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You Can Form a Part of Yourself Online: The Influence of New Media on Identity Development and Coming Out for LGBTQ Youth

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Internet-based new media are increasingly utilized by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth, yet little is known about the ways in which it influences their identity development. Employing grounded theory, this study explores the influence of on-line media on the identity development and coming out processes (n = 19) of LGBTQ youth. Results indicate that new media enabled participants to access resources, explore identity, find likeness, and digitally engage in coming out. Participants also discussed the expansion of these newly developed identities into their offline lives. Practice implications are addressed.

KEYWORDS *identity, LGBTQ, youth, coming out, media*

Emerging forms of media are critical to the identity development of many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth. New media refer to Internet-based media including websites, web-based TV, web-based news, social media, social networking, and video sharing. Contemporary research indicates that youth generally may use new media to explore identities, behaviors, and lifestyles that might remain inaccessible offline (Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Pascoe, 2011). Further, it has been suggested that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth in particular are able to cultivate a sexual

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minority identity online while their offline lives may require them to present as heterosexual or limit the presentation of their ideal sexuality in some way (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). Despite this burgeoning knowledge about media and youth identity, there remains a paucity of research about the influence of new media on the identity development and coming out processes of LGBTQ youth.

COMING OUT AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT ONLINE

Identity development is perhaps the most important developmental task undertaken during adolescence (Morrow, 2004). The emergence of a positive identity for LGB youth that includes their sexual orientation has been deemed important yet challenging (Eliason, 1996), and the coming out process is often the most stressful part of this identity formation (D'Augelli, 1996). Coming out, or the disclosure of one's sexual orientation, often occurs during adolescence (Cox, Dewaele, van Houtte, & Vincke, 2011), which is characterized by personal change and growth (Troiden, 1989). Many authors have detailed the coming out process, frequently making use of sexual identity development models wherein individuals accomplish "critical tasks within distinct phases" (Moe, Reicherzer, & Dupuy, 2011, p. 229) that culminate in a well-adjusted sexual minority identity. In her popular "coming out" model, Cass (1979) indicates that the development of a sexual minority identity requires active personal engagement and sharing of one's identity with selected others. Further, Cass makes a distinction between public and private identification, recognizing that an individual may continue to identify publicly as heterosexual while identifying personally as LGB.

The model describes six stages for successful coming out that include: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis (Cass, 1979). Identity confusion is characterized by an individual's increasing awareness of his or her sexual minority behavior and confusion over the incongruence of this behavior and the identification (or identification by others) as heterosexual. In identity comparison, the individual accepts the possibility of being a sexual minority and experiences alienation and isolation as his or her identity differs from what others perceive or expect. Identity tolerance involves individuals increasing their commitment to their sexual minority identity and acknowledging their needs. Further, increased alienation leads individuals to seek out and explore the sexual minority community. In identity acceptance individuals accept their sexual minority identity and increase their interaction with the sexual minority community. Identity pride involves individuals increasingly identifying with the sexual minority community and placing greater emphasis on how they are perceived by that community, not by heterosexuals. Further, they may experience frustration or anger over the

conflict between heterosexual and sexual minority values and increasingly begin to disclose their sexual minority identity. Finally, identity integration involves individual interacting with supportive heterosexuals, incorporating their sexual minority status as one of their identities rather than the predominant one, and assimilating their public and private identities (Cass, 1979).

These stage-based coming out models have received critique, particularly as their individual-level focus lacks attention to the social-cultural context in which individuals live. In an environment characterized by heterosexism and homophobia, full disclosure of one's sexual identity may not always be safe or appropriate. Selective disclosure "may represent a mature approach" (Moe et al., 2011, p. 229) to managing the potential stigma of sexual minority status. Further, these stages are commonly considered solely in the context of offline life. However, contemporary LGBTQ youth may come out online prior to coming out offline (Alexander & Losh, 2010; Bond, Hefner, & Drogos, 2009; Pascoe, 2011), which may offer opportunities for identity exploration and selective disclosure not fully understood in traditional coming out models.

IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN ONLINE AND OFFLINE LIFE

The majority of contemporary youth use the Internet, with 93% of adolescents in the United States (Jones & Fox, 2009) and 90% in Canada reporting an online presence (Blais, Craig, Pepler, & Connolly, 2008). Online participation may be a key element to identity formation or expression for youth because it allows the opportunity to explore their identity (Marwick, Diaz, & Palfrey, 2010). Many LGB youth are using new media "in productive ways to prepare them for living their sexual difference in their immediate physical worlds" (Hillier & Harrison, 2007, p. 95) as well as to develop their confidence and experiment with different approaches to coming out that may also be used in their offline lives (Alexander & Losh, 2010). Scholars of new media have emphasised the need to consider the ways in which "online situations and experiences... feed back into offline experienc[s]" (Baym, 2006, p. 86). The traditional dichotomy of the public sphere and private sphere is in many ways an archaic concept for contemporary adolescents whose lives exist both online and offline, and for whom online participation is a fully integrated aspect of their "social life" (Marwick et al., 2010, p. 61). Thus, it is counter-productive to position the offline and online worlds in opposition or to assume a false separation between the two. Instead, it is crucial that the complex interconnections between online contexts, experiences, and activities and offline life be investigated (Gray, 2009). While youth move fluidly between these spaces, their experiences in either space affects their behavior in the other (Hillier & Harrison, 2007).

For LGB youth, heteronormativity, marginalization, and negative experiences in their offline public, social, and personal spaces (e.g., school and home) may further limit their access to resources related to sexuality, as well as their ability to explore or develop their identities in their offline lives (Pascoe, 2011). Risks exist for youth online, including the potential for bullying and exposure to inappropriate content, which have negative consequences for those who experience it (Guan & Subrahmanyam, 2009; Staksrud & Livingstone, 2009). However, while consideration of risk is important, the potential benefits of online participation such as the promotion of self-expression and competence, the strengthened offline relationships, and opportunities to seek information they are unable to comfortably ask others about should also be recognized (Guan & Subrahmanyam, 2009; Marwick et al., 2010). Thus, this study aims to identify the influence of online media on the identity development and coming out process of LGBTQ youth.

METHODS

Participant Recruitment

Toronto, the largest urban center in Canada, was the site for data collection between September and December 2011. To facilitate recruitment, 19 organizations providing services or programming for LGBTQ youth, including several with multiple subprograms, were contacted via email to share the research opportunity with interested youth. Agencies were selected based upon a systematic search for organizations specifically serving LGBTQ youth in Toronto; all organizations with a valid email address were contacted. Participants were screened prior to study inclusion. At the participants' discretion this was done either via phone or, in keeping with the study's new media emphasis, via email. Inclusion criteria included youth 18–22 years of age who were active users of at least four forms of new media and who self-identified as members of the LGBTQ community. This age range was selected due to the heightened awareness of issues of identity and sexuality during this stage of development (King et al., 2008), as well as to allow for participants to provide autonomous consent. The requirement of use of at least four forms of new media was a collective decision of the research team, as participants were particularly sought for their knowledge of a range of new media formats.

Sampling and Procedures

Theoretical sampling was employed to capture a diversity of observations. Particular attention was paid to ensuring the racial and ethnic diversity of participants, given the study was taking place in a diverse city. Recruitment continued throughout the four-month data collection period until theoretical saturation occurred and minimal new information was provided by

additional interviews (Creswell, 1998; McCracken, 1988). Data were collected using in-depth participant interviews conducted by the primary investigator. Each interview, of one to three hours in length, was audio-recorded. This study was covered by a University of Toronto Research Ethics Board Protocol (#26749). Prior to the interviews, participants were expressly informed of the study process and procedure, provided written informed consent, completed a detailed preinterview questionnaire, and were provided with referrals to support services if necessary. The preinterview questionnaire included questions about participant demographics (e.g., age, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, level of education, socioeconomic status) as well as participant media use (e.g., hours of internet consumption per week, types of media used). During the interviews, a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of 12 open-ended questions was employed and prompts were used to stimulate in-depth discussion by participants. Exact prompts varied based on participants' experiences and detail of responses to the original questions. Examples of protocol questions include: *Has the media impacted how you view yourself/feel about yourself as an LGBTQ person? How has your use of the media influenced your identity? How do you relate to stories and images of LGBTQ youth in the media?* As compensation for their time and participation, participants received refreshments, a gift card of their choice, and bus tokens.

Participant Composition

The study population ($n = 19$), though relatively heterogeneous, all identified as members of the LGBTQ community. Participants' sexuality was identified as gay ($n = 6$), lesbian ($n = 4$), bisexual ($n = 2$), polysexual ($n = 1$), queer ($n = 1$), and using multiple terms ($n = 5$). The population consisted of both transgender/gender-queer ($n = 4$) and cisgender ($n = 15$), or nontransgender, participants. Participants identified as cisgender-female ($n = 9$), cisgender-male ($n = 6$), transgender/transsexual-male ($n = 3$), and gender-queer ($n = 1$). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 22, with a mean age of 19.47 (SD = 1.219). Participants racially identified as white ($n = 14$), multiracial ($n = 3$), black ($n = 1$), and Asian ($n = 1$), as well as ethnically Jewish ($n = 3$) and Hispanic ($n = 3$). The study population comprised avid consumers of new media. All participants spent more than five hours a week online and used a wide array of Internet-based media platforms. Use of social media, music and video sharing, and blogging were especially prevalent.

Analysis

Grounded theory was employed as the analytic framework of this study. This approach is frequently used for minimally researched areas (Bringer, Johnston, & Brackenridge, 2006) and uses the analytical and theoretical categories developed by previous data to refine further data collection

(Charmaz, 2011), thus permitting the construction of “empirically grounded” (Flick, 2006, p. 377) explanatory theories (Bringer et al., 2006; Charmaz, 2011; Pidgeon & Henwood, 1996).

Demographic data were drawn from the preinterview assessments, and descriptive statistics were generated using SPSS 19.0. All interviews were transcribed, uploaded into ATLAS.ti 6, and analyzed by a team of seven autonomous coders with a minimum of three coders analyzing each individual interview. Initial categories were identified, followed by open and axial coding; these categories were utilized to develop preliminary concepts and themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Inter-rater reliability was 98% as in-depth discussions of codes reduced bias and lead to consensus and agreement regarding themes (Denzin, 1994; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009). Methodological rigor is crucial to a grounded theory approach, so trustworthiness measures were employed to ensure credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability of study results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness measures included: prolonged engagement (data collection occurred over a four-month period); the research experience of the investigative team (combined the team have expertise in an array of quantitative and qualitative methodologies, and have well over two decades of clinical and research experience with LGBTQ youth populations); thick description (the extensive use of descriptive accounts and quotes); and an audit trail (to maintain a record of the research process). It is important to note that the five major themes were consistent across the diverse identities of participants, despite attention by the multiple coders throughout the coding process. To address potential biases resulting from the investigative team’s prior experience, reflexivity, peer debriefing, and bracketing were also used consistently and extensively throughout the research process. All names have been changed to protect participant privacy.

FINDINGS

Participants articulated a multitude of ways in which their online experiences influenced and informed their development as LGBTQ individuals. Five themes emerged that identified the influence of online participation. New media facilitated the opportunity to: (1) access resources, (2) explore identity, (3) find likeness, (4) come out digitally, and (5) potentially expand identities formed online into offline life. In particular, participants suggested that online engagement and lived experiences play an important role in the coming out process, influencing their offline lives.

Access Resources

Nearly all participants discussed the crucial role of new media in accessing resources relevant to their LGBTQ identities. As participants pointed out, the

access to LGBTQ resources offline can be severely impeded by a number of contextual factors, such as safety and stigma, while new media offer a wealth of relevant, realistic material without the limitations, risks, or difficulties of finding resources offline. In particular, they emphasized accessing resources that supported this crucial stage of sexual identity development online.

I definitely think online is probably the best way [to get real information] ... because books and stuff are usually like fiction - so it's like you get a story but it's not real, whereas online you can learn so much. . . I think online is way more- it gives you way more information; you can search up anything you want; you can go and look up different countries even. With books and stuff it's kind of based on one story. . . you don't get like an actual view of like the deep, in-depth [information] that maybe online provides more because you see videos and whatnot, right. (Anthony, 19, cisgender-male, gay)

When I came out, the only thing I had was the online media and I feel like all the support I needed, I got it from the online community. And I'm not [only] talking about like forums or discussion boards, but just blogs or posts and things like that; online newspapers and magazines that maybe are not out there for LGBT people, but they have their contents online and that was pretty helpful for me. (Steven, 19, cisgender-male, gay)

Thus, LGB youth are able to engage in crucial information gathering online; seeking out information on the LGB community as well as looking for relevant role models (Hillier & Harrison, 2007). The information they find online, which is commonly created by other LGB people, allows youth to seek out labels for their feelings and aids them in their identity development (Bond et al., 2009).

There exist many websites. Many trans people have started their own websites, disorganized, but with the resources. I know a website that a trans guy owns ... He has information ... and he points to resources. So it's really finding those gems that we really need to do and we need to have a source that is easily accessible. (Phillip, 18, transgender-male/androgynous, gay)

Explore Identity

Many participants emphasised the ability to explore, develop and rehearse their LGBTQ identities online. The anonymity of new media allowed participants and their peers to be creative with their presentation of self in a relatively safe space, as well as provided participants with the ability to restart or alter their personas at will.

Online is like a virtual playground. It's where we gather to share ... [Because] online, you can take on any identity you want. You can pick any username, you can pick any gender, any sex, any age, any fake email you want and that opens up a host of opportunities to explore your identity more ... And, when you were alone in the room away from your parents, away from the pressures of school, away from your friends, when you haven't come out to anyone, when your brain is given that choice... You can create a whole new identity ... You can do whatever you want. (Phillip, 18, transgender-male/androgynous, gay)

Importantly, several participants emphasized that new media allowed LGBTQ youth to be their real selves without the pressure or expectations inherent in their offline lives.

I think it's a lot easier for people to be themselves online because ... you can hide behind a façade, you could hide behind anything and be who you want to be or be someone totally else. You can be whoever you want to be online ... (Leila, 19, cisgender-female, lesbian/queer)

Find Likeness

Participants were able to contrast the negative messages they received through other media as well as feelings of difference in their offline lives with the comfort that they felt in the expressions of those who were similar in their online lives. This seemed to be an external reinforcement by others of their burgeoning awareness of their own sense of identity.

All the traditional media that I was faced with were telling me that I was wrong or that I was bad or that bad things were going to happen to me... Then when I went online that's where I was faced with much more information. Much more information was available. People wanted to talk, people wanted to express how they felt. I found likeness in people. (John, 19, transgender-male, queer/pansexual)

Another phenomenon discussed by participants was the way they increased their comfort with their identities by watching the journeys of other LGBTQ youth online, through video blogs, textual blogs or forums where LGBTQ people shared their experiences with peers. While not all participants shared their stories online themselves, many consumed the stories shared by others.

When I was coming out I watched a lot of videos on how to come out ... I think it's a lot more positive because it's the individual and they tend to make videos just because they can make videos, not to get an audience. (Jake, 18, cisgender-male, gay)

YouTube actually played a really big role in [my] coming out. I always tell people the six months to a year before I came out was literally a YouTube quest to find coming out videos basically, people telling their stories and the challenges they faced or how happy they are now that they've done it. It's really trying to find reinforcement because I wasn't looking for stories that involved being kicked out of their house or things like that because rationally I knew that wasn't going to happen. So mostly I was just looking for a little positive reinforcement. (Michael, 21, cisgender-male, gay)

Coming Out Digitally

New media may be changing the coming out process for contemporary adolescents. Participants stated that they strongly believed that the Internet was a good place to start the tentative process of coming out as an LGBTQ person because of the low level of risk involved.

I definitely think that the internet is probably one of the most helpful tools nowadays for youth coming out or youth who are out who are trying to access help for any reason or make friends because they're in the middle of nowhere and they're the only gay person in the world. (Leila, 19, cisgender-female, lesbian/queer)

Many participants discussed the use of new media in their own coming out process or in the coming out process of other youth they knew. Further, participants discussed the ability to come out in the relative safety and anonymity of online space before doing so offline, with this online coming out serving almost as a dry run for their offline experience.

Well, I feel like coming out is a lot easier when not doing it face-to-face, I guess because some people will just, like, send you messages, like, 'oh, I'm out'. It overcomes that fear of the confrontation. It does help get rid of that fear if you have the fear to come out online. There is, like, communities that you can privately just go, discuss ... People discuss sexual orientations that they don't feel comfortable with talking about in everyday life. (Kayla, 19, cisgender-female, bisexual)

A notable trend related to this practice is young people using social media and social networking in particular (e.g., Facebook, Twitter) to directly discuss their coming out narratives (Alexander & Losh, 2010) or indirectly come out through identification of interests, dating preferences, or relationship status. These activities often required a great deal of contemplation and assessment of the potential reactions of others, similar to the decisions made about identity disclosure offline.

[O]n Facebook ... I came out on National Coming Out Day recently ...
(Laura, 22, cisgender-female, bisexual/queer)

I think the big thing about coming out now is ... Facebook interested or Facebook in a relationship. That's a big decision because everybody on your Facebook list is going to see that. And so I think when I was coming out ... it was definitely something I thought about. Do I change my Facebook? Do I put my relationship status with my first girlfriend? I was like "what am I going to do?" And then I think what I did is I put a bunch of people on my limited profile so they couldn't see it, and then I changed it and then over a period of time, I deleted people that I didn't need and I was like if you're on my list, you're going to have to deal with the fact that it says this and it shows who I'm interested in ... I became more comfortable with my sexuality and my relationships that it said that. (Leila, 19, cisgender-female, lesbian/queer)

Many of the explorations and experiences mentioned above would not have been possible without the relative safety and anonymity of new media. Participants emphasized this safety and the physical and emotional distance created by new media—distance which allowed participants to limit their contact with the heterosexism, cissexism, homophobia, and transphobia that exist both online and offline.

So there's a lot more space to talk about what we're seeing and also what we're feeling in a way that can also be anonymous. And that I think is a really ... Is really important for queer folks growing up right now ... And was for me before I came out I participated online and as before I was comfortable in having myself labelled as queer by other people was something that I really valued, that anonymity and ability to put out my opinion and connect with other people without being found out ...
(Suelia, 22, cisgender-female, queer)

From a queer perspective especially again the Internet creates a distance and an anonymity that real life doesn't provide you with. Especially in online communities where you really can limit the interactions you have with other people. So if you don't want to talk to a homophobe you don't have to, whereas in real life you're sort of forced to interact with people who you might hate or might hate you. So yeah, I'm really not surprised that the Internet is a gathering space for queer youth. (Michael, 21, cisgender-male, gay)

Other participants noted that they could come out online without fear of reprisal from their families and friends.

For lots of youth who just can't come out because ... their families, their friends - or their communities - would just be far too hostile ... [online]

can often be the only ... aspect of their life where they can represent themselves. (Chris, 21, cisgender-male, gay)

Expand Identities Offline

Finally, many participants pointed out that the new identities initially explored and developed in online life could then be expanded into offline life. This often involved coming out to those within their offline lives. Not all youth discussed moving and integrating their online identities offline, but all participants valued the safe testing ground that new media provide.

[T]here's a sense of formative[ness]-you can form a part of yourself online and then try that out in the real world where there isn't that distance and where if you fuck up you can't just erase your profile and start again. So yeah I think new media in a sense is the trial ground for things you can bring in to your own [offline] life ... (Michael, 21, cisgender-male, gay)

Participants noted how the online activities they engaged in helped to prepare them for the intersection with their offline lives.

So now I've become a better person and I've even become even better at like coming to terms with things that I've gone through. So, you know, like so now I'm not afraid to tell people that I'm lesbian and I'm like I'm not afraid to, you know, like go out anymore. Like I'm not afraid of coming out the closet anymore 'cause I'm out. Like my friends know and they're like going "does it matter"? I guess if somebody were to come up to me and ask, I'd be like yes, I am. I came out to my mom recently too; it didn't go very well. She cried, but that's to be expected. (Song, 18, cisgender-female, lesbian)

I feel like it could help [people get more comfortable with their sexuality]. Starting online and talking to just strangers that are comforting to you would help you to gradually move into the public world with it. (Kayla, 19, cisgender-female, bisexual)

DISCUSSION

This study found that new media provided critical opportunities for LGBTQ youth to explore their identities and develop important skills. In particular, online activities allowed participants to access resources, explore identities, find likeness, come out digitally prior to coming out offline, and subsequently expand their new identities into their offline life. Extending the findings of

previous studies that new media provide opportunities for support (Alexander & Losh, 2010; Bond et al., 2009; Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Pascoe, 2011), this study identified that LGBTQ youth are able to rehearse crucial developmental tasks (e.g., coming out, cultivating identity, increasing self-confidence and self-acceptance, and building relationships) in online life through new media before undertaking them in offline life.

A particularly interesting finding was the important role that new media play in the coming out process for LGBTQ youth. It is important for practitioners utilizing existing models of sexual identity development, such as Cass's (1979) framework, to recognize and incorporate the importance of new media into the various stages of coming out. For example, Cass's stages of identity confusion, identity comparison, and identity tolerance seem to be facilitated through the use of new media to engage in online searches for information, role models, and representations of one's identity by LGBTQ youth. Participants illustrated this process by reading other youths' stories, visiting websites that contained advice and helpful information, and consuming YouTube videos prior to coming out. Further, LGBTQ youth engaged in testing out identity tolerance by coming out online to strangers or asking questions of other LGBTQ individuals in new media forums. Identity acceptance or identity pride could be demonstrated by joining online support groups, sharing LGBTQ information/images on blogs, participating in online LGBTQ campaigns, or disclosing one's LGBTQ status on social networking sites. Lastly, identity synthesis may be reflected in the integration of LGBTQ youths' online lives with their offline lives through coming out to parents, peers, or others in their offline social environment (Cass, 1979). As a number of factors facilitate the reconciliation and development of a positive identity, including fostering self-acceptance, providing sources of social support, and encouraging positive interpersonal relationships (Morrow, 2004), the utilization of new media by LGBTQ youth can facilitate positive sexual minority identification and enhance coming out experiences.

Limitations

Despite these findings, this study has several limitations. This research was concentrated in a fairly progressive urban area with a relatively well-educated and affluent participant sample. This is an important consideration, as research has indicated that there may be reduced access to computers and the Internet among Canadian youth who are from low-income households or who live in rural areas (Looker & Thiessen, 2003). As is the case with qualitative research, the findings are not intended to be representative of all LGBTQ young people; rather findings are simply a reflection of those that heavily utilized multiple types of new media. Further, despite the inclusion of transgender-identified participants, transgender identity development was not a focus of this article. Such limitations should be considered in the

context of these emergent findings that explore the importance of new media for LGBTQ youth development.

Practice Implications

This study illustrates the integration between offline and online life and suggests that practitioners support identity exploration and development by LGBTQ youth in the relatively safe space of new media. The construction of a positive identity is crucial and necessitates that LGBTQ youth reconcile their minority identities. As practitioners working with LGBTQ youth assess their identity process (Morrow, 2004) it may be increasingly important to understand the influence of positive online experiences and relationships on their development. Further, practice approaches with LGBTQ youth should include recommendations to incorporate new media activities to aid in the development of their coming out processes. Yet considering the contemporary debate regarding Internet safety among youth, in supporting LGBTQ adolescents' online activities practitioners should ensure youth have the tools and skills to interact safely with others online (Gray, 2009; Hillier & Harrison, 2007; Pascoe, 2011), such as fostering the ability of youth to properly use "privacy settings on social media sites" (Marwick et al., 2010, p. 62). Recognizing the developmental opportunities available to LGBTQ youth through new media and incorporating those opportunities into practice with contemporary LGBTQ youth is critical to effective interventions.

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