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Digital Coming Out: the Politics of LGBTQ Culture in Social Media

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DIGITAL COMING OUT:
THE POLITICS OF LGBTQ CULTURE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

by

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A dissertation submitted to the
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has been approved for the Department of Media Studies

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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As a marginalized community in the United States, LGBTQ individuals occupy a precarious space within society. They are afforded representation in some venues, however are often invisible. Through using social media, LGBTQ individuals have sought new ways to forge a community and increase their visibility. With this increase in visibility, there has been an increased way for individuals to both seek out and distribute information to help in the coming out process. After the election of Donald Trump and Mike Pence, social media became a hotbed of activity for LGBTQ individuals trying to raise awareness about issues that affect them specifically. Combining archival research, observation, interviews, and visual discourse analysis of social media feeds, this dissertation sheds light on the role social media plays in expressions of LGBTQ politics, culture, and coming out. Despite not being fundamentally changed, the increased access to LGBTQ stories have amplified the messages that are able to be sent. This has both been positive in acting as interventions in the issues of LGBTQ suicide rates, hate crimes, and discrimination from outside. Unfortunately, social media has also re-centered and prioritized white, cisgender, masculinity, obscuring other stories and creating potentially dangerous environments for women, trans* individuals, and gay men who do not meet this high standard of masculinity.
Dedication

I dedicate this work in the memory of Emily Margaret Gould who passed away on September 5, 2016. Even though she was only on this earth for but a few years, through her smiles and the tireless work of her parents, Meghan and Jim (two of the strongest people I know) she made a lasting impact on everyone who knew her. I never got to meet Emily in person, but through Facebook I had the ability to develop a deep bond with my cousin. Stories like Emily’s showcase the true potential and power that social media have to radically change people’s lives and bring people together.

Rest in peace, Emily.
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This work would not have been possible without the help from countless individuals who helped me along the way. I hope to pay tribute and express my gratitude to everyone who has helped me with this journey. While I will attempt to make this an exhaustive list, inevitably some people will be left off this list, but know that I am very humbled by the amount of support I have had from many people throughout my life.

I would not have been able to complete this without the helpfulness of all the participants. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for being willing to open up and share you amazing and wonderful stories with me. You truly inspired me every day as I was working on this project. Hearing your experiences and your desires to being about good and positive change in this world, not just for LGBTQ individuals, but for everyone connected with me deeply. You are all such strong individuals, so thank you for giving me the privilege of getting to capture your experiences and share them with the world.

I cannot overstate the helpfulness of each and every one of my committee members who helped me on this amazing journey. Dr. Polly McLean was very helpful through the development of this study and for being supportive through the entire process. She also exposed me to invaluable research and perspectives that were foundational for the theoretical and methodological framework that helped me conceive of this project. Dr. Stewart Hoover also was invaluable throughout my academic progression at the University of Colorado (CU) Boulder, particularly in inspiring me to understand the importance of religion in the creation of norms within the United States. Dr. Kathleen Ryan has been an inspiration and a role-model consistently throughout my career at CU Boulder. She was helpful in numerous respects including expanding my methodological understand of how to understand visuals, how to blend
both creative and academic endeavors, and emotional support. Dr. Kwame Holmes helped to provide a fresh perspective on queer theory and encouraged me to expand my thinking into different fields. Through our weekly coffee meetings, he taught me to be a better scholar and how to work together with others to unpack complex readings and apply these ideas to contemporary issues in an interdisciplinary way. Dr. Celeste Montoya inspired me to change the way that I thought about methodology and helped provide me a solid foundation in feminist inquiry and an understanding of the many different types feminisms that exist.

This project would never have come to fruition without the love and support from my parents, Sam and Diane Johnson. Without their unwavering support and always pushing me to set my goals high, I would not be where I am today. Coming out to one’s parents is a scary experience for anyone, and I cannot express enough gratitude for the way my parents have accepted and embraced me for who I am. I also need to thank my brother Aaron Johnson who inspired me to attend CU Boulder in the first place and has always been a source of emotional support, a great sounding board, and a role model who I have always looked up to.

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This work was a collaboration with many talented, smart, ambitious, and admirable individuals and I cannot express adequately the amount of thanks I feel toward every person who helped me along this journey.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction
Identity in the Digital Age

Young people, who are still uncertain of their identity, often try on a succession of masks in the hope of finding the one which suits them — the one, in fact, which is not a mask.”
~ W.H. Auden

Growing up in the late 1980s and throughout the turn of the century in the small city of Erie, Pennsylvania, the only exposure I had to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) community was through news stories about either Pride parades or the ongoing AIDS epidemic. While this provided visibility to this community, it was often in a negative light, which greatly influenced my perceptions on what it meant to be gay in the United States of America. Coming of age at the end of the 20th century, I had the experience of growing up with the development of digital technology that paved the way for social media to evolve. In college, I was exposed to my first glimpses of gay-specific social media and LGBTQ individuals. Even though I was not yet “out” to anyone, even to myself, I was able to use social media to connect with gay men both locally and at a distance. I kept this secret from everyone and was hesitant to use other popular social media platforms at the time (e.g., Myspace or Friendster). In my first year of my undergraduate degree, Facebook was first released and quickly took off across colleges, spanning the country as a way to connect with others on campus and keep up with friends from high school.

Growing up in a small, working-class city in northern Pennsylvania in a Roman Catholic household, being LGBTQ was never considered desirable. Even when family were not overtly anti-LGBTQ, there was an understanding of how difficult life would be for someone who lived life as an LGBTQ individual. Going to an LGBTQ-friendly college, having friends who were
LGBTQ, and interacting with gay and bisexual men online, slowly helped to shift my mentality about being gay in the United States. Through chatrooms such as Gay.com, I met and talked with gay individuals who were leading happy and successful lives. Once I moved to Los Angeles after graduating, I started dating men through the assistance of various social media sites, both gay-specific ones and “mainstream” sites, such as Myspace. Through these interactions I could take the first step and come out to myself before eventually coming out to friends and family (only after I had already begun a serious relationship).

During this time of being partially out, posting on social media was a complicated situation. Prior to finishing college, I used Facebook but never used Myspace until I started coming out. This allowed me to craft two very different personas online. One remained the same while the other allowed me the opportunity to explore expression of my new sexual identity. These different sites expressing different identities for me acted as extensions for the way I was already performing my identity in life. One of the reasons I kept these two spaces different was I felt, at the time, that it was inappropriate to come out to friends and family that I had not seen in a while (but followed on Facebook) through social media. When I did decide to post about my relationship online and photos from my first gay pride event, it proved to be a liberating moment for me. Even though I was nervous about going back to my hometown and see my family and friends around the holidays, those fears proved to be moot as I did not have to individually come out to anyone and nobody seemed offended by the fact that they learned about this through social media. It was this experience that made me start to consider the ways that the coming out experience was changing for LGBTQ individuals throughout the country because of the influence of social media.
The changing natures of coming out and social media

Recent data from the Pew Research Center (2013) show that the average lesbian, gay, or bisexual individual begins to realize they are not heterosexual around the ages of 10 to 13; however, the average person does not come out until about 10 years later. There are many fears that may contribute to this: bullying, social stigma, rejection from family or friends, or an outcast status in society. These are not unfounded fears either, even if acceptance of LGBTQ individuals has increased dramatically since the 1960s. More than 50% of LGBTQ individuals within the United States have been the subject of homophobic or transphobic slurs, nearly 40% of LGBTQ individuals reported having been rejected by family or friends, and 30% report having been physically threatened or assaulted (Pew Research Center, 2013).

Even though the LGBTQ Rights movement is often considered to have started in 1969 during the Stonewall Riots, the decades that followed were a roller coaster ride with certain advances gained, but also major setbacks such as the passing of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell (DADT) and the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in the 1990s. After the turn of the century, overall acceptance for the LGBTQ community began to change. This was partly due to a series of court cases, starting in 2003 with Lawrence v. Texas, which ruled that a prohibition of sodomy was illegal. This was followed by the repealing of both DADT and DOMA and it culminated with the lifting of a ban on Transgender individuals serving in military in 2016 (“LGBT Rights Milestones Fast Facts,” 2016), which was reinstated in 2018. There has also been an increase in portrayals of the LGBTQ community on television and movies, even garnering praise at some of the top awards within the industry (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; R. Becker, 2006; Bonds-Raacke, Cady, Schlegel, Harris, & Firebaugh, 2007; Branson-Potts, 2015; Sorren, 2015).

Despite an increase in acceptance, many individuals within the LGBTQ community are
often the victims of discrimination. One of the main issues facing LGBTQ youth is bullying, both in school and on social media, sometimes ending in physical assault, homicide, and suicide (Asala, 2010; Carosone, 2013; J. K. Puar, 2012; Remafedi, Farrow, & Deisher, 1991). Transgender individuals of all ages have faced additional discrimination in the form of “bathroom laws” such as HB2 in North Carolina, which required individuals to use the bathroom consistent with their biological sex, not their gender identity (Gordon & Price, 2016). Following the legalization of same-sex marriage, numerous states enacted religious freedom bills, essentially allowing business owners to choose not to offer goods or services to someone based on their gender or sexual identity. The election of Donald Trump and Michael Pence (who, as governor, had written the “religious freedom” bill in Indiana and worked to fund gay conversion therapy) created a culture of fear and uncertainty among many in the LGBTQ community who felt their gender or sexual identity could become criminalized yet again.

Since the start of the new millennium, technology has been evolving at an ever-increasing rate. In 2016, 90% of U.S. adults actively used the Internet, an increase of 70% since 2000 (A. Smith, 2017). In an even faster increase, between 2005 and 2016, the amount of U. S. adults who used social media increased by 1,280%, from only 5% of all U. S. adults to almost 70% (A. Smith, 2017). When looking at the breakdown of social media usage among different age groups, a substantial majority of these individuals are in the 18 – 49 year-old age group, indicating the substantial role that social media plays within the lives of millennials, Xenials, and Gen Xers (A. Smith, 2017). In 2016 adults in the United States spent an average of five and a half hours on social media each week, with those aged 35-49 spending almost seven hours per week, an increase of almost 30% from the previous year (The Nielson Company, 2017). Social media has quickly become integral to the way individuals communicate with friends, family, and strangers
across the globe. As van Dijck elucidates “connective media have almost become synonymous with sociality; you can check out anytime you ‘like,’ but you can never leave” (2013, p. 175). In other words, in our current media moment it is almost impossible to socialize without facilitation in some way through social media. This has led to the dissolution of the idea of a center of media production with media producers on one side and the audience on the other as two separate entities (Couldry, 2012; Jenkins, 2008; Shaw, 2015; van Dijck, 2013).

Since acceptance of the LGBTQ community and usage of social media have increased simultaneously, it is important to examine the role that an increase in the use of social media has had upon both the acceptance of, and the lives of individuals within, the LGBTQ community. As Pullen notes

This offers new opportunities for action and coalescence, allowing for the showcasing of diverse sexuality. The Internet and the World Wide Web seemingly reveal a patchwork of new social worlds, offering scope beyond the virtual and the disconnected. Whether this is concerned with identity, representation, production, consumption, or self-regulation, LGBTs are defining new pathways distant from historical confines. (2010, p. 1)

These emancipatory hopes for social media and the LGBTQ community are relatively common within discourses about how individuals will now be able to interact in completely new ways online, with the idea that these platforms offer spaces that are no longer bounded by the same social mores and norms that once constrained LGBTQ individuals (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Etengoff & Daiute, 2015; Pullen & Cooper, 2010). As van Dijck points out, “social media constitute an arena of public communication where norms are shaped and rules get contested” (2013, p. 19). He also goes on to point out that even though norms are shaped and challenged through social media, it is not always because of the interactions of individuals who are able to
act autonomously, but that through defaults and platform settings the companies that control the social network are able to control many of these changing social norms (van Dijck, 2013). This is an issue that became apparent when Facebook unveiled its “real name policy” in 2014 in a desire that all people should be completely “authentic” and transparent within their social media (Grinberg, 2014). Some social media sites desire complete transparency (e.g., Facebook), while others thrive on anonymity (e.g., Twitter, Reddit). Once considered to be a highlight of social media, there have been many incidents where the anonymity online led to increased bullying and negative remarks (Christopherson, 2007; Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Moore, Nakano, Enomoto, & Suda, 2012).

Many scholars who have researched and theorized about social media tend to fall either on the side of praising its potential (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Jenkins, 2008; Pullen & Cooper, 2010) or critiquing its harm (Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Moore et al., 2012). Rather than examining social media along these poles, it is my belief that social media needs to be studied by focusing on how content, platforms, and networks impact the lives of individuals. In this way, content on social media should not be regarded as separate from the individuals who create or consume it, but as an extension of their identity.

Social media is simultaneously shown to provide a voice to underserved and underrepresented populations (Brundidge, 2010; Gorkemli, 2012; Juris, 2012; Marciano, 2011; Solomon, McAbee, Åsberg, & McGee, 2015) and an increased harassment of people already at risk of bullying (Christopherson, 2007; Hlavach & Freivogel, 2011; Hughey & Daniels, 2013; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Poole, 2013). The potential for empowerment is often based on the ability for individual, rather than group, action, which has been criticized as de-politicizing these spaces (Dean, 2005). Recent political and social trends within the LGBTQ community have
been criticized as reinforcing heteronormativity, whiteness, and cisgender-ness (e.g., the emphasis on same-sex marriage and centering those who are “passing”) (Duggan, 2002; Halberstam, 2005; Muñoz, 2009; Jasbir K. Puar, 2010; Ross, 2005; Wight, 2014). Social media, therefore, has the potential for liberation and harm simultaneously, especially given the precarious social position many in the LGBTQ individuals are placed in. There has been a trend in recent years to use social media as a tool to reach out to LGBTQ individuals (particularly teenagers and young adults) who were struggling with coming out or being subjected to bullying.

I was riding a train to JFK Airport when it occurred to me that I was waiting for permission that I no longer needed. In the era of social media – in a world with YouTube and Twitter and Facebook – I could speak directly to LGBT kids right now. I didn’t need permission from parents or an invitation from a school. I could look into a camera, share my story, and let LGBT kids know that it got better for me and it would get better for them too. I could give ‘em hope. (Savage & Miller, 2012, p. 4)

In the last line of this quote, Savage is specifically conjuring memories of Harvey Milk by referencing their famous “Give ‘em hope” speech from 1977 (Shilts, 2008). Both of these men, even though separated by decades, were both hoping to intervene with an ongoing and consistent issue for young people within the LGBTQ community, which is a high rate of suicide and attempted suicide (Remafedi et al., 1991). In Milk’s speech, he states that this hope can be accomplished by the election of openly gay politicians, which can serve as a signal to this at-risk population that, to reference A Chorus Line, they did not have to think that “being gay meant being a bum all the rest of [their lives]” (Attenborough, 1985).

Milk hoped to serve as a role-model to gradually change public perception, whereas Savage’s approach desired something unique to our digital age to occur — a groundswell of
digital affective action to help those in need in a rapid and instantaneous manner. Permission and
time are no longer required or desired. The barriers for entry into producing content for social
media are negligible as almost 90% of individuals in the United States own a smartphone – more
than the amount who choose to engage with social media (A. Smith, 2017). Not just limited to
hearing messages about how life would get better, social media has been shown to offer many
other affordances, such as allowing for individuals to create their own coming out videos, dating,
and even virtual support groups (Pullen & Cooper, 2010). Despite the best of intentions, not
everyone is afforded the same exposure and representation. In a study of the It Gets Better (IGB)
campaign, Wight discovered many identities that were difficult to find, creating a new hegemony
and further silencing an already minimized population, particularly those who are bisexual or
trans*(2014). This was not necessarily the fault of Savage, per se, but rather the network logics
of YouTube in which more popular videos of famous individuals get more circulation than others
(Wight, 2014). In a society where the loudest get the most attention, those who are at the margins
are oft overlooked, ignored, or silenced.

Behind the IGB’s message is a reinforcement of the neoliberal logic that it is up to the
oppressed individual to take on the responsibility of “picking themselves up by their bootstraps”
and improving their own lives. The videos focus on individualistic message throughout: “tough it
up until you are in a position in which you are able to come out” (Savage & Miller, 2012). The
full title of Savage’s book is It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a
Life Worth Living. Embedded within the title lies the neo-liberal notion that one is responsible
for creating their own life worth living, essentially focusing the attention and onus onto
individuals rather than on the collective. A “life worth living,” often a vague expression, thus has
a very specific definition: it is a life that conforms to the rest of society (minus gender or sexual
identity) and contributes in a productive way to that society. In what is the epitome of what Duggan has referred to as “homonormativity,” this message no longer remains one of radical change, but encourages assimilation.

This New Homonormativity comes equipped with a rhetorical recoding of key terms in the history of gay politics: “equality” becomes narrow, formal access to a few conservatizing institutions, “freedom” becomes impunity for bigotry and vast inequalities in commercial life and civil society, the “right to privacy” becomes domestic confinement, and democratic politics itself becomes something to be escaped. All of this adds up to a corporate culture managed by a minimal state, achieved by the neoliberal privatization of affective as well as economic and public life. (Duggan, 2002, p. 190)

Rather than radically changing the system for everyone, the agenda that Duggan critiques is one that aims to slightly adjust the system to allow LGBTQ individuals to squeeze in. Even though both projects are about hope, they are about a very different kind of hope, a difference that Muñoz (2009) describes as a hope for the future versus a hope for the present, and a hope based almost entirely on the affective labor of the LGBTQ community and asking little of the rest of society.

Little empirical work has been done on the uses of social media within the LGBTQ community. The work that has been done has largely been quantitative in nature to understand the way that LGBTQ individuals are using social media (Pullen & Cooper, 2010), while not addressing the complex issues of society and culture. This study breaks new ground by not focusing on merely understanding how individuals are using social media, but by examining social media use from a more wholistic approach. Rather than viewing social media as just a tool to be used, this dissertation seeks to intervene in the literature in a novel way by examining the
positive and negative world-making possibilities that exist within these networks.

**A theoretical framing**

Despite being heralded as a necessity for emotional well-being, the actual act of coming out is often discussed in scholarly and political settings in a somewhat sterile, pragmatic way. It is described as necessary to lead a fulfilling life and for societal change, as a way out of the hopelessness that is cast upon those who are not out. However, the act itself is full of emotions: anxiety, fear, hope, happiness, and sadness. In the traditional way of coming out (i.e., in person to one’s family or friends), these emotions can be experienced simultaneously among all parties involved. Expanding this experience into the digital and social media, new questions of affect need to be raised and considered. As Ahmed points out, texts have emotions, which can lead to other emotions in other bodies (Ahmed, 2015). Not only do texts have emotions, but certain objects — and, by extension, images — have specific connotations or affects that stick to them more than others (Ahmed, 2015; Puar, 2007). While these connotations and emotions can change based on historical situations, the LGBTQ community is one that has had numerous connotations stuck to it. As Kitzinger reminds us, during the late 1980s throughout the 1990s the LGBTQ community as a whole became synonymous with sickness and death because of the AIDS epidemic (Kitzinger, 1999). This specific connotation may not be quite as prevalent, but connotations that are attached to groups or objects are essentially emotions that become linked to those affecting the way individuals can interact with them.

Coming out has become almost synonymous with a positive and happy emotion that it essentially unlocks in oneself. Rather than remaining just a political necessity, coming out has become framed as a pathway towards personal happiness and self-fulfillment (Savage & Miller, 2012). Specifically, an individual and personal happiness in the present moment or near future.
This focus on personal happiness and fulfillment focuses on optimism about the present, rather than pessimism about the current state of affairs, which Ahmed (2015) states is important for political revolution. It is only by envisioning and fighting for a utopic future that true liberation can occur (Muñoz, 2009). This focus on happiness is also related to a turn towards respectability politics among the LGBTQ movement with its focus on marriage and other heteronormative values. These discourses have stripped the movement from much of its radical potential drawn from its negative emotions of the past (Cvetkovich, 2012; Duggan, 2002; Muñoz, 2009).

Social media is, at its core, a series of discourses filtered through the logics of the various platforms and the audiences who interact with them. Accepting Foucault’s (1969) claim that discourse forms reality, the discursive practices that happen online impact the worlds of those who create them. These discourses are not unfiltered or occurring naturally, but rather are subject to logics that are imbued within the platforms (Castells, 2010; Sampson, 2012). It is because of this latter reason that, even though trans* stories exist within IGB, they are not easily found because of the sorting and recommendation features of YouTube (Wight, 2014). In this way, all decisions that factor into a social media platform need to be considered and treated as political actions, which can affect the way that discourses place out, and therefore alter the reality of some individuals.

Foucault points out that discourse needs to be understood as more than just language or signs, but needs to include “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” (1969, p. 49). These practices are not limited to content posted online but include the ways people interact with these platforms, including making decisions on what to share and not to share. In this way, expressions of sexual and gender identity (SOGI) become discursive practices that are defined not only by the actual expressions but by the societal framing. One must turn to
religion, especially the protestant undertones that have shaped and formed U.S. societal norms and culture to understand the demands and constraints placed upon expressions of SOGI.

Foucault related discussion of sexuality with the confession in that it is the one who lives outside of the societal norms who is forced to confess their “sins” (Foucault, 1990). As Ahmed (2006) points out, within U.S. culture there is a norm of compulsory heterosexuality that proscribes a path leading toward marriage and family rearing. Unless confessed otherwise, one is assumed heterosexual and it is only when the heterosexual is in the minority that they deem it necessary to come out. Despite the liberatory power that coming out is claimed to have for individuals (and on the individual basis this may be correct), by aligning with and using the normative terms of the discourse, the actual act might help to reinforce the hegemony of heterosexuality. Since it is only that which is deviant that must be confessed, the act of public coming out confirms its place in the minds of many of the abnormality of non-cis-heterosexual identities. As C. Wright Mills stated,

Any establishment of culture means the establishment of definitions of reality, values, taste. …Debate is limited. Only certain views are allowed. But more than that, the terms of debate, the terms in which the world may be seen, the standards, and lack of standards by which men judge their accomplishments of themselves, and of other men – these terms are officially or commercially determined, inculcated, enforced. (1972, pp. 412–413)

Hall (1980) posits that audiences have a multitude of ways to decode or interpret messages received including one that is oppositional to the dominant/hegemonic reading. One of the key points in Hall’s theory is that all messages are decoded in the terms of the dominant message, which, if we take Mills statement about needing to change the terms of debate seriously, could limit the effectiveness of resistance (Hall, 1980; Mills, 1972).
It is important, when considering resistance in the LGBTQ community to examine various performative acts in which individuals are engaged in resisting. Muñoz, in his work on disidentification, references Gramsci’s notion of a war of position, and how “the more multilayered and tactical war of positions represents better possibilities of resistance today, when discriminatory ideologies are less naked and more intricate” (1999, p. 114). Specifically talking about performers who subtly call into question societal norms, Muñoz describes a way of opposition that serves to challenge and undermine mainstream assumptions about groups of individuals to bring about subtle change. Challenging cultural norms and assumptions of the LGBTQ community was an important element for most of the individuals I spoke with throughout my interviews for this project in deciding what to share online. These desires to challenge cis-heteronormative values and to provide help for others within the LGBTQ community largely influenced the way that they engaged with social media.

Couldry states that we should view media as ritual and practice, rather than as objects separate from the ways in which individuals interact with them. The content, the platforms, and the individuals who use them all inform each other and shape both the way they function and the way they influence the lives of individuals.

By moving media research’s centre of gravity away from texts (and their production or direct reception) and towards the broader set of practices related to media, we get a better grip on the distinctive types of social processes enacted through media related practices, practices involving not just producer and performers but also interactive audiences, audience members who would like to become performers, and non-viewing members of the public who become affected by that wider process. (Couldry, 2012, p. 44) This is useful for two main reasons. The first is that it extends the audience beyond those directly
affected by the viewing or creation of media artifact to those who are affected in general by the way media enter the larger public discourse. The second is that by viewing media as ritual we are able to draw into question the role and influence of power, because “rituals are enactments of power through form” (Couldry, 2012, p. 66). As Foucault reminds us, power is not unidirectional, only coming from top down, but that it always includes resistance that lies within power (1990). This is important to remember in relationship to social media, because it helps to counteract the “myth of the mediated center,” or the notion that media is central to culture, since if media is a ritual performed by the interactions between audience and medium there is no set center (Couldry, 2012; Hoover, 2006). As Shaw elucidated in her study of video games, it was often only through a negotiation of identities between the game characters and the players that meaning was able to be negotiated for the audience (Shaw, 2015).

Viewing media as ritual highlights the patterned and repetitive nature of the way many interact. When considering social media and what posts are shared, it is important to consider how naturalized or ritualized this process has become and what this means. To state that media usage is ritualized is not to assume that is has become invisible, as some might contend (Deuze, 2011), but rather to suggest that these practices have become an integral part into the lives of many individuals.

**Research Questions**

This dissertation aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What is the role of social media in creating and/or reinforcing a dominant LGBTQ identity?

RQ2. Who is included in the dominant LGBTQ community, and what effects does being excluded have on those individuals?
RQ3. What new affordances are offered by social media for individuals to explore their sexual and/or gender identities?

RQ4. What potential benefits or harm can social media create in the lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals?

RQ5. What forms of resistance and political expression are made possible through social media discourse?

Methods

Building on both Couldry’s (2012) and Shaw’s (2015) methodological approaches to understanding the ritual use of media, I employed multiple qualitative methods to examine these questions via a variety of angles and perspectives. As Shaw explained in her study of representation in video games,

Games do not exist in a ludological vacuum, but neither can we ignore the extent to which play affects audience readings. We cannot look at representation by looking just at game texts, because the intertwined aspects of representation and play necessarily involve audiences’ use of texts. Audiences matter, and as I argue, they are how representation comes to matter. (2015, p. 37)

In an attempt to gain a 360-degree understanding of the influence of social media, I combined critical discourse analysis, visual communication analysis, and audience research that combined interviews and participant observation.

Due to the qualitative and multifaceted approach that I used to examine this topic, it was important to use grounded theory and a cyclical approach to coding the themes, categories, and concepts that emerged from the data (Saldaña, 2013). Despite that I explain each method separately, all research was conducted simultaneously. Therefore, the themes that emerged
throughout the interviews or focus groups informed the categories I would later examine in the archival research and vise versa. These categories were then used to further examine the data, which were then further dissected and explored for more nuanced expressions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Hallberg, 2006; Saldaña, 2013). It is through this iterative process that several key ideas, or salient categories, rose to prominence: the importance of (and a queer definition of) the political, the weight given to coming out, and the exclusionary discourses and practices exhibited by those within the LGBTQ community.

**Audience Research**

Finding out how individuals were interacting with social media in their daily lives was important to understand the meaning behind messages that are created online and how they are interpreted by the audience. To do this, I interviewed 20 participants in a combination of group and individual interviews. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, recruitment in online LGBTQ forums in the Denver metropolitan area, and snowball sampling methods. Participants were chosen based on their gender and sexual identities as well as other factors, such as age and ethnicity, to create a diverse participant group based on SOGI as well as other factors such as age and ethnicity to create a diverse participant group (see Figures 1 & 2).

![Figure 1: Shows the gender identity and ethnicity of participants](image-url)
As Hoover and Clark pointed out, “it is clear that what people say reflects a set of received ‘public scripts’ which value certain kinds of media over others” (2008, p. 5). It is through this tension between what is said and what is practiced that societal norms and power make their presence known. When examining issues of representation on social media, it is crucial to understand how people are actually using the platforms, rather than a presentation of idealized usage. Each interview was thus preceded by an informal conversation in which the participants were asked to demonstrate their social media usage. These conversations walked through each platform that the participants used and what they used them for. During this time the participants would show examples of each platform, including the content they produced as well as what they consumed. After the observation was concluded, each participant then participated in a semi-structured interview that focused on how they used social media around their various coming out experiences and how it may have changed when switching between the various phases (see Appendix A).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Gay</th>
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Figure 2: Shows the sexual orientation of participants.
Visual Discourse Analysis

To supplement the voices of my participants, I analyzed numerous LGBTQ-specific media, both historical and contemporary, to examine the way certain narratives become highlighted. I examined 330 historical articles, images, and advertisements from LGBTQ periodicals from the 1940s to the early 2000s stored in the New York Public Library’s Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender collection and in the Smithsonian Museum of American History’s Archives Center Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Collection, 1915-2016. In addition to the historical archives, each participant provided me with access to their social media profiles on the various sites and apps that they used. I recruited many participants from various LGBTQ Facebook groups, including “LGBTQ Professionals,” “Queer Denver Exchange,” and “Thick Latinos and their Admirers.” Additionally, I analyzed 13 candid coming out videos that were uploaded to YouTube, constituting over three hours of coming out footage. Using open coding, I analyzed these images and texts to determine the themes that were consistent within them to determine the ways they help to shape reality (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Hallberg, 2006; Rose, 2012; Urquhart, Lehmann, & Myers, 2009). Visuals have the ability of:

producing specific visions of social difference – of hierarchies of class, race, gender, sexuality, and so on – while itself claiming not to be part of that hierarchy and thus to be universal. It is because this ordering of difference depends on a distinction between those who claim to see with universal and those who are seen to be categorized in particular ways, that Haraway claims it is intimately related to the oppressions and tyrannies of capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, and so on (Rose, 2012, p. 9).

Christmann (2008) explains the need to examine photographs and visuals on multiple levels because rather than capturing reality they are always subjected to cultural influences. No
image is separate from reality, despite the perceived objectivity of some. As Sontag points out, a photograph implies a sense of reality as it contains a trace of the real and is far more than just an interpretation (Sontag, 2001). Some believe the relationship of photographic images with reality is starting to replace the real world with an image world or a media life (Deuze, 2011; Sontag, 2001). Visuals function as a performative language that they recreate, reinforce, or even craft their own reality in the same way that acts of language can act to codify and organize the world (Culler, 2011). Images thus simultaneously reflect, create, and shed light on the cultural mores and norms in which they were produced (Christmann, 2008; Hasenmueller, 1978; Knoblauch, Baer, Laurier, Petschke, & Schnettler, 2008; Panofsky, 1972).

In this view, when examining visuals, the concern is not the exact content or authorial intent of each visual, but rather the social production of the images and their impact on the lived experiences of individuals. Discourse analysis is also not concerned with looking for one solid narrative, but is open to exploring discourses that are both complex and contradictory (Rose, 2012). Through this project I am not making any claims to universal truth, but rather attempting to point to an interpretation of these narratives, while aware that my interpretations are also part of this narrative.

Bird noted that, “methods matter because the choices made along, with the very characteristics of the researcher, play into and ultimately shape the conclusions of any research” (2003, p. 9). As Shaw stated, “methods are central, not peripheral to our arguments” (2015, p. 42). Rather than merely being a means to an end, the research methods used are essential to the conclusions that I reached and the arguments that I propose throughout this text.

As is the case with many marginalized groups, those in the LGBTQ community are often unable to represent themselves or make their voices heard. As DeVault and Gross explain
the traditions of research interviewing have been strongly linked to social justice concerns and projects and to the idea of bringing forward neglected voices – and these traditions continue to be especially important for feminist projects. (2012, p. 9)

It is with this notion of highlighting and bringing to light the voices off LGBTQ individuals who do not always have this opportunity, that the voices of my participants will be prominently featured throughout this dissertation. In addition to understanding the role that social media has in expressions of LGBTQ culture, politics, and identity, a secondary goal of this project is to capture and share the stories and experiences of a cross-section of the LGBTQ community.

Overview

Before beginning to comprehend the role that social media is having within the LGBTQ community, it is important to understand the way that LGBTQ media has worked to shape contemporary culture. Chapter 2 provides an analysis of the historical trajectory of LGBTQ periodicals in shaping current norms within the LGBTQ community, particularly in the emphasis on coming out narratives and the belief that LGBTQ individuals must be politically informed and active. I also examine the ways that images, classifieds, and editorials worked to shape and reinforce ideas of attractiveness and desirability within the gay community. Moreover, I explore the historical emphasis on gay men at the exclusion of bisexual, lesbian, trans*, and asexual individuals.

Chapter 3, interrogates how social media is factoring into the coming out process for LGBTQ individuals. I start by raising questions about assumptions of what it means to come out and the ways that it needs to be rethought as a continual process rather than a discrete event. Through analyzing a series of candid coming out videos and posts about coming out, I examine the way these new technologies work to reinforce a “proper” ritual of coming out. These often
only focus on certain narratives and ignore many factors that can complicate this process. Finally, this chapter works to shed light on some of the new risks and anxieties that are caused by sharing content on social media, especially for LGBTQ teens and young adults and those who are already marginalized within the community.

Politics have long been an important aspect of the LGBTQ community, and Chapter 4 explores the ways that social media is changing political discourse. By focusing on the technological affordances that enable political discourse to spread to more individuals, I demonstrate how the precarious positionality of LGBTQ individuals can expand typical notions of what it means to be politically active. For a community that is often invisible and at heightened risk for suicide, health disparities, and violence, the LGBTQ community have shown a heightened emphasis on a politics of visibility and survival.

Chapter 5 focuses on the exclusionary tactics toward marginalized members within the LGBTQ community, particularly trans* and HIV-positive individuals as well as LGBTQ individuals of color. These include both active acts of aggression as well as microaggressions that many individuals report dealing with on a regular basis. In addition to examining the exclusion of certain individuals, I also explore the policing of what individuals share under the guise of demanding authenticity.

Finally, the Conclusion, focuses on the ways that social media both provides new affordances to help individuals in expressing their gender and sexual identities to themselves and to others, as well as creates new anxieties and fears around these expressions. I also provide guidelines for both individuals within the LGBTQ community to consider when using social media. Lastly, I include a list of things that social media developers should consider regarding how their decisions affect the way LGBTQ individuals interact with each other.
Chapter 2 – Creation of a Culture
The role of LGBTQ media in developing a hegemonic identity

“There are so many roots to the tree of anger

that sometimes the branches shatter

before they bear.”

~ Audre Lordev

In the late portion of the 20th century and into the early 21st century, representations of LGBTQ characters in mainstream media surged to levels that had never before been seen (R. Becker, 2006; GLAAD, 2017; Russo, 1987). In addition to the inclusion of LGBTQ characters in popular television, films, news, and even comic books, there has also been an increase in visibility for shows produced by and for the LGBTQ community. Examples of this increased visibility include shows such as Ru-Paul’s Drag Race winning an Emmy award for Outstanding Reality Show Host and films such as Moonlight winning numerous prestigious awards including an Academy Award for Best Motion Picture. Despite the recent increased visibility of LGBTQ-themed media, a significant amount of content has been produced for this community for decades, even pre-dating the official rise of the LGBTQ rights movement in 1969, particularly magazines and other periodicals.

A History of Secrecy

Examining the history of LGBTQ publications within the United States necessarily requires examining the laws and policies that regulated the openness with which one could live as an LGBTQ individual. While gay and lesbian men and women have formed communities within the United States since the late 1800s (Chauncey, 1994), it has only been in recent history
(since the early 2000s) that anti-sodomy laws have largely been struck down, thus eliminating the criminalization of homosexuality. In fact, for much of LGBTQ history in the United States, the mere suspicion of being homosexual was enough to be arrested, harassed, and fired. For this reason, much communication that existed between members of this community was done under a guise of secrecy -- meeting in secret bars, bathhouses, public parks, and through various media (Bérubé, 2003; Chauncey, 1994; D’Emilio, 1998; Meeker, 2006). To this end, many of the early publications preceding the LGBTQ rights movement of the 1970s were covertly targeted towards gay men. Lesbian women during the decades around the two world wars were still largely confined by societal restrictions, which expected them to enter into heterosexual marriages and prohibited them from being financial independent enough to go to bars or other spaces. As a result, much of lesbian culture at the time centered around small-events in the home with just a lover and/or a small-group of friends, which “structured a view that one’s sexuality [was] an exclusively private matter” (D’Emilio, 1998, p. 33).

Prior to the landmark One, Inc. v. Olesen case in 1958, any periodical that was geared toward the gay and lesbian community was considered to be obscene (Ball, 2015). As such, many of these early publications were produced in secret and disguised as other forms of magazines, such as the popular beefcake magazines published from the 1930s through the 1960s, which highlighted photographs of muscular men engaging in homoerotic sporting events (Rosenberg, 2015). There were also “pornographic” magazines that were discreetly geared toward gay men (often posing as fitness magazines), personal magazines that allowed individuals to post advertisements for anonymous sexual encounters, and gay travel guides to point men towards the gay bars, bathhouses, and cruising locations.

In light of these communication outlets, gay men, contrary to lesbian women, developed
a community around meeting in secretive bars and cruising for anonymous sex in parks, bathrooms, and truck stops (Chauncey, 1994; D’Emilio, 1998; Howard, 2001). It was through these initial forms of gathering that some of the first homophile organizations began to form in the 1950s. These organizations began publishing their own flyers and newsletters to keep individuals informed about issues affecting gays and lesbians as well as promoting political involvement (D’Emilio, 1998; Stewart-Winter, 2016). There were thus two main camps of gay and lesbian forms of publications that were being produced within the 1950s and early 1960s: 1) those focused on promoting political action and community engagement (e.g., The Mattachine Review) and 2) those focused on sexual pleasures and entertainment (e.g., Blue Notes-Flash: The National Magazine of Gay Correspondence). These two worlds would eventually merge in the late 1960s as the intensity of raids against gay bars increased and in the aftermath of the Lavender Scarevi in the McCarthy era (D. K. Johnson, 2004; Shilts, 2008). In 1967 The Advocate (still a popular magazine for the LGBTQ community) was formed in response to the harassment occurring in gay spaces in. This was done to have a widespread gay and lesbian publication that focused on the issues that were pertinent to that community.

In addition to providing pertinent information for the homosexual community, an important element of The Advocate in its early days was to provide a space to allow personal connections to form. In every issue of the newspaper, included would be a secondary classifieds section, which was equal in size and length to the more journalistic front section. These classified sections and personal ads, along with the travel guides, provided opportunities for communities of gay and lesbian individuals to form, an important element in creating a more cohesive idea of a community around something as ethereal as sexuality. As Martin Meeker elucidated in his study of gay and lesbian communications within the early to mid-1900s,
The projects of articulating identities and building communities, however, are not ones that many homosexuals chose with purpose or foresight. Indeed, the entire process was fraught because for boys, girls, men, and women who desired contacts there was neither innate knowledge nor a handbook given to them that shared the steps that must [be] taken to achieve an identity and find a community. Yet, a connection had to be made, and throughout the twentieth century an apparently increasing number of individuals possessed a burning desire to connect. (2006, pp. 1–2)

LGBTQ communities, since their inceptions, have always placed much importance on personal connections. This emphasis worked to shape and form many aspects that are now considered to be staples of contemporary LGBTQ culture.

One of the ways these connections were historically made was through gay and lesbian publications. These publications thus became important not only to provide an outlet for communication, but since they also served to educate and entertain the public, it is my contention that they became influential in working to shape the way the culture formed. Through their decisions on which topics were discussed, political leanings indicated, and images used by these periodicals, they worked to frame the issues and ideas that became foundational amongst the newly blossoming LGBTQ community (Scheufele, 1999). Most mainstream portrayals of the gay and lesbian community at this time were largely negative or treated as a wholly foreign culture within journalistic outlets (D’Emilio, 1998; Howard, 2001; Meeker, 2006; Russo, 1987). Rising up to critique mainstream representations, LGBTQ-specific outlets were formed to highlight “positive” portrayals, promote political activity relevant to the LGBTQ community, and support entertainment venues such as bars and nightclubs.

Even as mainstream representations of the LGBTQ community increased (particularly in
the 1990s and 2000s), the need for LGBTQ-specific publications and media maintained a strong importance within the community (R. Becker, 2006; Eaklor, 2008; Henderson, 2013a). One of the issues with much of the mainstream representation of LGBTQ individuals is that it often relied (and arguably continues to rely) on stereotypical and unidimensional representations of what it means to be gay, lesbian, transgender, etc. As Lisa Henderson points out in her text Love and Money, even when these are seemingly positive representations (as became more commonplace throughout the early 2000s) they still can work to celebrate only a certain type of queerness while chastising and ridiculing others (2013a).

Queer class distinction is visible through four gestures across a range of forms and genres: (1) good queers (protagonists, familiars) are moved from the class margins to the class middle, where practices of bodily control are maximized; (2) bad queerness and powerlessness are represented as class marginality and are signified by performative excess and failures of physical control; (3) wealth becomes the expression of fabulousness, in a limited version of the good life legitimately achieved; and (4) class is displaced onto family and familialism as the locus of normalcy and civic viability. (Henderson, 2013a, p. 34)

While this critique is largely levied toward mainstream representations (e.g., Modern Family, Will & Grace, The L Word, Queer as Folk) that are largely geared toward a predominately heterosexual or mixed audience, it is my contention that these class distinctions are prevalent within the LGBTQ community and many have their origins within gay and lesbian publications created by and for the LGBTQ community. While the scope of this chapter will focus largely on LGBTQ-specific publications, it is important to also consider the representations that occur within mainstream media and especially those that transcend across many types of media.

The importance of this became relevant to me as many of these publications, and
LGBTQ-specific media in general, were brought up in the interviews and observations that I conducted. Even though the interviews centered on “social media” and many of the participants came out in the age of social media, the importance of legacy or traditional media was often referenced as heavily influencing their perceptions of LGBTQ culture and identity. This ranged from reading articles about films and movies containing fourth-persona textual winks (Ott & Mack, 2014) to LGBTQ individuals to using personal ads to find dates and/or anonymous sexual encounters. As was indicated in almost every interview, as well as in my own personal coming out experience, media representations not only provide a lens to view the perceptions of others (as a whole) of the LGBTQ community and help shape one’s own personality; they are additionally useful tools to gauge someone’s specific reaction when planning to come out of the closet.

To better understand the importance of social media to public declarations of sexual/gender identities, culture, and politics, it is necessary then to analyze and examine the historical trajectory that has influenced contemporary LGBTQ culture. I examined numerous periodicals, comics, and other publications produced by and for the LGBTQ community ranging from the late 1950s to the early 2000s in two different historical archives: the “Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender periodical collection 1952-1999” at the New York Public Library and the “Archives Center Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Collection, 1915-2016” at the Smithsonian Institute. Forty-five boxes, each containing between forty to eighty periodicals vii were examined, specifically to examine the way the discourses within the LGBTQ community were formed and changed throughout time. Using grounded theory, extensive notes were kept on the main themes discovered within each periodical (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Hallberg, 2006; Urquhart et al., 2009). From these periodicals, 352 articles/media artifacts were randomly
selected, ensuring that the sources represented the vast diversity in types of publications and target audiences (see Figure 3). Applying discursive analysis methods, open coding, and building off the themes discovered within the periodicals, each article was analyzed and coded (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Flick, Kardorff, & Steinke, 2010; Gill, 2000; Lindlof, 2011).

Several prominent themes emerged throughout the analysis: importance of personal connections, an emphasis on political activism, emergence of stereotypes, and division within LGBTQ community. Each will be examined in more depth in the following sections.

**LGBTQ Periodicals, 1945 - 2015**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>AIDS Awareness Cards</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bay Area Gay Liberation</td>
<td>California Scene</td>
<td>Making A Way: Lesbians Out</td>
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<td>Bay Times</td>
<td>Clique Magazine</td>
<td>Front</td>
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<td>BL</td>
<td>Come Out</td>
<td>Man's Way</td>
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<td>Black &amp; White Men Together Quarterly</td>
<td>Compete</td>
<td>Queerly Divine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black Lace</td>
<td>Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians</td>
<td>RFD</td>
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<td>Blacklight</td>
<td>Gay Comix</td>
<td>S.T.H.</td>
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<td>Blood Brothers</td>
<td>Gay Liberation Supplement</td>
<td>Swerv</td>
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<td>Gay Life</td>
<td>The Advocate</td>
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<td>Bondings</td>
<td>Gay Parent</td>
<td>The Barb</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boonies: A Voice for Rural Gays</td>
<td>Go</td>
<td>The Bi-Sexual Expression</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Holy Titclamps</td>
<td>Liberation News</td>
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Figure 3: List of LGBTQ periodicals analyzed from the LGBT+ Archives at the National Museum of American History and the New York Public Library, 1945 - 2015

**Importance of Connections**

A common sentiment within the LGBTQ community has been that since there is no guarantee of familial acceptance or love, especially historically, it is crucial to form our own families and communities. This emphasis on finding and forging loving and supporting connections is especially evident when examining the place of importance that personal ads occupied within the early days of gay and lesbian periodicals. While there had long been an emphasis on connections, through coded language, bars, private gatherings, book clubs, and
public sex (Chauncey, 1994; D’Emilio, 1998; Howard, 2001; Meeker, 2006), new avenues for connections fueled by technological and media innovations changed the ways that the LGBTQ community could connect (Meeker, 2006).

*SWM seeks similar for fun and friendship*

Due to the importance of forming connections within the community, many popular magazines, including large classified/personal sections (half of the content for The Advocate at this time was classifieds) and even entire magazines, were dedicated to nothing except for forming these connections. Blue Notes-Flash (n.d.), for example, labelled themselves “the national magazine of gay correspondence” and also guaranteed a circulation of “over 135,000” people. The magazine, which consists entirely of two- to four-sentence classified ads and only one picture on the cover, also assured that its readers and contributors would be provided “total secrecy and confidentiality.” Published and distributed out of Miami, Florida, Blue Notes was mailed out as a companion magazine to Blueboy magazine, but was available for individual purchase within adult bookstores across the nation. Most of the ads are purely sexual in nature and the magazine was entirely male-centric, featuring ads such as:

CA-1072-92064

San Diego CA area. Wants to meet Marines, Sailors, truck drivers, hair chested men, etc. I am W/M 39, 6’, 170lbs. Nude photo a must. (n.d.)

And

AL-1003-35216-0

White male, 135 lbs., young, well built,

Confidentiality and discretion are key themes within many of the ads found in this magazine and others like it – indicating the new possibilities created by these magazines. Whereas discrete sexual encounters had been a longstanding component of the gay community, it was not without danger (Chauncey, 1994; Howard, 2001; Shilts, 2008). Cruising for sex in public parks, bathrooms, and even gay bathhouses and bars did provide some form of connection between men, but this activity, regardless of location, was also accompanied by a danger of being arrested, assaulted (by the police and others), or publicly outing (Shilts, 2008). The ability to discreetly meet men through a third-party “middle man” likely provided a sense of security to many individuals to explore their sexuality in ways they could not do so previously. Rather than a risky public encounter, gay men could now meet men in safer more private locations – important considerations for individuals whose jobs would have depended on remaining in the closet, such as politicians, military, or even teachers.

Beyond just providing a new venue for sexual encounters, these magazines also became a place to meet friends and potential long-term lovers. More than just providing alternative outlets for anonymous sexual encounters, these magazines were providing alternatives to anonymous sexual encounters:

CA-25424-90048

L.A. area: 31-year-old white Sagittarian tired of bar scenes and one nite [sic] stands is hoping
to meet a guy (25-40) equally Fed-up. If we have this much in common we might find a relationship. Consider myself trim and good looking. Please write and send photo if available. (n.d.)

While not as common as sexual ads, there was a noticeable emphasis on developing lasting relationships, which in addition to searching for companionship often included derogatory references towards the “cruising scene.”

Beyond the classifieds, a major source of advertising within these magazines was from groups and companies offering to provide individuals with matchmaking services. These ads oft explained the importance and superiority of personal (i.e., face-to-face) connections over mediated ones. For example, one ad from a 1977 edition of The Advocate advised people to “Get out of the ‘meat’ market, and meet people” (GSF, 1977, p. 3). Offering to connect members who lived within Southern California and New York City with other “compatible sincere gay men and women…with whom you can build a truly meaningful relationship” (GSF, 1977, p. 3), this advertisement appears on the surface to break many of the notions that flooded the typical classifieds sections for two main reasons. The first is that it clearly is speaking against casual hook-ups and the (perceived) lack of personal, deep, fulfilling connections resulting from bars and clubs. The second is that it seems to be providing an outlet for both men and women to make connections, whereas other magazines (e.g., Blue Notes) catered only to gay men, thus limiting access of lesbian women to a nationwide network as was available to gay men. Despite there being options for lesbian women to connect with other lesbian women, they were not as open or frequent as the ones for gay men (Meeker, 2006). While the ability to form connections through
mediated means did exist for the lesbian community, its limited nature often “translated into a feeling of isolation and, consequently, the sense that they should seek out and connect with other lesbians, whether by moving to cities, participating in an organization, meeting a friend, exchanging letters, or simply reading a book or magazine” (Meeker, 2006, p. 114). Despite boasting advertisement that the service was for both men and women, it is clear by their revised ad a year later in 1978 that, while the text remained unchanged (apart from expanding their service areas), the visual elements of the advertisement changed dramatically. Instead of simple black text on a white backdrop, the ad showcased white print against a black background with the word “MEN” in giant letters at the top. The bottom of the ad also included a black and white photograph of two shirtless, muscular men embracing in the entrance to a cave. Whereas the textual elements of this advertisement speak to an inclusive, relationship-focused dating service, the visual elements clearly indicate that this service is first and foremost a service for men to meet other men – most likely for sexual encounters.

The next year, the GSF advertisement changed its message once again, this time featuring a sketch of three, white men laughing with the heading “Making Friends”. Albeit clearly geared towards forming friendships and long-lasting relationships, this advertisement notably removes all but one mention of women from the text: you can “choose from among thousands of exciting men & women” (GSF, 1979). The advertisement becomes almost the exclusive property of gay men, where they are the priority and center of attention and women are there for mere decoration.

Despite being a popular newspaper within the gay and lesbian community, The Advocate also directly promoted the superiority of personal connections and experiences over mediated ones. In 1978, the Advocate began advertising for and held an event they named The Advocate
Experience. Despite The Advocate’s goal for individuals to read and be informed, this event speaks to the belief that something becomes lost in translation when messages and connections become mediated. By creating a “real-life” experience, the newspaper promised to “transform the participants’ experiences of being gay or homosexual into richer contexts wherein their lives can be lived in ways which are truly self-enhancing and contribute to all of society.” (Watson, 1977) This makes it clear that just connecting with others “virtually” or being informed is not enough to be respectable member of the LGBTQ community. Instead, it requires those personal connections to be who you “should” be.

By identifying gay and lesbian businesses and establishments as well as gay- and lesbian-welcoming establishments, the classifieds provided another service to gay and lesbian individuals in addition to finding ways to connect with one another. Speaking to the importance of promoting and supporting gay and lesbian businesses is the fact that in addition to the classified ads within, there were entire directories dedicated to listing these businesses. Resources such as Bob Damron’s Address Book (later rebranded as Damron’s Travel Guide) and Gay and Lesbian Yellow Pages (for a variety of cities) provided a directory to find businesses that were owned and operated by members of the LGBTQ community. While this did include bars, clubs, and bathhouses for those new to the scene in that community or merely travelling through, these guides also contained ads for mundane companies and services such as cleaning and repair services and clothing stores. The message behind this is clear: to be a part of the gay community, one needs to be able to support others and help make the community self-sufficient. This emphasis on local connections became one of driving reasons behind the metropolis-centric views behind much of gay culture.
The Computer Age

Mediated forms of making these connections have been around within the LGBTQ community since the advent of gay- and lesbian-specific periodicals, so it is not surprising that it did not take long to adopt computerized dating, with services such as DATAGAY (see Image 1), a San Francisco-based company that promised “a unique nationwide computerized introduction service” (DATAGAY, 1979). The image shows an illustration of a young, fit, shirtless, white man straddling a computer stool looking at an image of a relatively young, white man with a mustache. Unlike the previous advertisements for services such as GSF, this ad features very little text and is much more image centric. One of the messages that is conveyed in this simple image, however, is who this service is designed and intended for -- attractive white men. The other thing that becomes apparent is that while other services and even personal ads focused on
finding people with similar interests and desires (after all, you had to connect with a person before you could even send in a photo), this service placed a heavy emphasis on looks. You now not only had to have similar interests, but you also had to be aesthetically pleasing to even make a connection, a characteristic that had previously set classifieds and dating services apart from other fashions of meeting people such as cruising or in bars.

Further technological innovations led to another shift in the ways that LGBTQ individuals were connecting with each other. With the adoption of personal computers and the Internet, gay- and lesbian-specific chatrooms and discussion boards became available to provide ways to chat with individuals both internationally and locally. Services such as CompuServe in the 1980s and later America Online offered easy access for anyone who had a dial-up Internet connection to instantly connect with others and even share photos (if one did not mind a 15-minute download time) (Auerbach & Prescott, 2014; Grov, Breslow, Newcomb, Rosenberger, & Bauermeister, 2014; Tyrangiel, 2000; Walker, 2016). For the more technically savvy, there were also gay bulletin board services (BBSs), such as the Backroom that would allow individuals to chat anonymously with others about politics, cruising locations, fetishes, and even share porn (Auerbach & Prescott, 2014).

Numerous other sites popped up, such as Adam4Adam, Gay.com, and Manhunt, that allowed men to meet other locals for dates, sexual encounters, friendships, and to just chat. While the sites geared toward men tended to focus on sexual encounters and interests (as was the case within many of the older classified ads), there were also spaces that were created specifically for women. These spaces tended to be mailing lists with the purpose of communicating with other lesbian women, such as Euro-Sapho and US-Sapho lists (Auerbach & Prescott, 2014; Isaksson, 1997). These served as ways to forge romances and friendships, both
locally and internationally. Even though there were geographic-specific lists, numerous women were joining lists for other countries/continents. In a saved post from her Euro-Sapphire account, Isaksson explains the ways in which women were networking across the globe.

Some numbers: Of the 60 lists in the list of lesbian lists (in January 1997), 50 were running on U.S. servers. 55 of those 60 lists use English as their only or primary language. The first U.S. list started in 1987 and the first European list in 1993. Of the lesbian online population, approximately 9/10 or more are from North America.

The main purpose of the first international European lesbian list, Euro-Sappho, was to serve as the home base for European lesbians and bisexual/queer women. Likewise, the wild-list for European lesbian studies was started to facilitate networking and contacts between European women involved in lesbian and queer studies. Both of those lists have however been open to all women who have wanted to join.

When Euro-Sappho was started in July 1994, a fairly considerable number of North Americans joined it at once. In the beginning, reaching out to more Europeans and to building the list into the European forum it became was slow work. When I looked at my archives, I found out that in mid-July 1994, there were 67 women subscribed to Euro-Sappho. 26 of them were from North American addresses, i.e. almost 40 percent. (Isaksson, 1997)

Another one of the differences between the gay-specific sites and the lesbian-specific forms of online communication was the immediacy of expected meeting. While many of the sites for men were aimed towards fast connections and sexual encounters, the mailing lists and connections available to women were often more relationship and friendship oriented and would be developed largely online before ever meeting in person. One thing that was similar for both
forms of communication was that they also provided individuals questioning their sexuality to explore and learn about gay, lesbian, and trans* culture and terminology – a sentiment that came up in many of the interviews I conducted as well as in my own personal experiences.

Soon after these sites and lists became popular, other dating services (e.g., OKCupid) and posting sites (e.g., Craigslist) decided to become openly LGBTQ-friendly and offer additional services and features for them. This availability to connect within already popular, more mainstream websites began to make the LGBTQ-specific ones somewhat obsolete (Auerbach & Prescott, 2014; Tyrangiel, 2000; Walker, 2016).

**An Emphasis on the Political & Educational**

LGBTQ media was not just for the sole purpose of forging connections and finding a community, it has also been a venue for educating individuals about issues deemed to be important to the community. From the inception of gay and lesbian periodicals as methods of dissemination for various homophile groups, such as the Mattachine Society, it makes sense that at least the origins of LGBTQ periodicals would have a heavy political emphasis. While the specific political aims of the publications varied, they did share a common sentiment in the notion that a queer population needed to be a politically educated and active population. As LGBTQ periodicals flourished in the 1970s amid backlash occurring against the LGBTQ population in the wake of newly gained freedom from the 1969 riots and Gay Liberation Day marches of the early 1970s, many gay and lesbian magazines posted political information to keep their readers informed. One of the key ways that this was done was through a deliberate attempt to educate those within (and outside of) the history of LGBTQ individuals throughout cultures and time-periods. For example, a 2003 issue of XY magazine has an entire section dedicated to gay history tracing the timeline back to 1200 BC.
Projects such as this work serve two distinct purposes. The first is to engrain the idea of homosexuality throughout history in order to naturalize it, rather than to view it as a social construct that scholars like D’Emilio (1983) argue arise due to the conditions of capitalism and modernity. This is not to state that same-sex attraction and activities did not take place prior to modernity, but rather the notion of a gay community and identity around this attraction was formed due to the affordances offered by capitalism. The second function of these projects is to relate the stigmatization of LGBTQ individuals with previous suffering and discrimination of gay and lesbian individuals, with ads drawing upon the pink triangle used to denote homosexuals within the Holocaust and comparing gay individuals with other refugees.

Many of the political articles were focused specifically on issues that would be affecting the LGBTQ community at the time: potential legislation, lawsuits, discriminatory practices, etc. Among these types of stories/resources provided was a heavy emphasis on health-related issues that disproportionately affected the LGBTQ community. One of the issues that was tackled from early on was the increased rate of attempted suicide in LGBTQ individuals relative to their straight counterparts. (Asala, 2010; Carosone, 2013; Remafedi et al., 1991) This was done in two main ways: 1) sharing pertinent information risk and attempt to break the shame and silence that often accompanies suicide - both for those who have attempted and those who know individuals who have attempted.

This need to inform the LGBTQ population of health-related issues only expounded during the 1980s at the onset of the GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency) crisis (later named AIDS, or Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). Numerous articles were published within various publications warning individuals of risk-factors, as well as signs to look out for – even publications would be reporting on such an important issue, another more attention-getting
before all information was completely known. While it would be expected that LGBTQ-centric strategy was used to reach a larger audience. Since it could be easy for many to overlook reading articles that covered these health issues (they were not usually the most eye-catching visually), Eclipse Enterprises of Forestville, California began producing AIDS Awareness cards in 1993 (see Image 2) to provide a more creative way to reach a larger audience. Initiated by a company that was primarily known to create comic books, these cards were a more creative attempt to reach a larger audience. Not without controversy, however, the cards also contained condoms and graphic images of how to use them, which worked to link AIDS predominantly with unsafe sexual practices, while obscuring other ways to contract the disease. Additionally, in spite of accusations these cards were “capitalizing on people’s tragedy,” the creators of the cards defended them by stating that those that took time to read all of the information would get a good understanding of the disease and the risks surrounding it. (Robinson, n.d.)

*We’re Here, We’re Queer, Get Used to It*

Outside of just sharing health-related information relevant to the LGBTQ community,
there has been one other consistent story/topic that has permeated all forms of LGBTQ media: the importance and political nature of coming out. From the pre-Stonewall Days and the Mattachine Society and other organizers telling individuals that they needed to come out to increase visibility of the gay and lesbian population (D’Emilio, 1998; Stewart-Winter, 2016) to Harvey Milk’s speeches urging every gay and lesbian man and woman to come out (Shilts, 2008) to the anti-Prop 8 campaign in California in 2008 (A. B. Becker & Scheufele, 2009), coming out has long been considered a political and moral imperative for the LGBTQ community, and is viewed, as such, as a sort of ritual-based rite of passage.

It is through examining the idea of coming out through Foucault’s discourse about confession that we can begin to see both the power that coming out can have for individuals, as well as the power exerted upon those individuals by society through forcing them to come out. The confession has spread its effects everywhere. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one’s crimes, one’s sins, one’s thoughts and desires, one’s illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision whatever is most difficult to tell. (1990, p. 59)

Foucault goes on to discuss the ways in which the act of confession can be a freeing act (Foucault, 1990), much like the way that Milk described coming out as having a liberatory power (Shilts, 2008). Taken literally, it could be easy to dismiss Foucault’s discussion of confession as referring only to a Catholic priest, but what is underlying in all of this is that one confesses that which is not normal. When someone’s thoughts or actions conform to the societal norms, there is no need to confess them to anyone as they are assumed; however, it is when they deviate from those norms that a confession is mandated – by either the self, society, or both.
This notion that we need to confess the inner turmoil or differences that we have become a central component of the therapy culture that pervades so much of United States popular culture (Bellah, 1996). “We have seen that therapy has developed an acute concern for the monitoring and managing of inner feelings and emphasizes their expression in open communication” (Bellah, 1996, p. 138). This is something easy to see within our current popular media environment with such successful shows such as Dr. Phil, Dr. Oz, and The Doctors (just to name a few) that offer pop psychology advice about how to get in touch with and express our feelings. It is not enough to become merely comfortable with our feelings, but to be truly happy individuals, we need to express these feelings to the world – which, in turn, needs to accept us for these to respect our individuality.

It is in this way that we can begin to understand that coming out is not solely a political action as had once been called for by activists like Harvey Milk (including more contemporary activist organizations during the recent fight for marriage equality), but it is also something that is intensely personal and an action that needs to be taken before one is able to be a truly happy and authentic individual. In fact, there is often a tendency to view those who have not come out, without regard for reasons, as being less authentic or stunted in their development (Adams, 2010; Rasmussen, 2004). This also tends to ignore the fact that there are often culture factors (such as ethnicity and religious beliefs) that seem to play a large role on when one will come out and how one’s coming out will be received (Etengoff & Daiute, 2015; Grov, Bimbi, Nanin, & Parsons, 2006; Ross, 2005). This push for individuals to come out and be “authentic” can also create anxiety with some individuals not feeling ready to come out or choosing to delay for a variety of reasons, which do not include leading an inauthentic existence, but rather due to a complex set of conflicting identities (Grov et al., 2006; Owens, 2015; Solomon et al., 2015).
One of the ways that this emphasis on coming out has happened on such a large scale is through the discussion about it within LGBTQ-centric media. Nearly every single archival publication that I examined for this study had at least one, if not numerous, issues that centered around the idea of coming out being a moral imperative in ways that created a binary between “good gays” and “bad gays.” For instance, in a 1979 issue of The Barb an article titled “Laconic Commands” told LGBTQ individuals what they needed to do to be a good and contributing member to gay culture. Providing the readers with a list of ten commandments, number seven is to “Come Out!” and advises people to come out to as many people that they can; other pieces of advice range from learning to love yourself to supporting gay businesses to being politically active. While it does mention that some people may not “feel” that they cannot come out completely, it segues into donating money to gay organizations if one cannot come out. In this way, the only “legitimate” reason for not coming out is due to the potential financial repercussions (perhaps of losing one’s job). Moreover, there is only one acceptable way to be a member of the gay community according to this and anyone who does not follow these commandments becomes categorized, even implicitly, as a “less developed” gay individual. While the final paragraph of this article tells the reader to follow the commandments that work for them, the final statement again makes it clear that by taking these actions it is you who will benefit through your own rights and freedoms.

Numerous articles in a variety of periodicals painted similar pictures of the need to come out, many of them focusing on the necessity of it and providing tools and tips to help individuals get through this difficult time in life. The necessity to come out for both political gains and personal happiness, while gaining popularity in the late 1960s throughout the 1970s (although some homophile organizations had been calling for this since the 1950s and before) have now
become a staple of the modern LGBTQ rights movement. In 2003, XY magazine created an entire issue dedicated to creating a “survival guide” to being gay, which involved entire sections dedicated to coming out, how to do it, and why it was necessary.

The argument from within the LGBTQ community for the need to come out largely stems from the reality that SOGI are often invisible identity categories. Therefore, unless you tell people, they may not realize you are part of that group. However, due to the focus solely on SOGI, other important factors related to questions of identity can often be overlooked and become absorbed by the “default” of white maleness (Ahmed, 2006; Crenshaw, 1991; Jasbir K. Puar, 2007, 2012). Despite being considered a paragon of proper identity development within the LGBTQ community, coming out has additional complications when questions of race, ethnicity, class, and religion are factored in that can all affect the ways that one’s coming out is both realized internally and accepted externally (Etengoff & Daiute, 2015; Gertler, 2014; Grov, Bimbi, Nanin, & Parsons, 2006). By centering on one monolithic notion of how and when one should come out, the most marginalized within the LGBTQ community are further cast aside as whiteness, maleness, and middle-classness become centered as the ideal queer individual.

**Creations/Reinforcements of Stereotypes**

Perhaps one of the more lasting impacts of the topics covered and the images used, created, and spread throughout LGBTQ periodicals is the creation of stereotypes as well as creating certain ideals of how, particularly gay, individuals are supposed to look and act. While modern media has expanded this to include stereotypes of lesbian, bisexual, and trans* individuals, throughout the periodicals I reviewed in this study, representation of women and trans* individuals was almost entirely absent. When lesbian women were included, the portrayals were significantly different than those of men and often focused on family, love, and political
activism compared to portrayals of men, which emphasized physical attractiveness and sexual promiscuity. Representations of women were also often secluded into their own separate publications almost exclusively targeting lesbian women. The Advocate, for example, covered issues that spoke to the entire LGBTQ community and often considered itself as a voice for all. Nevertheless, the majority of images in the issues examined were of men and were often very sexualized in nature. This erasure in and of itself is telling by showing the emphasis on gay men and how women and “gay rights” were often treated as separate entities. This division between gay men and the rest of the community will be explored in more depth later in this chapter in the section “Divisions Within.” This section will be focusing on the messages created about gay men regarding sexual desire and desirability of different individuals.

It’s Just Sex

Since many early social gatherings of gay men revolved around discrete sexual encounters, it is logical that there would be a heavy emphasis on sex, at least in the early days of these periodicals. Advertising throughout the 60s and 70s was very sexually explicit, regardless of message content (e.g., political messages). In a 1976 issue of The Barb, an article entitled “A Day with Sunshine” discusses the passage of an ordinance that would protect gay and lesbian individuals in Miami-Dade County; the article frames a large advertisement for the gay complex Parliament House (located in Orlando, FL) that is located in the middle of the page, almost as large as the text of the article. Using a high contrasting black and white, the advertising features a fully naked man sitting on a cheetah-patterned blanket (see Image 3). Over this image, there is dark text providing information about the gay bar and hotel. However, because of the dark font color and the brightness of the white model (and the fact that the text is laid out so that it frames his penis) the model (and more specifically his penis) is where the eye is first drawn.
Additionally, by juxtaposing this advertisement with an otherwise unrelated article, it implies that the two should be connected in some way. A careful reader of the article would understand it was applauding the passage of the ordinance and that it contained a critique of Anita Bryant; the casual reader would likely think it is an article merely promoting this venue.

Highly sexual advertisements are neither novel nor related only to the gay male population (Reichert & Lambiase, 2003), but centering the majority of ads around companies featuring overtly sexual images when not related to sex (i.e., not for a bathhouse or pornography) did work to link gay sexual identity with promiscuity and partying. While stereotypes of highly promiscuous gay men are still prevalent, they no longer hold the same social status as they once did within the gay community (“And They Call That Gay Pride?,” 2001; Swain, 2007). As the LGBTQ community began to gain legal and social acceptance throughout the 1970s these sexual practices began to become ostracized within the community. Even before the AIDS epidemic became visible and understood, the ways that articles discussed public sex had started to change drastically, albeit not unproblematically. In a March 1980 issue of The Advocate, the cover page (see Image 4) featured the headline “Tribal Rites of the Anonymous Bushman” in addition to several black-and-white photos and drawings of naked men (one man is fully clothed but has his trousers unzipped and his erect penis is exposed) standing in a lush green jungle. By placing these men within an overgrown jungle under the headline, this issue conjures up images of the numerous anthropological studies carried out in many colonized nations throughout the world, in which the “superior” Western scientist went to observe the “primitive” lifestyles of the indigenous peoples (L. T. Smith, 2012).

The issue continues with the standard “Opening Space” in which the publisher of the paper habitually included a general letter to the public with his views on an important topic.
(typically related to the main stories of that issue). This particular editorial centers on the questions of sexual responsibility, how much sex is too much, and the image that we portray to the world. The main moral of the message is that individuals who focus their sexual identity mainly on sexual encounters are irresponsible and are doing a disservice to themselves and the community as a whole; it is more important to show the world that you are a productive and contributing member of society. In this way public sex is considered off limits to him and sex within backrooms is demeaning (but not unforgivably so) (Goodstein, 1980). It is within this framing that the featured article of this issue is contextualized for the reader and given the title "Quick Encounters of the Closest Kind: The Bush League – The Rites and Rituals of Shadow Sex” and focused on exploring the complicated world of gay cruising in a sex club, building on Humphrey’s sociological study Tearoom Trade. The article then proceeds to relate the cruising culture to drug addicts before finally coming to the conclusion that it will never go away and seems to be a fundamental part of male sexuality (Willenbecher, 1980).

Moving forward two years, AIDS had begun to affect the gay urban community and was creating panic among the community and sexual promiscuity, particularly that within large metropolitan areas, became associated with both an outdated lifestyle and with new dangers. The month after featuring an article asking whether sex was dangerous for the urban gay male, The Advocate featured another issue exploring urban male sexuality with the title, “Manhattan Hunting Grounds,” featuring an image on the cover of the door to a seedy men’s bathroom presumably in the subway system of New York City. What follows are two side-by-side articles (placed top to bottom on the pages) that span 7 pages each: the top article entitled “Manhattan Hunting Grounds” and the bottom “The Synagogue, The Saint and the Mine Shaft.” Centered on the first page between these two articles is a black and white photo of a man in a
A Day With Sunshine

Edited by Chris Robinson from NEWSWEST

Miami-Dade County activist Robert Kunst successfully engineered the passage of the nation’s 38th city ordinance protecting the rights of gays. A unanimous yes vote on the bills first reading turned into a narrow 5-3 vote for final passage when former recording star Anita Bryant and Chicago Cubs coach Alvin Dark organized opposition to the ordinance.

Bryant, who won three gold records in the music industry in the 1960s, but has since turned to promoting orange juice and religion, immediately vowed to head a campaign for referendum repeal of the ordinance.

“I am very jealous of the moral atmosphere in which my children grow up,” the singer told the commission, reading a delegation of more than 500 angry opponents to the measure.

“I have tried to teach them the wrongs of discrimination in race and religion, but I will never allow them to grow up believing that sexuality is morally acceptable,” she said.

The new ordinance, the first passed in the nation in more than a year and the only one in the South, was introduced to the commission by Ruth Shack, a first-term member who credited the gay community with helping her to win her seat in the November election. Ironically, Shack is

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RESORT COMPLEX

WORLD’S LARGEST GAY ENTERTAINMENT CENTER

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In a Tahitian Setting
Piano Bar
Stable Levi Leather Bar

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Located at 410 N. O.
Blossom
Orlando 32805

Image 3: Advertisement for Parliament House from The Barb
Tribal Rites of the Anonymous Bushmen

Spring Fashion

The Ticket Admits You to An Uproar Over Opera and Interviews with Louis Jourdan Anne Baxter Ugo Tognazzi
trench coat standing at a urinal in the middle of a dilapidated public bathroom. The first article functions as an educational tool in helping the audience understand cruising culture and the second functions as a reminiscing of the lost Gemeinschaft of the past gay community in the wake of the new Gesellschaft of sexual liberation, increased social acceptance, and new and dangerous diseases (Tönnies, 2002). Both articles are followed by another article, “A Scholarly Taxi to the Toilets,” that features an interview with scholar Humprey’s about his work on gay cruising culture. The article concludes with the fact that this activity should be abandoned in favor of safer and more “prideful” sexual encounters. Interestingly the other featured article within the section highlights the lesbian experience in Chicago. Contrasting the portrayal of the sexual habits of gay men, the article on the women in Chicago portrays a diverse group of women who focus largely on issues of social justice and to create a diverse and changing community.

This distinction between different types of sexual activities and practices becomes important as it laid one of the foundations for differentiating between “good gays” and “bad gays,” a stereotype that exists to this day. According to Henderson (2013a), promiscuity and being unable to hamper one’s sexual desire often results in them being categorized as a bad gay, whereas good gays engage in a more limited, respectable type of sexual behavior. This split serves as one of the factors that has led to divisions and discriminations within the LGBTQ community, a topic that will be discussed more fully in the next section of this chapter.

*Let’s Get Physical*

In 1978, the iconic gay group The Village People released their hit single, “Macho Man,” featuring the following lyrics:

Every man wants to be a macho man
To have the kind of body always in demand

Joggin' in the mornings, go man go

Workouts in the health spa, muscles grow (Village People, 1978)

While now an often-parodied song, it does speak to what had become portrayed as the ideal body and personality types for gay men: muscular and masculine. While not explicitly stated within many articles, images in both articles and advertisements provide a clear indication of what comprised the “attractive” gay man. Similar to the lack of women and trans* individuals, there was a severe lack of representation for men of color, skinny, overweight, disabled, or feminine men in any type of gay imagery. While larger publications like The Advocate would occasionally publish articles that dealt with an issue related to one of these groups, most of these articles were almost always centered on the differences from those individuals and the “rest” of the community. Representations of gay people of color were (and still are) often in magazines or clubs targeting those groups or as part of an evening that fetishizes certain groups.

Understandably, having separate channels of representation specifically for groups that are historically underrepresented is not problematic, but the notion that those venues are specialized parties or publications while those that feature issues related to and images of predominantly white men are viewed as “standard” ones is problematic. Additionally, there appears to be a continued divide between masculine and feminine traits even within these specialized publications. The 2011 swimsuit issue of Swerv magazine, geared toward the African American LGBTQ community within the United States, featured two different covers (see Image 5). In comparison to such magazines as Sports Illustrated, which has consistently had different models on different covers of their swimsuit issues, Swerv has two strikingly different versions of their cover.
One of the covers (on the left) features a heavily muscled black man clad in leather and chains wearing sunglasses. The text is a crisp white and the model fills up almost the entire frame, even blocking the “e” in Swerv with his head. They are leaning up against a plain, dark grey background with nothing else in the frame other than a glimpse of the stool he was leaning on. The other image, however, features a light skinned, very feminine person wearing a bright pink one-piece bathing suit, large earrings, a scarf, and bangles. They are standing in front of a wall that is adorned with ivory and, compared with the other cover, appears diminutive in the frame, with her big hair piece not even nearing the top of the frame. Another distinct feature is that the majority of the font on this second image is a bright pink matching the swimsuit the model is wearing. Additionally, while the model in leather seems to be staring straight at us (it is hard to tell for sure with the sunglasses), the one in pink is staring off to the side seemingly unaware that they are subject to the audience’s gaze. These two covers provide a clear indication of what traits are more respected within this community—masculinity and masculinity.

Divisions Within

Despite often being described as a monolithic culture or group, the LGBTQ community has historically been anything but unified community regarding acceptance of diversity within. Much of this is enabled through media representations of LGBTQ individuals, both historically and contemporary, as well as within both mainstream and LGBTQ media outlets.

The Stonewall Riots began through the combined work of lesbians, transgender women, drag queens, and gay men (of all races and ethnicities). Regardless of this, it did not take long before the gay men (specifically gay white men) began to distance themselves from those they found to be “sissies” or harmful or irrelevant to their agenda. This was done in a variety of ways...
throughout the media, including both a lack of representation and a purposeful exclusion. One of the groups that was very directly excluded was women. Most of representations were (and largely still are) of white, muscular men focused mainly on attracting male clients.

When women were represented within news outlets that were not specifically just for lesbians, there was backlash and resentment from within the gay, male community as one letter to the editor pointed out within a 1978 issue of The Advocate:

I resent strongly being forced to read lesbian news which you have incorporated within The ADVOCATE. While cramming lesbianism down the readers’ throat may make you richer, I for one won’t continue to read The ADVOCATE. I find it distasteful. The least you could do is put the lesbian news in one fold-out section. As a homosexual I consider what you are doing no better than what the heterosexuals do by attempting to indirectly
force their lifestyle on everybody. (Name Witheld, 1978)

Indeed, this is not necessarily representative of the majority of individuals within the LGBTQ community. Nonetheless, this letter does speak to a divide that has existed within media between gay men and women and continues to exist to this day. (Jotanovic, 2017)

In 2015, Roland Emmerich directed the film Stonewall, a semi-fictional story depicting the birth of the LGBTQ rights movement during the Stonewall Riots. The movie created a fictional character of Danny as the main character who the film follows and who ultimately starts the riots. Danny is the epitome of white, cis-male privilege who, according to Emmerich was created in order to provide a window into the LGBTQ community (Ginelle, 2015; Ramirez, 2015). The film follows Danny as he moves from Indiana to New York City after being disowned by his family, something that has been considered almost a gay imperative.

Even though gay sex has been continuously present in all areas of the country throughout history, there existed a presumed notion during this era of the 70s and 80s that those who did not live in a major city such as New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, or San Francisco were oppressed and thus were somewhat stunted within their gay development (Herring, 2010; Howard, 2001). This sentiment is expressed throughout many of the articles throughout the 1970s and 1980s, not always overtly but usually subtly. For instance, the Laconic Commands article from The Barb previously discussed in this chapter, there is never a command that one must move to a city, but many of the commands (such as support gay businesses) require one to live within a gay ghetto. A 1970s issue of Come Out! (produced by the gay liberation front) included a supplement that discussed the idea of gay liberation that contained a “gay manifesto” that spoke of the importance of having gay ghettos and stated that San Francisco had become a gay refuge.

These factors combined began to make a very clear gay ideal, achievable by white,
cisgender, masculine men while others were purposefully excluded through the guise of sexual “preferences.” Within personal ads placed in newspapers, phrases like “no S/M [sadomasochism], fats, fems [sic], or weirdos,” “white male.... looking for sincere friend and companionship for sex with other white male,” and “seeking lover. Must be white, to early 30’s,m about 6’, masculine, muscular…” were commonplace. These individuals desired the models they saw in the ads because that was how desirability in the gay community became branded. This is not to state this was accepted by all, and it was frequently challenged throughout many different publications as critiquing the “clones” -- those who tried to live the epitome of what they saw in the advertisements as “gay culture.” In 1984, Howard Cruse and Roberta Gregory published an issue of “Gay Comix” that featured a strip entitled “Cabbage Patch Clone” (see Image 6), which follows an attractive, white, masculine man who orders one of these dolls. When the doll is just there for his pleasure, he enjoys it; eventually the doll begins to talk, thus making the relationship complicated and resulting in the man kicking the doll out the window.

A more direct critique of representation and privileging certain bodies over others came in a 1995 issue of The Advocate that featured a three-page advertisement critiquing the images prevalent within gay advertising (see Image 7). The advertisement starts out by stating “A very special gay pride message brought to you by your community’s publishers, advertisers, merchants, clothiers, and club owners…” and then directs the reader to turn the page. On the next page is a collage of images of white, muscular, naked men around the text “If you don’t look like the men on these pages… you’re a worthless piece of shit.” The next page features more similar images and includes a “post” from a message board online showcasing the high priority of looks within the gay community.

From the early days of the homophile movements, the LGBTQ population has used
Image 6: Final page of the “Cabbage Patch Clones” comic from Gay Comix, 1984
media to help form communities. This has been with both positive and negative cultural remnants of the LGBTQ community to this day. Since LGBTQ publications primarily began as organizational newsletters, it is important to understand that consistently politics and education about LGBTQ history have been at the core of LGBTQ publications. In addition to politics, forming personal connections with others has been central to the mission of LGBTQ periodicals. One of these political messages has been about the importance of coming out. Coming out has often been viewed as a LGBTQ imperative; this was the case since before Stonewall and the media has placed a high priority and high visibility on this action. It has been necessary to live a legitimate LGBTQ lifestyle and not be viewed as being repressed or under-developed. However,

Image 7: Critique of images used within LGBTQ media that appeared in a 1995 issue of The Advocate

many of these narratives have been framed around the white, cisgender, and masculine experience in a way that obscures difference within the LGBTQ community and oppresses those who do not fit the dominate narratives.
Chapter 3 – Testing the Waters
Coming Out in a Hypermediated Age

“Once they realize that we are indeed their children, that we are indeed everywhere, every myth, every lie, every innuendo will be destroyed once and all. And once you do, you will feel so much better”

~Harvey Milk

Coming out has long held a central prominence within the LGBTQ rights movement, as was discussed within the previous chapter. Politics was often an underlying (or even overt) reason for LGBTQ people to come out to those that they know. One of the other messages that has been at the heart of the push to come out is the idea that things will be better for you afterwards. I know this was what I had been told when I was struggling with coming out, and while in some respects it does get better, there are also many times when other aspects of your life can become worse. I was fortunate that when I did eventually come out (albeit later in life) I had an accepting group of friends and family; however, that is not always the case for many people – including several of those who I interviewed for this project.

When a young person is grappling with their sexuality, it is a particularly nerve-wracking and confusing time in their life, with individuals usually starting to experience these sexual feelings as young as 13, but usually not coming to accept their sexual orientation until many years later (Grov et al., 2006). While general acceptance in the United States for LGBTQ individuals has grown over the past several decades, there are still many LGBT individuals who are grappling with this – many of whom face the very real threat of violence and bullying due
solely to their sexual orientation (Owens, 2015). Despite this, or perhaps in an attempt to combat this, there has been a growing trend of individuals coming out at younger ages (Goodman, 2013). Nevertheless, this declaration of sexual orientation in not a guarantee of a positive experience (Solomon et al., 2015).

In light of the potential turmoil and negative consequences that can fill this process of coming out, in recent years there has been an increase in generativity from those who have already come out as LGBT to help others who are struggling with doing the same, which led to the now famous “It Gets Better” (IGB) campaign (Savage & Miller, 2012). IGB consisted of individuals sharing their stories about how life improved for them in after coming out with the hope that this would provide encouragement for teenagers contemplating suicide thinking that the bullying they were currently facing would follow them for the rest of their lives. This inspired another form of sharing, which became a lot more personal. Rather than merely describing their experiences during and after coming out, individuals started setting up cameras to candidly record themselves coming out “live” to their family members, which are then shared through social media, especially through the video sharing site YouTube. This has been done at least partially to help others who might be struggling to do the same thing; it is also possible, though, that this is just the latest step for attention from a society that values the drama of reality television and “self-help” talk shows as popular forms of entertainment.

**Phases of Coming Out**

Coming out stories have become a staple within films and television shows that deal with LGBTQ characters, to the point that they have become prioritized over any other type of story dealing with LGBTQ characters (Henderson, 2013a). While indeed a historically and politically significant aspect of LGBTQ culture, unfortunately, the emphasis on coming out can become
problematic for several reasons. The first is that the issues and concerns surrounding one’s coming out are not universal, with those individuals who were raised in a strict religious environment or part of an already marginalized racial or ethnic group reporting more difficulty with coming out and acceptance (Etengoff & Daiute, 2015; Grov et al., 2006). This was an issue that arose in many of my interviews with the participants who had been raised in a religious environment and/or those who were part of an ethnic or racial minority.

One of the other issues in the way that coming out is often described or shown is that it creates a dichotomy – one is either in or they are out. It is often framed as a singular moment, usually when one reveals their SOGI to their parents. After that moment one is often regarded as being “out” whereas before one is regarded as being “in the closet” -- independent of the number of individuals to whom they have disclosed this information. This becomes problematic in the sense that the actual reality of coming out becomes obscured by implying that there is ever such a thing as being completely “out.” Rather than being a sole, defining moment that separates those who are out and those who are not (which is often regarded as being socially stunted, as was previously discussed), coming out is a continual process that never truly ends for the entirety of one’s life. This may get easier the more comfortable one gets with their own SOGI, but it is still a fact that when one meets someone for the first time, one’s membership in the LGBTQ community is not a known fact; moreover, it is a fact that the individual may choose not to disclose given its potentially negative ramifications.

Social media, considering its ability to connect us with others in faster and more pervasive ways than ever before, is amplifying this conundrum that LGBTQ individuals face. Now, every single friend request and post becomes a potential way to come out to a new person. In this way one is never fully out, but rather being LGBTQ is a process of continually coming
out. With the prevalence and importance of social media within today’s society, each post and privacy setting becomes a potential way to out oneself to someone new. In one way, this is helpful in that the “outing” can occur before one even meets someone or can help to aid in creating a mass coming out, as some of my participants utilized Facebook to do. Alternatively, as some of my participants experienced, it opens new ways to accidentally out oneself to unintended audiences.

Given these reasons, one of the arguments that I intend to put forth is that coming out needs to be thought of as a continual process, rather than a single event. Additionally, it needs to be thought of as beginning earlier than traditionally perceived (disclosing one’s SOGI to family or close friends); the process begins when individuals first come out to themselves. In every interview I conducted, respondents discussed how this was an initial hurdle of varying difficulty. However, for most, social media proved to be an important and contributing factor to this self-revelation – a topic that will be explored later in this chapter.

Interviews were conducted in two phases. The first was to engage in a casual conversation with each participant about their social media usage and their SOGI. Second, this was followed by a semi-structured interview in which I had each person vividly describe their coming out experience in a detailed manner, from the moments immediately preceding that instant up through present day. The questions focused on their feelings and emotional experience during the time, rather than just factual accounts of their coming out experiences. In addition to their coming out experience, we discussed media usage (both traditional and social/digital) at each stage of coming out. Individuals were prompted to “Tell me about when [they] first realized that [they] were gay, lesbian, or bisexual.” Later in the interview, the participants were also asked to “Tell me about when [they] came out for the first time.” While
seemingly straight-forward questions, they proved rather difficult to answer; this was particularly true for gay men and for the first question.

One of the obvious reasons for this difficulty is the time that had lapsed since this realization occurred to present day – even for those individuals who recently came out to anyone. Individuals commonly answered by explaining how reflectively they can now see signs of their SOGI at a very young age.

**Coming Out as Therapeutic Confession**

Before fully delving into the role of social media in the coming out process, it is important to examine the theoretical frameworks that can help us understand the coming out process in general. The previous chapter outlined the history of how coming out developed into a political action in the late 20th century, but the idea of coming out has roots dating much farther back, arguably to the Catholic ritual of the confession. Additionally, Catholic confession has had a long history pertaining to sexuality. It is through examining the idea of coming out through Foucault’s discourse about confession that we can begin to see both the power that coming out can have for individuals, as well as the power exerted by society upon those individuals by forcing them to come out. The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one’s crimes, one’s sins, one’s thoughts and desires, one’s illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision whatever is most difficult to tell (Foucault, 1990, p. 59).

Foucault goes on to discuss the ways in which the act of confession can be a freeing act (Foucault, 1990), much like the way that Milk described coming out as having a liberatory power. Taken literally, it could be easy to dismiss Foucault’s discussion of confession as
referring only to a Catholic priest, but what is underlying in all of this is that one confesses that which is not normal. When someone’s thoughts or actions conform to the societal norms, there is no need to confess them to anyone as they are assumed; it is when they deviate from those norms that a confession is mandated – either by the self, society, or both.

This notion that we need to confess the inner turmoil or differences that we have, has become a central component of the therapeutic culture that pervades so much of US popular culture (Bellah, 1996). “We have seen that therapy has developed an acute concern for the monitoring and managing of inner feelings and emphasizes their expression in open communication” (Bellah, 1996, p. 138). This is something easy to see within our current popular media environment with such successful shows such as Dr. Phil, Dr. Oz, and The Doctors (just to name a few) that offer pop psychology advice about how to get in touch with and express our feelings. It is not enough to become comfortable with our feelings -- in order to be truly happy individuals, we need to express these feelings to the world, which, in turn, needs to accept us for these to respect our individuality.

There is a tension that exists between the supposedly liberatory act of openly expressing one’s SOGI to the world and the fact that this declaration is only forced upon those who do not confine to the cisgender, heteronormative expectations placed upon them by society. This ambivalence was expressed by most of the individuals I interviewed for this project. In some regards, they described the moments after coming out as cathartic (particularly those who had recently come out). Alternatively, although not always clearly expressed, there was a sense of othering that everyone felt, due to the demand placed upon them to come out. It became clear that while clearly having personal liberatory potential, because of assumed reality of proscribed compulsory heterosexuality (Ahmed, 2006) that the coming out process still functions in order to
separate LGBTQ individuals from their “normal” counterparts (Foucault, 1990). Coming out is, therefore, almost exclusively discussed regarding its potential for liberation, while ignoring the complex societal structures that it serves to reinforce.

It is in this way that we can begin to understand that coming out is not solely a political action as had once been called for by activists like Harvey Milk (including more contemporary activist organizations during the recent fight for marriage equality), but it by virtue an intensely personal action crucial for being truly happy and authentic. This tends to ignore the fact that there are cultural factors (such as ethnicity and religious beliefs) that play a significant role in both the coming out timeline and reception of such (Etengoff & Daiute, 2015; Grov et al., 2006). This push for individuals to come out and be “authentic” can also create anxiety with some individuals not feeling ready to come out or choosing to delay for a variety of reasons, often related to a complex set of conflicting identities (Grov et al., 2006; Owens, 2015; Solomon et al., 2015).

Despite an increase in visibility from people listening to the calls of leaders of the LGBT Rights movement throughout the 1970s, times only became more challenging for gay men when the AIDS epidemic erupted in the 1980s. Several acts were eventually signed into law by President William H. Clinton: Don’t Ask Don’t Tell and the Defense of Marriage Act. These laws helped to solidify LGBT individuals as second-class citizens and would remain as laws until 2010 and 2013, respectively. Additionally, problems of bullying LGBT youth continue to be a problem, resulting in high rates of suicide for this population due to the hopelessness that many of them feel (Remafedi et al., 1991).

In direct response to the crisis concerning these high rates of suicide due to bullying for LGBT youth, columnist Dan Savage and his partner, Terry Miller, created a video about
their coming out in 2010 that they uploaded to YouTube. This was done to preach their message that the bullying will not last and that life will get better, because, according to Savage “all of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender adults [he] knew were leading rich and rewarding lives” (Savage and Miller, 2012: 3). Savage describes in his book that he felt compelled to do something about this latest tragedy to strike the LGBT community, and it was through the affordances of YouTube that he was able to reach a large audience and launch a massive campaign that has resulted in hundreds of shared videos, all of people telling their stories of how “things got better.” In the meantime, while we work to make our schools safer, we can and should use the tools we have at our disposal right now – social media and YouTube and this book – to get messages of hope to kids who are suffering right now in schools that do not have GSAs and to kids whose parents bully and reject them for being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. (Savage and Miller, 2012: 7)

That is not to say that IGB is without fault, as it has fallen under a lot of criticism for focusing only on a few types of stories, while possibly further marginalizing other groups (Wight, 2014). Despite some of its flaws, it is still generally seen as a positive step forward in helping to intervene in the lives of these at-risk youth (Goltz, 2013). This mediated generativity in which LGBTQ individuals who grew up feeling isolated wish to act as positive role models for others who may be feeling the same way, regardless of interpersonal familiarity (Goltz, 2013), has recently taken on a new form in individuals setting up (usually) hidden cameras to capture their actual coming out experience on video to share with others through social networking sites. These “live” coming out videos both spread awareness and sensitivity to LGBT issues, as well as reinforce specific heteronormative and neoliberal values and beliefs.
Coming Out & Media Representations

Videos depicting candid moments of coming out also function as models for individuals who are deciding whether to come out in a way that allows them to experience the process firsthand before committing to their own version of the process. While this is not new to social media and coming out stories have existed within media for a while (e.g., “The Puppy Episode” from Ellen in 1997 when her character came out) (R. Becker, 2006) the realness purported by these videos has added an additional element of authenticity to viewers to help offer them hope. This is not to state that one venue of representation takes priority or is more effective or useful than the others. However, based on the interviews with my participants, they do have different uses – traditional media was good for gauging others’ opinions and digital/new media was good for gaining confidence and a sense of identity.

One of the most recurring themes throughout all the interviews was the notion that popular media representations were useful for two reasons. The first was that these representations reduced a sense of exclusion and often became some of the first positive exposures to LGBTQ individuals. This concept is not really anything new, but does speak to the importance that representation has for individuals who have historically been underrepresented. Almost all people I spoke with were coming to realize their sexual or gender identities within the 1990s or early 2000s, a period of time of increased representation of LGBTQ individuals within mainstream television shows (R. Becker, 2006). More than just providing a sense of belonging or understanding, another empowering usage of these television shows and movies was that it gave a safe way for individuals to test out the reactions or opinions of their families before deciding whether to come out.

As popular media representations of LGBTQ individuals became increasingly common
throughout the 90s and into the 2000s, the ability to discuss, or even co-view, shows that featured LGBTQ characters and dealt with issues for the LGBTQ community became much easier. I remember in 2005, before I was out to family or friends, being able to discuss *Brokeback Mountain* with people helped me gauge how they felt about gay people in a way that felt safe and did not out myself. Not only was this an issue with face-to-face conversations, but posting about LGBTQ-related media or issues became an area of concern for individuals engaging with social media – an issue that will be discussed in greater length in a later section in this chapter.

**Finding oneself online**

In thinking of the impact that social media and the Internet have had on the coming out process, the leading factor has arguably been the ability for individuals to find information and connect with other LGBTQ individuals. Throughout my interviews, one of the most reoccurring themes was the power of media (in a variety of forms) in the initial coming out phase – when they came out to themselves. While many of the gay men I interviewed discussed the importance of mainstream representations of gay men in shows such as *Queer as Folk, Will & Grace*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, many others expressed the importance of social media and the Internet in learning to understand their identity. Particularly for those with non-cis-gender identities or those who did not fall neatly into either side of the perceived homo-/heterosexual dichotomy, the Internet, and particularly being able to talk with others who identified similarly to them, become a paramount and elucidating experience for them. Gemma, who identifies as an asexual, biromantic, cisgender woman, explained how it was through social media that she learned about asexuality:

I actually learned about the term asexuality from Tumblr. It’s not something that’s very
well known, even within the LGBTQ community. And when it is it is often excluded. I found the term probably when I was around 16 or 17. And it ate at my mind long enough so I finally googled it. And I found one of the main resource sites: The Asexual Visibility and Education Network. And so, on that, I found a forum and I found someone who was active on that forum and I started messaging her and asked about her experiences. This was when I was still trying to figure out if the term was right for me. Because, one of the hardest things I’ve found among other Ace people I’ve met is that it is really hard to determine if you are asexual when you’ve never known sexual attraction…you wonder “have I felt it and don’t know it?” (personal communication, January 29, 2018)

Avery, who identifies as non-binary and pansexual, also explained the importance of being able to connect with others through social media:

When I started to basically only use Twitter when I had moved home and was feeling very alone, I ended up connecting with people online. Most of whom were some flavor of trans* or something. A lot of us figured out in time, a lot of us who thought we were cisgender figured out. We learned a lot of different terms. I was probably identifying as non-binary about a year into that. (personal communication, January 30, 2018)

The one thing in common between all these different experiences is that it was only through having access to talk with, and learn from, others within the LGBTQ community who were not being afforded the same representation as others that they were able to start to understand their own feelings and life experiences. After benefiting from these groups, these individuals then joined in or started their own groups/forms of outreach to help others like themselves, illustrating Bellah’s observation about how

The therapeutic conception of community grows out of an old strand of American culture
that sees social life as an arrangement for the fulfillment of the needs of individuals. In a ‘community of interest,’ self-interested individuals join together to maximize individual good. (1996, p. 134)

Belonging to these groups not only helped to create an understanding of self, but also an understanding of a sense of community. While seeking out these forums and groups was common amongst the trans*, poly, and asexual individuals that I spoke with, it was not the case with the gay and lesbian men and women who often cited becoming aware of their identity first through mainstream media before exploring gay and lesbian spaces online.

The one online resource that did come up as being an early source of educational and explorational material for young gay men was online pornography. This was not discussed in many of the interviews at great length (except for three individuals who spoke about it quite frankly), but was often hinted at, usually toward the very end of the interviews and observations. Those who did discuss it, expressed how access to free pornography on the Internet became a learning moment about what being gay meant to them. This often was relevant in determining sexual preferences and the types of guys (and sex) in which the individual became interested. For example, Sean, who is Asian-American and identifies as a gay, cisgender male, expressed how pornography and parties were his first conscious forays into gay culture and was likely one of the notable reasons that led to him being attracted to bears ix.

That was more a lot online. The random porn. This was more in high school. So, it was more finding online stuff. The 90s was when it started, when the whole bear culture started. I remember the International Bear Conference (IBC) and…websites would just have it. Like Shutterbear would go to all the, kind of, social group stuff and post all of that online. So that’s where all the online stuff is where I started to get into that. And just
as in high school, I noticed the more burley guys more…the wrestlers, you know the football players. Along with all of the interest online sparked all of that. That, and it was the same, I didn’t want to be the typical type. I had seen all the...the *Queer as Folk* and everything else, because I wasn’t ready to come out at that point. All of that influence was, “Oh god, oh god…If I’m interested in that…if I’m going with that…that means I’m gay.” So in the sexual development, I was looking for everything that was the exact opposite of that.

While it makes sense that since the realization of one being gay often arises as one approaches puberty (and thus an awakening sexual attraction), the fact that pornography viewed at a young age features so prevalently into future sexual attraction is important to consider. It also speaks to a different way that individuals can find information and connections through social media based on their gender or sexual identity. While this is not to suggest a lack of non-pornographic or non-sexual social media sites for gay men, those sexual ones far outnumber the non-sexual ones. In fact, even sites such as Tumblr, Facebook, and Instagram, which almost every participant stated using, have distinct purposes for different people and were often used by gay men for some type of sexual purpose. Tumblr was often cited, albeit reluctantly, as being used for free pornography – particularly when searching for certain fetishes that may not be represented within a lot of pornographic sites.

Although pornography could seem trivial to some, the enlightening factor of pornography for young gay men has not functioned substantially different than the way others were using chatrooms, billboard services, and discussion threads – they worked to provide a common language and vocabulary. While popular media did work to help some people’s realization of their SOGI (mostly sexual), it was largely upon having private, heterotopic spaces away from the
rest of (hetero-cis) society that allowed for a free and open space for individuals to explore their own identity when they were unsure how they fit within the larger society. Foucault referred to these spaces as crisis heterotopias -- “privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis” (1984, p. 4). While Foucault felt that these spaces were disappearing, it is clear to me that in the digital world, at least for LGBTQ individuals, they are thriving as spaces, unbound by geography providing refuge for those who feel as outcasts from the rest of society.

**Of Queer Spaces and Vocabulary**

A recurring key theme throughout my interviews was the importance of having “safe” spaces of self-discovery. While there have long been ways for LGBTQ individuals to meet with others like themselves (e.g., bars, bathhouses, private gatherings, political organizing, etc.), ripping these spaces from the constraints of geography provides an extra level of security for those individuals who are questioning their fit within society. Queer spaces surely contain some element of risk involved, however; for instance, while gay bars provided a secure place for queer individuals to meet, they were often also constantly at risk for being raided by police, which contained the very real risk of a public outing. If you were lucky enough not to be in the bar when it was raided, there still existed the risk of being spotted when walking into the bar or related space. Digital spaces reduce (although not eliminate) the risk of accidental or unintentional outing, since they occur virtually and in the privacy of one’s own home.

These spaces function for two main reasons. First, they provide a space and a sense of belonging with social support. Suicide attempts amongst LGBTQ youth are very high compared with other youth demographics, and one of the biggest risk factors associated with this is a sense of social isolation (Remafedi et al., 1991). This holds especially true for individuals who are non-
gender conforming, since that often increases a sense of difference amongst peers (Remafedi et al., 1991). During a time of isolation, bullying, and harassment, these digital heterotopias can offer a place of acceptance and inclusion. Cameron, who identifies as a queer heteroflexible, trans* man, explained how having these safe spaces online saved his life:

I guess my first experience with social media would be YouTube. When I was 14 years old, I discovered YouTube was starting to become a bit bigger at that point and time, started to kind of takeoff. And that is when I started watching videos of other queer people. Even though queer wasn’t even really a word that we used then…this was probably around 2008 or 2009. I came across a video of this guy that I was subscribed to and it was “What is the T in LGBT” and that is when I learned the word transgender for the first time. I had heard the terms transvestite, transsexual, cross-dresser, tranny, shit like that growing up…and at that point on I realized what the hell I was. I grew up very confused, isolated, paranoid, didn’t really have a word for it, and then I was like…it just hit me like a ton of bricks. I didn’t have to think twice about it. I was like, damn. And from there I kind of used YouTube to post my own content. Creating videos, a collaboration channel with other trans* teenagers. We kind of posted on trans* issues, topics. Through there I was able to form meetups, like in real life…and now I don’t make YouTube videos anymore. Most of them are just private only I can see them…I’m trying to tip-toe the line of whether or not I want to be stealth…. If it wasn’t for social media I don’t know if I would be sitting here today. I don’t know if I would be alive. The fact that I was able to get on the Internet and find that there were other people out there like me, saved my life completely. (personal communication, January 31, 2018)

More than just providing spaces to talk with other LGBTQ individuals, through mediums such as
YouTube, these heterotopias also provided forums for queer people to proselytize messages of love and acceptance, as well as to share their own stories.

While there is not one specific type of video that exists, one of the most powerful ones that my interviewees spoke about was candid coming out videos. While the standard testimonial videos as offered by campaigns such as IGB were also discussed as helpful, these candid coming out videos were often referred to as being more authentic and real, and thus resonating more with people. Since these videos were so influential among those I spoke with, it seems necessary to examine the work that they are doing in more detail, particularly the expectations that they set up and reinforce about the coming out process.

**Coming Out Live**

One of the driving factors for Savage to create his YouTube video was that he did not necessitate specific permissions from parents or educators to reach out to these kids – a permission that he felt would never be granted if requested.

In the era of social media – in a world with YouTube and Twitter and Facebook – I could speak directly to LGBT kids now. I didn’t need permission from parents or an invitation from a school. I could look into a camera, share my story, and let LGBT kids know that it got better for me and it would get better for them too. I could give ‘em hope. (Savage & Miller, 2012, p. 4)

These affordances offered by the technologies readily available form a relatively low barrier to enter the world of video production on YouTube – one only needs access to a high-speed Internet connection and a computer or a smartphone. This provides access for numerous individuals to share their stories on YouTube and, by extension, much of the Internet, as the content uploaded to YouTube frequently is spread to other sites (e.g., Facebook, blogs) where others can interact
with it in ways previously unavailable through interpersonal communication alone (Jenkins, 2008). As discussed earlier, this is exactly what has been occurring within LGBTQ youth and young adults, as they are no longer sharing their stories and messages of hope (a sentiment called for by both Milk and Savage), but rather are recording their actual coming out experience and uploading it for thousands to view and discuss. This is in part functioning in a way to brand themselves in order to, according to Sarah Banet-Weiser (2011, p. 278), “communicate personal values, ideas, and beliefs using strategies and logic from consumer culture, and one that is increasingly normative in the contemporary neoliberal environment.”

Often these videos are described as “coming out live,” and claim to capture, usually using a hidden camera, the moment that these individuals come out to a family member. It is interesting to note that none of the videos that I observed (13 different individuals coming out and 15 videos total) constituted the first coming out of an individual, but often usually was the first time they came out to a family member, with them having come out to one or two friends prior to this recording.

To purposively mimic the browsing that one might do when searching for videos to watch, I used the search terms “Coming Out Live” in YouTube’s search feature and then used the autoplay feature to choose the other videos to be included in my analysis. This resulted in 13 different videos for a total of 195 minutes of footage. Additionally, I did no research on the individuals who uploaded these videos to determine any cultural factors that may influence the content of the video. My justification for this is that I aimed to understand what images and icons circulate in the culture regarding the coming out experience, particularly those that may be perceived as being authentic representations of this practice, as is the case in these videos. While the background of the individuals making these videos may play a role in the way that person
chose to come out, it does not impact the way the audience will decode these videos. Notably, no other search terms (e.g., gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual) were added that would potentially unnecessarily narrow or refine the search further. This searching method resulted in a prominent majority of videos representing cisgender, white men coming out as gay; the remaining videos consisted of one woman coming out to her grandparents as a lesbian, and two transgender individuals [one Male to Female (MTF) and the other one Female to Male (FTM)] coming out to their mother and sister, respectively. While it is theoretically possible that different search terms would have resulted in different videos to surface, it is important to examine the location and accessibility of these coming out experiences given the criticisms of the IGB campaign. There was additionally very little ethnoracial diversity represented, an important factor that will be discussed in more detail in chapter four.

One of the most striking observations from these videos was the consistent format they followed: some type of introduction explaining what the individual would be doing (occasionally via text on the screen, but most often by speaking directly to the camera) and some type of concluding remarks from the individual. This was always done in the same physical location as the actual coming out. and these elements helped to frame and bookend the actual coming out portion of the video. This works to solidify the notion that coming out is a planned process that needs to be thought-out ahead of time, reinforcing one of the findings that Manning (2015) discovered in his examination of personal recollections of coming out. This is partially due to the nature of these videos as they require the setup of some type of recording device, but it also speaks to the importance attributed to this action – that it should be carefully considered and thought out, not something done in the spur of the moment.

Once past the introductions, the actual coming out process was remarkably similar in the
videos. Almost all of them begin with the individual letting their family member know, either on camera or off camera to get them into the location for filming, that they have someone important to talk to them about. What followed was typically a few moments of anxiety on behalf of the individual as they are struggling to figure out how to tell their parent or siblings about their SOGI. This was heightened in importance by asking questions related to how much they loved them or reminding them of when they had previously told them they loved them. This helps to situate this as a very serious event that, since it is happening “live” has the potential to go poorly. In many of the instances the family member, typically a parent, would be concerned that their child had committed some crime or was in serious danger. This nervousness was often present even when the individual coming out knew of their family’s acceptance of homosexuality. In the one instance of the woman who came out as lesbian to her grandparents, the preview to the video sets up her nervousness to the audience before she calls them. Once they are overwhelmingly accepting of her, she ends the video by telling the audience that she should have known that they would be accepting due to the fact that one of her family members was gay and that they had always been very active in the LGBTQ rights movement (BriaAndChrissy, 2015). A skeptical view of this video would suggest that she had purposively misled the audience to increase the tension; it is also likely, though, that despite knowing her grandparent’s history (if she was in fact aware of this before she came out), she was still afraid that it would be different for her – a painful fact that individuals are often confronted with that their parents may accept homosexuality in others but not in their own offspring.

There were a few videos that did not contain this element of anxiety and the individual comes out in a much more jovial manner. However, potentially due to this, these videos give the feeling of being less authentic – perhaps because they do not fit the ascribed norm of the very
serious matter of this issue. This perception could also be due to an incongruency between these less serious stories and my own personal experiences, causing me to feel skeptical as to their authenticity.

Even though there is quite a bit of set-up to the videos, the declaration that “I’m gay” or “lesbian” or “transgender” typically appears very early in the videos, with the remainder of the time containing a discussion between the two or more individuals. This discussion almost always consisted of the individual who had come out asking their family member (typically a parent) about their thoughts, desiring to get instant approval. This was a desire that was often gratified; two videos were an exception in which the father did not wish to discuss the topic: one not feeling the need to (ClickHole, 2015), and another wishing to have more time to contemplate and assess his feelings (Brooklyn Beauty, 2013).

The talking points were very similar in most of the videos, with one of the most common ones was a discussion of whether the family member had already known. What often resulted was the explanation that they had known, but that it was not their place to ask. It should be noted here that this was not the case with the two transgender individuals who came out, and this conversation did not happen in either of those videos. This also seems to support the findings of Manning (2015), in which he discovered that relatively few people were pulled out of the closet, but that it was almost always the individual making the decision to disclose their sexuality, even when family members or friends suspected. This also reinforced the ritualistic notion of the event as it rarely happens spontaneously, but is instead a carefully planned event, regardless of the receiving party’s awareness of this secret.

Since there are major similarities between coming out and the religious confessional, it is important to examine the important power dynamic involved in this act that unfortunately
Manning does not address when articulating his typology of coming out (Manning, 2015). As evidenced in these videos, and drawing upon the work of Manning, it is clear that there is a power differential between the individual coming out and the person for whom they are doing this. We must consider the words of Foucault on the importance of confession, but we must also remember that the subject being confessed is typically outside of what is considered normal behavior. Here we can see the individual struggling with their SOGI must confess to “abnormality” to their loved ones in hopes of receiving some type of absolution (in the form of acceptance) for this disclosure. There is a tangible power dynamic involved with family member having the ability to offer acceptance and the one confessing feeling compelled to have to do so.

In addition to the format of how one comes out being ritualistic, there additionally seems to be a ritualized dialogue that has developed, especially between parents and their LGBTQ children, that also seems to conscribe a particular type of coming out that has become acceptable. Arguably the most nerve-wracking coming out experience is when one comes out to one’s parents, especially for a teenager who lives at home and is financially dependent upon the support of their parents. This is likely why the individuals in the videos that are the most nervous to reveal this part of their identity are the ones who are coming out to their parents. For this reason, I will be focusing on the discourse that has become ritualistic between parents and their LGBTQ children, clearly noting, though, that these discourses were not the same as when coming out to siblings or grandparents.

A major theme that arises from the dialogue between the parents and their children post coming out is how dangerous and bigoted the world is for those within the LGBTQ community. This topic appeared several times in each of the videos that contained a lengthy conversation between the parents and the children. An often-expressed sentiment from the one coming out
was the idea that this life was not a chosen one, and if the individual could, he/she would
“obviously” choose the path of being straight. The parents also expressed similar concerns and
made it clear that they were not disappointed in this revelation, but that it did worry them as the
world is not a safe place for LGBTQ individuals, making it a particularly challenging life – a
sentiment distinct from that expressed in the IGB videos. Albeit seemingly good intentioned on
the behalf of the parents (who do not know that they are being recorded), this statement does
serve to reinforce the idea that life is harder for LGBTQ individuals, which, despite the best of
intentions from these video producers, could lead to those struggling with their sexuality to feel
that life is hopeless – especially if they are legitimately concerned about serious, negative
consequences from their parents.

Another commonality between these videos, especially the ones of gay men coming out
to a parent, was the assertion that he was a still a virgin. While it could be easy to dismiss this
statement as simply a teenager being uncomfortable discussing their sex life with their parents, I
do not think it is that simple. This statement serves two main purposes in reasserting both the
masculinity of the child as well as their prescription to the main heteronormative, Protestant
values embedded within mainstream American cultures: monogamy and chastity. By reasserting
their chastity, the men are essentially reassuring their parents that they have not yet been
penetrated, an action that is often viewed as a threat to masculinity. This confirmation of
virginity seems to also work to distance themselves from the gay male stereotypes of hyper-
sexualized lifestyles that are at odds with the very heteronormative values of monogamy and
family (Halberstam, 2005).

Throughout all the videos, there was notable discomfort for all parties involved. Since
many parents expressed prior suspicions about SOGI, it was clear they had anxiety about the day
that this conversation would finally happen. All the parents who indicated prior knowledge or suspicion also indicated feeling a sense of inappropriateness on their part to broach the topic. Additionally, one of the parents had indicated previous preparation for such a day by watching coming out videos on YouTube (mallow610, 2012). This suggests that not only are these videos important to the individuals who are struggling with how to come out, but rather they also have the potential to become important for informing individuals’ reactions.

No videos of an individual coming out as bisexual results from this search. This is interesting to note, especially in light of the criticisms of the IGB campaign highlighting certain kinds of individuals’ stories over others, excluding other groups and, therefore, leading them to further feelings of marginality (Wight, 2014). As a group that is largely marginalized from both their heterosexual and their homosexual counterparts (Mohr & Rochlen, 1999), bisexuals stand to benefit from seeing positive representations. This marginalization of bisexuality is also evident when looking at user comments on the YouTube videos; several individuals posted comments about how it was ok that someone came out as gay or lesbian, but was curious how people would feel if the video had been about a bisexual individual. This indicates a notable dissociation. While homosexuality may have been able to work its way into mainstream society by subscribing to heteronormative values, a concept often referred to as “homonormativity,” (Jones, 2009; Ng, 2013) bisexuality presents a problem -- it does not seem to ascribe to those same values since being attracted to both men and women does not seem to equate to living a life of monogamy. In fact, bisexuality is often disregarded as being either nothing more than a stepping stone to homosexuality or an indication of a sexual addiction (Mohr & Rochlen, 1999). Additionally, as many teenagers who are coming out do not necessarily have a firm grasp on their sexual orientation, being able to hear from bisexual individuals would potentially benefit
them in exploring their sexuality, as having to “re-come out” as something different is not always the most pleasant experience (McLean, 2008).

We live in a society that is obsessed with reality television, celebrities, and social media (Bellah, 1996; Couldry, 2012). This is especially important as social media contributors, such as those on YouTube, who are starting to take the place of more mainstream celebrities (Ault, 2014). This means that there is likely an increasing demand or pressure for individuals to broadcast elements of their lives in hopes of making it big as a YouTube star. The videos that these individuals are posting, by virtue of their location in culture, have the ability to have a much larger impact on the most vulnerable population of the LGBTQ community – the youth who still are financially dependent on their parents.

Another element that becomes very important when examining why these videos are created and the work they do, is to think back to the notion that we are living in a therapy culture that promotes sharing all the personal details about one’s life with the world. Despite being about fulfilling some sense of personal happiness or self-acceptance, by sharing these videos there is also an attempt at building a virtual support group of LGBTQ teens. In some sense it is out of the feelings of generativity that I discussed earlier, but on the other hand, there is also a sense that these individuals who are posting these videos can also find support from the fans of their videos. Even if the reaction from family is not the most positive, there is a virtual safety net to provide acceptance and support. Bellah discusses this need for therapeutic communities:

The therapeutic conception of community grows out of an old strand of American culture that sees social life as an arrangement for the fulfillment of the needs of individuals. In a “community of interest,” self-interested individuals join together to maximize individual good. (Bellah, 1996, p. 134)
In other words, very similar to the goals of the IGB, the goal of these videos is not to fundamentally alter the coming out experience for the LGBTQ community, nor is it to promote greater acceptance. Instead, it is to help other individuals gain their own personal happiness, by acting as an example, and providing a model for how to achieve this happiness.

It is through this forming of communities and seeking (as well as providing) support from other like individuals, that LGBTQ youth are able to safely explore their SOGI (Craig & McInroy, 2014). Also, the fact that the individuals in these videos seemed to already be actively engaging with like-minded online communities, either as lurkers or as producers, seems to give credence to the importance of being able to initially explore sexuality without the risk of having to come out face-to-face. However, the fact that these videos are conversations of coming out to family, there also seems to be an indication that online community is not enough in and of itself, but rather should be seen as a stepping-stone to help individuals as they work toward expressing their gender and sexual identity to others in person.

One thing that has been touched upon in this section, is that while these videos do serve to help some teens struggling with their sexual or gender identities, not everyone is equally invited to this therapeutic party. In addition to there being no representations of bisexuality within the videos discovered, the videos were almost entirely made up of seemingly middle-class, white, gay men. That is not to say that more diverse videos do not exist, but, they are not readily available without specifically seeking them out – a task that too often falls on minority populations (Shaw, 2015). Since the issues surrounding one’s coming out are heavily related to cultural factors such as ethnicity (Grov et al., 2006), having an almost completely homogenous representation when searching videos is problematic.

After watching some of these coming out videos, Chase, who is not yet out to their
family, explained that the ambivalence that these types of videos produced:

It definitely makes me think, yeah I could definitely come out as well. But it’s a little different because of the cultural context. I know a lot of people, like in different geographic locations are watching these kind of coming out stories. And a lot of them are in America or European countries. It gives this kind of imagination that yes, it is acceptable. But they also have to face varying circumstances or even a cruel social reality. It’s kind of unfortunate for these people who have to have these kinds of dual experiences. One a moment of empowerment and a moment of devastation after watching those. (personal communication, November 18, 2018)

This devastation that Chase discussed is important because rather than these videos being powerful and helpful these videos can serve to remind some of why the cannot come out. Someone who does not fit the mold outlined by the videos might feel that their coming out experience will be significantly different – or worse, if it does go differently than the videos depict, internalize a rejection as being based on them as a person, rather than rejection based on ideology. After all, as Bellah (1996) pointed out, we often assume that acceptance or rejection is based on something that is innate about us as a person, not on ideological beliefs or other circumstances.

While I do not wish to overstate this lack of diversity within the video sample reviewed for this study, it is telling that the same issues that were found to be present within IGB (Wight, 2014) were similarly found in larger media representations of the LGBTQ community (Henderson, 2013b). This is consistent with other issues of representation within the LGBTQ community – even when the content is entirely consumer generated.

Beyond lacking racial or ethnic diversity, the lack of variation in the way individuals
come out could also lead to some problems. For example, these videos seem to promote the sense that in order to gain acceptance for being homosexual, one also needs to be a virgin. This is problematic for several reasons, beyond just reinforcing heteronormative values as discussed earlier, but also to what it means to individuals who are not a virgin or for those who are still confused about their sexuality. It could lead some individuals to feel that they need to declare their orientation before they do any experimentation, which could lead to the problem of individuals having to come out again or having to live in a different closet if they realize that they were wrong about their sexuality (McLean, 2008).

While not explicitly condemning individuals who are in the closet, by their very nature, videos implicitly reaffirm the hierarchy of gay identities in which being out is at the top of the pyramid (Cass, 1979; Grov et al., 2006). While I am not suggesting that people stay in the proverbial closet, I do want to be cautious of messages that preach a need for everyone to come out, as there are many factors that contribute to how one’s coming out will be received. For some individuals, coming out can have very serious ramifications or be in direct conflict with other key elements of their identity. By reinforcing this hierarchy, it can force people to come out, when it may in fact be in the interest of their safety to remain closeted, or it can further marginalize those not fully out.

**New Spaces, New Risks**

I have largely been focusing on the positive aspects of digital spaces regarding coming out (except for pointing to the often-excluded perspectives of non-cis, non-white, men). These new spaces do not come without their own risks and added anxiety. While a virtual space might seem to offer more security than a public space, such as a bar or a bathhouse, there is an added dilemma related to online privacy. Many of the most commonly referenced social media sites
used by individuals before coming out publicly were popular, mainstream ones, such as Myspace. This resulted in these individuals often being concerned about what was public, what was private, and how any post could be interpreted.

When Myspace came out in 2003 as an alternative to Friendster, it took advantage of some of the new technology available and allowed users a customizable experience, including allowances for showcasing favorite songs, top eight friends, and even colors by way of a custom page display (Madrigal, 2011). This was under the guise of allowing users to capitalize on their unique personalities and develop a life that they wanted online, in a venue that sought to encompass every aspect of life (Williams, 2005). While this was a welcome relief to many, to LGBTQ and questioning youth, it presented another potential front for bullying and the accidental outing of oneself. Since heterosexuality is the proscribed path that everyone is placed upon (Ahmed, 2006), deviations from that from children, or even behavior that resonates with stereotypes of LGBTQ individuals, becomes a potential way to out oneself to others. When I was in elementary school, I signed up to take dance lessons at the same studio that my cousins took classes at – on the opposite side of town. Despite not being out at the time (even to myself), I went to great pains to keep this fact hidden from my friends and classmates and remember being mortified when one of my best friends went to the recital (not even on the night that I performed) and saw my picture in the program. I instantly became upset that my parents had placed that good luck ad, because it was a new potential threat to increase bullying about my already questionable masculinity – after all I already was not a huge fan of the same action movies many of my other male friends were.

Hiding your SOGI when not out to yourself yet becomes second nature, often under the guise of not wanting to give people reason to question your cis-heterosexuality. Myspace
provided individuals the opportunity for a more personalized experience to allow people to feel their interactions were more authentic. The question of authenticity and expression of personality is a tricky question for LGBTQ individuals as there are legitimate reasons to keep aspects of personality hidden, particularly when not out to close friends or family. For this reason, a seemingly innocuous choice of having your favorite songs play, your list of friends be available, and choosing colors to accompany your profile became a potential landmine of self-exposure.

Sean explained his fears of what to make available on his social media in high school:

> For the most part I was very very open about everything, except for the gay stuff. So, I would write about my religion at that time, I was open about my struggles in school, kind of…you know trying to be good friends with certain people. But I was always. there was always in the back of my mind, knowing that this was public that it could be misconstrued. Especially if there was any kind of gay stuff. That kind of stuff I would write in my personal journal instead. I knew if there was any inkling of that online…back then I was super careful about that. (personal communication, February 20, 2018)

Even though one can take many precautions and use privacy settings to keep their SOGI secret online, there is only so much that one can do and these spaces (and the network logics that operate behind the scenes) can, and have, led to accidental outings. Will explained that since they were not out yet to their parents, they had created a second Facebook page unbeknown to family that allowed for posting of gay-related material, such as selfies at gay bars or to have a social space with predominately gay men. While they were careful to keep these two pages separate from each other, one day they friended a few cousins to whom they were already out. Shortly after, the discreet (i.e., gay) page showed up on their mother’s Facebook page as a “suggested friend,” resulting in an unexpected outing to their parents – which did not go over well. Sean
explained how during the era of Myspace, he also kept a secret and private LiveJournal account
during college in which he would write about their sexuality and their new boyfriend.
Unfortunately, it was not as private as had been assumed and resulted in an unexpected and
confrontational outing to their family.

Under the appearance of protecting kids, software is still working to out kids. As
reported by Logo’s news outlet, NewNowNext, which reports on issues concerning LGBTQ
individuals, Windows 10 included a new feature to allow parents to monitor what their children
are doing online. Rather than just blocking certain types of sites or monitoring sites, this feature
would send parents an email detailing their children’s use of the Internet (Tharrett, 2015). As I
discussed earlier in this chapter, the Internet and certain social media have become refuges and
safe-havens for LGBTQ and questioning youth to get information in a safe and private venue.
With this new feature, however, if a minor was regularly visiting sites pertaining to LGBTQ
issues or contained discussion boards or other forms of social interactions about LGBTQ issues,
the parent would receive an email, essentially outing the child before they were ready. This was
true even if it was simply curiosity that drove them to these sites.

The coming out process has long been, and continues to be, an important aspect of
LGBTQ culture. It is also one that has continually evolved throughout history with both
changing societal attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals and, as I have hoped to have shown in
this chapter, with technological changes. Social media has been very influential in the ways and
methods people are able to come out; however, the most important contribution is likely the
ability for individuals to safely research and connect with others early in the coming out process
to build a social support system. In 2014, a 20-year-old Daniel Pierce was kicked out of his
house and berated for being gay by his family, and this encounter was captured on video and
went viral (Ohlheiser, 2014). A GoFundMe account was created for him and brought in almost $100,000 to help him afford college. While not unproblematic (and this will be unpacked in a later chapter), it is a perfect example of the ways that social media can, and has, acted as a social safety net for what can often be a scary and crisis-ridden time in a young person’s life. However, despite all the good that has come from social media in relation to young people’s acceptance of their sexual and gender identities and with their coming out, there also comes new risks of accidental outings. Moreover, there is an added amount of affective labor that comes into play when now LGBTQ and questioning are trying to maintain an active life on social media and must question everything they post. It is these added levels of stress that have created noteworthy anxiety about social media for young LGBTQ individuals and caused many of those I interviewed to express their appreciation for and wariness of the way it affected their coming out experience.
Chapter 4 – Let’s Get Political
The Importance of Political Speech in LGBTQ Media

“No one should lose their job, be subjected to discriminatory treatment or harassment, or be
denied the opportunity for advancement because of bigotry, fear or hatred.”

~Brian Sims, Pennsylvania State Representative

On March 8th, 2018 in the semi-final episode of RuPaul’s Drag Race: All-Stars 3, the queens were visited in the workroom by Senate Minority Leader, Nancy Pelosi, who visited to speak about the importance of being political in addition to the importance of pride and seizing one’s own power. She concluded by telling the queens how they are doing just that. This was then followed by a short discussion of the ways in which drag is and has always been a political act. While this was likely an attempt on behalf of Pelosi to pander to the LGBTQ viewers of the show, it also highlighted an important element – the essential nature of political discourse within the LGBTQ community. As I discussed throughout chapter one, politics has long played an important role within LGBTQ-specific media as many of the early periodicals and publications arose out of political activism (Eaklor, 2008; Stewart-Winter, 2016). This was expanded throughout the 70s as openly LGBTQ politicians and activists were calling on people to come out for political motivation, an impetus which still exists (Gorkemli, 2012; Shilts, 2008).

Historically, there has been a division between political media and personal media (e.g., classified ads), but this has been changing with social media’s allowance of greater access for individuals to share news and political opinions/leanings (van Dijck, 2013). When I initially planned this project, I had not intended to make politics a major component. After my initial
conceptualization of this project, there was an immense political shift in the United States in November of 2016 with the election of Donald Trump and Mike Pence as the President and Vice President, respectively. Suddenly, the gains that the LGBTQ rights movement had made in previous years under the Obama administration (e.g., repealing the “Defense of Marriage Act” and “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” the nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage) were catapulted into question as Mike Pence had historically been an antagonist of the LGBTQ community (Drabold, 2016). This caused a resurgence of political activism among many of my participants, especially in relation to issues related to LGBTQ issues. Moreover, there had been a series of “bathroom bills” proposed in various states to limit trans* individuals’ access to bathrooms in which they would feel safe, racial discrimination and hate crimes within the LGBTQ community, and “religious-freedom” bills (one of which was signed by then governor Mike Pence).

Due to the political challenges facing LGBTQ individuals, combined with the easy access to disseminate information and opinions, it makes sense that social media would become a major source for political discourse. In fact, it was so prevalent that it surfaced in every one of my interviews – even when I was not specifically asking about it. All interviews began as a combination of participant observation and interview. Rather than asking a formal list of questions, I asked the individuals to walk me through their social media usage, and engaged in a casual conversation with them about each of the sites as they showed me examples of their interactions. It was during this portion that politics became a hefty topic of discussion, especially regarding Facebook and Twitter usage, but politics became important in every form of social media that was discussed. In effect, it became clear that the essence of being a queer space made the space inherently and necessarily political.

These political posts fell into several main categories that were comparable to the ones I
established within the first chapter, with a small amount of modernization. The two main areas discussed and posted about were either educational or about current political issues. There was also a reappearance of claiming Coming Out as a political act, particularly in reaction to Trump’s election. There was also discussion about non-political posts being political, which I will talk about in more detail at the very end of this chapter.

**Education**

Arguably the most “political” types of post mentioned by my participants were those intended to educate their perceived social media audience. Much as in the past of LGBTQ periodicals, these educational posts could take many distinct forms and focus on a wide variety of issues pertaining to the entire LGBTQ community. The thing that sets these posts apart from other political posts is that they do not have a direct intention of influencing people’s opinions about the subject, but are rather geared toward educating people about an important element to LGBTQ culture. Many of these posts center around the history of LGBTQ Pride and other important elements of LGBTQ culture, particularly surrounding histories of oppression. There is an oft (mis)quoted and somewhat cliché saying that, “those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Santayana, 1982). The quote is proceeded by a (rather racist) discussion that links progress to historical knowledge. In this discourse, he also mentions that this ability to learn from the past is the domain of adults, where children are not yet able to remember the past and connect it to the present and the elderly are no longer able to remember everything that has happened. It is this generational aspect of his discussion that I would like to focus on, rather than the more racist elements, particularly in how it relates to LGBTQ culture.

A common sentiment that was expressed was that the younger generation of LGBTQ individuals was losing touch with, or just unknowledgeable about, the past struggles of the
community. For this reason, posts about LGBTQ history have become common place, particularly among older LGBTQ individuals, to educate the younger generation about the origins of certain rights. Unlike other cultural groups or “families,” belonging to the LGBTQ community is not something that happens at birth, and therefore many of the cultural lessons passed between generations are not able to happen in the same way. Despite not being biologically related, those within the LGBTQ community often form their own families with similar functions, particularly with the “older” generations helping to educate the “younger” generations in order to maintain a sense of tradition; according to Ahmed, this transference of knowledge is centered around a politics of grief and grievable loss (Ahmed, 2015). For these reasons, the history that is shared is often not one of creation, but rather one of loss and trauma – AIDS, the Holocaust, the death of Harvey Milk, police abuse, etc.

Without knowing the history of how LGBTQ lives lost have been overlooked and safety violated, it is often feared that the more celebratory aspects of LGBTQ culture (e.g., Pride celebrations) will lose their cultural meaning and relevance. These remembrances function as a way of framing, defining, and imagining what the community is around a common sense of historical oppression (Anderson, 2016; Butler, 2016). It is this communal mourning that works to create a complex emotional history for the LGBTQ community. As Muñoz stated,

Communal mourning, by its very nature, is an immensely complicated text to read, for we do not mourn just one lost object or other, but we also mourn as a “whole” – or, put another way, as a contingent and temporary collection of fragments that is experiencing a loss of its parts. (1999, p. 73)

It is due to this shared mourning that even individuals who were not alive during the AIDS epidemic or the Holocaust can still feel a sense of loss for the community as a whole, what
Derrida would refer to as a politics of memory and inheritance. (2006)

*Educating Others*

While among certain individuals educating about the history of LGBTQ culture was of high importance, many of the people I spoke with placed a high priority on the need to educate friends and family about issues. It was here that they felt social media was an ideal place to reach out and provide information about issues that were affecting them. We live in an age where information is abundant; however, it also means that many individuals are only aware of the information that they want to be aware of or that they seek out (Dean, 2005; Gottfied & Shearer, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2014; Sears & Freedman, 1997). Much like online searches are limited by the search terms used, many individuals limit their own awareness by how they choose to seek information. To combat this selective exposure to information, many participants felt that by sharing news that was important to the LGBTQ community, they would be able to increase the awareness in their cisgender, heterosexual friends and families. Sometimes this included layering their own political commentary over current news to contextualize it for their readers; other times the articles were posted simply to provide the information without personal commentary.

When I spoke with people about why they shared these posts or what inspired them to share a news story when they came across it (particularly the less politically involved), the answer was almost always the same: to make people aware of these issues. At the base level, that is exactly what these posts are doing, but they also function at a deeper level, which is to increase visibility of the issues that LGBTQ individuals face in their lives – both domestically and internationally. For a community that already struggles with representation (GLAAD, 2017), it is important to be aware that the majority of current representations of LGBTQ individuals within
mainstream media are positive (Henderson, 2013a).

By frequently sharing articles through social media LGBTQ individuals can ensure that these issues will not be forgotten and they can remain visible – a strategy that has always been prominent within the LGBTQ community’s political activism. While some shows do deal with legal and social issues related to LGBTQ individuals, Henderson states, “such legal complexities in queer family living are rarely the stuff of broadcast television, even where a season of queer liberalization delivers a majority of openly gay nominees to an Emmy category” (2013a, p. 53).

Popular issues are often addressed, such as same-sex marriage (which is often done in a celebratory way) or the desire for gender affirmation surgery (as has been the plot of several episodes of Grey’s Anatomy), but these are often addressed on an individual level with the issues resulting from one-person objecting to this act. Complex legal and social issues are rarely addressed or even acknowledged within these shows. While Modern Family has a gay couple, who have adopted a child, the complexities of that adoption are neither addressed nor is there a mention of how there are still many states that limit or prohibit same-sex couple from adopting. Since the majority of LGBTQ representation focuses on middle- to upper-middle class individuals (Henderson, 2013a), other systemic issues such as access to HIV medication, homelessness, suicide, and the really high violence against trans* people of color are rarely addressed.

The overwhelming presence of these positive portrayals in comparison to the few, niche shows that address the more serious issues can create the notion that the LGBTQ community has achieved equality, with the only issues being a few individuals who are “behind the times.”

**Coming Out…Revisited**

Since the Prop 8 campaign in the 2008 California election, there has been a sharp return
to the politicization of coming out that was called for in the 1970s (Shilts, 2008). Several of the individuals I interviewed had only recently come out to their family. While each had their own reasons for not coming out previously, usually due to a fear of rejection or a lack of necessity, the election of Donald Trump and Michael Pence sparked a need to be openly out to their family to take a stand against the perceived potential threat to their rights as LGBTQ citizens.

In her interview, Alicia, who identifies as a white, cisgender, bisexual woman, explained that:

she went on a date with a woman and a few days after the election was talking to her mom and she came out to her mom as she was describing why she was so upset about the election. She told her mom that she was also into women and sort of beginning a relationship, then moved the conversation on. (field notes from personal communication with Alicia, December 9, 2017)

Hector, who identifies as a Hispanic, cisgender, gay man, also expressed how it was due to the Trump presidential candidacy that he felt the need to make a public declaration of his sexual orientation on Facebook:

In October of last year, I had a friend, who is a woman, who posted, “Hi. I’m Bisexual.” And she was kind of a role model to me. And then I got to thinking, I have to post that I am bisexual or I’m gay [Hector had previously dated women] …Am I truly bisexual or am…. I was thinking and thinking. After Trump won the election…that day, that night, everybody was posting across social media. Everyone was shouting concerns. And my friends, most of them are immigrants and come from Latin America. So, there was a real far among them….so I said…I thought, maybe, if things are going to get worse. I want…I need to be fully exposed, so I posted “Hi. I’m gay.” And that was the first time that I posted on my wall where everyone could see. (personal communication, November 13, 2017)
In the 1980s the LGBTQ community coined the phrase, “Silence equals Death” while fighting for funding to combat the growing AIDS epidemic. This is a strategy that operated under the logic that if the community was loud enough that it could no longer be ignored. Under perceived threats by the Trump/Pence administration, this strategy has surfaced again to make sure that people are aware of the amount of LGBTQ individuals in their lives. It has also expanded to take on a more intersectional approach than solely focusing on LGBTQ-specific issues (see image 8).

Image 8: Alicia’s coming out post in response to the Trump’s inauguration.

Queer Spaces are Political Spaces

Social media has become an integral part of our everyday lives, both in how we determine what to do but also with how we share what we are doing. Activities that used to be considered banal are now shared constantly – one only needs to look at Kim Kardashian’s Instagram page for countless examples of this (Lofton, 2017). Every individual I spoke with
throughout my interviews, mentioned the use of multiple sites/apps for accessing social media. Moreover, they expressed using social media consistently throughout the day, even to the point of interrupting my interview with them as some received social media messages during our conversation. Each of these sites were used for very specific purposes. While it has become known, especially in the 2016 Presidential election and the following years since, that places such as Facebook and Reddit became hotbeds of political activity, the most striking observation that I noticed was that this line was not as clear as it initially appears. Apart from one individual, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram were always the first ones discussed from all of my participants. By the end of each interview, though, each gay or bisexual man also discussed using sites such as Tumblr and “the apps” such as Grindr and Scruff for more “personal” reasons. These sites were often used either for pornography (Tumblr) or for arranging sexual encounters. On the surface, these areas would seem to not be conducive for political exchanges outside of the typical ones you might encounter while acquainting yourself with someone before going on a date. However, these spaces proved to be just as political as many of the other spaces.

“The Apps” & Pornography

During the 2016 Presidential Election, Grindr decided to make their political standpoint known about various issues within the election by live-tweeting of the Vice-Presidential debate. During this venture, Guy Branum, an openly gay comedian became the voice of Grindr and tweeted, “If Donald Trump gets to deport 16 million people, I want you to think how much hotness would be lost from your @Grindr screen. #VPDebate” (Rodriguez, 2016). In other words, white, gay men should be concerned with immigration issues not because of human rights because it might affect their sexual activities. While this tweet is problematic for centering this critique on the white experience (ignoring that of LGBTQ individuals of color), it does showcase
how Grindr was attempting to chime into this political discourse.

Fortunately for Grindr, the lesson was learned after the backlash over that tweet, and while they continued to stay involved politically after President Trump’s inauguration, the message took on a dissimilar tone. Grindr had been political on its Twitter page almost since its inception. Nonetheless, during the election and during the travel ban that was implemented shortly after Donald Trump took office, this content merged into the app itself, replacing the ads that at one time opened when an individual opened the free version of the app. Shortly after the travel ban was initially enacted, and in response to a rising anti-immigrant sentiment in the country, Grindr featured a short “documentary” series following the experiences of gay immigrants, allowing these individuals to share their stories. This was in an attempt to humanize the immigrant experience for many who would not necessarily be exposed to that element of the story. It also highlights an important issue -- while LGBTQ issues have often focused on questions of sexual health, marriage, and bathroom rights, they encompass significantly more than that. Providing an intersectional point-of-view, Grindr was attempting to demonstrate the many factors of identity that intersect with sexual or gender identities in ways that become complicated and cannot be understood as single identity issues (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Crenshaw, 1991; Jasbir K. Puar, 2012).

Seth Tyler is a porn producer who I interviewed as part of this project who largely used his various social media sites (most notably Tumblr and Twitter) to promote his porn company, Fisting Twinks, which produces specialized porn for individuals interested in fisting. These sites are primarily used to provide free previews of his work to drive business to his paid sites in addition to recruiting potential performers. However, in several instances, Tyler switched up the content he posted on his pornographic Tumblr to make political statements about the history of
the LGBTQ community, including the AIDS epidemic (see image 9), Pride celebrations, and when Gilbert Baker (the creator of the rainbow flag) died.

My Tumblr page is at times...I’ll post different things on there. You know. I’m definitely pretty random. I’m a random guy...a little disorganized at times. What made me post those things? I think it is just important for people to know our history. I think it is important that millennials know that...there is a whole generation that is gone. I just came back from Tulsa, Oklahoma. I was filming a guy there. He is about 56. He was diagnosed with AIDS, or HIV back in ’84. And he is still alive. It is a miracle, or whatever you want to call it that he is still alive. He’s had HIV for 30-plus years. His face is totally wasted. He’s lost all the fat in his face. He looks sick. He looks like he has been doing meth, which he never touches it. And um...I wish people....I guess the reason I post those things is that we always need to know what happened behind us. You know, that’s important....to know where we came from because, you know, with this current administration they may set us back 20 or 30 years and we have to keep fighting. Every day we have to fight to have equal rights and equal protection. And, we could lose those things. It’s easy to become complacent, because, there are so many people out there who don’t like us. I post those things so maybe a few people will just be aware or have an awareness that there are people out there who want to kill us, for lack of a better word. There’s people that want to see us dead. (personal communication, December 5, 2017)

Get PrEPped

A major health calamity for the LGBTQ community since the 1980s has been the AIDS crisis, considered now a chronic condition rather than the deadly epidemic it once was. This is largely due to the public intervention by the LGBTQ community in raising awareness and
visibility of this once-horrific disease. Despite that it is not as deadly as it was before, it is still an on-going threat to the health and well-being of all sexually active individuals, with the LGBTQ population being disproportionately affected. In 2014, there were over 37 thousand new cases of HIV within the United States; 26 thousand of those were among gay and bisexual men, of which 10 thousand of those were for black gay and bisexual men (HIV.gov, 2017). Pre-Exposure Prophylactic (PrEP) drugs for HIV were introduced in 2012 and are used as a
preventative measure for individuals who lead a high-risk lifestyle for contracting HIV. PrEP is a once daily pill that can reduce an individual’s risk of getting HIV anywhere from 70% for intravenous drugs to 90% for sexual intercourse. (Center for Disease Control, 2018). One of the biggest factors in helping to increase sexual health is that PrEP requires an individual to get tested once every three months for all sexually transmitted infections (STIs), which is correlated with significant decreases in new gonorrhea and chlamydia infections, leading scientists to conclude that PrEP is at least partially responsible (Rulli, 2017).

Given the health benefits of PrEP and the long tumultuous history the LGBTQ community has with HIV, it only makes sense that this drug would become the center of several social media campaigns. In addition to the organizations that have started social media campaigns such as “Get PrEPped” on Facebook, “the apps” have been active in promoting this drug by enabling individuals to mark on their profile whether or not they are on it. Some also run ads that link to information about the drug and offer resources to find ways to offset the high costs of these drugs. SCRUFF, for example, even featured a video of creator Johnny Scruff discussing the benefits and potential side effects of the drug with a health care professional. Additionally, Grindr has created a feature that will remind users to get tested for HIV and other STIs once every three months. These are just several examples of the ways in which these apps are using the affordances offered to them through their tech platforms not only to allow individuals a connection with others, but also to provide useful and sometimes lifesaving tips and information.

**What does it mean to be political?**

The LGBTQ community has a long history of political communication and that has only intensified with the proliferation of social media. However, there is much debate over the
definition of politics when it comes to social media activism, with claims that there is a disconnect between online discourse and “real-world” results (Samuelson-Cramp & Bolat, 2018). Part of this can be attributed to a divide between politicians and the discourses and desires of ordinary citizens (Dean, 2005), but it is my contention that it is also due, in large part, to a misconception of what is political. Taking a narrow definition, it is easy to categorize any action that does not result in immediate and tangible political reform as not being political. It would also be easy to examine the cacophony of opinions expressed online and conclude, as Jodi Dean did, that because there is little common terminology, opinions, or priorities, in our hypermediated world there is more division between political beliefs rather than unification or an increase in those who are politically active. (2005) Indeed, it is true that political polarization is at an all-time high (Pew Research Center, 2014), but it does not necessarily follow that social media has led to a breakdown in political action, particularly among marginalized groups like the LGBTQ community. Instead, it may be necessary to redefine or rather, in the case of the LGBTQ community, to return to a different understanding of politics. Writing in 1969 around the same time as the LGBTQ rights movement launched into the national spotlight, Carol Hanisch popularized the notion that “the personal is political,” which worked to shape leftist politics over the next several decades (2000).

Visibility

Initially created among feminist scholars and activists, it is a notion that translated well into the LGBTQ community, with the early days of political activism promoting a very personal approach, namely coming out to family and friends (Chauncey, 1994; D’Emilio, 1998; Shilts, 2008; Stewart-Winter, 2016). What made this political was not the support systems that could be formed or the ability to live a more open and authentic life; it was the notion of visibility that
truly was thought to be able to make a political difference.

The importance of visibility has been an idea that has resurfaced and gained more prominence in the era of social media, with a renewed call for visibility in the wake of the Prop 8 campaign from 2008 and the numerous bathroom bills that have been proposed within the past five years. Not only has social media enabled this “come out” call to be spread more widely, it also has enabled individuals to come out in more diverse ways. By doing this, these individuals are adding to the national discussion of the LGBTQ experience. Dean, however, does not believe that communication itself is a valid form of political expression.

When communication serves as the key category for left politics, whether communication be configured as discussion, spectacle, or publicity, this politics ensures its political failure in advance: doing is reduced to talking, to contributing to the media environment, instead of being conceived in terms of, say, occupying military bases, taking over the government, or abandoning the Democratic Party and doing the steady, persistent organizational work of revitalizing the Greens or Socialists. (Dean, 2005, Chapter 1, Section 2, para. 4)

It is clear to Dean, then, that this focus on communicating one’s SOGI is not sufficient to count as political action. Many of the actions that individuals have used to either come out or to express their support as an ally (e.g., adding a rainbow filter to a profile picture or sharing their coming out story) are often in the realm of what is considered slacktivism, (Dean, 2005, 2009; Samuelson-Cramp & Bolat, 2018). However, the mere act of being visible, especially in regard to the LGBTQ community, can and should be considered a political act. Even though no policy is likely to have changed simply by individuals adding a rainbow filter to their profile picture on Facebook (see image 10), when this happened in 2015 in support of the repeal of DOMA individuals were able to see how many people were in solidarity with this decision. To Dean this
would merely be a communicative act, but for individuals who were questioning whether they should come out for fear of being rejected by their family, this simple communicative action allowed individuals to feel supported and not alone.

Visibility for the LGBTQ community in mainstream media is considerably higher than it has ever been in the past (GLAAD, 2017), but the difference between real-world visibility and mediated visibility is drastic. While no census in the United States has ever asked questions about SOGI (other than questions that already presumed heterosexual and cisgender, e.g., choosing between male and female as choices for gender), it had been rumored that in 2020 these questions would finally be included. This gave hope to many in the LGBTQ community that they would finally be counted (C. Johnson, 2017; O’Hara, 2017; Visser, 2017). Shortly after Trump came into office, these questions were removed (C. Johnson, 2017). In 2018, the census committee decided to include one question about sexual orientation (potentially due to the backlash over the removal of other questions), which is couples can indicate if their significant other is same-sex or opposite-sex (Wang, 2018). Clearly a step in the right direction, it is nevertheless still limiting those in the LGBTQ community who are afforded visibility to those in
a relationship while completely ignoring others, such as the trans* community.

Another act to increase visibility was in response to the “bathroom bills” introduced around the country to prevent trans* individuals from using public bathrooms consistent with their gender identity. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, in 2017 alone there were 27 different bills that had been proposed across the United States to limit access to restrooms for trans* individuals and, between 2013 and 2016, “at least 24 states considered ‘bathroom bills,’ or legislation that would restrict access to multiuser restrooms, locker rooms, and other sex-segregated facilities on the basis of a definition of sex or gender consistent with sex assigned at birth or ’biological sex’” (2017, sec. 3). In an effort to push back against these bills, and to highlight the hypocrisy behind them, there was a social media campaign built around #WeJustNeedToPee; trans* individuals would take selfies in public restrooms with the hopes of raising awareness to the precarious place many trans* individuals occupy and to demonstrate how trans* people have already been using bathrooms assigned to their identified gender (see image 11) (Kellaway, 2015). Even though this movement was criticized for placing too much attention on trans* people who were passing and, thus, unlikely endangered by these bills, it did work to create a visual awareness of this issue and help to denounce the idea of the “unseen trans* threat” by increasing the visibility of everyday trans* individuals.

According to Dean, these acts of visual disruption and solidarity, because of the ease with which people can enact them, cause people to feel politically active despite the limitation of their actual political choices (Dean, 2005). What Dean fails to acknowledge is that these actions are not always performed in a vacuum devoid of other political actions.

My analysis of the Pew Research Center’s 2013 Survey of LGBT Adults shows that 212 out of 1,170 individuals indicated that they regularly discuss LGBT issues on social media.
These individuals who actively engage are also more likely to engage in offline political activities. For instance, 73% of those active social media users (ASMU) also endorsed membership in an LGBTQ organization, with 56% of those individuals having been a member within the past twelve months. ASMU were also much more likely to let a company’s stances on LGBTQ issues affect their purchases: 84.4% stated that they have actively decided to purchase certain products or services because the company was supportive of LGBTQ rights. The same percent of respondents also endorsed having chosen not to purchase a product or service (or having engaged in a boycott) because a company was perceived to be anti-LGBTQ (with 82% of these individuals having done so within the past 12 months). Seventy-two percent of ASMU also had indicated that they had attended a rally or march in support of LGBTQ issues and had attended a Pride parade or event. Finally, 67% of ASMU indicated that they had donated money to politicians or organizations primarily because of their support of LGBTQ issues (see Figure 4).

Only 18% of individuals who participated in the survey indicated that they were ASMU,
and unsurprisingly those who did not consider themselves to actively discuss LGBTQ issues online were also unlikely to be involved offline. While more than 26-million people changed their profile photo to include a rainbow flag in 2015 (Dewey, 2015), because of the relatively small percentage of individuals in the LGBTQ community who consider themselves politically active online, the mere act of liking a post, sharing a post, or changing the filter on your profile photo is not likely to be considered by the users as being actively engaged, as Dean implies that it does. What is more likely, is that many individuals who are engaging in these activities would otherwise be completely unengaged. Therefore, these acts serve to vastly increase the visibility of communities and issues that would otherwise be difficult to see, and thus easier for the masses to ignore.

**Surviving**

If we accept that the personal is political and that visibility is a political necessity for the
LGBTQ community, another political action that must be considered is one that works to protect and increase the safety of individuals within the community. This is one action that has been very prominent within all forms of social media targeting the LGBTQ community. Given that concerns regarding the health and safety for members within the community have been prominent in LGBTQ media since their beginning, it makes sense that these would continue to be prominent. One of the biggest factors affecting the life expectancy of the LGBTQ population is suicide; LGB youth attempt suicide at rates five times higher than (and consider suicide at rates three times higher than) their heterosexual counterparts (Kann et al., 2016) while 40% of trans* individuals report a past suicide attempt (often before the age of 25) (James et al., 2016). Suicide prevention has been at the forefront of LGBTQ social media as evidence by apps like Grindr and SCRUFF advertising for LGBTQ-friendly, virtual counselors to help those in crisis. Individuals often associate these apps as nothing more than places to exchange nude pictures and find quick, anonymous sex; as demonstrated earlier, though, the political is never far away even in these spaces. In 2017, a story was circulated about a young man on Grindr who began chatting with a man recently diagnosed as HIV-positive and who was currently standing atop the George Washington Bridge ready to jump (Zane, 2017). This man proceeded to post this experience on Facebook, which to date has garnered over 1,200 reactions and over 90 comments in response:

A few nights ago, while relaxing at home, I started messaging a man on Grindr. The conversation started like any other, but then quickly went in a direction that I've never experienced before.

This man, who is my age, revealed to me that he has recently been diagnosed with HIV and is struggling to accept it. At this point, I started to tell him that I can be an ally if he needs one. But then, he told me that he is messaging me from the George Washington
Bridge and that he was planning to jump off and kill himself.

Immediately, I put on my shoes and jacket, then ran a few blocks to the bridge. I frantically started looking for him in the dark, hoping that he hadn't already jumped or that I wouldn't be witnessing him jump as I approached him.

I quickly spotted a person wearing a hoodie leaning against the railing. I ran up to him and stopped to look at his face to make sure this was the man I was talking to. When he looked up at me and I saw he had been crying, I knew this was the man I was talking to on the phone.

At that moment, I grabbed him and hugged him for what felt like 5 minutes as he cried on my shoulder. Without any hesitation, I convinced this man to get off the bridge and come back to my apartment to talk with me.

Come to find out, this man is an undocumented immigrant who fled his country after his family ousted him and his brother tried killing him for being a gay man. After listening to his story, I was speechless. There was nothing in my life that is comparable to what this person has experienced, so I struggled to think of any words to say. All I could do was listen. We talked for a few hours, and by the end of it, I assured him that he should never feel lonely again because I will be his friend, and I meant that sincerely.

That night on the George Washington Bridge will stay with me forever and has taught me that we all have times when we feel life is against us. Here was a person who wanted to die, but I helped him live. I may have changed this man's life, but I wonder if he knows that he changed my life too.

Be grateful for your life and everyone in it. Hug your friends and family a little closer. (Blank, 2017)
At first glance this post may just read as a person committing a good deed. However, I do not feel it should be reduced to simply a good deed, but rather the result of a culture that has become reinforced through social media, its interactions, and even its advertising. Being on “the apps” means that one needs to be ready to encounter situations like the one that Blank did in 2017 at any given moment. One moment you can be flirting with a few individuals and the next you can receive a suicide warning. I know this from personal experience in addition to numerous anecdotes from friends, as well as public postings such as the one Blank posted.

One night I was chatting on SCRUFF with a friend when I received a message from an unknown person (who was not located in my current city); he indicated that his husband was cheating on him and that he could not get in touch with him. He asked me to tell his husband that he said “goodbye” and that he would be committing suicide that evening. Since he was nearly 1,000 miles away, I did not have the same options that Blank did and I did not even know the man with whom he was trying to get in touch, despite living in the same city as he did. After sending him the contact information for the national suicide hotline, I spent the evening trying to track down this man he referenced in hopes he would be able to help this man who messaged me. I eventually did find him and was told that messages like this were not uncommon and that it was an ex of his who had a history of making suicidal threats to gain attention.

While I was relieved that this situation did not likely end in a suicide, as I have known too many gay individuals who have ended or attempted to end their lives, it still highlights the way that this is ever present within LGBTQ culture. I am not claiming that helping an individual out is necessarily a political action, but the fact that we, as LGBTQ citizens, are primed to be ready to deal with these situations is political. The focus, in non-traditional political spaces, on suicide and mental health awareness is an act that, if not inherently political, undoubtedly has
political ramifications. In addition to these encounters and dealing with suicide and violence prevention in general, the focus on PrEP and other measures for protection from STIs indicates the strong focus among content producers and individual consumers on ensuring survival of the LGBTQ community.

In 2017, Georgia state representative Betty Price suggested quarantining individuals who had HIV, because “It’s almost frightening the number of people who are living that are … carriers with the potential to spread…whereas in the past, they died more readily, and then at that point, they’re not posing a risk” (Armus, 2017). Despite later retracting these statements Price is not the only person suggesting that individuals living with HIV, a common dog-whistle for the LGBTQ community, should die or be killed. In the summer of 2016, after the Pulse Nightclub shooting in which 49 individuals, mostly gay, Latino men, were murdered, Pastor Kenneth Adkins declared that the victims got what they deserved (Taylor, 2017). In autumn of 2017, President Trump allegedly made an off-the-cuff joke about Vice President Mike Pence wanting to hang all gay people (Brammer, 2017). Earlier that year in May, a high school teacher in San Luis Obispo, CA, wrote a letter to the student newspaper for a special edition focused on LGBTQ issues. In it, he quoted a Bible verse stating that gay individuals should die (Wilson, 2017). And in 2017, there were at least 28 trans* individuals who were murdered in the United States, and in the first three months of 2018, at least 7trans* individuals were reported to have been violently killed (Human Rights Campaign, 2018).

There are numerous examples of times that individuals have publicly spoken out and called for (or at least suggested) that the LGBTQ population should be put to death. This is not a new trend, and in 2015 Scott Calonico released a short documentary, When AIDS Was Funny, which brought to light the callous way the Reagan administration treated AIDS, jokingly denoted
as “the gay plague” for years as the deaths from AIDS soared to over 4000 individuals (Lawson, 2015). Because of the lack of federal help for LGBTQ issues such as HIV, suicides, or homicides, it fell upon the LGBTQ community to help themselves survive. This was done in part by courting politicians and non-profit agencies for funding to fight for policies and life-saving drugs (Stewart-Winter, 2016), but it also was done through our media by asking the community to help each other. Survival, thus, should be seen as a political action – particularly for a community whose existence has been threatened repeatedly and continues to fall under attack.

Matthew, who identifies as a black, cisgender, gay male is very active on social media and often uses it to make try to promote a message of positivity that he thinks is important for everyone to be aware of. As part of this he tries to preach a message of survival and overcoming issues that may have affected people’s pasts.

I use Facebook all the time. Originally, I probably used these platforms way better than I currently do. Even though I am still very active, I will often post something and then it will be hours before I pay attention to it again. If I post something political, and then it will blow up and I have to come back hours later and read through that shit and comment on whatever they say or whatever… I would like to think that one of the main things that I do on social media is put out the message that I want to push out which is all about positivity, and acceptance. That’s what I really use it for and I really do a good job of that… Pretty much any of my social media is used to show that world that no matter what your background is, you can still…you don’t have to be a victim of your circumstance. So that would be the main reason why…I can stand on a corner and give my testimony and only the people on that corner will hear that testimony. But if I go on social media and I give that testimony, that can reach a whole broader spectrum of people. And despite what my
background is, which is very complicated, I still have this amazing ability to love and give
love. To love people. And so, I want to push that. I think that love is important. I think it is
important that we love ourselves. That we love other people. I can’t really push this
message of love if I didn’t first learn how to love myself. So, that really is why I use it.
(personal communication, February 3, 2018)

Dean argues that interacting with others through media only feels like action because it
gives us pleasure and tricks us into thinking that we are making a difference (2005). The notion
that our digital actions could have a real-world impact is just delusion brought about by our
fetishization of technology (Dean, 2005). However, what Dean does not consider is that while
these actions might not result in immediate, large scale political change, they do have the
potential for small results that can change, or even save, someone’s life.

After watching the videos that he credits with saving his life, Cameron decided to go on
and create a series of videos to help other individuals in a similar situation. This was also
demonstrated in the candid coming out videos on YouTube that I analyzed, in which many of the
individuals only created a video after finding help and solace from other similar videos. While
such actions as taking over a military base or organizing for an underrepresented political party
are dramatic ways to have a potential large impact on the political world, they still are not able to
address the immediate life-threatening pressures for young LGBTQ individuals in the same way
that communicative acts can. When the basic needs in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (e.g., food,
safety, shelter) have not been met, they need to be addressed before other larger issues can be
addressed – and many in the LGBTQ community are still struggling to achieve these base-level
necessities. There is a sense of generativity in the way the LGBTQ community uses social media
to look out for and protect themselves. For a community that has had its very existence
threatened throughout history, to stand together and fight for and ensure its survival is itself a political act.
In 2014, Facebook enacted a policy that required users to use their legal names. While not forcing everyone to submit verifiable proof of their identity, they ran automated searches that examined for names that were unlikely to be the real names of individuals. One of the largest groups that was hit by these search bots were drag queens and trans* individuals (not to mention Native Indians) (Grinberg, 2014; Holpuch, 2015; Wilson, 2015). Individuals who triggered this search bot to flag their profile had their accounts suspended until they changed their names and/or provided proof that they were using their legal name. This was done in part because of Mark Zuckerberg’s personal belief that an individual’s online presence should be an open and authentic portrayal representation of their offline life.” (McFarland, 2014). This notion of authenticity is often referenced in terms of how individuals behave online, despite the challenges of accurately defining it. Zuckerberg, in his definition of authenticity, used it in relationship with the term “open,” which is relatively low-risk for white, heterosexual, cis-men to do. For LGBTQ individuals, especially LGBTQ individuals of color or in one of the lesser known/accepted letters within the LGBTQ umbrella, being fully open online is not a choice that comes without risk. There are many aspects of people’s lives that some may not want to be public knowledge, which does not necessarily make them inauthentic – but rather tailoring their online persona to the
Ahmed explains that the world is structured around compulsory heterosexuality (Ahmed, 2006). Ahmed is writing about the “real” world, we can extend this idea to online and digital spaces that also prioritize heterosexuality and cisgender-ness. And, just as in the real-world with the creation of heterotopias for LGBTQ individuals (e.g., bars, clubs, saunas, houses, etc.), queer-centric spaces have been created in the digital (Bérubé, 2003). Though some criticize these spaces for solely functioning as safe spaces (Dean, 2009), they work to allow certain individuals who often do not conform with society’s norms to freely express themselves and interact with others who share like experiences (Gudelunas, 2012). Because of this desire for marginalized communities to bond and connect with others with similar experiences, there are numerous apps and sites that each target small demographics, or subsections, of the LGBTQ community.

Despite a seemingly homogeneous “safe” space that is provided by these queer spaces, as Ahmed also illuminates, the world is not only structured around heterosexuality, but also whiteness (Ahmed, 2006). While many of these queer-centric sites do provide safe spaces for white, cis-gender, “masculine” men, they can also be new places of anxiety, loneliness, and aggression for LGBTQ individuals of color, trans* individuals, those who are perceived as more “feminine,” or those who are HIV-positive. More than just erasure from representation in advertisements and other media messages, these individuals are often attacked over social media, sometimes directly, and other times indirectly, within profiles and status updates. Indeed, there are many aspects of social media that have been helpful for the LGBTQ community in terms of increasing visibility, connections, and the spread of information. It has nonetheless also amplified both the divisions within and the external pressures.
What does authenticity mean?

A term that gets used a lot when thinking about online activity is “authenticity” (Leppänen, Møller, Nørreby, Stæhr, & Kytölä, 2015; Lim, Nicholson, Yang, & Kim, 2015; McFarland, 2014; Reinecke & Trepte, 2014). Even though we live in a world that is driven by branding culture, both from corporations and individuals, there is still a desire to see certain aspects of life as authentic (Banet-Weiser, 2012). As Banet-Weiser explains,

Even if we discard as false a simple opposition between the authentic and the inauthentic, we still must recon with the power of authenticity – of the self, of experience, of relationships. It is a symbolic construct that, even in a cynical age, continues to have cultural value in how we understand our moral frameworks and ourselves, and more generally how we make decisions about how to live our lives. (2012, p. 5)

While here we are asked to discard the dichotomy between authentic and inauthentic, I would contend that for many individuals there is little middle ground. It is this false-dichotomy between the two that allows judgements of people’s media usage as either being authentic or fake, with the former being considered proper use of social media and the other improper.

As Zuckerberg discussed the need for individuals to be authentic online, what became apparent was the lack of a functional definition for what authenticity means for everyone, and especially how that factors into people’s lives. In much of the literature on authenticity, the argument is often structured as a person juggles their need/desire to be popular and the desire to conform to the norm of showing their “real-self” online (Leppänen et al., 2015; Lim et al., 2015). According to Lim et al., “a potential disparity and tensions between one’s authentic self in the real world and one’s online presence has been increasingly noted in various feature articles in the media” (2015, p. 132). In these theorizations of what is the “authentic” individual, there seems to
be, at least at the current moment, a consensus that what happens offline is authentic (save for maybe identity thieves or con artists) and what happens online, since it has the ability to be filtered or edited, has the potential for an infiltration of inauthenticity.

Take for example, the criticisms (Hess, 2015) over individuals who post selfies with captions like “woke-up like this” when they have clearly done their hair and make-up and strategically positioned themselves for the best angle and optimum lighting. They are discussed as being inauthentic and attempting to fool individuals online into thinking they are more attractive than they actually are. This discussion happens as though this behavior only exists online and only due to the technological affordances of photography filters, readily accessible cameras, and digital, social platforms; however, these same behaviors occur in real life. For instance, the first time a person stays over at a new significant other’s home, the morning is often started earlier for both individuals who attempt to secretly leave the bed, sneak off to the bathroom to fix their hair, brush their teeth, and potentially retouch make-up before returning to bed to fall asleep in a “cute” position. These are two acts that are objectively similar and for similar goals – to have other individuals think you wake up looking better than you do. However, the former is described as inauthentic while the latter is usually considered a charming personality trait, with the only difference between the two being the presence of a lens and the broadcasting over social media.

The notion that the “real” life is more authentic than the technologically enabled life, is problematic and conjures up the aged argument of Gemeinschaft versus Gessellschaft (Tonnies, 2017). In recent years, since the advent of “the apps,” many gay men have complained about the ways that such apps have ruined the gay bar, which has, as a result, harmed LGBTQ culture. There is a notion that a culture built around online connections is not authentic and that there is
something missing about the ways people “used to interact.”

Beyond the longing for a “simpler” and “more real” past, the other issue with assuming that the real world is de facto authentic is that it assumes a level of privilege that is not available to many members of the LGBTQ community. The driving rationale behind Facebook’s policy to require legal names was that the only reason one would use an alias would be for inauthentic reasons (e.g., scamming or cyber-bullying). This policy, enacted under the leadership of two heterosexual, cisgender, white individuals -- Mark Zuckerberg and Cheryl Sandberg -- failed to account for the numerous reasons why some individuals may not wish to use their legal name online (Grinberg, 2014). For LGBTQ individuals, living an identity that is different than their real-world persona has the potential to be incredibly freeing, affirming, and potentially more authentic. Social media allows individuals to experiment with being their authentic self in a safer way that would often be afforded in the “real” world.

While authenticity could be described as living in one’s own truth, there are often societal norms and values that are attached to this notion that prohibit some from actually occupying their truth if that truth does not conform to what is considered “normal.” One of these is the notion of openness – that to be truly authentic, we need to have our lives open to others -- although, as Hess illustrates, there is a notion of being too open:

The too authentic failed selfie includes those instances where the user has included something too personal, such as the selfie taken in the bathroom with embarrassing products present and the night-out-at-the-bars selfie that accidentally features someone vomiting in the background. (2015, p. 1635)

What is considered “too personal,” however, is subject to interpretation. Clear from the examples that Hess provided is that what is too personal is often what is at odds with the
protestant sensibilities of “respectable” U.S. citizens. Whereas it is common knowledge that many individuals use sex toys or may drink too much at bars, these are not considered appropriate photos to share with others and are expected to be censured. Omission of these moments from your life is not considered to be inauthentic, but rather it is expected and the lack of censure is considered an oversharing and overstepping of boundaries.

The take-away is that one is expected to share based on what makes society comfortable or provides the information that they want to know. For LGBTQ individuals, the questions over what and when to share as well as with whom, are battles that are ongoing (even though most of my participants stated that they do not care what they share). During each of my interviews, I asked the participants what they share online and if they censured or limited what they shared. With one notable exception, most stated that they did not censure what they shared and they expected individuals to deal with the content. Upon further exploration of this topic, however, it became clear that there were numerous factors that limited what was shared, with whom, and when. Certain topics were off-limits for most individuals to share on most mainstream social media sites and what was considered scandalous for Facebook was considered blasé on sites like Tumblr or apps like Growlr.

At the end of every interview, I asked each participant the same question, which was “Do you consider your usage of social media to be authentic?” Realizing the potentially loaded nature of the question, because culturally there is a right answer, it was no surprise that everyone answered with a quick and resounding “yes.” However, I allowed the individuals to self-define what it means to be authentic, which can help us work toward a more inclusive and comprehensive notion of how authenticity is defined and the ways that it is lived.

The first notion that should be dismissed is that authenticity requires openness to all
aspects of your life. While an LGBTQ youth who chooses to have two Facebook or Instagram pages: one that is “straight and cis” and the other allowing them to explore other aspects of their identity might seem to be inauthentic on the face-of-it, it might allow them to be more authentic that what being limited to one page might allow them. Banet-Weiser encourages us to not think about authenticity as a dichotomy (2012), yet when issues like this are discussed it is often set up with terms along this polarity (often with the “straight and cis” profile being deemed as inauthentic). While not completely open, the ideas that are expressed within these profiles still belong to and reflect a portion of that individual and should therefore not be demonized.

Additionally with many individuals, particularly those from conservative religions and/or who belong to another already-marginalized population, receiving additional complications to coming out (Grov et al., 2006), the ability to create these multiple sites of expression through social media might actually allow them to express all aspects of their personality in the most “authentic” way possible.

Within the LGBTQ community, particularly among white, cisgender, gay men there is criticism over individuals who do not post face pictures on “the apps” as not being their authentic self. While it is not unreasonable to want people to share a face picture with you (I myself require that when talking with individuals) to discriminate against individuals who do not publicly post their face online is the result of privilege. There are many reasons, other than being inauthentic, that one may not wish to have their identity broadcast across social media platforms – even ones that are intended for gay-specific audiences (e.g., not being out, having gotten out of an abusive relationship, or being interested in more less mainstream sexual acts). Posting a face picture online, especially when it can be associated with sensitive and personal information (e.g., HIV status, fetishes, location) involves a relinquishing of power. The information that you have
shared is now available for individuals to take and do with what they please. For individuals who are subject to discrimination from both outside and within this can be problematic as it can open them up to attacks outside of their locus of control. By limiting and controlling what and when information gets shared, these individuals are seeking to be able to stay in control and retain some power over their own representation.

Appropriate Media Usage

Outside the requirement of a perceivable authenticity, there was also a notion of what constitute an appropriate use of social media. Apart from Seth Tyler, who runs the porn site fistingtwinks.com and used his social media for promotion and recruitment, most individuals who I interviewed glossed over their use of Tumblr to find porn and even the use of “the apps.” Even though, by their own definition, these apps and sites meet all the qualifications for social media, these specific uses were often left to the end of the conversation and almost always with additional explanation.

In almost every interview there was an implied sense about proper uses of social media, which was reflected in the image that the participants projected in much of the interview. Many apps and sites are commonly used for sexual encounters or to view pornography, the way the participants spoke of these uses made it clear that these uses were not considered proper or appropriate, but rather were deviant to social mores. When these more “deviant” uses of social media were broached, it was almost always qualified with statements about how that was not the main use of social media or questioning whether that was even of interest to me.

Currently just on Scruff and Grindr, and just us it for what it is, a hookup app. You know…haven’t had the proudest moments from being on those sites, but that is what they are there for, I guess. Nobody proudly says that they are on them. (Cameron, personal
communication, January 31, 2018)

This downplay of viewing pornography and connecting with others for sexual encounters, both of which were prominent foundations of early gay culture in the United States (Bérubé, 2003; Chauncey, 1994; D’Emilio, 1998; Howard, 2001), is likely due to two reasons. The first is the protestant founding of traditional American values that emphasizes hard work and productivity while demonizing idleness. Even if free-time, individuals are expected to be productive and make the full use of their time (Thompson, 1967). Additionally, sexual activity within the United States has also historically been stigmatized as deviant if it occurs outside of procreative reasons (and even for procreation if it happens too frequently) (Barker-Benfield, 1972; Briggs, 2002; Carter, 2007). This puts pornography and casual sex in opposition of two foundational US values. The additional factors of the stereotype of the LGBTQ community (particularly of gay men) being hypersexual and the emphasis on monogamous relationships as a result of the push for same-sex marriage intensify this desire to portray oneself as an upstanding citizen.

These narratives that are crafted by these participants, however, should not be regarded as inauthentic nor as a deliberate attempt to mislead my interpretations. Rather, these crafted narratives are indications of the way that cultural norms affect the way we represent ourselves to each other, both in person and online. Other than Seth Tyler, there were two individuals who were relatively open with me about their viewing of pornography and their use of “the apps,” both of whom were close personal friends of mine. This closeness likely allowed for a break from the common and accepted narrative that social media is not used as a waste of time or for prurient reasons.

The second notion of authenticity that needs to be dismissed is that it can or should be
judged from the outside. Even though all the participants reported being authentic in their online presence, they all also admitted to custom tailoring what was shared, with whom, and when – including those individuals who in the beginning stated that they do not censure themselves online. As Butler reminds us, everyone is performing their identity (Butler, 1988) and no once performance will ever be wholly honest and truthful.

**There’s a site for that**

One of the advantages of social media in terms of presenting aspects of one’s personality is that there are a vast number of differing sites and apps that individuals use for social networking. In his testimony before congress on April 10 in light of the Cambridge Analytica data breach, Mark Zuckerberg stated that the average American uses eight different apps to connect with and stay in touch with people (Zuckerberg, 2018). Zuckerberg was speaking about American citizens in general and referencing apps such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. For the LGBTQ community, there exists a plethora of other, LGBTQ-specific apps that exist to cater to specific niches within the community. These range from Growlr (an app for gay & trans* men who are attracted to “bears”), Trans (a trans* specific dating app), Bristlr (an app for gay and trans* men who like men with beards), and Wing Ma’am (an app for lesbian women) (Mathews, 2015).

During his testimony, Zuckerberg and Senator Lindsey Graham debated over whether Facebook had a monopoly on social media – or rather, a monopoly on the types of interactions that Facebook enabled (Zuckerberg, 2018). This question went unanswered as it is a concept from the business world that does not translate neatly into the ever-changing, user driven world of social media. Rarely do any two social media platforms offer the same experience for their users, which often results in individuals using each one in different ways – even apps that seem
to offer very similar uses.

At the start of each interview, I began by asking each participant to describe their social media usage and what sites/apps they use. During this time, each person would explain how they use each site, for instance people tended to use Facebook primarily for purposes of staying in touch with friends and family; Twitter was used to engage in political discussions or follow celebrities; Instagram was used for more personal gratifications (such as following cute animals or attractive men); and Tumblr was used to follow artists or for pornography. Even LGBTQ-specific apps were used for different reasons. For example, Grindr was used often for quick hookups, but apps like Growlr were used for making friends, chatting, and while travelling.

Some sites, particularly ones such as Tumblr, were often used for lurking (the act of just viewing, and not creating, content), and others, particularly Facebook, were used to create content with the potential of sparking discussions. Focusing mainly on the ones in which content was created, each site allowed someone to express a different side of themselves and inspired them to change levels of privacy. Facebook was considered one of the most sensitive sites and individuals were generally cautious about what was posted and its potential audience. For instance, on Facebook people would keep their family in a group separate from their friends who were in a group separate from coworkers. This allowed people to decide which of their friends would be able to see what information. There was also a hesitancy in adding people as friends who they did not know personally or at least who did not have numerous mutual friends. Matthew also indicated that he now researches all potential friends if he does not know them personally.

I feel like with my energy I cannot just let anyone into my life. That is the same thing with social media...if it is someone I know and I know I’ve had an interaction with I will accept
them. But if it’s somebody…it depends on how many mutual friends. Because I have found that us talking about gay rights, issues around police and people of color, that I have come to find that there are a lot of people that don’t see things the way that I do. Which is fine. That is fine. We can all have difference in opinion. However, so many people in social media their opinions are based in ignorance. So many people don’t even do any research. So, because of that aspect, that’s when I have to become more careful of who I accept. So now, I’m like we have this mutual friend and I’m looking at their pictures. I’m looking to see if there are things that have anti-gay messages or, not if they are necessarily anti-Black Lives Matters, but just anti people having rights. (personal communication, February 3, 2018)

Instagram, on the other hand, was more likely to be public or have fewer requirements for whom would be allowed to follow them. It was also a space where individuals felt free to post more revealing pictures, either physically or emotionally. Many of the men that I spoke with used Instagram to post shirtless and/or gym selfies, mirroring the types of individuals they often followed, and several of the women and trans* individuals described feeling more open about what could be posted on Instagram from a personal standpoint.

Beth, who identifies as a white, cisgender, lesbian woman, explained how she has felt a pressure to hide her previous heterosexual marriage on some of her social media to avoid the stigma that she is just experimenting with her sexuality.

Here I am, came out at thirty and mom’s like “eww.” Still thinks its icky. Weird is her word of choice, like “gay people are so weird.” I’m like, well, you know what? I’m fucking gay, so get real. If you think I’m weird, that’s fine but then we can’t hang out. I think that is a lot of where it comes from. I also think…upon meeting new people and be openly gay in
Denver and in social circles or whatever. I think that the fact that I have been married to a man before and have been out for so little. It’s every lesbian’s fear that the woman they are seeing will go back to men...like that people will think that I’m not really gay, or whatever...Like I don’t want people to see my Instagram because I don’t want people to know that six months ago I was married to a dude. It’s just weird. (personal communication, January 30, 2018)

Beth, who had completely censured her Facebook page of this previous marriage and cleaned out her friends list after her divorce, did not do the same with Instagram. Although she expressed concern over certain people seeing her account and previous photos, she made it clear that it was only women that she was interested in potentially dating that she didn’t want to see. She felt on Instagram that she could be completely open and transparent about both her sexual identity and her previous marriage.

Cameron also explained how he shared much of his transformation on Instagram, even though he has been toying with the idea of going stealth in other aspects of his life.

I think the whole reason I keep myself out and open on Instagram, even though I debate about it all the time, because I can be found, etc. Is, visibility is so important for the trans* community I’m in a situation where I feel safe being visible and I honestly would feel a bit guilty if I chose to erase my visibility completely. Because if it wasn’t for others being visible before me, I never would have found who I was. (personal communication, January 31, 2018)

Perhaps due to the lack of identifying information on Instagram or its prioritization of photos versus text, it was deemed to be a safer place to share content deemed unsafe on Facebook. Of note, both Instagram and Facebook are owned by the same company.
Facebook did have one common use among almost all participants that I interviewed, which was the use of special interest groups. While not initially cited as a primary use by the participants in their interviews, they all eventually discussed the ways that Facebook enabled queer spaces to exist that allowed them to feel part of a community – either locally or globally. These were all centered around a shared interest ranging from sexual attraction to profession to commerce, providing safe spaces for individuals to interact with others without exposing themselves to the rest of Facebook. In a way, groups like this allowed individuals to feel safe without having to worry about their own privacy settings, because the person who created the group oversaw that. In these spaces people would post revealing selfies, ask for career advice, and even look for places to live and shop. This use of social media harkens back to the early days of LGBTQ periodicals, which often prioritized supporting local, queer businesses and establishments. This works to create a community both online and offline.

The Privilege & Tyranny of Visibility

The vast amount of social media that exists as well as the number of active users allow LGBTQ individuals to seek out niche communities and express themselves in free ways that otherwise may have seemed risky. This, however, is not always a positive aspect for many individuals, particularly for those LGBTQ individuals who are also in other marginalized populations, including lower economic classes, race, ethnicity, and those living with HIV.

Despite its common view as a solid identity category, the LGBTQ community is comprised of a diverse group of individuals who span a wide range of other “identity markers,” such as race, ethnicity, class, and religion. Often, however, this is overlooked within scholarly research regarding the LGBTQ community, especially in work related to the actions of individuals online. For example, in the edited volume LGBT Identity and Online New Media,
there is no mention of any of the above-mentioned factors of identity, despite its main focus being on questions of identity in the social media environment that currently exists (Pullen & Cooper, 2010). This text is just one of many examples that collapse a diverse group into a falsely stable community, something that has been critiqued by queer scholars of color as not being representative of the experiences of everyone (Ross, 2005). To understand the complexities of identity, I turn to two differing theories about identity construction: intersectionalities and assemblages.

Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality is an attempt to complicate the notion of single identities (1991). Crenshaw was particularly interested in highlighting the unique positioning of women of color in society, in that they were disadvantaged based on both their gender and race. As many other feminists of color have noted, blanket feminism tends to reflect the experiences of white women and the black rights movement tended to focus on the experiences of black men; black women were being thrust into the background in both situations (Cho et al., 2013; Cohen & Jackson, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; Eisenstein, 1978). The essential principle of intersectionalities is that all individuals’ identities are comprised of various intersections of privileges and oppressions, much like a web of identity. In this way, we can understand that there is rarely an identity that is wholly privileged or wholly oppressed, and thus we cannot take a unidirectional approach to understanding one category of identity, but instead we need to understand that within each category there are many intersecting categories that factor into one’s social positioning.

Intersectionality, while an improvement from a mono-dimensional understanding of identity, is not without its criticisms. There are two main ones that I will be addressing here: (1) that intersectionality reifies fixed notions of identity and (2) is not able to provide the actual
complexities associated with questions of identities (Cho et al., 2013; Nash, 2008; Jasbir K. Puar, 2007, 2012; Robertson & Sgoutas, 2012). Some critiques of intersectionality simply label it as a form of “identity politics,” in the sense that often intersectionality gets used to locate and advocate for the most disadvantaged group of people while ignoring others. I would like to reject these notions and state that they are merely reflective of the way that this theory has become co-opted by modern, neo-liberal politics. Instead of dwelling on this critique of a weak version of intersectionality, I instead would like to invoke Jasbir Puar’s critique of intersectionalities, in which she not only provides a critique of intersectionality, but provides us with a useful alternative in which to consider identity -- the Deleuzian notion of assemblages (2012).

Puar does not suggest, and nor do I, that we should abandon intersectionality, but rather that we can reconceptualize it as something less static and less focused on difference, which ultimately produces more types of subjects, but still requires discrete categories (2012). Returning to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of assemblage, Puar suggests that we need not understand identity as a relationship between fixed identity categories and markers, but rather one that is based on encounters and experiences – after all, if not deciphered through experiences identity categories are without meaning. By highlighting identity categories, intersectionality is fundamentally about the human body, prioritizing that above all else.

No matter how intersectional our models of subjectivity, no matter how attuned to locational politics of space, place, and scale, these formulations may still limit us if they presume the automatic primacy and singularity of the disciplinary subject and its identitarian interpellation. (Puar, 2007, p. 206)

If we no longer must prioritize the individual subject, new possibilities are opened to understanding identity, especially concerning how that identity extends out beyond our body and
into the complex networks of social media. Building upon Ahmed’s notion that spaces come to take on the characteristics of those who inhabit them (2006), we begin to see the ways that these social networks begin to embody the characteristics of whiteness and homonormativity.

It is with this in mind that the issue of the ways LGBTQ individuals are represented online become problematic, particularly the focus on cisgender, white, gay men. The It Gets Better Campaign, for example, has been cited as prioritizing white gay men and lesbian women, while obscuring voices of LGB individuals of color and trans* individuals (Jasbir K. Puar, 2010; Wight, 2014). This is an issue that extends beyond this one campaign but permeates much LGBTQ online culture. Much of the criticism over the high visibility of cisgender, white gay and lesbian men and women has focused on the subtle erasure of other identities. As these quotes show, however, there is an additional risk that is related in that this lack of other representations could cause further depression and anxiety.

**Spaces of Exclusion**

More than just a lack of representation in many channels, many individuals are actively excluded, attacked, or discriminated against within many platforms. In the summer of 2017, a new app for gay men, DaddyBear, focused on helping young gay bears find a sugar daddy and vice versa. While clearly serving a very niche group, which is by its very essence exclusionary, DaddyBear decided to ban anyone who was living with HIV (de Koff, 2017). This was done under the prejudicial idea that there are no sugar daddies who are living with HIV and, relatedly, they would not desire to be in a relationship with someone who was HIV+ because,

No one would like to date people living with HIV unless he is living with it…Most gay sugar daddies are not living with HIV, so they don't want to bring home any unwanted souvenirs. However, we support that gay men living with HIV have the right to date with
other gays with HIV. But many rich and successful gay sugar daddies do not want to date with gay men living with HIV, which is the reason why we launched this app to meet their needs. (Rodriguez, 2017)

This feeds into the stereotypes and prejudices that exist within the LGBTQ community that those with HIV are less healthy than others and that serodiscordant relationships cannot work. While the CEO of DaddyBear referenced the needs and desires of his clientele to justify this decision he did not explicitly state how he knew this was true.

Most LGBTQ sites do not exclude HIV+ individuals; it does not mean that these are safe spaces for these individuals. Despite using these LGBTQ-specific spaces as safe and accepting heterotopias away from the heteronormative values imbued into more mainstream sites, many of the same flaming behaviors still occur (Christopherson, 2007; Moore et al., 2012). Largely due to the anonymity offered to individuals, HIV+ individuals as well as LGBTQ individuals of color report receiving high numbers of inflammatory messages (see image 12).

I knew that people were racist, because I was in the military. They were racist. But when I moved to predominately white areas was when I realized these motherfuckers are real racists. But not like KKK racists. These are some of the people who were like, I’ll be friends with a black person, but you are not good enough for me to be in a relationship with. I’ll have sex with you…You’re good enough to be in bed with me, but you are not good enough for me to be vulnerable with and spend the rest of my life with…. I have had people who have tried to talk to me who if I said I was not interested or didn’t respond fast enough, I’ve had guys call me n****r, like quite a few times. (personal communication February
No Fats, Femmes, or Asians

Some individuals go out of their way to attack certain groups of LGBTQ individuals. However, much of the discrimination that occurs in these spaces is more insidious, much as Hall describes the differences between overt and inferential racism (2000). This inferential discrimination typically occurs under the guise of “preferences” (Allen, 2015; Henry, 2018; Trott, 2017). While these preferences run the gambit for what people are attracted to, they tend to have a few things in common. Preferences typically are phrased as negatives, indicating what people do not like rather than what they do like (e.g., “not into black guys,” “no Asians,” or “no femmes. Even when posted as an indication for what type of person they are attracted to, the
posts take on the tone of an imperative and are often very limited in scope (e.g., “only into white guys” or “only masculine guys”).

Race, body type, perceived masculinity, and HIV status are main categories that individuals create within their profiles as their preferences. There is considerable debate within the community from individuals defending these statuses and statements as uncontrollable preferences and others stating that these are just forms of discrimination in disguise (Allen, 2015; Henry, 2018; Trott, 2017). This debate is nothing new as statements like these were included within classifieds from the earliest days of LGBTQ periodicals and undoubtedly existed offline. While not fundamentally different, the expression of these perspectives in social media does change the potential reach of these opinions, creating spaces that do not feel welcoming for certain individuals. This is the result from a variety of factors, including receiving antagonistic messages, viewing discriminatory headings and profile names, and receiving a lack of communication within certain apps or sites.

One of the differences with individuals discriminating in social media versus older forms of media is that there are certain technological affordances that allow these prejudicial practices to go unseen. SCRUFF, an app for gay cis- & trans*-men prides themselves on being an inclusive app that offers a social space for many different people, including different body types, trans* individuals, non-binary users, and HIV+ individuals (Strudwick, 2016). Despite claims of inclusivity, SCRUFF offers a feature that allows users to filter out individuals by race and ethnicity. When questioned about why this was a feature on an app that was focused on inclusivity, founders Johnny Skandros and Eric Silverstreet indicated that this feature was designed to allow individuals to filter based on their preferences. The two founders, both of whom are white, cisgender men, compared ethnic and racial preferences to any other type of
attraction, such as body hair (Strudwick, 2016).

By comparing race, ethnicity, and masculinity with other markers of attraction works to hide the way that racism, sexism, and homophobia factor into the ways that these preferences are expressed or formed. Omi and Winant (2015) inform us that the US culture has been built on the back of numerous racial projects (and by intersectional extension gendered and sexual projects), which have informed the ways that we think about, not just identity categories, but every aspect of our life. Skandros and Silverstreet, acknowledged that racism and discrimination were very real issues in online interactions in their app (Strudwick, 2016), but that it was too complicated to actually deal with, which is due to the obtuse, overlapping, and often invisible ways that these racial projects work to structure society, desires, and wants.

Wanting the Other

Microaggressions are the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group. (Sue, 2010, sec. 1, chapter 1, para. 14)

While the overt displays of racism and homophobia within social media were problematic to many individuals, equally problematic were the daily microaggressions that made them feel excluded. There were two ways that these microaggressions were experienced: either having people expect them to educate them or being treated as a fetish object. While never done intentionally to ostracize individuals, and often done with the best of intentions, these interactions often alienate people and make them feel othered. Cameron stated that he was often made to feel othered through “the apps.”

On my Grindr and Scruff, I’m open about it [being trans*]. The reason I am using it for,
they are going to find out eventually, so why not just put it out there in the first place. I go back and forth with whether or not putting it on there. Because, you know, I mean. Its good because it clears the air. I don’t need to have that conversation and be like you know what, let me disclose this to you. There is no disclosure needed, its already disclosed blatantly on my profile. Yet at the same time, I’m fetishized so I’m sought out for that reason. Which, depending on my mood, sometimes I’ll let myself be fetishized, but normally I don’t…I’m not about that…Back when I was on my OKCupid Tindr, where I was using it to date, right? Negative encounters being I disclose to them and then either they just like ghost me, ask a million freakin question. I’m not there…Alright, I like to educate people to an extent. When I’m going on a date with someone, I’m not sitting a bar having a drink with you to educate you… With these hookup apps, with gay men, sure. Tons of inappropriate stuff said to me all the time. You know when people hear you are trans* sometimes you become tokenized, right? “Oh, here is this trans* person that I can ask these million questions in my head that I’ve been curious about” …Messaging me out of the blue asking inappropriate stuff. Usually about my genitalia. (personal communication, January 31, 2018)

Education has been a large part of the LGBTQ political agenda for decades, so in some ways it makes sense that this might be expected of individuals. Despite what might be noble intentions, these interactions result in several forms of exclusion. The first is that it denotes the differences within certain (typically HIV+ or trans*) individuals and makes them feel as though they are visitors in a space that is not necessarily for them. They are allowed entry with qualifications, compared to the unfettered access to which many individuals are entitled. Second, there is an implied sense of disinterest or lack of caring in that individuals are not willing to learn on their own accord.
Fetishizing certain bodies, whether based on race, ethnicity, or gender is nothing new and builds on the long tradition of treating certain people as less than their white, cis-gender counterparts. A common acronym in gay-specific apps is “BBC,” which stands for “Big Black Cock” and is used both from individuals seeking this or individuals claiming to have this. In early 2018, a twitter debate erupted between several gay porn stars over whether this was an acceptable term to say; Max Konnor, a black porn star, stated that it is never appropriate to use this term (see image 13).

This tweet caused several white, gay porn actors to take offense. Austin Wolf explained that being fetishized and treated as an object is part of the porn industry and it is what Konnor signed up for (Street, 2018). Throughout this Twitter discourse, there was disagreement over this term from both within and outside of the porn community. The salient difference between those with differing opinions was the race/ethnicity of the individuals – men of color felt the term to be disrespectful and a turn-off, while white men were quick to defend this term by noting that these
black men should be flattered by this term (see image 14).

Big C stated that he gets turned on when people talk about his “big white dick” and that Konnor should “own [the term].” In absence of the historical fetishizing or reduction to object status in the way that people of color and/or trans* individuals have experience, this is easy for white individuals to state. As hooks informs us,

Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. Cultural taboos around sexuality and desire are transgressed and made explicit as the media bombards folk with a message of difference no longer based on the white supremacist assumptions that “blondes have more fun.” The “real fun” is to be had by bringing to surface all those “nasty’ unconscious fantasies and longings about contact with the Other embedded in the secret (and not so secret) deep structure of white supremacy. (hooks, 1992, p. 21)

In this way the admiration of Big C’s white cock is a reminder of and submission to the power of whiteness, while the references to black men’s penises serve as reminders that they are only
acceptable for sexual pleasure and are nothing more than the obsession that white men have over black body parts. In discussions of desirable encounters with others, when people of color are desired it is often only due to their body parts or racist notions of heightened sexuality (e.g., the longstanding stereotype of the “passionate, Latin lover).

The desire to be educated by or sexually pleasured by these individuals reinforces the idea that they occupy a world that is centered around cis-white supremacy and individuals who do not fit that mold are only desirable insomuch as they are able to provide a service. These contacts re-center whiteness and cisgender-ness; they highlight the ways that others do not belong in the same way – under the guise of inclusion.
Chapter 6 – Conclusion:
The More Things Change, The More They Remain the Same

“People are complicated to the point that nobody is any one thing...
The Internet is just another experiment showing us more sides of us.”

~ Frank Ocean

It is often thought that social media, through changing the way we interact, has fundamentally altered the message. After all, as McLuhan stated, “the medium is the message,” (McLuhan, 1994) so if the medium changes, the message should also be changed. A common sentiment within the gay community has been that “the apps” have been killing the gay bars and queer culture in general (Norman, 2015). When I first conjured up the idea for this study, I had assumed that I would find that coming out and expressions of LGBTQ culture had fundamentally changed. In some ways they have, but in many they have not.

LGBTQ culture is now much more visible than it ever has been, which brings with it both new benefits and challenges. Visibility has always been a struggle for the LGBTQ community and has often been a large goal of the modern LGBTQ rights movement. This has been under the notion that the more visible the community is, the less discrimination they will face both from external sources and from that which has been internalized. When you do not see individuals, who resemble you in the larger U.S. culture, your presence in culture is essentially erased. While this is problematic for all marginalized groups, it is especially problematic when the dominant narrative about your identity is one that aligns with deviance, misery, and sin.

Increasing the visibility of the LGBTQ community through social media is beneficial in that it acts as an intervention to the epidemic of suicide among LGBTQ teenagers. As questioning teenagers unsure how to process their feelings about their SOGI, the ability to see
and interact with others “like them” has shown to have life-saving ramifications. Social isolation has been shown to be related to depression, morbidity, and mortality (Teo, 2013). Since social media has removed limitations for connections based on geography, LGBTQ communities are able to form remotely and provide resources and support for teenagers and others unsure of how they fit into U.S. society.

It is through being able to reach out to individuals both directly and indirectly (simply by becoming more visible) that social media has arguably made its greatest contribution to LGBTQ culture and politics. This is not fundamentally different from previous political aims of LGBTQ politics, however. It has simply increased access to this ability. When theorizing about communicative technology it is easy to assume that it is going to fundamentally change the nature of communication either for the better or the worse. Social media, and the Internet in general, historically have been anticipated to both liberate and hinder open communication (Brundidge, 2010; Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Padva, 2008).

Rather than fundamentally changing communication, it is more appropriate to think of the changes in terms of volume. Acoustic and electric guitars are used in very different types of music, and it can be said that the invention and adoption of electric guitars changed the face of rock and roll music. Despite this difference the fundamentals of how a guitar is played are ultimately the same – chords and finger positions have not changed, they tend to have the same basic physical structure, and they are played relatively similarly. If one knows how to play an acoustic guitar they can pick up an electric guitar with ease. The change was a result, not of the function of the guitar itself, but the volume that was then possible.

Similar to the ways the electric guitar changed music, I contend that the change that social media has brought to expressions of LGBTQ identity is not one of form or function, but
rather one of amplification and the changes that accompany the new volume. Through my examination of the archival LGBTQ collections, the themes and types of communication that were prevalent were not fundamentally different from the themes that came to light from my contemporary interviews and research on social media. Since the pre-Stonewall day, expressions of LGBTQ culture have often emphasized personal connections, coming out, the need to survive, and the need to be politically active. These are still the cornerstones of LGBTQ-specific communication present in almost every queer corner within social media spaces. Even in spaces that are designed with a specific purpose (e.g., “the apps”), these foundational messages are present.

While the content and intent of messages have not changed, through social media they are able to be broadcast and directed toward new and wider audiences. Partially due to my recruitment through politically minded spaces (e.g., the University of Colorado Boulder, the Denver Queer Exchange) my participants were predominately very politically active. Many participants used their social media to broadcast messages about issues related to LGBTQ rights, health, and policy to inform both within and outside of the community. Social media has given these individuals a larger platform to preach their messages. Through being able to actively engage in these discourses, there is a hope among many that they will be able to change the terms of the conversation, something C. Wright Mills (1972) stated was a necessity for real political change.

While LGBTQ periodicals such as The Advocate have always been politically minded, through broadcasting stories in places such as Facebook, Tumblr, and Grindr, the potential exists to exponentially increase visibility. Instead of only being targeted toward a niche community who are likely already interested, political messages have encroached on what had traditionally
been considered non-political spaces. All queer spaces now have the potential to be political and provide everyone with the voice to become a spokesperson for a cause, and the participants I spoke with indicated the importance of this. By sharing posts about the AIDS epidemic on his pornographic Tumblr, Seth Tyler demonstrates the ways that LGBTQ individuals are never fully able to escape politics. In this way, LGBTQ users are actively engaged in a world-building project with hope for a better future (Muñoz, 2009).

These amplification-afforded messages come with the benefits of turning social media into a powerful tool for political empowerment and survival. Some contend that this amplification leads to a cacophony of issues being constantly broadcast, resulting in an increase in political and emotional fatigue (Dean, 2009). This may be the case on the macro-level; nevertheless, these judgements are often based on cis-heteronormative standards of what political action should be – large scale actions enacted to bring about wide-reaching change. For LGBTQ individuals, however, mere survival should be considered a political act. Despite an overall increase in acceptance for LGBTQ individuals in the decades post-Stonewall, many in the United States still view and treat LGBTQ citizens as less than. Suicide, homicide, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and disease still disproportionately affect LGBTQ individuals compared to the rest of the United States population. Having tools that allow people to help protect others in their own community, as well as broadcast these issues to a larger population to create awareness, are important political tools of survival. Examining the political uses of social media within the LGBTQ community help to provide a new, more inclusive framework for what constitutes political actions – one of caring, support, and survival.

The amplification of political messages has been helpful to many in the LGBTQ community, but it is not without victims. A driving tenet of the modern LGBTQ rights
movement has been the need for individuals to come out. This has resulted in coming out narratives being prioritized as the quintessential LGBTQ story. Pressure has long existed for individuals to come out to everyone, often at the detriment of religious individuals and people of color (Gertler, 2014; Grov et al., 2006; Ross, 2005). This pressure has increased with individuals sharing their own coming out stories and experiences, sometimes even recording them with hidden camera and broadcasting these videos. Done with the intent of helping individuals still in the closet, a narrative is driven forth that unless one is completely out they are less developed as an LGBTQ person.

This narrative is based on assumptions of U.S.-centric, gender-conforming whiteness; creating additional anxiety for those whose lives do not follow these norms. Trans* individuals have seen an increase in support since the turn of the century, but it is often prioritized for those who have the money, time, and privilege to be able to (or even desire to) conform to societal standards of gender. When Caitlyn Jenner came out via her Vanity Fair cover in 2015, she was praised based on how beautiful she was (Biedenharn, 2015). The #WeJustNeedToPee Twitter campaign started by highlighting individuals who clearly passed as their gender identity, ignoring those who would not pass. Masculinity, beauty, and whiteness have long been the staples of LGBTQ standards of acceptance – reinforced through portrayals in advertising, entertainment media, and news coverage. Despite hopes that by providing more individuals with the ability to share their stories there would be an increase in diverse representations, all stories have been amplified creating an omnipresent white masculinity that deafens and obscures other narratives.

Within this white and masculine landscape, not only are people of color, women, and trans* individuals obscured almost to the point of invisibility, when they do appear they are often
at risk of attack. Mirroring a growing trend of a perceived crisis of white masculinity (O’Sullivan, 2017), ethnic minorities are often attacked when they occupy queer spaces, under the pretense of preferences (Allen, 2015; Henry, 2018; Trott, 2017). Women and trans* individuals are often also excluded from what are claimed to be inclusive spaces (Leavell, 2018).

When not openly attacked, the times people of color and trans* individuals are offered admittance to these spaces are often as objects to fetishize. They are there for the pleasure and service of white men, who rarely have any regard to their issues.

Foucault (1969, 1990) informed us that discourse shapes reality. Photographs and visuals are especially powerful in projecting cultural norms and values (Christmann, 2008; Hasenmueller, 1978; Heywood, Sandywell, & Gardiner, 2012; Panofsky, 1972; Rose, 2012). Despite the overall message not changing drastically, the amplification of these images and discourses enhance the power of this reality-making. Social media does allow for counter-hegemonic readings of these texts (Hall, 1980); however, it is also clear that these messages become created either in isolation from the dominant messages or in areas that are openly hostile to them.

As I started this project, I came in with the intent to understand how coming out has changed through the proliferation of coming out narratives in social media. What I learned was that my initial hypothesis and interests were informed by and reflective of my own biases coming from a place of white masculinity. Through meeting with a diverse group of individuals about their experiences with social media, I realized that coming out was only part of the story – and not even a major part for many people. The idea that once someone is out, disregarding that coming out is a process and not a discrete event they can live their life completely open and honest to their own truth is one that comes with a lot of assumptions. Social media has helped
numerous LGBTQ individuals, including all of those I interviewed. At the same time, there was a lot of ambivalence expressed in their attitudes about social media – particularly those who do not fit the dominant, white, masculine narrative. It was considered both a tool for emancipation and liberation as well as for repression and hatred. It is with this ambivalence in mind that I offer up a few recommendations on how we can use social media and some things that app and site developers should take into consideration.

**Social Media Usage**

There is a tendency to think of social media as something removed from “real life,” by placing a screen in between ourselves and those with whom we interact. Additionally, sometimes we just broadcast to an imagined community without realizing the full audience of a post or profile (Gruzd et al., 2011; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Social media allows us to feed our most narcissistic tendencies; however, as an already marginalized community we need to fight the neo-liberal tendencies to view it as a space for individuals. Instead, we need to return to the community-focused intent of the original LGBTQ rights movement and bring that into our modern, digital era. Rather than viewing social media as a tool that will allow us to separate ourselves from our fellow citizens, it can be a tool to unite and support the most marginalized among us. Social media cannot only spread messages farther than ever before, but it also offers the possibility to greater exposure to those different from us.

It is by using social media to force ourselves out of our comfort zone and to learn to emphasize with others that we can truly work to create a more empathetic and engaged community. Thinking of social media as an extension of, rather than a separation from, other aspects of our lives can radically change the way it is used. This is something that some participants I interviewed already do, while others created a strict dichotomy between online and
offline lives and personas. There is benefit to both approaches, particularly when it comes to issues of safety. Safe-exploration of SOGI is a benefit of social media in that it can provide safe spaces of learning and experimentation not often available in the “real” world. Being there to support individuals, truly supporting and understanding their desires, and respecting people’s own journeys are ways that social media can be enhanced to craft these safe spaces.

Authenticity is a concept that is often judged for individuals and those not living according to societal norms are deemed less authentic than others. These judgements are based on cis-heteronormative white standards that do not work for many. Concepts of authenticity and the type of authenticity that is desired are often considered in the designs of social media sites. These factor into decisions on what names are allowed, what types of pictures are allowed, and even the spaces to which people are given access. Representation within the workforce will not fix issues of access and content alone (Shaw, 2015), but it is a good starting place. Outside of some LGBTQ-specific sites, social media is largely designed and operated by cisgender, white men who take certain world-views as given. The ideas fueled by these world-views are then imbedded within the networks of social media, with little thought of how they affect less represented individuals (Wight, 2014).

Rethinking notions of authenticity and honesty outside of these white, cis-heteronormative ideals can provide alternative ways for representation online. By requiring individuals to choose their SOGI as their Facebook status forces individuals to label themselves publicly before they may be ready to do so. It is an option to leave these statuses blank, but, as my participants indicated, blank statuses are often feared to indicate a deviation from the cis-heterosexual norm. This often requires individuals to fear the risk of accidental outings, either real or implied, by leaving these blank, coming out before they feel ready, or lying about their
SOGI. The latter is often the one chosen, which takes an emotional toll on these individuals who feel they must lead a lie online.

There is often a desire embedded within social media to mirror the outside, unmediated world. Choices are offered to allow individuals to express every aspect of their identity. Rather than focusing on mirroring the “real” world, social media can push the world forward by creating an idealistic world not bounded by the conventions and ideals of the past. As Muñoz stated, “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality for another world” (2009, p. 1). Therefore, a queer social media project should include a strive toward making the online a more ideal and inclusive location.

Therapeutic Confession (revisited)

One of the unintended results from my interviews was the declaration by many of my participants about how much they appreciated my interview and that it served as a form of therapy for them. While I was always quick to tell them that I should be the one thanking them for their important contribution to this research and to the LGBTQ community, upon further reflection I realized I should not have been surprised by this response. My original intention was to examine the coming out experience for individuals from their perspectives, but these interviews ultimately recreated another coming out moment for them, only this time encouraging active reflection on thoughts and feelings. Despite knowing what these interviews would focus on (and I was relatively open ahead of time about the questions that would be asked), they still appeared to reflect the emotional rollercoaster that surrounds these experiences. There is a thought that once one comes out for the first time that it becomes easier, almost to the point of being trivial. Even some of my participants would discuss how they are out and open with their lives. Regardless of these claims, there was almost always a bit of nervousness in the beginning.
about discussing their coming out and sexuality with me. This could be attributed solely to the interview setting; however, because these more personal questions did not begin any of the interviews, I would suggest that influence was limited. Rather, I wish to contend another interpretation of this nervousness and then later cathartic release.

Throughout LGBTQ media, coming out has become ritualized to the point that it not only becomes an unfair standard of judgement, but the way it is approached is also the same. There are certain areas of your SOGI that are appropriate to reveal to others, and those that are to be remain hidden. Once we enact this ritual, it does become easier (for most) because we have practiced the approved script of being LGBTQ in America. This factors into not only our face-to-face interactions with individuals, but how we portray ourselves online. Expressions of SOGI online, therefore, are also limited by these scripts. What Ahmed referred to as compulsory heterosexuality (2006) and Duggan described as the new homonormativity (2002) have shifted and blended to take on new meaning within the LGBTQ community online: compulsory homonormativity. While it is considered more acceptable to express SOGI, it is only acceptable when done in certain contexts. The importance of this visibility cannot be understated; it is important to remember what remains hidden. My interviews allowed many of the feelings, emotions, hopes, and fears surrounding the LGBTQ community to be expressed, resulting in a cathartic release, even if only fleeting. Social media has given voice to millions of LGBTQ Americans and shown a vulnerable and at-risk population that they are not alone and there is hope. It has also created a new script that must be followed in order to gain this acceptance. Deviations from this narrative are confined to less popular apps and the LGBTQ-specific apps (the online version of the gay ghetto). These other aspects of LGBTQ identities are thus relegated, confined, and contained within a new, digital closet.
Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This nature of this project posed several substantial challenges. One of the main challenges was related to recruitment, especially those who did not represent the already over-represented middle class, white, male population. One of these limitations stemmed from the geographic region of recruiting in the Denver metropolitan area. Denver country has a population that is 80-percent white and only 14-percent of individuals living in poverty (United States Census Bureau, 2016). This was attempted to be corrected by recruiting using convenience samples directly focused on increasing diversity of participants; however, recruiting in a more diverse area would likely provide a more diverse population of participants.

One very significant challenge was conducting the observation phase of the interviews. While the conversations were relatively productive they were still subject to the image that individuals wished to portray and were not able to capture the spontaneity of actual social media usage. Because social media is rarely a time-bound activity (e.g., watching a movie, playing a video game) observing it in real-time is problematic and difficult to accomplish. Despite encouraging participants to use their social media freely during this portion of the interviews, there was sense that they did not feel comfortable using it the way they normally do.

To account for this difference of idealized presentation of use and actual use, future research would benefit from expanding observation time when studying social media to establish better rapport with the participants. This would allow individuals to feel more relaxed and begin to stop their performance of ideal social media use and begin to use it normally. This would also be benefitted by creating interviews to mimic real-life situations when individuals would likely be mindlessly engaging with social media. Other options such as asking participants to keep a journal of their social media use could be useful, but would also suffer from what individuals
choose to disclose or keep secret.

When I began this project, Donald Trump had just started his political campaign and his subsequent election drastically changed the political landscape. Participants were consistently discussing how it was the current political climate that inspired them to behave the way they did on social media. Because of this it is unclear if these trends are just fads or evidence of a more pervasive social media presence. It is important to continue interrogating the way marginalized communities, such as the LGBTQ community, are using social media as a tool of resistance and empowerment. In most of these political posts there was often a unifying of the LGBTQ community, which placed white gay men in the quintessential queer experience in the United States. It is clear because of this tendency that any research into social media politics and expressions of identity must take an intersectional lens.
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Appendix A: Interview Guides

Interview Guide 1

The research will be using an unstructured interview design. An unstructured interview design does not use a set of pre-arranged questions but allows the questions to develop during the interview. Given the population under study, an unstructured interview will be the best research technique to solicit responses since it has more of a conversational tone.

The following questions serve as a basic guide for the questions that will be asked, but is not necessarily indicative of the order of the questions. It also does not indicate that all questions listed will be asked.

This guide will be used when the individual being interviewed has already come out.

➢ **Tell me about when you first realized that you were gay, lesbian, or bisexual?**
  o (Probe) How did that make you feel?

➢ **What did being gay, lesbian, or bisexual mean to you?**
  o (Probe) How did you think you fit into society?

➢ **What was the attitude of your family towards the LGB community at this time?**
  o (Probe) How were you aware of this?

➢ **What type of social media did you use at this time?**
  o (Probe) What would have been some typical activities you may have engaged in online?
  o (Probe) Did this influence how you saw yourself fitting into society?

➢ **Tell me about when you came out for the first time?**
  o (Probe) Who did you come out to?
  o (Probe) What was their reaction?
  o (Probe) What were your thoughts, hopes, and fears surrounding this?
  o (Probe) How long after you realized you were gay, lesbian, or bisexual before you came out?
  o (Probe) Where did you come out?

➢ **What inspired you to come out?**
  o (Probe) What factors contributed to the way in which you came out?

➢ **How did you decide how you were going to come out?**
  o (Probe) What kind of guidance (either personal or through media) did you receive?

➢ **Tell me about your use of social media during this time?**
  o (Probe) Where there any specific websites that you used?
  o (Probe) Did they factor into the way that you came out?

➢ **How has your use of social media changed after coming out?**
  o (Probe) Do you use the same websites/apps and if so, do you use them the same way?
  o (Probe) Do you use any new websites/apps?
Interview Guide 2

The research will be using an unstructured interview design. An unstructured interview design does not use a set of pre-arranged questions but allows the questions to develop during the interview. Given the population under study, an unstructured interview will be the best research technique to solicit responses since it has more of a conversational tone. The following questions serve as a basic guide for the questions that will be asked, but is not necessarily indicative of the order of the questions. It also does not indicate that all questions listed will be asked. This guide will be used when the individual being interviewed is still “in the closet.”

➢ **Tell me about when you first realized that you were gay, lesbian, or bisexual?**
  o (Probe) How did that make you feel?
➢ **What did being gay, lesbian, or bisexual mean to you?**
  o (Probe) How did you think you fit into society?
➢ **What was the attitude of your family towards the LGB community at this time?**
  o (Probe) How were you aware of this?
➢ **What type of social media did you use at this time?**
  o (Probe) What would have been some typical activities you may have engaged in online?
  o (Probe) Did this influence how you saw yourself fitting into society?
➢ **Have you thought about coming out?**
  o (Probe) What were your thoughts, hopes, and fears surrounding this?
  o (Probe) How long after you realized you were gay, lesbian, or bisexual before you started thinking about coming out?
➢ **Why haven’t you come out?**
  o (Probe) What factors contributed to this?
➢ **Tell me about your use of social media?**
  o (Probe) Where there any specific websites that you used?
  o (Probe) Do you use any websites or apps that allow you to have a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity without having to come out to your family and friends?
  o (Probe) Has this changed throughout time at all?
➢ **Do you have any concerns with using particular websites or apps?**
  o (Probe) What steps do you take to keep your sexuality a secret from those you wish to?
➢ **Do you use some apps differently than others, in relationship to your sexuality?**
  o (Probe) How do you use these apps?
  o (Probe) What is it about these apps that inspires you to use them differently than others?
Focus Group Guide

Coming Out Experiences

I. WARM-UP AND EXPLANATION (10 minutes)

A. Introduction

1. Thank you for coming
2. Your presence is important
3. Describe what a focus group is: like an opinion survey, but conducted in a group rather than individually
4. You were selected for this focus group because of your experiences with coming out.
5. Before we begin, please tell us your preferred name (or pseudonym) and when you came out (or let us know if you are not yet out).

B. Purpose

1. We will be discussing your coming out experience and your social media usage.
2. I’m interested in your thoughts, feelings, comments, and stories.
3. There are no right or wrong answers
4. Whatever you say is welcome.
5. You can have differing opinions. I would like to have as many points of view as possible.

C. Procedure

1. Explain use of video camera. One of the goals of this project is to create information for the LGBTQ community through a documentary. Anyone wishing to not partake in the documentary but still participate in the research project will be seated on the side and will not be filmed.
2. This is a group discussion, so please don’t wait for me to call on your. Please speak one at a time so that the camera can pick up everything you say.
3. Since we have a lot to cover, I may change the subject or move on to the next point. Please stop me if you want to add something.

II. GENERAL COMING OUT EXPERIENCES

A. Personal experience

1. What was your experience coming out?
2. Who did you come out to first?
3. How did it feel?
4. How does it feel now?

B. Preparation for coming out

1. When did you first decide to come out?
2. What were you thoughts/feelings leading up to coming out?
3. Why did you decide to come out when you did? OR why have you decided to not come out yet?
4. What, if any, preparation did you do to come out?

III. REACTIONS TO OTHERS COMING OUT

A. Social Media Examples (To begin the leader will show a series of examples of coming out stories and experiences from the social media sites Youtube,
Instagram, Tumblr, Facebook, and Vine. After each example, the leader will guide the participants through the following questions):
   1. How many of you have seen a similar type of experience shared?
   2. How did this compare with previous videos (or pictures or posts) that you have seen?
   3. How did you find these posts?
   4. Did this example feel authentic to you?
      a. Please explain more.

IV. SOCIAL MEDIA AND COMING OUT

A. Creation of Content
   1. Have you created any posts about your coming out experience, either before, after, or during?
   2. What was your motivation to do this?
   3. What was the reception to these posts?
   4. What were your concerns before you made the post?

B. Current social media usage
   1. If you are openly out, how did your social media usage change when you came out?
   2. Were there any considerations you had in posting before you came out versus after you came out?
   3. If you are not openly out, what concerns do you have about what you make public on social media?
   4. What are your favorite types of social media and what do you use each of them for?
   5. What kind of posts do you typically make?
   6. How many of you feel that your social media life is an authentic reflection of you?
      a. How would you define authentic?

V. CLOSING

A. Before we end, I would like to go around the room once more and ask each of you if there’s anything else you would like to say about your coming out experiences or your social media usage. Anything that you think I should know about? Anything that you may have forgotten?

B. Thank participants for coming and sharing their knowledge.

C. Inform participants of the interview phase of the research project and invite participants to express any interest afterwards.
Notes

i Excerpt from W.H. Auden’s 1973 collection of essays, *Forewords and Afterwords*

ii The acronym to represent the LGBTQ2SIAA community has changed constantly and consistently throughout the decades that have followed in the wake of the Stonewall Riots. For consistency and simplicity purposes, throughout this dissertation LGBTQ will be used to represent any iteration of the acronym. Many of the additions to this acronym are often the result of an attempt to raise political visibility of one group that has been historically excluded from the mainstream movement. For example, 2S stands for “two-spirit” and is intended to raise awareness and inclusion for the indigenous populations who have been marginalized in the United States since the arrival of the colonists. Since, in my definition, “queer” refers not to a sexuality or gender-identity, but instead is a political and personal ideology that, at its core, is about marginalization and resisting hetero-cis-patriarchal norms of society it can encompass all the other addendums to the acronym for this diverse and widespread community.

iii Since the 2008 US Presidential election, the use of the term mainstream media became common-place and now has a plethora of definitions in the way that it is used. For the purposes of this dissertation, the term mainstream refers to anything that is not explicitly and primarily for LGBTQ individuals. Many of these “mainstream” sites are frequently used and enjoyed by LGBTQ individuals and they often offer content for them (e.g., *Will & Grace* on NBC), but the space is not primarily for them. For this reason, LGBTQ spaces will be referred to as LGBTQ or queer spaces and all others will be referred to as mainstream spaces.

iv Trans* is used to refer to the umbrella category that includes those individuals who are not cis-gender. This includes those who identity as transgender, transsexual, non-binary, agender, etc.
Audre Lorde, “Who Said It Was Simple” from *From a Land Where Other People Live.*

Copyright © 1973 by Audre Lorde.

The Lavender Scare refers to the persecution of individuals suspected of being homosexual during the Cold War, in which it was believed that homosexual individuals working in the government would be prime targets for Russian coercion.

For simplicity, all types of publications examined in these archives, when spoken about in general, will be referred to as periodicals. For specificity, it should be noted that these collections contained a variety of magazines, newspapers, zines, flyers, advertisements, posters, photographs, comic books, trading cards, and announcements for meetings. When discussing an individual example, the specific type of media artifact will be clearly denoted.

Excerpt from Harvey Milk’s 1978 speech after Proposition 6 was defeated in California.

A “bear” is a gay slang term for a larger, hairier man.

Excerpt from a 2013 letter by Brian Sims (the first openly gay state representative in Pennsylvania) to Senator Pat Toomy about the Employment Non-Discrimination Act

The extended quote reads, “Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. When change is absolute there remains no being to improve and no direction is set for possible improvement: and when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Santayana, 1982). While this quote was used to falsely explain what set Western Civilization apart from the more “savage peoples,” it is an idea that holds a lot of weight within our current time period and is often referenced when certain events transpire that are related to ones from history. When I initially decided upon using this quote, I was unaware of the racist and colonial origins of the statement, due to the common place way that it is used throughout society. However, it is rather apropos to
the hierarchy that is often created within the LGBTQ community between those who have come out and fully embraced their SOGI and those who have not done that (or even did that later in life).

xii “Older” and “younger” have been placed in quotation marks because in relationship to the LGBTQ community they are not always a reference to one’s biological age, but can also refer to how recently an individual has “come out.”

xiii Within the gay community, there are numerous apps that are primarily designed for the purposes of both facilitating dating and sexual encounters. These are commonly referred to as “the apps.”

xiv “Passing” or “stealth” are terms used to describe with trans* individuals visually conform to the gender standards of their gender identity.

xv Excerpt from a 2015 speech at the GLAAD Awards

xvi Quote from a 2016 Interview with Frank Ocean, an openly gay, black male rapper, for Revolt.tv.