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# Lesbian and gay male identity development and online communities

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Lesbian and Gay Male Identity Development and Online Communities

By

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## Chapter One

The aim of this study is to broaden the understanding of how online resources including blogs, chats, websites, and social networking can help support identity formation in lesbian and gay people. More specifically, my focus is on personal narrative journeys from awareness or questioning of sexual orientation to coming out as a lesbian or gay person while using online mediums as a source for guidance and support as one discovers their own path towards a lesbian or gay identity. Although it is important to discover how the Internet is used for support, guidance, information and as a social networking tool for all sexual minorities including lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgendered, two-spirited, and/or queer people, I chose to focus on lesbian and gay identity development. I did this in order to establish a more focused and in-depth examination of sexuality identity development and to critique identity development models that focus only on lesbians and gay men.

Issues regarding sexual minority people have risen in social, political, and legal spheres in the last few decades, as have representations of them in media. In this introduction, I briefly outline some of the significant changes that have taken place in television, movies, and Internet-based media.

### **The Emergence of Sexual Minority Figures: Television, Movies, and the Internet**

It's no longer good enough for us to tell kids who are different that it's going to get better. We have to make it better now, that's every single one of us. Every teacher, every student, every adult has to step up to the plate. And that's gay adults too. Because I know gay cops, soldiers, athletes, cabinet ministers, a lot of us do, but the problem is adults, we

don't need role models. Kids do. So if you're gay and you're in public life, I'm sorry, you don't have to run around with a pride flag and bore the hell out of everyone, but you can't be invisible either. Not anymore. (Rick Mercer, 2011)

This quotation comes from Canadian television personality, political satirist, and blogger, Rick Mercer, from his television show, *The Rick Mercer Report* (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [CBC], 2011). The openly gay comedian's most popular segment, *Rick's Rants*, received a great deal of attention when his video on teen suicide went viral - when videos become immensely popular due to public online sharing - in October, 2011 (The Canadian Press, 2011). In fact, in only one day, it had 126 000 views on YouTube.com, a website which purports to allow "billions of people to discover watch and share originally-created videos" (2011), and is currently the number one most viewed video on The Rick Mercer Report website (CBC, 2011). His "rant" alludes to the "mind-boggling" fact that 300 youth commit suicide every year in Canada. The recent suicide of Jamie Hubley sparked Mercer's rant. Hubley, a 15 year-old resident of Ottawa, Ontario, took his own life "after months of suicidal musings on his blog and social-media websites" (The Canadian Press, 2011). Hubley claims he had been the only openly gay teenager at his high school and had been bullied since grade seven (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation News [CBC News], 2011). Although Hubley had made efforts to speak out for sexual minority youth through a gay-straight alliance at his high school, and had been prescribed multiple medications for depression, but he nonetheless chose to escape the torment of his peers and took his own life on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2011 (CBC News, 2011). Through his "rant" entitled *Teen Suicide*, Mercer implores all people, not just lesbian and gay individuals, to stand up and become



visible for lesbian and gay youth as “adults don’t need role models, [but] kids do” (Rick Mercer, 2011).

It is probable that Mercer would be supported by Egale Canada, which is a “national lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) human rights organization: advancing equality, diversity, education and justice” (Egale Canada, 2011). The organization spearheaded a research project which looked to find what life at school was like for teenagers with sexual or gender minority statuses entitled, *Every Class in Every School: The first national climate survey on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian schools* (Taylor et al., 2011). Being the first national study of its kind in Canada, it reported from surveys of 3,700 high school students, that one-in-seven (14%) identified as non-heterosexual. Taylor et al. (2011) recognize that surveys on topics such as sexuality have particular limitations, such as the fact that participants often under report pertinent information such as sexual minority status, out of concerns for safety and confidentiality. In addition, many youth identify as heterosexual even if they have had same-sex attractions or have had sexual experiences with another of the same sex. With this in mind, Taylor et al. (2011) suggest that there may be *several* sexual minority students in every classroom in every school in Canada.

### **Television**

Increasing numbers of sexual minority youth discover their identities at younger ages, but where can they look to find positive role models (D’Augelli, Grossman & Starks, 2008)? The emergence of lesbian and gay male figures in modern Western society can be linked to popular media including, newspapers, television, and movies (Gross, 2001). Within the last 50 years,

lesbian and gay male individuals have been showing up in the living rooms of every home in North America with the help of television producers and writers who began to write prime time television shows which included stories that centred around lesbian and gay male characters (Gross, 2001). In 1994, for instance, *Newsday* reported that an episode of *Roseanne* (1988-1997), included a scene where a lesbian kissed the main character of the show, Roseanne, a mother and wife, but had decided not to broadcast it (Freifeld, 1994). Controversy ensued as newspapers picked up on the reports, stating mixed messages between whether sponsors would pay for advertising for such content, deemed racy at the time. ABC stood to lose \$1 million in revenue for violating network standards of decency (Freifeld, 1994; Roseanne's notorious kiss will air, 1994). ABC aired the show, attracting 19.8 million viewers, resulting in the most-watched program of the week (Streitmatter, 2009).

In 1996, Ellen DeGeneres, comedian and main character on the popular television sitcom *Ellen* (1994-1998), made headlines when ABC announced that the main character of the show, Ellen Morgan, would be 'coming out' on screen as a lesbian (Streitmatter, 2009). However, just before the program aired, Ellen DeGeneres announced to the public that she, and the character she played on television, are both lesbian (Gross, 2001). Although the show was cancelled a year later, *Ellen* was a major milestone in American television history as it was the first television program to feature a gay or lesbian character in a leading role (Streitmatter, 2009). Another prominent example is NBC's, *Will & Grace*, which ran from 1998-2006. Arguably, it is the most successful program in American television that features gay characters. The fact that the show included two dissimilar gay men – Will is a conservative lawyer, while Jack is a flamboyant struggling actor/singer/dancer - in its central cast of characters suggests to the public that not all

gay men are alike (Gross, 2001). At the show's peak, 19 million people were tuning in every week to see the laugh-out-loud comedy of two gay men and their close relationships with two heterosexual females (Gross, 2001). The show's popularity attracted A-list celebrities including Cher, Madonna, Janet Jackson, Alec Baldwin, and even Academy Award winners Matt Damon, and Michael Douglas (Gross, 2001). Arguably, the show's rather subtle message in the end was that gay people deserve rights equal to those that heterosexuals enjoy and largely take for granted (Streitmatter, 2009).

Other television series featuring lesbians and gay men include the American and Canadian co-production, *Queer as Folk*. The show followed the fictional lives of five gay men and a lesbian couple. Running for five seasons from 2000-2005, it remains historically significant for representing gay sexuality in graphic detail (Johnson, 2007). Airing from 2004-2009, the American television series *The L Word* centered on a group of seven chic lesbian friends living in West Hollywood. Before *The L Word*, lesbian characters had barely existed on television with the notable exception of Ellen, discussed above. Both *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* series originally ran on Showtime, an American subscription television network. By the end of 2010, Showtime had more than 20 million subscribers (Fast Company, 2011).

More recently, American television comedy series, *Modern Family* (now in its third season), depicts the lives and experiences of three households within an extended family. One family includes a gay couple, Mitchell Pritchett and Cameron Tucker, who adopt a daughter from Vietnam and are looking to expand their family with the addition of a son. The show earns \$1.6 million an episode (Pomerantz, 2001), has garnered 14 Emmy nominations, including 'Best Comedy of the Year' for two years running (Stelter, 2011), and has won many other awards

including the Respect Award from GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) in 2010 for the positive images and storylines that reflect a diverse North America, providing an “invaluable window” into what family life is like for millions of youth.

## **Movies**

The movie industry has also produced some award winning movies featuring gay characters that have touched the hearts of moviegoers across North America as prominent analyst of gay and lesbian representations in American television and movies, Streitmatter (2009), points out. *Philadelphia*, in 1993, was the first big-budget Hollywood film to depict a gay man, played by Tom Hanks, in a positive light and shed perspective on the subject of AIDS. Grossing over \$200 million in the box office, *Philadelphia* showcases a committed gay relationship, portrays a loving family, depicts a community of support, and shines a spotlight on homophobia as a gay man battles AIDS and overcomes the struggles that many lesbian and gay men face in a society that does not accept or understand what it is like to be gay in North America. When *Brokeback Mountain* was released to theatres in 2005, it was considered a “cultural milestone” (Weiss, N13), touching on the hardships of two men in the 1960s who loved each other romantically but could not be open about their relationship because of societal homophobia. *Brokeback Mountain* grossed \$140 million in revenue and shed new light on the issues and tragedies of homophobia and the effects of living in the closet. It focused on the lives of two gay men who were heterosexual in their public lives, but in a closeted relationship with each other in their private lives.

Movies featuring lesbians have also had their share of the spotlight. *The Kids are Alright*, released in 2010, totaled a domestic gross of \$20,811, 365 and \$34, 705, 850 worldwide (Box Office Mojo, 2012). *The Kids are Alright* is a story of two lesbian mothers, played by Julianne Moore and Annette Benning, who each give birth to a child with the same anonymous sperm donor. With the children now teenagers, they seek to find their biological birth father and bring him into the family. The film, as explained by Toumarkine in *Film Journal International* (2010), “deals with such universal issues as the importance of family values and slyly, without any soapbox preaching, puts across not just that kids can be all right in same-sex marriages but that same-sex marriage itself can be natural and beautiful” (para. 13).

There have also been lesbian-featured films that may not have been successful at the box office but have gathered attention through online lesbian communities. For example, Autostraddle, a website geared towards “a new generation of kickass lesbian, bisexual & otherwise inclined ladies (and their friends)” (About Us, para. 1) rated 1999’s *Show Me Love* as their number one favourite lesbian motion picture. *Show Me Love* is a coming of age story of two lesbian teenagers, Elin and Anges, who struggle with their minority identities in a small town in Sweden (Bjorklund, 2010). According to Bjorklund (2010), this movie “challenges and queers the genre” (p. 38) of a typical romantic comedy making the storyline attractive and engaging to a large audience.

### **The Internet**

Gay and lesbian characters and their stories emerging in popular culture are indications of broader acceptance of gay and lesbian people in North American society. However, it cannot be

assumed that real gay and lesbian people enjoy or watch such television shows or films, or draw from them as supports for their own sexuality identities (Streitmatter, 2009). According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project (2009), 93% of teens use the Internet. Thus, perhaps gay and lesbian youth increasingly look beyond mainstream television to find representations of gay and lesbian people within a venue that can be easily assessed. With vast amounts of information and social networking capabilities including web boards, blogs, wikis, video and photo sharing websites, the Internet has become a virtual world of communication and therefore online communities of like-minded people (Baym, 2010). Without the limitations of geography or 'outing' themselves by entering a public social arena such as a community support group where one may be detected by a possible homophobic peer, the Internet provides sources to informational and social venues within and between other sexual minorities. They can receive real-life advice pertaining to lesbian and gay male issues that are generally not approached through television or Hollywood movie screens. Chayko (2008) argues that because the Internet is accessible from wherever people have access to computers or smart phones, these shared online communities are not only convenient, but portable.

She states, for instance, that;

... the technology of today provides us with portability, a powerful and effective tool in coordinating people's streams of thought. Now, we can *think in tandem* with people whom we may never have met but with whom we have much in common, and we can do this pretty much wherever and whenever we want. (Chako, 2008, p.17)

Social media networking has become a central factor in how youth communicate with each other. For example, Facebook, a social media giant, was founded in 2004 and gained 21 million registered users by 2007, and 1.6 billion page views a day. These statistics clearly indicate that the Internet has become an essential tool for communication (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Websites geared specifically to lesbian and gay people have also been gaining ground in recent years. For example, *The Trevor Project*, founded in 1998, is “determined to end suicide among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ<sup>1</sup>) youth by providing life-saving and life-affirming resources” (The Trevor Project, 2010, About Trevor, para. 2). The Trevor Project website offers news, blogs, and other information regarding issues concerning lesbian and gay youth. In addition, it includes an "online, non-time sensitive question and answer resource for young people with questions surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity" called *Ask Trevor*, and a "free, confidential, secure online messaging service that provides live help" known as *Trevorchat* (The Trevor Project, 2010, Programs, para. 1&2). Youth ages 13-24 also have the chance to create a personal profile, through *Trevorspace.org*, to connect with other individuals, as well as find resources within their communities.

Similarly, *PFLAG* Canada founded in 2003, offers a website which provides support, education and resources to “parents, friends, and colleagues 24 hours a day, 7 days a week” via a toll free phone call (PFLAG, 2009, para. 1). The website also provides countless subject-specific links for those who would prefer to find information or support without having to speak to an

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<sup>1</sup> Acronyms used throughout this thesis correspond to those used by particular organizations or researchers. Although this study looks firmly on lesbian and gay male individuals, it is still relevant to examine issues regarding all sexual minority persons.

individual. The *It Gets Better Project* (2010) and website, founded by columnist Dan Savage and his husband Terry Miller in September 2010 in response to the stories of tormenting, bullying, and suicide of LGBTQ youth and those perceived as such, has inspired over 30,000 people and organizations to create videos expressing to their LGBTQ youth in schools that they are not alone, and that life does in fact get better. Visitors and users of the website are invited to create videos and share their stories. Similarly, the website of the *Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network* [GLSEN] (2011), in the U.S., provides information on school issues that pertain primarily to LGBTQ students, and is the “leading national education organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all students” (About Us, para. 1). The *GLSEN* website provides news, resources, blogs and other information to the LGBTQ community and their straight-allies on how to create safer spaces for students in schools. *Egale Canada* (2011) describes itself as the Canadian “national lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) human rights organization: advancing equality, diversity, education and justice” (About Egale, para. 1). As an organization they spearhead human rights (both national and international), safe schools, and hate crime prevention campaigns (About Egale, para. 2-5). Their website provides information pertaining to all Canadian (and international) LGBT news, events, issues and resources.

Given the availability of all of these Internet-based resources, my research looks to discover how the Internet is used as a tool for social connections, networking, and information for lesbian and gay male youth to explore their own identities in ways that were not available to prior generations (Hammack, Thompson, & Pilecki, 2008). Role models may not exist within families or friends for lesbian and gay male youth. Although popular media, including television, newspapers and Hollywood movies, increasingly represent gay and lesbian people, they do not



adequately speak for *all* lesbian and gay male identities but rather scripted versions that commonly mirror stereotypes (Streitmatter, 2009). By contrast, the Internet allows for youth to access other lesbian and gay youth and adults through online social networking including blogs, chat rooms, online bulletin boards, and other websites geared to lesbian and gay subject matter. These youth, through this active discovery and connection to others like themselves via the Internet, may discover a sense of self or identity that is not available to them within the confines of their offline social communities.

Given the profound influence of the Internet in society, I am interested to explore how it may influence the identity development of lesbians and gay men. Several theorists, such as Cass (1979) and Troiden (1988) have offered lesbian and gay male identity development models to illuminate the ways by which lesbians and gay individuals come to identify themselves as such. These theoretical frameworks were offered prior to the Internet and its profound effects on society. Thus, there has been little theoretical advancement on how the formation of gay and lesbian identities might be affected by Internet resources and communications. With the relatively anonymous access to the Internet and the informative sources within, it is reasonable to suggest that many lesbian and gay people seek personal support, information, research, and like-minded people online. The question is: How does such online interaction affect sexuality identity development and how can theoretical models be newly understood in light of the Internet?

### **Questions Guiding the Research**

In order to assess whether the Internet is used as a tool in facilitating lesbian and gay identity development processes, I interviewed seven self-identified lesbian or gay adults who

agreed to look retrospectively upon their identity development as youth and how the Internet was used during the formation of their lesbian or gay identities. I crafted and used the following three questions as a foundation for the research:

1. How are lesbian and gay identities created and maintained in light of the prevalence of online resources including websites, blogs, chats, bulletin boards, and social networking sites?
2. As an adult looking retrospectively upon lesbian and gay identity development processes throughout their youth, how were online resources used to feel more secure in identity development allowing for successful growth and confidence into the present day?
3. Is online technology an important social facilitator in serving identity development processes?

## **Chapter Two**

### **Sexuality Identity Models: A Review of the Literature**

In this literature overview, I will briefly discuss the implication of sexual minorities in history through written works created by Plato, ancient Grecians, and European explorers. I will then lead into the current state of rights and freedoms of lesbian and gay people in Western society resulting from perseverance and activism throughout the modern gay liberation movement. Contemporary issues and concerns that lesbian and gay individuals may potentially face affecting emotionally, psychologically and medically healthy lives will be explained as well as the early onset of youth discovering their same-sex attractions. School life for these youth discovering their same-sex attractions at younger ages will be examined in comparison to their heterosexual peers. Previous lesbian and gay male identity development models that have been offered in the past and more modernized theories that identify social facilitators affecting the strength of the previous models will be analyzed. And finally, the emergence of online communities and social networking capabilities via the Internet will be considered in light of previous identity development models and questioned in order to evaluate the importance of Internet usage throughout lesbian and gay identity development processes.

#### **A Brief History of the Emergence of Sexual Minorities and Current Health Concerns**

When a new penal code for the North German Federation was written in 1869 by Karl Maria Kertbeny, it included the word “homosexuality.” As Mondimore (1996) argues, “the idea that some individuals’ sexual attractions for persons of the same sex was an inherent and unchanging aspect of their personality” (p. 3) was fundamentally new. However, the suggestion

of same-sex attractions has been written about in literature for centuries. Plato's (1971/2008), *Symposium*, thought to be written in 386 B.C., describes scenes in which a young man, Akibiades, tries to seduce the great philosopher Socrates. When they first meet, Akibiades declares, "Now I fancied that he was seriously enamoured by my beauty" (Plato, 1971/2008, p. 56). Akibiades continues with his relentless attempts to have Socrates be intimate with him as he spends time alone with him, wrestles with him, eats dinner with him, and even spends the night in bed with him. Socrates' strength and self control is admired by others as he does not become intimate with Akibiades. However, the unexpected result is that Socrates does not react to Akibiades' solicitations as many men would today (Mondimore, 1996). It is arguable whether or not these same-sex attractions were also ways that people identified themselves.

For many people in Western civilization today, the highest expression of sexuality involves a man and a woman in a committed relationship. Such heterosexual pairings are thought to form the foundation for marriage, procreation, family and child rearing. Furthermore, such family units based on heterosexual marriage are passed down through generations and the cycle of heterosexuality is repeated in perpetuity. However, both same-sex and different-sex sexual practices have existed throughout human history. It is social organization that has created radically different views upon the matter (Kinsmen, 1996). A closer look at ancient Greek society reveals that sexuality and procreation were not linked in the way that they are in the West today. Mondimore (1996) argues that sex was seen as necessary, and marriage, between a man and a woman, was the only honourable path to procreation, but sexual pleasure outside the marriage was available in a variety of forms for men. Men were expected to have an

*eromenous* (p. 8), which is a younger male partner from whom the older, the *erastes* (p.8) could exert pleasure and build status.

He indicates that,

For men at least, whether the partner was male or female and whether one was married to his partner was almost inconsequential. It was perfectly acceptable, in fact expected, that a man would have a wife and an eromenous simultaneously – at least some of the time.

(p.8)

The first recorded recognition of females attracted to the same sex is through the famous poetry of Sapphos. Born on the Greek island of Lesbos, she wrote of loving women in sixth century B.C. (Powell, 2007). However, in first century B.C., female eroticism was also depicted on vase paintings and writings of “tribadism” (Mondimore, p.10) – women capable of penetrating another woman.

Mondimore (1996) also points out that there was a shift in societal moral thinking during the early Middle Ages. The term “sodomy” emerged to describe any disapproved sexual acts. Generally, these acts included any sexual behaviour that would not result in conception, hence same-sex sexual behaviour. During this time, any sodomitic act was considered illegitimate or unnatural, thus sins and crimes against nature.

Instances of same-sex sexuality in what is now Canada have been documented in journals kept by European explorers of the nation. These journals depicted First Nations carvings of those who believed to have crossed genders and engaged in same-sex behaviour (Maynard, 2004). It was not until colonial exploitation and power was exercised over the First Nations that forms of

“same-sex and same-gender erotic pleasures within and outside relationships” were abolished within Aboriginal cultures (Kinsmen, 1996, p. 92).

When Canada was declared a country in 1867, sodomy and all non-reproductive sex was against the law. In 1892, the Canadian *Criminal Code* prohibited the act of *gross indecency* between male individuals with punishments of life imprisonment or death (Kinsmen, 1996). It was not until 1969 when Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau passed Bill C-150, that same-sex sexuality was decriminalized. The idea that what consenting adults do in private could not and should not be regulated by the State was a major step towards recognizing gays and lesbians as people rather than as criminal deviants, and that same-sex attractions, behaviour, and identity could be accorded rights equal to heterosexual people (Chambers, 2010).

Modern gay liberation in North America is commonly associated with the Stonewall riots of June 1969, when New York Police raided a Greenwich Village gay bar setting off a two-day riotous rebellion against the oppression and inequality of sexual minority individuals (Carter, 2004). By 1971, gay liberation groups emerged in every major city and some campuses in Australia, Western Europe, United States, and Canada (Adam, 1987). Through these efforts, common initiatives within gay communities in Western countries were able to stay connected and aware through gay liberation presses in several cities across North America (Adam, 1987). Despite the widespread assumption that the Stonewall riots were the spark that lit the gay liberation fire, Karl Heinrich Ulrich was a gay activist long before the term existed. In the 1840's, he began to name and define experiences of his own attractions to the same sex (Kinsmen, 1996). For example, Ulrich introduced the word “uranian” in reference to men who were sexually attracted to other men (Mondimore, 1996). Through thorough examination of his

own unchanging sexual attractions to men, his life was dedicated to convincing others that sexual orientation is a “stable, inherent human characteristic and that homosexuality is a valid and natural form of human sexual expression” (Mondimore, 1996, p. 28). Ulrich’s letters, diaries and pamphlets show the first process of homosexual identity development, describing his personal experiences of growing and unchanging attraction to other men from child through to adulthood (Kinsmen, 1996). Although the term “uranian” is not used today to describe same-sex attraction between men, Ulrich’s original ideas of homosexual identity development and the immutability of sexual orientation has sustained over time.

In 1973, *homosexuality* was removed as a category of mental illness from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, before which it had been considered a disease of the mind, categorized alongside bestiality and pedophilia (Kinsmen, 1996; Mondimore, 1996). In 1995, the Supreme Court of Canada read sexual orientation, which Perrin (2002) describes as “a persistent pattern of physical and emotional attraction to members of the same and/or opposite sex” (p. 3), into the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. A 1996 parliament ruling brought sexual orientation under the protection of provincial human rights legislation (Hurley, 2007). In other words, the *Canadian Human Rights Act* was amended to explicitly include *sexual orientation* as one of the prohibited grounds of discrimination under Bill C-33 (Hurley, 2007). And as of June 2005, gay couples were granted the legal right to get married in Canada and be recognized by the institution of marriage by the government (Michaels, 2003). Canada was the 4<sup>th</sup> country in the world to do so (CBC News, 2011), the first and still only that does not have a residency requirement.

Although lesbian and gay movements have come a long way since punishment of prison terms, pillory, exile, castration, or even death (Mondimore, 1996) for same-sex sexual activity, sexual minorities continue to face stigmatization and marginalization in society (Harrison, 2003). Based on the ground-breaking work on stigma by Goffman (1963), Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) propose that stigmatization occurs when a person possesses or is believed to possess an “attribute or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context” (p. 505). Based on prior experience of discrimination and prejudice, as well as exposure to the dominant culture, lesbians and gay males can develop a shared understanding of the dominant view of their stigmatized status in society (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Steele, 1997). Some understand such oppression as a factor of homophobia, heterosexism, and/or heteronormativity (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Homophobia, as defined by Pharr (1997), is the irrational fear and hatred of those who love and sexually desire those of the same sex or as defined by Walton (2009) as, “attitudes, expressions, and behaviours against gay and lesbian people” (p. 212). Heterosexism and heteronormativity are widely used terms to describe contemporary political, critical and social practices that “derive from and reinforce a set of taken-for-granted presumptions relating to sex and gender” (Kitzinger, 2005, p. 448). These include the assumptions that it is only *natural* or *normal* for people of opposite sexes to be attracted to one another and that these attractions are the only ones that should be publicly displayed or celebrated. Collectively, homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity are social practices that position same-sex pairings as deviant in comparison to heterosexual ones. Social institutions such as marriage and family are thus reserved for those of different-sex pairings (Jung & Smith, 1997; Kitzinger, 2005). These terms refer to the “myriad ways in which



heterosexuality is produced as a natural, unproblematic, taken-for-granted, ordinary phenomenon” (Kitzinger, 2005, p. 448).

Individual or group discrimination has been characterized by Meyer (1995) as *minority stress*. Referring specifically to lesbians and gay males, he points to three aspects of experience in dominant society: internalized homophobia, stigma, and experience of prejudice events. Meyer and Dean (1998) describe internalized homophobia as “negative social attitudes toward the self of a gay person, leading to devaluation of the self and resultant internal conflicts and poor self regard” (p. 161). Experience of prejudice can lead to expectations of rejection due to stigma held against lesbian and gay people, ameliorative coping processes, and/or hiding and concealing gender-atypical behaviours or mannerisms that may lead others to discriminate based on their stigmatized status in society (Meyer, 2003). Dobsin (2011) explains that lesbian and gay male youth may respond to oppressive and prejudicial events in “practical and often low-profile forms in everyday acts of survival and individual oppression” (p. 74), which may negatively affect individual growth and identity development. These acts may include psychological coping mechanisms such as denial or staying in the closet for many years thus affecting personal growth or social relationships. Running away from home is another coping mechanism in order to escape unsafe environments in the home or at school which may lead to selling sex or exchanging it for survival needs if these youth are forced to live on the streets.

Gender-atypical expressions or characteristics, (such as girls acting tomboyish or boys demonstrating traits that are associated with femininity), although certainly not exclusive to lesbian and gay male populations, can become sources of possible ostracization and violence (Savin-Williams, 2005). As a result, monitoring behaviour is common among lesbians and gay

men who are not yet comfortable with their lesbian or gay male identities (Savin-Williams, 2005). This may include monitoring or changing how one dresses, speaks, walks and talks. Plummer (1995) highlights the impact of stigma as a negative influence upon evolving identity in his claim that,

The awareness of stigma that surrounds homosexuality leads the experience to become an extremely negative one; shame and secrecy, silence and self-awareness, a strong sense of differentness – and peculiarity – pervade the consciousness. (p. 89)

Minority stress is a concept that is also used to explain possible health outcomes of sexual minorities including substance abuse, body image problems, loneliness, low self-esteem and suicide (Hamilton, & Mahalik, 2009). Measures of lesbian and gay male adaptation to stigma or minority stress include ties to a supportive community, and a positive self-identity (Meyer, 2003). Another measure of minority stress points to the extent to which sexual orientation is disclosed to others, often referred to the “outness level” (Balsam, & Mohr, 2007, p. 307). Until a lesbian or gay male self-proclaims themselves as being *out*, they are commonly referred to as being *in the closet*.

While lesbian and gay men may experience challenges to their mental health in terms of their development and conceptions of stigmatization, they may also be at risk for very serious sexual health concerns. In 2008, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] (2010) estimated that approximately 56 300 people were newly infected with HIV in 2006 (the most recent year data is available). This places the United States in a public health crisis as at least half the newly infected cases of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) are of those under the age

of 25 (Hunter & Baer, 2007). Over half (53%) of these infections were of gay and bisexual men. Those with a history of injection drug use accounted for an additional 4% of new infections. Sexual risk including unprotected sex and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) accounts for most HIV infections in gay males while alcohol and other illicit drug use also contribute to increased risk (CDC, 2010). The CDC (2010) states that the mental, sexual, and social health of gay males may be profoundly affected by stigma and (internalized) homophobia. The report specifies that,

Internalized homophobia may impact gay males' ability to make healthy choices, including decisions around sex and substance use. Stigma and homophobia may limit the willingness of these males to access HIV prevention and care, isolate them from family and community support, and create cultural barriers that inhibit integration into social networks. (para. 7)

Some lesbians may find themselves unintentionally pregnant while trying to conform to heteronormative pressures to have heterosexual relationships, while intentional pregnancies can occur in order to hide a homosexual orientation from families (Hunter, & Schaecher, 1990). Also, drug use can lead to lowered inhibitions and risky sexual behaviours (Hunter, & Mallon, 1998). To exacerbate matters, some lesbian and gay male youth are rejected by family, peers, and typically not represented in most social institutions including schools and health care establishments (Hunter & Baer, 2007). As a result, lesbian and gay male youth tend to have high levels of homelessness and denial of employment and education compared with their heterosexual counterparts (Hunter & Baer, 2007). Doctors may be uninformed about lesbian and gay male health concerns or uncomfortable with lesbian and/or gay male patients. Doctors and

other medical practitioners may assume the health problems of lesbians and gay men are attributed to their sexuality (Ryan, Brothman, & Rowe, 2000). Moreover, Isreal and Tarver (1997) claim that there is an underutilization of medical and social services by lesbian and gay individuals due to fear of rejection and possible embarrassment due to their sexuality. Other barriers to safe and healthy sexuality include: lack of confidential testing, health insurance (issues pertaining to the U.S.), and mental health problems as a result of the HIV virus and/or diagnosis. Remaining factors could include depression, substance abuse, sexual compulsivity, and histories of violence (Havens, Mellins, & Hunter, 2002). Thus, it is crucial that lesbian and gay people, along with the professionals who work among them, are educated about safe and healthy sexual practices. In addition, these issues should be discussed with youth in schools as many lesbian and gay people are discovering their sexuality identities at younger ages (Savin-Williams, 2005; D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2008).

In a study of 528 LGB youth, D'Augelli, Grossman, and Starks (2008) found in their study that males first become aware of their same-sex attraction at an average age of 12 years and females at 13. Both female and male participants identified as either gay or lesbian at the average age of 14 years and disclosed their sexual orientation at 15. Floyd and Stein (2002) believe that the likely occurrence of a relatively early trajectory of awareness of same-sex attraction for youth is the greater availability of information about sexual orientation and the growing visibility of gay males and lesbians in society, allowing for many youth to recognize and label same-sex attractions at younger ages. The early recognition of same-sex attraction in adolescents is beneficial as Udry (1988) argues that sexual development is integral to personal identity development.

### **Life in the Classroom: Sexual Minority Youth and Schools**

One of the most challenging aspects of being a lesbian or gay child or youth can be coping with life at school. Lesbian and gay male students are generally the last minority group to be recognized, understood and appreciated (if at all) in education systems – especially those who fall in school grades K-12 (McNinch, 2004). In fact, lesbian and gay male individuals are the only individuals who are a minority in every country in the world, unlike other ethnic and/or religious minorities who are usually the majority in at least one country (Wintemute, 2002). Therefore, the need for an inclusive education including identity development of lesbian and gay male individuals is crucial. Taylor et al. (2011) found that life at school can range from extremely uncomfortable to simply dangerous. In fact, 70% of all participating students, including LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ individuals reported hearing homophobic expressions such as *that's so gay* every day in school. Disturbingly, 10% of LGBTQ students heard homophobic comments from the adults they are supposed to trust and rely on the most in schools – namely, their teachers. 55% of sexual minority students reported being verbally harassed daily or weekly in their schools, and 58% of non-LGBTQ youth found the homophobic comments upsetting. More than one-in-five (21%) reported being physically harassed or assaulted due to their sexual orientation. 64% (two-thirds) of LGBTQ students reported feelings unsafe in their school with change rooms being reported as the most perilous (49%).

Similarly, Grossman et al. (2009) found that LGBT youth experienced oppression and negative social conditions in their schools, as reported by LGBT youth in interviews and open-forum discussion groups. They also found “core themes” (p. 31) that emerged from the

discussion in relation of LGBT youths' experiences and interpersonal school violence in relation to their personal mental health. The findings included serious issues that need to be addressed in schools surrounding issues of LGBT individuals in order to promote healthy development for these adolescents and discontinue future negative marginalization. The reported themes included both a lack of community, and "lack of empowerment with a concurrent lack of a sense of human agency" (p. 31). Students in the groups were aware of their marginalization within the school community and felt they had little control over how their peers treated them. They also stated that they were unable to imagine any catalysts to change their current situations within the schools and that, even if there were such efforts, it could not be done without assistance from teachers and administrators. Many of the students said that, even if they did receive help from their school (which was rare), once they were off school property they were left to defend themselves once again. When confronted with negative attitudes towards their sexuality, their perception of their lack of human agency led them to choose to not report any incidents. Not only would they not disclose their experiences in school to their parents because of possible homophobic reactions, they were also aware that teachers and other school staff were often silent or ready to blame them. Unks (1995) has described schools as among the most homophobic institutions in society, yet lesbian and gay male youth in North America are legally required to attend these institutions (if not home-schooled) where they are largely stigmatized and/or ignored as individuals.

Schools are a central space in the social lives of youth. Schools, Walton (2009) explains, are places where "heterosexuality is positioned as the default category of sexuality and thus normalized" (p. 212). Such cultures of heteronormativity are detrimental to those who are not

heterosexual or are perceived that way. Moreover, sexuality education in school often begins too late in youth development to prevent or educate students of the danger of risky behaviours (Bachanas et al., 2002). When sexuality is taught in the context of health curriculum, it is predominately referred to in heterosexual terms (Walton, 2009). High numbers of adolescents begin sexual activity between 12 and 14 years of age (Strack, Alexander, Weston, Tomoyasu, & Solomon, 2000), and many sexual health programs focus only on abstinence and delay of sexual activity (Hunter & Baer, 2007). When homosexuality is mentioned, it is usually in the context of HIV/AIDS (Monahan, 1997). For this reason, educators must be conscious of the needs of lesbian and gay youth and support them as they become more aware of their sexual identities and same-sex attractions at younger ages (Grossman et al., 2009).

### **Lesbian and Gay Male Identity Development Models**

While lesbian and gay individuals can face serious emotional, psychological and physical health concerns throughout their developmental process, they may also face complex difficulties when discovering their personal identities. Most schools and families consist of predominately heterosexual individuals and often cannot offer the support for and/or understanding of lesbian or gay identity development. The process by which people come to identify themselves as lesbian or gay male in Western society has been studied through several large-scale research investigations where thousands of lesbian and gay male participants have been interviewed to explore their “homosexual identity development” (Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994; Eliason, 1996; Troiden, 1988). However, the transition from self-awareness to self-identity varies across individuals, societies, and time (Savin-Williams, 1995).

Here, in order to give context into previous lesbian and gay identity development theories, I will briefly explain Cass (1979) and Troiden's (1988) linear stage theories of homosexual identity development. Although these theories were considered ground-breaking during their time of conception, many researchers have found limitations to these linear stage models (Brown, 1995; D'Augelli, 1994; Dube & Savin-Williams, 1995; Eliason, 1996; Bilodeau, & Ren 2005; Savin-Williams, 2005). I will follow with a discussion of how the previous models do not extrapolate to all lesbian and gay men in a more modernized society. This will include a sample of contemporary lesbian and gay identity development theories and a look at how the Internet has become a tool for support and community throughout lesbian and gay identity development processes.

Cass (1979) and Troiden (1988) have each constructed linear stage-models describing lesbian and gay male identity development. Though the number of stages and names differ across the theories, they share common characteristics. These models show individuals moving through stages of identity, starting from the recognition of their feelings for the same-sex, and ending with acceptance of and pride in one's identity. The commencing stage, termed by Troiden, the *sensitization stage*, is characterized by confusion about one's identity accompanied with anxiety over sexual feelings, thoughts, and actions for their same-sex attraction. During this stage, said to occur between 6 and 12 years of age, individuals may be feeling different rather than recognizing themselves in the beginning stage(s) of homosexual identity development. Here, internalized homophobia may take root and begin to form a basis for later difficulties with acceptance of being lesbian or gay. In the next stage, commonly known as the *identity confusion* stage, many individuals become confounded with conflicted views between their emerging



homosexual feelings and those reported by their heterosexual peers. This stage has generally been seen to occur prior to the age of 15; however current research has shown that the age is dropping, perhaps due to more information available on homosexuality and the emergence of lesbian and gay males in the public life, including mass media (D'Augelli, Grossman & Starks, 2008; Mondimore, 1996). The incongruity felt during this time may take the form of the lack of interest in the opposite sex as described by their heterosexual peers, or an awareness of an interest in members of the same sex. Through self-examination and feedback of others, individuals evaluate the possibility of their identity to be desirable, too costly or a temporary phase of sexual attraction. This stage may end with *identity foreclosure*, a developmental shutdown where individuals may continue to develop in other ways, but their sexual orientation identity is arrested. However, if identity foreclosure does not occur, individuals may begin exploring their identity as they accept their attraction to the same sex. The next stage allows individuals to engage in contact with other lesbians and gay men and selected disclosures may be made to well-trusted heterosexuals. These experiences may lead the individual either to devalue or minimize contact with other lesbians or gay men to allow for greater acceptance of their intended heterosexual status or individuals will begin to accept their identities creating a positive image of themselves and creating close connections to other gay individuals. Individuals may also make selective disclosures to others; however passing for straight may still take place. A discrepancy between positive reactions among lesbians and gay males and negative reactions from homophobic heterosexuals lead to the following stage. This incongruity will compel them to either enter a dichotomized source of pride for their gay identity or a source of anger from experiences of heterosexism and homophobia. The final stage merges the public and the private

aspects of lesbian and gay male identities with an integrated sense of self along with other positive aspects of identity.

Although the linear stage theories of identity formation for lesbian and gay individuals have been highly recognized by professionals in the field of psychology, many other identity theorists view stage models as too limited by the inherent assumption that the process of sexual identity only has one outcome (Brown, 1995; D'Augelli, 1994; Dube, & Savin-Williams, 1995; Eliason, 1996; Bilodeau, & Ren 2005; Savin-Williams, 2005). Brown (1995) argues that stage models do not account for the fluidity and changing nature of sexual identities, or for nonlinear processes of coming to terms cognitively with one's "felt and embodied experiences" (p. 17). Bilodeau and Ren (2005) dispute the fact that stage theories imply a progression of lesbian or gay identity development that conclude with an endpoint. This assumption that identity development cannot be impeded by life circumstances such as trauma or stressors does not allow stage theories to expand the identity development process to all lesbian and gay people. To account for nonlinearity, D'Augelli (1994) offers a *life-span* model of sexual orientation development that takes social context into account and issues other stage models do not. D'Augelli's model describes six "identity processes" that offer the ability to be fluid or fixed due to environmental, biological and social factors in one's life. These processes include: exiting heterosexuality, developing a personal lesbian or gay male identity, developing a lesbian or gay social identity, becoming a lesbian or gay male offspring, developing a lesbian or gay male intimacy status, and entering a lesbian or gay male community. Development in one stage may be greater than in another and at different times than other lesbian or gay male individuals. For

example, one may be in a committed non-heterosexual relationship, but not yet have come out as lesbian or gay to one's family or anyone else.

Savin-Williams (2005) refutes previous claims of sexual identity formation by creating a newer model entitled *Differential Developmental Trajectories* theory. He discards previous antiquated assumptions made in linear models of lesbian and gay male sexual identity formations. He uses the term *differential* to refer to the variability inherent within and across individuals, *developmental* to signify milestones and processes that occur across the life course, and *trajectories* to indicate the "probabilistic individual pathways" that occur throughout one's lifespan (p. 83). His theory confounds the notion that life progresses along an orderly series of idealized sequential stages, the lack of consideration for complexities and diversity of developmental processes, and that young lives can be understood from highly selective adolescents, mainly those that identify as gay. Savin-Williams (2005) states that,

Some people are not exclusively gay. Some do not achieve an integrated identity.

Some remain developmentally static. People's lives are far more chaotic, fluid, and complex than any simple model might suggest. (p. 74)

### **Lesbian Identity Formation**

Most sexual orientation identity development models fail to recognize some key differences between lesbian and gay male identity formation. Typically, stage models take the experiences of gay men as the norm and extrapolate them to lesbians (Brown, 1995). Gonsiorek (1988) argues that coming out processes appears to be more abrupt in males, whereas the processes for females appear to be characterized by more fluidity and ambiguity. Golden (1990)

describes how some women perceive choice as an important element in their sexual orientations, while gay men typically perceive their sexual orientations as a given, a central aspect of themselves, where choice has little to do with the matter. Gonsiorek (1988) also claims that males are more likely to engage in sexual activity during the coming out process where females are more likely to respond with reflection and removal from social interactions. Differences in the speed or tempo of identity development may be influenced by patterns of sexual socialization. Therefore, if gay males are more likely to engage in sexual activity during the coming out process, then males may be more apt to move through identity formation at a quicker speed than females.

The self-affirmation process for lesbians has affiliations with self-conceptualization, performance, and awareness of affectional attractions to the same-sex, while men appear to view sexual behaviour and fantasy as central to their sexual identity development (Brown, 1995; Gonsiorek, 1988). However, Brown (1995) explains that the strength of stage models is their ability to describe how the development of sexual self in lesbians is one of “constant interaction and interchange between internal reality and external cultural context” (p. 18). Eliason (1996) developed a more dynamic model of lesbian development to help formulate the connection between self-esteem, identity development, and stigma management. She proposes that lesbian identity is developed in a more cyclical manner, tied to other identities, which combines social, historical, and cognitive processes. Eliason’s cycles of lesbian identity include pre-identity, emerging identity, recognition/experiences with oppression and re-evaluation/evolution of identities.

### **The Kinsey Scale of Homosexuality**

In the 1940's, Alfred Kinsey and his associates conducted a study on the sexuality of men, and later, of women. Published respectively as *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1958), Kinsey sought to overturn Victorian morality and religious taboos by bringing sex to the forefront of public debate (Chambers, 2010). Famously, he created a 7-point scale – The Kinsey Scale – to illustrate sexuality based on sexual behaviour in both males and females after discovering that most individuals are neither completely heterosexual nor completely homosexual. Although Kinsey's statistical methods are now considered contrary to current ethics standards, as he recruited prisoners as many of his participants (Bancroft, 2004), there is still strong evidence to support the idea that sexuality can be illustrated as a spectrum (Mondimore, 1996; Savin-Williams, 2005). Kinsey (1948) states that,

[Individuals] do not represent two discrete populations, heterosexual and homosexual. The work is not to be divided into sheep and goats. Not all things are all black nor all white ... Nature rarely deals with discrete categories. Only the human mind invents categories and tries to force facts into separated pigeon-holes. The living world is a continuum in each and every one of its aspects. (p. 639)

The 7-point Kinsey scale lays on a continuum from 0 to 6, where 0 represents individuals who are exclusively heterosexual and 6 characterizes those who are exclusively homosexual. 2 through 5 represent, predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual; equally heterosexual and homosexual; predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally

heterosexual; and predominantly homosexual, only incidentally heterosexual respectively. Kinsey's work supported the view that "homosexuality is not a rare form of pathology" but is a relatively "common variation of human sexual experiences" (Bancroft, 2004, p. 6). He was also able to show that many people, not exclusive to those who identify as lesbian or gay male, had same-sex attractions or interactions at some point in their lives (Bancroft, 2004). Although Kinsey's studies were about sexual behaviour and not sexuality identity, his results were groundbreaking because he was able to demonstrate that sexual behaviour did not necessarily coincide with public heterosexual *identities*. This is important when discussing lesbian and gay identity development as sexual behaviour is commonly conflated with sexuality identity. Kinsey's theories of sexual behaviour being represented by a continuum may suggest that current lesbian and gay male identity development models do not necessarily reflect identity growth of all lesbian and gay male individuals (Brown, 1995; Eliason, 1996; D'Augelli, 1994; Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999; Savin-Williams, 2005), as he too suggests that lesbian and gay male individuals cannot fall into distinct and definite categories.

### **Identity Development and "Coming Out"**

Cass' (1979), D'Augelli's (1994), Eliason's (1996) and Savin-Williams' (2005), theories have a similarity, namely, the realization and articulation of one's sexual orientation to oneself and others, referred to as "coming out" or "self-identifying" as a lesbian or gay male.

deMonteflores & Shultz (1978) define coming out as "the developmental process through which gay people recognize their sexual preferences and choose to integrate this knowledge into their personal and social lives" (p. 59). D'Augelli (1998) and Henderson (1998) assert that exiting from the lifelong assumed heterosexual identity and entering the new lesbian or gay male

identity is both a political and personal act that must be done in a context that is not cut off from others who have built or are building identities similar to their own. Coming out is argued to be one of the most important developments in the life of lesbian and gay male individuals (Savin-Williams, 1995). However, the age at which milestones are achieved, such as first-awareness of same-sex attractions, then self-labelling, and then coming out, seems to have steadily declined since the 1970's (Guiney Yallop, 2004). As lesbians and gay men progress through adolescence, it becomes increasingly more difficult to deny same-sex attractions as they deal with early feelings of isolation, alienation and confusion due to conflicts with personal identity in a heterosexist society (Savin-Williams, 1995). In fact, according to D'Augelli (2005) and Savin-Williams (1995), many lesbian and gay individuals may experience greater distress when deciding how and when to disclose their sexual orientation to others, sometimes delaying their coming out for many years. In such cases, coming out is highly selective. D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington (1998) reported that over 75% of gay youth first approached a best friend about their sexual orientation rather than 20% who told family a member during this time, as families may be further sources of ostracization and violence. It is also significant to note that very few youth first disclose their sexual orientation to the professionals in their lives including teachers, counsellors (5%) and/or clergy (2%) (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). Lock (2002) emphasizes that,

Unlike members of other cultural and racial minority groups, sexual minority group members may not be able to count on family members to empathize and educate them about how to manage negative attitudes and behaviours directed at them. In fact, families

of sexual minority youth are often non-accepting, rejecting and potential sources of violence themselves. (p. 81)

Although the process of coming out is typically a stressful time for most lesbian and gay males, indicated by experiences of depression, victimization, substance abuse and suicidality (Hamilton & Mahalik, 2009; Havens, Mellins, & Hunter, 2002; Meyer, 1995), there is often a positive association between coming out and one's feelings of self and self-worth. Savin-Williams (2005), for instance, assert that lesbian and gay teenagers generally feel positive about their sexuality identities. In a synthesis of research performed on adolescents and their "feelings on being gay" (p. 167), three quarters of same-sex attracted young people feel "very good," "good," or "indifferent" about being gay (p. 167). This could be due to the amount of information on lesbian and gay male subject matter, and support available to youth via the Internet from their home or school computers.

### **The Use of Virtual Communities and Resources for Lesbian and Gay Individuals**

With relatively easy access to online resources, lesbian and gay male individuals may reach out to others who can help support the construction of identity. Apart from one's physical setting, the coming out process then may be met with more compassion and understanding from other lesbian and gay people from around the globe. This, in turn, allows lesbian and gay youth and adults to feel more secure about their sexual identities. In addition, the information available online can be sought not only by lesbian and gay individuals looking for support and recognition but to the population as a whole, including potential uninformed homophobic heterosexuals. The Internet may serve as an educational resource to heterosexuals unaware of lesbian and gay male



identity development struggles, creating a greater number of supportive lesbian and gay male allies around the world. However, despite the affirmative uses of the Internet for emerging lesbian and gay youth who are seeking positive support and community, it can also be a source of cyber-bullying and a resource for those who wish spread discrimination and hate toward sexual minorities. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on how the Internet can play an active role in positively supporting lesbian and gay identity development.

The Pew Internet and American Life Project's (2009) research centre found that 93% of American teens aged 12-17 use the Internet. That amounts to 21 million teens using web-based technology in the United States. Of those 21 million teens, 63% are online daily while 36% use the Internet more than once a day. Thus, the Internet has greatly affected the ways in which people come together and communicate as it has the ability to eliminate geographical isolation while bringing together alike individuals simply by offering online subcultures of communication. Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, and Tynes (2004) indicate that it is critical to view the Internet as a new social environment for adolescent issues pertaining to identity formation, sexuality, and self-worth. Outside of the Internet, lesbian and gay youth can be excluded from many lesbian and gay-centered communities due to social, financial, political or legal barriers that prevent meaningful involvement. Politically and socially, most lesbian and gay male support communities within cities are adult-focused in their activities (Unks, 1995) having few youth venues and such communities often do not address youth issues or concerns in programs or services. Legal barriers keep youth out of bar or pub-scenes, which can be a major hub of adult lesbian and gay communities. Also, age restrictions on driving could prevent youth from rural areas from accessing lesbian or gay male communities that do exist within larger cities

(Singerline, 1995). Lack of financial resources could also create a barrier to join activities that may be costly (Dobinson, 2011). Bypassing all these challenges, the Internet enables multiple communication functions including email, instant messaging (IM), chat, blogs, bulletin boards, and social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr to allow adolescents to participate and co-construct their own environments or communities in a social context (Greenfield & Yan, 2006).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue that there are four components to the sense of community, which are: membership, influence, integration, and emotional connection. A virtual community is known to be a “community extended via emerging technologies” (Koh & Kim, 2004, p. 76). *Membership* (the feelings people experience of belonging to their virtual community) and *influence* (the influence other members have within their community) are considered as common perception factors in both online and offline communities, while *immersion*, the sense of flow people feel during virtual community navigation, is regarded as an important feature within online or virtual communities (Koh & Kim, 2004). Like physical communities, virtual communities are characterized by “common value systems, norms, rules, and the sense of identity, commitment and association” (Fernback, 1999, p. 211). Blanchard (2007) and Nip (2004) found that many of the individual feelings, commitment, and perceptions are similar in online and offline groups.

From a sample of adolescents (sexual orientation not identified) from Australia, Canada, USA, Switzerland, and Holland, over a seven-year period, Thomas (2007) documented interaction in online or virtual communities and examined how young people construct their identities in various social contexts. Thomas argues that online communities are important

“socialization agents” (p. 180) for youth culture as online interactions can strip away many of the usual “semiotics” of identity (p. 17), which can include how one generally looks, speaks, walks, talks, acts, and/or performs in the physical world. In the case of lesbian and gay male individuals who hide their identities in physical social contexts, this could offer an opportunity of expression of self through an online or virtual community. Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, and Tynes (2004) state that,

[...] the online medium provides adolescents with a venue wherein they can and do deal with the same developmental issues in their offline lives. In the case of sexuality, it provides a place to discuss embarrassing topics in an anonymous social context. It also provides a safe place to ‘practice’ new kinds of relationships, such as dating, that can be risky in the real world [...]. (p. 662-663)

Lesbian and gay youth, like all adolescents, must have opportunities for self-affirmation and socialization if they are to develop into healthy adults. Many lesbian and gay adolescents experience feelings of alienation, which typically arises from feeling different from the dominant group. This consequently can create difficulties in meeting and creating communities in which they feel safe relating to others (Savin-Williams, 1995). Lesbian and gay male youth typically have smaller social networks and fears of losing friendships and relationships with parents due to their sexualities (Savin-Williams, 2005). Given that lesbian and gay youth may have the choice to hide their sexual orientation, especially those who pass as heterosexual, many will not seek out information or social support regarding sexual identities (Graber & Bastini, 2001). However, with Web-based technology, lesbian and gay male individuals have more opportunities for relatively anonymous access to resources, both social and informational, to support their

identities. These virtual communities that can be accessed via the Web allow for social communities to connect without being limited to the circumstances of geography (Hughes-Hassell & Hinckley, 2001). Turkel (1995) states that more and more gay teens are using the Internet to make contact with others, to find role models for their identity development as gay individuals, and even to establish romantic and sexual relationships. As Egan (2000) explains,

For homosexual teenagers with computer access, the Internet has, quite simply, revolutionized the experience of growing up gay. Isolation and shame persist among gay teenagers, of course, but now, along with the inhospitable families and towns in which many find themselves marooned, there exists a parallel online community – real people like them in cyberspace with whom they can chat, exchange messages and even engage in (online) sex. (p. 113)

Thomas (2007) also explored how lesbian and gay male identities can be constructed and controlled within the confines of anonymous and supportive environments on the Internet. Brewer (1991) emphasizes that importance of group identities as essential for individuals emotional functioning as one addresses conflicting needs for individuation and affiliation. Huegel (2011) explains that many websites geared to lesbian and gay male individuals sponsor scheduled chats and guest speakers. One may speak to a counsellor, post conversation topics, or allow for online chats with other lesbian and gay people who may be going through or have been through similar experiences. Webinars, bulletin boards and blogs are another avenue of support that these websites may offer. Through the arena of cyberspace, lesbian and gay adolescents no longer have to openly out themselves by, for instance, approaching a bulletin board, or becoming involved in a potentially unsafe situation by approaching another who may not be supportive of

their identity (Woodland, 1999). Also, having anonymous access to resources and information at your fingertips from a home computer, finding help or support becomes a less risky way to reach out and break the isolation that many lesbian and gay individuals feel during their identity processes as adolescents (Dobinson, 2011). Bryson (2005) discusses the Internet as a powerful tool for learning about lesbian and gay male identities.

She points out that,

For many [lesbian and gay male] youth, the Internet might be characterized as a provisionary and localized performative accelerant; multiple interstitial sites where youth share with each other as they begin to trace the intimate patterns of who they are in the myriad spaces of becoming. (p. 136)

Using the Internet as a source for subject matter pertaining to lesbian and gay male information and identity formation, individuals can enter safe-spaces online as either their real selves or as virtual-life appearances where they may be free from oppressive forces that may lie outside online communities (Woodland, 1999). These virtual identities allow individuals to experiment with new definitions of self or identities to see what fits them best. Cass (1979), D'Augelli (1994), Savin-Williams (1995), and Troiden (1988) have consistently indicated that social contacts with other lesbian and gay male individuals help manage growing self-definitions of sexual orientation identity as well as provide support dealing with issues of stigma and feelings of alienation from a heteronormative society. As contacts increase over time, they will come to take pride in their sexual identity as they fully synthesize identity with other aspects of self. Some of the questions that remain are: how is identity created and maintained and how does

it change over time with the use of online resources including websites, blogs, chats, bulletin boards, and social networking sites? Do online technologies that provide resources and social contact allow for lesbian and gay male youth to feel more secure in their identity development allowing for successful growth and confidence into adulthood? Is online technology an important social variable serving identity development processes?

### **Summary**

This chapter has provided an outline of the difficulties that lesbian and gay male youth face while trying to discover their own identities, an overview of the current research pertaining to the lesbian and gay male identity development processes, and the use of the Internet for possible support, research, information and/or online connections to those of similar circumstance.

Internalized homophobia or minority stress may develop due to stigmatization or discrimination, or one may contract HIV/AIDS due to lack of sexual education. Other health problems may materialize due to homelessness or underutilization of health care. D'Augelli, Grossman and Starks (2008) found that lesbian and gay male youth are becoming more and more aware of same-sex attractions at younger ages. However, most educational systems do not reflect or explicitly support lesbian and gay male children and youth. My examination of the current research shows that lesbian and gay male identity development models used today may not account for the vast amount of information, support, research, and/or online connections accessible for lesbian and gay male individuals on the Internet. Thus, my research explores how the Internet as a source research, support, and/or social connections may have an impact on

lesbian and gay male identity development models offered and described earlier in this chapter. Previous lesbian and gay identity development models were designed in a time when the Internet did not exist for public use. Therefore, these models do not take into account the extraordinary amount of information that is available on the Internet, and the ease with which it can be accessed. My research will re-evaluate current identity development models in light of an age of technology and anonymous access to extensive amounts of resources via the Internet.

The next chapter provides a synopsis of the methodological approach to inquiry utilized in this study. It outlines the qualitative research design that was utilized through the course of the research, the method that was employed to collect data, and the analysis procedures followed throughout the project. My research, while taking into consideration the previous lesbian and gay identity development models and theories generated by Cass (1979), D'Augelli (1994), Eliason (1996), Savin-Williams (2005), and Troiden (1988), and the arguments made in contrast to the rigid and linear models made by Brown (1995), Eliason (1996), Golden (1990), Gonsiorek (1988), and Savin-Williams (2005), will look at how the participants used the Internet as a source of information, research, support and/or community throughout their identity development processes.

## **Chapter Three**

### **The Research Design**

#### **Introduction**

In order to evaluate whether existing lesbian and gay identity development models reflect the experiences of modern lesbian and gay youth who have had the opportunity to use the Internet as a form of research, support, and information throughout their identity development processes, I employed a qualitative research design guided by narrative inquiry. Denzin and Lincoln (2001) describe qualitative inquiry as a socially constructed nature of reality that measures *how* social experience is created and given meaning. Likewise, Merriam (1998) explains that “all types of qualitative research are based on the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (p. 6). She goes on to explain that “qualitative research is an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as a part of a particular context and the interactions there” (p. 6). These ideas behind qualitative research are important to my study as I am looking into the identity development processes of lesbian and gay males as they situate themselves in real-life social worlds such as school, home, and their immediate communities, but also in virtual social worlds where information, resources, support and/or virtual communities can be accessed at any time, and in any place, from a computer via the Internet.

#### **The Narrative Research Design**

In order to explore the retrospective journeys of identity formation processes of lesbian and gay male adults and how they used online technology throughout their youth or adolescence



to facilitate their journeys, I employed narrative inquiry to focus on the informants' identity development into lesbian and gay male people, in part from online resources and communication. Narrative inquiry is a long-standing, recognized and viable approach to conducting qualitative research (Coulter, Michael, & Poyner, 2007). It is a methodology rooted in research conducted by the Chicago School sociologists who studied the life stories of juvenile delinquents and criminals in the early 1920's and 1930s (Denzin, 1970). Bruner (1986/1996) explains narrative as structure for organizing knowledge and experiences in order for humans to make meaning. Using narrative inquiry as the methodology in this research project, I was able to explore what Riessman (2002) explains as "compelling topical narration" (p. 696) about the significant aspects of one's life, particularly epiphanic events (Denzin, 1989), and turning points (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001). In the case of lesbian and gay male identity development, epiphanic events and turning points may include any point throughout the development process where one realizes their own identity emerging or being oppressed in a heterosexist society. It is how one carries themselves through those moments and which resources were used in order to support their growing identities that will be relevant to current lesbian and gay male identity development models. Chase (2005) summarizes narrative inquiry as an extended way of "understanding one's own and other's actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, and of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time" (p. 656). Narrative inquiry allowed me to work with each participant to describe the factors that shape, construct and explore the complexities and realities of their experiences, and how they came to find their personal identity by using online resources in support of their personal development (Chase, 2005). McAdams (1997) claims that the content

of a life story or personal narrative embodies a person's identity that both develops and changes over time. As a methodology for looking into identity development of lesbians and gay males, personal narrative allows others a deeper and more personal perspective into each participant's story of growth and discovery. In particular, "when we understand circumstances, events, or conflicts from other peoples' perspectives, we can identify and implement better strategies for addressing these problems" (Larson, 1997, p. 455). Narrative is unique as it "explores and communicates the narrator's point of view, including why the narrative is worth telling in the first place" (Chase, 2005, p. 656).

Throughout the data collection procedures, guided by narrative inquiry, I employed grounded theory strategies recommended by Charmaz (2011) where data collection and analysis "reciprocally informed and shaped each other through emergent iterative processes" (p. 360). More specifically, I adopted strategies from the method of grounded theory as I continually compared the narratives I received from each participant and compared that emerging data to that of the previous lesbian and gay male identity development models that have been offered in the past (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). By comparing concept (previous lesbian and gay male identity development models) with concept (the use of the Internet during current lesbian and gay male identity development processes as explained through narration by my participants), I was able to create astute analytic comparisons to previous theories to that of my own, guided by the research (Charmaz, 2011). In order to discover variation, themes and categories within my emergent data, I first created my analysis of identity development with the use of the Internet and its resources within, and then compared what I found to the existing literature on lesbian and gay male identity development models.

**Research Methods:**

This section will explain the steps taken to obtain permission from the Research Ethics Board (REB) to protect the rights of each participant, how participants were found and contacted, and how the methodological approach to narrative inquiry shaped the types of questions I asked during interviews.

**Ethics.** Prior to searching for participants or conducting interviews, I submitted an application for ethical review of my research to the Lakehead University Research Ethic's Board which included details of the proposed research project *Lesbian and Gay Male Identity Development and Online Communities*. I included, a copy of an information summary letter/statement of introduction (see Appendix A1), a consent form (see Appendix A2), a form for participants to waive their right to confidentiality (see appendix A3), and potential research questions (see appendix B1) in May 2001. The ethics application also included sensitivity and awareness of possible emergent ethical issues that may occur as research proceeds through interviewing, transcribing and analyzing. Due to the nature of narrative storytelling, participants may share stories of a deeply personal nature that include sensitive topics including private issues of personal experiences, dissatisfaction with family, friends or their communities and/or issues of prejudice. Accordingly, I took my responsibility as guardian of data very seriously and acquired all measures available to ensure that data was kept confidential and secure and participant identities remained private. The information summary letter/statement of introduction presents background information about me as the researcher, describes the purpose and parameters of the research, explains the foreseeable risks or harm associated with participation, and provides a lesbian and gay male help-line number given that sharing intimate stories of their

past could trigger an emotional response to which professional guidance might be useful or necessary. The consent form details the terms of the agreement between the participant and researcher and reiterated the rights of the of the participant, such as the right not to answer any question asked as part of the research or to withdraw from the research project at any time, should they choose to take part in the study. All participants were assured that anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained, if they chose, by the use of pseudonyms for the participants in the research. If a participant's real name was used in the audio data, those references would be edited out of the textual transcribed data. Participants who wished to be named then waived their right to privacy and confidentiality. This was done by providing written evidence - signing the *Letter to Waive Consent to Privacy and Confidentiality* (see Appendix A3). The research project received ethical approval June 3, 2011.

**Contacting Participants and Data Collection Strategies.** In order to locate participants, I first employed the convenience sample technique. This category of sampling “relies on available subjects – those close at hand” (Berg, 2007, p. 43). I contacted Pride Central and The Gender Issues Centre – LGBT support communities – within Lakehead University, and discussed my topic with lesbian and gay male people I knew throughout Ontario and asked if they or if someone they might know would like to participate in my research. I did not receive any participants from the Lakehead University LGBT support centres but instead participants were contacted directly by me or they were found through the word-of-mouth (snowball) strategy. Snowball sampling is defined as “a nonprobabilistic form of sampling in which persons initially chosen for the sample are used as informants to locate other persons having necessary characteristics making them eligible for the sample” (Bailey, 1994, p. 438). Participants were

initially contacted by email where an introduction and summary of the project was given as well as the *Invitation to Participate/Statement of Introduction* (see Appendix A1) letter. Upon agreement, the *Letter of Informed Consent* (see Appendix A2) and *Letter to Waive Consent to Privacy and Confidentiality* (see Appendix A3) were sent via mail including a self-addressed and stamped envelope for their return or email to the participants. If sent by email, the participants then printed signed, scanned, and sent the documents back to me. I made clear that the *Letter to Waive Consent to Privacy and Confidentiality* was only to be signed if they did not wish for a pseudonym to be used in place of their actual names. I also indicated to the participants their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and that they could choose not to answer any question asked as part of the research. In some cases, the interview took place before I received written consent for participation. This was due to participants mailing or emailing back the signed consent forms after the interviews took place. In this event they were asked verbally if their voice could be audio-recorded for the duration of the interview then read the *Letter of Informed Consent* aloud where their reading was audio-recorded. They were also asked whether they would like their name to be replaced by a pseudonym.

**Participant Profiles.** All participants self-identified as a lesbian or gay, and each had used online media throughout their identity formation processes as youth. The participants for this study included four lesbians and three gay men. They ranged in age from 21 to 42, and

consisted of post secondary students to working professionals of various disciplines. All but one participant were raised in rural<sup>2</sup> towns throughout Canada. All participants are White.

Below, I provide a brief description of each participant. Only two names have been changed to protect confidentiality and privacy. Five out of the seven participants wished that I use their real names in this thesis.

**Mike.** Mike is 23 years old and a recent graduate of Lakehead University. He was born in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario and moved to St. Catherines, Ontario for high school. Mike is currently the president of the Lakehead University Student Union. He is currently in a long-term relationship.

**Ted.** Ted is a 42 years old working professional from Montreal, Quebec. He is recently divorced from his first husband. Ted was born Catholic but now considers himself a spiritual man rather than a religious one.

**Adam.** Adam is 24 years old, born and raised in Perth, Ontario. Adam is a graduate from Lakehead University's Bachelor of Education program and is currently living and working in Barrhaven, Ottawa.

**Amy.** Amy grew up in Osoyoos, British Columbia. She is 24 years old and is in her final year at Cambrian College in the child and youth worker program. She is a retired basketball

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<sup>2</sup> Although the intention was not to find the bulk of participants from rural areas of Canada, this was the end result for the participants willing to take place in this project.

player due to undiagnosed knee problems. Currently, Amy lives in Sudbury, Ontario with her girlfriend.

**Bronwyn.** Bronwyn is 30 years old and teaches social issues at a University in central Ontario. She grew up in Toronto but considers herself a northern Ontario girl due to the time she has spent there. She currently lives in Simcoe County with her partner.

**Colleen.** Colleen is 21 from St. Thomas, Ontario and is currently attending Lakehead University in Thunder Bay. She has been in a relationship with Lis, another participant in this study, for 3 and-a-half years and is engaged to be married.

**Lis.** Lis is 23 years old and is engaged to Colleen. She grew up in Atikokan, Ontario. She is a student at Lakehead University. Lis had considered herself heterosexual for most of her life, until she met Colleen.

**Research Settings.** Interviews took place between June 21, 2011 to November 4, 2011, lasting anywhere from 25 to 45 minutes in length. Due to the distance between the participants and me, the interviews took place via a number of media. Three interviews were conducted over the phone and three via Skype, which, according to the Skype website, is an online peer-to-peer video and audio conferencing program. Skype allows for conversation to take place in real-time (Skype, 2011). And a final interview was conducted in person in a private room at Lakehead University. All conversations were audio-recorded.

**Interview Process.** Participants were aware of the nature of the study before each interview began as each participant was given the opening statement as well as possible further interview questions before each interview. This was done in order for each participant to prepare

any specifics they would like to include in their narrative rather than just discuss generalities of their experiences. At the beginning of each interview I chatted with each participant on non-related issues before leading into my opening discussion statement in order to develop a friendly rapport between them and me (Berg, 2007). I also asked each participant to discuss themselves in general terms to learn more about them and their history, but to also allow them to begin the interview on their own terms. This was done in order for them to feel more comfortable discussing personal, and possibly traumatic, stories of their past.

Conventional to narrative inquiry, I prepared an introductory statement in order for the narrator or participant to openly tell his or her story (Chase, 1995). I led into the discussion with each participant by saying, “please tell me about your experiences as an lesbian or gay individual discovering your lesbian or gay identity and coming out process while using Internet-based technology such as websites, online bulletin and message boards, chat rooms, and/or social networking sites.”

I created a statement that allowed the narrator to discuss significant aspects of their lives, particularly epiphanic events (Denzin, 1989) and turning points (McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001) given the narrators social location in his or her own experiences within and outside the lesbian or gay male community or culture (Chase, 1995). I also created some additional statements and questions for the participants that could help them in telling their personal stories of identity growth and formation (see Appendix B1). As I created these statements and questions, I worked toward eliciting conversations and inviting stories, rather than using a conventional interview strategy that positions interviewees as having a reactive role during interviews (which is that they answer questions asked by the researcher) (Chase, 2005).



Using the additional questions, and semi-structured interview method (Berg, 2007), I looked to discover how each participant felt they moved through a process of moving from initial recognition or curiosity of feelings for the same sex through to personal identification of being a lesbian or gay male individual and how online resources were used throughout this process. I explored questions such as: throughout their process of discovering their own lesbian or gay male identity, which online resources did each interviewee find useful? And how do they think their identity formation processes might have been different if they had not been able to use online resources?

After each interview, each participant was afforded the choice to further discuss issues that emerged during the interview at a later date. One participant asked after-the-fact that I include some expanded ideas regarding their interview. The ideas were recorded and then used within the final analysis. Although every narrative is unique, each embodies and gives insight into the lesbian and gay online social worlds. To establish verifiability, each transcription and interpretation of the stories was sent back to the participants in order to verify the authenticity and criteria of each story.

**Data Recording Procedures.** All interviews were audio-recorded then transcribed by me using Atlas.ti – a qualitative analysis software program. I made sure to pay careful attention to include additional contextual information collected on tape, including tone and emotional responses (e.g., giggles), hesitations and silences by the participants. I also took field notes that included various moments throughout the interviews that could not be picked up on a voice recorder (facial expressions or body movements based on the subject at hand) or the “speculations, feelings, problems, ideas, hunches, impressions and prejudices” (Bogden &

Biklen, 1992, p. 121). Demographic information about time, place, and date of the field setting before each interview were also included in the field notes. After the interviews took place, reflections on the interviews were written. Field notes were held in a locked filing cabinet along with the interview tapes and transcriptions.

**Coding and Interpretation Development.** I followed Creswell's (2003) description of the theory behind data coding. He points out that,

[Data] analysis takes place and understandings are derived through the process of constructing a transcript by listening and re-listening, viewing and re-viewing . . . .  
Transcription facilitates the close attention and the interpretive thinking that is needed to make sense of the data (p. 82).

Marshall and Rossman (2006) explain that interpretation of data is, "often referred to as 'telling the story,' interpretation brings meaning and coherence to the themes, patterns, categories, developing linkages and a story line that makes sense and is engaging to read" (p. 161). This definition of interpretation is noteworthy to my research as the goal was to hear narrative stories from the participants in order to reveal identity development processes which then could be retold in correlation to previous identity development models. In order to give meaning to the data I employed the constant comparison method recommended by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to connect the themes within my data to previous lesbian and gay male identity development models. I did this by continually looking back to previous lesbian and gay male identity development theories, asking questions of the coded data and its relevance to the topic at hand, and

finally by looking to see if the new data corresponds to that of the previous theories. The significance of the similarities and differences within the data are then reported with respect to the corresponding information outlined in the literature review and the questions that guided the research.

### **Summary**

This chapter outlined the narrative research design and the steps taken to receive permission from the Research Ethics Board of Lakehead University. The data collection strategies were also explained including: how participants were found and contacted, how participant profiles were created, and how the interviews took place, as well as the data recording procedures. Also, the method by which data was coded and interpreted and how common themes, which related to previous lesbian and gay male identity development processes, were discovered. Chapter four will provide a summary of the findings based on the analysed data.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Findings**

This chapter provides a description of the findings in relation to themes that emerged from my analysis of the data. The chapter will be organized into two sections. The first segment will discuss the themes that emerged throughout my data analysis regarding participants' identity development. The second will look at participants' Internet usage and its forms throughout the process of each participant discovering their own lesbian and gay male identities. I did this in order to effectively communicate both the lesbian and gay male identity development processes and how the Internet was used as a resource throughout each journey. Full narratives are not included in this chapter. Instead, I have included sections of each narrative that are representative to each theme outlined.

The following four themes emerged from my analysis regarding lesbian and gay male identity development: (a) discovery and secrecy; (b) questioning sexuality identity and internalized homophobia; (c) coming out and struggling with a minority identity; and (d) pride in a personal lesbian or gay male identity.

The following three themes emerged from my analysis of the interview data when participants discussed how and why the Internet was used throughout the identity development processes and how it is still used by them today: (a) anonymity and privacy; (b) personal support through online communities; and (c) Internet as a teaching tool for others.

## **Lesbian and Gay Male Identity Development**

Although the participants' narratives of their own sexuality identity development processes were not all alike, the stories contained similar themes. These themes included: (a) discovery and secrecy; (b) questioning sexuality identity and internal homophobia; (c) coming out and struggling with a minority identity; and (d) pride in a personal lesbian or gay male identity.

*Discovery and Secrecy.* When participants were asked to tell stories of their processes of discovering their lesbian or gay male identities, many discussed the secrecy they held in regards to their feelings for the same sex. In fact, it would be many years before they would tell others of their feelings for the same sex.

Ted told his story of the exact moment that he knew he had feelings for those of the same sex. In the excerpt below, he describes his experience as an "Adonis."

I think I probably knew that I was gay, but now, I didn't have a term for being gay. I just knew I was different from the other boys. And I knew from probably 3 or 5 years old. At 8 years old it became much more clear to me. What happened at 8 years old, I won't forget. I was at my cousin's house. An 11 year-old boy came in, and to me, it was like an Adonis. And I remember not wanting to play with him but wanting to be with him. I wanted to lie down beside him. I wanted to have him hold me. I wanted to play house with him. Which was different from when I was with girls, and I wanted to just be their friend. So I knew it was much more of an attachment emotionally to men than it was to women. And that to me, was the start of, of confirming what I was feeling. . .

Amy and Bronwyn illustrate the secrecy they held while initially discovering their attraction to the same sex. As Amy explained,

But when ... I guess ... probably in about grade 7, I was about 12 years old, I started to realize that that is how I felt [that I was attracted to the same sex]. I typically didn't want to tell anybody... I kinda kept it a secret.

Later in the interview, Amy returned to the silence she held onto throughout high school as she speaks about her experiences as an athlete.

...when I was on the basketball team, I definitely felt more nervous about anybody knowing [that I was attracted to the same sex] while I was on the basketball team because when you're on a team full of females and you're 14 years old and you think if you tell somebody [that you are interested in the same -sex], you have to share a change room with people, your sharing hotel rooms with people, your sleeping in the same bed, you're ... you know I wouldn't be interested in a teammate or anything like this, they were all my friends, but when your that age that's what you think. You think that if I told somebody that I'm gay or that I'm interested in girls, you're thinking that they might be thinking, "well do you like me?"

Bronwyn described her "secret" feelings for the same-sex affecting her behaviour.

I can remember in maybe grade 7 or 8 being really worried about hugging my friends cause I was worried that they would find out about a secret about me. But I didn't know what the secret was, I just knew there was a secret.

Secrecy was often held throughout the discovery period of the participants' identity development processes. Along with undisclosed feelings for their attractions for the same sex, questioning of identities was a commonality within the participants' stories. In particular circumstances, participants reveal their awareness of personal internalized homophobia.

***Questioning Sexuality Identity and Internalized Homophobia.*** Upon realizing that they were attracted to members of the same-sex, participants expressed internal turmoil about their feelings. Along with participants questioning their emerging identities, in some cases, internalized homophobia was a backdrop of their sexuality identities.

For example, Amy explained that,

I think there were definitely periods where I was unsure of myself because, like I said, there was a lot of things that happened in my life that really shook up the plans for me of what I was supposed to do, so I think that there wasn't a clear cut path per say that I went down and knew exactly where I was going and that is what I wanted and that is what it was. I definitely had some struggles and some hurdles I had to climb over before I was able to come out and really figure out who I was.

Lis also expressed some clear doubt in her emerging identity as a lesbian. She described feelings of "faking it" while beginning her first same-sex relationship after years of dating men. She also pointed to the "work" that would have to take place in order to date women rather than men when she stated,

I felt, I felt like I was faking it somehow, you know, that if I did like ... I guess I still felt like I was a straight girl who was having a gay experience [...] I had never wanted to have

come out and have to live as a minority. You know it was something that, you know, it wasn't like I was staying in the closet, I didn't feel like I was, you know, denying something that I wanted, but it was just something like "ya I could be with a girl," but I didn't really want to and it's a lot of work and I was just happy with guys. And then I met [my fiancé].

Adam described how he rationalized his feelings for the same-sex by telling himself that "everybody has those feelings [for the same sex]". As he grew older, he started to recognize that heterosexuality was the "norm" and therefore his feelings for the same-sex were not.

Adam described his experience this way:

When I was younger, um, I didn't really know what to think about my feelings [for the same sex]. I kinda fought for the longest time and thought "NO, I am straight," everyone just had these feelings for the same sex ... When I was 12/13 I started realizing that guys were kinda attractive and then kinda tried to fight them a lot and tried to ignore those feelings, cause I thought, you know, this isn't normal.

Bronwyn described an experience where internalized homophobia was apparent in her identity development and pretending that she was heterosexual would allow her to think of herself as "fine." She explained that,

In high school, I knew I had a secret, and I had a lot of internalized homophobia, so I didn't really admit [my sexual orientation] to myself. I thought I might be bisexual, but wasn't sure. I did admit to myself that I was questioning. That felt pretty safe, and I told a few bisexual friends that I was questioning. But I didn't tell any of my close friends or



family. I socialized mostly with straight people and kinda went around pretending everything was fine. I dated a few boys. I didn't think about my sexual orientation very much as a teenager, I was busy doing other things. That probably made high school a lot easier for me than other LGBT folks.

She continued her account of internalized homophobia when she described an experience in high school involving a popular music duo, the Indigo Girls.

I was really a big fan of the Indigo Girls. My friends liked them, and I knew that they were different. But even that showed some of my internalized homophobia. I remember looking at the addresses on the back of their album cover, for different social groups. One of them was for PFLAG, (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). When I was looking through their album cover as a teenager, I was offended that they printed that address. I thought to myself: "Why do they need to be so open about their sexuality?" But at the same time, I also treasured that they were open about being gay, although I assumed that since they were gay, that they were a couple and worried that that would make them more susceptible to breaking up as a musical group. Assumptions bred from misconceptions.

Ted described a very "dark time" in his life where he wanted to eliminate his feelings for the same sex because he feared that he would be known as a pedophile or as a person with a sexual dysfunction. Furthermore, he believed that if he were admit to others that he had feelings for the same sex, his family would no longer see him as the "perfect" individual as he was presently known.

... And then puberty, which was really a lot of conflicting emotions, cause that's when sexuality comes into play, and understanding that, you know, why am I not attracted sexually to women? You know the bargaining came in and God, and kept trying to change me, change me, all that kind of stuff ... I kept asking myself, "you know Ted, why aren't you in love?" He was the perfect son, the perfect friend, the perfect brother, the perfect nephew. He was just perfect in every sense. You know, that's what I was putting myself through. Then there was this dark Ted that no one knew and no would have to ever find out, because that Ted liked boys. And that meant at the time, for me, I was homophobic, at that time gay people were pedophiles, they were, um, they had sexual dysfunctions.

Secrecy, questioning of identities, and internalized homophobia were common themes found within participants' stories of discovering their emerging lesbian and gay identities. After years of seeking to understand their sexuality identities, participants each made the decision to "come out" and disclose their identities to those they could trust.

***Coming out and Struggling with a Minority Identity.*** When participants were asked to talk about their "coming out" process, each participant focused on a different set of experiences that occurred during this time. They centered this event within family, peers, dating, and time and place.

Bronwyn described the process of "coming out" to *herself* to be five or six years in length. She discussed the anger she experienced while discovering her identity as a lesbian individual given that she "wasn't exposed to queer issues when she as younger or to queer

possibilities.” However, Bronwyn was able to find refuge for her emerging identity by moving away from her current surroundings allowing for a new space for her to feel and be “different.”

Bronwyn explained those experiences this way:

I decided I wanted to kind of get away from school and everything so I went on a trip to Australia ... and met some folks and kinda started to meet other lesbians and connect in a place where there weren't as many consequences because I really didn't know anybody there. I ended up traveling with a group where I met my first girlfriend and meeting some other older lesbians who were really kind to me and kinda knew where I was at ... I could just experiment with being really different than everybody else. It was a lot easier to be different from everybody else because I was already different than everybody else [as a tourist].

Mike described similar circumstances to Bronwyn as he also travelled through Europe for a year on an exchange program. While Mike was able to find refuge in his identity away from home, he could not regain momentum with his identity development upon his return.

I was lucky enough on exchange to Europe for a year and so that allowed me to really be myself. And then when I came back to Canada I had to go back into the shell that I created for myself being, ah, being sort of a high school jock it was a very, very different experience. So while I was in Europe I really got to figure out who I was and everything about me and when I came back I just sort of regressed and lived within this shell and it wasn't really until I accepted it at end of high school/beginning of university, and I didn't come out to my parents and thus everyone, until last year.

Ted recounted feelings of “internal torment” he experienced in his early twenties when he began to fear that he may be seen as a “stereotypical gay male.”

Now [that I knew I was gay] I had all the same stereotypes ... So I did a lot of struggling. There was a lot of internal torment, and I really hated myself. I really didn't like who I was. And there was a feeling I couldn't get rid of as much as I bargained, as much as I, you know, sought out help to get it out of me, it never happened.

Ted later added,

Then I came out, or I was outed by my parents, my mom, then I really started the soul searching and who I was, for my sexual orientation basically, and then all of my focus was on me accepting myself at that point, and who I was, why I was the way I was, you know, what at the time, what the theories were behind homosexuality, was it nature, was it nurture. . .

Unlike Ted, Amy's referenced her fears of coming out mainly within her social status within her high school. Amy was the captain of her basketball team in high school and top prospect for women's university basketball in British Columbia until a knee injury ended her basketball career. She shared her fear of losing her identity as a peer leader and athlete within her high school if she had come out to her peers.

I think that [coming out] is something that could have turned a lot of people's backs on me or felt that it could have turned people's backs on the sports team too. And I guess I felt that at the time, that my team would feel differently about me ... and speaking in regards to if I would have gone on to play university basketball, had I gone on to play for

a big university in B.C., I think that being labelled as somebody who is gay at the time could have attracted some questionable media and attention. I don't know, because you think about how it is now for people who are coming out and saying that they are gay, like in the NHL and stuff, there is a really big thing around that. I know there is a coach's son who just came out as gay, and there is a lot of stuff like that and a lot of people turn their back on them, and a lot of people shun them cause of what they came out and said, so a lot of people are quiet and don't say anything.

Although admitting that she did not have any issues with rejection or bullying from her peers in high school regarding her sexuality identity, Colleen imparted that her family was not as accepting.

She revealed that,

The only thing that I had trouble with was my sister married into a Dutch-reformed family and she had a lot of issues with me being that [a lesbian], cause she thought that that would reflect upon her. And we're not Dutch-reformed, so she worked really hard to sort of fit a mould in that family, and I didn't fit into that. Um, and then my dad is a lawyer in town so people know his name . . . And I think he had some concerns about business and things like that.

Unlike the other participants, Lis self-identified as heterosexual until she met her female fiancé. Although she considers her coming out process as relatively unproblematic, she still faced concerns from her immediate family. She admitted to believing that disapproving reactions regarding her sexuality were unavoidable from some members of her family. She explained that

her father “blamed” it on travelling to Europe while her mother was simply “going to be a bitch about it.”

Although today her family is completely accepting of her sexuality identity, Lis indicated that although she has been dating a woman for three-and-a-half years and is engaged to be married, she sometimes cannot situate herself as being labelled a lesbian. She described the quandary this way:

I will occasionally [call myself a lesbian], and sometimes it feels really right but other times, I'm like “No, that's not what I am.” Like, I'm definitely more ... I mean ... I definitely think that there is a scale. I mean, definitely, at this point I am engaged to a girl, you know, I'm going to spend the rest of my life with a girl. So I guess I do consider myself a lesbian, but ... but ya I mean it's ... I dunno, it's weird .. I still haven't quite ... it's like my mind hasn't quite caught up with my actions, you know?

The coming out processes for the participants reveals a struggling period of their lives. Mike and Bronwyn did not feel comfortable coming out as a gay man or lesbian, respectively, at home but were able to find comfort in their identities while traveling to different countries. However, they were not necessarily able to express their new identities upon return. Colleen and Lis experienced concerns within their families understanding and accepting their new identities, while Ted battled with *why* he was born a gay man. Each of the participants faced difficulties throughout their coming out processes. In the next section, I address the pride and happiness that each participant felt as they became confident in their identities as lesbians or gay men.

*Pride in Lesbian or Gay Identity.* When participants were asked “what does your lesbian or gay male identity mean to you?,” the answers varied from very emotional responses including tears expressing the pride and joy that the participants feel when discussing their identities, to responses which reflected on the importance of inner strength and personal commitment to their lesbian or gay male identities. However, some participants reported their identity as “all encompassing” while others believed their identities are only a part of how they define themselves.

Ted, for instance, expressed personal pride in his gay identity and his unwillingness to change himself for anyone. He expressed himself quite emotionally when he said that,

It’s who I am (pause). And I’m really proud of that, and I wouldn’t change it for the world (pause). Because (sniffing), it’s made me the great person that I am today, and I understand (pause) (sniffing) ... Sorry Alison, you’ve hit a few cords (sniffing) ... It’s made me who I am today, and I wouldn’t change it for the world. Not even if someone gave me a pill that would change someone to become straight cause you know what, there’s no point. I am fully happy who I am. So, identity is part of who I am. It doesn’t define me; it’s just part of who I am. It’s not all my focus; it’s probably down the list. It’s probably one of the last ones. There are so many more things that make up Ted then “Ted is gay.” You know, Ted is a professional, Ted is family oriented, Ted, you know, is friendly, warm. You know, there are so many more things.

In contrast to Ted, Colleen considers her lesbian identity to be “all encompassing” when defining herself as an individual, rather than just part of what makes Colleen who she is.

It's pretty all encompassing, I think. You hear people say things like it's just one part of me. You know like, you hear people that are like, I like soccer, I like to play baseball, so I just happen to also be gay, when I don't think that it's just a small part of you. It's a pretty big part of me. I think partly that may have to do with the fact that I don't hide it. I probably can't hide it if I want to. The way I dress, the way I breath ... I think some people just count it as one of their interests, instead of who they are.

Each of the participants shared some common experiences throughout their identity development processes. These experiences included discovering their sexuality identities but keeping their emerging identities undisclosed to others, questioning their emerging identities, personal struggles with understanding their minority sexuality identities throughout their coming out processes, and pride with regard to their lesbian or gay identities. However, how the participants moved through their identity development processes all differed in time, space, and context. One tool that allowed participants to successfully move through their identity development processes was the Internet. This next section will describe how and why the Internet was considered an invaluable tool during this time of self-discovery.

### **Internet Usage throughout the Lesbian and Gay Male Identity Development Processes**

Throughout the participants' discussions about their lesbian or gay male identity development processes, the use of the Internet was cited as a common practice for each of them when they were adolescents discovering their sexual identities. My analysis indicates the following three themes that emerged when participants talked about how and why the Internet and online-based technologies were used throughout the identity development processes and how



such technologies are still used by them today: (a) anonymity and privacy; (b) personal support through online communities; and (c) Internet as a teaching tool for others.

*Anonymity and Privacy.* When participants were asked what led them to use the internet as a tool for learning about their growing lesbian or gay male identities, the sense of anonymity and privacy that is provided by using the Internet as a source of information, support and community were the most common answers.

Mike and Adam, for instance, discussed the lack of resources and support available to them outside of the Internet when they were trying to “figure out” their sexuality identities. Mike described the Internet as a device that he was able to “hide under.” He added that,

There are no other resources around where you are able to hide your identity while learning your identity ... and figure out the information you need to know or talk to people that you need to talk to without having your personal life sort of crash around you in a time when you're not really ready for that.

Ted, unable to discuss his sexuality with his friends and family, used the Internet without fear of being discovered or outed by researching emerging information regarding his new gay male identity.

There was a little bit of anonymity to it [using the Internet]. So I could stay, I guess, no one could identify me right? Even though I was ‘out’ [to myself], I wasn’t ‘out’ [to everyone else], at that time. So it gave me flexibility to do research on my own time and without fear of being caught by anyone. So the Internet was a really good vehicle for me to my own self-discovery, without fear of all those things.

Amy also felt uncomfortable discussing her newly discovered lesbian identity with those closest to her fearing that they might not understand her situation and therefore fail to provide the support she needed. She was able to use the Internet to keep her research and support private, and could find the information she needed on her own terms. She elaborated by saying that,

It was really nice to meet other people who were my age, struggling with, you know, not knowing how to talk about it with their parents and being able to have somebody who was listening. I guess it was nice because you didn't know them, and they didn't know you, so if it did get uncomfortable or whatever there was no commitment and no relationship or anything that you had, so it was just nice to have someone to talk to about whatever, and you may never have to talk to them again.

***Personal Support through Online Communities.*** All of the participants agreed that the discovery of their lesbian or gay male identities felt like a very isolating and lonely period of their lives when they did not know if their feelings were “normal,” or if there was anyone who was able to understand their current situations. With the ability to go online and access support through the Internet, they were able to find connections with other lesbian and/or gay male individuals who were facing similar situations and experiencing feelings comparable to their own.

Bronwyn discovered “a sense of connection and the sense that there are real people out there that are really different like me.” Mike revealed that he was not only able to find individuals who are experiencing the same feelings for the same sex that he was, but also he was able to find other gay males in isolated communities like himself “who were going through the

same thing,” while also putting him “in touch with the greater [gay] community.” Similarly, Amy was able to use information from the Internet regarding how to manage particular situations such as coming out to her parents and other common experiences that many lesbian and gay male people face while discovering their identities. Colleen described the Internet as a “life saver” during that period of her life. She stated that she does not believe that she would have found a supportive lesbian community otherwise. For Adam, the Internet was used as an outlet when discovering his feelings for the same sex when he explains,

I used the Internet as an outlet because I was in small towns. So, I didn't have much information out there and it was really hard for me. I didn't have anyone in my family that was out or anything, so I used a lot of chat rooms to talk to people that were my age and to kinda see how they felt because I wasn't sure how my feelings, like if they were normal, if other people were having these feelings. So I kinda used it as a gateway to explore my feelings, so I could talk to people, and let them know how I was feeling. It was a big weight off my shoulders to know that other people were feeling the same way.

Lis discussed how the Internet proved to be a useful tool for discovering a lesbian community and learning how to accomplish future goals as a lesbian individual such as having a family.

I started going online and looking up stuff. It wasn't something that helped me come out but it was something that now I got involved with to be a part of the [lesbian] community. It's almost like a hobby for me ... I go online and read lesbian blogs. I mean, it's nice. One of the ones I read is by a mom. She talks about different gay people and how they

ended up having kids. And that is something that is very important to me because I definitely want kids.

*Internet as a Teaching Tool for Others.* Although participants used the Internet for their own growth and identity development processes, the Internet was also discussed as a teaching tool for others who are currently discovering their own lesbian or gay male identities and/or for heterosexual individuals who wish to learn more about lesbian and/or gay male people.

For instance, Amy works with at-risk youth, many of whom identify as lesbian or gay, and leads such youth to online research to help them with their own struggles in discovering their identities. As she states,

I was actually working at a youth centre ... It was basically [with] at-risk street youth, and there was a large population of them that were part of the [lesbian and gay] community and were coming out and having struggles. I actually sat down with them on the computer and showed them a couple of resources and a couple of things that they could go to, a lot of organizations.

Additionally, Ted sees the Internet as a teaching tool for others who are looking for more information on lesbian or gay male identities and want to be positive allies of the lesbian and gay male community. He said,

I know my father has gone online and done research on homosexuality. He is trying to understand me. I know my cousins have, I know my brothers have, you know, so all of that has helped them better understand who I am, and accept me. The Internet has played a huge role in getting to where we are today. To getting to what I am going to call the

“gay-cause” or the “gay-movement,” or people understanding and accepting us (lesbian and gay male individuals) in society. So I think the Internet has really played a huge role.

Anonymity and privacy was the main motivating factor the participants turned to the Internet throughout their discovery and secrecy stage of their lesbian or gay identity development. While participants struggled with coming out and accepting their new minority identities, they were able to find support and guidance through online communities. Finally, although participants admit they do not currently use the Internet for online support as adults, they lead other lesbian and gay youth to online support websites and heterosexual people who are looking to educate themselves about lesbian and gay issues.

### **Summary**

Participants’ accounts of their sexuality identity development show a clear connection between their evolving sexuality identities and the use of the Internet for personal support, information, research, and community. The Internet was described as an invaluable tool throughout different times throughout each identity development process. In addition, the Internet was utilized by both all of the participants, demonstrating its value regardless of gender identity. Past identity development models, due to the time of their conception, do not show the value the Internet may hold throughout periods of development. The themes that emerged from my analysis of data pertaining to participants’ discussions about their lesbian or gay male identity development included (a) discovery and secrecy; (b) questioning sexuality identity and internalized homophobia; (c) coming out and struggling with a minority identity; and (d) pride in a personal lesbian or gay male identity. Each of the participants’ lesbian or gay male identity

development stories included the use of the Internet as a tool to further explore their sexuality identities and coming out processes. The themes regarding Internet usage consist of (a) anonymity and privacy; (b) personal support through online communities; and (c) Internet as a teaching tool for others. The connection between lesbian and gay male identity development and the use of the Internet further supports the notion that current lesbian and gay male identity development models need to be reanalyzed in light of current access to information, support, and communities via the Internet.

In the next chapter, I discuss the findings as they relate to current lesbian and gay male identity development models and the use of the Internet as a personal and social tool in discovering lesbian and gay male identities. The questions guiding this research project will be revisited and discussed in light of my findings.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

This study is a retrospective look at how lesbian and gay individuals moved through their identity development processes as youth while using the Internet as a tool for support, information, and research. Based upon stories given by each of the seven participants interviewed, I discerned themes from my analysis of the data that describes their experiences. The themes concerning lesbian or gay identity development are: (a) discovery and secrecy; (b) questioning sexuality identity and internalized homophobia; (c) coming out and struggling with a minority identity; and (d) pride in a personal lesbian or gay male identity. In regards to Internet usage throughout the participants' identity development, the themes are: (a) anonymity and privacy; (b) personal support through online communities; and (c) Internet as a teaching tool for others. In this chapter, I return to the literature in order to make connections and distinctions between the results that emerged from my study and identity development models.

Previous lesbian and gay male identity development theorists could not have anticipated the modern use of the Internet that many lesbian and gay people take advantage of today. To make these connections and distinctions, I link the themes regarding the progression of the participants' identity development processes with how the Internet was used during those periods of their lives. In other words, throughout the time of discovery and secrecy, participants turned to the Internet because it offered anonymity and privacy. During the time the participants were questioning their emerging sexuality identities, sometimes negatively as an indication of internalized homophobia, the Internet was used for personal support through online communities. These supportive communities found on the Internet were also used throughout the

participants' coming out process and while struggling with their newly realized minority identities. Finally, all participants expressed current personal pride in their lesbian or gay identities, which has changed to how they currently use the Internet.

### **Turning to the Internet for Anonymity and Privacy during Periods of Discovery and Secrecy**

Participants' early awareness of feelings for the same-sex parallels Cass (1979) and Troiden's (1988) theory of lesbian and gay male identity development. During this time, some participants recognized themselves as being "different" from their peers rather than understanding their growing attraction to individuals of the same sex. Bronwyn and Amy's secrecy and removal from social interactions due to their feelings of unlikeness to others reflects Gonsiorek's (1988) suggestion of lesbian identity development. In all cases, the participants' feelings of difference led them to keep their identities secretive. This included the decision to stay in the closet, or to keep their sexuality identities undisclosed, for many years. Dobsin (2002) theorizes that keeping these identities undisclosed to others can be considered a psychological coping mechanism of denial. Bronwyn, for instance, refrained from hugging her friends in fear that they might find out her secret of being attracted to other women. Similarly, Amy worried that teammates on her high school basketball team would begin to deliberate over intimate feelings she might have for them if she were to admit her attractions to other females. Plummer (1995) and Savin-Williams (2005) state that lesbian and gay individuals who are aware of the stigma and common stereotypes that surround homosexuality are most likely to keep their identities a secret. Doing so then leads to monitoring their behaviour in order to keep their identities confidential. Bronwyn and Amy's experiences reflect the previous studies carried out



by Plummer (1995) and Savin-Williams (2005) as they both kept their identities secret. Their behaviours were particularly monitored around those of the same sex, in fear that someone might discover their undisclosed identities through their actions of hugging or coming too close to another female. Although participants kept their identities secretive during this time of their lives, they looked to gather information about their emerging identities. Seeing as they were not comfortable speaking to their families or peers about their current circumstances, they turned to the Internet in order to find the information they desired.

Throughout this time of secrecy and undisclosed feelings for the same sex, participants turned to the Internet for information about their sexuality identities. The ability to access resources (both social and informational) anonymously and privately and on their own terms was revealed to be the chief motive in their decision to use the Internet. Hughes-Hassell and Hinckley (2001) recognize the Internet as a resource that does not limit access to information or social networks based on circumstances of geography. As most participants were living in rural communities when exploring their lesbian or gay identities, the Internet was used because they did not have access to resources offered in large urban centers. Unks (1995) describes schools as one of the most homophobic institutions in society. Therefore, it is not surprising that Mike and Adam felt dissatisfied with the information available through their schools or from others close to them on the topic of gay identity development. They saw the Internet as a *safe place* where they could *learn their identities* while still *hiding their identities* from others until they were comfortable to discuss them openly. Participants expressed that they feared outing themselves by entering a library, approaching a bulletin board or encountering a potentially dangerous situation by disclosing to someone who might not be supportive of their lesbian or gay identity. This fear

of negative or hateful reactions from others is also suggested by Woodland (1999). In addition, Amy felt that she benefitted from not having to make close personal connections to other lesbians but rather finding individuals on the Internet where she felt more comfortable speaking about her developing lesbian identity.

The advantage of anonymity and privacy was the main motivator for the participants to turn to the Internet during the time when participants were discovering their lesbian or gay identities and chose to keep such identities secret from their families and peers. As the participants' identities progressed, so did their use of the Internet. When participants began to negatively question their emerging identities, which reflected their internalized homophobia, they used the Internet for personal support through online communities. This support found online was also used during their times of coming out and during their initial struggles with their newly realized minority identities.

### **Questioning Sexuality Identities, Internalized Homophobia, and Personal Support through Online Communities**

Questioning lesbian and gay identity indicates that one is unsure of whether one is gay or lesbian. This was a common emotional aspect of each of the participants' developmental processes. This period of uncertainty can originate from a societal assumption that it is only "natural" or "normal" to be attracted to those of the opposite sex (Kitzinger, 2005). Cass (1979) and Troiden (1988) agree that it is common for lesbian and gay individuals to question their emerging identities. However, in this study, participants differed in what led them to question their identities. While Adam presumed that he might not be "different" from his peers and that

every person had some sexual feelings for the opposite sex, Lis simply believed her attraction to the same sex was “fake” as she was 20 years old before she recognized and acted on feelings toward another female. Lis’ feelings of “faking” her attraction to another female lies within her belief that the decision to be with members of the same sex is a personal choice. This aspect of choice in a lesbian identity reflects Golden’s (1990) theory of lesbian identity development. However, Lis’ previous dismissal to same-sex relationships as an adolescent may point to a case of internalized homophobia. Lis admits that, as a youth, she was attracted to women. However, at that time, she did not pursue having a relationship. In extreme forms of internalized homophobia, non-identified lesbian and gay men can reject their sexual orientation (Frost & Meyer, 2009) and opt for so-called reparative therapy or Christian “ex-gay” groups. Lis may have denied her sexual orientation as a lesbian until she felt comfortable as an adult to act on her affiliation to the same sex.

Russell, Clarke, and Clarey (2009) state that conventional labels commonly used to describe lesbian and gay men are seen not seen as self-descriptive by many. Kinsey (1948/1958) also believed that this is true of sexual behaviour. Many labels describing lesbian and gay men only point to definitive statements about an individual. For example, gender-atypical expressions or characteristics, (such as girls acting tomboyish or boys demonstrating traits that are associated with femininity), although certainly not exclusive to lesbian and gay male population, are common stereotypes that are used to describe the lesbian or gay population. However, despite how sexuality is socially constructed, it is defined differently on an individual, personal level. For this reason, Lis has great difficulty describing herself as a lesbian. She does not feel that social stereotypes that describe lesbians necessarily apply to her as an individual. In opposition

to Adam and Lis, Amy began to question her identity in its entirety, not just as a lesbian, but as a young woman, due to other circumstances within her life that were changing her perspective on the future. These circumstances included losing her status as a star basketball player due to a major knee injury. Bronwyn and Ted, on the other hand, were not only questioning their own emerging identities but facing their own internalized homophobia.

Homophobia, as defined by Walton (2009), is “attitudes, expression, and behaviours against gay and lesbian people” (p. 212). Internalized homophobia is further characterized by an internal psychological conflict between experiences of same-sex affection or desire and a feeling of need to be heterosexual (Herek, 2004). Again, societal beliefs in heteronormativity may underlie these “negative social attitudes toward the self of a gay person, leading to devaluation of the self and resultant internal conflicts and poor self regard” (Meyer and Dean, 1998, p.161). Bronwyn’s disgust with an advertisement for an organization which supports lesbian and gay youth she found within the album cover of a favourite band, *The Indigo Girls*, shows the lack of empathy and understanding she not only had for her own feelings, but for others who were discovering their lesbian or gay identities. Bronwyn believes that this was due to her lack of exposure to queer issues and queer relationships as a youth. Ted’s misunderstandings of gay individuals led him to believe that he might be a pedophile or one with a sexual dysfunction. Plummer (1995) indicates that the impact of stigma as a negative influence on an evolving lesbian or gay identity may lead to a strong sense of differentness within one’s conscience. Individuals who are developing a lesbian or gay identity, according to Brooks (1996), need their identities validated and confirmed by their families and society. Role confusion may result if they cannot integrate previous life experiences and obtain positive confirmation from others of

who they are as a lesbian or gay male. These stigmatizing beliefs both Bronwyn and Ted held against other lesbian and gay individuals, and thus themselves, led them to hide in shame and secrecy for many years before they were comfortable discussing their sexuality with others.

Another difficulty participants revealed throughout the interviews about their identity development processes was their decision to come out to their families and friends. During this time, individuals may not only face possible oppressive and homophobic people in society but also further homophobic contexts at home (Bernal & Coolhart, 2005). It was not until Mike and Bronwyn travelled to different countries that they felt comfortable enough “be themselves” as lesbian or gay individuals. According to Savin-Williams (1995), when lesbian and gay youth decide to come out and discuss their sexuality identities with their families or peers, they may face many negative responses ranging from disapproval to more extreme reactions such as verbal or physical abuse, religiously-based therapy to change youth’s sexuality identity, hospitalization, or expulsion from the family home. Colleen’s experience of coming out to her family illustrates some of the negative reactions that youth can face due to the stigma surrounding homosexuality. Colleen’s in-laws struggled with accepting her sexuality identity as it did not assimilate within their Dutch-reformed beliefs, while her father worried about the image her identity might place on his legal practice. Lis also faced considerable challenges when she initially discussed her new sexuality identity with her mother and father. Even though her mother is a member of Egale, the Canadian “national lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans human rights organization: advancing equality, diversity, education and justice (Egale Canada, 2011, About Egale, para. 1), and wrote newspaper articles about “growing up gay” in her hometown, she initially had trouble accepting her daughter as a lesbian, nonetheless.

Discrimination, rejection, harassment, social pressures to conform, and victimization of sexual minorities have been well documented (D'Augelli, & Rose, 1990; Rhoads, 1994; Savin-Williams, 2005; Jurgens, Schwitzer, & Middleton, 2008). Ted and Amy both struggled with their new sexuality identities as they began to learn of the stereotypes and stigma that others in society may hold against them. The participants in this study faced what Meyer (2003) characterizes as *minority stress* – discrimination based on group status. Throughout this continuing period of isolation and internal conflict, participants looked to find social, moral, and personal support from others who have faced or were facing similar situations. They found this via the Internet.

Through the use of the Internet, the participants were able to find supportive and informational research from other lesbian and gay men and their allies. In turn, this allowed them to feel more comfortable and even proud of their sexuality identities. Woodland (1999) believes that lesbians and gay men should openly welcome the use of the Internet during their identity development processes. This is especially true for those who have chosen not be open about their sexuality to their family or peers. Due to the easy accessibility of the Internet, it became an invaluable tool for experiencing lives of other lesbian and gay individuals, for meeting people like themselves who helped define a new “normalcy” which included their developing sexuality identities, and created a space free from oppressive forces. Many of the participants agreed that without the use of the Internet during their identity development processes, they might not be as content within their lives today. The Internet provides individuals with the ability to communicate with others outside their immediate physical locality, which can allow for safer environments and a larger audience for support and concerns regarding lesbian and gay identities (Woodland, 1999; Munt, Bassett, & O’Riordan, 2002). As participants began to learn more about

their sexuality identities, they became accepting and comfortable with themselves as sexual minorities through the use of the Internet. In turn, concerns about coming out to family and friends were eased. The renegotiation of self that each participant experienced during this time was guided by each participant's experience of learning about their new sexuality identities in a different way, namely online.

Although participants faced struggling periods throughout their lesbian or gay identity development processes, they were able to look to the Internet to find the personal support they needed. All the participants are now confident in their sexuality identities, and their outlook on their lives as lesbian and gay individuals is nothing but positive. However, in light of the change in attitudes about themselves, their use of the Internet has also transformed.

### **Personal Pride in Lesbian and Gay Identities and Current Internet Usage**

All participants express personal pride in their lesbian or gay identities. They differ, however, in how they describe the reflection of their identities upon their individual definitions of self. The lesbian and gay identity development models described by Cass (1979), Troiden (1988), D'Augelli (1994), Brown (1995), and Savin-Williams (2005) all illustrate a sense of pride at the conclusion of their sexuality identity processes. This is understandable as the identity development process could not be complete without the accomplishment of a confident sexuality identity. Participants remarked that they either considered their sexuality identities as "all-encompassing" or simply as an element that makes up who they are. The differentiation between how participants described their identities demonstrates that lesbian and gay individuals can differ across contexts (Diamond, 2005). Thus, neatly categorizing lesbian and gay men into

distinct developmental stages does not necessarily reflect the complexities of identity development and the experience of all lesbian and gay individuals (Moradi et al., 2009). Each participant moved through their identity development process at different speeds, time, and in different contexts. However, regardless of their diverse processes, they all currently feel pride about their lesbian and gay identities. Due to the confidence each participant holds within their own identity, they admit the Internet is no longer needed as a tool for support and informational research. However, they also acknowledged the use of the Internet for others who may be struggling with their emerging lesbian or gay identities and for heterosexual people who wish to know more about lesbian and gay issues.

Knowing the Internet was a useful means to information throughout Amy's lesbian identity process, she points other youth who are struggling with their emerging lesbian or gay identities to the Internet for their own personal support. Ted considers the Internet to be a useful resource for heterosexual individuals who are looking to increase their own knowledge of lesbian and/or gay issues. He also believes that by using the Internet, members of his family who might not necessarily "understand" him can gain knowledge on issues surrounding sexuality identity. Although there are many websites that offer nothing but vitriol and hate against sexual minorities, using the Internet to increase social awareness on lesbian and gay issues can decrease stigma, stereotypes, and other prejudices that individuals can hold against lesbian and gay men. For example, the Egale Canada website includes current LGBT news, issues, events, and research which includes Egale's own National Education Survey (2012) entitled *Every Classroom in Every School: The first national climate survey on homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in Canadian schools*. The PFLAG Canada website provides support, education, and



resources to “parents, friends, and colleagues 24 hours a day, 7 days a week” via a toll free phone call (PFLAG, 2009, para. 1). PLFAG Canada also provides countless subject-specific links for those who would prefer to find information or support without having to speak to an individual. For women, Autostraddle, is an “intelligent, hilarious & provocative voice and a progressively feminist online community for a new generation of kickass lesbian, bisexual & otherwise inclined ladies (and their friends)” (2012, About Us, para.1). The website offers everything from social networking, interviews with celebrities, news regarding the lesbian and gay movement, recipes, advice, and support.

Encouraging youth who are questioning their sexuality identities to go to such informative and supportive websites on the Internet allows them to find what they require while taking advantage of anonymity, privacy, and personal support all on their own terms. This includes eliminating having to directly speak about issues that they might feel uncomfortable talking about person-to-person. Heterosexual individuals can also take advantage of the Internet to enhance their education and knowledge about issues regarding lesbian and gay communities. They can use the informative websites during their own time and without the fear of the possibility of insulting a member of the community by asking personal questions that might be considered offensive.

## **Summary**

The linear stage theories of lesbian and gay identity development models developed by Cass (1979) and Troiden (1988) describe a process in which individuals progress along a direct path which begins with confusion regarding one’s identity and moves through to pride within a

lesbian or gay identity. These models are intended to provide a general pattern of development. The models do not take into consideration individual contexts, time, and space. In addition, due to the period of time the models were developed, they could not have taken into account the modern and multiple uses the Internet serves to individuals discovering their lesbian or gay identities. Some more progressive models have been offered since Cass (1979) and Troiden's (1988) such as D'Augelli's (1994) *life-span* model, Savin-Willaims' (2005) *Differential Developmental Trajectories* theory, and Elison's (1996) model that focuses on lesbian identity development. These more current identity development theories account for the variations within people's lives and use a non-linear pathway to describe lesbian and gay male identity development. However, these models also could not have accounted for the use of the Internet as an important learning, supportive, and social tool throughout the lesbian and gay identity development processes. My study illustrates how some lesbian and gay people progress through their individual lesbian and gay identity development in part by using the Internet as a source of informational research and support throughout their journeys. The Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 93% of American teens aged 12-17 use the Internet, 63% of whom are online every day. With this in mind, it is crucial that when developing lesbian and gay identity development models, and models about sexuality identity development in general, the use of the Internet as a source of informational research, support, and communities throughout identity development processes is taken into account.

My analysis indicates that when participants explored their identities and kept their feelings to themselves, they turned to the Internet in order to gather information about their emerging identities. By using the Internet, they were able to take advantage of the anonymity and

privacy that the Internet holds while searching for the information they needed without having to approach another who might have a negative reaction to their attractions to the same sex. While the participants were doubtful about their identities, sometimes with feelings of internalized homophobia, the Internet provided a safe place to find personal support where participants could speak with others who have been or are going through similar circumstances regarding their emerging identities. The safe space the Internet provided through LGBT-positive websites was also utilized while the participants were coming out and struggling with their new minority identities. The personal support on the Internet allowed the participants to come through some difficult periods in their identity development that might not otherwise have been available.

All participants expressed personal pride in their lesbian and gay identities as confident and successful adults. Due to their self-confidence in their identities, they revealed that they no longer need or use the Internet for informational research or support for their identities. However, the Internet was identified as a useful tool for current lesbian and gay youth who are discovering their emerging identities and for heterosexual people who are looking to find more information on issues regarding sexual minorities.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to discover how and why lesbian and gay people use the Internet throughout their identity development processes. As previously discussed, the Internet was found to be an invaluable tool throughout each of the participants' journey in exploring their own lesbian or gay identity. The Internet was shown to be used in diverse ways and for different reasons during the course of the participants' development into adults who are confident about their lesbian or gay identities. For example, when they first discovered their emerging lesbian or gay identities, they chose not to disclose their secret to their families or peers. Throughout this time, the Internet was used for its anonymity and privacy. Questioning their feelings for the same sex became common as their undisclosed but budding identities began to affect their everyday behaviours. In some cases, this questioning period was pervaded with thoughts of internalized homophobia. However, the participants were able to turn to the Internet for support, guidance and informational research on their identities during this time. The result was participants became proudly out and confident about their lesbian or gay identities. Eventually, they ceased to use the Internet in the same way as they had throughout their identity development processes. Each of the participants suggested that the Internet is a crucial tool for others to use who are struggling with their emerging lesbian or gay identities and/or for heterosexual individuals who are looking for information regarding lesbian or gay issues.

Previous lesbian and gay identity development models need to be updated to reflect the prominence of the Internet as a tool for support, guidance and informational research. The purpose of this study was not to negate previous lesbian and gay identity development models

such as the ones created by Cass (1979), D'Augelli (1994), Eliason (1996), Savin-Williams (2005), and Troiden (1988), but to offer a modernized conception of the lesbian or gay identity development process while using the Internet throughout the journey. For each participant, the Internet was a global community in which they could remove themselves from their immediate locality and connect to others around the world who have been through or are going through similar circumstances to themselves. In fact, many of the participants admitted that they did not know how they would have made it through their identity development process without the support, guidance, and informational research the Internet was able to provide. However, although the Internet was an invaluable tool throughout the participants' identity development processes, most admitted to wanting more resources they could access personally in addition to finding support online. An increased societal shift in public thinking regarding sexual minorities needs to take place in order for lesbian and gay youth and adults to feel more comfortable and secure confiding in friends, family, and/or professionals with concerns about their identity development rather than having to turn to virtual support via the Internet. These concerns point to a need for widespread public education and greater professional development for teachers regarding lesbian and gay identity development processes and issues in order for emerging lesbian and gay youth to feel comfortable coming to trusted individuals in person.

### **Professional Development for Teachers**

Unks (1996) argues that schools are one of the most heterosexist institutions in society, yet lesbian and gay youth in North America are legally required to attend schools where they are largely stigmatized against and/or ignored as individuals. In fact, many teachers are unaware of the homophobic and heterosexist practices and prejudices that exist in their schools (Meyer,

2009). In 2009, the Ontario Ministry of Education implemented an *Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* that focused on policy and practice, and states that, “students, teachers, and staff learn and work in an environment that is respectful, supportive, and welcoming to all” (p. 12). The Ottawa-Carlton District School Board has created a Rainbow coalition with the help of surrounding community agencies to provide “lesbian, gay, bisexual, two-spirited, trans-identified, and straight students with a safe space to socialize, support each other, and discuss concerns” (Ontario Ministry of Education, p. 16). Issues and concerns raised in this coalition are then conveyed to other teachers through a one-day Rainbow Forum. Although some schools are making the effort to stop homophobia and heterosexism in their schools, many participants in this study admitted to being dissatisfied with the information and support that their schools offered. In addition, the majority of participants chose not to speak to anyone within their schools about their emerging identities during their time in elementary and/or high school due to fear of rejection or possible homophobic judgments from their peers and/or teachers. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2009), only forty-three of Ontario’s seventy-two school boards acknowledge having an equity policy in place. How many of these equity policies focused on lesbian or gay issues within their schools is unknown.

My analysis of interview data, combined with an assessment of current contexts in schools on homophobia and heterosexism, indicates that teachers, administrators, and school boards need to work to create a safe place for sexual minority students to feel comfortable discussing their emerging sexuality identities. Doing so could involve introducing lesson plans and units, which include sexual minority subject matter that does not solely focus on sexual health. For example, social studies and history units could include the discussions about gay and

lesbian liberation movements during the 1970's and 80's, and campaigns since then to accord lesbians and gays the same legal rights as straight people. Introducing famous sexual minority figures and/or characters can create empathy and understanding for sexual minority issues. This not only creates a space that allows sexual minority students to connect to the subject matter, but also provides opportunities for heterosexual students and teachers to educate themselves on diverse sexual minority concerns. In fact, Lipkin (1996) explains that limiting discussion of sexual minority issues to the sexual health curriculum can result in uninformed people, including educators, who medicalize homosexuality or reinforce the common misconception that being lesbian or gay is exclusively about sexual activity. In order to create a greater understanding and accepting future generation, teachers cannot simply bring lesbian and gay content into their classroom as a simple lesson or unit but they must create "a new space, a better space for everyone" (Dei, 2006) where all students, regardless of sexuality, feel safe and welcome.

### **Training for Pre-Service Teachers**

In order to interrupt the challenge of heterosexism and homophobia in classrooms, pre-service teachers need to be educated and trained in the issues that surround lesbian and gay identities. Hatton (1996) claims that many teacher education programs do not adequately prepare pre-service teachers to discuss issues that surround homophobia and sexual minority diversity in their classrooms. Many of the participants in this study turned to the Internet in order to find the support, guidance, and informational research they required throughout their identity development processes. None of the participants felt comfortable speaking about their emerging identities with anyone within their schools. If more teachers were apparent about their openness to discussing sexual minority issues within their classrooms, this might have not been the case.

One reason for this lack of education or preparation for pre-service teachers is that many professors believe topics which surround lesbian and gay issues are controversial or taboo (Robinson & Ferolja, 2001; Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006). Walton (2005) observes that equity and diversity courses for pre-service teachers are left to a small segment of their education courses, most of which are electives. This highlights the lack of understanding that educators, including those who teach pre-service teachers, hold of current institutionalized homophobia in schools today. Lesbian and gay youth need to feel that they are accepted within their schools, including their classrooms, and that teachers are a large part in creating safe and supportive environments where all students, including sexual minorities, feel welcome.

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research on the experiences of lesbian and gay identity development processes is needed to answer many questions that were not addressed in and did not arise throughout this study. From my analysis of the data, I offer several recommendations for areas of future research:

1. This study covered a limited scope of sexual minority individuals - lesbians and gay men. Future research could look into the identity development processes of other sexual minority individuals including bisexual, identified-trans or two-spirited people, while using the Internet as a tool for support, guidance, informational research and community.
2. Including participants from larger city centres who have easy access to lesbian and/or gay support, information and opportunities to socialize with other lesbians or gays outside the Internet may gather different results in terms of their identity development process than



those from rural areas. In addition, using participants from various socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicities, and education levels could enable future researchers.

3. Future research could examine how current teachers address, if at all, lesbian and/or gay issues within their classrooms. Many of the participants in this study were dissatisfied with the support and/or information that was available to them within their schools. As this was a retrospective look into lesbian or gay identity development, teaching practices and classroom dynamics toward lesbian and gay individuals may have positively progressed.
4. Future research could recruit participants who admit that they do not or have not used the Internet as a tool for support, guidance, and/or informational research throughout their identity development processes and compare their stories to those who have used or are currently using the Internet throughout the identity development processes.

### **Social Change**

This thesis opened with a discussion in reference to openly gay comedian Rick Mercer and his plea, on his television show *The Rick Mercer Report* (CBC, 2011), for lesbian and gay public figures to come forward and pronounce their minority sexuality identities in order for emerging lesbian and gay youth to have encouraging role models. However, prominent lesbian and gay public figures can also help to educate heterosexual people about lesbian and gay identity development. Popular media, including television, newspapers, and movies, provide a large platform from which lesbian and gay people, including “cops, soldiers, athletes, and cabinet ministers” (Rick Mercer, 2010, para. 1), can shed light on important issues concerning sexual minority identity development. A recent story discussed in the media was the suicide of

Jamie Hubley in October 2011 in Ottawa. His suicide prompted Mercer to make his *rant* and arguably helped to educate the Canadian public about the difficulties that lesbian and gay youth face in schools and society. Given that the video has generated almost half a million views on Youtube, I conjecture that Mercer's rant may have enhanced understanding of the issues concerning lesbian and gay identity development, and thus challenged negative social attitudes towards lesbian and gay people. Likewise, lesbian and gay characters have increasingly featured on television and in movies. However, such characters do not adequately represent *all* lesbian and gay male identities, but rather scripted versions that commonly mirror stereotypes (Streitmatter, 2009). This again points to the importance of lesbian and gay people coming out about their sexual identities openly, especially those who are prominent public figures. Doing so positions them as role models for lesbian and gay youth and will help educate the public about sexuality minority identity development

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## APPENDIX A1

## Invitation to Participate in Research Project/Statement of Introduction

Dear Potential Participant,

You are invited to participate in a qualitative study entitled, "*Lesbian and Gay Male Identity Development and Online Communities*." The purpose of this study is to explore how online resources, including blogs, chats, websites, social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook help support identity formation in lesbian and gay (L/G) youth through a retrospective inquiry of personal journeys from self-identified L/G adults. Mainly, my focus is on personal narrative journeys from awareness or questioning sexual orientation to 'coming out' as an L/G person while using online mediums as a place for guidance and support as one discovers their own path towards L/G identity formation. More specifically, I will focus on how web-based online technologies are used during the identity growth and 'coming out' process of L/G people and in which ways these media are useful and supportive in their experiences of discovering their own identities. You have been selected as a participant because you are a self-identified L/G adult who has experienced moving through L/G identity formation process as a youth while using online media as a resource and/or support throughout your process.

This study will be conducted by myself, Alison Ross. I am a Master of Education student at Lakehead University and have been involved with L/G communities and organizations throughout Ontario. Should you choose to participate in the study, your participation would be entirely voluntary. You may **refuse** to participate in any part of the study, refuse to answer any question, and you may **withdraw** from the study at any time without penalty.

During the study you will be asked to participate in an individual interview, lasting approximately one hour, during which you will describe and reflect upon your experiences of using online media as a source of support and resource throughout your journey of L/G identity formation. We will engage in conversation about your personal discovery of your own identity and how online media was used from the beginnings of L/G curiosity through to coming out as an L/G individual. You will be given the opening discussion statement; “please tell me about your experiences as an L/G individual discovering your L/G identity and coming out process while using Internet-based technology (i.e. websites, online bulletin and message boards, chat rooms, and/or social networking sites) before the commencement of the study in order to prepare your thoughts of your identity formation journey. I may then ask individual questions in order to gather a more in depth understanding of your personal story.

Individual transcripts and interpretation of the stories will be sent back to the participants in order to verify authenticity and soundness.

If you consent, data from the interviews will be recorded by audiotape and written notes will be taken by the researcher. If you chose not to have your interview recorded, you may still participate in this research project. If speaking about past memories or struggles of discovering your L/G identity causes emotional stress, you will be offered an L/G-friendly hotline number (416-392-6874) where you may speak to a professional about your past or current emotional concerns. You will not be identified in any recorded data or publicly disseminated information. Pseudonyms will be used in transcripts and written findings to your reference to your participation in the project.

All data, including transcripts, audiotapes and written notes, will only be viewed by myself during the research process and will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in which I will be the only person who holds the key. Lakehead University will then securely store the data for five years after the research process, after which all data will be destroyed. All electronic data (i.e. audio recordings) will be downloaded and stored on a secured hard-drive (not connected to the internet).

By participating in this study you will be benefiting families of L/G youth by contributing education on how the identity formation processes can be supported by different online mediums as one moves through their journey to adulthood. This research will also contribute to new literature concerning identity formation of L/G youth while using online media as a source of support and resource information during their journey of discovery. The findings will be relevant to different research communities such as teacher and inclusive education, L/G identity theory, and to sociologists who are interested in L/G identity formation.

You can contact the Lakehead University Ethics Board (807-343-8283) if you have any questions concerning the ethical nature of this study or the ethical conduct of the researchers.

I sincerely look forward to your participation in this study. If you have any questions concerning this study, I can be reached through email at [aross4@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:aross4@lakeheadu.ca). My supervisor, Dr. Gerald Walton can also be reached through email at [gerald.walton@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:gerald.walton@lakeheadu.ca).

Thank you for your consideration in participating in this study.

Alison Ross



## APPENDIX A1

## Letter of Informed Consent

I, \_\_\_\_\_ have read and understood the covering letter of the study entitled “*Lesbian and Gay Male Identity Formation and Online Communities*,” by Alison Ross. I do agree to participate in this research project and I understand that I will describe and reflect upon my experiences of using online media as a source of support and resource throughout my journey of L/G identity formation. We will engage in conversation about my personal discovery of my own identity and how online media was used from the beginnings of L/G curiosity through to coming out as an L/G individual.

I understand that as the participant in this study, the information I provide for this research will benefit families of youth who are finding their L/G identity while using online media as a source of support. The findings from this research will be relevant and may be used by different research communities such as teacher and inclusive education, L/G identity theory, and to sociologists who are interested in L/G identity formation.

I understand that I can contact the researcher, Alison Ross ([aross4@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:aross4@lakeheadu.ca)), the research supervisor, Dr. Gerald Walton ([gerald.walton@lakeheadu.ca](mailto:gerald.walton@lakeheadu.ca)), and/or the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board (807-343-8283) if I have any questions or concerns regarding the ethical conduct of the researchers and/or the ethical design of the study. I also understand that all data will be stored securely at Lakehead University for a 5-year period and then destroyed.

I understand that I can refuse to answer a question at any time or refuse to participate in any part of the study. I also understand that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that I may withdraw at any time from participating in this research project, even after signing this form. Any information that is collected about me during this study will be kept confidential, and if the results are published, I will not be identified in any way unless I chose to waive my identity in which I sign the "*Letter to Waive Consent to Privacy and Confidentiality.*" I also understand that the findings and analysis of this project will be sent to me from the researcher, Alison Ross, to verify its authenticity and soundness prior to research publication. I have discussed those details and issues of respectful research with the student investigator of the study, Alison Ross.

If you agree to participate in this study please check the box and sign below.

Thank you for your participation in this study.

I agree for my interview to be recorded for the purposes of this study YES  NO

---

Signature of Participant

Date

I have explained the nature and parameters of this study (as both academic and respectful study) to the participant and believe that they have understood

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Signature of Student Investigator

Date

## APPENDIX A3

## Letter to Waive Consent to Privacy and Confidentiality

I, \_\_\_\_\_, as a participant in the study “*Lesbian and Gay Male Identity Development and Online Communities*” waive my right to privacy and confidentiality. I understand that my signing this waiver that my real name may be used in this study.

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Signature of Participant

Date

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Signature of Researcher

Date

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Signature of Witness

Date

## APPENDIX B1

## Tentative Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about your experiences as a lesbian or gay individual discovering your lesbian or gay identity and coming out process while using Internet-based technology such as websites, online bulletin and message boards, chat rooms, and/or social networking sites
2. Can you describe some of the online resources or web-based technology you used when forming your L/G identity?
3. What online resources helped you out most? Why?
4. Were there any online resources that did not help facilitate your lesbian or gay identity development?
5. If the Internet didn't exist. How do you think it would be different?
6. What does a lesbian or gay identity mean to you?