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The Social Meanings of Sexual Identity Formation: Identity Management, Experiences of Homophobia, and Changing Patterns of Interaction among College-Aged Gay Men

Zachary Douglas Owens

University of Colorado at Boulder, zachary.owens@colorado.edu

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The Social Meanings of Sexual Identity Formation: Identity Management, Experiences of
Homophobia, and Changing Patterns of Interaction among College-Aged Gay Men

by

Zachary D. Owens

B.S., College of Charleston, 2004

A thesis submitted to the
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Zachary D. Owens
has been approved for the Department of Sociology

Janet Jacobs, Ph.D., Chair, Dissertation Committee

Joanne Belknap, Ph.D., Dissertation Committee

Jennifer Bair, Ph.D., Dissertation Committee

Matthew Brown, Ph.D., Dissertation Committee

Emmanuel David, Ph.D., Dissertation Committee

Lee Chambers, Ph.D., Dissertation Committee

Date: _____

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Zachary D. Owens (Ph.D., Sociology)

The Social Meanings of Sexual Identity Formation: Identity Management, Experiences of Homophobia, and Changing Patterns of Interaction among College-Aged Gay Men

Thesis Directed by Professor Janet Jacobs

I analyze sexual identity formation and management among college-aged gay men as they navigate their way through a predominantly straight culture. Drawing from 42 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, I show some of the challenges men face managing their sexual identity in both physical and online spaces. First, I analyze how technology, specifically social media, has changed the ways in which gay men come out to others in addition to how gay men manage their sexual identity online. I then investigate ways in which internet technologies have changed patterns of social interaction among young gay men, particularly when it comes to seeking out romantic partners. I argue that the increase in online interaction is actually increasing public invisibility of gay men as the number of physical spaces that cater to gay men decline. Next, I examine the experiences these men have had with homophobia at different stages of their lives. Despite recent advancements in gay rights and increased visibility and perceived acceptance of gay people in various media outlets, homophobia continues to be pervasive in American culture. I then argue that the overall homophobic cultural discourse has led many men to internalize negative emotions about their gay identity. I analyze the ways in which some gay boys and men “try out” heterosexuality in hopes that they will discover that it is actually their true sexual identity. I also explore some of the ways in which men feel their sexual identity is a limiting factor in a predominantly heterosexual culture. This research allows for a richer, more detailed understanding of how gay men form and manage their identity in a society that is in part still characterized by institutionalized homophobia.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Ben: If you could take a pill right now and wake up tomorrow and not be gay anymore, would you do it? I mean there would be no side effects. You'd just wake up and be straight. Nothing else about you would change. But now you're straight. Would you do it?

Zach: Well I guess I've never really thought about it. Would you do it?

Ben: In a heartbeat. Absolutely.

Without hesitation, this 18-year old, gay-identified freshman told me that he would change his sexuality “in a heartbeat” if he were given the option. We were chatting in an office on a university campus about his experiences as a gay man prior to his time in college. I was conducting exploratory interviews with gay men as I began to formulate my research questions that would later guide the work of this dissertation. I was somewhat surprised that Ben brought up the topic of changing one’s sexuality. I had set out to talk to gay men in a college setting about their life experiences overall, and I was unprepared for the seriousness of his declaration that he wished he could be straight. Given the recent advancements in civil rights legislation for gay people, and polls reporting increased acceptance of gay people overall in American culture, I entered into this research somewhat expecting to hear about vibrant experiences of gay men who were living in a time of greater acceptance of homosexuality than ever before. As I continued conducting interviews, it became clear that despite so many recent advancements for gay people in society, many young gay men still feel the constraints of a deeply heterosexist society. This dissertation focuses mainly on the struggles that young gay men in college currently face, in addition to their experiences with homophobia both prior to and during their time in college. In the following pages, I share the lived experiences of these young men as they navigate their way

through a heteronormative world. I begin by exploring the process through which gay men form their sexual identity.

A. Sexual Identity Formation and Theoretical Framework

There are certain characteristics in contemporary times that have become so imbued with significant social meaning that they have become central to what many people consider to be their identity, or who they “really” are. Race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality are some of the differences that have acquired enough social significance to become a core of who we are. These differences seem so natural and important that they often go unquestioned in social life. Sociologists have demonstrated, however, those things we consider natural and innate are in fact social constructs. Rather than categories that have existed across time and cultures, classifications according to race, gender, and so on are historically and culturally specific. One’s sexuality is something that has come to be a key site of identity formation in modern times. To be attracted to someone of the same sex makes one gay, lesbian, or bisexual in today’s society; this has not always been the case. Such categories do exist now, however, and the fact that these are socially constructed does not make them any less real for those who claim these identities or are labeled as such by others. As such, researchers have investigated the process of sexual identity formation to better understand how sexuality and individual identity are bound together.

Diamond (2006) defines sexual identity formation as “the process by which sexual-minority (i.e., non-heterosexual) individuals come to acknowledge and accept their same-sex sexual orientation and to develop a positive selfhood” (472). She argues that due to hegemonic heterosexuality, the formation of a heterosexual identity has received little attention in the academy, which demonstrates the “otherness” of non-heterosexuals. The models of sexual identity formation for non-heterosexuals, one of which will be briefly described below, are

critiqued by Diamond because they suggested “impossibly uniform, inexorable, and linear developmental trajectories” (472). These models tend to be universalizing and fail to account for the considerable variation that exists within individual sexual identity formation.

Floyd and Stein (2002) give an overview of some of these linear models of sexual identity formation for non-heterosexual individuals. They state, “Ideally, the process results in the formation of a consolidated sexual identity in which a personal sense of self is synthesized with public roles” (168). Troiden (1989) argues for a four-stage model of sexual identity formation that follows a linear path. The first stage is sensitization, which he asserts usually occurs in childhood or in early adolescence. During this stage, “the individual first becomes aware of same-gender attractions” (Floyd and Stein, 2002:168). It is during this stage that the first challenge to his/her heterosexual socialization occurs, and he/she realizes that he/she may not “fit in” to the prescribed model of heterosexuality. Following this stage is the identity confusion stage which, according to Troiden, usually occurs during early to mid-adolescence. The individual feels confusion about his/her sexual attraction to members of the same sex, and also begins to have sexual experiences with same-sex individuals. This “first-contact” with someone of the same-sex is seen as a turning point and a confirmation of same-sex attraction. The third stage in Troiden’s model is identity assumption, when the individual begins to define him/herself as non-heterosexual, and begins to disclose this to others. The fourth stage in this model is commitment, “during which the individual takes on his or her sexual orientation as a way of life” (Floyd and Stein, 2002:169). After these stages are complete, identity synthesis occurs, and the individual embraces self-acceptance and consolidates his/her sexual identity with other salient identities.

Troiden's model of sexual identity formation is one of several popular models that "explain" how non-heterosexuals come to embrace a gay identity. Stevens (2004) also reviews several models of identity formation, including those of Cass (1979), D'Augelli (1994), McCarn and Fassinger (1996), and Fassinger and Miller (1997). All of these models share a common theme of discreet stages that an individual passes through in a linear fashion, usually starting in childhood and ending in one's early twenties. Obviously, these models have their critics who argue that such universal, rigid, and linear accounts of identity formation could not possibly be generalized to a given population. Diamond (2006) critiques such models by stating, "This notion directly contradicts the proliferating evidence for fluidity, circumstance, and even choice in same-sex sexuality, particularly among women" (473). Furthermore, these accounts do not adequately discuss how culture, community, and relationships may shape one's sexual identity formation, thus largely ignoring social structures that influence individual lives.

In his study of gay and bisexual college males, Rhoads (1997) is similarly critical of these rigid models. He argues, "The assumption that lesbian, gay, and bisexual students share quite similar experiences has led to overgeneralizations about their lives and has compromised the quality of scholarship on such populations" (460). One cannot assume that because one has a sexual attraction to someone of the same sex that they share commonalities with others that have similar sexual attractions. He goes on to state, "Developmental 'models' of homosexuals become problematic if they are used to particularize findings to specific individuals when, in fact, significant differences exist among lesbian, gay, and bisexual students" (461). People have multiple and intersecting identities, and can therefore not be said to go through the same process as others given their varied social locations.

Thus, sexual identity formation cannot be neatly compartmentalized into distinct stages through which all non-heterosexuals pass. While the models may be helpful in beginning to understand how such identities are formed, they should not be seen as all-inclusive accounts that apply in all circumstances. One shortcoming of these models is that they assume the process begins at an early age and culminates in a salient identity in early adulthood; however, there are many self-identified non-heterosexuals for whom this age-specific model does not apply. Furthermore, not all (or even most) feel comfortable disclosing a gay identity in adolescence or young adulthood. Rasmussen (2004) discusses several reasons why a young person may not want to or be able to come out at a young age. “Pressures not to come out might be allied to a young person’s racial or ethnic background, their family’s religious affiliations, or to family threats—real or implied—regarding the withdrawal of financial support” (146). These are all very real and very serious issues to confront when deciding if coming out is an acceptable thing to do as a youth. Models that claim youth will feel comfortable disclosing their sexuality at a specific age do not take into account the lived realities of individuals, and the very real consequences of disclosing a non-heterosexual identity. Rasmussen argues that “what this research suggests is that people’s relationship to the closet and coming out is affected by factors such as race and age” (147).

In the face of such daunting reactions from a heteronormative society, oftentimes gay individuals negotiate multiple identities. Valentine (1993) found that lesbians may choose to negotiate multiple identities depending on the space and other individuals they are around. As heterosexuality is presumed in a heteronormative culture, these women may find it easier to allow others to assume their heterosexuality if they feel the situation would be hostile otherwise. In their study of gay men in fraternities, Yeung and Stompler (2000) found that “multiple social

identities submerge and reemerge according to cultural and institutional configuration, organizational structure and group ideology” (148). Thus depending on the social context, one may strategically manage sexual identity if one feels that a gay identity would not be accepted in a particular social space.

Similarly, Hubbard and DeWelde (2003) found that youth are acutely aware of the stigma surrounding non-heterosexual identities. In a class exercise, the instructors had students write a “coming out letter,” even though the majority of students identified as heterosexual. The goal was for the students to see how it would feel to disclose a non-heterosexual identity to someone close to them. The students reported discomfort and emotional turmoil completing the assignment, and they overwhelmingly indicated in the beginning of the assignment that they were heterosexual and just pretending not to be. This indicates their unease assuming a stigmatized identity at a young age even when they knew it was just an assignment and that they were not really coming out to someone. One can imagine the pain and anxiety associated with someone who is actually homosexual writing that letter and disclosing their identity with the knowledge of the consequences such a disclosure might bring. This is a tremendous burden young people face and further problematizes models that do not account for the difficulties youth face in acknowledging their sexuality. Striepe and Tolman (2003) argue that regardless of sexuality, all youth feel pressure to conform to traditional gendered scripts of masculinity and femininity, which in a heteronormative society are intrinsically linked to sexuality. In this dissertation, I hope to give voice to some of the tensions and challenges young men face as they develop their gay identity, and some of the struggles they face once their sexual identity development is complete. I will also show that many of the respondents did not form their sexual

identity in discreet stages, but rather experienced confusion as they vacillated between straight and gay identities.

Some argue that the “recent visibility of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals within U.S. culture promotes both early trajectories for sexual orientation identity development and greater comfort with orientation among youths” (Floyd and Stein, 2002:185). While there has been increased visibility of non-heterosexuals in contemporary society, one must still account for the fact that we live in a heteronormative society where the institution of heterosexuality serves as a regulating and disciplining force. Even in so-called “progressive” areas where one might assume there is relative ease in disclosing or embracing a non-heterosexual identity, there are still many potential negative consequences associated with such disclosure. In the following chapters, I will show some of the challenges men face managing their sexual identity in both physical and online spaces.

Scholars have noted the need for non-heterosexuals to conceal their identity to avoid negative reactions from others (Leary, 2002; Shippee, 2011; Payne, 2007; Cameron and Hargreaves, 2005). Goffman (1963) noted that those with “spoiled” identities might engage in passing in order to reduce the visibility of a stigmatized trait. Historically, there were many severe consequences for stating one was gay, such as loss of employment, arrest, forced psychiatric procedures, ostracism from loved ones, and so on. As such, many non-heterosexuals have engaged in passing for heterosexual to avoid these negative consequences. However, as stated previously, some argue that the increased visibility, awareness, and acceptance of non-heterosexuals have reduced the need or desire to pass as heterosexual. Yoshino (2007) argues that the gay community has moved beyond passing in the 21st century, and that “gays are increasingly permitted to be gay and out so long as we do not ‘flaunt’ our identities” (19). Here

the author argues that while complete acceptance of gay people has not been achieved (thus the directive not to flaunt such identities), acceptance has become mainstream enough where most gay people no longer need to hide their sexual identity. While laws criminalizing homosexuality have been repealed in the United States, and gay people have secured some basic civil rights in many jurisdictions, I will demonstrate that many men still feel the need to hide their gay identity. The men I interviewed did not have to worry about being arrested for their sexuality, but I will share many of the concerns they had about the social consequences of revealing their sexual identity. This research allows for a richer, more detailed understanding of how gay men manage their identity in a society that is in part still characterized by institutionalized homophobia.

In this dissertation I will show how heterosexism continues to affect sexual identity formation for young gay boys and men. Some models of linear sexual identity formation assume that youth will explore their emerging gay desires by having contact with members of the same-sex (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989; Coleman, 1982). These models hold that sexual and/or romantic relationships with other non-heterosexual individuals will help confirm a person's same-sex attraction and will allow for the individual to accept his or her gay identity, completing the sexual identity development process. I critique the idea that contact with members of the same sex serves to confirm an adolescent's sexual identity, as the majority of respondents in this study indicated they did not know of any other gay-identified people in their communities. Some respondents indicated that they would have enjoyed the opportunity to date other boys in middle and high school, but were unable to do so for lack of visibility of other gay youth. Despite claims that recent visibility of gays and lesbians is allowing youth to identify as non-heterosexual at younger ages (Floyd and Stein, 2002), the persistence of heterosexist attitudes continues to silence people who want to come out. I will demonstrate that the persistence of homophobia in

both school and home environments keeps many gay youth in the closet, thus critiquing the idea that most non-heterosexual youth will experience this stage of identity development.

I further problematize linear models of sexual identity formation by showing that not all individuals who recognize their same-sex attraction are willing to act on it due to internalized homophobia. Many of the models of sexual identity formation previously discussed assume that as individuals begin to experience same-sex attraction they will seek out contact with other non-heterosexuals. I will show that many respondents internalized homonegative attitudes, resulting in their struggle with accepting their identity. Rather than seek out potential romantic or sexual partners, these participants actively tried not to be gay by trying to force themselves to be straight. Even if there were opportunities to pursue a same-sex relationship, internalized homophobia and the fear of coming out in a heteronormative environment prevent sexual identity formation from occurring in distinct stages. Rather, the confusion and desire to be straight complicate the identity development process, with many men reaching young adulthood without having developed a positive selfhood that Diamond (2006) argues is the result of sexual identity formation.

C. Existing Studies

In this dissertation I have drawn on various bodies of previous research on sexual identity formation, which I previously described. I have also drawn on research related to how college students construct their online lives as natural extensions of their online selves, the ways in which young gay men use the internet in search of romantic partners, how homophobia continues to persist in American culture, and how this persistence leads young gay men to internalize anti-gay attitudes during their sexual identity formation. Below I will briefly summarize some of the

main findings from these bodies of literature, and in each chapter I will draw from these sources in addition to other studies related to this research.

There has been considerable research on how college students are constantly engaged in online activities, and how they view their online presence as natural extensions of their offline selves (Bicen and Cavus, 2011; Aleman and Wartman, 2009; O’Riordan and Phillips, 2007; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008; Pascoe, 2011). While the internet used to be a utility that people would log off and onto, many young people today no longer think in terms of “logging off,” but rather see their online selves as a part of their identity. The internet has also become a place where young people can find information about being gay and how to come out to others (Pascoe, 2011; Zhao et al., 2008; Gray, 2009). Additionally, the internet, and specifically social media sites such as Facebook, are now areas where people must manage their presentation of self (Goffman, 1963). Given that non-heterosexual individuals may feel the need to conceal their sexual identity to avoid potentially negative consequences (Leary 1999, Shippee 2011, Payne 2007, Cameron and Hargreaves 2005), I investigate the ways in which young gay men construct their online identities on Facebook, and the strategies many of them use to partially or fully conceal their sexual identity.

There has also been a number of research studies on how the internet has changed the ways in which gay men meet one another and pursue sexual interests (Landovitz et al., 2013; Rice et al., 2012; Rendina et al., 2014; Beymer, 2012; Winetrobe, 2014; Weiss et al., 2010; McColgan, 2011; Levi et al., 2014; Bauermesiter 2010; Ross, 2005; Gudelunas, 2012). The bulk of this research has focused on risky sexual behaviors and how the internet has increased speedy, and often sexual encounters between gay men. While I agree that the internet has changed how many gay people meet one another, I focus on the ways in which gay men are using online

technology to find long-term intimate partners, not casual sex partners. As more men turn to mobile application technology to find one another (Van De Wiele and Tong, 2014; Baams et al., 2011; Grov et al., 2014; Gudelunas 2012; Rosenfeld and Thomas, 2012), I explore the ways in which men utilize this technology to find other gay men, especially since physical gay spaces are not readily available to many of them.

Existing research on homophobia shows that anti-gay prejudice continues to be embedded the structures of American society (Kimmel, 2004; Gramick, 1983; Walters and Hayes, 1998; Vincke and Bolton, 1994; Sullivan, 2003; Herek, 2004; Allen, 1999; Lewis et al., 2003; Plummer, 2001). Much of the focus of this research has been on mental health, but the overall findings of this body of research conclude that homophobia remains prevalent throughout the culture, and gay men experience negative physical and emotional consequences in a culture where they are seen as having a spoiled identity (Goffman, 1963). Some scholars have asserted that despite the persistence of some anti-gay prejudice and discrimination, it is no longer necessary for most gay men to hide their sexual identity as acceptance of homosexuality continues to increase (Seidman, 2002; Ghaziani, 2011; Yoshino, 2007). I critique this notion throughout this dissertation, especially given the homophobia many of the respondents encountered in their schools, their homes, and their college environment.

Due to the persistence of homophobia, there have also been numerous studies on how gay men internalize homonegative attitudes during their sexual identity formation (Allen, 1999; Frost and Meyer, 2009; Williamson, 2000; Isay, 2010; Davies, 1996; Locke, 1998; Meyer and Dean, 1998; Flowers and Buston, 2001; Herek, 1997; Shidlo, 1994; Igartua, 2009; Rowen and Malcolm, 2003; Newcomb and Mustanski, 2010). As in the research on homophobia described above, much of the findings in this body of research focus on mental health issues such as

depression and anxiety. One of the overall themes that emerges from this research is that internalized homophobia stands as a barrier to gay identity formation. As young boys and men begin realize that they have same-sex attractions, they begin to understand that these desires are indicative of a non-heterosexual identity. Having already been exposed to anti-gay attitudes prior to this realization, many people struggle to accept that they are gay. Much of the literature shows that they associate a gay identity with being somehow wrong and abnormal. Tension arises as they begin to realize this bad identity is indeed their own identity, and I will demonstrate the struggles many men had overcoming these beliefs.

D. Chapter Overview

In the four data chapters in this dissertation I focus on different aspects of young gay men's sexual identity formation. In Chapter 3 I analyze the ways technology, specifically social media, has changed the ways in which gay men come out to others, in addition to how gay men manage their sexual identity online. The rapid proliferation of social media, mobile applications, and internet technologies has shifted a wide variety of social interaction from physical spaces to an online environment. Most men report using social media, specifically Facebook, to directly or indirectly come out as gay to their friends and family, while others actively monitor their social media accounts in order to continue to pass as straight to certain members of their social groups. In this chapter I discuss three strategies of identity management college-aged gay men use to disclose or conceal their sexual identity to others. The first group of men, "Out and Proud," uses Facebook as a way to celebrate and reaffirm their sexual identity, in addition to actively coming out to others on the social media website. The second group, "Out and Discreet," uses Facebook to indirectly come out to some of their friends while hiding this information from others. The men in the last group I identify, "Facebook Closeted," actively manage their online profiles to

ensure their sexual identity is not exposed. Facebook is both transformative and risky for college-aged gay men, as it represents a new platform for them to come out as gay to friends and family, as well as other areas of their lives where they must actively manage the presentation of their sexual identity.

In Chapter 4, I continue to investigate the ways in which internet technologies have changed patterns of social interaction for young gay men, particularly when it comes to seeking out romantic partners. While more men turn to online environments to meet other gay men, this chapter critiques popular assertions that these types of interactions are used mainly in the pursuit of sex; rather, most men report using the internet to seek out long-term relationships. Furthermore, I argue that the shift to online interaction has actually decreased public visibility of gay men, as public gay spaces are no longer required for gay men to meet one another. This chapter critiques the idea that we have moved “beyond the closet,” and that the decline in gay bars and other gay public spaces can be explained by mainstream assimilation into the heterosexual community by gay men. Rather, I argue that the increase in online interaction is actually increasing public invisibility of gay men as the number of physical spaces that cater to gay men decline.

I shift the focus from online interaction to men’s experiences in physical spaces in Chapter 5. Specifically, I focus on the experiences these men have had with homophobia at different stages of their lives. Despite recent advancements in gay rights and increased visibility and perceived acceptance of gay people in various media outlets, homophobia continues to be pervasive in American culture. In this chapter I analyze men’s encounters with homophobia in three different social environments. I first discuss homophobic attitudes and behaviors many of the men in this study experienced in elementary, middle, and high school. I also discuss the lack

of adult intervention when boys were victims of public anti-gay bullying. I then turn to the home environment, detailing some of the homophobic messages many men heard from their parents and other family members. Lastly, I investigate men's experiences of homophobia in college, and the persistence of heterosexism in a seemingly progressive and socially liberal town.

In Chapter 6, I discuss that the overall homophobic cultural discourse has led many men to internalize negative emotions about their gay identity. As many of the men began to realize at various stages in their adolescence that they were gay, many struggled with the formation of a gay identity and experienced dread, fear, shame, and a general sense of apprehension. In order to resist claiming a gay identity, some boys dated and/or fantasized about girls in an attempt to suppress their emerging gay identity. I analyze the ways in which some gay boys and men "try out" heterosexuality in hopes that they will find it is actually their true sexual identity, though none of the men in this study were successful in their attempts to confirm an underlying heterosexual identity. I then argue that not all men attempted to change their newly emerging sexual identity, but instead felt a sense of loss at not being able to engage in certain activities, such as dating. This sense of missing out on different experiences because of their sexual identity did not end for some of the men once they came to college. I explore some of the ways in which men still feel their sexual identity is a limiting factor in a predominantly heterosexual culture.

In the following chapter I describe the research methods I employed to gather the data for this dissertation. I then begin to share the stories of the men who graciously shared their life stories so that this research could be presented here.

Chapter 2: Research Methods

A. Participant Recruitment and Semi-Structured Interviews

1. Recruitment

I employed a qualitative approach to explore the life experiences of young gay men who were currently in college. I conducted forty-two in-depth, semi-structured interviews with gay men between the ages of eighteen and twenty-seven on a large university campus in the Rocky Mountain West. To qualify for the study the individual had to identify as gay and be enrolled in a university. Participants were recruited in a variety of ways. One primary method of recruitment was including information about the study in a monthly email that is distributed to subscribers of the campus GLBTQ Resource Center. The Center is a safe area where all are welcome to explore issues related to GLBTQ identity, and additionally offers common areas where students can study or meet new people. Additionally I posted information about the research study on the group's Facebook page. I also attended Resource Center events and socials and gave brief presentations about my research and asked interested participants to get in contact with me. The Resource Center was very helpful in recruiting people who were perhaps more comfortable with openly identifying as gay, but I realized I would need to pursue other options to reach out to men that would not be comfortable attending Resource Center events. I spoke about my research in a variety of classes that focused on gender and sexuality, using the video projector to give out my email address and phone number. I consciously chose not to ask people to by take a paper flyer in these types of classroom settings to indicate their willingness to participate, as interested participants might not want their fellow classmates to know that they are gay. Even if a respondent did not want to be seen copying down my contact information in front of his fellow classmates, my email address is not complicated and is easy to remember. Therefore someone

who was interested in contacting me to participate in the study could write down my email address at a later time in the class without drawing attention to himself. I also posted flyers advertising the research in over 30 residence halls on a weekly basis, in addition to popular gathering spots on campus in an effort to recruit participants. Lastly, at the end of every interview I would ask the respondent to pass along my information to anyone he thought might be interested in participating in this study.

The feminist research principle of reflexivity, further addressed in a following section, helped me grapple with some of the personal struggles I encountered during the recruitment process. Before starting this research I have never really thought of myself as being nervous about public speaking. In graduate school I have had to stand in front of a new class of undergraduate students every semester and attempt to project a confident air of authority as I teach them about various sociological concepts and theories. While I would occasionally feel a bit apprehensive during these experiences, I would quickly get used to the situation and the nervousness would fade away. That was not always the case for me during my recruitment efforts for this research.

As previously noted, I would often give a short presentation to various GLBTQ groups to advertise my research. After years of public speaking, I was suddenly extremely anxious to speak in front of a group of students. After reflecting on my experiences I believe the root cause of this nervousness was the fear of exploiting a safe space for these GLBTQ (and allies) students for my own research gain. While the potential participants have male privilege, they lack heterosexual privilege and are thus are a member of a marginalized group. Many of these men may seek out these groups and attend these meetings in order to have a space where they feel safe and comfortable acknowledging their sexual identity. I feel that the anxiety I experienced during

these meetings stemmed from a worry that somehow I was taking advantage of this safe space. While I stressed that participation was completely voluntary and I was not overly aggressive in my recruitment efforts, I still felt awkward advertising my research in these spaces. This could be in part from my outsider status; while I identify as a gay man, I am not a part of the undergraduate community and thus can be seen as an outsider. I worried that students would see me as someone to avoid. “Stay away from the research guy or he’ll ask you for an interview” is what I imagined the students were thinking. I had to remind myself that this was a largely irrational fear, and that I am helping to give voice to experiences that would otherwise go unheard.

Using a reflexive approach I also realized my own discomfort standing in front of a group and announcing my own sexual identity. While I currently live as an openly gay man, my sexual identity is not something I actively disclose. If someone asks me if I am gay, I do not (usually) hesitate to respond in the affirmative. However, I do not usually self-disclose my sexual identity in the classroom when I am teaching or upon meeting a new acquaintance. As I reflected back on the anxiety I felt advertising my research, I realized that I do not normally self-disclose for two reasons. One is simply that my sexual identity is but one part of who I am, and that aspect of my life seems irrelevant in a classroom setting or most other social spaces. But more importantly, and related to this research, I realized that I still worry about negative reactions from others if they harbor homophobic attitudes. Will I be treated differently if people know I am gay? Am I afraid of losing some of the privilege I have as a white male? Do I just want to be seen as “normal” and not as having a stigmatized identity? Do I still have negative feelings about my own sexual identity? These are just some of the questions that came up as I reflected on my

discomfort and anxiety I experienced during these meetings, and it is important to acknowledge such reflections in relation to this research endeavor.

As I conducted more interviews and became more comfortable with the recruitment and interview process overall, the anxiety I felt lessened but never completely dissipated. The fear of exploiting safe spaces for young gay men, in addition to my own fears of losing heterosexual privilege, lingered throughout this research endeavor. According to the principles of reflexivity, your own identity does matter when conducting this type of qualitative research. It matters for the researcher in the sense that I had to grapple with my own emotions during both the recruitment and interview stages of this research. More importantly, however, my own identity matters for the young men who agreed to participate in this research. In order for these men to reveal very intimate, and sometimes painful, moments from their lives I had to establish an element of trust with each participant. Discussing my own identity and experiences, where appropriate, enabled the men to understand that I could very much relate to many of the stories they shared with me. Understanding the role of the researcher from this perspective allows me to tell a story that others may not be able to, and to give voice to the lived experiences of the young men who bravely shared their life stories with me.

2. Semi-Structured Interviews

Once a prospective interviewee contacted me I would explain the study in more detail to make sure he understood the research process. We would then set up a time and place to meet one another for the interview. Interviews were conducted in a private office on campus in order to assure interviewees that their participation in the research would be confidential. The interviews were semi-structured in order to allow for a more dynamic and rich conversation. According to Kvale, a semi-structured interview “has a sequence of themes to be covered, as

well as suggested questions. Yet at the same time there is an openness to changes of sequence and forms of questions in order to follow up the answers given and the stories told by the subjects” (1996:124). As I was interested in hearing the varied experiences and stories of these men’s lives, semi-structured interviews were much more appropriate than formal, rigidly structured interviews that could potentially miss many of the unique experiences of these men.

In all forty-two in-depth interviews were conducted with young adult men who were enrolled in the university. Thirty-five men identified as White, three men identified as Hispanic American, and four men identified as Asian American. During the interview I also asked the participants to discuss how they would describe their family’s socioeconomic status. Six men categorized their family as lower or lower-middle class, twenty-two men identified as middle class, and fourteen men identified as upper-middle or upper class. I also asked the men to describe their hometowns as socially conservative, liberal, or neutral. Twenty-one men identified their hometown as socially conservative, fifteen categorized their hometown as socially neutral, and six identified their hometown as socially liberal. Tables 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 illustrate these demographics.

Table 1.1: Respondent Demographics by Race

Race	(n)	% of Sample
White	35	83%
Hispanic American	3	7%
Asian American	4	10%

Table 1.2: Respondent Demographics by Class

Social Class	(n)	% of Sample
Lower or Lower-Middle	6	14%
Middle	22	53%
Upper-Middle or Upper	14	33%

Table 1.3: Respondent Demographics by Hometown Social Environment

Social Environment	(n)	% of Sample
Conservative	21	50%
Neutral	15	36%
Liberal	6	14%

Each interview lasted between one to two hours and participants received a \$25 gift card in compensation for their time. Participants signed an Informed Consent form that ensured confidentiality and explained any risks and/or benefits associated with participating in the study. Given that many of the men were not openly gay to their social networks, it was imperative to emphasize that every step would be taken to ensure their confidentiality. I also stressed that their participation was completely voluntary, that any question or topic could be skipped, and that the participant could terminate the interview at any time. Despite the sensitive nature of some of the questions, no respondent ever asked to skip a question and no one requested to stop the interview early. Indeed, many participants told me after the interview that they appreciated the opportunity to discuss their experiences with me, and that they had enjoyed our conversation despite remembering difficult times in their lives. Participants were asked about their experiences

growing up, their coming out process, relationships and experiences in school prior to attending college, and their overall experiences related to being gay on a college campus. Appendix A contains the questions each participant was asked.

As indicated by the types of research questions, my study deals with areas of intimate life that most people do not discuss with many people, especially not strangers. In addition to basic background questions and the coming out process, I also asked about experiences related to bullying, homophobia, sexual and other intimate relationships, and so on. I knew that I might feel somewhat awkward asking these questions, but I also realized they were important and necessary questions to ask. However, I was not as readily prepared for the emotional toll the interviews would have on me personally. One of the most difficult aspects of the research process for me was asking questions that would have an obvious emotional impact on the participant. One example that stands out is a time when I asked a question about bullying in middle school. After a prolonged silence the man looked away and wiped some tears from his eyes. I tried to assure him that we could move on if this was something he did not want to discuss, but he told me that he wanted to share some of the horrible experiences he had at the hands of homophobic bullies. Hearing these stories, so personal in nature, took a larger emotional toll on me than I had expected. In addition, it brought back memories of my own personal experiences with homophobia, which was also somewhat unexpected.

I realized that going into this research I would reflect on my own life as I conducted interviews, and that feminist research is subjective in nature, but I was not quite prepared for how many of my own negative memories would resurface during and after these interviews. Hearing stories of verbal and physical bullying reminded me of my own difficult experiences, mostly in middle school. I was somewhat overweight, which in itself made me a target for

bullies, and also somewhat of a late bloomer, having a fairly high voice that was considered effeminate. I was also shy and mild-mannered, and these factors together made me very susceptible to negative treatment from others, primarily boys. Many of the respondents told similar stories of such treatment, and I had to learn to deal with my own emotional issues so that all of the focus could be on the stories the participants are telling, not on my own emotional reaction to those stories.

I believe these two areas of discomfort surrounding recruitment and interviewing are related. It is likely that my own fear of disclosing my sexual identity to strangers is rooted in the abusive treatment I received from my peers at an early age. It is also related to heterosexual and male privilege. As I grew older I became more confident, reached a weight that was healthier for my height, and developed a deeper voice and other stereotypically masculine features. The negative treatment from others stopped as these changes occurred, and I went on to become “popular” in high school (however one defines that). I consciously projected a heterosexual identity even though I knew I was gay, and received the privileges associated with being a heterosexual white male in our society. As I reflect on my own experiences during this research I have to question whether or not I am still reluctant to give up the privilege associated with heterosexuality. Many of the men who participated in this research shared a similar reluctance. Referring back to Ramazanoglu and Holland’s (2002) assertion that reflexivity allows the researcher to better understand the relationship between the researcher and the researched, I was able to see how my own identity shaped this study and the steps I needed to take in order to maintain an appropriate emotional distance during the interviews.

C. Data Security and Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded with the respondent's permission and transcribed, by myself in the beginning stages of the research and by a professional transcriber later in the data collection process. Following audio recoding of the interview on a digital recorder, the file was then transferred to my private computer that is password protected. Following this file transfer to my computer the audio recording on the digital recorder was permanently deleted. The interviews that were professionally transcribed were transmitted through a secure online channel, and upon confirming my safe receipt of a transcription, the transcriber permanently deleted their copy of the file.

Following verbatim transcription, all names and identifying markers of the respondents were changed to ensure confidentiality. Data were then coded line-by-line to generate initial codes that linked common concepts. After initial coding, these common concepts were grouped together in larger, more inclusive groups using focused coding (Lofland and Lofland 1995, Charmaz 2001). It was at this stage that common and repeating themes and concepts emerged, and codes could then be linked with other codes to discern patterns within the data. Using memos (Davies 1999), I documented and connected findings and patterns that emerged within and between data categories. I employed these methods in each of the data chapters in this dissertation.

D. Researcher Positionality and Standpoint Theory

It is important to understand what it means to identify as gay in a heteronormative society. As non-heterosexuals face discrimination, oppression, negative stereotypes, and other social consequences related to their sexual identity, giving members of this group voice is important for greater social understanding and acceptance of these individuals. Some claim that in order to give voice to underprivileged groups in society, the researcher can better do this if

she/he is a member of that group. As Sandra Harding argues, (2004), “Knowledge is always socially situated. Thus, to the extent that an oppressed group’s situation is different from that of the dominant group, its dominated situation enables the production of distinctive kinds of knowledge” (7). She posits that since knowledge is founded on experience, “different experiences should enable different perceptions of ourselves and our environments” (2004:7). In other words, those with different life experiences will understand the social world in a different way than the dominant class, and will therefore be able to produce a knowledge that is subjective to their position. This is one of the main concepts underlying standpoint theory.

Harding goes on to argue that the experience of being in an oppressed group gives one “a critical insight about the dominant group, its institutions, practices, and culture” (2004:141), which distinguishes a standpoint. She argues that the dominant culture’s production of knowledge insists it is superior to that produced by oppressed groups because it is not “subjective,” but it is the dominant group’ objectivity that makes it ethnocentric, as standpoint theorists realize there can be no universal knowledge of social relations. Hartsock (1997) is in agreement, stating that a standpoint is not a biased opinion; rather, it is a position of engaging with those whom the research is attempting to represent. She argues, “A standpoint, however, carries with it the contention that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible” (218). She discusses five claims regarding standpoint theory that can be used to understand the formation of gay identity in a heteronormative society.

She begins her discussion of the claims of standpoint theory with the concept that “material life (class position in Marxist theory) not only structures but sets limits on the understanding of social relations” (218). In other words, one’s location in the social world

constructs the way one sees that world. To claim a gay identity in a heteronormative culture inherently locates one in a different social position than those who claim a heterosexual identity. Those claiming a non-heterosexual identity will face the position of being labeled as the “other,” which is related to Hartsock’s second claim about standpoint theory. She states, “If material life is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for two different groups, one can expect the vision of each will represent an inversion of the other, and in systems of domination the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and perverse” (218). In this sense one can see the heteronormative culture as the rulers and those identifying as gay as the dominated group. According to Hartsock, those occupying opposite groups will not be able to see each other as those within the group see themselves, and furthermore those in the dominant group will have both a partial and perverse view of the oppressed group. This relates to Harding’s point that those in the dominated group will be able to have “critical insights” about the dominant cultural practices (2004:114), while those in the dominant group will not fully understand the group they oppress. Thus, a standpoint from this group allows for the creation of knowledge that would otherwise be unavailable from the perspective of the ruling group.

Thirdly, Hartsock states that another claim of standpoint theory is that “the vision of the ruling class (or gender) structures the material relations in which all parties are forced to participate, and therefore cannot be dismissed as simply false” (218). Hartsock discusses the ruling class as related to gender, discussing that men are the dominant class in society. This analysis can be extended to the heteronormative culture, where those who have historically conducted research on those identifying as gay have identified as heterosexual. Oftentimes their findings reinforced dominant ideologies about homosexuality (i.e., that homosexuals are perverse and suffer from psychological diseases or flawed bodies) (Terry 1995). Conducting

research from the standpoint of gay identity allows one to create knowledge without the presuppositions that may exist when one is not a member of an oppressed group. Hartsock notes the fourth claim of standpoint theory by discussing the vision of the oppressed. It requires a struggle “and represents an achievement which requires both science to see beneath the surface of social relations in which all are forced to participate, and the education which can only grow from struggle to change those relations” (218). There is a struggle for those who claim a gay identity to be understood by the dominant group (in this case the larger heteronormative culture), and it takes a scientific exploration of what it means to identify in this way in a society that has traditionally been homophobic. As the struggle continues to change these relations, education of the dominant culture will be imperative, and those sharing a standpoint with the gay community will be able to help share this knowledge.

Lastly, according to Hartsock, “As an engaged vision, the understanding of the oppressed, the adoption of a standpoint exposes the real relations among human beings as inhuman, points beyond the present, and carries a historically liberatory role” (218). Utilizing a standpoint allows for the exposure of hidden (and apparent) domination that exists over gay individuals. Because one who identifies with an oppressed group can see the domination firsthand in a way that one from the dominant group may be unable to comprehend, the vision and knowledge from one adopting a standpoint is better suited to expose the true relations between the opposed groups. Furthermore, one of the aims of feminist research is to make political changes that promote equality between groups of individuals where unequal relations have endured historically, and assuming a standpoint will allow those in the gay community freedom to push for full equality in our society.

For the above reasons discussed by Hartsock and Harding, adopting a standpoint is well-suited for my research. Using the feminist principle of reflexivity allows me to understand how my own identity affects the research I conducted with gay college-aged men. According to Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), “A reflexive approach demands awareness of, and appropriate responses to, relationships between researcher and researched” (156). Specifically, I am interested in how perceptions of a gay identity change or differ for men as they enter a college environment, their experiences of homophobia, and also how men negotiate being gay in a primarily heterosexual environment. I have personally experienced a different perception of my sexual identity after transitioning to a collegiate environment, encountered homophobia prior to and during my college years, and have experienced the need (or desire) to perform a heterosexual identity when returning home to my family and certain groups of friends. Understanding my own experiences and how they have shaped this research allows this work to be framed in a feminist perspective by acknowledging my own standpoint.

E. Limitations

As noted previously, most of the participants in this research identified as White, and the majority also identified as at least middle class or higher in terms of socioeconomic status. Due to the relative homogeneity of this group, it is difficult to generalize my findings to other populations, notably young gay men of color and those from lower-class backgrounds. In the following chapters I will share stories from lower-class men in addition to men of color, but it is important to remember that the majority of my findings relate to young middle and upper class white men. Future research should attempt to more inclusively share the experiences of young men of color and young men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Another limitation of this research is that few respondents reported growing up in socially liberal areas. After I asked each respondent where he grew up, I would ask him to categorize the area as socially conservative, liberal, or neutral. 50% of respondents categorized their hometowns as socially conservative, 36% said their hometowns were socially neutral, and 14% categorized the area where they grew up as socially liberal. Given the small number of people who categorized the social environment of their home communities as socially liberal, it is possible that respondents who grew up in more conservative communities self-selected into my study. The main headline on the flyer I used to recruit participants advertised that I was seeking to discuss gay men's experiences on a college campus. Following that I stated, "I am researching the experiences of gay men as they navigate their way through a predominantly straight world." Gay men who grew up in more socially conservative areas likely had a more difficult time navigating their way through a heteronormative society. These men may have been more interested in sharing their experiences with me, which could explain why only 14% of men in this study were from socially liberal areas. Future research should aim to be more inclusive of gay men who are from socially liberal areas.

Lastly, all of the men who participated in this study were currently enrolled in a university. Undergraduate respondents planned on obtaining a Bachelor's degree, and graduate students were enrolled in either Master's or Ph.D. programs. Only 34% of Americans hold a Bachelor's degree, while 8% of Americans have a post-Bachelor's degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). As the majority of Americans do not have a 4-year college degree or higher, my findings are limited to a university-educated population. Future research on the experiences of young gay men should include men who have not enrolled a university in order to be more inclusive of the general population.

Chapter 3: Is it Facebook Official? Coming Out and Passing Strategies of Young Adult Gay Men on Social Media

A. Introduction

Increasingly there is little separation between college students' online and offline lives; the online world is not a distinct and separate area that students log into and then do not think about once they log off. Rather, students are constantly engaged online and construct their online lives as a natural extension and part of their offline reality (Bicen and Cavus, 2011; Aleman and Wartman, 2009; O'Riordan and Phillips, 2007; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008; Pascoe, 2011). Smartphones, which are mobile telephones with built-in internet connectivity, are now used by approximately 90% of undergraduate students in the U.S. (Hanley, 2014). With the overwhelming majority of college students able to connect to the internet at almost anytime without having to use a conventional computer, it is no surprise that social media use is also nearly ubiquitous among undergraduate college students. Around 90% of college students are active on Facebook (Junco 2011), and as such it has become a major space where students spend time interacting with others as well as managing their own online identity.

Given the pervasive use of Facebook by college students, it has become an area of life where individuals must monitor their presentation of self (Goffman, 1959). This can be particularly problematic for gay students who must now navigate the closet (Seidman, 2002) both offline and online simultaneously. In other words, gay students who are not out to everyone offline may worry that something on their Facebook profile would indicate their sexual identity, such as pictures or comments related to homosexuality (Aleman and Wartman, 2009). Gay students who are not out to anyone or only to select people face the task of actively managing their online presentation of self just as they do in their offline lives to continue to pass as heterosexual. Thus, Facebook poses a risk to these students to potentially be outed to people who

they do not trust with this information about themselves. At the same time, Facebook can be seen as transformative to the coming out process for this generation of gay men. No longer does a person have to use traditional means of communication, such as phone calls, face-to-face talks, and letters, to come out to people in their lives. Rather, Facebook provides an opportunity for gay people to come out to a wide audience at once, either indirectly or actively (Dilly, 2010). If a person wants to actively tell their Facebook friends that they are gay, a simple status update of “I’m gay” would be visible to everyone that could see that status. Alternatively, a person can more indirectly come out by changing certain features that would be less visible, such as changing their romantic interests to “Interested in Men.” Either directly or indirectly, Facebook presents an innovative, transformative, and often risky new way to come out as gay for these students.

In this chapter I discuss how college-aged gay men use Facebook related to the coming out process. I identify three strategies of identity management these men use to disclose or conceal their sexual identity to others. The first group of men I identify are “Out and Proud,” men who use Facebook either to actively come out to others for the first time, or to reaffirm and celebrate their sexual identity. The second group of men I discuss, “Out and Discreet,” use Facebook as a tool to indirectly come out to others. Men in this group either subtly change certain features on their profile, such as “Interested in Men,” or consciously manage privacy controls to allow certain friends to see some content related to their sexual identity while hiding this from others. The third group of men I identify are what I call “Facebook Closeted.” These men actively monitor and control information on their Facebook profiles so that their sexual identity is not exposed to anyone. After discussing each of these groups of men, I explore how

online identity management and construction has changed the coming out process for this generation of undergraduate gay men.

B. Out and Proud: Facebook as a Reaffirmation of Sexual Identity

Identities are complex, multi-faceted, and continuously shifting (Seidman, 2002). Diamond (2006) defines sexual identity formation as “the process by which sexual-minority (i.e., non-heterosexual) individuals come to acknowledge and accept their same-sex sexual orientation and to develop a positive selfhood” (472). The growth and spread of the internet has allowed many people to explore what it means to be gay in new ways that were unimaginable in the past. Young men who are forging a gay identity can turn to online venues to seek out information related to sexuality (Pascoe, 2011; Zhao et al., 2008) and also practice coming out to others (Gray, 2009). Social media sites such as Facebook can also provide an outlet for gay men to actively come out to others and construct their gay identity online. Additionally, while many men in this study reported some type of passing on Facebook, a small number of the men reported using Facebook in a way to celebrate and reaffirm their sexual identity, or at least not actively try to hide their sexuality. Graham, a 20-year old junior, reported that he often posts material on Facebook related to being gay:

I just posted a whole bunch of stuff for Coming Out Week, but for a long time I didn't like put anything related to my sexual identity on it. But recently I've just been posting a whole bunch of stuff. And like people would comment on my photo sometimes...I'm not like worried about it, but for a long time when I was sort of like in the closet on Facebook, I guess you could say.

Graham states that while he now feels comfortable posting things related to his sexuality on Facebook, such as celebrating Coming Out Week (a week every year in which people are

encouraged to disclose their sexuality to others), it took some time for him to feel comfortable claiming a gay identity online. He goes on to say that he is friends with some of his extended family on Facebook who are conservative Catholics, but he no longer feels the need to hide this particular aspect of his identity. Indeed, Facebook is a site where he can openly and proudly claim his non-heterosexual identity, even in the presence of people he feels may disapprove. While there is always some risk of receiving negative reactions from others who may disapprove of his sexuality, Graham feels it is still a safer space for him to explore a gay identity than in offline interactions.

Aaron is a 21-year old junior from a poor, evangelical Christian background. The coming out process was difficult for him given his family's religious background, and it was particularly difficult for him to tell his mother. He waited to tell her until his freshmen year in college. After deciding that it was an important thing to do, he called his mother to come out to her as gay:

Out of everybody in my family, she was probably the one who negatively responded.

Yeah, she didn't think it was a good thing. She thought it was like a disorder sort of thing and sinful. I remember she cried on the phone, but it was just a hard time interacting with her for like a few months following that. But she's better about it now. Like she's accepting in a really weird way. Yeah, she was reading books on how to convert me and all these things. But now she goes to a pro-gay church which blows my mind.

Aaron's mother initially reacted negatively to his coming out, straining their relationship for a period of time while she did research on how to convert Aaron to heterosexuality. Assuming this was the most difficult coming out experience, he then decided to openly tell everyone else, including some family members, via Facebook. Here he explains this process:

Zach: How did you decide you were going to do that? What did you say on Facebook?

Aaron: I said, I'm gay, I'm gay. I think that was it. I remember tagging it twice.

Zach: What was the response?

Aaron: There were some family members who responded negatively, distant family members. Besides that all my friends are supportive.

Zach: What were the negative responses?

Aaron: Like my aunt and cousin sent me a long letter about how I'm going to hell. I didn't want my grandparents to know because they are just really old and don't have much longer left. And I knew it would cause a lot of stress on them. But then my mom told them. So they didn't talk to me for like a year. I went over to their house and they refused to touch me because they were old enough to where like they think it's a sickness. But now I talk to them and they are fine. They just avoid the fact altogether. But those are probably the only two negative responses.

While some members of Aaron's conservative family responded negatively to his coming out, all of his friends were supportive. Actively coming out on Facebook was a way to tell everyone at once that he was gay. While there were a few negative responses, the positive responses far outweighed the negative reactions. Aaron goes on to talk about the relief he felt posting that he was gay on Facebook, as now there was nothing left to hide and he no longer had to worry about something appearing "too gay" on his Facebook page. Unlike some of the men who discreetly changed "Interested In" to indicate their sexual preference for men, or those who manage privacy controls to be out to only some friends, Aaron used Facebook as a tool to actively come out. In this sense we can see Facebook as a transformative tool that has significantly changed the coming out process for some people, and it has done so in ways that were unimaginable to previous generations of gay men. Similar to Dilly's (2010) assertion that the "practical work" of

coming out can now be accomplished online, these men demonstrate that social media can be an online platform on which to come to many people at once.

In addition to using Facebook as a tool to come out, we can also see it as a space where people can celebrate and reaffirm this aspect of their identity. Sam, a 19-year old sophomore, discusses that he doesn't try to hide his sexuality on Facebook; in fact, Sam sees Facebook as a place where he can have fun posting pictures and comments that indicate he is gay:

Sam: My friend Sage posted this image of Jon Snow from *Game of Thrones* which is one of the guys on there. And we're like commenting on how hot he is. So like anyone on my Facebook should know.

Zach: So that's not something that you have to consciously manage or hide?

Sam: No, it's...it's out there. In fact there was...one of my friends uploaded a picture recently of me and us at Beats [gay dance club] with some two guys, making out in the background photo-bombing. It was really funny. My dad texted me before I even saw the picture. He's like oh, looks like you're having fun at the bar. And I was like what!?

Sam takes a playful attitude about his online identity, allowing even his father to see him at a gay dance club with two men making out in the background. Sam uses Facebook to openly reveal his sexual identity to others, actively using this social media site to proudly discuss this particular aspect of his identity. The ease of sharing photos and comments on Facebook has in part transformed how some men share their sexual identity with others. Rather than viewing social media as a source of anxiety related to their sexual identity, the men who are "Out and Proud" view Facebook as a tool to aid in the coming out process and to embrace this aspect of their lives.

It is important to note that this group only represents 10% of the entire group of participants. While some scholars argue that we live in a post-gay culture where gay people have been widely assimilated into the general public (Ghaziani, 2011), or that we are somehow “beyond the closet” (Seidman, 2002), my findings indicate that this is not necessarily always the case for most people. While a few of the men report using Facebook to either actively come out to many people at once or to celebrate their sexual identity, the majority of men in this study expressed various levels of tension and discomfort surrounding the revelation of their sexual identity online. In contrast to those scholars who argue that, while discrimination against gay men still exists, we are living in a culture generally accepting and tolerant of homosexuality, my findings indicate that we have not achieved this just yet.

C. Out and Discreet:

Many of the men discuss that Facebook has been a source of anxiety surrounding the potential of being outed to friends and family who do not know that they are gay. Jack, a 27 year-old graduate student, discussed the anxiety he felt when a friend tagged him in a picture that he described as “obviously gay:”

I was like yeah, there is nothing that can out me more than this picture. Honestly it was me and a bunch of other guys and the way that people were dressed including me and they were touching each other and it was very very clear that this was a gay picture. So I was like what do I want? I didn't want to untag myself because I like having this idea of pics of me in a chronological order but I thought if my dad sees this it's bad because I hadn't come out to him at the time. I didn't want my friends to know because they might be questioning or they might tell my ex girlfriend. So that's when I decided to create a new list called “not yet.” And I still have this list and I haven't really changed it a lot.

And I put all these people on this list and changed the settings so that people on that list couldn't see the pictures I was tagged in.

By creating a new list with more privacy controls, Jack could effectively hide anything that could be considered gay by those to whom he was not out. As noted by Phillips (2002), "One might be entirely 'out' to one's friends and coworkers but still maintain a formal indeterminacy at family reunions. The ability to segregate these contexts is a measure of social power, and the inability to segregate them can be personally disastrous" (7). Thus by Jack actively managing his privacy controls to disallow certain people to see posts he felt would identify him as gay, he is able to maintain power over the coming out process and the fear of being outed. However, there were some people that he did not add to the "not yet" list, and once he had removed the people that he was most worried about finding out that he was gay, he used Facebook as a way of informally telling others:

With everything I've written on facebook for at least a year and half now I'm sure that cousins...they have to be pretty dumb if they don't realize it by now. I'm sure they know but I've never actually told them. I just assume that they know. I've never come out to them in a sense of actually telling them. I assume that by seeing what I do on facebook that they can get it. Honestly I've become more and more out online. I talk about pride and I talked about the white party in Miami and I took pictures of that and of rainbows on beaches. Oh my god I can't think of everything I put that would have outed me! (laughs) I've never had a status that was explicit and said hey I'm gay or something. I guess I've done it much more implicitly. I never really use the term I'm gay to anyone. I don't why I don't do that. I don't know why I don't say that word.

Thus, Jack uses Facebook as a way of indirectly coming out to people that he doesn't tell personally. While he still maintains a "not yet" list for people who he doesn't want to know he is gay, he uses Facebook as a way of coming out to others with whom he feels comfortable disclosing his sexual identity. By utilizing implicit identity statements (Zhao et al., 2008), it is easier for Jack to let people find out via the internet than actually telling them directly. However, it is important to note that he still feels uncomfortable saying the words "I'm gay," but rather relies on people assuming he is gay by the things he posts related to sexuality. By not having to explicitly tell people he is gay, he is able to avoid some the stigma of non-heterosexuality (Hubbard and DeWelde, 2003).

Patton, a 22 year-old senior, also discusses how he uses Facebook to indirectly tell people that he is gay. While he was initially very cautious about managing his online heterosexual identity, recently he has removed some of the restrictions on his account so that more people can see his relationship preference:

For the longest time on facebook I didn't put "interested in." I just didn't answer it. After a while I kind of wanted to come out to more friends, so I went and updated that to interested in men and only allowed close friends because you have the option to manage that. I excluded most people. Only about 20 people on that list. I deleted the notification to say it's been updated because I didn't want everyone to see that. I can tell some of my friends still haven't seen that yet because they'll ask if I have a girlfriend. And just yesterday for National Coming Out day I went and removed that restriction so that any friend can see that. That will give a few more people an opportunity to find out. I don't really express myself very flamboyantly so I don't really worry about those types of comments showing up (things that are "super gay"). I've liked a few things that it's

unlikely that my extended family will see and when I update my status I'm very careful with word choice and keep it very generic. I'll say I'm lonely or hoping to find somebody but won't use masculine pronouns like him or boyfriend.

While Patton now lets everyone see that he is interested in men, he is still careful not to directly state that he is gay on Facebook by not using masculine pronouns in status updates about looking for a partner. He feels it is less risky to indirectly come out on Facebook than it is to directly tell his friends on the social media website. It seems as though he is hoping people will notice his relationship interests without explicitly stating that he is gay. Similar to Jack, Patton is able to avoid some of the stigma of coming out as gay by indirectly allowing others to see it on his Facebook page.

Nate, a 25 year-old gay man who graduated college two years ago, also discusses how he uses Facebook to indirectly let people know that he is gay. Once he decided to come out to close friends and family he felt comfortable indicating on Facebook that he is gay:

I more or less used facebook as a tool to come out to people. After I went through the initial wave of telling people in person and then I put interested in men on facebook and I was like ok, it's there, it's done. I don't remember any facebook reactions because that's kind of awkward to go up to someone and say on hey I saw on facebook that you're gay. That would be a weird line to start with. Very few people were up front about it if they noticed.

Like Jack and Patton, Nate avoided directly coming out to some people and assumes that people will notice if they are interested. He also avoids potentially awkward conversations or negative reactions by using Facebook as a tool to come out. When a person directly comes out to another person there is a risk that the other person will not be accepting or will react to the news in an

unfavorable way. Nate avoids these risks by using Facebook because, as he says, it would be unlikely for someone to say that they saw on Facebook that he is gay. In this sense Facebook and other social media outlets have become a way for many men to come out as gay with fewer concerns about potentially negative reactions.

Ryan is a 20-year old junior from a conservative and religious family. He spent the last two years of high school studying in Asia where his mother had relocated for work. During that time he established an online relationship with a man in the United States. When Ryan returned to the U.S. he then began dating Paul offline as well, and he changed his Facebook relationship status to “In a Relationship.” His curious sister noticed the change, and he used this conversation as a way to come out to her:

Ryan: I had just come back from China and we were talking online and um you know it was because of Facebook I had a relationship. And she asked me what my girlfriend’s name was. And I didn’t have a girlfriend; I had a boyfriend. And so his name was Paul. So she asked me what my girlfriend’s name was and I just said Paul. And she was like oh. And I was like yeah.

Zach: And had you been planning on telling her or was it just kind of you kind of just went with the moment?

Ryan: Um I think when I did that little thing on Facebook—because a lot of my family’s on there—so that’s how they keep in contact. It was kind of just like there it is kind of thing, you know. I just didn’t really care anymore. I just threw it out there.

Ryan used Facebook to communicate that he was in a relationship without specifying the gender of his romantic interest, assuming that people would ask him who he was dating. It was at this point that he replied with a male name, at which his sister was somewhat at a loss for words. In

this sense Ryan used Facebook to instigate his coming out to his family. He changed “In a Relationship” to “In a Relationship with Paul” soon thereafter which served as a way for him to indirectly come out to the rest of his friends on Facebook.

Vance is an 18-year old freshman who is enjoying exploring his gay identity now that he is at college and has more freedom. He grew up in a conservative Catholic home where he attended mass weekly and took religious training classes. When his mother discovered Grindr, a mobile dating app for gay men, on his phone the semester before he began college she became very upset at the realization that Vance was gay. She made him attend therapy in the hopes that it was just a phase. When he arrived at the university and was no longer living under the constraints of his conservative home, he felt relief and became more comfortable discussing his sexual identity. He still worries about negative reactions when coming out to people and he feels more comfortable with people finding out that he is gay on Facebook:

Zach: Do you ever actively monitor Facebook? Are you ever worried about – are you friends with people that don't know you're gay on Facebook?

Vance: Oh yeah, for sure. Like family wise and stuff like that. But honestly I've kind of gotten to the point if you find out I'm gay like it's not the end of the world or whatever.

Zach: So would you mind if they found out through something like Facebook?

Vance: Yeah, actually over Facebook would be so much easier because then I wouldn't have to be in the room with them and deal with the actual, “My God – you're not gay!” Usually it's, “you're not gay!” I mean what I've done with my mom or whatever, it was that. So I assume it would be like that with them.

Zach: So you think there would be potential for less negative reaction?

Vance: Well I think it would be the same level of negative reaction but I am away from it so like I can actively choose to see – it's not like I'm in the same room with you and I have to deal with you like, “You're not gay.” Like that stuff.

After Vance's mother reacted negatively to his coming out (or rather being outed involuntarily), Vance now worries how others may react to the news. The few people he has told directly have responded with disbelief and assertions that he must in fact be wrong about being gay. He is not actively coming out to many people in person, but rather he has gotten to the point that he does not care if people find out in other ways. Facebook, therefore, offers a way for him to indirectly come out to others and avoid potentially negative face-to-face encounters.

Compared to the “Out and Proud” men, the “Out and Discreet” people retain a greater sense of safety and stigma avoidance, thus demonstrating their greater discomfort with the coming out process. There is less anxiety surrounding indirectly coming out on Facebook, and additionally these men hope to avoid potentially negative reactions that could occur when coming out to someone in person. As noted by Rasmussen (2004) and Hubbard and DeWelde (2003), youth are acutely aware of the stigma surrounding non-heterosexual identities and the very real negative consequences that one could experience from others. Coming out on Facebook in a controlled and indirect manner allows these men to retain a greater sense of safety than other ways of coming out.

D. Facebook Closeted: Passing as Straight on Social Media

While some men discuss that they indirectly use Facebook to let people find out about their gay identity, others actively manage their online personas so as to appear straight. Kyle, an 18 year-old first-year student, discusses how he consciously constructs a heterosexual identity on Facebook:

Most of my friends on facebook don't know that I'm gay. I consciously don't post anything that has gay connotations with it or something. Also the interested in part that is blank. My gay friends know not to post anything about being gay and I would probably delete anything if they did. My aunt tried to friend me and I haven't said no but I haven't said yes yet for about two years.

Similar to Jack's anxiety that someone might post something that would indicate that he is gay, Kyle worries that a gay friend may post something gay-related and consciously watches his account so that he can delete anything he feels is "too gay." He also avoids adding family members out of concern that they may see something related to his sexual identity. Even though Facebook allows users to manage how much information certain friends can see, Kyle's apprehension about adding family members shows that despite enhanced privacy controls, the risk of family members or other close individuals finding out about his sexuality via Facebook is too great to allow access to those people.

Owen is an 18 year-old gay man who is not out to many people, including his parents, friends from high school, or even his current college roommate. He is currently dating someone he met through the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), but prefers to keep his relationship status fairly secret.

I'm friends with my mom on facebook and I don't have a twitter. I don't like facebook that much. I used it to talk to my roommate over the summer and some of my friends from home. Most of my friends play online games with me anyway so I just hop onto my gaming computer and play with them. I've told Dan [his boyfriend] not to post anything gay on my facebook...he put himself in a relationship on facebook but not with me and there's no photos of us together. He knows I'm not out to a lot of people.

Owen actively manages his online identity as to not appear gay in any way. Because he is closeted to most people, he is cautious about what information appears on Facebook and instructs his boyfriend (who is out to many more people than is Owen) not indicate that they are dating or post any pictures of them together. Thus, while some men indirectly come out as gay to others on Facebook, others actively pass as straight to avoid disclosing their sexual identity.

Wyatt, a 22 year-old gay senior, similarly manages his Facebook account to keep people he has not come out to from finding out that he is gay. While he is involved in groups such as the Gay Straight Alliance and is out to most of his friends on campus, he hasn't disclosed his sexuality to his family or friends outside of campus. After recently participating in a drag show sponsored by the Alliance he made sure to warn people about posting photos of him.

I did do the drag show though. But I told no one to tag me and I got rid of all those pictures. So I do have a very conservative facebook. Not a lot of pictures of me. All of my profile pictures are of random things I like... So people that post on facebook like, I am a lesbian, I am gay, I am bisexual, I have never done that. I just felt like it's not appropriate.

Wyatt actively monitors his Facebook account so that it doesn't become what he calls "too personal," despite the fact that he also has privacy controls that would prevent people from seeing certain content. He also states that he would never post the fact that is gay on Facebook even if he were out to all of his friends. When asked why, he stated that he feels people share too much information on social media sites and that those types of things shouldn't be used to share private, personal information about one's life. Unlike many of his peers, Wyatt thinks most things about his life do not need to be discussed in an online environment.

Relatedly, Hunter, a 22-year old junior, is from a deeply religious and conservative family. While he no longer attends Evangelical services himself, he was brought up in a home where homosexuality was regarded with disgust and as a sin. He has struggled since puberty with the knowledge that he is gay, and until recently he prayed that God would cure him from what he considered an unnatural desire. While he has recently come to accept his sexuality and view it in a more positive way, he is still closeted to his family and to most friends. When I asked if he maintained a 100-percent heterosexual identity on Facebook, he matter-of-factly replied, “Yes.” He worries that if he did not respond to the “Interested in” feature on Facebook (where one can say their gender preference for a potential partner), people would assume he might be gay. On this feature of Facebook he falsely posts that he is “Interested in Women.”

Hunter is currently dating and decided to ask his boyfriend if they could be friends on Facebook. Hunter’s boyfriend respectfully declined, stating that he had been Facebook friends with boyfriends in the past and it caused unnecessary drama in the relationship. Even though his request was denied, I asked Hunter if he would have worried about others seeing his friendship with this man.

Zach: So you wouldn’t be worried about being friends with him on Facebook...if your other friends could see that you were friends.

Hunter: Friends? I mean no, I wouldn’t worry. But at the same time there’s so many friends I have on Facebook, I don’t know....

Zach: They wouldn’t pick out this one picture and be like this guy looks gay?

Hunter: Yeah. But and I of course wouldn’t post any pictures of us. But then you know if I couldn’t do that or you know wouldn’t say anything about us, I’m like well, what’s the point of being friends on Facebook?

Thus while he would enjoy being friends with his boyfriend on Facebook, he acknowledges the fact that since he desires to remain Facebook Closeted for now, he would not be able to post any pictures or comments related to their relationship. While there are certainly straight couples who hide their relationship on Facebook for a variety of reasons, such as a disapproving parent or friend, gay people who are still mostly in the closet face a uniquely depressing challenge: to hide something that is a central part of their being and also something that brings them great joy in order to continue to pass as straight to those they assume would disapprove. According to Pascoe (2011), young people often expect their relationships to be confirmed online through social media, and to also show affection toward their significant other in this online space. This online celebration of a relationship is something that is not possible for many gay men, causing them to miss out on some of the happiness their heterosexual peers experience when recognizing their own relationships on social media websites. As stated earlier, online life is no longer a separate world for members of this generation; offline and online realities are increasingly indistinguishable, which creates a good deal of difficulty for those attempting to construct an online identity that may not match their offline lives.

E. Discussion and Conclusion

Some argue that the “recent visibility of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals within U.S. culture promotes both early trajectories for sexual orientation identity development and greater comfort with orientation among youths” (Floyd and Stein 2002:185). While there has been increased visibility of non-heterosexuals in contemporary society, one must still account for the fact that we live in a heteronormative society where the institution of heterosexuality serves as a regulating and disciplining force. Even in so-called “progressive” areas where one might assume there is relative ease in disclosing or embracing a non-heterosexual identity, there are still many

potential negative consequences associated with such disclosure. The negative reactions of others (or the fear of such reactions) are an important consideration for people in deciding to disclose their non-heterosexual identity.

The large majority of men in this study indicated they felt anxiety and tension when constructing their online identities on Facebook. Only 10% of respondents were Out and Proud on the social media site, while 90% indicated some type of discomfort or anxiety related to managing their sexual identities online. My findings indicate that despite the perception of increased acceptance for gay men in contemporary society, most men still feel some level of discomfort in the coming out process and in the construction of their online sexual identities. Many of the men, particularly those who are Out and Discreet, discussed that coming out online was a less risky way of disclosing their sexuality to others and allowed them to avoid potentially negative reactions. Despite the transformative nature that Facebook has had on the coming out process for this generation of gay men, most men in this study acknowledge that coming out is still a process fraught with risk and the potential for negative reactions. While the social consequences may not be as severe as they once were for claiming a gay identity, my findings show there is still a good deal of apprehension and concern surrounding the coming out process and the construction of an online gay identity.

Scholars have noted the need for non-heterosexuals to conceal their identity to avoid negative reactions from others (Leary 1999, Shippee 2011, Payne 2007, Cameron and Hargreaves 2005). Goffman (1963) noted that those with “spoiled” identities might engage in passing in order to reduce the visibility of a stigmatized trait. Historically, a revelation of a non-heterosexual identity has been associated with many negative consequences, from employment termination, family shame, physical and emotional abuse, legal persecution, and so on. As such,

many non-heterosexuals have engaged in passing for heterosexual to avoid these negative consequences. However, as stated previously, some argue that the increased visibility, awareness, and acceptance of non-heterosexuals have reduced the need or desire to pass as heterosexual. Yoshino (2007) argues that the gay community has moved beyond passing in the 21st century, and that “gays are increasingly permitted to be gay and out so long as we do not ‘flaunt’ our identities” (19). Here the author argues that while complete acceptance of gay people has not been achieved (thus the directive not to flaunt such identities), acceptance has become mainstream enough so that most gay people no longer need to hide their sexual identity.

My findings do not support the assertion that most gay people no longer feel pressure to hide their sexual identity from others. Indeed, 90% of the men who participated in this research indicated they felt some type of pressure to either partially or completely conceal their gay identity. Those who are Out and Discreet must master the ever-changing privacy settings on Facebook to control who can see things that may indicate that they are gay. Additionally, these men acknowledge the stigma related to claiming a gay identity and the potential for negative reactions when coming out to people for the first time. As such they use Facebook to indirectly come out to others in order to lessen the stigma and retain a sense of safety in the process. The men who are Facebook Closeted feel an even greater sense of apprehension related to claiming a gay identity. These men consciously construct a heterosexual identity on Facebook in an effort to prevent people from finding out that they are gay. Their anxiety over the potential of being outed on Facebook demonstrates that, counter to arguments that most people no longer feel a need to hide their gay identity, homophobia remains a potent force that these young gay men encounter in both their online and offline lives. While the men who are Out and Proud offer limited support for a post-gay culture (Ghaziani, 2011) and a society that has moved “beyond the closet”

(Seidman, 2002), my findings overwhelmingly show that general acceptance of non-heterosexuality has not been this widely achieved.

In the face of such daunting reactions from a heteronormative society, often times gay individuals negotiate multiple identities. Valentine (1993) found that lesbians may choose to negotiate multiple identities depending on the space and other individuals they are around. As heterosexuality is presumed in a heteronormative culture, these women may find it easier to allow others to assume their heterosexuality if they feel the situation would be hostile otherwise. Yeung and Stompler found in their study of gay men in fraternities that “multiple social identities submerge and reemerge according to cultural and institutional configuration, organizational structure and group ideology” (2000:148). Thus, depending on the social context, one may strategically manage sexual identity if one feels that a gay identity would not be accepted in a particular social space.

My findings show that Facebook is a site where gay men are now confronted with the task of negotiating multiple presentations of their sexual identity to different groups of friends online. With the limited exception of those men who are Out and Proud, the majority of men constructed different online identities depending on who the perceived audience would be. Some of the Out and Discreet men had different privacy lists that prevented some people from seeing content related to their gay identities. Others in this group would change a setting such as “Interested in Men” to indirectly come out to some of their friends while still not explicitly claiming an online gay identity. Men who are Facebook Closeted actively monitor their Facebook profiles to make sure nothing “too gay” appears on their profile. As noted previously, people are presumed to be heterosexual in a heteronormative society until proven otherwise. By not posting anything related to their gay identity on Facebook, these men are hopeful that people

will assume they are straight. Additionally, some men intentionally construct a heterosexual identity by stating they are “Interested in Women” on Facebook. Managing these multiple identities is burdensome and emotionally taxing on these men, demonstrating that while Facebook may be a liberating tool for some gay men, it is also a source of great anxiety for many others.

Thus Facebook is both transformative and risky for these young gay men, and an important trend for understanding the construction of a gay identity in this technologically significant space. Constructing a gay identity online has made it both burdensome and liberating in the coming out process for gay men. It is important to understand these trends because virtually all young gay men confront the task of managing their online sexual identity. Understanding how these men do it gives us a greater understanding of the overall process of forging a gay identity, both online and offline. As internet technology is rapidly evolving and changing, and as more social interaction moves from physical to online spaces, future research should focus on how these changes affect both the coming out process and the construction of online identities for young adult gay men.

In the following chapter I will demonstrate how the internet has changed other areas of social interaction for these men, specifically how young gay men meet one another in the absence of physical spaces.

Chapter 4: Out of the Bar and onto the Web: The Changing Patterns of Social Interaction Among Gay Men

A. Introduction

In the previous chapter I analyzed how social media, specifically Facebook, has changed the ways in which some gay men come out to others, in addition to how Facebook has created another area of life where young gay men must manage their identity. In recent years the internet has also revolutionized the way in which people seek out romantic partners. There are now dozens of online dating websites in addition to mobile smartphone applications that allow people to locate a potential partner. This has significantly improved the efficiency of finding new people, particularly for those who are in “thin dating markets” (Rosenfeld and Thomas, 2012). Those in thin dating markets are individuals who have significantly fewer partners to choose from due to group membership in a relatively small population, such as that of gay men. Indeed, Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) found that 60% of same-sex couples met online between 2008 and 2009, and as such the internet is replacing more traditional ways of meeting people face-to-face in physical settings.

Given the transformative effect the internet has had on how gay men meet one another, many researchers have focused on how this has altered sexual practices of young gay men (Landovitz et al., 2013; Rice et al., 2012; Rendina et al., 2014; Beymer, 2014; Winetrobe, 2014; Weiss et al., 2010; McColgan, 2011; Levi et al., 2014). Much of this research has focused on risky sexual behaviors and how online interaction facilitates speedy (and often sexual) physical encounters between gay men (Bauermesiter 2011; Ross, 2005; Gudelunas, 2012; Landovitz et al., 2013; Rice et al., 2012). While this has contributed to our understanding of technology and public health, there has been little sociological research on how the internet has changed patterns

of social interaction. Additionally, largely missing from the literature is a discussion of young gay men who are using online venues to seek out long-term relationships, not casual sex partners.

Many gay men now report using online dating services and smartphone applications to meet other gay men (Van De Wiele and Tong, 2014; Baams et al., 2011; Grov et al., 2014; Gudelunas 2012; Rosenfeld and Thomas, 2012). While some scholars argue that these technologies have allowed young gay men to engage in more casual sex with one another and to do so in riskier ways (Bauermeister et al., 2010; Ross, 2005; Landovitz et al., 2013; Rice et al., 2012), the great majority of men in my sample reported using these services to seek out other men for serious relationships, not sexual hookups. Additionally, while many men use the internet to meet other men, they are often very cautious about what types of services they use and how to meet up with someone in a physical environment.

Prior to the invention and near-ubiquitous access to the internet, gay men often used codes, known cruising spots and bars, advertisements in newspapers, and urban gay enclaves to find other gay men (Stryker and Van Buskirk, 1996). As internet technologies have become more advanced and meeting online has become more commonplace, physical meeting spaces are no longer necessary for gay men to meet one another (Rosser et al., 2008). Indeed, one study found that gay bars decreased 12.5% nationwide between the years of 2005 and 2011 in Damron's gay travel guide (Thomas, 2011). Some scholars attribute the declining number of gay spaces to gay men's assimilation into heterosexual bars, neighborhoods, and other physical spaces, in addition to the ease and safety of meeting others online (Ghaziani, 2011; Seidman, 2002; Rosser et al., 2008). My data do not support assumptions of increased assimilation into heterosexual spaces. Rather, the decline in physical gay spaces and the shift to online interaction has decreased public

visibility of gay men, and as such many respondents reported not knowing where to locate other gay men without using some type of online service. I argue that we are not “beyond the closet” (Ghaziani, 2011) due to assimilation of gay men into heterosexual spaces, but rather young gay men often turn to online environments due to the lack of physical places to meet other gay men.

In this chapter I will show how young adult gay men are using online spaces to seek out long-term relationships, and the difficulties many of them have in locating others with the same interests. I will also demonstrate that recent legal changes regarding same-sex marriage has shaped how young gay men are conceptualizing the possibilities of long-term relationships and the possibility of marriage.

B. “So Nowhere to Go, Like Literally Nowhere to Go:” A Lack of Physical Spaces for Gay Men to Meet

As many social interactions have moved online there has been a decline in the number of physical spaces where gay men can meet one another. These physical spaces, such as gay bars and clubs, are areas where men can be relatively assured that they are in the company of other gay men. This is especially important for men who are seeking out intimate relationships. Many of the men in this study report being fearful of flirting with someone who may be heterosexual for fear of a negative reaction. Having a physical space where one knows he is around other gay men can help reduce this apprehension. The movement of social interaction to online spaces, and the subsequent decline in physical gay spaces, has led many men in this study to feel socially isolated and unaware of where to find other gay men.

Dean is a 25-year old graduate student who has encountered difficulty meeting other young gay men. The town where the university is located, which I call Mapleton, has no gay bars, coffee shops, or bookstores, so there is no physical space where gay men can congregate and know they are around other gay men. There is a medium-sized city located about 30 miles

away from Mapleton, which I call State City, that does have some gay bars and dance clubs.

Here Dean expresses his frustration with the lack of gay places close to the university:

So nowhere to go, like literally nowhere to go. There is once a month the guerrilla gay bar which we went to one time, or twice. The first time sucked, the second time was pretty fun because I was in drag and I love attention. But there's really just like – I mean it's like a lesbian scene of outdoorsy, crunchy, hippie, granola – but then the gays are like “eww” and so they go to State City. Yeah, you've got to drive 45 minutes and have a DD or have a friend or whatever. And then in terms of what you encounter in Mapleton, it's so weird. There is like the good old boys and their trucks still like we've gotten yelled at on the street like walking along.

Dean discusses how difficult it is to meet other gay people by pointing out that he would have to drive almost an hour to State City, which does have a few gay bars and clubs. As he mentions this involves securing transportation and a designated driver, as many gay spaces revolve around the consumption of alcohol. If Mapleton had a gay bar or club he argues this would make meeting others much simpler. He talks about a “guerilla bar” that occurs once a month, which is a meeting of gay people at a predetermined bar or restaurant that is advertised on social media. However, in Dean’s opinion it is mostly lesbians who attend this monthly meeting, and therefore most gay men still make the trek to State City if they want to find other gay men. Dean also says that he has been yelled at by “good old boys and their trucks,” implying there are also safety issues to be considered when being openly gay in Mapleton. This type of overt homophobia will be addressed in the next chapter.

Micah, a 22-year old senior, similarly vents his frustration that there are no gay spaces in the university town of Mapleton. I asked Micah if he had pursued any romantic interests recently, and here he responds:

Um I vaguely thought that some friends might be interested, but again it's that like social coding. Like I don't fuckin' know how gay guys find each other to date. Like I really don't. And I don't know how people find each other to date in general. Like my dating history has been very different and like almost all the people I've dated have been friends of mine that we just kind of ended up being attracted to each other and then being in a relationship.

And that's the weirdest thing that bothers me about Mapleton. It's just like you know you talk about Mapleton being this like liberal stronghold, and it's the San Francisco of the Midwest, and I don't...whatever. All these stupid words that people want to throw out there, but you now I don't see gay guys holding hands. I don't see lesbians kissing. Like I don't see that.

Micah is visibly angry when he is talking about how hard it has been for him to meet other gay men, given the lack of physical spaces that exist where gay men can meet one another. He states that he does not see gay men or lesbians in public, and given the lack of visibility he finds it frustrating to figure out how to meet other gay men. Gone are the days of the "hanky code" where gay men would use different colored handkerchiefs placed in various pockets to indicate their presence to other gay men (Stryker and Van Buskirk, 1996). Given the invisibility of other gay men in the community, many men turn to online spaces in their effort to find relationships, but as will be discussed, many of the men in this study were having difficulties meeting other gay men in those spaces as well.

Patton is a 22-year old senior who has also found it hard to meet other gay men. Here he talks about the challenges of meeting gay men in addition to how he tries to indicate his sexuality:

So it is really hard in Mapleton. Um, it's—'Cause I haven't even really seen a lot of gay couples, um, male gay couples in Mapleton. I've seen a lot of lesbians that have been together. In my entire time here, I think I've seen two gay couples of men. And so it's just really hard to find people, I feel like. And then even if I meet another gay person doesn't mean I'm gonna be compatible with them.

And there's occasionally times where um if I'm like thinking that I might run into somebody who I could meet and I have like a rainbow colored bracelet, I'll put that on. Just little things that the gay community would notice. Um and put myself out there a little bit. But um and certain t-shirts that I have that are just kind of like just subtle enough to kind of throw the hint, but not enough to where it says "I'm gay!"

Patton echoes Dean's assertion that is much more common to see lesbians in the university town than it is to see other gay men. In his four years in Mapleton he says he has only seen two other gay couples, which makes it "really hard" to meet other gay men. Given the lack of physical gay spaces and the relative invisibility of gay men, Patton uses subtle attempts to signal that he is gay to other potentially gay men. The donning of a rainbow bracelet or a t-shirt that other gay men may recognize as indicating his sexuality allows Patton to be visible to gay men, while not overtly advertising his sexuality to others. Patton's unease regarding being openly gay in public is similar to Cole's statement that he feels the need to be careful in Mapleton, suggesting that this "San Francisco of the Midwest" is not as progressive as many would like to believe. Overall many of the men in this study find the invisibility of the gay

community frustrating, and something that significantly prevents them from meeting other gay men.

C. Young Gay Men's Use of the Internet to Seek Out Intimate Partners

The lack of physical spaces for gay men to meet one another has led many of the men to look online for this purpose, but many of the men point to the difficulty of having online encounters lead to offline meetings. Graham, a 20 year-old junior, grew up in a suburban area that he describes as “definitely conservative.” He was not out to many people at his high school and did not know of any other gay men that attended his school, but he was very interested in finding a boyfriend. He turned to an online dating service to meet other men when he was 17:

Um, so yeah, my first boyfriend when I was 17 I met online. And he was like in Thailand at the time traveling because he was working as like a model in different countries and stuff. And it was just like I didn't think that he was real sort of a thing. 'Cause he had all these like fancy photos and I was like, “You're not real.” And then I Skyped and he was real and like super into me and stuff. But, he was like my first boyfriend and I just felt like it was a disaster. Um, and it was a disaster. So, I think we broke up after like a month or two months and, um, after he got back to the States, we started dating. And then I started seeing somebody who I also met off that site. God, I wish I never went on that site [laughs].

Like many young romances his first few relationships did not work out the way he had hoped, but without the option of meeting someone online he does not think that he would have been able to pursue any type of relationship with a man until he came to college. Now that he has been at college for a few years he still uses online services to meet other people, but still has not had much luck meeting someone that he wants to seriously date:

I mean I'm on like Grindr and I'm on like this thing called Jack'd. It's like a dating site on iPhone. And I like met somebody off Grindr once, and it was like a very like negative experience where like they just weren't anything like the person I'm expecting them to be. And I was just like okay, like what is this. So I'm on Grindr now, I just like don't even...like I don't like meet up with people on those, but like I have them but I don't think I would start a relationship under the context of like we met on Grindr. But then again, like I didn't think I would start a relationship in the context of I met you at a club, or like I met you off of an online dating site. So the more that I think about it, like the more that I realize it is hard to like meet people who are also gay. So it's like um...it's like however that comes about, it'll come about. But I'm definitely like more of the sort of person that's leaning towards like I want to like have an ideal situation to like base things off of friendship, however they do come about.

Discussing Grindr, which is a mobile application that lets gay men locate other gay men using the phone's GPS technology, Graham expresses his dissatisfaction with the service despite the fact that he continues to utilize it. He realizes that his goal of meeting someone for a serious relationship may not happen using online services, but given the difficulties he has faced meeting other gay men in physical spaces, he keeps returning to an online environment in an effort to find a serious relationship.

Similarly, Isaac, a 20 year-old junior, states that while it is often difficult to find someone online to actually meet in person, he feels that online services are his best option for meeting other gay men. He has attended several meetings of LGBT groups on campus in an effort to meet other men, but as he explains it was not something that he enjoyed:

But uh yeah, like on campus...like of the two groups that I would have gone to meet people, I just didn't like the culture there. And but that's just...it wasn't really my scene and I didn't get involved with that. I did start patrolling on like Ok Cupid and finding people around me. And I talk to people a lot. And I was supposed to have a meeting with one that didn't happen. And other ones, we just talk a lot and then never meet.

Since Isaac has not had much luck meeting people at campus-organized meetings for LGBT people, he primarily relies on online dating services to meet people. However, as he mentions many times throughout the interview, these online encounters fail to result in an offline meeting, which he finds frustrating. He also uses Grindr, the smartphone messaging application that Graham previously discussed. However, he says that particular service mostly caters to men looking for casual sex partners:

But I do use Grindr a lot, but a lot of guys were looking for hookups, but I'm primarily looking for like dates with people. And I don't know. And I mean a lot of it is headless torsos of men and you get a lot of things like hey, wanna hook up right now? And I'm just like no. I...I like...I'm more into faces and people and getting to know people.

Thus while Isaac states that he uses Grindr in order to meet other men, he feels that many people using the service are wanting to meet for casual sex, something he is uninterested in. Trevor, an 18 year-old freshman, also vents his frustration with Grindr even though he admits he is on the site quite a bit:

I've learned that the people who have pictures that are not of their face are usually (A) quite unattractive, and (B) quite creepy. But yeah, it's.... I'm still...I'm still pretty wary. And I'd definitely say I'm careful. Um but it's...it's very interesting. It's very...I would

recommend that anyone that's going and look at logs of Grindr chats, because it's people who are sick puppies. People who are really gross.

Despite the fact that Trevor characterizes Grindr users as “sick puppies” and “really gross,” he still uses the service and states that he finds it interesting. He also mentions that he is careful about who he chats with or who he would meet up with, which is a sentiment shared by most respondents. While online dating may have made it easier to meet other gay men, most men are quite cautious about arranging an in-person meeting. Kyle, who is also an 18-year old freshman, echoes this concern about using the internet to meet people:

You always hear the really sketchy stories about how, like, “Oh, somebody got murdered on Craigslist” or something like that. And it's just...like, that probably isn't going to happen, but it's just like a little bit scary.

It is paradoxical in a sense that most men report using the internet to meet other gay men, but many of these same men also state that they are skeptical of actually meeting a quality person online. While many men report not knowing about or not wanting to go to physical spaces to meet other gay men, many men also report that they are skeptical of actually meeting a potential boyfriend online. Contrary to some scholars' assertions that initial online meetings can lead to rapid offline encounters (Bauermesiter et al., 2010; Ross, 2005), the majority of respondents argue that they are even more cautious about meeting other men offline due to the perceived riskiness of such an encounter.

D. The Internet and the Search for Long-Term Relationships

Despite the difficulties the online world poses for men seeking out other men for relationships, as previously noted many men continue to hope that they will indeed find a boyfriend online. Patton, a 22 year-old senior, discusses his search for a significant other:

I've really been wanting a partner. Um, somebody to come home to, snuggle with, just that intimate comfort. And I've tried online dating sites. Um, and so I put my profile up there. I had a lot to learn about dating from the beginning 'cause I feel like I kinda got a late start. 'Cause I didn't start noticing...being attracted to people or noticing attractions to people until college whereas most people are in high school. Um, so I...one of my first attempts was, "Hey, you know, we're both on OK Cupid. I know who you are at school here. You wanna date?" [Chuckles] And I was like, "Oh, wow. That sounds really different when somebody else goes and shows me how that sounded." Uh, so I've chatted with a few people on OK Cupid, um, went on some dates. Um, just this last week one looked really promising and then at the end of the third date he's like, "Yeah. Not interested. Sorry, you know, if the touching was misleading, but I'm not interested." So like, "Okay." So, um...

Patton also discusses the difficulties he has had meeting people in more traditional ways, such as campus organizations and other physical spaces. As a result, despite the difficulties he has had with online dating, he continues to utilize it in his search for a partner. It is important to note here that Patton, like many men in this sample, is using the internet to find a potential boyfriend and not a casual sex encounter. Quinn, an 18 year-old freshman, also indicates that the casual sex often associated with meeting people online is not something he is interested in:

Um for me I don't really like any sort of anonymous hookup. And I don't really like any sort of we barely know each other, let's have sex. It's always if somebody was gay and I was gay and we were close enough friends or good enough acquaintances, I would. But I wouldn't just randomly hook up with somebody like that day. So I pretty much have to at least know you, but we don't need to be dating or have any sort of intimate relationship.

But the kind of—say on Scruff—of here’s a picture, come to my house, be naked...that’s not really...I don’t think I could do that.

Quinn’s aversion to casual sex counters popular stereotypes that young gay men are hyper-promiscuous and not interested in long-term relationships. Quinn goes on to discuss that whenever he goes on dates with people he is looking for a potential long-term partner:

You know my thing is I don’t...I feel like I would go on dates with people just to find out if we were interested in a relationship, but the entire time I’m definitely kind of looking for that guy that I’m eventually gonna fall I love with. You know I really....I do see myself getting married. And I do see myself adopting children. Um but I’ve never really been a big surrogate fan, just because there are so many kids in the world who need homes that don’t have it. Um I don’t know, besides that, I just kind of where obviously myself in the end is married, a couple of kids, maybe a dog.

Quinn’s long-term goals are very “traditional” in the sense that he desires a spouse, children, a dog, and presumably a picket fence in front of his suburban home. However, since Quinn’s spouse will be a man it is not what many people would consider “traditional.” It is significant to note that Quinn used the term “marriage,” and many other respondents also discussed their desire to have a “husband” one day. As same-sex marriage becomes legal in more jurisdictions, it would appear that many gay men in this age cohort have internalized the idea of one day marrying their partner, something that previous generations of gay men likely would not have done.

Cole, a 19-year old sophomore, also echoes Quinn’s desire to find a long-term monogamous partner in the future. While discussing his plans to enter politics once he graduates

from college, I asked him what his relationship plans would be as well. Here he envisions his future:

Zach: In terms of relationships, once you have your career and you are ready to settle down, do you see yourself in the more traditional monogamous long-term relationship? Is that the goal or something different?

Cole: Absolutely. Ever since my parents divorce I've wanted children. Because I want to prove to my parents how to be parents basically. But also the idea of a child is so cool to me. So yeah, I want that husband, I want to be a power couple. I want to be like – I was going to say Bill and Hillary Clinton but that's a terrible example because they have a terrible love life. But as far as like power couples like...Yeah. I want to be out there. We don't even necessarily have to be the same politically like as far as – I want to go into politics and they can go into something completely different. But we need to be successful in whatever we are doing. If they are a psychologist and they are successful and I am a politician and I'm successful, I want to be a power couple. And with that I want to do that to show people that it is possible to be successful as a gay couple. It is possible to make all of your dreams come true. We are human, we are not any different than anyone else. And we don't really have those icons yet. Even with Neil Patrick Harris like you know almost nothing about his partner. Anderson Cooper, you know nothing about his partner. And it's a shame. It's truly a shame. I recognize why they do it. The culture is not ready. But my feeling, you've got to play the game to change the game.

Cole has also embraced the idea of one day marrying and having children, and in his words he is looking forward to being a “power couple” with his husband. For this generation of gay men same-sex marriage no longer resides in the world of wishful thinking, but rather it is now a legal

option in many states. Massachusetts became the first state to legalize gay marriage in 2004, a time when many of the respondents would have been in elementary or middle school. At the time of writing, 37 states and Washington, D.C. now recognize same-sex marriage. The Supreme Court has agreed to hear appeals cases regarding the legality of same-sex marriage in some states, which may result in a ruling clarifying same-sex marriage laws on a national level. Given the legal reality of gay marriage for the respondents, many of their relationships are now being reimagined in the normative context of heterosexual relationships. While none of the men reported wanting to get married right away, many did indicate that they desire marriage in the future, demonstrating the power of a relatively new cultural discourse on same-sex marriage.

E. Discussion and Conclusion

In the previous sections I have demonstrated that while the internet may make it easier to locate other gay men, especially in areas that lack physical spaces for gay men to meet one another, most of the men report feeling isolated from the gay community as a whole. I have also shown that the majority of men in this study are seeking out long-term partners as opposed to casual sex hookups. Additionally, it has been noted that young gay men are now imagining their intimate lives in a heteronormative framework, in that many men discuss marrying their husbands in the future. Lastly, I have argued that the decrease in gay physical spaces leads men to turn to online platforms to locate other gay men, but these online encounters do not usually lead to offline meetings, further isolating the men and decreasing the visibility of the gay community as a whole.

Many of the respondents report that they turn to online applications such as Grindr in an effort to meet other gay men in hopes of starting a relationship. However, many of those men also feel like Grindr and other online sites are more designed for matching men for casual sex

encounters than for meeting potential boyfriends. While there are websites such as Ok Cupid that are more dating oriented than Grindr, the men who used those websites also reported difficulties in finding other men they would like to date. Combined with the lack of physical spaces to find other gay men, many of the respondents report feeling a sense of social isolation. The internet has been described as making communication easier between people, and whereas the internet may be thought of as breaking down barriers of social connectivity, my findings show that it may be increasing this sense of isolation for young gay men.

Indeed, the frustration that many men expressed at finding other gay men demonstrates there is a collective experience of social isolation among the men in this study. They seem largely turned off by online attempts to meet other people and do not know of physical places to meet others. There is a GLBT resource center at the university that holds regular meetings, but many of the men voiced a reluctance to join those meetings out of a general dislike of the political nature of the gatherings. This in a sense reifies the internet as the only avenue to meet other gay men, further increasing their sense of isolation. It is important to note that many of the men think that their personal experience of isolation is somehow unique, that other gay men are somehow not having difficulties finding one another. Because of the lack of a social support system to talk about these feelings with other gay men, many of the respondents repeatedly returned to online environments to seek out others.

As previously discussed, when the men would find a potential date online, an offline meeting often failed to materialize. The men's reluctance to meet offline was in part due to safety concerns, in that the person they agreed to meet could be dangerous or somehow threatening to their personal safety. However, I argue their hesitation to meet offline is also due to their relative lack of dating experience, or even conversing with other gay men in person. A

majority of the men said they did not have many gay friends, and most of the men were also relatively inexperienced at dating other men. Online chatting acts as a type of surrogate dating for these men. As will be discussed further in a following chapter, most of the men in this study reported that they had very little opportunities to date in high school, and many are still facing difficulties dating in college. Unlike their heterosexual peers, young gay men did not have the opportunity to experiment with dating prior to college, and as such their reluctance to meet offline may be a manifestation of this inexperience.

Despite the relative lack of dating experience it is significant to note that many men discuss future plans for “marriage,” using that term in addition to “husband.” Due to recent legal changes over the last ten years, same-sex marriages are now part of the cultural discourse. In this way we can see how culture frames the ways in which people imagine relationships, and due to the increased legitimization of same-sex relationships by the government, young gay men are now imagining relationships in the normative context of heterosexuals. These legal changes are important because they change the relationship imaginary and create new possibilities for the formation of heteronormative coupling by same-sex partners. As more young gay men imagine their lives in a more heteronormative context, they are finding it difficult to find potential boyfriends who may be their future husbands.

As physical spaces where gay men can meet one another have declined, many men now turn to online platforms to find one another. However, almost all of the men in this study found the available online spaces to be insufficient for helping them find other men to date. There seems to be a technological lag with the social changes that have occurred in recent years regarding the way young gay men imagine their relationship possibilities. While certainly there are men who only want casual sex partners, I find that many men are also looking for more

serious relationships. The available mobile applications such as Grindr are not conducive for the men in this study to find those types of relationships. Despite the rapid advances in internet technologies, it appears that the internet has not caught up with the way many young gay men are now imagining their lives and intimate partnerships.

Lastly, I have shown that the decline in gay spaces is not due to assimilation of gay men into heterosexual areas, but rather is a consequence of more men turning to the internet to meet one another. There are two important consequences of this shift from physical spaces to online spaces. First, as more men meet one another online there is less visibility of gay men in the physical community. This makes it more difficult for gay men to find one another offline. Unlike characteristics such as race and gender, sexual identity markers can be difficult to locate in public spaces. With the absence of such markers or codes, and a lack of physical spaces where they can assume they are around other gay men, these men remain invisible to each other and to the public in general.

The second important consequence of this shift is that social isolation among young gay men is actually increasing, which is paradoxical in that the internet is intended to help break down barriers, not reinforce them. Many men report lacking an idea of where to actually meet other gay men, despite their ability to talk with them online. So while this cohort of gay men may be able to more easily locate people to chat with via online services, they find it difficult to transform these online encounters into actual physical friendships or potential boyfriends. Coupled with the lack of physical spaces to meet gay men, these men feel an increased isolation from a gay community as a whole. As more interactions move to online spaces, future research should consider ways in which these changes are contributing to a collective experience of social isolation among young gay men.

The focus of this chapter and Chapter 3 has been on young gay men's experiences with various aspects of the internet, and how the internet has significantly affected many different patterns of social interaction. In the following Chapter, I shift the focus of this analysis to these men's experiences in physical settings, specifically their experiences of different types of homophobia in their lives both prior to and during their enrollment in college.

Chapter 5: It Gets Better, But What About Now? The Persistence of Homophobia in American Society

A. Introduction

There has been a recent surge in the discussion of issues pertaining to gay people in many news outlets, particularly due to the ongoing legal debate surrounding same-sex marriage that was discussed in the previous chapter. There has also been an increase in the visibility of gay people in the media. It is no longer breaking news if a gay character is cast in a prominent role in a television sitcom or is a host of a cable news show. While many would argue that the depictions of gay people in the media are often homonormative, or representative of only a certain type of gay person (often white, middle- or upper-middle class, monogamous, cisgender gay men), the representation of any type of gay person in the mainstream media is a relatively recent phenomenon. As discussed in Chapter 3, some argue that we are now “beyond the closet” (Seidman, 2002) or living in a post-gay era (Ghaziani, 2011), where it is no longer necessary to hide one’s non-heterosexual identity due to widespread assimilation of the gay community into heterosexual spaces (Yoshino, 2007).

Despite the increase in the discussion of gay rights and the heightened visibility of gay people in the media, I argue that widespread acceptance of homosexuality has not yet been as widely achieved. Indeed, homophobic attitudes in American culture remain prevalent among a sizeable portion of the population. A recent poll conducted near the time of writing reported 42% of Americans find consensual and intimate adult relationships between same-sex couples to be morally unacceptable (Riffkin, 2014). There have been numerous studies on homophobia and its prevalence in American culture (Kimmel, 2004; Gramick, 1983; Walters and Hayes, 1998; Sullivan, 2003; Herek, 2004;). One of the main findings of research on homophobia is that it remains a pervasive force deeply embedded within social structures. While much of this work is

now dated given the rapid changes in American culture in recent years regarding the discourse on homosexuality, the underlying assumption of this research still applies today: many people dislike, fear, and/or feel uncomfortable with non-heterosexual individuals.

It is important to note that I consciously use the terms “homophobia” and “internalized homophobia” to describe the negative attitudes and prejudice many men in this study experienced. Williamson (2000) asserts that the term “homophobia” is problematic in that it emphasizes the role of the individual rather than societal structures in producing negative cultural attitudes about non-heterosexuals. The term heterosexism, which he defines as “an underlying belief that heterosexuality is the natural/normal/acceptable or superior form of sexuality” (p.98), could potentially shift the focus from the individual to larger social forces. Similarly, Herek (2004) finds the term homophobia to be misleading because it is not a phobia in the psychiatric sense of the word. He proposes that in addition to heterosexism, sexual stigma and sexual prejudice would be more appropriate terms to describe anti-gay attitudes and behaviors. While I am aware of the limitations of the terms, I choose to use homophobia and internalized homophobia due to their relative familiarity to the general public, and hope that this research can be used to help change homophobic environments in many different social environments.

In the following chapter I will demonstrate the persistence of homophobia in primary and secondary schools, in addition to a lack of intervention from school officials. I will also show that parents were reinforcing negative stereotypes and perceptions of gay men in the home. Lastly, I investigate how many men continue to encounter homophobic attitudes and behaviors during their time in college. While conditions have improved for gay people over the last few decades, homophobic attitudes remain prevalent in American culture.

B. Homophobia in Primary and Secondary Schools

Elementary, middle, and high school years can be incredibly difficult for young people who may not fit in with their peers for a variety of reasons. Being perceived as gay can make going to school a dreadful experience. The relatively recent “It Gets Better” campaign (itgetsbetter.org) has sought to assure gay children and teenagers that while they may experience a difficult time in their youth, one day they will be adults and will no longer have to endure homophobic bullies. While this can be seen as a positive message to bullied gay youth, who are four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (CDC, 2011), it does not address the problems gay youth are currently experiencing. While acceptance and awareness of gay youth may have increased over the past few decades, my findings show that homophobic attitudes are still pervasive among American children and teenagers. Perhaps it will get better in the future, but what about now?

Brian is a 20-year old senior who attended school in a semi-rural, socially conservative area in the Deep South. Brian identifies as both Latino and White, and here he discusses some of the bullying he experienced for both his race and sexuality:

So the thing is...is whenever I was growing up, I wasn't the most masculine person out there. And that on top of me not being White, was like that kind of whole combined thing...like none of the Mexican kids there wanted to have anything to do with me 'cause the culture is very machismo and all that. And then the White kids were just kinda like you're not White, what are you doing with us and everything. So I actually...in middle school um I went to let me see—elementary school—Strickland Middle School. And when I was there they had these uh...they had these metal detectors so kids couldn't bring in weapons or anything. So they got around that. There's these pieces of bamboo

they take outside and they sharpen them up and I remember whenever I was oh I don't even remember what grade I was in. But I asked to play softball with the White kids and that was a big mistake 'cause they stuck me in the rib cage with one of those...with those sharpened bamboo sticks. So I was...you know I was like this little alien creature on the sideline. You know "he doesn't like the stuff that we like. What the hell is wrong with him?" And I sucked at that type of thing. I cried.

Zach: So you tried to play sports?

Brian: Yeah. I gave it a try and wasn't any good. And then like I'd cry a lot so like whenever they'd hit me and stuff, like I cried. So they had like little taunts for pain and be like oh, he cries whenever we beat him up. Let's beat him up more. And so you know that was a sign of non-masculinity because if somebody knocks your tooth out, you're supposed to spit it out and then hit them back. I didn't do that.

Brian was singled out for physical and verbal abuse for both his race and a perceived lack of masculinity, which was associated with a perception that Brian was gay. Brian's school had metal detectors to prevent guns, knives, and other types of weapons from being brought on school property, so students sharpened bamboo sticks to avoid detection and used those as weapons against Brian. He painfully recalls these instances when he felt like a "little alien on the sideline," and he cried frequently as a result of the abuse. It is not difficult to imagine how this toxic social environment would negatively affect not only Brian's physical and emotional well-being, but his academic performance as well. Indeed, he later tells me that he developed behavioral issues as a result of the constant bullying and was subsequently enrolled in an alternative high school for "problem" students. Fortunately, Brian told me that he excelled in this

new environment as most of the students kept to themselves, and he eventually graduated early and at the top of his class, thanks in part to the elimination of constant bullying.

Louis, a 21-year old senior who grew up in socially conservative urban environment, similarly recalls how bullying was an ever-present occurrence in his school. Here he talks about how he was bullied from elementary school all the way through high school:

I've gotten teased forever. For like since elementary school about like at first it started off as being a girl. And then it's like progressively once you started like learning words it just like progressed to like even worse words. So. High school is when it got really bad and I would cry a lot. Just 'cause I was like I don't know what's going on. Like I don't think I'm doing anything wrong, or portraying myself in like a different light.

Zach: So this went on all through high school?

Louis: Yeah, every day. Multiple times a day. I probably couldn't even go like one class period without someone—multiple people—saying something. Like either to my face or behind my back.

Zach: What did the teachers do?

Louis: Ignored it. Yeah. So I mean I just did my own business and I really didn't get said anything to in P.E., because I had...like their girlfriends were my friends. So like of course like my girlfriends are gonna back me up, so they didn't say anything. But I would say I more got discriminated when we would like play like....'Cause I always took team sports, and I was always picked last. Like all the time. Like I was like oh...you know and the jocks were always picked first when they picked teams. And I was like well, I know I'm gonna get picked last. So I don't really care. I go just on whoever's team. But like I

didn't think I was bad, but they just...they would like—it's bad to say—but they'd pick like the unfit like nerdy kid like over me. And I'm just like uh I don't...whatever.

As he recalls the negative experiences he endured in elementary school, Louis says he feels the teasing has been going on “forever.” His earliest memories of school involve taunts about him being a girl. Calling a boy a girl is meant to demasculinize him and reduce his social status amongst his peers (Kimmel, 2004). As he grew older the insults worsened as kids gradually learned new and more insulting words to call him. Louis feels the bullying peaked in high school, where he could not even go to one class without being insulted. Although this behavior was not unnoticed by the teachers, they did not intervene on his behalf to stop the abusive behavior. Louis is not unique in his experience of teachers failing to stop homophobic behavior, as many of the men in this study who experienced bullying report a lack of adult intervention to stop it.

Patton, a 22-year old senior who identifies his hometown as socially moderate, also experienced bullying from an early age though high school, and similar to Louis's experiences, he found that the bullying intensified once he was in high school. Here he recalls particularly traumatic experience he had as a freshman:

Part way through freshman year I went to go heat up something in the microwave. Um, and I came back, just sat down to finish my lunch after I got back from the microwave, and, um, four of my friends I had made at that point in time—they were all giggling. I was like, “What's going on?” So I was like, whatever. I'll just continue. So I took a sip of my milk and they all laughed harder. And then I got worried. I was like, “What'd they put in my milk?” You know, “I'm gonna be sick later.” 'Cause they were talking about, um, uh...They were talking about laxatives the week before. I'm like, “Great. Now I'm gonna

be sick.” So I broke down and started crying. And the bell rang and I was still crying there.

Patton’s “friends” insinuated that they had put a laxative in his milk while he was away microwaving his lunch, and as a result he became very upset at the thought of the consequences the laxative would have on him at school. Fortunately, Patton did not experience the effects of the laxative, either because he only had a small amount of milk before becoming suspicious, or the students had not actually put a laxative in his milk but were rather pretending to in order to upset him. Either way, Patton realized that day that his friends were not actually real friends, and he goes on to discuss how the same group of people would later join others in using anti-gay language against him.

Zane, a 26-year old graduate student from a socially moderate hometown, also was taunted with homophobic language for much of his time in school. Like several other men in this study reported, he was often called names that he did not understand as derogatory until a later time. Here he discusses some of the verbal bullying to which he was subjected:

There was one kid in particular that I remember quite clearly which was really weird for me because I didn't even know this kid – he knew who I was though. And so he would make fun of me and call me a faggot, queer, he told me to go fudge pack which I had no idea what that meant until like ninth grade. So I was just like, okay, got it now. It's like, I didn't know what that meant. I love fudge. It was just name-calling all the time. And there was nothing I could do because I was this scrawny little boy and I was like – you are yelling at me and I don't know why and you're also yelling things at me that it don't know what they mean. But yeah, it was all the time. But it was very difficult too. It was almost like I couldn't go anywhere in the school. I couldn't go to lunch without getting

tormented, I couldn't go to classes, in between classes, without getting tormented. There was no safe space essentially.

Zach: Did the teachers do anything to help?

Zane: God, no, there was no intervention ever.

Zane expresses his confusion about some of the names that he was called, and notes that at the time he did not realize what they actually meant. When one bully told him to “go fudge pack,” a derogatory slang term for anal sex, he did not understand that this was an anti-gay insult. Like many of the other men in this study, Zane reports that the name-calling was an ever-present occurrence, and that he had nowhere he could go to escape the taunting. When I asked him if teachers would ever step in to stop the abuse, he replied that there was “no intervention ever.” A majority of men reported that homophobic abuses, both verbal and physical, were commonplace at school and that authority figures were not helpful in ending the abuse.

Dean, a 25-year old graduate student who attended school in an area he identifies as having both conservative and liberal elements, echoes the lack of assistance from teachers and other faculty members as he recalls his experiences in high school:

If they did notice it would've been like – we don't talk about that or it's fine, don't worry about it. Like the assistant principals were like the coaches of the athletic teams and they were like, oh good, boys being boys. You know, it was like a man up, kind of thing. Like I remember in high school like senior year I was trying to do with my AP biology wanted to do like an AIDS rally and it turned into just like, okay, an AIDS announcement during one of the rallies and then it was like, no, you're not allowed to do that, it's too controversial.

Zach: Talking about AIDS is too controversial?

Dean: Talking about AIDS is too controversial. And we couldn't read a book, it was called *Genome* because it had a chapter in it that was like four pages that was on the gay gene. Like just on the research. It was just the cold, hard facts of what's been found. It was like, it's too controversial, and so it's in there and we can't read it and so they wouldn't let our teacher cut out the pages and give us the books, it had to be like she could only scan excerpts. It was just this whole – I don't know.

Zach: So they actively censored that?

Dean: Yeah, for sure. And that was the feeling of the whole area was like you don't do it in public, you don't talk about in front of people. It was like, you can be what you want to, just keep it to yourself. And if somebody's mean to you about it, then that's really your problem because you are causing it.

The staff in Dean's high school preferred to ignore bullying behavior, with some of the assistant principals excusing it as simply something boys do to one another. The teachers also were not allowed to discuss topics that were considered controversial because they were related to gay people, such as AIDS and the search for a gay gene. In Dean's perspective the teachers thought that anyone who was gay should not openly disclose that information, and if they did and received negative treatment because of that disclosure, it was somehow their own fault for bringing attention to it. Thus, many of the men in this study faced a school atmosphere where anti-gay bullying by other students was pervasive, and many found they could not count on adults to intervene on their behalf. In the following section, I now turn to the home environment, demonstrating that many men also encountered homophobic messages from their family members.

C. Homophobia in the Home

It was not just school where many men encountered homophobia and negative attitudes toward gay men. Many of the respondents discussed how they heard their parents or other relatives talk negatively about gay people within their home. While exposure to these types of comments is much different than the physical and verbal bullying many participants endured at school, it still taught them that something was wrong with identifying as gay, a sentiment that many of the men internalized at a young age.

Evan, an 18-year old freshman who grew up in a socially moderate area, has not come out as gay to his family yet. He states that it is something that he would like to do, but he worries about the negative consequences of such a revelation. Here he describes his apprehension of coming out to his father:

I'm a little bit worried about my dad's reaction just because of like I know that he...I know that like I have an uncle who's gay. Um and he's really close friends with my dad, so I know that he's not like opposed to homosexuality, but he was like I remember—I don't know if I'll ever forget this—but I was sitting on the computer in my living room one evening, and he was watching TV and there was like two really flamboyant gay people on there. And he said uh if you ever...if you ever turn out to be...come out to be like that, I'll kick your ass. So it was just like oh, well don't worry about that. Um but like saying things like that will make me a little bit worried about how he'll react. But at the same time, like I know that he loves me and I know that he will eventually accept it like a lot easier than I've heard of other people's. Like where they refuse to accept it, and then they like get abusive. I know my dad would never do that.

While Evan feels certain his father would not actually become abusive if he were to come out to him, he still recalls hearing his father say that he would “kick [his] ass” if ever turned out to be

like the men on television. It is important to note that Evan refers to the gay men on TV as “really flamboyant,” demonstrating his father’s disdain for effeminacy. It is possible that Evan’s father may have already figured out that Evan was gay, and he was telling Evan that he should not be flamboyant in his gender presentation. The fact that Evan said “I don’t know if I’ll ever forget this” demonstrates the staying power of an off-handed comment from his dad, and one that continues to make him question whether or not coming out to his father is a good idea.

Several other men also reported vividly remembering a comment from their parents that has made them apprehensive about coming out to their family members. Kyle, 18-year old freshman from a socially conservative town, talks about some of the reasons he has not come out to his family yet:

Zach: What do you think are some reasons why you haven’t told them yet?

Kyle: They are...[chuckles]...pretty homophobic. I mean, growing up just like whenever they came in contact with a gay person or they talked about something that had to do with homosexuality, they would always be a little bit, you know, not very warm or something to it. I remember a couple of weeks ago my mom was talking about how, like, 20-something years ago, she...she and my dad were living in an apartment on a floor directly above two gay guys living together. And one of them had HIV and he ended up dying of it. And then the other one ended up killing himself. Yeah, right after that. And my mom was joking about it. And, I just sorta sat there and didn’t say anything. Also, there was one time when I, like this was a over, maybe, a year ago...a little bit over a year ago...when my dad had been drinking with his friends and then he came home. And he’s a very messy guy. And so he, uh, ate like a fruit or something and he left the core—it was like a pear or something—and he left the core on the counter. And I told him to clean it

up. And he tried to, like, beat me up or something. And I ran off. And then the next morning, he said some—we were...I was yelling at him. He was yelling at me. And he said all he ever wanted was a straight son. And I don't...I didn't ever tell him I was gay. I didn't ever tell anyone in my family. I have no idea where that came from.

Zach: Do you think you will one day tell your parents?

Kyle: I don't know how they'll react. And I wanna at least be, like, financially stable, so I can at least support myself if they don't approve. I've got no other way to pay for college because they make too much money for me to get a loan.

Kyle is understandably worried about his parents reaction to finding out he is gay. His mom was joking about the deaths of two gay men and Kyle was unable to figure out what to say or do in response. Even more worrisome for Kyle is his father's comment that "all he ever wanted was a straight son." Given that Kyle has not disclosed his sexual identity to his family yet, this implies that his father may suspect that Kyle is gay and would be disappointed to find out that it were true. Like many of the young men in this study who have yet to come out to their parents, Kyle also worries about the financial consequences of such a disclosure. The homophobic remarks he has heard from his parents make him wary of their support once they know he is gay.

Some of the respondents indicated they did receive negative reactions once they decided to come out to their family, mostly due to homophobic attitudes of the family member and/or their concern for what others would now think about them. Justin, an 18-year old freshman who grew up in a socially conservative city, recalls his coming out experience to his family at the age of 17:

My mom and my brother pretty much didn't know how to handle it. They were drinking and just pretty much shouting about it downstairs. And I like...I was sitting on the stairs

going up just listening to the things that they said for about maybe an hour. And it was...it was not good. You know, it was pretty much my mom said, "Well, what are people going to think? Especially in this kind of community? You know, this could be affecting your dad's job." Which, it can't. But...[chuckles]. I actually ended up being grounded for about two months. And they said part of it was talking to people about it and then I guess the other part was for actually being like it.

Zach: So you got grounded for being gay?

Justin: Yep.

One can imagine the pain Justin experienced while sitting on the stairs listening to his mother and brother, both of whom had been drinking, discuss his sexuality for over an hour. Justin's dad works for the military and his mother was worried that he could somehow lose his job if people in the community found out that Justin was gay. Furthermore, Justin was grounded for two months for actually being gay and for also talking about it, demonstrating the negative environment Justin had to navigate once he came out to his family.

Grounding was not the only way parents attempted to punish their children for being gay or "fix" their son's sexuality. Trevor, an 18-year old freshman who grew up in a rural, socially conservative town, discusses how his parents believed that being gay was something that could be cured:

The first time I was 15 – no – 14. I was 14 and they sent me to a psychologist – and I think I was like eighth grade, at the end of eighth grade is when that happened. They were like, this is an adult problem and we are going to fix this. And then I went to high school a year after. I mean after that they sent me to a psychologist, the psychologist was kind of like, yeah, you are. You are really gay. And I was like, no, no I'm not. I'm not

gay, I'm fine, I'm cured. And I went off to high school and I was like, man, I'm so gay. God, I am so gay though. That's when I formally came out to my parents and I was like – I'm gay, I really am. And they were like, “Oh God, no you're not. We will just nip this shit in the bud right now.” They refused to believe it and because my dad is a pastor he found one of those reparative therapy groups. So I went to one of those up in New Hampshire – it was like every other Saturday kind of group meeting. Emphasis on sin, but with me they didn't really like – they would say things like, this is very sinful and this is very bad and blah blah blah. But because I was 15 they would do it in a very roundabout kind of way so that it was like – we are going to shame you in a nice way. Because that's what we do to 15-year-olds, is shame them in a nice way. I was just going along with it and I had – I knew I wasn't very convincing when I tried to like play otherwise. I mean come on, look at me. I had a girlfriend, like she was my beard. She didn't know she was my beard but she was my beard in high school. And when I finally broke up with her and I was like, I'm gay. And she's like, no, we can fix this. And I was like oh, fuck me, no. Everyone wants to fix it. Why does everyone want to fix this. I'm not broken. I'm fine.

Despite Trevor's assertion that he was not broken and was actually fine, many people in his life were determined to change his sexuality. His parents first sent him to therapy and later to a reparative therapy group, whose purpose was to “cure” Trevor's homosexuality by framing it as a sinful choice. Trevor later explains that his relationship with his parents continues to be difficult, and when they do speak there is usually a comment about how he should stop being gay or that hopefully this is just a phase that he will grow out of. It is not surprising that exposure to such negative attitudes about homosexuality in both their school and home environments led

many of the respondents to conclude that the stigma of being gay has not disappeared either in the social environments of young men's lives or in their family relationships. It is important to note that the large majority of men who reported encountering homophobia in their school and home environments lived in socially conservative or moderate environments. While underrepresented in this study, those from socially liberal areas recalled significantly less homophobic attitudes and behaviors in their school and home environments, demonstrating the power of different cultural discourses on the participants' experiences.

D. Homophobia in College

Many of the men came to college having already encountered many of the homophobic attitudes and behaviors previously discussed. The university and the town in which it is located, Mapleton, are often described as socially liberal and progressive. Additionally, younger people are regarded as having more tolerant and accepting attitudes toward homosexuality than older generations (Hicks and Lee, 2006). Given the progressive reputation of both the university and the town, many of the men in this study did not expect to encounter homophobia once they arrived in Mapleton. While not as pervasive as the homophobia experienced in their schools and homes prior to college, some men did report experiencing anti-gay prejudice during their time in college.

Dean, a 25-year old graduate student, recalls a time that he and his boyfriend went to State City, a medium-sized city about 30 miles from Mapleton, to see a football game. State City is also widely regarded as a socially progressive metropolitan area. Dean and his boyfriend were holding hands as they walked away from the stadium after the game ended. The sight of two men holding hands highly agitated a man who was walking past them. Dean describes the incident here:

And I remember like walking along and holding hands after the football game and then this guy got so mad he just started screaming. It was just like, asshole, faggot, go to hell, faggot, assholes! Just couldn't control himself. I just started laughing because I'm sorry that you're going through this just because of me. I was laughing but at the same time it also worried me so we made sure to get away from him pretty quickly.

Dean and his boyfriend had done nothing to provoke the man other than holding hands in public, and this small public display of affection shared between two men enraged someone who happened to notice and disapprove of it. While Dean laughed about the ridiculousness of such a homophobic outburst, he said he was also worried that a verbal confrontation could quickly escalate into physical violence so he and his boyfriend quickly moved away from the angry man. I asked Dean if he had encountered any hostility in Mapleton, and here he responds:

Dean: In terms of what you encounter in Mapleton, it's so weird. There is like the good old boys and their trucks still like we've gotten yelled at on the street like walking along. And just stupid high schoolers who never went to college kind of guys cruising around on substances and looking for something to harass.

Zach: And when people yell at you are you holding hands, making out?

Dean: No, just like walking along, sometimes just walking together, sometimes holding hands. My boyfriend gets really mad and I get really sad and I never know what to do.

And then in my head I'm coming up with like all these bitchy, responses like screaming at them if they rewind it in time. And then I'm like stop it, don't do that. It's like this – yeah – so I think we both kind of have a weird unhealthy response to it still. Not sure quite yet what to do with that when it happens. Yeah, to be called such a liberal place there's definitely a lot of strange things that go on in Mapleton.

Describing some of the harassment he has encountered in Mapleton, Dean remarks on the irony of such abuses occurring in an area often characterized as liberal. He also discusses the “unhealthy response” both he and his boyfriend have when such homophobic behavior occurs, despite the fact that anger and sadness are natural responses to the experiences he describes. Encountering such hostile attitudes toward homosexuality in Mapleton adds to the feelings of internalized homophobia many participants reported, which I discuss in more detail the following chapter.

As discussed in Chapter 4, Mapleton does not have any physical gay spaces that men can go in order to meet other men, such as a gay bar or club. Many of the men report making the trip to State City in order to find physical gay spaces. While State City is often described as progressive and it does have several gay bars and clubs, some men report encountering homophobic behavior there as well. In addition to Dean’s verbal encounter with an angry passerby, Graham, a 20-year old junior, recalls a much more threatening encounter he had in State City:

Um, so a group of us got threated with a knife once. So that was intense. I was with some other gay guys and we were walking and two of the guys were holding hands. And then there were like some people following us for a while and I definitely heard the word fag. And then this guy came up and showed us a knife he had in his pocket so we just started running. Nobody chased us or anything so I don’t know if they were just fucking around with us or what, but it was definitely terrifying.

After noticing that they were being followed and hearing anti-gay slurs being used by members of the group behind them, Graham recalls how scared he and his friends were when someone approached them with a knife. Fortunately, he and his friends were able to get away unharmed

and no one pursued them. While he is uncertain whether or not the people in the group genuinely meant to cause them harm, or if it were just some people “fucking around” with them, it is still an event he vividly remembers. It also demonstrates the very real threat of violence gay men continue to face in a heterosexist society.

As previous research has shown (D’Augelli and Rose, 1990; Lance, 2008; Iconis, 2010), some students arrive on college campuses with homophobic attitudes. In addition to experiencing homophobic encounters in both Mapleton and State City, some of the men also report encountering homophobia on the university campus. Kyle, an 18-year old freshman, discusses his experience with his assigned roommate at the beginning of the fall semester:

Kyle: And, like, I...like, I don’t know. I feel like a lot of people may...a lot of gay people may feel this way. But, like, when you’re living with another guy whose...who you don’t know, you might not feel comfortable telling them that you’re gay because they might react in an adverse fashion. And, just, once again to avoid confrontation, I just kept it quiet.

Zach: Did he ever seem like he might be anti-gay?

Kyle: Well, like, he made really bad jokes about, like, killing fags and... Yeah. And then he made another joke about how if—because he had the stereotype that all gay guys are promiscuous, which I don’t think is true at all. Um, he had this...he made this joke about since gay guys are promiscuous and they love anal sex, that they...that straight guys should give it to them whenever they want. And it’s basically came across as a rape joke. And I was like, okay. That’s not cool.

Zach: How did you—what did you say at the time?

Kyle: I just pretended he didn't say it. I have a problem with pretending people didn't say things. And he just kept up with the gay jokes. After a while, it just got to the point where I was like, "Okay. I really don't like you. I really don't want to live with you anymore."

While it has been noted that many young men use homophobic language to assert and protect their own masculinity (Pascoe, 2005), it became clear to Kyle that his roommate was not engaging in the common "That's so gay" discourse that one often hears in casual conversation. After repeated comments about "killing fags" and straight guys raping gay men because they are so promiscuous, Kyle decided that he could no longer live with his assigned roommate and requested a room change, and fortunately within a week he no longer had to live with his homophobic roommate.

It was not just roommate situations where men encountered homophobic attitudes and behaviors on campus. Xander, a 21-year old senior, describes some of the comments he has heard walking to class:

I mean just walking around, it's like guys walk by. Like not all of them. But I've heard it a few times. Usually it will be a couple of guys walking behind me or past me and I'll hear them say gay or fag to their buddy and then they'll laugh. And I don't ever feel threatened or anything. I mean I don't think anyone is going to jump me like when I'm walking to class. But it kinda sucks to hear when I'm minding my own business but I'm going to go around confronting people every time I hear something like that.

I later asked Xander if he ever felt uncomfortable off campus in Mapleton, to which he responded:

Xander: Um I kind of feel uncomfortable going like to Main Street out to the bars on the weekends sometimes, but...

Zach: Why is that?

Xander: I don't know. Just the fear of maybe someone saying something to me.

Having heard homophobic comments on campus, Xander says that he sometimes worries when he goes out to bars in downtown Mapleton out of fear that someone would say something negative to him regarding his sexuality. While both the university campus and the town of Mapleton are regarded as accepting and progressive areas, the stories these men tell demonstrate that homophobia is not just limited to socially conservative areas, but indeed persists in socially liberal areas as well.

E. Discussion and Conclusion

In the previous sections I have shown that despite recent trends in a greater cultural acceptance of homosexuality, homophobic attitudes and behaviors remain commonplace in many areas of social life. I have demonstrated that such attitudes and behaviors are still quite common among children and teenagers, as many of the men reported both physical and verbal bullying from their classmates. I have also shown that such abuses were often ignored by adult authority figures in the educational system, resulting in a lack of support for these victims of bullying. Additionally, many of the men I interviewed witnessed homophobic remarks and behaviors from their family members. Lastly, I have analyzed how homophobic behavior continues to affect these men's lives at a university that is often characterized as liberal and progressive. While "it may get better" for these men as they grow older, more attention needs to be paid to what these youth are going through in the present.

Attending school was an activity that many of the men dreaded on a continual basis. While many heterosexual individuals may be subjected to bullying at school for a variety of reasons, children and teens who are perceived to be gay are especially singled out for abuses.

Many of the men reported that they believed their perceived lack of masculinity was one of the root causes of being targets for homophobic bullies, the vast majority of which were other boys. David and Brannon (1976), in their discussion of hegemonic male sexuality, argue that men are expected to adhere to four broad dimensions of the male sex role. The first aspect of male sexuality is that men must not be like women in any way. This implies there is a stigma for anything seen as feminine, or more generally speaking, emotional or passive. Many of the respondents who were victims of both physical and verbal bullying reported that they were often called out “for being a girl” or being “a sissy.” The fact that the majority of men reported some type of anti-gay bullying from their peers in elementary, middle, and high school demonstrates that homophobic ideologies, as well as traditional constructions of hegemonic masculinity, continue to be rampantly reproduced in younger generations.

Furthermore, many men reported that teachers and other school authorities were not helpful in preventing or stopping abuses from occurring. Some authorities even brushed off the bullying as some rite of passage, an example of a “boys will be boys” type of behavior. This lack of intervention not only allowed the abuses to continue unchecked, it also led the boys to assume that the adults in their schools were, if not supportive, at least complicit with the type of homophobic behavior they were witnessing. Indeed, one respondent recalled that a teacher stopped two girls from hugging one another because that type of behavior “could promote lesbianism.” While faculty members and staff may harbor homophobic attitudes themselves, there are also adults who may not hold anti-gay attitudes but nonetheless do nothing to help victims of homophobic bullying. These teachers may fear the consequences of speaking out against anti-gay prejudice in a homophobic environment. One way in which homophobia works is by silencing the voices of those who are supportive of gay people yet feel there could be

negative repercussions if they show that support. Until school authority figures take a more aggressive and interventionist approach to prevent and stop such bullying from occurring, it is likely that such abuses will continue to happen.

Many of the men in this study also indicated that they heard homophobic comments or witnessed homophobic behaviors by their family members. Many men still vividly remember seemingly off-handed anti-gay comments by their parents or other family members. This perceived anti-gay prejudice has prevented some of the men from coming out to their families, despite the fact that many would like to come out so that they can stop hiding this aspect of their identity. The respondents not only fear disapproval or other negative emotional responses from their parents, but some of the men also expressed a fear that their parents would withdraw financial support if they found out they were gay.

Some of the men who have come out to their parents did indeed experience negative reactions to their disclosure. Several were required to attend therapy sessions in an attempt to “fix” their homosexuality, while others were punished or made to feel guilty for being gay. While the negative reactions could have been even worse, and indeed for many young gay men they are, they demonstrate that many parents are still harboring homophobic attitudes and are creating an atmosphere where their gay children feel uncomfortable. While it is heartwarming to hear stories of parents lovingly and acceptingly embracing their children’s non-heterosexual identity, it is important to remember that many gay youth cannot count on that type of reception to their coming out as gay. Campaigns such as the It Gets Better Project (itgetsbetter.org) are telling youth in this society that it will get better in the future, but we need to do something to make it better now.

Lastly, some men encountered homophobic attitudes in both Mapleton and State City, areas that are often labeled as socially progressive. They also witnessed anti-gay prejudice on a university campus that is often similarly characterized as socially liberal. Due to the pervasiveness of homophobia, gay men can be potential targets of homophobic behavior even in areas where they would likely assume it is relatively safe to be openly gay. If we lived in a post-gay era (Ghaziani, 2011) or were “beyond the closet” (Seidman, 2002), one would not expect homophobia to be so prevalent throughout the culture. The recent advancement of certain gay rights, such as same-sex marriage in many jurisdictions, and the now relatively common visibility of gay people in the media, mask an important truth: despite increased acceptance of homosexuality, anti-gay sentiments remain widespread throughout the culture. Just as some people argue we live in a post-racial society because an African-American man has held the office of president, some may also argue that we live in post-gay era because of recent advances in gay rights across the country. We do not live in post-racial society anymore than we live in post-gay society. Any argument that states that we do live in such a culture prevents a wider cultural discourse on the persistence of homophobia throughout our society.

Chapter 6: Internalized Homophobia, “Trying Out” Heterosexuality, and Feelings of Loss

A. Introduction

In the previous chapter I documented how homophobia remains prevalent in U.S. culture. Given the widespread heterosexism in society, children often internalize homophobic attitudes at an early age. There have been numerous studies on the detrimental effects of internalized homophobia on gay individuals (Allen and Oleson, 1999; Frost and Meyer, 2009; Williamson, 2000; Isay, 1989; Davies, 1996; Locke, 1998). Meyer and Dean (1998) define internalized homophobia as “the gay person’s direction of negative social attitudes toward the self, leading to a devaluation of the self and resultant internal conflicts and poor self-regard” (p.161). Much of the research on internalized homophobia has been quantitative in nature and a significant amount focuses on mental health.

Meyer and Dean (1998) argue that many gay people are raised by heterosexual parents who may harbor anti-gay attitudes. They also argue that unlike members of other stigmatized minority groups, gay people do not have the protecting and supportive attitudes of their family members, and they lack access to an affirmative reference group until they come out. Because young gay men are exposed to anti-gay attitudes before they realize their own sexual identity, it is difficult for many men to accept their “spoiled identity” (Goffman 1963). A spoiled identity is one that causes the individual to experience social stigma and disapproval from others. Those with spoiled identities may engage in passing in order to reduce the visibility of a stigmatized trait. Indeed, many gay people will attempt to suppress their emerging gay identity in an attempt to pass as heterosexual (Martin, 1982). This delayed identity formation is also in part due to internalized shame gay men may feel at the recognition of their same-sex desires (Allen and Oleson, 1999). Rowen et al. (2003) determined that higher levels of internalized homophobia are

associated with a less developed gay identity and higher levels of sex guilt, leading many gay individuals to have an overall negative view of themselves as they begin to form their gay identity. Similarly, Plummer (2001) found that the use of homophobic language by young boys often does not have a sexual connotation in early school years, but provides a significant reference point for forthcoming gay identity formation by young gay men. As gay identity formation begins, victims of homophobic bullying in their earlier years will subsequently associate homosexuality with negative emotions.

In addition to internalized homophobia, Meyer (1995) argues that the experiences of stigma and prejudice further add to the minority stress that gay men feel in a heterosexist society, and such stress leads to an increased risk of mental health problems among gay men. Living with a stigmatized identity can result in increased feelings of loneliness, depression, and isolation (Vincke and Bolton, 1994; Lewis et al., 2003; Ferguson et al., 1999; Gilman et al., 2001; Sandfort, 2001; Baams et al., 2011). Higher levels of internalized homophobia are also associated with less disclosure to heterosexual friends and less sense of connection to the gay community (Herek, 1997). This sense of stigmatized difference and isolation can lead men to not only attempt to pass as heterosexual, but to also engage in heterosexual behaviors in order to avoid accepting their gay identity.

Many of the men in this study reported feelings of internalized homophobia, and many men also reported attempting to date or fantasize about women in order to suppress their homosexual desires. Given the forces of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1993), non-heterosexuals face pressure to exhibit desire for the other sex, or at least not actively demonstrate desire for the same-sex. In a heterosexist society people are assumed to be straight until proven otherwise, so one strategy to deal with anti-gay prejudice is to attempt to engage in heterosexual

behaviors. In their study of gay identity formation, Flowers and Buston (2001) found that gay men reported actively constructing a heterosexual identity that contrasted with their “true” gay identity. This public display of heterosexuality shielded them from homophobic abuses, but at the same time many of the men reported emotional distress at what they called “living a lie.”

In the following sections I analyze how living in a heterosexist society led many men to internalize homonegative attitudes. Many men experienced fear, dread, disgust, and a general sense of apprehension as they began to form their gay identity. These emotional struggles caused a number of the men to hope that their same-sex desires would cease to exist, even as they came to the realization that they would not. I will also show many of the boys attempted to date girls when they were younger in hopes of suppressing their gay desires, in addition to hoping that they would discover that they were actually straight. In this sense we can see how these young men “tried out” a heterosexual identity for a period of time in order to avoid the stigma of homosexuality. Lastly, I discuss how many men felt that they were missing out on activities that their heterosexual peers were engaging in, such as dating. I explore the feelings of loss and yearning that gay men feel when exposed to ideals that they cannot as easily obtain as heterosexual people.

B. Internalized Homophobia

While general social attitudes regarding homosexuality have improved over the last few decades, and gay people are acquiring new legal protections in many parts of the country, there is still widespread unacceptance of homosexuality. As previously noted in Chapter 5, a recent poll conducted near the time of writing reported 42% of Americans find consensual and intimate adult relationships between same-sex couples to be morally unacceptable (Riffkin, 2014). It may be easier to be openly gay in 2015 than it was at the turn of the century, but the persistence of

negative attitudes about being gay have led a large number of respondents to internalize the idea that being gay is a bad thing. Thus, the majority of men in this study expressed some type of discomfort with being gay at some point in their lives. The following accounts highlight this pattern of apprehension.

Andrew, an 18-year old freshman, has suffered from anxiety problems from an early age. While seeing a therapist to learn how to better cope with his anxiety, he would also discuss the discomfort he felt with the growing realization that he was gay. Here he shares his story, and the struggles he experienced until the end of his first semester in college:

Yeah, I'm around 10. I'm around 10. And so then I started seeing a therapist for anxiety and I talked to her about the gay feelings and everything I remember I specifically talked to her about this. And um I learned...I was also learning a lot of techniques to deal with the anxiety. And so I used those techniques to be able to just push all of the gay feelings away and just push it and press it down you know. I'm not really gay and whatever. But I kept denying it and denying it. Um and so basically you know that went on for quite awhile...I would worry about it and be like this is...it was the biggest internal struggle of my entire life because I...it would just compound with every other stressor I had in life you know. And I would think about um I would just worry about it and worry and worry. And then there would be like a month or two where I just didn't have those attractions at all. You know? And I just wouldn't think about it and I was totally fine. Then after that it'd rise up again. And so that went on for like middle school, high school. But I um I didn't ever allow myself to think about men. That wasn't something I...the thought of even possibly experimenting with that was no go. Like I'm straight and there's nothing that's gonna change that and I'm not even gonna...I was not open to the possibility that I

could be gay or like men. So now, I recognize that I like men, but I mean I still never even allowed myself to think about men. Um and then finally enter this last December, right, and I finally accepted that I am gay.

Calling it “the biggest internal struggle of my entire life,” Andrew describes the difficulty he had accepting the fact that he is gay. In fact, he had only come to accept his sexuality two months before our interview. He had been determined to be straight and he would not allow himself to fantasize about other men. Later in the interview he tells me that in high school he would view lesbian pornography so that he would not see a naked man while he was watching sexually arousing material. Hoping to avoid the possibility of being gay, Andrew actively tried to repress his sexual desires for men by avoiding the thought of other men altogether.

Not all of the men in this study tried to avoid thinking about other men in hopes that their feelings would go away, but many discussed the fear and guilt they felt when they would have such thoughts. Cole, a 19-year old sophomore, hopes to enter politics after he finishes college. Here he explains how he thought being gay would harm his career options:

Yes, that to me was the biggest thing. I always worried about my future opportunity. You know you always hear stories about gays getting beat up. And then the media plays gays as like these drug addicted, sex addicted, HIV-having men. And I played into that. I was like, that's going to be me if I am gay. That was what was on my mind. And it killed me. It absolutely killed me. Even to this day I still feel like being gay – well I don't feel – I know being gay gives you less of an advantage in life. I actually used to think about marrying a woman – a lot. That's why I kept trying to date them. I was like, maybe it's not me, maybe it's the girl. If I meet Mrs. Right then I would marry her. And I still sort of have that feeling today. Like if I were to meet an amazing girl who I found attractive, I

would marry her. But it's highly unlikely. But that was my thing. I dated so many girls, I can't even count on two hands or my toes probably. I was just trying to find the right person because I felt like they were out there and I just like – it was them – wasn't necessarily me. That I'm not gay, I just haven't met the right girl. Yeah, she just never came along. And finally I just gave in because she's not going to.

Cole had internalized the notion that to be gay was to be “like these drug addicted, sex addicted, HIV-having men.” He was also aware that gay men could be subjected to physical violence, and all of these thoughts together were enough to make him hope that he was in fact not gay, but had simply not met the right young woman who would confirm his underlying heterosexuality. I later asked Cole if he thought this heterosexual fantasy was an attempt to actively avoid being gay.

Here he responds:

Absolutely. From the moment I knew I was gay I did not want to be gay. I remember – this is very strange. I would find random people on Facebook – you know I grew up with social media. Find random people on Facebook and bring up this topic of I don't want to be gay. Some people were like, oh, you probably shouldn't be. Keep in mind, random people on the Internet. I also felt like scum on earth when I would watch gay porn and I felt like scum on earth every time. I would engage in gay sexual activity and I would feel like scum on earth every time. I felt like I was never going to be anything I could be. Just all in all I felt like shit.

Cole was deeply troubled with the realization that he was gay, and he reflects on the tremendously negative feelings he experienced when watching or having gay sexual activities. He sums up his feelings succinctly when he says, “Just all in all I felt like shit.” The negative emotions he felt in coming to terms with his sexuality indicate that he had internalized a

heteronormative cultural discourse that suggested there was something wrong with someone like himself who experienced same-sex desire.

Similarly, Hunter, a 22-year old junior, described his multi-year struggle to reject his emerging gay identity. Hunter, who comes from a deeply religious, evangelical Christian family, subscribed to the idea that homosexuality was a sin for which he would be punished if he did not become straight. Here he explains the anger he felt at God for not helping him with this struggle:

And I would scream at God a lot you know. I struggled with anger. And not in any way hurting people. Maybe I would yell or something but um most of the time I wanted to like be alone and kind of fume at people or God.

Zach: And did you pray that this would go away?

Hunter: Oh yeah. Tons of times. And you know after seven...maybe a little over seven years, it gets tiring. And I started to question. Yeah. I'm like God just do it! Just get rid of it!

Zach: Did you ever seek out any support during this time?

Hunter: It was mostly asking my parents to pray even though I didn't really like seeking their help about it 'cause of how disappointed they would be. Um yeah, so I felt very alone in it. Very alone. Um so senior—or after graduating high school—that whole summer I just kind of gave up fighting. I still didn't embrace anything by any means or any romantic homosexual thoughts. And at the time I thought I was being numb and stone cold to sin. And I was in a horrible spiritual state. But like deep down, I would think this feels so much less stressful to just not care or feel bad about looking at porn and masturbating. It's not okay, I just couldn't care anymore.

Hunter, who still self-identifies as a Christian, was hoping that God would take away his gay desires. After years of prayer, he finally gave up, believing that it was easier to just not care than feel constant anger and guilt. Although he has now found a way to adhere to his Christian beliefs while also accepting his gay identity, Hunter is still somewhat uncomfortable with speaking openly about his sexuality. Here he explains this discomfort:

I've actually noticed like a discrete physical sensation that occurs still kind of to this day but to a lesser degree just whenever I talk about my sexuality at all which is fairly uncommon to be honest. And it's just sort of like a common sort of anxiety sensation with a bit of jitters, a bit of tightness in the chest. And I think the strongest example of when that happened was the first time that I told anyone. I never really have been able to figure out why that happens because on a rational mental level I'm pretty much come to terms entirely with it. So I don't know, it could just be a holdover. I'm not a neuroscientist. But you know, it is something I've noticed and I think it has been sort of a deterrent, just physiologically speaking, for me talking about it more openly. Not that I really have any particular desire to. But I have not elaborated on my sexuality with most of my friends here. Not one way or the other.

Noting that he experiences a “discrete physical sensation” whenever he talks about being gay, Hunter describes the anxiety he feels telling people he his gay. He also says that talking about being gay is not something he does very often, further demonstrating his discomfort with this part of his identity. Years of believing he was committing a sin has left a lasting effect on how Hunter perceives homosexuality and himself, despite the fact that he has now reconciled his faith with his sexual identity.

Nate, a 25-year old graduate student, also recalls his apprehension in realizing that he was gay, as he associated being gay with something that was “wrong.” Here he describes his reaction as he began to accept his sexuality:

And then it was after I understood that...that I liked guys and that guys were supposed to like girls, that's when I realized that hey, this is wrong—quote-unquote—“wrong.” And um that was probably middle school age probably. I was like you know 12, 13, 14 maybe. Um and I just remember watching a Maury Povich Show, where this...this...this guy came on and he...the church changed him essentially from being gay to being heterosexual. And that's when it kind of clicked, like oh no, this...this is wrong. And I need to change this. And I can change this. And then I...I went through a phase where you know I actively tried to do a mind-over-matter thing, you know where it doesn't matter what my mind says I want to do this, I can overcome anything that my...my...my mind tells me to. I would see a girl and I would think she's really pretty. And then I would tell myself that girl is hot. Or you know I would just look at superficial attributes and kind of turn that into my head, and be like oh, that girl must be really hot.

Similar to Hunter's assertion that he actively tried not being gay until he finally “gave up,” Nate also attempted to suppress his homosexuality until he felt he could no longer continue to do so. Like many of the other respondents, he attempted to convince himself that he was heterosexual by forcing himself to think that women were attractive. I asked Nate, who now accepts his gay identity, how he thinks his life would be different if he were straight. Here he reflects on this question:

If I compare my life to you know the heterosexual lens of what would my life be like if I grew up straight, obviously it wasn't as easy because I went through my entire childhood

contemplating whether what I'm doing is...can be changed. Whether what I was thinking and doing is wrong. If you know of course it went...not of course, but it went through my head...even the religious you know doubt of you know am I going to hell? Um eternal damnation. All those things. Things that you know I don't think heterosexual people have to think about...just sexuality. They might have to think about that because they shot someone on the street, but not because of you know who they slept with that night. So in that lens, I think my life was harder...yeah.

Acknowledging his lack of heterosexual privilege, Nate realizes his life has been more difficult than his straight peers because he had to struggle with feelings and desires. Similar to Hunter, he spent a good amount of time hoping to change his sexual identity and worrying about spiritual condemnation if he were unsuccessful in these attempts. Overall Nate, like many men in this study, received the cultural message that something was wrong with being gay and consequently internalized these negative attitudes as he struggled with the realization that he could not change this aspect of his identity.

C. "Trying Out" Heterosexuality

As previously demonstrated, a majority of the men had negative emotions regarding their emerging gay identities, and many went through feelings of guilt and shame. Related to these feelings, many of the men in this study also attempted to date girls while they were in school in an attempt to either suppress their gay desires or to replace them with heterosexual feelings. In this sense we can see that these men were "trying out" heterosexuality in a hope that it would be a good fit, and if it were this would ease their fears of being gay. While many of the men knew or strongly suspected they were not attracted to girls, they nonetheless tried heterosexual dating for some period of time.

Connor, an 18-year old freshman, struggled in his teenage years as he began to realize that he was sexually attracted to men. Like many of the men discussed in the previous section, this awareness came with confusion and dread. He remembered that he had always had a feeling that he was different from other boys, but until middle school he was not really familiar with the idea of different sexual identities. At this point he began watching gay pornography on the internet. As he began to realize that he was gay, he says “I was definitely afraid of it just because I – I had the impression, based on whatever that that would just make my life worse and that it was absolutely better to fit in.” In his attempt to fit in, he tried dating a girl in high school. Here he recalls that experience:

So I had kind of convinced myself throughout high school that I liked this one girl. And I think I really wanted to convince myself that I liked her so I kind of convinced myself about it on and off for like three years I was like – I would talk to people, I like her so much. Nothing ever happened until junior year. I asked her out to homecoming and we went to homecoming and I was like – I think that that night was when I really realized it. It was like a high school dance so there was like grinding all up and everything and I was like, this is just really not – like I should be feeling something. Because that was my first actual physical contact with a girl in that way at all. Like I hadn't kissed anybody, I hadn't done anything like that. So it was like – I was really building it up in my mind like, yeah, this is going to be great. I'm going to be super attracted to her, all this stuff. And then it just was not happening and that was like one of the worst nights ever because – and even on the limo beforehand and all of that stuff during dinner I was like, I have to be – like I need to be physically attracted to her and I need to like want to make out with her and

grind with her and all this stuff. And it just was not happening. I tried really hard to force it.

In his attempt to convince himself that he was straight, Connor had a platonic relationship with a girl for three years, culminating in homecoming date. During the evening they were dancing very close together. Connor felt he should be feeling some sort of sexual desire, but he felt nothing and it turned out to be “one of the worst nights ever.” Connor, like many of the men in this study, had not succeeded in his attempt at being heterosexual.

Similarly, Eric, an 18-year old freshman, began to realize he might be gay in his early teenage years. He too understood that being gay was something that was considered abnormal. Here he discusses how he attempted to figure out if he were straight:

I was 13 and I remember being in middle school – I think it was in seventh grade – and I remember thinking, okay, the first person I kiss will determine what I am because if it's a guy then I'll be gay but if it's a girl then I'll be straight and that's just – it was my way of being like I'm not any – it's like a non-identity. But it was definitely starting to come to grips with what was going on.

Zach: So in your mind it could all be settled by a kiss?

Eric: Yes indeed. Like I knew as soon as I kissed a girl that I wasn't into it but I knew also as soon as I agreed to go on a date with a girl that I wasn't into it. So I always knew even when I said it depends which one I kiss first kind of thing.

Zach: When you were 13 and kind of deciding if this kiss could help decide, was that an effort – were you hoping that you would be attracted to girls – was there concern there?

Eric: Yeah, oh my gosh, yeah, I was like, I don't want to be gay. It would be horrible.

Yeah, I definitely in my head I was like, I want to be straight, I want to be normal. Not outcast I guess.

Eric echoes Connor's statement that he associated being gay with not being able to fit in when he said, "I want to be straight, I want to be normal. Not outcast I guess." Given the cultural discourse that associates homosexuality with abnormality, Eric realized his gay identity would make his life more difficult and that he felt badly about himself and who he was.

Wyatt, a 22-year old senior, strongly suspected he was gay in high school. He would try to make himself be sexually attracted to girls because he was uncomfortable with the thought of being gay. He also did not know of any other gay boys in his community, so there were no options to explore his developing gay identity with another boy. Like many teenage boys, he felt social pressure from his friends to have a girlfriend. Though he did not think he was straight, he did try to date and force himself to be attracted to girls. Here he recalls some of these experiences from high school:

I was fascinated by other guys. But I just kind of negated it for a while and then during high school I was kind of pressured into dating a girl friend of ours in the group. So my friends are, like, you need to ask her out. Like my friend pressured me into asking her out. And I don't know, so I just asked her out not even really wanting to. Like she was a friend so it's like, I guess that works. And then we started dating for a bit and it just didn't work out. Oh, she wasn't right for me. So I guess around 16 I kind of figured out that I was either bisexual or gay. And then during college I kind of like yeah, no women, I'm totally gay. I tried women a couple times before college and it just didn't work. I was just trying to force myself like, oh, I have to like women, I have to like women. And then I

was like I don't like anyone. Maybe I did not give women a fair chance. And then kind of tried that again. And like one woman in particular was like there was something there but I think it was just a truly good friendship and it just wasn't working out.

Zach: Did that worry you?

Wyatt: It did because that was the time all my friends were like, dude, look at that chick. And I kind of was just like I pretended to be sexual, oh, okay. Not sort of caring but I guess I just didn't really care to begin with. Like what I do was if I ever checked out a guy I would take twice as long checking out a girl. So I would do this thing in class like, holy crap – like there was this one bad boy that I totally was crushing on. I found him super attractive and I could not – like every time I would stare at him I was like, oh my God. And then I'd be like, oh there's a girl that's really attractive so I should check her out and just kind of cancel it out.

Wyatt would force himself to fantasize about girls anytime he would catch himself thinking about a boy sexually. He hoped this would “cancel it out,” or in other words it would negate any gay feelings that he might be having if he could also have straight desires. Once he began attending college he accepted that he could not force himself to be straight. Like many of the men in this study, Wyatt attempted to try out heterosexuality due to the stigma of homosexuality.

D. Feelings of Loss and Missing Out

While some of the men in this study tried to engage in heterosexual activities in order to avoid embracing a gay identity, others did not attempt to try out a heterosexual identity. Due to their inability to truly claim a heterosexual identity, a number of men in this study reported that they had feelings of missing out on activities in which their straight peers engaged. The respondents feel a sense of loss at not having the ability to have certain social experiences

because most of their peers are heterosexual. They describe their inability to flirt or ask people out on dates because they fear the person may be straight. Many of the respondents discussed how they feel a strong desire to date in college, but as noted in Chapter 4, they do not know where to find potential dating partners. This desire, coupled with the inability to find a relationship, leads many men to feel a sense of yearning and an envy of their heterosexual peers who do not face the same types of barriers when seeking out a romantic partner. Most respondents felt that these feelings of “missing out” began in middle and high school and have continued during their time in college.

Dennis is a 19-year old sophomore who feels that he did not get to have stereotypical adolescent experiences because of his sexual identity. He realized that he was gay at an early age and, unlike many of the men in this study, he did not attempt to try out a heterosexual identity. Because he did not know of any other gay people in his school, he did not have the opportunity to have a teenage relationship. Here he discusses his feelings around missing out on the experiences of his straight classmates:

So it was in middle school that this weird feeling started to happen because I feel like it was around that time at which it was sort of expected that romance would be a part of your life. Even in a very minor degree. And I realized that I was attracted to men and I quite blatantly realized I wasn't attracted to women. So there was sort of kind of – if doubt is the right word, I'm not sure it is – but there was a very sort of discrete feeling of, there is a part of the essential schooling experience or the essential childhood experience that I am not part of and that this is sort of bad somehow. You know, it was more sort of a negative thing than a positive thing. It wasn't like, oh man, romance is so cool, I'm not getting it. It's like, oh God, I'm not into girls, there must be something wrong with me. It

was along the lines of – because – I don't know. I sort of experienced a pressure throughout my life. I think everyone sort of experiences this to some degree, to be normal. To match the people around you. And this was one sort of very obvious way in which I was failing to do so. I saw other people kissing and dating and I thought, it wasn't just that I felt that this was something I was supposed to be doing but I wasn't doing it, it was also, I'm supposed to want this but I don't really. Because for quite a long time outside of the privacy of my own room, I kind of actively sort of suppressed any romantic feelings I had towards men.

Dennis echoes many of the men in this study when he says he felt the need to be normal, to fit in, and that he realized this was a particular area where he was not succeeding. Because of this experience, Dennis feels that he somehow missed out on a normal part of adolescence. He says that he still feels a longing to date someone in college, but does not know how to find other gay men: “The example I have given to my straight male friends when they wonder why I find it so irritating to date is I tell them, well, imagine if 90% of the women in the world were lesbian and of the remaining 10% a significant majority were very butch.” While he is no longer suppressing his gay identity, he still feels that he is not able to have the same relationship experiences as his straight male friends.

Similarly, Uri, a 20-year old junior, explains that he did not get to experience dating prior to college. Here he describes this lack of experience and the effects on his romantic life in college:

Like I don't...I don't have the social context to really be able to do a lot of that romantic stuff. And I missed out on dating a lot. Like I missed out on middle school dating. Even my first kiss wasn't until sophomore year of college. Um you know I...I...I don't know a

lot of how that works. I don't really know what to do. And I feel like college guys kinda expect you to know what you're doing. And it's...it's hard for me to enter back in and like I...I feel like I probably would have been with a guy earlier if I would have been close enough to a guy to like express this is what happened to me, this is my history, this is why it's tough for me. But I want to explore this with you. Will you work on that with me? If I had a guy that I was close enough to that I could say that to, I could...I could see myself exploring that path further. But that opportunity just hasn't really been there. And it wasn't there because I wasn't involved with the community a lot. I wasn't doing stuff with GLBT. I wasn't talking to people that were in that community a lot, you know. And I still don't really know of many gay people.

Uri feels that his lack of dating experience in middle and high school is limiting his ability to pursue romantic interests now that he is in college. He feels underprepared to seek out a potential date because he feels that he would not know what to do. While many of his heterosexual peers gained experience in dating one another, Uri missed out on those opportunities. Given the homophobic atmosphere in many schools, in addition to a lack of visibility of other gay youth, many young gay men enter adulthood with little to no experience of intimacy with another person.

In this regard, some respondents discussed how they wanted to date in high school but did not know how to tell if other people were gay. There was a fear that they could potentially flirt with someone who was straight, and that there could be negative consequences if that turned out to be true. Evan, an 18-year old freshman, remembers how he followed-up on some homoerotic banter in the boys' locker room in high school:

So like I was really scared to start practicing basketball because I was worried that like boy are they gonna be mean, and especially the locker room. Like it would get awkward. Um and I think for the most part it was awkward because I made it awkward just because I would like keep to myself and um like I didn't want to have a locker, because I didn't want to have to go in the locker room. So I'd change in the bathroom. But then the coach was like no, you're gonna have a locker in the locker room. So then I was just like not talk to anybody. And then one time uh this...the...like the most popular guy on the basketball team uh he was like Evan suck my dick. And then he like got on the ground and then I was just like shrugged it off and like turned away and like laughed it off kind of. Um and then later on I did end up saying like oh, I actually do want to do that. I actually like just messaged him on Facebook and was like do you remember when you said that? And he said yeah, I'm sorry it was just a joke. And I was like no, I actually do want to. And he was like what the fuck? That's fucking gross! And then um that actually ended up being another reason why my sophomore year wasn't a good experience, because then he like ended up telling all of his friends. And then that kind of got worded out a little bit more. Like my family heard about it, because he was friends with my brother and my brother told my mom, and then my mom told everybody so that people had people calling me. And I was like no, what are you talking about? He just misinterpreted something I said. And that was pretty scary. It was scary 'cause I didn't want people to know.

Yearning for intimacy, Evan's follow-up to the basketball player resulted in him almost being outed to his friends and family. Evan continued to talk about his embarrassment related to pursuing the young man, but that he really wanted to be with another person in the same way that

many of his classmates in relationships were experiencing intimacy. While miscommunication and mixed signals happen frequently in heterosexual interactions, they do not carry the potential risk of being outed against one's will.

As discussed in Chapter 4, many men in this study reported not knowing how to locate other gay men in their community. This lack of visibility makes dating difficult, and this difficulty leads many to feel a sense of loss compared to their heterosexual peers. York, a 19-year old freshman, feels that he is missing out on dating due to his inability to determine if someone he likes is gay. Here he explains his feelings of hope when he first came to college, followed by his feelings of loneliness after he arrived:

I was like I'm gonna go to college and I'm gonna find someone. But it's really not that easy. I mean I got here expecting a little bit more diversity, but all I really saw was you know all the straight frat guys. And that's what really terrorizes me about myself is that's what I'm into. I want what I can't have...at least in most cases is I want all those really muscular, put together, attractive, confident men. I don't want some like really gay guy in like skinny jeans. One that goes to an LGBT club and be super feminine. And that's not at all what I want. I want the frat guy. There's just a lot of dejection involved in that.

Like with most people like if I was straight, I...I'd see a girl walking down the street and there's some chance there. Because most of the time she is straight, so there's that chance. But with me, it's like statistically, most of the time there isn't even a chance.. So it's like...it's harder because it's like I just view everybody else as like straight and it's impossible for me to ever get and I feel like there's no chance. I just really want to experience love. Have somebody love me back just the way I love him. So um it's...I'd

like to just kinda experience that in my life or some point in time. My other friends have dates. They are really happy. Um I...I want that feeling too.

York, who had attended schools with no openly gay people, had hoped he would have the opportunity to date people once he arrived in Mapleton. However, this has proved difficult because he does not know how to tell if the person he is interested in is gay, and he is afraid of an awkward reaction if he were to flirt with a straight man. York mentions that he is attracted to more stereotypically masculine men, so the more visible gay men on campus in “skinny jeans” that go to the “LGBT club and [are] super feminine” do not interest him. As such, he is at a loss for meeting the type of man he is attracted to. Yearning to experience love, he describes his mood as dejected, a sentiment shared by several of the respondents who felt that they were missing out on college dating and experiencing intimacy.

E. Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated that many young gay men internalized anti-gay attitudes that they have been exposed to in a heterosexist culture. As they began to realize their same-sex attractions and form a gay identity, many men reported discomfort, fear, shame, and an overall discomfort with the idea of being gay. I have also shown that in an effort to suppress their same-sex desires, some men engaged in heterosexual behaviors. One of these behaviors included dating girls in their adolescence in an attempt to force themselves to be straight. I have also demonstrated that not all men tried to become heterosexual, but rather felt that they were missing out on standard youthful experiences due to their homosexuality, feelings that many still harbor in their young adulthood.

It is unsurprising that many men have internalized negative attitudes about homosexuality while living in a heterosexist culture. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, they encounter

homophobic bullying at school and hear anti-gay attitudes at home. They also witness homophobic behaviors at their university and in a city that is often labeled as progressive and liberal. This leads them to think that something is wrong with who they are, and many of the men in this study reported that they hoped their homosexuality would go away while they were beginning to understand their sexual identity. The internalization of homophobic beliefs began early in their lives, often before they began to realize they were gay. As discussed in the previous chapter, many men reported that they were called anti-gay names before they knew what those terms meant. As noted by Plummer (2001), this use of homophobic language by children often initially lacks sexual connotation, but as gay identity formation begins for the boys, they will associate their identity with the negative treatment they received from their peers. As the boys mature and same-sex attraction becomes stronger, many experience a fear of not being normal.

While previous scholars have confirmed this internalization of anti-gay attitudes happens in a homophobic environment, my research updates this field of research to show that it is still prevalent in a time of perceived greater acceptance of non-heterosexuals. Despite more positive portrayals of gay men in the media and a changing legal landscape where gay people are gaining more widespread legal protections, homophobia remains embedded in American culture. As such, gay men are internalizing anti-gay discourses at an early age, leading to considerable emotional distress as they form this aspect of their identity. Not only does this make life more difficult, but upon realizing that they have a “spoiled identity” (Goffman, 1963), people begin to feel bad about who they are as they judge themselves by the attitudes of the dominant culture.

This research also shows how some men attempt to become heterosexual by dating girls and suppressing same-sex attractions. Some of the participants describe this process using the word “forced,” demonstrating the internal struggle they felt by doing something that did not

come naturally to them. Some men, such as Wyatt, engaged in heterosexual behaviors in order to appear straight to their peers. By actively expressing his attraction to girls around his heterosexual male friends, Wyatt was hoping to avoid being perceived as gay. Other men, such as Connor, dated girls in high school in hopes of changing his gay identity. If he were somehow able to make himself attracted to girls, he would no longer have to face the struggles he associated with homosexuality.

Indeed, due to an internalized idea that being gay was somehow wrong, many of the men in this study recalled their desire to be straight before accepting that their attempts at trying out heterosexuality would not succeed. Eric, when he stated, "I want to be straight, I want to be normal," echoed the concerns of other men who sincerely hoped they could force themselves to be heterosexual. This research demonstrates that in a heteronormative culture is not uncommon for non-heterosexual individuals to engage in heterosexual behavior in an attempt to suppress their gay identity.

Lastly, I have shown that not all men attempted to try out heterosexuality. Recognizing that they could not change their sexual identity, some men realized that engaging in heterosexual behavior would be a futile endeavor. Rather, these men reported a sense of loss at missing out on experiences such as dating in high school. Either because they were afraid of disclosing their gay identity, or due to the fact that there were no other visibly gay boys in their communities, these men expressed disappointment at not getting to engage in certain activities because of their stigmatized sexuality. There was also the risk of flirting with or making romantic passes at another man if his sexual identity was unknown. Thus, these men were craving the intimacy that their heterosexual peers were able to pursue without the risky consequences they faced as gay boys in a predominantly heterosexual environment.

Some men, such as York, had hoped that there would be more opportunities to date other young men once he began college. Having missed out on the ability to share intimacy with someone else prior to college, he had high hopes that he would be able to find someone at a large university in a college town that many claim is progressive and liberal. However, due to the relative lack of visibility of other gay men in Mapleton, York has so far been unable to find anyone to date. He says he feels like it is impossible to meet anyone and that “there is no chance” of finding men to date. York, like some other men in this study, feels a sense of loss at not being able to experience love. While there are many single heterosexual people who also feel lonely and desire an intimate partner, gay men have a much smaller, and often invisible, population from which to choose a romantic partner.

There have been many advances in gay rights since the start of the modern gay rights movement at the Stonewall Inn riots of 1969. It is now legal for same-sex couples to marry in a majority of states. Additionally, many states have laws protecting gay people from discrimination in areas such as housing and employment. Gay people are also increasingly represented in the media, and more Americans are stating that they are comfortable with the idea of homosexuality. However, despite these advances, homophobia remains pervasive throughout the culture. How people publically say they feel about homosexuality does not necessarily reflect how they privately feel. As such many gay boys and men internalize anti-gay attitudes, causing them to feel inferior to their heterosexual peers. Additionally, despite the perception of increased acceptance of homosexuality in American culture, most men in this study felt uncomfortable publically acknowledging their sexual identity prior to and oftentimes during their college experience. While some men attempted to suppress their gay identity by engaging in heterosexual behaviors, others experienced a sense of loss at being unable to participate in

certain activities such as dating. As a society we have come far in the struggle for gay rights, but heterosexuality remains a profound disciplining force that continues to limit gay people's everyday experiences.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

A. Summary

In the previous chapters I examined how college-aged gay men face constraints in a heterosexist society. In particular I analyzed: 1) how young gay men use Facebook in relation to the coming out process, exploring various levels of comfort men felt as they constructed an online identity on social media; 2) how many young gay men use the internet to seek out long-term relationships due to the relative invisibility of other gay men in physical settings, and to how recent legal changes have led to a new relationship imaginary for gay men; 3) the various ways that homophobia continues to shape everyday situations for many young gay men and boys; and 4) how some men internalized anti-gay attitudes and the effect it has had on their sexual identity, and the ways that being gay limits some of their experiences in a heteronormative culture. In the following sections I will discuss how my findings contribute to broader sociological understandings of identity and sexuality. I then discuss some limitations of my findings and how future sociological research could improve our understandings of the issues young gay men face in a heterosexist society.

B. Gay Identity in a Heteronormative Culture

Connecting back to Diamond's (2006) definition of sexual identity formation as "the process by which sexual-minority (i.e., non-heterosexual) individuals come to acknowledge and accept their same-sex sexual orientation and to develop a positive selfhood" (472), I have shown that this sexual identity formation is not linear and universal, as some models have presumed (Troiden, 1989; Cass (1979), D'Augelli (1994), McCarn and Fassinger (1996), and Fassinger and Miller (1996). Rather, my findings demonstrate there is considerable variability in how people come to acknowledge their gay identity, and even once it has been accepted they may struggle to

“develop a positive selfhood.” In the following analysis I will discuss how my findings contribute to our understandings of sexual identity formation, the role of technology in the coming out process, and how technology has changed patterns of social interaction among young gay men. I will also discuss how my findings contribute to a better understanding of how homophobia remains pervasive and problematic for this generation of gay men.

As the vast majority of college students are active on social media sites such as Facebook, these online platforms have become virtual extensions of their offline lives. Because much of social media revolves around sharing personal information about oneself, sites such as Facebook are now areas where one must manage his/her presentation of self (Goffman, 1963). People spend extraordinary amounts of time applying filters to their photographs, posing repeatedly for selfies until they capture the perfect picture, and constructing a version of their lives they think best represents their best image. I have shown that crafting this ideal image can be particularly difficult for young gay men who may not be out to various members of their social network. While Facebook can be a tool to help men disclose their sexual identity to others, Facebook use can also be risky for gay men at different stages of the coming out process.

Most men in this study discussed a sense of apprehension when it came to their Facebook profiles, particularly those who were Out and Discreet and Facebook Closeted. Those men who used Facebook to indirectly come out to certain groups of people on Facebook, who I call Out and Discreet, saw Facebook as a platform that would assist them in coming out to people in an indirect way. Coming out as gay in a heteronormative society inherently carries a risk of receiving negative reactions from others. These risks range from subtle displays of discomfort to physical violence. Some men discussed how they mitigated those risks by indirectly coming out to people on Facebook. By changing their romantic interests to “Interested in Men,” or mastering

privacy controls, they also prevent certain groups of people from seeing something that might be “too gay.” In this way men who are Out and Discreet could avoid potentially negative reactions that can occur when directly coming out to other people. For example, after one participant changed his relationship interests to “Interested in Men,” he said, “I don’t remember any facebook reactions because that’s kind of awkward to go up to someone and say oh hey I saw on facebook that you’re gay. That would be a weird line to start with.” Additionally, if someone did react negatively, a simple click of a button could delete the person from his social network. This and other examples demonstrate how Facebook has changed the coming out process for this generation of gay men.

While significant for the coming out process, I have also shown that Facebook poses yet another area of life where gay men must manage their presentation of self. Men who were Facebook Closeted discussed the strategies they used to prevent people from discovering their sexual identity through their social media account. These men faced the task of constructing an online straight identity that did not match their offline selves. Given that 90% of respondents were either Out and Discreet or Facebook Closeted, I have demonstrated that the coming out process remains fraught with risk for many young gay men. While the consequences of publically claiming a gay identity are less severe today than they have been historically, most of the men in this study reported that disclosing their sexual identity in a heterosexist culture remains a daunting challenge. Understanding how these men negotiate this challenge gives us a greater understanding of the overall process of forging a gay identity, both online and offline.

I have also demonstrated how the internet has changed patterns of social interaction among young gay men. As many types of social interaction have moved to online spaces, many of the men in this study reported a sense of social isolation. As there has been a decline in the

number of physical spaces where gay men can be reasonably assured that they are in the company of other gay men, many men reported not knowing how to find other gay men in their community. Thus, many men turn to online dating sites and mobile applications to find romantic partners. Contrary to popular stereotypes of hyper-promiscuity of young gay men, most men in this study were looking for long-term relationships. However, many of the sites these men turn to, such as Grindr, cater more to those looking for casual sex. As a result, many men report frustration at not being able to meet someone online who might be a successful future partner. While the internet has increased ease of communication between individuals, I have shown how it is also increasing social isolation among young gay men.

Relatedly, as many men discussed their desire to find a long-term relationship, many of the respondents also spoke about getting married sometime in the future. Due to recent legal changes over the last decade, same-sex marriage is now part of a larger cultural discourse on what types of relationships are considered possible. As many of these men were growing up as the debate over same-sex marriage intensified, they embraced the idea that getting married to another man one day was a real possibility. Because of this, I have shown how young gay men are now imagining relationships in the normative context of heterosexuals. Having a husband is now part of the relationship imaginary for this generation of gay men due to recent legal changes that validate such unions.

Despite increased recognition of same-sex marriage in many jurisdictions, as well as increased visibility of gay people in the media, I have also shown that homophobia remains pervasive in American culture. While some scholars have asserted that gay life in the United States has become so open and assimilated into heterosexual culture that it is no longer necessary for most people to hide their gay identity (Seidman 2002; Ghaziani, 2011; Yoshino, 2007), I

have shown that this widespread acceptance of homosexuality has not been achieved. As 42% of Americans still think that consensual same-sex relationships are morally wrong (Riffkin, 2014), homophobic attitudes remain prevalent throughout the culture. I documented how men encountered these homophobic behaviors and attitudes in their schools, homes, and college environment. While social and legal conditions may have improved for gay men over the past few decades, I have shown that gay men still face hostile environments in many different areas of life.

Young people are more likely to be accepting of homosexuality than are older generations (Hicks and Lee, 2006), but many men in this study reported encountering homophobic attitudes and behaviors from their peers. Homophobic bullying was a regular occurrence for many men in elementary, middle, and high school. I also demonstrated that school authorities need to intervene more to prevent and stop homophobic abuses from occurring, as some of the men in this study reported that teachers and other officials did nothing to help them. Additionally, some men reported encountering homophobia in Mapleton and State City, two areas that are regularly described as progressive and socially liberal. Combined with the homophobic messages many of the men heard from their families while growing up, experiencing homophobia has been an ongoing occurrence for many young gay men. As such, I argue that we do not live in a post-gay era, and to claim otherwise masks the difficulties many gay boys and men continue to experience.

Due to the prevalence of homophobia in American culture, I have also shown that many men in this study have internalized anti-gay attitudes. They began receiving the cultural messages that homosexuality was deviant, abnormal, or immoral before they began to understand their own sexual identity. As their gay identity developed, many men reported feelings of

distress, anger, disgust, and shame. I have shown that in an attempt to suppress their same-sex attraction, many men forced themselves to date and/or fantasize about women.

I have also shown that many young gay men feel that they have missed out on certain experiences, such as dating, because of their sexual identity. Some of the men in this study report that they wanted to be have the same type of adolescent romances that heterosexual people could pursue in middle and high school. However, due to the fear of disclosing their sexual identity, or the invisibility of other gay boys in their community, these men were not able to have those types of experiences. Many report this led to a sense of loss. Some men report that they continue to feel that they are missing out on dating because of their inability to find other gay men in their community. While social conditions are better now for gay men than they ever have been in this culture, I have shown that gay men continue to face significant social and dating challenges in a heterosexist society.

Relatedly, I have further contributed to theoretical understandings of sexual identity formation by not only demonstrating that sexual identity development does not occur in distinct, linear stages, but by also showing that not all people will experience certain stages proposed in classic models of sexual identity formation. One particular stage that non-heterosexual youth are theorized to experience is having sexual or romantic contact with a member of the same sex (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989; Coleman, 1982). Some respondents in this study indicated they would have enjoyed having romantic and/or sexual contact with other boys in middle and high school, but due to the lack of visibility of other gay youth in their communities, they were unable to pursue those desires. While gay people make up a relatively small percentage of the overall population, I argue the persistence of heterosexism is another reason that these participants could

not find other gay people to date. Due to widespread homonegative attitudes, many gay youth do not disclose their sexual identity, further increasing the invisibility of this group of people.

Lastly, I have shown that existing sexual identity formation models are problematic because many young people who recognize their same-sex desires do not act on them due to internalized homophobia. Exposure to anti-gay attitudes in many different areas of social life leads many gay boys and men to try to become straight. I have shown the struggles many of the respondents faced on a daily basis as they tried to force themselves to become heterosexual. Previous models of sexual identity formation have assumed that even if there were confusion during the development process, non-heterosexual individuals would want to seek out other gay people in attempt to confirm their identity, or experience same-sex fantasies and desires (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989; D'Augelli, 1994; McCarn and Fassinger, 1996; Fassinger and Miller, 1997). I have shown that some men actively work to suppress their same-sex desires in hopes of becoming straight. Even if there were opportunities to pursue a same-sex relationship, internalized homophobia and the fear of coming out in a heteronormative environment prevent sexual identity formation from occurring in distinct stages. Thus, I have shown how internalized homophobia and the subsequent desire to be straight complicate the sexual identity formation process, resulting in some gay men reaching young adulthood without having embraced a positive sense of self predicted by previous models of sexual identity development.

C. Directions for Future Research

As I discussed in Chapter 2, there were several limitations to my study that future research about the lives of young gay men should address. First, the men who participated in this study were overwhelmingly White (83%). This in part reflects the lack of racial diversity in Mapleton and the university, both of which are predominantly White. In 2013, 91% of the

population identified as White in Mapleton (U.S. Census, 2014), and 72% of the undergraduates at the university identified as White (University of Mapleton, 2014). While I was able to give insight into the lived realities of young gay men on college campus, the stories that I have shared were primarily from white men. While these men lack heterosexual privilege, they do have white privilege and male privilege in a society characterized by institutional racism and sexism. Many of these men have experienced homophobia, but none of the white men have experienced racism in addition to anti-gay prejudice. Given the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) of multiple identities, gay men of color will necessarily have a different experience than White gay men. Future research should aim to be more inclusive of men of color to explore these differences.

Second, only 14% of respondents identified as having a lower-class background in this study. Some of the trends I described in this dissertation are class-based, and as such may not reflect the experiences of men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, many of the respondents reported using Grindr to search for other gay men. Grindr is a mobile application designed to work on a smartphone, and there is no separate website that one can access from a conventional computer. Smartphones, and the accompanying monthly data plan one must purchase from a cellular provider in order to access online applications, are potentially cost-prohibitive for poor gay men. Future research would benefit from investigating the experiences of lower class gay men to capture how social class affects many of the trends I have described in this dissertation.

Third, half of the participants in this research identified the communities where they grew up as socially conservative. Only 14% said they grew up in a socially liberal area, while 36% characterized their hometowns as neither conservative nor liberal. While I have demonstrated that homophobia is also prevalent in socially liberal areas, it is likely that the men who grew up

in socially conservative areas encountered a higher level of homophobic attitudes and behaviors. Future research would benefit by seeking out more young gay men who grew up in socially liberal areas, as they may have different experiences with the challenges I have shown that gay men face in society.

Fourth, I only interviewed men who were enrolled in a 4-year university. Given that the majority of Americans do not have a 4-year degree or higher, my findings are limited to university-educated gay men. While I demonstrated that gay men also experience homophobia in college, it is difficult to generalize my findings to gay men who have not had the opportunity to attend a university. As higher education can be seen as a privilege many people are unable to obtain, future research into the lives of young gay men should also include non-university students to be more inclusive of the general population.

Lastly, as technology continues to rapidly evolve, future research should focus on how other connective online sites are changing social interaction as well. Mobile smartphone applications that allow people to connect instantly are becoming increasingly popular ways for people to find romantic partners. In addition to Grindr, popular mobile applications that cater to gay men include Scruff, Jack'd, Growlr, and Manhunt, with many new sites appearing frequently. Future research should focus on how the rapid proliferation of these technologies continues to change the ways in which people meet intimate partners.

D. Conclusion

In this dissertation I have had the opportunity to explore the complex ways young gay men have constructed their identities, in addition to some of the challenges they face in a heterosexist culture. As noted by Seidman (2002), identities are complex, multi-faceted, and continuously shifting. Through the narratives of the men who participated in this study, I was

able to discover some of the different ways in which young gay men form and manage their sexual identity. I also learned of the struggles that gay youth continue to encounter as they live their lives in a society where they are seen as outsiders in a heteronormative culture.

While many of the stories I shared in this dissertation told stories struggles and heartache, in closing I would like to say how very strong this group of young men were overall. Despite negative experiences both in the past and in the present, so many of them were eagerly optimistic about the future. Their willingness to meet a complete stranger and share their most intimate histories demonstrates the bravery of this group of young men. I am privileged to share their stories in hopes that we as a society can better understand the current experiences of gay youth. From this understanding I hope that we can make the optimistic future these men are envisioning a reality.

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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

-How old are you?

-What is your current year in college?

The first set of questions will be about your relationship with your family.

-Where did you grow up?

-Would you say you grew up in a socially liberal, conservative, or neutral type of place?

-Do you have siblings? A large extended family?

-Are your parents married or divorced?

-Would you say that your family is close-knit? Why or why not?

-Did you grow up in a religious family?

(If Yes) In what religion were you raised?

Did your family attend services often?

Would you say your family was religiously devout?

What were your own views about religion?

Did religion play a large role in shaping your own worldview?

Now I am going to ask you some personal questions about your sexuality.

-When do you think you first knew you were gay?

-Did you experience same-sex attractions before college?

(If yes) Could you tell me more about this?

Did any of your friends know about this?

When did you first tell them, or when did they find out?

How would you describe their reaction?

Did you feel you could rely on them for support?

Do you feel that your relationship changed after this disclosure?

Were you out to some friends, but not others?

-Does your family know that you are gay?

(If yes) Did you tell them, or did they find out another way?

How would you describe their reaction?

Do you feel you can rely on them for support?

Do you feel that your relationship changed after this disclosure?

(If no) What are some reasons you haven't told them?

What types of steps do you take to make sure they don't find out?

Do you plan to disclose your sexuality in the future to them?

-Is there anything else you would like to share about your home life before attending college?

The next set of questions will be about your experiences in school prior to attending college.

-What is your overall opinion about your school experience?

-Did you ever experience any type of negative treatment from peers?

(If Yes) Do you think it was related to how the person perceived your sexuality?

How did you deal with such a difficult experience?

Did you try to change or hide any behaviors that would perhaps be

associated with being gay?

-Tell me about your different groups of friends during your school years.

-Would you say you were part of a certain clique? How so?

-Is there anything else you would like to share about your school life before college?

Now I am going to ask you about your experiences since you have enrolled in college.

-How would you describe your transition to college overall?

-Do you live on campus? Do you have roommates?

-If you did not experience same-sex attraction before college, can you tell me about the first time you felt that you might be gay?

-Tell me about your different groups of friends in college.

-Do all of your friends know you are gay?

-Are there certain spaces on campus where you feel you need to act straight?

(If yes) What are those spaces?

What do you do to make sure that people think you are straight?

-Are you engaged in social media sites such as Facebook?

(If yes) Do all of your friends on those sites know you are gay?

If some friends do not know, what steps do you take to keep them from finding out?

Now I'm going to ask you some questions about intimate relationships.

-Have you ever been (or currently are) in a serious relationship with a man?

-Was there a need to hide this from certain people? If yes, what types of things did you do to hide this relationship from others?

-Do you ever have casual sex with other men? If yes, is it because you cannot disclose same-sex relationships with others?

-Did you ever have sexual relationships with women, even though you were attracted to men? If yes, what were some of the reasons?

-How do you go about seeking out intimate relationships with other men? Do you ever use mobile apps such as Grindr? Are there physical spaces that you can go to?

-Now that we have discussed all of this, were there times where you acted straight even though you knew you were gay?

(If yes) What were those times or situations?

What types of things would you do to appear straight, or not let others know that you were gay?

-Thank you very much for participating in this interview. Is there anything else you would like to share?
