the respondents turned to more traditional forms of communication to share personal details of their lives:

No, it is safer to share personal information face-to-face as such communications are rarely recorded and participants in the conversation can be more easily controlled. Also any “eavesdropping” by a third party (the online analogue being an unknown individual viewing my profile) would not have sufficient identifying information nor will the information be in an easy to sort/store format.

This issue of surveillance is much larger than whether or not someone should come out of the closet via a SNS, however, there is an important implication involved with the amount of fear and skepticism many of the participants voiced.

As was seen with research question two, many of the individuals who turn to SNS during their coming out process do so because they are unable to negotiate certain facets of their identity in real life. However, this becomes complicated because the overall lack of trust many people feel about the Internet and SNS in particular. Many people coming out are faced with less than satisfactory choices for information collection and dissemination during this process. Either they can come out to a potentially hostile audience in a more traditional format, like face-to-face, or they take a chance and use a SNS, hoping that their information does not eventually get used against them. The unfortunate reality is that for some LGBTQ individuals, neither of these possibilities is tenable which could cause a delay in the negotiation of sexual identity, or worse, cause mental or emotional anguish. The impact of not having a safe, private, welcoming place to negotiate sexual identity was highlighted by one participant:

While every once in a while you may come across someone like that on the Internet, I think a lot of it is just sex and sometimes it can lead to problems too. I’ve known of a person who used to live in the halls that met someone through Adam for Adam and he was really depressed, but he was like: “Do whatever you want to me.” So the guy had unprotected sex with him and he ended up getting HIV.

This example is extreme, however, this is an all-too-real consequence for some LGBTQ individuals who are trying to find the right platform to negotiate and explore their sexual identity.

The perception of control is paramount on SNS, especially during the coming out process. Because of the heightened awareness of the security problems on SNS, many LGBTQ individuals are eager to explore their sexuality online while being simultaneously suspicious of any information given to them. Without proper guidance from family, friends and loved ones during this process, many LGBTQ individuals unwittingly put themselves in harm's way by recklessly using SNS. The answer to this does not seem to be in making the Internet safer to come out on, but rather creating safe coming out environments for the LGBTQ community to express what they want and need to their friends and family in the nuanced way they desire to- face-to-face.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The exploratory nature of this research has pushed the boundaries of understanding not only how the coming out process is negotiated by the participants, but also how the different theoretical underpinnings used can be expanded and reconceptualized to encompass the ever-growing world of communication technology usage. First, in regards to MSDT, this research proposes a new way to think about the typology of social play. When this theory was first conceptualized, the media being used by the general public is archaic and antiquated as compared to what it has evolved into today. Social play was originally conceptualized to be a form of media usage that was done for pure entertainment in the company of other people. However, as more social interaction moves to a virtual environment, the way that social play is thought about needs to be reframed to match how media is being used and depended upon today.

This research does not only push the limits of media systems dependency theory, but it also proposes the expansion of the prosthetic body, the application of identity theories and challenges the tenets of queer theory. Specifically in regards to the prosthetic body, this research posits that the interactive nature of SNS allows an individual to control how their profile page works as a prosthetic body. Rather than the profile page being static and passive, it has become a dynamic and changing stand-in for the person it is representing. This is a new aspect in regards to the concept of the

prosthetic body which was originally conceptualized to explain how an object would allow someone to access the public realm; however, that object was usually something unchanging like a newspaper article or a book. The ability to control and rapidly change information on a SNS profile means that it truly has become an extension of the individual it represents, not unlike what Haraway (2006) predicted in her *Cyborg Manifesto*. Because of this, the objects today that act as a prosthetic body are more than just the static objects Michael Warner referenced when he first posited the concept. The prosthetic body should now be conceptualized to include how it works as a true extension of the individual in real time.

In the rest of this chapter, the following issues will be discussed: emergent findings related to the ongoing process of coming out, the limiting nature of sexual identity categories on SNS; identity negotiation and media dependency, and; the control of information within the electronic panopticon. Following the discussion of the findings, limitations of the study, implications for media, identity and queer theories and the LGBTQ community and their allies will be addressed.

Perpetually Coming Out: Stuck in Adolescence

It is widely known that the coming out process is a frustrating circular process for those who experience it. Once you've chosen to "come out" to selected friends and possibly family members, you get to do it again, and again, and again. As new friends and others come into your life you find it necessary to repeatedly explain your sexual identity because of presumed heterosexuality in society and the fact that your own sexual identity is often hidden. While some interviewees subscribe to stereotypes to broadcast

their sexuality (e.g., clothes, hairstyle), others have taken to using SNS to handle this repeated conversation for them. While this study focuses on SNS use, it is interesting to note that most interviewees indicated they prefer coming out in person face-to-face.

The focus of the study was on SNS use specifically, however, a more nuanced understanding of the coming out process and the fatigue experienced by people going through it emerged from the interviews. Coming out conversations appear to happen in stages, but the conversations are circular and keep one from coming out of the “coming out” experience. This cyclical communication process keeps the LGBTQ individual in a perpetual state of emotional adolescence. This concept was first posited by Sivagami Subbaraman, the director of the LGBTQ Resource Center at Georgetown University (personal communication, March 16, 2011). She stated: “the coming out narrative has overtones of the classic conversion narrative: ...I was in the closet, and now I am OUT” (personal communication, March 16, 2011). Simply put, because the coming out experience is transitional, it is a developmental stage of one’s sexual identity formation. This point gets complicated, however, by the fact that—because of society’s default to presume universal heterosexuality in all members—a member of the LGBTQ community goes through a perpetual coming out process. There will always be new people coming in and out of their lives, so that there is always the need to decide whether or not to tell these new people of their sexual identity. Because of this, “...coming out also captures us in an endless narrative of a moment—a constant process of coming out; and what is often culturally then decoded as being stuck in that time of emotional adolescence” (Subbaraman, personal communication, March 16, 2011). Until societal norms have changed to the point where coming out of the closet as a sexual or gender minority is no

longer relevant, there will be serious implications for holding a whole community of LGBTQ individuals in a perpetual state of emotional adolescence.

Several of the interviewees articulated their frustration with this never-ending process of coming out. One participant framed it as such: “Coming out sucks. It is a hard process that never ends. I am constantly coming out to people, whether verbally or not. Being able to come out is a lot easier than staying out.” Another individual vented their frustration with the perpetual coming out process when asked whether she wished she had actively come out or not:

Honestly, I wish that there didn’t even need to be this question. It is completely asinine that there even needs to be a coming out experience, and that we as gay individuals have to actively or passively come out. I wish that I didn’t have to make an announcement to every person I have met or will meet.

The unfortunate aspect of this situation is that there will have to be major societal changes for this perpetuation of emotional adolescence to stop. Ideally, this transition from a “non-sexualized” child into a sexual being would take place at the same time it takes place for most heterosexual individuals: during their adolescence.

A common theme found throughout the collection of narratives was how the coming out process is broken into two stages. The stories interviewees shared about negotiating these two stages of the coming out process revealed how important SNS have become in helping them maintain their sexual identity and relationships. Differences exist in the stories of older interviewees for whom SNS were not widely available, who indicate they predominantly use SNS for relationship maintenance. Younger interviewees shared compelling stories of their use of SNS to explore and share their sexual identity.

Stage 1 involves actively coming out for the first time in emotional conversations with selected friends and family, either online or preferably face-to-face. In Stage 2 one maintains an online sexual identity to continually reinforce and communicate one's minority sexuality. There is that initial "active" coming out where the individual tells everyone they are close to—this can last days, months or even years. Then there is the second phase of coming out, this sort of "passive" coming out where you maintain your online profile and use it to inform new people who are introduced into your life that you are a sexual minority.

Interviewees above the age of 26 or 27 did not use SNS during the first stage of coming out, just because these sites were not available or as widely used as they are today. However, many of them are using SNS now for relationship maintenance. Their online profiles do the work for them to constantly reinforce that they are still gay, and that nothing has changed. This is in line with what media studies scholar Denes (2008) called "the second coming out." SNS are also used by older interviewees to find specific groups in their community or for the purpose of dating. Younger interviewees who are using SNS to actively come out are using it to "figure out" what it means to be gay personally and to gather information about the gay community. This delineation of SNS use during different stages of the coming out process makes sense and supports media use dependency theory claims; specifically that an individual will use and become dependent upon the media that best suit their needs at that point in time. When an individual first comes out, their communication during this early stage is usually marked by a lot of activity online and face-to-face. The LGBTQ individual not only needs to figure out which friends and family to tell, but they also are trying to figure out how they are

supposed to act as a gay person. After this initial stage of coming out and telling one's story repeatedly, there is then maintenance of one's sexual identity. This is through reinforcing sexuality with both verbal and non-verbal communication (e.g., saying you are gay, wearing stereotypical clothing, cutting your hair short if you are a lesbian, etc.); this period however, is not marked with the same kind of sexual identity upheaval that occurs during that first stage of coming out.

Even though there is a dependence on SNS during both stages of the coming out process, almost all of the individuals interviewed stressed how important it was for them to come out to the people they are close to face-to-face. While many have argued the coming out process seems like a selfish endeavor—"I am telling all of you about my sexuality whether you like it or not"—most LGBTQ individuals understand and are concerned about how stressful this news can be for those closest to them. Interviewees recognize the coming out process is not one-way communication. It is not something that is experienced only by the person who is coming out. Interviewees shared that when an LGBTQ individual comes out of the closet, it is also a coming out for their families and close friends. Despite the risks involved for the person coming out, interviewees repeatedly emphasized the importance of allowing friends and family to maintain face and were careful to help them do that. It was important for interviewees to allow friends and family to feel secure in their own identity while sharing their own news about their sexuality.

Until homosexuality is normalized, to the point that there need be no announcement, the coming out process will be experienced by not only those who have to announce their sexuality, but also those who will hear and will be affected by that

announcement. One respondent stated the following when she reflected on whether or not it was easier to come out online than face-to-face:

Actually I don't know. Everything has its pros and cons. Coming out on a social network is like not coming out at all in my opinion. It could just have been someone who hacked into your account or something. Plus, I value the reactions of people so that I can gauge who is a real friend and who is a fake. I think it's less riskier personally to come out face-to-face.

This overwhelming response by most of the participants to come out in person rather than online has interesting implications for both media studies and interpersonal communication scholarship and is something that should be studied further in the future.

The concepts of being held in a perpetual state of emotional adolescence, the stages of coming out and the need to come out face-to-face raise some interesting questions that have significant implications for the LGBTQ community and society overall. One possible implication is that LGBTQ individuals are forming, or will form, their communities around people who do not have to be constantly reminded of their minority sexual identity. This is an easy way to alleviate the pressure of having to constantly come out, but it is also very isolating as there are very few people in society who do not presume heterosexuality as the default sexuality. Future research needs to be conducted on how social messages perpetuate this process of holding people in a state of perpetual emotional adolescence. Also, how does social support alleviate the stress of being held in this state of emotional adolescence? The tolerance levels of people being kept in a perpetual emotional adolescence and what the overall risks are to an LGBTQ individual's emotional, physical, mental, and social well being should be examined further.

Not Another Brick in the Wall: the Limiting Nature of Framing on SNS

Using SNS to help create internal and external framings of sexuality is not necessarily a surprise. Dahl (2008) and Gray (2009) both found that LGBTQ individuals turn to the Internet when trying to form sexual identity. The interesting element to emerge from the current study, however, was the discontent with how limiting the medium is in its' ability to truly let LGBTQ individuals explore their sexual and gender identities on a continuum. The reactions from participants ranged from a sense of ennui to complete outrage and protest against the heteronormative regulation of SNS.

The complicating part is that even though there is discontent with the way SNS choose to frame gender and sexuality, there is still a strong dependence upon the medium, both for information gathering (internal identity creation) and communal interaction (external identity creation). From this, it can be inferred that LGBTQ individuals have to choose between the lesser of two evils. Either they conform to the labels provided by a specific SNS and are able to gain access to a larger community, or they choose not to use SNS and limit their exposure to the community and support that is crucial during the initial coming out process. It is important to note here, however, that the absence of status on a SNS is not the equivalent of protesting against the system. By choosing to have an absence of gender and sexuality on a SNS, it creates a dearth of information within the formation of a complete, multifaceted identity.

Allowing individuals to choose what gender or sexuality they identify with can be as simple as a text box on a SNS rather than discrete "check one" categories that are supplied by the programmers of SNS. There could be some push back regarding this

only because it would create innumerable “categories” of sexuality and gender online. The simple answer to that is: so what? Perhaps by destroying the binary system that all individuals are forced into, there can finally be progress toward viewing gender and sexuality on a continuum.

I Can Be Anything I Want to Be Online: Sexual Identity Negotiation and Media Dependency

Using SNS to fill in the identity gaps created by more traditional forms of communication is compelling. Specifically looking at how LGBTQ individuals use SNS to alleviate the tension of identity gaps provides pragmatic guidelines of how SNS can better tailor their services to the community. A large majority of the participants interviewed used SNS for social play, specifically to alleviate relational and communal identity gaps. This is telling because while there have been studies done that suggest the LGBTQ community uses SNS for information gathering purposes (Gray, 2009), the data from this study suggests that during the first and second stages of coming out, LGBTQ individuals are actually using it to actively build community and relationships. This is a revolutionary change from 60 years ago when members of the LGBTQ community were using pulp fiction novels, like *Beebo Brinker*, to live vicariously through the lives of the fictional characters.

Also, the usage of SNS as a prosthetic body has some interesting implications. There is evidence of LGBTQ individuals using numerous forms of media throughout modern history as a prosthetic body—from the pulp fiction of the 1950s and ‘60s to channels like LOGO, however, this is one of the first forms of communication

technology that allows the individual to interact with people from around the world in a relatively safe environment. Haraway (2006) predicted that this kind of behavior would turn the population into cyborgs—half human, half computer—the upside to this, however, is that it is starting to blur the lines between gender, sex and sexuality. There is hope that if SNS are continued to be used in dynamic ways, not only to alleviate tensions caused by identity gaps, but to also explore and formulate new meanings for gender and sexuality, that there will be the same kind of revolutionary change taking place in society in the near future.

The use of SNS to alleviate tensions caused by identity gaps that were created during more traditional forms of communication is merely a stopgap, however. A more permanent solution would be to lessen the creation of identity gaps in the first place. Most of the time, these identity gaps were created because an LGBTQ individual was lead to believe that some part of who they are as a sexual being is wrong or inferior. This is a subject that needs to be addressed on a societal level, and only then will LGBTQ individuals be able to find more healthy permanent solutions to their identity gaps.

Big Brother is Watching You: Controlling Information on SNS

Independent of where they are in their coming out experience, most LGBTQ individuals had some level of skepticism about the safety of the Internet and coming out online. For many of them, there was the issue of being watched by the unknown spectator. By trying to control how much personal information they put online, they were in effect trying to control not only the permanent record of their lives, but also how they were being perceived online. The ability to reinvent oneself on a SNS is a double-edged

sword. On the positive side, it gives individuals the ability to control exactly how they are perceived, and by extension, they can start to mold their identity into something that is closer to how they perceive themselves. On the negative side, there is the constant fear of being watched and judged. There is the fear of employer discrimination. There is the fear of ostracism from social groups. The ability use SNS as a helpful tool during the coming out process seems to be a delicate procedure. On one hand, an individual wants to give out enough information so that they are able to get good information in return. On the other hand, an individual does not want to give out too much information for fear of being targeted, stalked, profiled, or judged.

For some LGBTQ interviewees an enormous amount of time and emotional energy is spent actively monitoring, changing and updating online profiles to keep up with this constantly changing medium where they are being watched by friends, family and others who may or may not be aware of their sexual identity. The process is exhausting and control is elusive for these people who have yet to come to terms with the limitations of this new medium. This is best highlighted by how vigilant the following participant admits to being when watching the content that is posted to his SNS profile:

...that's another reason why I like my Blackberry, too. I almost have it as a safety device, where I can be in class and it has happened, where I have been in class and I've gotten a comment where I cannot have that on my page, I cannot have it. And I can delete it right there and I don't have a problem...

There is no easy fix to this issue. As a society, we have been trained to think that we are constantly being monitored and watched during our every move in public. From cameras on red lights to bar codes on our driver's licenses, there is a nebulous "someone" tracking our every move, purchase or website visited. During the coming out

process, this mindset is very detrimental because the one thing an LGBTQ individual needs during this stressful time is a sense of privacy while still being open to exploration online. Unfortunately, this is not a problem for just the LGBTQ community, but for everyone who uses the Internet and SNS. That seems to be the *caveat emptor* of using SNS to facilitate the coming out process: there will be risk of exposure involved.

Limitations

One limitation of the study was the exclusionary nature of the data collection. Because I used purposive sampling, I was able to study the communication phenomena where it occurs and access a specific audience. Unfortunately, recruitment contacts used were predominantly university liaisons and in professional academic associations. Because of this, the sample population was almost exclusively college educated and likely middle class. In the future, research on the coming out process will need to be inclusive of those who are not college educated. The experiences of those from the working class would be valuable to examine in and of themselves and also to determine whether or not SNS usage is consistent across classes.

Also, in an effort to create inclusion for all sexual minorities in the construction of this study, this act of inclusion inadvertently created a sense of exclusion for some. Some of the participants were even so bold as to call me out on this: “You seem to phrase things as if it is all binary—but I think you should consider the internal contradictions of coming out. Instead of either/ors, coming out is a lot of both/ands.” This is obviously not something that I had set out to do in the study, but it came across this way to some of the participants. The issue of concern is that once something is

named—whether it be sexuality, gender or anything else—it is hard to be able to frame it any other way. That was the issue that I ran into early on with this study. In order to study the subject I had to name it, and by naming it I created a framework that does not fit all of the people I was hoping to study. What is the answer for this? Without becoming a full-fledged postmodern critical theorist, there is no easy answer, except to acknowledge that indeed in my act of inclusion, I unwittingly excluded those who chose not to frame their gender and sexuality along the lines prescribed by society.

Finally, my own assessment of my gender and sexuality throughout this project limited my ability to truly understand how some individuals within the LGBTQ community construct their identity. As a gay woman, I initially held the presumption that while all coming out stories are different, at the core, the experience would still be similar. However, throughout the process of this research, that presumption on my part was constantly challenged, calling into question the way I chose to frame this research. While I feel that I was able to “hold the data at a proper distance,” I do have to admit that my own experience as a gay woman created some limitations and exclusion with how I designed the project.

Implications and Future Research

Media’s Role in the Coming Out Process

As communication technology becomes more integrated into our everyday lives, the research on its’ effect on identity formation will continued to increase. Theories used to study media and its’ effects will have to be revamped and new ones will be created. Specifically, when MSDT was first conceptualized, much of the communication

technology that exists today was considered in the realm of science fiction. The theory is still relevant and has practical applications today, however, there is one area of use that was not conceptualized within the six typologies of MSDT: the use of media as both a protective and therapeutic prosthetic body. While it might seem like the concept of the prosthetic body does not fit into the MSDT framework, it actually helps broaden and extend the conceptualization of the theory.

For some of the individuals interviewed, their use of SNS depended solely on being able to use the medium as a prosthetic body while they gathered information about their sexuality. Beyond the ability of SNS to connect individuals with each other, SNS specifically provide protection from some of the emotional and physical dangers associated with the coming out process. This, in itself, is a reason for LGBTQ individuals to seek out SNS, but it can also make them become dependent upon the medium.

In addition to the protective prosthetic body aspect of SNS, there is the therapeutic aspect as well. For many of the participants of this study, their SNS profile pages were spaces of virtual refuge. Within the status updates, news feeds and profile pictures are a place where they can explore who they are and start to heal the scars caused by the difficulties of coming out to a sexually ambivalent society. It is because of the protective and therapeutic aspect of SNS that there needs to be an expansion of why individuals use media, and how the medium itself can be a reason for dependency. Moreover, there has been little to no research done on how SNS work as a prosthetic body in general. This is an interesting (and unintended) feature SNS as it is useful to the LGBTQ community, but can also be useful to other minorities as well. The implications of this research do not just shed light on how we can expand the typologies of media

dependency, they also revealed the myriad of ways LGBTQ individuals are using media during the coming out process.

One of the more interesting aspects to be articulated in this research was the usage of SNS to help alleviate the fatigue caused by the prolonged emotional adolescence caused by the perpetual coming out process. As an LGBTQ individual passes into the second stage of the coming out process—where everyone of importance knows about their minority sexuality—SNS becomes a tool of reinforcement. What needs to be studied further is what the implications are of maintaining sexuality online? How does the perpetual articulation of sexual identity shape an LGBTQ individual's overall experience of the coming out process. There has been little longitudinal research done on the usage of SNS on identity formation, let alone sexual identity formation. It is because of these reasons that the use of SNS to alleviate the stress of the perpetual coming out process should be studied in depth further.

Identity Theories. Hecht's CTI works very well as a framework for this kind of research because it acknowledges the multi-faceted and contradictory nature of identity and how we as individuals communicate that. CTI is one of many different identity theories that would be relevant to this research, but what makes CTI a good fit here is that it was specifically designed for the communication discipline. There are, however, other identity theories that could provide insight into the coming out process that CTI was unable to. For example, Fassinger and Arseneau's (2008) model of identity enactment of gender-transgressive sexual minorities. Rather than breaking identity down into personal, enacted, relational and communal elements like Hecht's CTI, Fassinger and Arseneau's model regards identity as being created by three interrelated components:

gender orientation, sexual orientation and cultural orientation. Specifically looking at the sexual identity negotiation from a cultural point of view could provide better insight into media usage during the coming out process. The implications of applying Fassinger and Arseneau's model to the coming out process is something that is compelling and should be studied further.

Queer Theory: the Ironic Truth

Queer theory is a radical framework, that requires its' scholars to adopt a critical, "no prisoners" attitude toward the construction of reality and the hegemonic influences of society that keep sexual and gender minorities down. The ironic aspect of queer theory is that while its' scholars lambast the lack of pragmatic application inherent in other theories, it remains locked in the ivory tower of academia next to them. Pragmatism is necessary to alleviate the excruciating experience of coming out, and it needs to be a "where the rubber hits the road" form of pragmatism. The call of queer theory is to hold everything in suspicion and to deconstruct it down to expose the inequalities of society. What, however, are the implications of deconstructing sexual identity?

The proponents of queer theory, and I myself am one of them, call out for radical tactics like deconstructing sexual identity to try to shatter the confines of the binary system of gender and sexuality. This is a halcyon pipe dream that cannot and will not be easily attained in the near future. What is dangerous about writing these unattainable prescriptions is that it does not take into account the day-to-day struggles of LGBTQ individuals throughout society who do not have the time or resources to shatter the binary systems while trying to keep from being harassed, bullied or discriminated

against. There needs to be less talk about the deconstruction of the binary system and more attention paid to how we can provide LGBTQ individuals with basic human rights. When LGBTQ individuals no longer worry about legalized discrimination, they will be better equipped to tackle the nebulous issues of what is gender and sexuality and how it is constructed within society.

Creating a Counterpublic on a SNS

SNS network together LGBTQ individuals who would never meet otherwise. The ingenuity of SNS is to provide a platform on which the members of the LGBTQ counterpublic can gather. This ability to access community means more to LGBTQ individuals because it is these types of positive interactions that will hopefully keep them from spiraling into inevitable depression without a support system or worse, from committing suicide. Many LGBTQ individuals have created robust social support systems out of people whom they have never met. For some, a virtual support system is the only one they have. Future research needs to investigate the implications of having a social support system that is completely virtual for marginalized groups like the ones in the study. Interviewees indicated they are becoming more dependent on SNS to relieve communal identity gaps through social interaction online. What exactly is the best way to form and nurture online counterpublics? How can SNS be better used to introduce the isolated members of the LGBTQ community to the virtual support groups that are rapidly being formed? More research, in general, needs to be done on the growing representation of counterpublics on SNS.

Other Aspects of the Coming Out Process

Coming out is messy and intricate. There is no script. There are no easy-to-follow directions. It is a process that—no matter how much social support a person has—each LGBTQ individual goes through alone. The LGBTQ participants in this study turn to the Internet and SNS to alleviate gaps that were created in their “real life” relationships. An area that needs to be studied further is the communication and creation of identity gaps between friends and family members that occur over more traditional face-to-face communication. What concerns do LGBTQ individuals, their friends and family have the most during face-to-face coming out conversations? How do LGBTQ individuals, their friends and family negotiate the tensions that arise during coming out conversations? The process of coming out is, at its’ elemental level, a communicative act. LGBTQ individuals primarily express their sexuality through their words and their bodies. It is when these are not enough that they turn to alternative methods of communication, like SNS.

Also, the actual coming out process needs to be examined from the point of view of the family members or close friends of an LGBTQ individual. Most of the research being done today looks at how the process affects the LGBTQ individual coming out. The coming out process is not based upon a “sender/receiver” model of communication, but rather is a nuanced flow of simultaneous messages between all parties. How this process affects those around them is something that needs to be studied further.

Finally, as was mentioned previously, there needs to be more focus and future research on both the consequences of holding LGBTQ individuals in a perpetual state of

adolescence and how the two stages of the coming out process are mitigated long-term. The implications of holding the LGBTQ community in a state of emotional arrested development could be extremely detrimental and have long term consequences. It would be beneficial to look at both of these issues in a longitudinal study to see how the ongoing process develops and changes as an LGBTQ individual also develops and changes.

Conclusion

If there is one thing to take away from this research, it is that, by and large, the coming out process is shrouded in uncertainty and extremely hard for everyone involved. Having to come out of the closet as a sexual minority can be emotionally, mentally and physically dangerous. Because of the amount of risk and difficulty involved in the coming out process, interviewees turned to SNS to help them with this on-going conversation. Coming out as a sexual minority is not only stressful for the person who identifies as LGBTQ, but also for their friends and family members.

Using SNS during the coming out process, however, only treats the symptoms of a much larger issue. There is simply not enough support for LGBTQ individuals in their homes and communities. All too common are stories of families rejecting one of their members because of their sexual or gender minority status. As one respondent said: “My father, who has made the comment more than once, that he’d rather have a dead son than a gay son.” This kind of behavior is unconscionable, and leaves little confusion as to why LGBTQ individuals turn to SNS to help alleviate the stress of coming out.

In conclusion, no matter how messy, intricate, unhealthy, stressful or long the coming out process is, it is something that is *our own*. One participant stated it perfectly

when she said: “I think that coming out is almost a rite of passage. It sucks that we even have to, it’s such a big deal and it shouldn’t be, but it is. But, I think it’s a good thing... and a good step to take.” Using communication technology like SNS to articulate one’s sexual identity gets us one step closer to exploring and embracing who we are and sharing that knowledge with those whom we care about the most. As Internet access and SNS use becomes even more widespread, more people will have the tools at hand to alleviate some of the stress of coming out should they choose to use it for that purpose. Ultimately, the coming out process is an individual one to be treated with care by all parties involved. Coming out is a crucial conversation that should never be left to chance nor should its’ consequences have to become a matter of life or death either emotional or otherwise.

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APPENDIX A

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

OPENING:

Thank you for participating in this interview today. The purpose of this interview is to gather research from members of the LGBTQ community about your coming out experience and how you use communication technology during the coming out process.

I strongly believe in the value face-to-face interviews with members of the LGBTQ community in order to accurately portray the coming-out experience. Your input is critical for me to understand your coming-out experience and how that fits into the collective narrative of the LGBTQ community. I understand that the coming-out process is something that happens over time and that sexual identity is never something that is concrete. But my focus is how you use communication technology during your coming-out process and during the negotiation of sexual identity.

As we move from topic to topic I welcome any comments on any issue at any time – including topics we have already covered. This interview is merely a conversation about a shared experience.

Topic: Sexual Identity

1. How do you sexually identify yourself (gay, lesbian, bi, straight, queer, questioning)?
2. When did you first become aware of your sexual identity (age, year in school)?
3. Explain your first awareness of sexual attraction to another person. How did you react to it internally? How did you react to it externally?
4. Do you still feel like there is a potential for you to be attracted to (the opposite sex, or group you do not identify with)?
5. Do you think someone's sexual identity is static (does not change) or fluid (can be constantly changing)?

Topic: Coming out

1. Are you out? If yes, how out? Are you completely out, or do only friends and not your family know, etc.? If you are not out, why?
2. Tell me about your coming out experience. Who was the first person you told?
3. How did you come out to this person/these people (did you do it face-to-face, over the phone, e-mail)?
4. Did you actively come-out, meaning you told people first, or did someone "out" you?
5. If you actively came out, is there another way you wish you could have come out?

6. If you were outed, do you wish that you had more control of that situation? How so?

Topic: Technology

1. What technology do you use the most to communicate with friends and family (i.e., Internet, phone, face-to-face)?
2. Do you have social networking profiles (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc)? If yes, which social networking sites (SNS) do you use?
3. Are your profiles set to private? Why or why not?
4. Do you feel it is safer to share personal information about yourself on an SNS than to tell people face-to-face?
5. Do you prefer to share details of your life on SNS than to tell them in person? Why or why not?

Topic: Using technology to come out

1. Does your SNS profile have your sexual identity on it? Why or why not?
2. Do you have SNS “friends” that you are hesitant to see your sexual identity? If yes, who are they?
3. Did you post your sexual identity on an SNS before “officially” coming-out? Why or why not?
4. If you posted it before everyone knew, how did people react? What was the feedback you got from changing your sexual identity?
5. Do you feel it is safer to come out on a social network than it is to use other methods of communication (i.e., phone, face-to-face, etc)? Why or why not?

Topic: Using technology to form sexual identity

1. When you were learning about your sexual identity, did you use SNS to find people who identified with the same sexuality? In other words, did you try to look for people “like you” online?
2. Have you or would you use an online dating service to find local people who are also (gay, lesbian, trans, bi, queer, etc.)?
3. Tell me about a time where SNS have helped you connect with people that have the same sexual identity.
4. Have you ever gotten a date from an SNS? If yes, how was that experience, if no, would you consider it?
5. Have you used an SNS to “try out” your sexual identity? In other words, have you changed your “interested in” to see what the reaction would be? What was the reaction, if any?
6. Does SNS make it easier to form your sexual identity? Why or why not?

Clearinghouse Question

1. If there was one lasting impression you would like for me to take away from this interview with you today about your coming out experience, what would it be?
2. Do you have any questions for me?

CLOSING:

Thank you for participating in this interview today. As I indicated earlier I value your feedback. If you would like to add more to the conversation we just had, I encourage you to contact me. My email address is rsauerbier@csuchico.edu. The information you shared with me will be included in my research paper to help understand the role of communication technology in the coming out process.

Thank you for your time!

APPENDIX B

MEDIA PROFILE

| | Identity Gaps | | |
|-------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Six Typologies | Personal Identity | Relational Identity | Communal Identity |
| Social Understanding | | | |
| EX.: | | | |
| Self Understanding | | | |
| EX.: | | | |
| Action Orientation | | | |
| EX.: | | | |
| Interaction Orientation | | | |
| EX.: | | | |
| Solitary Play | | | |
| EX.: | | | |
| Social Play | | | |
| EX.: | | | |
| Prosthetic Body | | | |
| EX.: | | | |