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An ethnographic analysis of adolescent sexual minority website usage: exploring notions of information seeking and sexual identity development

Rocky M. Sulfridge
Wayne State University,

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AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF ADOLESCENT SEXUAL MINORITY WEBSITE USAGE: EXPLORING NOTIONS OF INFORMATION SEEKING AND SEXUAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

by

ROCKY M. SULFRIDGE

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DEDICATION

To my mother, for your infinite trust, love, and sacrifice

to make possible my rewarding life.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When we read ethnographic studies, there is always a point at which we need to ask who is speaking, and for whom. — Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, 1990

Kerry Town—a small, quaint, preserved historical district in downtown Ann Arbor, Michigan—is home to the Washtenaw Rainbow Action Project (WRAP). WRAP is a resource center that exists to build the capacity for successful outcomes of educational, social, and political initiatives by and for the Queer and Ally Community in the Washtenaw County area. WRAP welcomes all who support its mission to participate in its activities.

Through volunteering, giving speeches on topics such as "Homophobia and Pedagogy" and "Hate Crimes in Our Neighborhoods," and orchestrating discussions on coming-out stories, I am familiar with this facility and its patrons. However, on this cold winter's morning, as I gaze upon the windows decorated

with pride flags and lambda signs, it is not the stir of people that catches my attention, but rather a "Closed" sign that hangs slightly angled on the front door.

As on most Sunday mornings, I arrive early to meet with friends for brunch at "\aut\", the community's local gay restaurant/bar that sits directly across from WRAP. Waiting for the arrival of my friends, I take advantage of the free wireless and begin my search for why WRAP appears to have closed up shop. Are they renovating or moving, or have they really closed their doors for good? Browsing their website, I'm relieved to read that they are moving to a facility only one building over. I continue reading about upcoming WRAP events and, after surfing for about ten minutes, I stumble upon a touching narrative of a 14-year-old girl's experience with Youth Guard's online refugee camp:

A Little Closer

There's a girl in my grade. Her name is Laurie. She's a bit shorter than me, and has blond hair and blue eyes. She's beautiful and smart and she makes me laugh. This girl has taken me over completely, invading every atom of my body. And I can't tell her. The "gay revolution" hasn't hit the part of the country I live in.

Sometimes when I look in the mirror, I don't recognize myself. I have to edit myself every morning when I wake up so that no one can see what I really am. Nothing with a rainbow on it. Check my pride at the door. The only thing that shows me that my reflection is really me is the hurt. The words hurt, the words everyone at school spouts off without a second thought. Only two people at school know. They say they're my best

friends, they say they accept me, they say they'll love me no matter what. I hear the words, but I see their smiles never reach their eyes anymore.

Maybe they're really the reason I joined Youth Guard. The list is... well, I don't really know how to serve it justice. The list is my friends, family, home, and community all at once. All in one America Online accessible package that gets sent to my e-mail account whenever someone wants to speak with me. I get e-mails everyday from other GLBT youth all over the country. The people there know me, even though they've never met me. Not that long ago, we filled out surveys about ourselves, and not that long ago, one of the girls I know from the list had to move in with her neighbor because her parents found out about her.

Some of the people in my group are 17. I joined when I was 13, making me the youngest person in the group. I'm only 14 now, and those 17-year-olds are the luckiest people alive to me. They're set to go to college now, they're going to get away from their small towns, from their homophobic lives. I know that the liberal cities don't solve all the problems in homosexual life, but they've got to solve some.

Youth Guard is my home right now. I haven't met these people, but they make me feel, for once, as though I really belong somewhere, with people who will love me for me, not a preconceived notion of who I thought I was when I was in kindergarten. Some of the teens on there have gone through so much. They're out and proud, and they have to deal with their entire towns. They have to deal with the homophobia of

hundreds of people at their schools, and on their jobs, and in their lives. I have to handle two people, two people I'll probably never see again when I actually get to move away. But right now, as a 14-year-old, the day I can get out of this place seems so far away, too far to accept. Kadi.

(Virtual Refugees: For Thousands of Gay and Lesbian Teenagers All Over the World, Cyberspace Is the First Refuge, 2004)

After reading Kadi's narrative, a series of questions came to mind as I pondered my own coming-out process in a place that was also far from accepting. The topics of secrecy, confusion, fear, support, resources, outreach, and communication, among many others, flooded my brain as I thought about gay youth and current times. What challenges do young sexual minorities experience today? How difficult is it for them to develop sexually and self-identify as gay? Finally, is the Internet the new venue for identity development of young sexual minorities?

This last question is important because sexual identity development is a much more difficult process for sexual minorities. Research has indicated that many young gay people prepare to come out during their mid-teens and early 20s (Hamer, 2003). Ryan and Futterman (1998) report that the average age at which adolescents self-identify as lesbian or gay has steadily dropped over the years from 21 to 16. With this drop in age, they posit that adolescents will experience "greater stress, more negative social pressure, greater likelihood of victimization, and greater need for support" (Ryan & Futterman, 1998, p. 3). Regardless of their stage of coming-out, gay youth continually experience

rejection and ridicule from their peers and the wider community in general (Rivers, 2001).

During this entire process, information needs are also significant for gay adolescents and differ from one individual to another. Existing literature suggests that these needs vary based on the different levels of support received from family members and peers, and access to information that could aid in their exploration of sexual orientation. Research also posits that in addition to the struggle to find support and possibly become victimized because of identifying as gay, younger gay youth are also likely to have problems coping with their sexual orientation because they are "cognitively or affectively not equipped to effectively manage these issues" (Anderson, 2005, p. 340).

As I pondered Kadi's situation, I could conceptualize many gay youth experiencing a similar situation and how the Internet might be a form of support for those in the coming-out process as well as a location to seek information without feeling vulnerable. After reviewing all the literature relevant to this thought, I had two necessary pieces of the puzzle: a widely accepted conceptualization of the coming-out process—that is, the Cass Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation (HIF; Cass, 1979)—and an approach to information needs, the Information Impoverished Theory (Chatman, 1996). However, there was a general absence of investigation into gay youth online and the formation of gay and lesbian communities in cyberspace. I concluded that an analysis of an online community could give further insight into how gay youth use the Internet to deal with the pressures that they experience, to seek information, and to gain

social support during the coming-out process. Figure 1 broadly illustrates the likely trajectory of adolescent sexual minority identity development, with the final box representing the focus of this dissertation.

More precisely, the literature suggests three interrelated research questions:

Research Question 1: How does a gay teen website function as a tool for adolescent sexual minorities' information needs and development of their sexual identity?

Research Question 2: What are the dominant topics members of a gay teen chat forum discuss and contemplate in conjunction with their sexual identity formation?

Research Question 3: What are the revealed struggles and impacts of sexual prejudice on GLBT youth as discussed by members of a gay teen website?

Research Approach

Because gay adolescents seek to find support and information while being secretive, a readily available population is distinctively difficult to find. Savin-Williams (1998) explained, "it is never easy to recruit 'hidden populations' for participation in research projects, especially when the basis for the concealment is a very realistic fear of reprisals for membership in a marginal group" (p. 10). Therefore, face-to-face interviews or focus groups would be very difficult to carry out. However, as McKenna and Green (2002) reported, people are increasingly using the Internet to fulfill important social and psychological needs. Therefore,
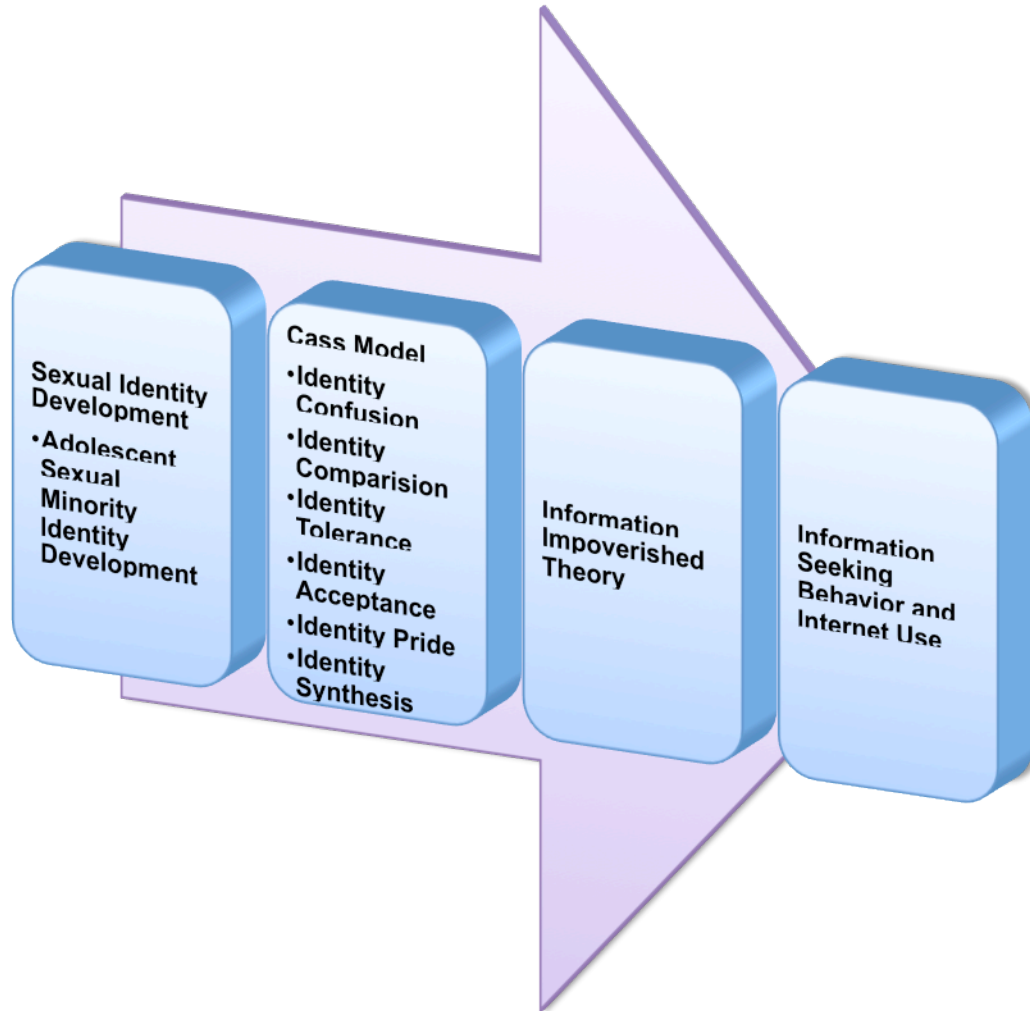
Figure 1.
Overall representation of adolescent sexual minority identity development

finding a gay adolescent website would be useful for this study. Because of the

desire for secrecy and the stigmatized nature of gay, lesbian, bisexual (GLB)

identity, ethnography is a particularly useful mode of inquiry about gay youth. As

Hine (2000) articulated, "the Internet and similar networks provide a naturally

occurring setting for study… [which] is often put outside the experimental setting"

(p. 18). Unfettered by Human Subjects restraints, an ethnographic approach and

thematic analysis of an online community could provide insights not readily obtainable through other methods of inquiry.

This study examined Chadzboyz.com, an online community geared toward gay adolescents. At the start of this study, there were only a limited number of websites that catered specifically to adolescent sexual minorities, and none had the popularity or longevity of Chadzboyz.com. Therefore, the selection of this site over other such sites was attractive. The method used to study this site was more "observant participant" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) than "participant observer" (Emerson et al., 1995). As Campbell (2004) stated, "Computer-mediated discussion groups actually make it easy to passively observe –'lurking' is an accepted role in these virtual environments, even if the label carries a somewhat sinister connotation" (p. 2). Though Campbell posits that informal and formal interviews may yield additional insightful information, a description of how adolescents use a gay teen chat forum can be identified through observations alone.

Dissertation Structure

Besides the objectives proposed in the previous section, an additional objective of this dissertation is to guide the reader through the six chapters of this study to enhance understanding of adolescent sexual minorities and Internet usage. Chapter 1 includes an overview of the problem and the rationale for the study. The chapter raises research questions, introduces the methodology, and discusses objectives.

In Chapter 2, a literature review examines the issues of homophobia, gives a theoretical background on coming-out models (Cass, 1979; Halpin & Allen, 2004; Kort, 2003; Ryan & Futterman, 1998) and Information Impoverished Theory (Chatman, 1996), and discusses sexual identity development as well as young people and Internet use. Chapter 3 addresses methods used in this study and gives logical explanations about the ethnographic approach to this particular research. Chapter 3 includes the research setting, information about the researcher, the research design, data collection, and data analysis. Chapter 4 presents findings while illustrating the complexities of this culture. This leads to the discussion of the research findings in Chapter 5, where I underscore relevant points and outline particular interpretations of the data. The final chapter concludes this dissertation with a brief summary and discussion of virtual ethnography and reflexivity. Additionally, limitations and suggestions for future inquiry are provided.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Civilized men [and women] have gained notable mastery over energy, matter and inanimate nature generally and are rapidly learning to control physical suffering and premature death. But, by contrast, we appear to be living in the Stone Age so far as our handling of human relations is concerned. (Allport, 1954, p. ix)

Introduction

This project begins with an examination of the pervasiveness of homophobia in American society as a background to understand the stigmatism of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) individuals. This examination is followed by a discussion of racism and sexism to clarify the concept of sexual prejudice. Next, sexual identity development and the coming-out process are presented as a structure within which one might come to understand the often-problematic self-identity of being GLB. An overview of the Cass Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation (Cass, 1979) is included as a theoretical framework for studying identity development of gay youth. Literature about youth and Internet use is presented next to give insight into the information-seeking behavior of sexual minorities during the coming-out process. Finally, the Information Impoverished Theory (Chatman, 1996) is reviewed to illustrate one process by which adolescent sexual minorities may be motivated intuitively to access the Internet for information.

Homophobia

Introduction. Homosexuals are generally perceived as inferior and less respectable than heterosexuals in the United States (Lehmiller, Law, & Thormala, 2010). As a consequence, GLBT individuals are targets for harassment and discrimination, and find themselves monitoring their behavior and lifestyle (Herek, 2004). Though many recent articles have indicated some improvement in attitudes toward homosexuality, researchers have noted that various stereotypical and incorrect beliefs still commonly exist (Lehmiller et al., 2010; Sakalli & Ugurlu, 2001). Recent studies of homophobia have moved beyond simply documenting the prevalence and correlates of this prejudice to the conceptualization of the term and its application in research. *Sexual prejudice* is a currently popular term that encompasses all forms of bias based on sexual orientation (Herek, 2008). It is vital to review the prevalence of homophobia while being conscientious about research language and discussing the definitions of terminology used in recent studies.

Prevalence of homophobia. Homophobia is a widely recognized prejudice, as is indicated by the numerous empirical studies done in the past three decades. Additionally, the U.S. government has acknowledged the prevalence of homophobia with the recent signing of The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act (S.909.IS, 2009) by President Barack Obama.

The societal environment has limited the progress of gay men, lesbian women, and, even more specifically, adolescent sexual minorities in their search for identity. They must continually struggle with a conflicting societal belief

system in their pursuit of personhood (Lima, Lo Presto, Sherman, & Sabelman, 1993). According to Kurdek (1988), even with documented evidence that homosexuals are equivalent to heterosexuals, negative attitudes toward homosexuals still prevail. Some researchers have posited that homophobia is a response to confusion of sex roles in society, and that individuals with strong stereotypical sex role beliefs will be more homophobic (Lieblich & Friedman, 1985). Lieblich and Friedman's work suggests that these individuals also believe in the "just world" hypothesis (Lieblich & Friedman, 1985).

According to Glennon and Joseph (1993), people with a strong belief in the "just world" hypothesis (the idea that people get what they deserve) believe that HIV/AIDS (Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome or Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) is a deserved punishment for homosexuals. *AIDS*, *homosexuals,* and *violence* are words commonly associated together since the outbreak of AIDS in 1981. Walter (1986) stated that violence against homosexuals is a serious national problem aggravated by the issue of AIDS. According to Pratte (1993), recent research has been concerned about attitudes toward homosexuality and the fear of AIDS. The literature has also included concerns about internal homophobia among those diagnosed with AIDS (Lima et al., 1993).

Herek (1993) noted that college and university communities need to confront the issue of homophobia. In his study, he referred to the extreme homophobia at Yale University that causes homosexuals to live in fear and secretiveness. He stated that prejudice and violence are real problems, and that

these issues need to be documented in order for colleges and universities to take action. Unfortunately, Rayburn, Earleywine, and Davidson (2003) reported that many victims of hate crimes are reluctant to disclose their victim status; thus, the problem of hate crimes may even be more serious than once thought. Additionally, a study of attitudes toward homosexuality from 1986 and 1991 revealed that the attitudes of college students under the age of 25 toward homosexuals remained stable (Pratte, 1993). Awareness has spurred some colleges and universities to take action, as Rooney (2003) reported in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Duke University, labeled as the most homophobic university in the country by the *Princeton Review*, decided to adopt a campaign to counter the negative publicity by encouraging students to wear T-shirts imprinted with "Gay? Fine by me" (Rooney, 2003). Despite actions by institutions to combat homophobia, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2010) recently reported that students, staff members, professors, or administrators who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender report significant harassment at their colleges and discomfort with the overall campus climates.

Homophobia, bullying, and adolescence. Even more prevalent in the literature than GLBT college and university experiences is the victimization of adolescent sexual minorities during their grade school and high school years. Bullying is a pervasive problem faced by youth in the United States, as reported by Nansel and colleagues (2001). In their national survey of youth in grades 6 through 10, 29.9% of students indicated moderate or frequent involvement in bullying, either as a bully, a victim, or both. Bullying and peer victimization among

adolescents has become a significant public heath issue (Espelage & Swearer, 2008). This health issue links homophobia with bullying and victimization of adolescents. Current literature has established that "bullying and peer victimization sometimes include homophobic epithets directed at heterosexual and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth" (Espelage & Swearer, 2008, p. 155). Specifically, "sexual minority youth—adolescents who self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB), who have same-sex romantic attractions, or who engage in same-sex sexual relationships—appear to be a subset of young people at especially high risk of negative outcomes from their interactions" with those who do not share their GLB identity (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006, p. 573).

In a study by Pilkington and D'Augelli (1995), 44% of gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants reported one or more threats of physical assault, 33% indicated having objects thrown at them, 31% stated they had been chased or followed, approximately 20% reported an experience of physical assault, and 22% reported actually being physically hurt at school because of their sexual orientation. The Human Rights Watch (2001) concurs that young sexual minorities are almost three times as likely as heterosexual adolescents to experience assault or to be involved in at least one physical fight in school, three times as likely to have been threatened or injured with a weapon at school, and nearly four times as likely to have felt unsafe and avoided attending school.

Common among most studies on young GLBT adolescent bullying is verbal harassment that includes anti-gay slang and derogatory comments.

Homophobic epithets such as "You are so gay" and "You're a fag" have been linked to negative psychological consequences (Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008) and are readily used in high schools today. Regular verbal abuse from classmates was reported by 55% of gay, lesbian, and bisexual participants in a study by Remafedi (1987); and Frankfurt (1999) found in his study that high school students reported hearing anti-gay slang approximately 25 times a day. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth experience verbal harassment on a daily basis while at school, according to Murdock and Bolch (2005).

Murdock and Bolch (2005) posited that youth who are sexual minorities appear to be at increased risk for physical abuse, verbal harassment, and exclusion. Given what we know about this risk for sexual minority youth, more effort is needed in this area of study. Espelage and Swearer (2008) noted that current literature has begun giving some attention to this public health concern, stating that "recent qualitative and ethnographic investigations have expanded on the importance of changing the language children and adolescents use, improving school environments that promote homophobic attitudes and behaviors, and protecting sexually questioning and LGBT youth" (p. 156). Though this appears to be a positive direction for attitude change and behavior, empirical studies have traveled down a difficult road with the conceptualization and application of the term *homophobia*. Multiple definitions can be found for *homophobia*, ranging from physical aggression (Bernat, Calhoun, Adams, & Zeichner, 2001) to a personal negative attitude toward those who identify as homosexual (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980) to the fear of a sexual behavior itself

(Boswell, 1980). This broad spectrum and often-vague collection of definitions has created some confusion for current researchers. The following discussion reviews conceptualizations of homophobia, focusing on three relevant terms (*homophobia*, *heterosexism,* and *sexual prejudice*), and offering a comparative discourse on homophobia, racism, and sexism.

Broad conceptualizations of homophobia. Measurement of attitudes toward homosexuality has varied in both content and format, with focuses on a variety of targets (Kite, 1984). The lack of specific definitions has significantly flawed the reliability of many early studies on homophobia.

As noted by Bernat, Calhoun, Adams, and Zeichner (2001) in their study of homophobia and physical aggression, conceptual breadth creates difficulties for comparing studies and overall interpretation. A broader spectrum looks at prejudice against lesbians and gay men, categorizing it under names such as *homophobia* (Smith, 1971; Weinberg, 1972), *homoerotophobia* or *anti-homosexualism* (Churchill, 1967), *homosexphobia* (Boswell, 1980; Levitt & Klassen, 1974), *homosexism* (Lehne, 1976), *heterosexism* (Morin & Garfinkle, 1978), *heteronormativity* (Yep, 2002), and *homonegativism* (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980).

Because of the specificity and target of each study, *homophobia* is often defined vaguely, combining items that measure evaluative and attitudinal response, such as "Male homosexuals are sick" and "Male homosexuality is a perversion," with those that measure more affective responses, such as "If I walked into an all-male gay bar, I would become quite anxious" or "If a male

homosexual approached me in a public restroom, I would be disgusted" (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980, p. 359). This specificity and vague defining of *homophobia* reduces its conceptual clarification (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980).

Homophobia has been defined in the literature with multiple meanings, ranging from the literal fear of homosexuals, to the internalized fear of being homosexual, to the stereotyping and demeaning of homosexuals, to a broad definition encompassing the entire domain of anti-gay responses. First, Weinberg (1972), credited with popularizing the word *homophobia*, defined it as "the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals" (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980, p. 357). Rosan (1978) stated that *homophobia* is actually an abbreviation for *homophilephobia*, which means the fear of persons of one's own sex—an interpretation that Serdhahely and Ziemba (1984) clearly indicated is not the popularized connotation. *Homoerotophobia* and *anti-homosexualism* were the first generalized terms, defined as a fear, dislike, and distrust of homosexuals (Churchill, 1967). Boswell (1980) offered *Homosexphobia* or *homosexophobia* as a replacement for *homophobia*, complicating the definition further. According to Boswell's new terms, *homophobia* is the fear of the sexual behavior and not necessarily of those who identify as being homosexual.

Second, the fear of homosexuality is also unspecified in that it can represent an inverse relationship for homosexuals. Studies have indicated that gay males diagnosed with AIDS experience an increase in their levels of personal homophobia (fear of oneself being a homosexual) and a decrease in their levels of self-esteem (Lima, Lo Presto, Sherman, & Sabelman, 1993; Price,

Omizo, & Hammett, 1986). The fear of possibly being a homosexual can lead to homophobic behavior (Adams, Wright, & Lohr, 1997). The definition now incorporates the internal belief of those who fear being homosexual and their actions. Through these actions, individuals seek acceptance from others while aiding society in their stereotyping (Herek, 1984). Researchers also refer to types of homophobia in hopes for clarification.

Third, to continue with the breadth with which homophobia is defined, Morin and Garfinkle (1978) state the following:

> Homophobia is any belief system, which supports negative myths and stereotypes about homosexual people. More specifically, it can be used to describe: (a) belief systems which hold that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is justifiable; (b) the use of language or slang, e.g., "queer," which is offensive to gay people; and/or (c) any belief system which does not value homosexual life styles equally with heterosexual life styles. (p. 30)

Because of changes in society and the gay community, language often changes or takes on new meaning. For example, the slang word "queer" is no longer seen as offensive by a large portion of the gay community. There is a need for continuous redefinition of *homophobia* and "things homosexual" (Plasek & Allard, 1984). Current research has begun to use terms such as *heterosexism* and *heteronormativity* to describe the nature of homophobia. Yep (2002) stated that these terms refer to a form of violence that is "deeply embedded in our individual

and group psyches, social relations, identities, social institutions, and cultural landscapes" (p. 168).

Finally, Hudson and Ricketts (1980) defined *homonegativism* to include the entire domain or catalogue of anti-gay responses. To continue with Weinberg's (1972) concept, Hudson and Ricketts established homophobia to be a distinct dimension specifically outlined as the responses of fear, disgust, anger, discomfort, and aversion that individuals experience in dealing with gay people in proximal and distal contact (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980). In the review of empirical studies, this definition has been widely accepted for use in experimental research to reduce homophobic attitudes.

The need for continued redefinition of *homophobia* is prevalent given the multiple meanings found in the literature. As Kite (1984) posited, this varied spectrum of definitions for *homophobia* could significantly flaw the reliability of future studies. Researchers with an interest in studying facets of homophobia need to specify their definition to aid in conceptual clarification.

Focused conceptualization of homophobia. In the review of prejudice and attitudes toward homosexuality, two terms (*homophobia* and *heterosexism*) have been prominently used in the literature. Because of the lack of consistency in terminology, various criticisms have periodically plagued empirical research on the study of homosexuality and the commonly used term *homophobia*. In recent studies a new term, *sexual prejudice,* has emerged to rectify the previous confusion. Clearer conceptual definitions would aid in the development and

operationalization of these terms. The following is a discussion illuminating these three constructs (*homophobia*, *heterosexism*, and *sexual prejudice*).

      Homophobia. As previously stated, the term *homophobia* was first coined by Weinberg (1972) to mean "the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals" (see also Hudson & Ricketts, 1980, p. 357). Fone (2000) asserted that one reason for this fear is the perception that homosexuals or homosexuality disrupts the supposed natural law that establishes sexual and gender orders. It is this fear or dislike of sexual differences that is the source of homophobic heterosexuals' dread of homosexuality. A stereotypical view that homosexual men embody effeminate attributes and that mannishness is prevalent in homosexual women reinforces the adverse reactions by heterosexuals (Fone, 2000). The myth that the social conduct of homosexuals differs from that of heterosexuals is another source of fear and an operational definition of *homophobia*, according to Fone (2000). He articulated that this supposed difference in social conduct disrupts the "social, legal, political, ethical, and moral order of society, a contention supposedly supported by history and affirmed by religious doctrine" (p. 5).

      Homophobia in research has been defined differently depending on a researcher's presumption of homophobia and its displays. These displays include opposition, hatred, violence, and verbal and physical abuse (Herek, 1993; Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995). Homophobia has also been represented as a denial of rights and privileges, as conflict, and as pressure to conform to supposed normative standards (Parravano, 1995). Though the original term

homophobia was conceptualized as fear of homosexuals, it was also identified as homosexuals' experience of rejection, hostility, and invisibility (*Chronicles of Higher Education,* 2010; Hudson & Ricketts, 1980). According to Herek (2004), the term's original definition was monumental in that it located "the 'problem' of homosexuality not in homosexual people, but in heterosexuals who were intolerant of gay men and lesbians" (p. 8). The Canadian AIDS Society concurred in its definition of *homophobia*:

> Homophobia refers to individual negative attitudes and personal prejudice. The term itself recognizes that homosexuality is not the problem. The problem is irrational prejudice and fear, which translates into hatred of gays and lesbians. (p. 16)

This term, *homophobia*, still appears to be widely used in psychological and popular literature as well as in the mass media (Fernald, 1995). It has served as a model for researchers to conceptualize a variety of negative attitudes based on sexuality and gender (Dermer, Smith, & Barto, 2010). However, it has often been criticized; Herek, for example, notes "that homophobia implicitly proposes that antigay attitudes are best understood as an irrational fear and that they represent a form of individual psychopathology rather than a socially reinforced prejudice" (Herek, 2000, p. 19). Some researchers have argued that homophobia is psychopathological and can be defined as intense, irrational fear (e.g., Kantor, 1998), whereas Herek (2004) stated that there is not enough empirical data to support such claims. Presenting homophobia as a diagnosis of an illness has also alarmed some researchers. As Herek posited, "by casting hostility against

homosexuality as a purely individual phenomenon… the notion of homophobia as illness focuses attention on the prejudiced individual while ignoring the larger culture in which that person lives" (p. 11).

The complexities and justifications of homophobia are detailed and historical. As Herek (2004) noted, "similarities are readily apparent between homophobia and xenophobia, which has been used for at least a century to describe individual and cultural hostility toward outsiders or foreigners" (p. 9). The construction of homophobia and its current use is intricately embedded in American history and is beyond the scope of this project. However, the residing limitations articulated here have established that the term *homophobia* is overly narrow in its characterization of oppression as the product of individual fear, but is also far too encompassing, ranging from private thoughts to policies and actions by the government as well as organized religion (Fernald, 1995; Herek, 2004). A term that is closely related to but not synonymous with *homophobia* is *heterosexism*.

Heterosexism. Unlike *homophobia*, which has been employed to describe individual anti-gay attitudes, *heterosexism* typically refers to ideologies and patterns of institutionalized oppression of homosexuals on a societal level (Herek, 2000). *Heterosexism* began to be used around the same time as *homophobia* to describe an ideological system that casts homosexuality as inferior to heterosexuality (Herek, 2000). Conceptually, heterosexism is "the system under which homophobia enforces the supremacy of heterosexuality and the erasure of gay, lesbian, and bisexual experiences" (Lipkin, 2004, p. 6).

Fernald (1995) added, "like other forms of oppression, heterosexism is manifested both in discriminatory social customs and institutions and in individual behaviors that discriminate against individual lesbians and gay men" (p. 80). According to Herek (1990), examples of heterosexism would include the previous ban against gay and lesbian military personnel; lack of legal protection from antigay discrimination in housing, employment, and services; and legal hostility of federal and state laws against same-sex marriages.

Another key element of heterosexism is that children who grow up in the United States tend to internalize societal heterosexism from an early age (Herek, Cogan, Gillis, & Glunt, 1997). Therefore, homosexual men and women typically experience some degree of negative feelings when they recognize their own homosexuality. The development of this negative feeling can occur in either childhood or adulthood. Weinberg (1972) labeled this feeling "internal homophobia." Herek (2004) posited that mental health practitioners and researchers have agreed that internalized homophobia involves negative feelings about one's own homosexuality. How they conceptualize, define, and operationalize heterosexism, nonetheless, varies. Many researchers also agree that internalized homophobia poses a psychological challenge for many throughout life (see Herek); however as Herek et al. (1997) stated, "most lesbians and gay men successfully overcome the threats to psychological well-being posed by internalized homophobia" (p. 17).

Much like the term *homophobia*, *heterosexism* has been used inconsistently. It has frequently worked as a synonym for *homophobia*. However,

Herek (2004) pointed out that some researchers have made a distinction between the two terms, using *heterosexism* to describe "cultural ideology manifested in society's institutions while reserving homophobia to describe individual attitudes and actions deriving from that ideology" (p. 16). Herek (2000) posited that even with its historical focus on cultural ideologies and not simply individual behaviors, *heterosexism* is not a sufficient replacement for *homophobia*. Because prior definitions of *homophobia* suggest that it is both overly narrow in its characterization of oppression and too encompassing a term, a third construct, *sexual prejudice*, is proposed and discussed next.

Sexual Prejudice. *Sexual prejudice* refers to negative attitudes based on sexual orientation (Lehmiller et al., 2010) and/or social bias (Lehmiller et al., 2010), or negative attitudes focusing specifically toward an individual because of her or his sexual orientation (Herek, 2000). According to Herek (2004), this term has the benefit of connecting hostility toward homosexuality with the extensive body of social science theory and empirical research on prejudice. The term *sexual prejudice* does not involve the implied value of irrationality or fear encompassed in the term *homophobia* (Dermer et al., 2010). Additionally, Herek (2004) posited that prejudice has three key elements. First, prejudice is an attitude. Second, this attitude is held toward a social group and its members. Third, prejudice is typically a negative attitude involving, for example, hostility or dislike. The basic definition that can be constructed from these elements is "an enduring negative attitude toward a social group and its members" (Herek, 2004, p. 17).

Dermer et al. (2010) solidified *sexual prejudice* as a key term for scientific analysis of all negative attitudes based on sexual orientation that would include bisexuality, transexuality, homosexuality, and even heterosexuality. It is this definition of prejudice that simplifies the concept and aids researchers in their analysis of heterosexuals' hostility toward homosexuals. By utilizing this term, those working with gay and lesbian individuals have the "ability to be aware of, identify, and name the multifaceted face of oppression" (Dermer et al., p. 325).

Dermer et al. (2010) took the stance that negative attitudes toward homosexuals is not necessarily a phobia and could be better defined as a prejudice. Herek (2004) stated that most antigay activists do not suffer from homophobia, in that they do not have a debilitating fear of homosexuals, but rather they are hostile toward gay people and exhibit dislike. It is a combination of "negative attitudes toward people based on their membership in the group homosexual or gay or lesbian" (Herek, 2004, p. 17). Herek compared sexual prejudice to prejudice based on race, gender, and religion.

To quote Herek (2000) once again, there are three advantages of conceptualizing negative attitudes toward homosexuals as sexual prejudice:

First, sexual prejudice is a descriptive term. Unlike homophobia, it conveys no a priori assumption about origin, dynamics and underlying motivations of antigay attitudes. Second, the term explicitly links the study of antigay hostility with the rich tradition of social psychological research on prejudice. Third, using the construct of sexual prejudice does not

require value judgments that antigay attitudes are inherently irrational or evil. (p. 20)

Through the conceptualizing of hostility and dislike toward homosexuals as sexual prejudice, this relatively new construct may assist in the development of strategies to reduce antigay attitudes.

To summarize, *homophobia* and *heterosexism* are two notable terms commonly used in literature. The lack of consistency with the use of these terms, however, has led to some criticisms and the need for redefinition for future studies. Currently, *sexual prejudice* has emerged as an attractive alternative to these terms because it is a descriptive term linked to social psychology research and does not overlook socially reinforced prejudice.

Comparative discussion of homophobia, racism, and sexism.

Racism. Racism is another form of prejudice equally as complex as homophobia. Racism is more complicated than the definitional single sentence typically found in the glossary of introductory sociology textbooks. Instead, Chin (2004, p. 235) argued that racism is a "complex, multifaceted phenomenon in society" and therefore requires a definition that recognizes this complexity.

Jones (1997) provided a five-point definition that addresses the various facets of racism. First, racism exists based on a belief in racial superiority-inferiority because of biological differences. Second, racism has strong in-group preference, solidarity, and the rejection of out-group people, ideas, and customs that differ from the in-group customs and beliefs. Third, cultural systems give privilege and advantage to those in power. Fourth, individual thought and

behavior follow the cultural mechanisms of racism. Fifth, most attempts to prove the rationality and validity of beliefs about racial differences are based on racism. As such, this definition suggests that the limitation or barrier of access to resources can often leave minority groups with irreparable effects, both personally and as a group (Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993).

Racial inequity is evident in 1) individual behavior, 2) cultural attitudes, and 3) institutional norms and practices that categorize racism. Individual racism is the first category of racism (Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993). Individual racism exists in the in-group's superior attitudes as believed by a particular person and presented in discriminatory behavior. A second category is cultural racism. Cultural racism is exhibited in deeply held social attitudes regarding racial roles and behaviors. To clarify, Grosfoguel and Mielants (2006) defined *cultural racism* in the following way:

> Cultural racism is a form of racism that does not even mention the word 'race'. It is focused on the cultural inferiority of a group of people. Usually it is framed in terms of the inferior habits, beliefs, behaviors, or values of a group of people. It is close to biological racism in the sense that cultural racism naturalizes/essentializes the culture of the racialized/inferiorized people. (p. 4)

Cultural racism includes displays of superiority of one race over another (Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993).

A third category of racism is institutional racism. Institutional racism is an inherent bias against a race built into the structures of a society (Ponterotto &

Pedersen, 1993). These structures promote inequality and often inflict economic and social sanctions on minority groups. As stated by Biernat and Dovidio (2003), institutional racism is "typically not recognized as being racially unfair, because it is embedded in laws (which are normally assumed to be right and moral), is ritualized, and is accompanied by racial ideologies and stereotypes that justify it" (p. 102). These intentional or unintentional manipulations or tolerance of racist policies ultimately impede targeted, mostly minority groups (Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993).

Aronson (2004) warned against the modern form of racism most prevalent among those who in fact consider themselves unprejudiced, despite their subtle discriminations of minority groups. Sternberg (2005) characterized such a modern form of racism as aversive. He went on to define aversive racists as those "who consciously, explicitly, and sincerely support egalitarian principles and believe themselves to be nonprejudiced" (Sternberg, 2005, p. 215). According to Pearson, Dovidio, and Gaertner (2009):

Aversive racists, in contrast, sympathize with victims of past injustice, support principles of racial equality, and genuinely regard themselves as non-prejudiced, but at the same time possess conflicting, often non-conscious, negative feelings and beliefs about Blacks that are rooted in basic psychological processes that promote racial bias. The negative feelings that aversive racists have toward Blacks typically do not reflect open antipathy, but rather consist of more avoidant reactions of discomfort, anxiety, or fear. That is, they find Blacks 'aversive', while at the same time

find any suggestion that they might be prejudiced 'aversive' as well. (p. 3) These individuals harbor negative feelings toward historically disadvantaged groups. This aversive racism manifests itself in cognitive processes in which one inherently categorizes others into groups to distinguish one's own group from others (Sternberg, 2005). This classification naturally creates bias because it serves a personal need for power and status, while at the same time downgrading others to lesser status. Given the internalized racially biased traditional values and beliefs prevalent in society, aversive racism is the performance of subtle racial biases that are less accepted in explicit public forms.

Comparing definitions of racism and homophobia identifies similarities. As identified by the framework of racism and sexual prejudice, interactions with a stigmatized group could be anxiety-provoking. This anxiety or negative attitude could be the result of limited contact, fear, lack of education, or belief in a supposed natural law that establishes sexual and gender orders. Garnets and Kimmel (2002) argued that "racism and antigay attitudes are all facets or manifestations of the higher-order construct of authoritarian conservatism" (p. 176). Both racism and homophobia explore the role of hate both individually and institutionally in their definitions and recognize the long history of prejudice. Both identify negative attitudes varying from mild discomfort through disgust, fear, or anger to the extreme, open hatred (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980; Sternberg, 2005). Heterosexism and racism have also been compared to sexism as a prejudice.

Sexism. Women are victims of subtle forms of prejudice evident in the patriarchal society in which we live. Such prejudice not only consists of feelings

of antipathy toward women, but may also be exhibited in ambivalence toward women (Aronson, 2004). Bothamley (1993) tries to explain this unfortunate prejudice by positing that in some circumstances, the physical differences observable between men and women are neither accidental nor socially constructed. Instead, these distinctions contribute to the expression of fundamental and immutable differences, which sadly, some believe justify the different treatment of men and women, and the privileges given to men (Bothamley, 1993). Male status superiority characterizes the implicit belief as the defining characteristic of sexism (Lott, 1995). More specifically, Albee (1981) posited, "sexism means ascribing superiority or inferiority, unsupported by any evidence, in traits, abilities, social value, personal worth, and other characteristics to males or females as a group" (p. 6).

The idea that sexism holds benefits for men is woven into the texture of our society; therefore, behavior maintaining its existence is enacted (Albee, 1981; Lott, 1995). Lott conceptualized sexism using three related and independent components: prejudice, stereotypes, and discrimination. Prejudice is negative attitudes toward women (Lott,1995). These negative or hostile feelings are the result of learned stereotypes. Sexist stereotypes are "well-learned, widely shared, socially validated general beliefs or cognitions about women, which reinforce, complement, or justify the prejudices, and often involve an assumption of inferiority" (Lott, 1995, p. 14). Lott described discrimination against women as "overt behaviors that achieve separation from women through exclusion, avoidance, or distancing" (p. 14).

Sexism is often an unconscious ideology or set of beliefs that are unquestioned because alternative understandings are inconceivable (Aronson, 2004). Such attitudes downgrade women to inferior status by recognizing only their traditional roles, such as "homemaker" and mother. Glick and Fiske (2002) identified two forms of sexism: hostile sexism and benevolent sexism. Those who demonstrate hostile sexism hold stereotypic views of women's inferiority to men, whereas those who demonstrate benevolent sexism hold stereotypically positive views of women. Benevolent sexism ultimately posits women as the weaker sex. Benevolent sexism suggests that these cooks and nurturers are in need of protection, thereby relegating them to inferior status (Glick & Fiske, 2002).

Inequality is prevalent in 1) individual behavior, 2) cultural attitudes, and 3) institutional norms and practices that characterize society and categorize sexism. The first category, individual sexism, occurs when both men and women act on gender constructs experienced in their communities and understood through individual experience (Ellis & Llewellyn, 1997). These individuals harbor negative feelings and perform these negative understandings toward women as a historically disadvantaged group. The second category, cultural sexism, is the product of traditional sexist attitudes that are demonstrated in males' superior attitudes that relegate women to a subordinate category (Ponterotto & Pederson, 1993). The third category, institutional sexism, involves policies that advance male domination on institutional levels. These institutionalized fears of inequality often inflict economic and social sanctions on women, and are manifest in intentional or unintentional manipulations or tolerance of sexist policies such as

poll taxes, admissions criteria, and promotional procedures (Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993).

Homophobia has several links to sexism in that they both employ prejudiced attitudes, stereotypes, and discrimination. Fone (2000) made a compelling comparison to benevolent sexism, stating, "if men are contemptuous of women because they accept stereotypical notions about women's alleged weakness, irrationality, sexuality, or inferiority, they are also contemptuous of homosexuals because they believe that gay men act 'like' women" (p. 5). Aronson (2004) argued that sexism is often an unconscious ideology or beliefs that are unquestioned because alternative understandings are inconceivable. This explanation is comparable to Herek's (2000) argument that heterosexism typically refers to ideologies and patterns of institutionalized oppression of homosexuals on a societal level.

However, Dermer et al. (2010) and Herek (2004) argued that even though sexual prejudice is closely linked to sexism, it is sexual orientation that gives sexual prejudice its form. To treat hostility based on sexual orientation as an element of sexism can obscure aspects of sexual prejudice that are distinct from gender ideologies (Herek, 2004).

Summary. To summarize, intolerance toward others is an important problem in today's society. Research shows that sexual prejudice is commonplace in the United States (Baunach & Burgess, 2010). As a consequence, sexual minorities such as GLBT find themselves to be the targets of discrimination and hatred. As Herek (2008) reported, one in three gay men

and one in eight lesbians have reported experiencing personal violence or property damage because of their sexual orientation.

Additionally, it is important to note that those who wish to aid in the welfare of the GLBT community, such as advocates and researchers, need to become familiar with key terminology and language. As Dermer et al. (2010) poignantly stated,

> Having the proper language to describe, understand, and research sexual oppression and prejudice is one stop in helping practitioners, researchers, the LGBTQ community, and society at large create an opportunity structure that not only accepts but also normalizes same-sex attraction and relationships. (p. 330)

Utilizing *sexual prejudice* as a broad term that encompasses all forms of bias based on sexual orientation, Dermer et al. (2010) went on to state that the "advent of specific language to encapsulate society's prejudice against sexual minorities opens the door to seeing prejudicial and homonegative views of society as the ill to be combated rather than seeing homosexuality as individual pathology" (p. 329).

Sexual Identity Development and the "Coming-Out" Process

Introduction. To further illustrate the stigmatized nature of adolescent sexual minorities, a review of sexual identity development and the tedious "coming-out" process is offered. A cornerstone of human development is the formation of a cohesive sense of sexual identity that can start in early years of adolescence (Halpin & Allen, 2004). The formation of sexual identity has also

been noted as a key to life for sexual minorities, but one that has continuously been reported as a distinct and problematic developmental process differing from that of heterosexual youth (Rowen & Malcolm, 2002). "Typically, the earlier stages of gay/lesbian identity formation are fraught with confusion and despair marked by low self-acceptance and low self-esteem" (Rowen & Malcolm, 2002, p. 78) unlike that of heterosexual youth. According to Harrison (2003), sexual minorities are persistently stigmatized and marginalized by society's pressuring of gay adolescents to hide their sexual identities. This compounds the anticipated normal developmental concerns of adolescents, and can create unique problems for the adolescent sexual minority. "Unlike members of other minority groups (e.g., ethnic and racial minorities), most LGB [lesbian, gay, bisexual] individuals are not raised in a community of similar others from whom they learn about their identity and who reinforce and support that identity" (Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006, p. 46). More often than not, a heterosexual orientation is the dominant culture, and GLBT individuals are therefore faced with unique developmental challenges. Striepe and Tolman (2003) present additional insight into one of these challenges of identity formation:

> Few adolescents worry that they will have to sit down with their parents and confide what they have come to realize about their sexual identity, that is to say "Mom, Dad, I'm straight." In our society, heterosexuality is assumed from birth. It is when adolescents show signs of being different than the heterosexual norm that sexual identity becomes a visible aspect of development. (p. 523)

The development of a GLBT sexual identity is often a difficult process of identity formation and integration because of the stigmatized nature of this identity (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). Figure 2 illustrates the set of possible psychological and social motivators for sexual minorities during this identity-formation process. Considerable research has indicated that sexual minority (GLBT) adolescents must learn to manage a stigmatized identity alone because of the lack of active support and modeling from parents and family (Ryan & Futterman, 1998), access to gay role models (Rosario et al., 2004), inability to socialize with other gay youth (McKenna & Green, 2002), fear of exposure (Hamer, 2003), and an overall hostile social environment (Draganowski, 2004). Draganowski posited that this "perceived lack of acceptance leads to an initial approach of understanding and exploring one's sexual orientation in secrecy" (2004, p. 577). Further, Ryan and Futterman (1998) stated that the lack of socialization with other gay youth increases social isolation and hinders identity development.

Coming-out. The identity developmental process for gays and lesbians is often referred to as "coming-out," short for the phrase "coming out of the closet." Investigators have posited several definitions for this process. Creelman and Harris (1990) defined *coming-out* as a process of recognizing, understanding, and accepting homosexual identity. Whitt (1993) concurred that it is simply identity acceptance. Joyce and Schrader (1997) elaborated the notion that coming-out is one's own acceptance, beyond mere awareness of one's own
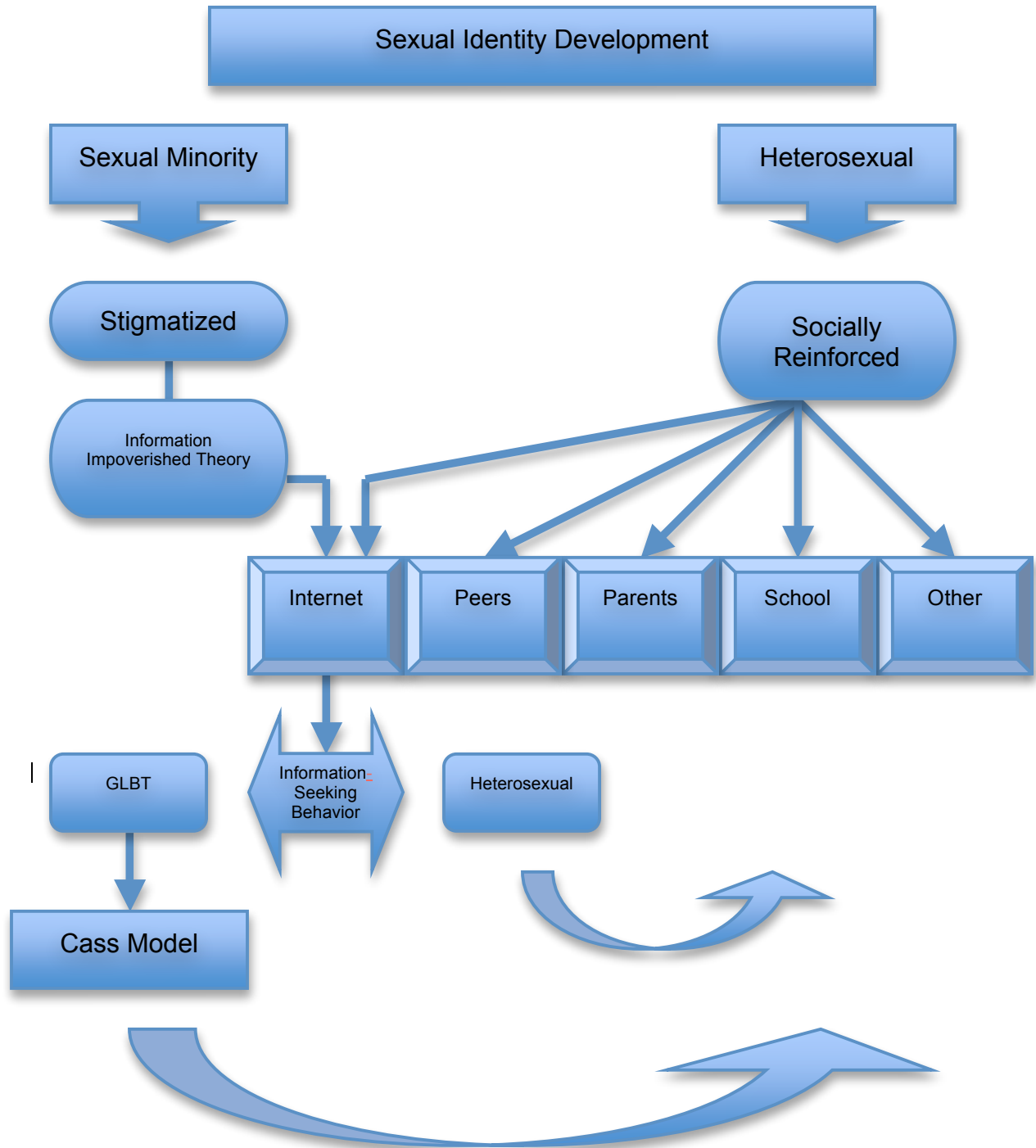
Figure 2.
A detailed model of the "coming-out" process that identifies the psychological and social motivations that may drive the process for sexual minorities

sexual identity. Stenback and Schrader (1997) argue that coming-out is a

process/phase in which individuals acknowledge their own homosexuality to

themselves or others, and Garner (2001) reiterated that coming-out is a process/phase associated with self-acceptance. In general, coming-out is noted as a progression of coming to terms with one's identity by exploring one's sexual orientation as well as gay/lesbian culture over a period of time. Smith, Dermer, and Astramovich (2005) posited that the average age of awareness for sexual minorities is between 10 and 11 years, while identifying or self-labeling as homosexual does not occur until around 13 to 15 years. Furthermore, Friedman and Morgan (2008) indicated that late adolescence and early adulthood is a period of significant identity development characterized by increased autonomy and exploration.

Several models of identity development have been proposed to describe the coming-out process. According to Ryan and Futterman (1998), most models "(1) recognized the impact of the stigma, which affects both the formation and expression of homosexual identity; (2) unfold over a period of time; (3) involve increasing acceptance of 'homosexual' identity; and (4) include disclosure to non-gay persons" (p. 4). One of the earliest and most popular theories used to describe the developmental process of sexual minorities is the Cass model (1979). This model offers a delineated structure that many find useful in exploring the GLB identity development.

Cass Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation. This six-stage model, often referred to as "Homosexual Identity Formation" (HIF), gives insight into what is considered to be an evolution of a sexual identity for gays and lesbians. Cass (1979) suggested that this evolution starts when individuals come

across an incongruity between their perceptions about their own behavior, a characteristic they attribute to themselves, and their beliefs regarding how others perceive them in reference to sexuality. According to Cass, individuals desire congruency between their personal perception of self and their societal perception. When there is incongruence, individuals will question their differences of sexual orientation and become perplexed. This perplexed feeling is known as Identity Confusion, which is the first stage in the Cass Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation, or HIF (see Figure 3).

The first stage in the HIF consists of individuals becoming aware that homosexuality has a possible bearing on their behavior and life. "Could I possibly be gay?" In light of this new insight, inconsistency of perceptions of being part of the heterosexual norm or possibly gay creates cognitive dissonance: experiencing psychological pain as one comes to accept, deny, or reject the idea. Kort (2003) stated that this stage is the personalization of information regarding sexuality. If at any time an individual refuses to consider accepting a possible homosexual identity, Cass identifies the individual as moving into an Identity Foreclosure stage. It is important to note that the Foreclosure stage can result during any of the proceeding stages. In contrast to this possible stage, however, Cass posited that those who further consider their homosexual identity will move into Stage 2, Identity Comparison.

1	**IDENTITY CONFUSION**	
2	**IDENTITY COMPARISON** Foreclosure	
3	**IDENTITY TOLERANCE** Foreclosure	
4	**IDENTITY ACCEPTANCE** Foreclosure	
5	**IDENTITY PRIDE** Foreclosure	
6	**IDENTITY SYNTHESIS** Foreclosure	
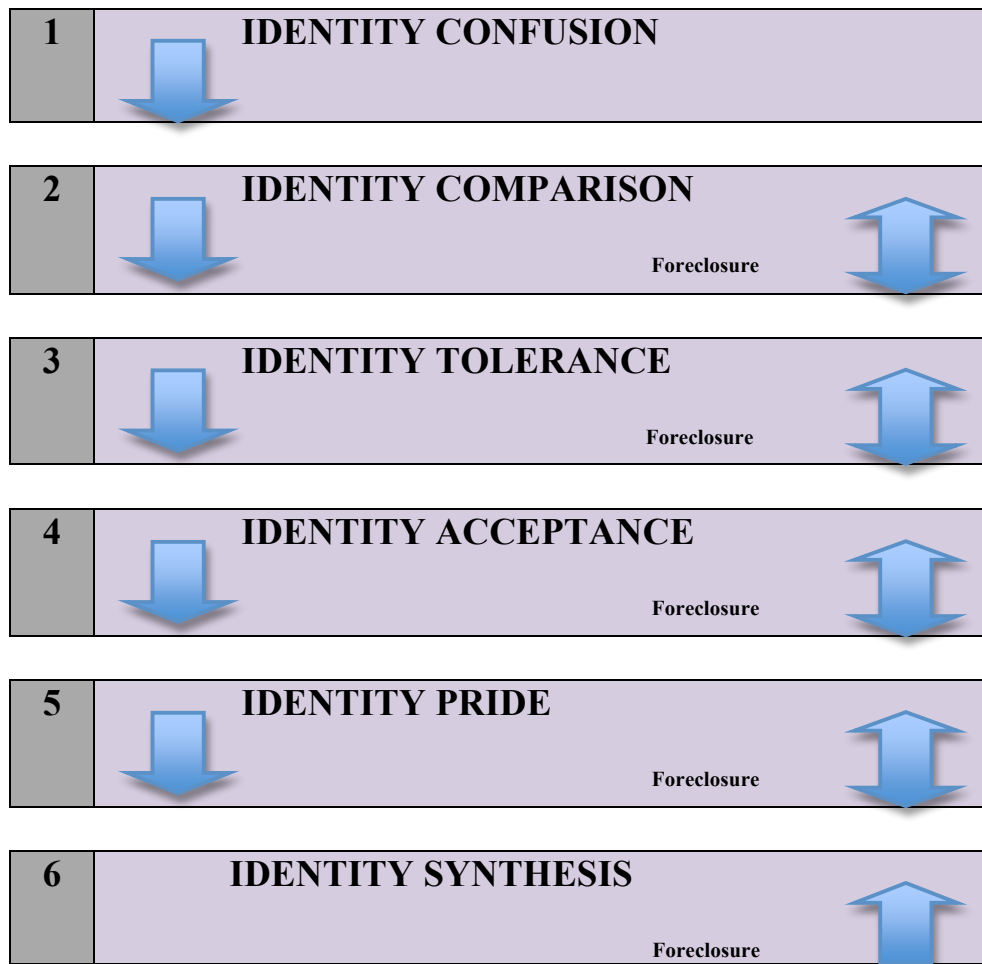
Figure 3. Cass Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation

Note. Adapted from Cass (1979).

Halpin and Allen (2004) described Identity Comparison as "coping with the social alienation occurring as individuals become aware that others perceive them to be heterosexual, while perceiving themselves and their behavior to be possibly homosexual" (p. 111). This stage is characterized by a feeling of alienation from others and a limited supportive community. This especially painful experience creates a void within individuals and a need to redefine their sense of

meaning in the world (Sexual Identity Development and Coming Out Straight: Online, 2009).

An increasing acceptance of a homosexual identity, desire to seek out a homosexual co-culture, and acknowledgement of social, emotional, and sexual needs are associated with the third stage, known as Identity Tolerance: "I'm not the only one." In this stage, one becomes more tolerant of one's feelings about gays, lesbians, and transgender individuals through contact. A variety of stereotypical roles may be tried in order to understand this co-culture and find similar others to help alleviate the sense of alienation.

In the fourth stage, Identity Acceptance, individuals tend to embrace their sexual identity, having resolved many previous questions and concerns. Continued contact with the GLBT co-culture and a movement away from a heterosexual community are often characteristic of this stage. "Sexual Identity Development and Coming Out Straight: Online" (2009), a website that synthesizes the contributions of the HIF, states that disclosure, social coming-out as GLB, elevated comfort in being associated with others identified as GLBT, and finding congruency between self and societal perceptions are representative behaviors in stage 4.

Identity Pride exemplifies stage 5 of the HIF model. During this stage, individuals find themselves engaged in the gay co-culture while addressing the incongruity between society's negative perception and the positive perception of self as a homosexual (Halpin & Allen, 2004, p. 112). According to Cass (1979), individuals will reject heterosexual society while finding support only in the gay

co-culture. Additionally, anger is the predominant emotion as the individual "directs his or her discontent, resulting from experienced alienation and sexual stigma toward heterosexuals and society as a whole" (Sexual Identity Development and Coming Out Straight: Online, 2009). HIF suggests that during the fifth stage, GLB individuals are encouraged to advance toward the final stage, Identity Synthesis, by recognizing and acknowledging supportive heterosexual individuals.

Identity Synthesis occurs as individuals experience positive interactions with non-homosexuals and begin to develop a holistic view of themselves that is not completely contingent on sexual orientation (Halpin & Allen, 2004; Sexual Identity Development and Coming Out Straight: Online, 2009). Cass (1984) posited that individuals will recognize that the rigid classification of "good homosexuals" and "bad heterosexuals" is not completely accurate, and will decrease the intensity of their anger toward heterosexuals as well as allow trust of others to continue to increase during this final stage. More trust of others builds during this final stage as a homosexual identity is integrated into all aspects of one's life. Again, sexual orientation is not the only defining attribute to explain one's view of self; rather, a holistic view is seen.

The HIF holds intuitive appeal (Radonsky & Borders, 1995) and has informed many studies looking at identity development of adolescents (Adam & Phillips, 2009; Brady & Busse, 1994; Cass, 1984; Cass, 1996; Degges-White & Myers, 2005; Halpin & Allen, 2004; Horwitz & Newcomb, 2002; Nicely, 2001; Rowen & Malcolm, 2002; Striepe & Tolman, 2003; Yarhouse, Tan, & Pawlowski,

2005). For example, Brady and Busse (1994) developed a Gay Identity Questionnaire that was derived from tenets of the HIF model proposed by Cass (1979). The results of their study supported the use of the Gay Identity Questionnaire by clinicians and researchers for identifying gay males in the various stages of homosexual identity formation (Brady & Busse, 1994).

Further, Nicely (2001) integrated research on stages and processes of change, internalized homophobia, and gay identity development to understand patterns of alcohol use among gay men. His study revealed an increase in internalized homophobia as the individual moved toward change. This corresponded with the developmental sequence of the Cass model. Specifically, this change was seen as movement from being in the closet toward coming-out (Nicely, 2001). Nicely further commented as follows:

> During the identity tolerance stage, an individual begins to make contact with the gay community. With the first contact there are accompanying losses of denial and suppression of one's homosexuality. The first act of coming out is accompanied by upheaval of feelings (guilt and shame about being gay) and a sense that nothing is as it once was. This shift toward disclosure results in a discomfort that parallels the increase in internalized homophobia as one moves toward change from addictive behaviors. (p. 77)

An exploratory analysis of internalized homophobia and HIF was conducted by Rowen and Malcolm (2002). The contributions of their study included, first, that the resolution of HIF is dependent on overcoming internalized homophobia; and,

second, that participants' age was also linked to their stage of HIF. The study indicated that

> progression through the stages of HIF is likely to increase with age. However, the mean age of men in the lower stages of HIF (27.36) suggest homosexual identity is a developmental task that is not accomplished until adulthood, rather than being resolved during adolescence. (Rowen & Malcolm, 2002, p. 88)

Utilizing the HIF model, Halpin and Allen (2004) studied the psychosocial well-being of 425 males who indicated sexual attraction to other men. In this study, significant relationships were found between happiness-sadness, satisfaction with life, self-esteem, and loneliness within the Cass model stage of gay identity formation (Halpin & Allen, 2004). The results, however, showed "a [inverted] 'U' shaped function, in which greater levels of distress were associated with the middle stages of Identity Tolerance and Identity Acceptance" (Halpin & Allen, 2004, p. 122). This finding questioned the linear direction of the Cass model reporting that Identity Confusion and Identity Comparison, the earlier stages, were similar to Identity Pride and Identity Synthesis, the later stages, with regard to level of distress.

Degges-White and Myers (2005) used an interview protocol based on the HIF model to investigate the emotional and physical health risks of adolescent lesbians. Adams and Phillips (2009) also selected the HIF model to serve as a point of comparison for their study of two-spirit (Native/First Nations gender identity and gender variance), lesbian and gay Native Americans. Results

suggested that participants followed one of two developmental pathways: one that supported Cass's HIF model and one that "demonstrated a notable lack of the key experiences specified by Cass" (Adams & Phillips, 2009, p. 973).

The HIF model informs many studies looking at identity development of adolescents. Notable topics of interest have been stages of identity formation (Brady & Busse, 1994), internalized homophobia and alcoholism (Nicely, 2001), internalized homophobia and age (Rowen & Malcolm, 2002), reconceptualization of stages (Halpin & Allen, 2004), and physical and emotional health risks of GLBT individuals (Degges-White & Myers, 2005).

Summary. The Cass HIF model is a popular, linear model that characterizes homosexual identity as a progressive development that is motivated by the need to make sense of one's sexual orientation and how this sexual identity will be revealed to others (Cass, 1979). A major criticism of this model, as with most linear models, is that not all individuals will progress and experience all six stages in the linear format as proposed by Cass. Despite the shortcomings of linear stage theories, the Cass model has remained a primary source to examine and explain the identity development of homosexuals. Given the complexities of examining sexual minority youth and the popularity of Cass's HIF model in previous studies, utilizing the HIF model complements the current study looking at identity development of GLB adolescents.

Youth and Internet Use

Introduction. In continuing to illustrate the trajectory of adolescent sexual minorities' identity development and the coming-out process, overlooking the

technological advancement of the Internet would be remiss. For American youth, the Internet is a central and indispensable element of life. According to a survey conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project in Fall 2009, 93% of American teens ages 12 to 17 use the Internet, and nearly two-thirds of these teens, about 63%, reported going online everyday. Gross et al. (2002) reported that 90% of in-school adolescents use the Internet "occasionally" or "regularly" at home, and that 84% of respondents reported that they go on-line on a "typical day." Seventy percent indicated at least one Internet session within the last three days (Gross et al., 2002). Given the popularity of social networking services such as Facebook and Twitter and the accessibility of mobile Internet, it is speculated that these numbers are even greater.

With the popularity of Internet use, adolescents spend a considerable amount of time in online interactions with others (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, Kraut, & Gross, 2001), information seeking (Bond, Hefner, & Drogos, 2009) and presumably engaging in identity development (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005). Gross (2002) claimed that American adolescents (predominantly from middle- and upper-income households) who use the Internet from home are increasingly likely to find their close friends online. "Thus, youth need not necessarily forsake their school-based relationships when they log on; the Internet can now be both a space in which to interact with distant associates and strangers and a supplemental medium for communication with one's established, off-line peer network" (Gross, 2002, p. 77). As Internet use among teenagers has grown exponentially in the last 10 years (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2009),

so has interest regarding its effect on the psychological well-being of youth. Specifically, research has recently focused on the Internet, sexual identity development of adolescents, and the identity process of sexual minorities.

Sexual identity development and the Internet. Gross (2004) expressed concern for the scarcity of research on what exactly youth are doing when they are online, with whom, and why; and, "moreover, how these aspects of Internet use may be related to young people's well-being and development" (p. 634). This, compounded with the sexual maturation of adolescents particularly poses many questions about sexual identity development, interpersonal bonds, and their relation to Internet usage. Huffaker and Calvert (2005) highlighted that with "sexual maturation comes changes in the roles that one is expected to assume with members of the opposite sex" and that adolescents are increasingly expected to assume a sexual identity (para. 5). This maturation is accompanied by increased interest in sex and sexual drive (Weinstein & Rosen, 1991). As a result, adolescents spend time incorporating ideas of sex in their discourse (sex slang, telling sexual jokes) and discuss sex-related materials (sex-oriented literature) with their peers (Rice, 2001).

This developmental period for adolescents is a critical time when the process of cementing identity is most important. As adolescents come to understand who they are, they integrate elements of sexuality into their identity (Bond et al., 2009). According to Erikson (1963), this critical developmental task is to explore and resolve the crisis of identity. Baumeister and Leary (1995) posited that a fundamental need for a healthy development of adolescent identity

is the formation and maintenance of strong interpersonal bonds. Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, and Ryan (2000) concurred, stating that close connections with others on a regular basis are associated with higher well-being; and, specifically, that feeling understood and appreciated and sharing pleasant interactions are especially strong predictors of well-being. According to Ward (2004), peer communication is the primary source of information about sex for adolescents, followed next by the media.

In a study conducted by MSNBC (Couric, 2005) on heterosexual adolescents and sex, parents topped the list of information sources for questions dealing with sex and sexual relationships (70%). Friends (53%), school (53%), TV and movies (51%), and magazines (34%) followed behind. As an information source, the Internet ranked the lowest. Tebb and Reznik (2008) posited that the Internet has increasingly grown in popularity for heterosexual adolescents' information needs on sexual health, but still trailed behind peers, parents, and teachers.

The increasing pervasiveness of the Internet in the lives of adolescents offers a virtual world where teenagers are able to connect with their off-line peers, and understand and control their sexual feelings as they construct a sexual identity. As Gross (2004) stated, this venue might, with its anonymity, provide adolescents with an ideal setting in which to explore their identity and seek information on sexuality. Participants in Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, and Tynes's (2004) study reported use of "online space of teen chat to air adolescent concerns about sexuality and to develop creative strategies to exchange identity

information with their peers" (p. 651). One key way participants expressed their identity to others was through their screen name. According to Subrahmanyam et al. (2004), many of the screen names in the study utilized strong gender stereotypes, such as "Snowbunny" and "TJHockeyGUY44," to portray a feminine or masculine persona (p. 659). In addition to sharing identity information through screen names, some participants identified themselves with adjectives such as "hot" or "sexy," conveying that they were looking for sexual intimacy in a conversational partner (Subrahmanyam et al., 2004, p. 661). These types of exchanges were seen as critical to the expression of emerging sexuality and exploration (Subrahmanyam et al., 2004).

Sexual exploration and information seeking are significant elements within human information-seeking behavior (Spink, Koricich, Jansen, & Cole, 2004). Sexually related information seeking on the Internet takes many forms and channels, including chat room discussions, accessing websites, or searching the Internet for sexual materials. This information-seeking behavior on the Internet can be a useful tool for teenagers who wish to be anonymous and experiment with identity (Gross, 2004).

After observing teenagers' communication in chat rooms and instant message usage, Sweeney (1999) stated that "the internet's greatest asset to 'teendom' might be access and the confidence to slip in and out of personalities, the ability to try on identities, the adolescent equivalent of playing dress-up in the attic" (p. 1). Trying on identities through the usage of the Internet is an important activity in adolescents' "declaration of sexuality because it provides information

that allows teens to label feelings and figure out who they are" (Bond, Hefner, & Drogos, 2009, p. 34). It also affords them the ability to discuss embarrassing topics such as premarital sex, birth control devices such as condoms, and the sexually developing body in an anonymous social context (Subrahmanyam et al., 2004).

As teenagers navigate their sexual identity online, sexual orientation, whether heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual, often emerges (Grotevant, 1989). This sexual orientation development is a milestone during adolescence. "While the challenges of assuming a mature sexual identity occur for all youth, these challenges may be particularly difficult for those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered" (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005, para. 21). Di Iorio, Kelley, and Hockenberry-Eaton (1999) reported that heterosexual-oriented participants turned to their peers first and foremost during the pivotal time of sexual self-realization, unlike their sexual minority counterparts, who reported turning to the media as a primary source of information seeking (see Bond et al., 2009).

Gay youth and the Internet. As gay youth acknowledge their identity, many adolescents seek out accurate information and social support. Grover (1994) noted that 95% of gay youth surveyed expressed feelings of isolation from peers. Bond et al. (2009) stated that "LGB adolescents are not experiencing sexual identity formation with the assistance of face-to-face communication among peers, they may look elsewhere for support and information" (p. 33). Thus, the Internet has particular importance to sexual minorities. Campbell (2004) noted that "web sites, chat rooms, and other online services oriented

toward the gay community create a safe venue for private, at-home exploration and entertainment, away from prying eyes" (p. 6). Though Campbell's participants comprised homosexual men who shared erotic predilections, his research offered a valuable glimpse into virtual communities located online. Campbell also stated that "computer-mediated communication offers possibilities for the exploration and expression of identity, for affiliation and solidarity among otherwise isolated and even stigmatized individuals" (p. 6).

Rivers and Carragher (2003) posited that heterosexual-oriented adolescents are socially sanctioned to explore their sexuality and sexual roles through examples such as school dances or Valentine's Day activities, whereas young sexual minorities are denied this opportunity to establish non-erotic and non-threatening social interactions with their lesbian and gay peers. In addition, Mercier and Berger (1989) stated that sexual minorities do not always achieve unconditional support when they decide to disclose their sexual orientation to their family, friends, and peers. Thirty-five percent of Mercier and Berger's sample of young sexual minorities indicated their parents were either "unhelpful" or "very unhelpful" as sources of support. They also reported that 27% indicated teachers were "unhelpful" or "very unhelpful," and 43% indicated that school counselors were seen as "unhelpful or very unhelpful" (Mercier & Berger, 1989).

This lack of support for sexual minority youth often motivates them to suppress or hide their sexual feelings and fantasies from family members and peers in fear of encountering discrimination, disparagement, and even punishment. Martin (1982) argued that a young sexual minority who is able to

hide and who has seen what happens to openly GLBT adolescents will spend a great deal of time and energy continuously monitoring her/his social behavior, work to repress any personal mannerisms or traits, and avoid people and places that may result in suspicion. Carragher (1999) concurred, stating that young sexual minorities who avoid social condemnation have more than likely lived a secretive life, altering their behaviors by avoiding certain places and people in an effort to portray a sense of heterosexuality. D'Augelli (1994) argued that we have yet to understand fully what it is like to grow up lesbian or gay without fear of persecution or intolerance. Rivers and Carragher (2003) posited, additionally, that "even when lesbian and gay youth are more assured of their sexual orientation, most of the services directed toward this particular population are directed toward adults specifically and are, therefore, often inaccessible to adolescents" (p. 376), making them information-poor.

Sexual minority youth face more extreme developmental challenges than most mainstream youth as they come to explore their sexual identity. Information-seeking fear compounded with the lack of social support makes the Internet a valued vehicle or tool for young GLBT individuals. Egan (2002), a novelist who frequently contributes to the *New York Times Magazine*, notes in an essay that the Internet provides a safe haven for numerous gay teenagers who do not dare disclose their sexual orientation to their family or peers. Thus, Egan posits, the Internet helps gay adolescents to feel less isolated by giving them a forum where they can acknowledge their sexual identity and form relationships with others who accept them. Utilizing a small sample of anecdotal evidence,

Egan's (2002) work provided a non-academic starting point for looking into some elements of gay youth's stated Internet use.

Bond et al. (2009) also claimed that the Internet is an important tool for the sexual development of GLBT individuals:

The medium used most commonly for information-seeking purposes during the coming-out process was the Internet; 70% of participants report using the Internet a resource for information. Almost half of the sample (49%), reported not just using the Internet as a resource but using the Internet as their primary source of information during the coming-out process. (p. 40)

Utilizing a convenience sample of self-identifying GLB individuals from a midwestern university, Bond et al. (2009) retrospectively examined individuals' coming-out process and communication patterns. Responses to their questionnaire inquiring about information-seeking practices, family openness, loneliness, and self-esteem revealed that GLB individuals remembered using media more than face-to-face relationships to gain information during their coming-out process. Furthermore, younger respondents (18-23) more than older respondents directly indicated the Internet as a frequent resource used to seek information.

Information seeking most commonly involved communicating with other young gay adults through online mechanisms such as chat rooms and message boards, according to a study done by Hamer (2003). Recruiting eight self-identified gay, young men (late teens to early 20s) from a university campus,

Hamer conducted retrospective interviews to examine information-seeking behaviors of adolescent gay males' coming-out. The analysis of information-seeking behavior indicated that the Internet had the capacity to support interpersonal communication and was readily used by the respondents. Conditions most strongly reported for sexual minority youth to utilize the Internet for information seeking were, as indicated previously, the experience of fear and the concealment of information-seeking activities. The fear experienced by young sexual minorities was that of fallout associated with self-identifying as gay. Noting that the Internet offered a level of security that was not found with peers, a self-identified gay youth stated the following:

> "I used the Internet to find information about being LGBT. I was not comfortable for many years with myself to talk to my friends. Originally, I was an AOL member. I searched other people's profiles for 'gay teen' and chatted with a few of them online. Otherwise, the majority of my information came from Internet websites and forums devoted to the subject." (Bond et al., 2009, p. 43)

Hamer (2003) posited that sexual minority youth have three types of informational needs that are typically addressed by interaction with young gay adults through Internet websites and online forums. These informational needs were linked to self-labeling, consequences of self-identifying as gay, and forming an understanding of gay identity. Respondents to a Canadian study by Joyce and Schrader (1997) reported several types of information needs in connection with coming-out. Among the many information needs, respondents were seeking to

locate gay communities, answers to questions about their sexual orientation, and others who were also questioning their sexual orientation. Additionally, they needed insight into how to grasp and establish a gay identity, where to find other gay men, and answers to sex questions and health concerns. Participants of Hamer's (2003) study were asked to describe their behavior when seeking answers to questions about their gay identity and coming-out. Most participants indicated that they interacted with gay people on the Internet; used chat rooms, listservs, online support groups, and personal Web pages to meet others; and consulted Websites to read information about being gay (Hamer, 2003).

Bond et al. (2009) found that "stories communicated through computer-mediated means could serve as information source for the LGB adolescent browser, in essence, constructing a virtual community that gives these adolescents a sense they are not alone" (p. 34). As they are coming out online, they are essentially strengthening their real-life sexual identity. Egan (2002) noted, "through Internet romances, many gay and lesbian teens can experience the same age-appropriate emotions and personal development as their straight peers" (p. 1). The Internet may serve as a catalyst to motivate gay youth to move from a pre-coming-out phase to a coming-out phase (Bond et al., 2009); and, specifically, Internet chat rooms may provide an open venue for adolescents to express concerns about identity development (Subrahmanyam, Greenfield, & Tynes, 2004).

Subrahmanyam et al. (2004) acknowledged that Internet chat rooms are an "open window into the expression of adolescent concerns" (p. 651). In their

study, they conducted a microanalysis of a half-hour conversation transcript recorded from a chat room targeting heterosexual teenagers. Findings concurred with previous researchers that the Internet, particularly online chat forums, provides adolescents with an additional venue to deal with developmental issues (Subrahmanyam et al., 2004).

To summarize, previous analyses of the information-seeking activities of gay youth show how the Internet makes sense intuitively to aid them in their identity development while supporting their concealment of information seeking. However, of the strictly academic studies reviewed here, two were retrospective, and thus were limited to the interviewees' memories. Another was limited in only dealing with a half-hour of chat room conversation. While suggestive, these studies are not sufficient to fully and reliably answer the research questions of this dissertation.

Information Impoverished Theory. GLBT youth can be considered an "information-poor" group because they lack the same opportunities for accessing needed information that is readily accessible to their heterosexual counterparts. A theoretical perspective gaining considerable attention, the Theory of Information Poverty by Elfreda Chatman (1996), provides a useful framework for examining the complex social and cultural phenomenon of information-seeking behaviors of gay adolescents.

In addition to reviewing young people's information-seeking behaviors, the Information Impoverished Theory (Chatman, 1996) describes one process by which adolescent sexual minorities may be motivated intuitively to access the

Internet for information. Hamer's (2003) use of Chatman's theory to address this motivation is insightful and aids the explanation of gay youth's participation in an online gay community.

Chatman's theory originated from a number of empirical studies on the information behavior of "ordinary people" (Todd, 2003), primarily adult groups such as janitors, single mothers, and aging women. Chatman's meta-analysis of these studies identified four key components of information poverty: secrecy, deception, risk-taking, and situational relevance.

The key component, secrecy, is defined as an aim to conceal (Bok, 1983). A plausible explanation for secrecy, according to Chatman (1996), is a "desire we all have to claim an intimate or private dimension of life that is uniquely ours" (p. 195); that a secret "be shared with no one, or confided on the condition that it goes no farther" (Chatman, 1996, p. 195). To guard oneself against unwanted exposure, to deliberately attempt not to inform others about one's true state of affairs, is underlined as secrecy (Chatman, 1996). The secret, if disclosed, might entail an enormous amount of risk to oneself or one's true state of affairs. Luhrmann (1989) observed that "the overall intent of secret information is the idea that it will protect a person from unwanted intrusion into private space. As well it conveys a secret-laden way of experiencing reality (that is knowledge about one's own life) that is primarily inaccessible to others" (p. 131).

A second factor that requires the secrecy associated with information poverty is deception. "Deception is a deliberate attempt to play act, that is, to engage in activities in which our personal reality is consciously being distorted. It

is a process meant to hide our true condition by giving false and misleading information" (Chatman, 1996, p. 196). Receiving useful information becomes a challenge when one deliberately attempts to act out a false social reality. As Chatman elaborates, "the fundamental result of deception leads to a remarkably precarious position in which information sought is irrelevant" (1996, p. 196).

The third component affecting the information-seeking and information-sharing process is risk-taking. "The purpose of secrecy and deception is to protect someone at risk or someone who perceives that revealing information about oneself is potentially dangerous" (Chatman, 1996, p. 196). One could view secrecy and deception as a self-protection behavior. This component of the theory details the risk factor of communicating information about oneself, as well as requiring and accepting information from outsiders (those who are not like oneself). "In everyday discourse, for people to benefit from information received from outsiders, there needs to be some aspect of trust associated with the source" (Chatman, 1996, p. 197). This is a particularly challenging condition if the receiver of information is already skeptical or has a predisposition to question the knowledge base of the informant. Chatman continues:

> What appears to be conditional influences of information poverty is poor people's desperation to shield the real state of need they are experiencing. This is due to their perception that is too costly to themselves to share and because networks of trust between themselves and others have not provided trustworthy opportunities. (1996, p. 197)

The fourth component, the concept of situational relevance, is often defined as information utility. Specifically, this component reflects the extent to which the information may be applicable to the individual's concerns or interests (Wilson, 1973) and offers growth of knowledge (Swanson, 1977). Chatman (1996) stressed that a source of information must make sense and be relevant to an individual who is engaged in some problematic situation. Some people who are experiencing unique challenges in life often question the value of many sources provided by outsiders intended to respond to their situation (Chatman, 1996). "Even if a source is perceived as potentially useful, it will not do much good to the individual if that source is not legitimized by contextual others" (Chatman, 1996, p. 202).

These four key components of the theory suggest six propositional statements describing an impoverished information world. The Theory of Information Poverty (Chatman, 1996, p. 197) describes this world of the informational poor:

1. People who are defined as information-poor perceive themselves to be devoid of any sources that might help them.

2. Information poverty is partly associated with class distinction. That is, the condition of information poverty is influenced by outsiders who withhold privileged access to information.

3. Information poverty is determined by self-protective behaviors that are used in response to social norms.

4. Both secrecy and deception are self-protecting mechanisms arising from

a sense of mistrust regarding the interest or ability of others to provide useful information.

5. A decision to risk exposure about our true problems is often not taken because of a perception that negative consequences outweigh benefits.

6. New knowledge will be selectively introduced into the information world of poor people. A condition that influences this process is the relevance of that information in response to everyday problems and concerns.

Utilizing the six propositions of information poverty, Hamer (2003) studied the barriers and challenges of adolescents during the coming-out and gay identity development process. His findings indicated that there are some connections between the situations of young sexual minorities and Chatman's theory of information poor. Specifically, this study offered support for Propositions 1, 3, 4, and 5, and did not show evidence for Propositions 2 and 6. Findings revealed that using the Internet is a prominent information-seeking activity. Gay youth employed the Internet to participate in chat rooms, listservs, e-mail connections, and interactive Web pages in order to meet other gay teens. Hamer (2003) stated that gay youth may see themselves as lacking resources and therefore readily see the Internet as a viable option for information seeking. The Internet could "be in part a by-product of the perception that there are few, if any, other available resources that will meet information needs" (Hamer, 2003, p. 84).

The fear and concealment associated with information seeking reported by Hamer's (2003) participants support Propositions 3, 4, and 5, which make reference to self-protective behaviors. Hamer speculated that "young people's

experience of fear in connection to information seeking is related to the perception of negative consequences attached to potential exposure; these consequences might be regarded as loss of benefits associated with heterosexual group membership" (p. 85). Motivated to seek information while maintaining a heterosexual membership, participants indicated a desire for gay mentors as information sources when trying to understand coming-out and a gay identity (Hamer, 2003). This supports Proposition 4, because sexual minorities seek insight from those who are like them and gravitate away from those of a heterosexual membership. Information poverty implies "restricted access to social and cultural resources; such a limitation means that…[young sexual minorities] have fewer available resources to employ as they make meaning from their sexual experiences" (Hamer, 2003, p. 85).

Though Chatman's (1996) second and sixth propositions were not supported in Hamer's (2003) study, gay youth did indicate experiencing information poverty when seeking information on a gay identity. Hamer concluded that "the experience of information poverty by the participants in this study is related to their heterosexual group membership, and their maintaining a heterosexual identity demands the concealment of information-seeking" (2003, p. 85). Utilizing the Information Impoverished Theory to explore gay youth's participation in online gay communities may reflect a process of socialization and a richer understanding of their gay identity development (Hamer, 2003).

Summary. Research shows American youth see the Internet as an essential element of their lives. Online interactions with others are commonplace

for adolescents, and the amount of time spent online is substantial. The psychological well-being of youth is of concern in the current literature. Specifically, research has focused on the Internet as a tool for information seeking, sexual identity development, and identity process of sexual minorities. Chatman's (1996) Information Impoverished Theory reflects a number of propositions that affect the information seeking of young sexual minorities. With the advances in communication technology, the continued growth of youth Internet access, and young sexual minorities identified as information-poor, distinct and rapidly evolving use of the Internet for sexual identity development seems likely. This growing role of online communication in the lives of sexual minorities such as GLBT adolescents seems to serve a distinct function for their development.

However, existing research concerning adolescent information-seeking behavior and Internet usage is limited. The previous studies reviewed, though enlightening, were restricted to anecdotal evidence or retrospective accounts, or were limited to a 30-minute observation of a chat room discussion. More research is needed that directly examines the complex social and cultural phenomenon of information-seeking behaviors of young sexual minorities. Furthermore, attention is needed addressing how websites specifically function as a tool for adolescent sexual minorities and how a chat forum may aid in their identity development. Additional investigation studying the sexual lives of GLBT youth, providing valuable theoretical insights about their experiences and

progression toward a GLBT identity, is needed to aid the current void in the literature.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Our delight in any particular study, art, or science rises and improves in proportion to the application which we bestow upon it. Thus, what was at first an exercise becomes at length an entertainment. — Joseph Addison

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss an ethnographic approach to studying adolescent sexual minorities' usage of a gay teen Internet site. Specifically, this chapter will explain the research design that was used to collect qualitative data to address the research questions. This methodology chapter is divided into the following topics:

1. Traditional Ethnographic Approach;

2. Virtual Ethnographic Approach; and

3. Current Research Study.

Traditional Ethnographic Approach

As an introduction to the traditional ethnographic approach, a review of this method with an examination of theory as a guide to practice is presented. Pitfalls and considerations are covered to aid in the researcher's understanding of utilizing a theoretical framework in the field. This is followed by a discussion of virtual settings and field notes. Next, the practice of interpretation is presented to identify possible tensions a researcher may ultimately experience when trying to balance the role of insider and outsider. Finally, an overview of data collection practices typically employed is presented.

Ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or culture. The ethnographic method originated in anthropology and sociology, according to Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, and Vetter (2000), and was based "upon the human capacity for participant observation and the capability for reflecting upon it" (p. 91). Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) added that in ethnography, the description of cultures "becomes the primary goal…the search for universal laws is downplayed in favour of detailed accounts of concrete experience of life within a particular culture and the beliefs and social rules that are used as resources within it" (p. 10). An ethnographer attempts to be holistic, describing as much as possible about a select culture or subculture (Fetterman, 1998). According to Hammersley and Atkinson (1995),

> Doing ethnography in its most characteristic form involves the ethnographer participating, overtly and covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research. (p. 1)

Additionally, ethnographers often go into the field with a theoretical framework in mind that can guide their inquiry but can also raise complex questions about biases, biases such as expectations and the use of place for the ethnographer (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000).

There are a few concerns when entering into the field with a theoretical framework. First, field researchers may enter into the field with categories or static taxonomies to understand native terms, which run the risk of altering an

open-minded understanding of natives' meanings (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Such a frame may guide observations and lead to findings that simply fit into categories, lacking the richness of interpretation that is consistent with the context and people observed. Emerson et al. (1995) concurred that "a field researcher may implicitly impose such categories exactly in asking exogenous questions rooted in a priori research agenda or theoretical framework" (p. 111)—in other words, hypotheses. Second, Emerson et al. (1995) noted that "describing local settings or actions in terms of dichotomized variables may involve an imposition of exogenous categories" (p. 111). This imposition may conceal and alter a perception of the indigenous language, rituals, and behaviors studied.

In opposition, Fetterman (1998) argued that "theory is a guide to practice; no study, ethnographic or otherwise, can be conducted without an underlying theory or model" (p.5). Fetterman cited the benefits of theory as necessary to define the problem and how to approach it. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) discussed some benefits to going into the field with a theoretical frame in mind, including the likelihood that such a frame will draw the researcher to focus on certain people. Additionally, Fetterman suggested, theory can certainly aid observations as they focus our efforts on a problem and how to tackle it; however, such a practice can also lead to the reductionist behaviors that immersing oneself in a setting seeks to avoid.

Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) urged field researchers to go into the field and "cast their nets broadly" so as to observe a wide range of events. Once the field researcher has collected some amount of data, she/he will likely identify

patterns. Emerson et al. (1995) advised field researchers to remain open-minded, even after noticing emergent patterns, because they must look for different forms and variations to ensure that the patterns observed are accurate and to revise or note exceptions to the norm. Prus (1998) recommended conducting fieldwork as "examining the production of all human activity in close, sustained, inquisitive, and reflective manners" (p. 43).

Researchers cannot ignore that the very practice of interpretation is a way of imposing an external meaning on those studied. Selecting categories or patterns as emergent through observation is a means by which we impose our own judgments on the experiences of those observed. Even choosing to record certain observations and not others is a means of imposing outside influence on indigenous behaviors. Therefore, in balancing the role of insider and outsider, tension will occur for the researcher. We must recognize and accept that this tension will exist in the process of ethnography.

Griffin (2008) argued that theory is practical and useful for solving problems. Such a framing enables a researcher to gain insight into the patterns observed, whereas respect for indigenous meaning and behaviors helps the ethnographer remain faithful to her or his participants. Additionally, Prus (1998) stated the following:

> If social scientists are sincere in their quest for a scientific appreciation for the human condition, they have an obligation to respect the nature of human group life and develop theory and methodology that is attentive first and foremost to the human essence. (p. 25)

Consistent with such a view, Prus urged,

> Rather than approach the study of human behavior (and community life) as if it were caused or produced by factors or variables acting on people, the approach adopted here assumes a socially constructed, linguistically enabled, and meaningfully enacted orientation to the study of human group life. (1998, p. 26)

Instead of using findings as proof of past research conducted, ethnographers should use their findings to illustrate what is "going on" (Prus, 1998).

Data collection.

Participant observer. Central to qualitative data collection is the use of participant observation. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) asserted, "immersion enables the fieldworker to directly and forcibly experience for herself [or himself] the ordinary routines and conditions under which people conduct their lives, and the constraints and pressures to which such living is subject" (p. 2). Ethnographers emphasize the need for a highly participatory role to discover indigenous meaning and portray those studied with accuracy. Emerson et al. stress immersion in the field setting:

> Through participation, the researcher sees first-hand and up close how people grapple with uncertainty and confusion, how meanings emerge from talk and collective action, how understandings and interpretations change over time. In all these ways, the fieldworker's closeness to others' daily lives and activities heightens sensitivity to social life as process. (1995, p. 4)

This type of participation can lead to understanding the meaning of actions and events of others and aid in interpreting social constructions.

Fetterman (1998) identified participant observation as crucial in most ethnographic fieldwork. This immersion within a culture is imperative to gaining an appreciation and accurately representing those studied. Fetterman characterized such a practice as "participation in the lives of the people under study with maintenance of a professional distance that allows adequate observation and recording of data" (1998, p. 34). He described the process engaged by the participant-observer as follows:

> It begins with a panoramic view of the community, closes in to a microscopic focus on details, and then pans out to the larger picture again – but this time into new insight into minute details. The focus narrows and broadens repeatedly as the fieldworker searches for breadth and depth of observation. Only by penetrating the depth and skimming the surface can the ethnographer portray the cultural landscape in detail rich enough for others to comprehend and appreciate. (Fetterman, 1998, p. 37)

This challenging process of skimming the surface of a particular culture and also searching in depth helps one to learn and understand people's habits and to decipher the social structure that binds people together.

One important concern of the participant-observer is how distant or close a researcher should be to those being examined. Negotiating how involved a researcher is in a natural setting when collecting data, one can be a complete participant, a complete outsider, or a partial participant (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

This is not a simple choice between participation and nonparticipation, however. The extent of participation is, as Genzuk (1999) articulated, on a "continuum which varies from complete immersion in the program as full participant to complete separation from the activities observed, taking on a role as spectator; there is a great deal of variation along the continuum between these two extremes" (p. 3). According to Genzuk, participant observation is an omnibus field strategy (combining document analysis, interviewing, direct participation, observation, and introspection simultaneously). The three kinds of data collection practices typically employed are observations, interviews, and documents/artifacts. These collection practices produce three kinds of data—descriptions, quotations, and excerpts of documents/artifacts—to produce a narrative description (Hammersley, 1990).

Fieldwork observations. The following are some generic guidelines for conducting fieldwork observations as posited by Genzuk (1999, p. 5):

1. Be descriptive in taking field notes.

2. Gather a variety of information from different perspectives.

3. Cross-validate and triangulate by gathering different kinds of data. Example: observations, interviews, program documentation, recordings, and photographs.

4. Use quotations; represent program participants in their own terms; capture participants' views of their own experiences in their own words.

5. Select key informants wisely and use them carefully. Draw on the wisdom of their informed perspectives, but keep in mind that their perspectives are limited.

6. Be aware of and sensitive to the different stages of fieldwork:

(a) Build trust and rapport at the entry stage. Remember that the researcher-observer is also being observed and evaluated.

(b) Stay alert and disciplined during the more routine middle-phase of fieldwork.

(c) Focus on pulling together a useful synthesis as fieldwork draws to a close.

(d) Be disciplined and conscientious in taking detailed field notes at all stages of fieldwork.

(e) Be as involved as possible in experiencing the observed setting as fully as possible while maintaining an analytical perspective grounded in the purpose of the fieldwork: to conduct research.

(f) Clearly separate description from interpretation and judgment.

(g) Provide formative feedback as part of the verification process of fieldwork. Time that feedback carefully. Observe its impact.

(h) Include in your field notes and observations reports of your own experiences, thoughts, and feelings. These are also field data.

Participant observation takes time and commitment. Negotiating the level of participation from a complete participant to a complete outsider to a partial participant is a complex methodological question. Participant observation offers

the chance to generate new understanding of a culture and to build theories. In addition to observations, ethnographers employ interviewing as a tool for supplementing the material gained by participant observation.

Interviewing. Ethnographic interviewing is a technique used to gather qualitative data about cultural members and their goals. The idea is to interview cultural members in their natural setting, possibly while they are performing activities, interacting with other cultural members, and responding to their environments. This procedure can bring about understanding of many rituals and behaviors, providing specific details and insights not readily observable. Genzuk (1999) posited that there is no one correct interviewing procedure or format that is universal for all situations. It is imperative to evaluate particular situations and address the needs of the interviewee, the interviewer, and the setting in general. "Therein lie the challenges of depth interviewing: situational responsiveness and sensitivity to get the best data possible" (Genzuk, 1999, p. 6).

Patton's (1987) summary of general guidelines for conducting ethnographic interviews noted two prominent guidelines to keep under consideration. First, "throughout all phases of interviewing, from planning through data collection to analysis, keep centered on the purpose of the research endeavor. Let that purpose guide the interviewing process" (see Genzuk, 1999, p. 6). Second, "the fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within which respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms" (see Genzuk, 1999, p. 6).

To reiterate, ethnographic interviewing is widely used and is generally regarded as a powerful tool in extracting data. Researchers who elect to use this method of data collection should familiarize themselves with various interviewing techniques because interviews can differ from one to another. Moreover, an ethnographer should allow for flexibility and sensitivity given the interviewing circumstance. In addition to collecting data through interviewing, ethnographers often are exposed to cultural artifacts that can provide further insight.

Documents/Artifacts. Ethnographers may also make use of various documents and artifacts (artifacts being anything people make and use) in addition to observations and interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). It is complementary to review material relevant to a particular culture when it is available. These documents and artifacts can provide additional insight or information for a researcher. Qualitative researchers have in some cases centered on a set of artifacts such as government reports, student work, a photograph collection, newspaper articles or written texts in the environment. This collection of artifacts created by a studied group can speak volumes; identify how these artifacts function for an individual and/or for a group can shed a great deal of insight into this culture (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). To conclude, artifacts can store cultural meaning and provide researchers with an abundance of information to assist them in assessing and understanding a culture.

Summary. Qualitative data collection takes place in natural settings employing a combination of observations, interviews, and document/artifact reviews. A qualitative researcher is advised to keep fairly detailed records of her

or his thoughts and feelings while data are collected. Ethnographers often use participant observations to collect data. The degree to which a researcher participates is on a continuum from detached observer to complete participant. The researcher will usually record her or his thoughts and feelings when developing field notes so as to guard against bias when interpreting the collected data. Next, interviews are often employed as well. These interviews are usually focused, employing open-ended questions so that the subject's reality and perceptions can be documented, understood, and interpreted. Additionally, documents and artifacts are commonly collected and examined because they can provide insight into the lives, experiences, and perceptions of a culture.

Virtual Ethnographic Approach

While the traditional ethnographic approach informs a researcher about the art and science of describing a group or culture, the advancement of computer-mediated communication (CMC) introduces the need for adaptive ethnographic approaches. Virtual ethnography is currently a popular form of ethnography that seeks to investigate communities of the Internet. This form of ethnography is not intended to replace the traditional method, but rather to bring into focus both assumptions of ethnography and features of technological advancements (Hine, 2000). Virtual ethnography is the process of conducting and structuring an ethnography using the virtual, online environment as the site of the research (Evans, 2010). This site, the Internet, provides a naturally occurring field site for studying what people do while they are online.

Virtual ethnography can be used to enlighten and enrich one's understanding of the Internet as technology and as a culture by specifically focusing on cultures that enable the Internet and are enabled by the Internet (Hine, 2000). Hine stated that, initially, virtual ethnographic methodology was used to

> establish CMC as a site for rich and sustained interactions, which could be viewed as constituting cultures in their own right. Ethnographic studies of online settings made a major contribution to the establishment of a view of the Internet as a culture where the uses people make of the technology available to them could be studied. These approaches established cyberspace as a plausible ethnographic field site. (p. 9)

To continue with the introduction of a virtual ethnographic approach, a review of methodological differences and data collection is presented in this section. Additionally, a virtual ethnographic framework is proposed to guide virtual ethnographic research (Hine, 2000).

Virtual ethnography and data collection. Evans (2010) made the following distinction between traditional and virtual ethnography:

> While an anthropological ethnography that occurs "in real life" is conducted to detail the experiences of people in specific cultural milieu, a virtual ethnography will look to do the same job, but in an environment that lends itself to different means of collection of data. (para. 4)

He also explained that the surveys and interviews that are integral to ethnography can be "supplanted by the collection of pre-existing information that

is abundant in online environments such as social networking sites and Internet forums" (para. 4). Material from online discussions and forums can be archived, giving the ethnographer access to information from a specific community. Evans suggested that this can be done without forgoing the need for ethnographers to involve themselves within the environment and reflect upon the experience of being immersed in the community that is typical of a traditional ethnographic approach.

A virtual ethnographer is able to collect data utilizing computer-based methods in order to construct an ethnographic profile of a community. The method of participant observer or observer participant (Campbell, 2004) is still relevant for this ethnographic process; however, the role of the researcher is somewhat different compared with the traditional ethnographic role. Miller and Slater (2000) posited the importance of immersion into a community, the need to reference a specific location, and the use of participant observation (e.g., in a discussion forum) when conducting a virtual ethnographic study, even when using the Internet as the research environment. Evans (2010), however, highlighted that the field itself is "radically altered; since the field is now text on a screen and the group of people involved in the community can be scattered worldwide in physical geography… sharing the same space as one another thanks to the use of technology" (para. 5).

Hine (2000) argued that virtual ethnography can involve using some different means to collect data (retrieval of archived material, capturing of online discussions). Morton (2001) concurred that ethnography on the Internet can be

conducted as distanced. He clarified the concept of distanced research as constituted by the evaluation of sources such as images, emoticons, texts, and observations of a social interaction in online space while not directly participating in online discussions. This approach was demonstrated in Rosenberg's (1992) ethnography of WolfMoo, which is noted as one of the first virtual ethnographies that examined text-based virtual worlds.

Reid (1995) offered further support, arguing that MUDs (Multi-User Domains) on the Internet can develop a common culture through the sharing of language and the development of ways in which participants can make themselves and their environment meaningfully present to one another through textual means. The crucial step in all of these observations is to see features of Internet interactions as functional in a social sense, enabling the achievement of a distinct culture. Virtual ethnographies at this point shifted somewhat from the traditional model of ethnography. Aycock and Buchignani (1995) utilized what they describe as a "retrospective analysis," and Miltra (1999) employed snapshot approaches, both of which provide thought-provoking analyses of online phenomena. These selective approaches, according to Hine (2000), allow for researchers to concentrate on a particular topic of interest and to follow it through in detail without being overwhelmed by a community's production and collection of words.

Evans (2010) added that these approaches allow for a strategic relevance to particular research questions rather than a faithful representation of objective realities. The Internet is "a place of performance spaces and performed spaces;

there is ongoing interaction and a wealth of recorded, existing material for the ethnographer—a place of ongoing activity and static, pre-existing information, both of which can inform the ethnography being taken" (Evans, 2010, para. 8). Hine's (2000) contention was that virtual ethnography is a process of intermittent engagement, rather than long-term immersion. This indicates a greater flexibility in the ethnography process. A researcher will initially struggle to find the appropriate ethnographic approach influenced by the community being studied. Miltra (1999) clarified an ethnographic approach:

> I begin by focusing attention not on the reproduction in cyberspace of the benchmarks of community in the physical world, but primarily on the texts and discourses that putative online communities produce. Here the notion of the text suggests that what is seen and read on a particular Web page carries a potential for meaning, and in hypertextual combination, these pages constitute a discourse of the Web. In all these approaches the common thread is that of the connection between discourse and community where it is suggested that communities are produced around discourses and the existence of communities is predicated upon the way in which networks of texts are able to signify meaning to the community while the texts become signifiers for the communities as well. (para. 3)

Given the variety of approaches, *virtual ethnography* is not clearly defined in common usage (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1989) and can be labeled as a subjective exercise (Evans, 2010) open to interpretations.

Mariampolski (1999) and Evans (2010) posited that virtual ethnography cannot reasonably be defined as just another technique or method used; rather, researchers utilize different means and techniques when conducting a virtual ethnography. In her examination of the Internet as a community, Hine (2000) critically reviewed pertinent questions such as the following: How can you live in an online setting? Does someone need to be logged on 24 hours a day, or can you visit the setting at periodic intervals? Evans acknowledged that virtual ethnography does have biases, recognizing that "the production of ethnography is in itself a subjective exercise" (2010, para. 17). Evans also addressed a poignant criticism of virtual ethnography:

> The obvious criticism is that a virtual ethnography will not have the sufficient breadth of coverage to make significant points about behaviour of online actors; but this is a criticism that can be leveled at any number of research methodologies throughout the social sciences, from experimental psychology to anthropological ethnography. What is advantageous in this case is that there is the possibility of breadth—ethnographies rooted in one community will have depth of information on that community that is being studied. A virtual ethnography may encompass some degree of breadth of communities without sacrificing the depth of study. (2010, para. 9)

This is a defining characteristic of both traditional and virtual ethnography.

Other defining characteristics of ethnography, such as field notes, recordings, and photographs, that have had a long history as records of events

utilized by ethnographers to analyze data and to reconsider and refine observations, can also be used to aid observations in virtual ethnographies. Stone (1995), in his virtual ethnography of newsgroup discussions, benefited from records of discussions in archives because the use of this material "seems non-selective: the 'ultimate field recorder'" (p. 243). The use of such archived material in a virtual ethnography provides an additional advantage for those using this methodology. As Hine (2000) observed, virtual "ethnography can be time-shifted so that the ethnographer's engagement can occur after the events with which the engagement happened for participants" (p. 23). This affords researchers the ability to intermittently engage with a community when a long-term immersion is not possible.

Virtual ethnographic framework. As virtual ethnographies seek to investigate communities of the Internet utilizing various approaches to address specific contexts of interest, a framework to guide this type of research would be helpful. However, there are no sets of rules to produce a perfect ethnography; and, as Hine (2000) argued, defining fundamental components of the ethnographic approach can be challenging. The focus of ethnography on dwelling within a culture stresses adaptation as well as previous assumptions. Hine, in her book, *Virtual Ethnography* (2000), developed a broad framework of 10 principles of virtual ethnography as a general set of rules to consider while conducting ethnographic research. She noted that these principles are neither a prescriptive nor an exhaustive set of rules. Hine (2000, p. 63) paraphrased these 10 principles as follows:

1. We can use ethnography to investigate the ways in which use of the Internet becomes socially meaningful.

2. Interactive media such as the Internet can be understood as both culture and cultural artifact.

3. The ethnography of mediated interaction often asks researchers to be mobile both virtually and physically.

4. Instead of going to particular field sites, virtual ethnography follows field connections.

5. Boundaries, especially between the "virtual" and the "real," are not to be taken for granted.

6. Virtual ethnography is a process of intermittent engagement, rather than long-term immersion.

7. Virtual ethnography is necessarily partial. Our accounts can be based on strategic relevance to particular research questions rather than faithful representations of objective realities.

8. Intensive engagement with mediated interaction adds an important reflexive dimension to ethnography.

9. This is ethnography of, in, and through the virtual—we learn about the Internet by immersing ourselves in it and conducting our ethnography using it, as well as talking with people about it, watching them use it, and seeing it manifest in other social settings.

10. Virtual ethnography is, ultimately, an adaptive ethnography, which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself.

Hine concluded that an "ethnography of, in and through the Internet can be conceived of as an adaptive and wholeheartedly partial approach which draws on connection rather than location in defining its object" (p. 10). She also argued that an adaptive approach to ethnography would allow it to thrive in the continuously developing conditions of mediated communication. Thus, these 10 principles can inform the decisions a researcher makes when examining a partial account of the Internet relevant to a particular culture.

Current Research Study

Because the experiences of adolescent sexual minorities have been largely absent in the existing literature (Campbell, 2004), an adaptive ethnography would aid in the investigation into expressions of sexuality online and the formation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (GLBT) adolescent communities on the Internet. A virtual ethnography would bring into focus the assumptions of a traditional ethnography while recognizing features of technological advancements. This dissertation project employed a virtual ethnographic framework to meet the strategic purpose of this study: to produce a partial account of a GLBT community on the Internet.

Research questions. The purpose of this study was to examine information-seeking behaviors and sexual identity development of adolescent sexual minorities with the scope focused on the seekers of information through their usage of a gay teen chat forum. The following research questions will be addressed and discussed:

1. How does a gay teen website function as a tool for adolescent sexual minorities' information needs and development of their sexual identity?

2. What are the dominant topics members of a gay teen chat forum discuss and contemplate in conjunction with their sexual identity development?

3. What are the revealed struggles and impacts of sexual prejudice on GLBT youth as discussed by members of a gay teen website?

The research setting. Chadzboyz.com, an online community geared toward gay adolescents, was selected as the setting for this study. This web organization was developed as a place for information needs, support, and friendship for all GLBT youth and allies of the gay community. According to Chadzboyz.com, their forums aim to provide a sense of community for young gay teens from around the world:

> These forums were founded on the ideal of open and civil discussions amongst these teens. While the forums are intended for young gays, all are welcome to join the community as long as they respect the membership, support gay teens and do not prey on young gays in any manner. First and foremost it pays to remember that we are all entitled to our views, be they right or wrong. That's the whole point of this forum.

This website, a textual environment, was the focus for this dissertation project.

The role of the researcher. My goal in undertaking this research was to develop knowledge about adolescent sexual minorities' information-seeking behavior and sexual identity development by gaining others' perspectives and developing a deep understanding of these social phenomena. In doing so, I have

acknowledged that I, as the researcher, am human and have my own consciousness. In this study, I was considered the main instrument, and for that reason, the challenge of limiting bias was more difficult than in other study types. As the researcher, I needed to start from my own perspectives and then immerse myself in the culture of the participants being studied. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) posited that a researcher who is familiar with a particular group is obligated to treat the group as "anthropologically strange" (viewing a particular culture from a completely outsider perspective, or what some have called a "Martian perspective"), in an effort to make clear the presuppositions she or he takes for granted because of familiarity with a studied culture.

Patton (2002) eloquently discussed this challenge of being both an insider and an outsider:

> A participant observer shares as intimately as possible in the life and activities of the setting under study in order to develop *an insider's view* of what is happening. The researcher not only sees what is happening, but feels what it is like to be part of a setting or program. Experiencing the setting or program as an insider accentuates the participant part of participant observation. At the same time, the inquirer remains aware of being an outsider. The challenge is to combine participation and observation so as to become capable of understanding the setting as an insider while describing it to and for outsiders. (p. 268)

Sands (2002) explained that ethnographers experience tension because they have to negotiate their roles of insider and outsider. He posited, however, that if

the goal is to experience culture with the intent to use field work as a means of description and explanation, then this tension is simply "both a reminder of long-term goals and a means of producing those goals in the form of field work and its eventual text, be it written, film, or other means of presentation" (Sands, 2002, p. 128).

Finally, according to Sands (2002), it is neither novel nor unique to ethnography for individuals to switch back and forth between roles and experiences. "Daily, we as humans are role switching and role playing. In the middle of this social milieu, we are able to reason cognitively and analyze our experiences and behavior from different perspectives" (Sands, 2002, p. 129). In experiencing a gay teen website, I could recognize myself as a participant sharing in the intimacies of this particular setting. However, I was also able to assume a position as an outsider, a position from which Patton (2002) stated I would "be able to perceive and, hopefully, describe those relationships, systems and patterns of which an inextricably involved insider is not likely to be consciously aware" (p. 267).

As a researcher, I have become familiar with gay websites geared toward adolescents by discussing them with gay teens themselves, browsing popular gay websites, and contributing to some of those sites. However, as an ethnographer, despite my personal involvement with the gay community, I was still obligated to treat this community as "anthropologically strange." As a researcher studying this distinctive setting and population, I experienced tension trying to observe from an outsider's lens while recognizing that I needed to look

at this phenomenon from my own perspectives to interpret what I saw. In doing so, I made a move toward self-reflexivity, "a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference" (Davies, 2008, p. 5). Striving for self-reflexivity is one way to acknowledge that the only lens through which we look is our own. Self-reflexivity can take various forms and shapes, such as asking ourselves about our frame of mind, about our position in the network of a culture, and about ways in which we produce knowledge.

Taking into consideration the work of Bentz and Shapiro's (1998) Mindful Inquiry, I became more attuned to my own reflexive behavior. Their work posited 13 philosophical assumptions (see Appendix A) to contemplate when approaching qualitative research. The type of self-reflexivity discussed in the Mindful Inquiry was a process of attending to all aspects of the body and mind, the emotions and feelings of an internal event, while conducting research. To be reflexive with one's own emotions and mindful of the culture around oneself is a continual process. As Hertz (1997) articulated, "to be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation about experiences while simultaneously living in the moment" (p. viii).

I took opportunities afforded to me in my participation and observations of this particular culture to become more self-aware, and challenged my thoughts and emotions as I created notes. I wanted to reflect on the personal meaning I may have included in my observations, recognizing that I was always present in the details I observed and recorded. In doing so, I considered my various identities, how the research related to me, and the bias that my past and present

experience may have on my perspectives of this culture. I learned that I needed to monitor my emotions at times. Dramatic narratives by familiar members of this community on occasion provoked an emotional response. These were points at which I felt too emotionally tied and needed a reprieve from my observations. Attuned to my feelings, I would diagnose my internal state and include my interpretations.

In addition to considering the assumptions of Mindful Inquiry, I also recognized myself as an intellectual studying a particular population. Jung (1993) stated that reflexivity is also a way to instruct oneself about how to be critically conscious of what one is doing as an intellectual. One's ability to see oneself as an intellectual in a particular context and identify possible biases is constituted as a higher level of reflection (Jung, 1993). With respect to self-reflexivity, I found it important to include a brief narrative about myself to make more transparent the inherent experiences and biases that I brought to this project.

About the researcher. I am a doctoral student of communication at Wayne State University. Additionally, I am a full-time lecturer at Eastern Michigan University and a part-time lecturer at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. During my time teaching at these institutions, I have worked to be an advocate for the GLBT community and, more specifically, for students struggling with their sexual identity. Having once been an undergraduate student seeking social support and resources during a particularly vulnerable coming-out process, I can empathize with their emotional turmoil and struggle to solidify a sexual identity.

College had offered the first opportunity to explore same-sex and other minority sexual identities in a more accepting environment that was not readily available in high school. In the recent past, the average age for many self-identifying as gay or lesbian was 21 (Friedman & Morgan, 2008). Today, however, it is reported that awareness for sexual minorities is around the age of 10 or 11 (Smith, Dermer, & Astramovich, 2005), and that over the years, gay youth self-identify much earlier than college, at ages 13 to 16 (Fetterman, 1998; Friedman & Morgan, 2008). This shift in age for the coming-out process piqued my curiosity about the available resources for gay youth and their information-seeking behaviors. Reflecting on my own adolescence and the complete void for sexual exploration and exposure to a queer community, I have always been concerned with and intrigued about the well-being of this younger GLBT population of today as well as how they communicate their feelings of difference.

Working with GLBT campus organizations over the years and listening to the experiences and coming-out stories of many young adults in college today, I encountered an overwhelming and universal reference to the Internet. Obviously, I find the Internet to be an invaluable resource in my daily life, and I was genuinely intrigued by its use as a source for identity development. I had already found that the information I accessed through the Internet helped me provide my students with guidance and was a great communication tool. I am interested mostly in the online communication between adolescent sexual minorities and how this interaction may aid in their overall coming-out process and sexual identity development. The Internet has a transformational power that can enrich

one's life, broaden one's perspective, and offer insight into one's identity. Listening to the developmental challenges of GLBT students and pondering my own struggles during adolescence, I felt it would be worthwhile to examine how a gay teen chat forum might aid young sexual minorities today.

Data collection. The major methods of data collection for this dissertation project were field notes and archived messages placed in an ongoing chat forum database that has ease of retrieval spanning over a six-year period. In-depth readings of previous postings and continual observations of members' participation in chat forums were monitored intermittently for five years. Campbell (2004) stated that groups using CMC for discussions actually make it easy to passively observe. He also underscored that this passive observing (commonly known as "lurking") is an accepted role in these virtual environments.

Rafaeli (1992) and Paccagnella (1997) also considered data collection utilizing this type of database. Their conclusive statements articulated the position that publicly posted or archived messages are not a violation of anyone's privacy. Public discourse on CMC is considered to be public. "Analysis of such content, where individuals', institutions', and lists' identities are shielded, is not subject to 'Human Subjects' restraints. Such study is more akin to the study of tombstone epitaphs, graffiti, or letters to the editor. Personal?—yes. Private?—no." (Rafaeli, 1992, para. 23).

Danet, Ruedenberg-Wright, and Rosenbaum-Tamari (1997) concurred, arguing that open channels such as messages posted to a public website are essentially "public" spaces and therefore readily admissible to social science

inquiry. In regard to online handles, they concluded that "there is no apparent need for researchers to disguise the identity of participants any more than participants have done so themselves" (Danet et al., 1997, p. 8). In spite of this, this dissertation project has taken into consideration the sensitivity of adolescent sexual minorities utilizing a gay teen chat forum and did not publish any profiles that would identify specific individuals, nor contact any members. Thus, none of the data were collected through deceptive means. It is the role of the researcher to be unobtrusive, to simply act as an interested outsider, minimally participating (navigating through the website and appearing in discussion forums but not contributing).

The extent to which I interacted with participants was limited to the creation of a screen name. In order to access discussions, a free basic membership account had to be created, giving admission to the website's chat forums. Additionally, to err on the side of caution in making judgments affecting the well-being of online research participants, a letter of support from Chadzboyz.com and IRB/HIC approval (see Appendix B and C) was sought for this project.

When I began my observations of Chadzboyz.com in the fall of 2007, I spent approximately 5-8 hours a week reading, scanning, and recording data. I kept a list of discussion topics, created folders to house important excerpts, and produced a collection of hand written notes about my observations, thoughts and feelings at the times of exploration. In the successive three years my engagement commitment became intermittent, though I would spend significantly

longer hours exploring archived posts, perusing the landscape and recording data during each engagement (approximately 3-4 hours), my visits were limited to 4-6 times a month. However, my active participation and use of Chadzboyz.com content within these years kept me knowledgeable with the website, members' interests and concerns, and insight into the GLBT culture as reported by this medium.

The last year of the five was an intensive, almost daily exposure to this culture to produce significant field notes that were cultivated from a considerable increase in members and discussion topics. At the start of this project, there were an estimated 2,000 registered members, which grew to 5,798 members by the end. This increase of registered members produced sizable discussion forums that became time consuming to review. At last review, Chadzboyz.com had 3,068 topics listed in the Chadz Community Center, 3,073 topics listed in the Chadz Help Clinic, and 4,250 topics listed in the Introduce Yourself Forum. Given the significant increase in membership and the thousands of posts by these members, I averaged an approximate 15 hours per week in this final year.

Data analysis.

Qualitative data. Qualitative data analysis is made up of "examining, categorizing, tabulating, or otherwise recombining the evidence, to address the initial propositions of a study" (Yin, 1984, p. 99). More specifically, Bogdan and Biklen (1998) stated the following:

Data analysis is the process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate

to increase your own understanding of them and to enable you to present what you have discovered to others. Analysis involves working with data, organizing them, breaking them into meaningful units, synthesizing them, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others. (p. 157)

The researcher will usually enter a particular culture or subculture, collect data (observations and artifacts), and review the collected field notes at a later time. In this project, cultural artifacts were examined as an extension of the culture that is typically not accessible or observable. Grounded theory was utilized as the foundation for data analysis. Questions regarding this population were often generated before, during, and after an observational period. As data was collected, patterns of discussion themes, topics, issues and concerns pertaining to this particular culture began to emerge. Glaser (1998) posits that as one collects data, she or he should ask what category does the incident indicate. These emergent patterns are the basis of grounded theory.

Bogdan and Biklen (1998) recommended doing analysis both in the field and outside the field. Data analysis for this dissertation project was an ongoing process that took place both in the field (active observations and field notes) and outside (review of archived materials and field notes). Field notes and detailed forum discussions were reviewed extensively to see what predominant themes became known. The material I selected to record and revisit was not initially systematic however, as I originally did not understand as of yet any categories. A decision was made early in my observations not to focus on one seemingly

prominent event before collecting data on a broad perception of the cultural landscape. I scanned through the website and its many forums to familiarize myself of the culture and its practices. I observed various threads and posts that linked one discussion to another area of the website to additional threads. Once I had a partial account of the surroundings, I then prioritized time documenting discussion threads, events and activities related to members of Chadzboys.com, saving specific examples as they applied to emergent themes.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

In itself, homosexuality is as limiting as heterosexuality: the ideal should be to be capable of loving a woman or a man; either, a human being, without feeling fear, restraint, or obligation. — Simone de Beauvoir

Introduction

As an ethnographer engaging in the lives and concerns of adolescent sexual minorities who are members of Chadzboyz.com, I have become sensitive to and perceptive of this community's behavior. This undertaking has been a meaningful and rewarding experience, producing a collection of treasured field notes. These field notes for this project recorded and answered questions about where "here" is, who is there, what if any are the virtual relationships observed, what is happening in the environment, and what activity is occurring. In the context of the Chadzboyz.com website, thick descriptions starting broadly (home pages) and then focusing on specific events (chat forums) were monitored and analyzed. Cultural artifacts (discussion threads, poetry, etc.) and online materials designed to describe and promote the Chadzboyz.com website and its members (upcoming events) were also collected and reviewed. Details, most of particular interests at the time of observation, were recorded, as were my overall feelings. These field notes were not typically edited but were routinely reviewed. It was standard for me to collect and review as much as I could while taking time to step back and reflect on my experiences. Some observations may appear flat and thin when describing general website designs or arrangements of discussion forums

but were considered just as valuable as deep dimensions within a culture and/or hidden layers of meaning. All lead to understanding a dynamic process and culture.

The narrative that follows illustrates the cultural landscape of Chadzboyz.com while focusing attention on its heartbeat, three discussion forums. In writing this narrative, I find it important to open the scene with my initial introduction into Chadzboyz.com.

Starting Out (Baby Steps)

My first exposure to Chadzboyz.com was during a discussion held with two confident gay teenagers at WRAP (Washtenaw Rainbow Action Project). Both were juniors in high school and spoke highly about their involvement and experiences with this website. After asking several questions about the site and its content, I was eager to investigate and see whether this site targeted the population I wanted to examine. After a quick search on Yahoo for Chadzboyz, the hyperlink immediately directed me to a new location (see Appendix D). The screen read

"ChadzBoyz," underlined in a rainbow of colors noted as a symbol of gay pride. I quickly skimmed over the many eye-catching cartoon characters of boys smiling, kissing, and posing shirtless for a variety of different categories of interest that a gay youth might wish to investigate.

The homepage is formatted into seven main areas, referred to as "zones," that offer links to various topics. Deciding where to explore and collect data was unexpectedly daunting at this point. Simply focusing on the first area, labeled "Latest Features," gave listings of new, posted blogs, articles on body and health, and updates of gay kissing on television. The second area, identified as "Chadz Zone," is the main zone, which features daily cartoons, polls, horoscopes, and fun links. Media, world news, poems, poetry, members' stories, fiction, gay teen blogs, and chat forums for exchanging views, making new friends, or finding "pen-pals" are featured. The "Support Zone" contains advice and resources for gay teen boys. One can find support on coming out, overcoming suicidal thoughts, dealing with shyness, same-sex relationship dangers, and AIDS. "Boyz Zone" is the area that houses the picture galleries of "hot sexy boys" and erotic drawings. Next, "Pride Zone" posts many pages of photos of Pride Week in Toronto over the years, including street scenes in the "gay ghetto" around Church and Wellesley, the Dyke Parade along Younge Street, and the Toronto Gay Pride Parade. One can also learn about the history of the pride flag and the lambda symbol. The last two areas, "ChadzBoyz Poll" and "Celeb Zone," allow members to vote on various gay-related topics and view photo galleries of popular male celebrities. In order to explore further, all are welcome to register by signing the registration agreement terms, as indicated in Figure 4. After registration, Jonathon Chadwich (otherwise known as Chad) provides a welcoming narrative about the beginnings of Chadzboyz.com and its intent (see Appendix E).

| Chadzboyz.com - Registration Agreement Terms |
| --- |
| While the administrators and moderators of this forum will attempt to remove or edit any generally objectionable material as quickly as possible, it is impossible to review every message. Therefore you acknowledge that all posts made to these forums express the views and opinions of the author and not the administrators, moderators or webmaster (except for posts by these people) and hence will not be held liable.

 You agree not to post any abusive, obscene, vulgar, slanderous, hateful, threatening, sexually-oriented or any other material that may violate any applicable laws. Doing so may lead to you being immediately and permanently banned (and your service provider being informed). The IP address of all posts is recorded to aid in enforcing these conditions. You agree that the webmaster, administrator and moderators of this forum have the right to remove, edit, move or close any topic at any time should they see fit. As a user you agree to any information you have entered above being stored in a database. While this information will not be disclosed to any third party without your consent the webmaster, administrator and moderators cannot be held responsible for any hacking attempt that may lead to the data being compromised.

 This forum system uses cookies to store information on your local computer. These cookies do not contain any of the information you have entered above; they serve only to improve your viewing pleasure. The e-mail address is used only for confirming your registration details and password (and for sending new passwords should you forget your current one).

 By clicking Register below you agree to be bound by these conditions.

 I Agree to these terms and am **over** or **exactly** 13 years of age

 I Agree to these terms and am **under** 13 years of age

 I do not agree to these terms |

Figure 4.
Chadzboyz.com registration agreement terms

The Initial Terrain (A Day's Exploration)

Having become familiar with this site, I bypassed the various visual stimulants placed to draw attention to multiple areas of Chadzboyz.com and clicked on the Gay Boy Forums located in the Chadz Zone, which directs one to a Forum Index screen. The Chadz Zone is a significant area within this website for members to interact and share their thoughts and ideas with others; it houses the discussion forums, as illustrated in Figure 5. The time read "1:05pm," and there were only three users online: two who were registered and one
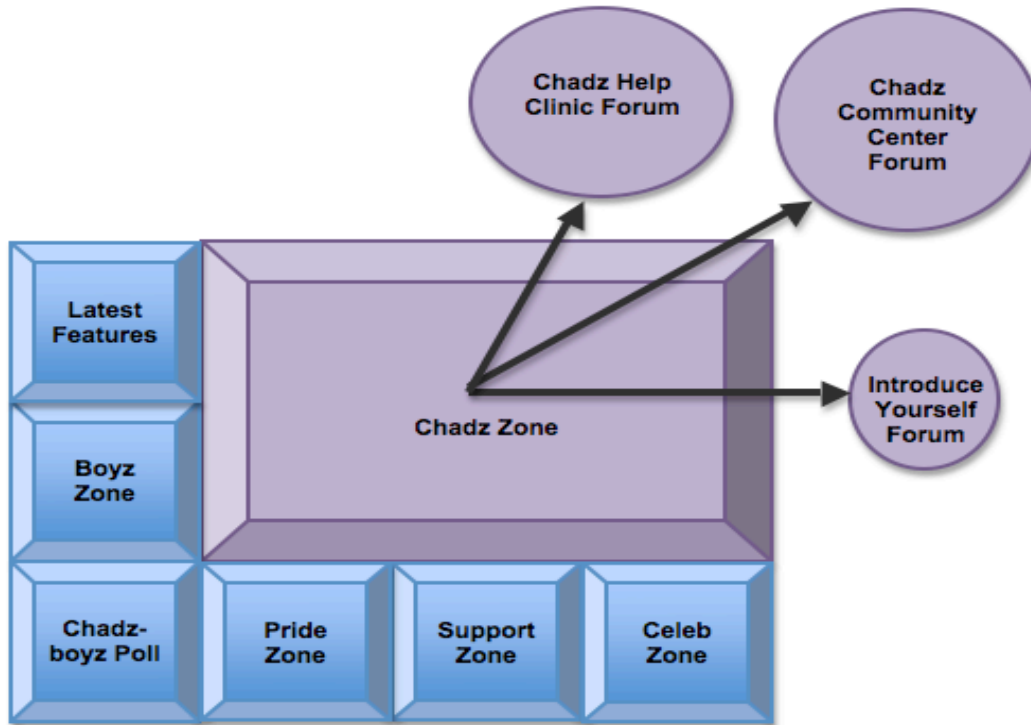
Figure 5.
Illustration of Chadzboyz.com zones and significant forums

guest. Little activity was taking place at this hour on Chadzboyz.com Forums, which is a discussion board for gay teens. At that time, there was a total of 2,223 registered users and an uncountable number of guests who had limited access to the forum. The most users ever to be online at the same time were 20 people, on Sunday March 06, 2005 at 8:55pm. This information is readily available for all individuals viewing the homepage of ChadzBoyz Forums, located in a box labeled "Who is Online" at the bottom of the initial Index screen.

This Index screen provides viewers with an abundant amount of information and options for further perusing of the site. A vibrant blue box, with "ChadzBoyz Forums" boldly written in white, captures the attention of new users, guiding their eyes to the motto "Out of the Box: Living Lives with Pride," written in

smaller font size in the upper right-hand corner of the index screen. Below the motto, users automatically have options for where they would like to visit next. Small icons refer members to areas that may be of interest to them, such as FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions), Profiles, and even a Log In option to check one's private mail. However, the main focus of this page is a listing of possible forums one would like to investigate. Four major headings in blue, labeled "Chadz Locker Room," "Chadz Chadder," "Chadz E-Zone," and "Chadz Boyz Room" quickly guide a member to an area of interest or need. For example, Chadz Locker Room is organized into four forums. The first is "New Members," with a description reading "Welcome everyone worldwide. Go here for forum guidelines, newbies [jargon for new members of the site] tips, how to add colour, (etc.). READ THIS BEFORE POSTING!" "Announcements and Site News," "Questions, Comments and Suggestions," and "Testing" are the other areas one could move to.

The next heading, labeled "Chadz Chatter" (also known as "Chadz Community Center") indicated the most activity, having the largest number of topics, posts, and views. The forums offered here seemed to grab the most interest, from members as well as from me, with 519 topics in the "Introduce Yourself" forum and 698 topics in the "Open Discussion (Chit Chat)" forum. The "Chadz Help Clinic" forums also received significant attention, with 276 topics in the "Advice Couch" forum and 14 topics in the "Sexual Health" forum (also known as "Your Health" forum). In order for viewers to enter into one of these forums and browse or post, they must first become a registered member and sign on

using a selected password. As a registered member, I typed my screen name and password to log in and began my usual exploration and observation of the most popular forum, "Open Discussion (Chit Chat)."

As the screen opened, I was immediately overwhelmed with 698 topics, each with an icon signifying post type, an indication of replies, the original author, number of times viewed, and the time of the last post. Forum Moderators' (website administrators') announcements and "Sticky" topics were listed first, followed by the 14-page list of topics organized by time of last post. As I browsed through the variety of topics, the diverse list made it difficult to select one area to review. For example, *Kenny vs. Emo*, *Serious Bodily Harm*, *Favorite Fashion Designer*, *Fetishes*, *OMG Help*, and *Are You a Metro-Sexual* were among the eclectic topics. I noticed the number of posts for each topic: *Closeted Gays* received a great many replies compared with others, and had indicated recent activity. Without hesitation, I clicked on this topic to be introduced to a collection of members hosting a discussion on the topic of being gay and closeted. I found myself engrossed in the subject at this point and failed to step back and review any other area of this site.

Finding My Way or Getting Lost?

As I explored daily the workings of this community to satisfy my continued curiosity, one day I returned to the Chit Chat forum and began to skim once again the lengthy list of posted topics by members. Clicking on *I'm Jealous of Other Guys* (see Appendix F), I continued my investigation of high-activity posts. My initial attention was drawn to the variety of avatars, the graphical images that

members had selected to represent themselves. Figure 6 illustrates a diverse sampling of such avatars. After this pause, I read carefully through the first post

Figure 6.
Diverse sampling of avatars (http://www.free-avatars.com)

by a gay teenager who stated, "I'm so jealous of good looking guys with great bodys." Though the content of his remarks speaks to the title of this discussion thread, my preliminary thoughts registered that throughout my entire time reviewing posts on this site, grammatical and spelling errors seemed to be the norm. It appears this is an acceptable practice because members of this site place a higher value on rapidly conveying their thoughts than on correct spelling and grammar. In addition, I noted that members commonly communicate with run-on sentences and limit their language with few adverbs and adjectives. It is important to indicate that the use of emoticons to express emotional information is frequent with members' comments. They felt the need to underscore when they were simply joking, being sarcastic or serious.

Finding myself pondering the lackadaisical feeling of this discussion thread (a single conversation), I read thoroughly the series of posts. Much as in the threads I had reviewed earlier, members responded to one another sharing their stories of jealousy, answering direct questions, and asking new ones.

However, this thread differed in that it took sudden turns in discussion from positive replies to negative ones and back again. A recurring theme of low self-concept resonated from start to finish. Comments such as "I'm not a prize to look at, I'm nothing near cute" and "No one will ever like me… I'm so ugly on the inside and the outside. I live a life that is loveless, hopeless, selfish and lonely… and nothing will ever change" created a sense of despondency as I read the posts from these gay teens. Next, a feeling of uneasiness came about as members began to express their feelings about jealousy. "I won't lie when I get jealous I start to think of murdering the guy so I'll feel better," one member admitted. "I am VERY VERY jealous person, mostly of other peoples looks… Even to the point of being cruel to them," another member stated. Others continued to add their thoughts and feelings, incorporating emoticons in their posts:

> No I don't think murdering people for their looks is a good reason…. Anyway, I'm not a bag of good looks so I get jealous pretty quickly and then I start hating those people, without any reason, and I have a grudge on them but when they actually do talk to me I sorta ignore them or even response in a mean way ☺, I guess its just a human nature ☺!

Lightly peppered throughout the thread were replies of positive advice and encouragement that were well received by other members who had previously posted, asking for advice or stating their feelings. For example, YA, the author who started the thread, chimed in toward the end of the discussion and remarked, "I really appreciate your comments. Most people wouldn't have given

this thread a second glance, but I'm glad there is a place online where people care about each other ☺."

At the end of the last page, a small blue hyperlink labeled "Watch this topic for replies" gave members the option to be notified when other members posted to this thread. Having missed this detail during my first review of "Closeted Gays," I kneaded my forehead while sitting back in my chair and contemplated the likelihood of these expressive discussions continuing further. These thoughts overwhelmed me as I was feeling deeply ambivalent about where I was in mapping and understanding this website and its members.

Who's Who (Introduce Yourself)

Of the initial 2,223 registered members at the beginning of this study, 519 of them opted to introduce themselves as new or a "Newbie" to the Chadzboyz.com forums. The slang term *newbie* means a newcomer to a particular corner of cyberspace, such as a game, newsgroup, the World Wide Web itself, or an operating system. It can be both a disparaging and friendly term, always referring to a neophyte. In this particular community, *newbie* is a term often used by its members and holds a positive connotation; newbies are received with extra attention. An entire forum is dedicated to the introduction of new members, where they can post their "hellos," some personal information, and the "scoop" on why they have joined. Current members usually greet newbies with friendly "welcomes," sometimes informing them on the methods of the site and inviting them to contact them if they would like to talk. The following excerpt exemplifies a recurring thread posted on the "Introduce Yourself" forum:

NR: Hello! I love this site, I have been looking for a site for gay teens, but I couldnt find one till now. I am happy to have found chadzboyz. I am here to chat, and maybe find love. I have been single for 5 years and am kinda depressed about it. I live in Az and there are no gfays around me. I am kinda fat and I think I am ugly (might post a pic, might not), and *sigh* I am lonely. I live in Arizona, and I kinda like it. The weather is nice for now... dont know how long it will last. I love snoopy stuffed animal, and I LOVE Eeoore (sp?). So, welcome me please.

YU: Hello~ How do you do?

HP: well, hi! Glad you found the site. ^^ this is one of the best chat sites for gay teens. ☺ so yeah, welcome to the boards. I bet you will meet a lot of people here.

NR: Thanks for welcoming me [HP] you're a… peach (lol, its an old saying)

TA: Welcome, [NR]! I'm sure you'll find these boards everything you've hoped for and more (with the exception of a few of the more inane, crude threads). The people are kind, generous, and always willing to talk--and the atmosphere is relaxed and encouraging. I love it, personally!

This community is most likely composed primarily of gay adolescent boys ranging from at least 13 years of age (as agreed to during registration) to 19 as identified by their posts, introductions, and profiles. A few non-traditional members make up this community; for example, some report being older (20 – 40), and a few members have identified themselves as girls but have

acknowledged this site to be geared toward boys. In my review of replies to self-identified females in this community, adolescent male members always responded with positive and supportive comments, as seen in the following chat extract:

> *NN: HI ALL!!! I JUST JOINED! AND I AM NOT A BOY SORRY GUYS! BUT I AM A BI GIRL! WOW! I HAVE FINALLY PUPLICLY ANONCCED THAT I AM BI!!! WEEE!!!! DOES THE I'M PROUD DANCE!!! BUT WHELP I NEED MORE FRIENDS COME AND TALK TO ME!!! I DON'T BITE!!! Only if you pervoke me though, then i might... hehe. so come and say hihi!* 😃😃😃😃😃😃😃😃
>
> *KJ: Well nice to meet you* 😃 *Hope to see you around the boards!*
>
> *SP: welcome, hope you make plenty of friends, theres a lot of cool people here.*

A "Members List" is readily available for users to peruse user names, locations, email addresses, and personal websites. Besides usernames, all information on this "Members List" is optional and posted at a member's free will. Email addresses, locations, and personal websites are sporadically listed. Many one-time users tend not to develop a profile, whereas high-contributing members often list more information. Members appear to be broadly located throughout the world, mostly concentrated in the USA, Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia. There were only a few other countries represented, such as Thailand, Mexico, New Zealand, and South Africa.

What's All the Talk About? Meaningful Patterns/Content

The greatest amount of exploration of this community has been spent in the high-traffic forums of Advice Couch (Chadz Help Clinic) and Open Discussion (Chadz Community Center). Additionally, the Coming Out Stories forum received significant review because my curiosity was equally piqued by the successes and struggles of adolescent sexual minorities' identity development process. Given the abundance of threads to review, this narrative unfolded with the mindset of two discussion areas: one where members are seeking and providing assistance, and another where members socialize. Browsing, stumbling, and finding my footing again in these discussion forums has created a collection of field notes reflecting daily experiences and insights. Through interpretations and analytical reviews of these field notes, I attempted to discern patterns, to reveal a synthesized compilation of some meaningful subjects discussed while acknowledging topics on the fringe. The following themes and topics will be addressed independently, with quotes from members of the discussion forums as they exemplify their lives.

Chadz Help Clinic. As members use the Chadz Help Clinic forum to explore topics of interest and read the surfeit of advice given by fellow members, they will happen upon topics labeled as "Sticky" ("Sticky" topics appear below some announcements on the first page). Sticky topics are noted as often quite important and should be read whenever possible. As with announcements, it is a board administrator who determines what receives a "sticky" post and what permissions may be required to contribute to threads of conversation. Topics labeled with a "Sticky" post usually receive a great deal of attention. The

following "Sticky" topic excerpt, labeled "ANSWERS TO ALL YOUR QUESTIONS," provides an example of one member's crude advice and summary of popularized topics found in this forum:

KJ: Well, I am going to solve everyone's problems, right here and now.

1) Yes, if you are here and have to ask, you are probably at the very least bi, and most likely gay.

2) No, you probably shouldn't come out if you think everyone is going to hate you. It is a very individaul decision, based on all kinds of personal situations. Only you know all of these things and therefore, only you can make the ultimate decision.

3) No, there is no magic way to tell if the guy you like is gay.

4) No, seducing your straight best friend is probably not the smartest move in the world (and probably not going to happen anyways)

Haha not being mean, it just seems like this covers every topic posted here. Maybe it will help. 😁

After years of engagement with this particular forum, the above post seems a bit premature. The call for advice on a vast variety of topics, both personal and general, is overwhelming. Members use this forum to ask questions about issues that adolescent sexual minorities would find significantly important; specifically, discussions surrounding gay identity and behavioral concerns. The "Coming-Out" Process, Identity, Relationships, Self-esteem and Suicide, Sex, Religion and Homosexuality and Sexual Health were identified emerging themes and topics that were recurrent in this forum.

The "coming-out" process. Exchange of information about identifying as gay or bisexual, self-disclosure of one's identity as gay to family and friends, and the stress and fear of being identified as gay without choice are the most prevalent concerns that receive the majority of feedback. Relating to others' situations and sharing their personal difficulties are typical responses, with encouraging words peppered throughout discussions of this nature. The following excerpt exemplifies a common discussion about "coming out" while also illustrating an interesting dynamic of how members give advice and respond to those members who post less-than-supportive feedback:

> CP: I came out to every one I know, except my family, I just don't know if it would be smart to tell them yet. I am 15, and My best friend is a guy but what if my mom thinks we are together? then she would be all over protective and paranoid about him, even though we have been having sleep overs and such for like the last 5 years. And also if I told them, they would be paranoid ever time I went out any where with any guy. But then they might find out annother way like hear me on the phone, or see my comp history. Would it be smart to tell them yet?

> EM: Thats your decision to make. I think if you feel like this is the right time to tell them, then go ahead. If them being paranoid over you and your friend is all you have to worry about, I would go for it. Once family knows, theres nothing to it anymore, you can be yourself around everyone. Maybe they will support you.

CP: hmm, yes, I guess having paranoid parents is not really that bad, and I don't see them doing anything worse, so maybe I will tell them in the near future!

GE: BE VERY CAREFUL! Make sure you are ready!! It can be totally unpredictable. Your still pretty young. Granted it was pretty easy with my mom in that I only went through hell for like two weeks, told me I was too young (at 17) she forbid me to tell my father and acused me of having sex with my best friend. But now she totally ignores that it ever happened. And I thought she would actually be ok/knew that I was. I'm not trying to discourage anyone, just make sure that you are ready for anything and there is none or little stress present for them beforehand.

CP: hmm, yes, I agree, I might want to take this causiously(sp?) but I do think they will understand. And I think after a week or two they would lighten up. I just hope they don't think I am confused or say that I am to young.

YS: Hmmm ❓...i think it depends on what kind of family you have. I probly wont come out till i'm ready, cuz my family are total bible freaks 😕you should know all the the possible outcomes of the situation, then if you still feel up to it, come out 😃! Cuz it would suck if your parents throw you out! 😐

UE: My parents are religious, but quite liberal. I told them when I was 15 (one year anniversary) and they were quite fine with it. Although my dad

acted weird and almost pretended it didn't happen for a while, it was a better reaction than some people get still.

EF: GAHH!!!!! This is soooo infuriating. [CP]. You're 15. Time to grow up. The only way you can ever know the outcome of something is by doing it. You're old enought to make your own mistakes now. Only you can decide the path you're going to take. Some may argue, he's only looking for the advice of others. Well woop la dee doo. The advice and experiences of others count for nothing because the circumstances are completely different, as they are with anyone else. [CP], you're displacing your feelings onto the people of the board. We're not your parents, we can't give you the understanding and acceptance you need and ultimately deserve. There is however one thing you mentioned that should be considered. How do you want your parents to find out? Again, the choice is up to you. But you have to consider if they'd rather find out by accident, or whether they'd rather hear it from you. You need to make your own choice. In the end, the experiences of others count for nothing, neither does the advice, they don't have to live with YOUR particular outcome. That's why I'm not giving you advice, only things to think about.

OM: You seem to be forgetting [EF] that in order to make a proper decision, you need to be aware of all the outcomes, like previously mentioned. By asking advice, he is not asking WHAT TO DO. He is asking WHAT SHOULD I DO. The difference? Once he reads the other advice, he might be aware of some things that he didn't thought of on his own.

This is the reason why people ask for advice. So that they can open their eyes further. It is easier to make a precise decision with a group then by yourself. Might as well ask what others think because in the end, they might show you another way. As a matter of fact, asking for advice does not make a person immature. It's a sign of maturity. If you don't know something, ASK!

IK: I would wait. There is no use putting yourself through any more pressure than there needs to be. Tell you friends and close relatives who are open minded (and won't tell your immediate family), however, I would wait until you get into a relationship before coming out. As for the "right time", the right time is the time YOU feel comfortable with; for me, I should have waited till I moved down to Christchurch, then again, I'm not overly concerned now, parents are leaving today at 15:00, and I'll be able to go out, without any problems, with out the parents constantly checking on me (yes, I know, I'm 23, but my parents worry that I could get beaten up, mugged or something else).

CP: well, thanks for your big post there [EF], and you did have a point, I guess I had better tell them before they find out by accedent, but [OM] also was right that I am more of asking what I should do... and that I really just wanted an outside oppinion on this, sometimes you think about something so much you wonder if anything makes sence any more! I really want to tell them, I don't want them to find out on their own, but I

*have no immediet reason to tell them... But I do have less to think about now, thanks every one! ^^*

Though it appeared that this member was satisfied with the feedback given from fellow members, the discussion thread continued for several more posts (see Appendix G-1), addressing concerns of irritation by fellow members and levels of respect expected. The fervor expressed by many members about coming-out illustrates that most find this stage in life to be significant and challenging.

Identity. The second emerging theme that is closely tied to the "coming-out" process is identifying oneself as either gay, going through a phase, or simply confused. Many users ask advice about attractions to the same sex and struggle with initial feelings of homosexuality. The following excerpt posted by an 18-year old male serves as an example of many members' need for information as they find themselves struggling with the idea of their sexual identity:

HK: I know this topic has come up before but I just wanted to see what people would say in relation to my cirumstances. I am confused about whether or not I'm gay or bi or straight I dont really know. I just always kind of maybe assumed i was gay in the back of my head when i was younger because i was told that alot by my peers. Also I went out with a girl for like 7 months and we didnt even kiss, and she was my best friend...still is. However, i did get drunk one night and sleep with my other friend who is a girl, but im not sure if i just did it because i was drunk or maybe i just wanted to have sex i dont know. Also the only girl i have ever kissed is the girl i just told you about who i had a drunken sex experience with. Another

thing is i guess ever since i discovered what porn in is in earlier years, i have enjoyed gay porn, but i can also enjoy straight porn. I guess if I can enjoy a solo movie of a guy enjoying himself i am somewhat gay if not completely. I just dont know how i am supposed to know if i have never had an experience with another guy, i dont have any gay friends to talk to, and i dont want to come out to anyone unless im 100% sure that i am. My college offers mentors to kids questioning their sexuality. I could go talk to them but what if im not gay then its just going to be embarrasing and I'm a very shy person so i dont know if i could talk to someone in person about all of this. Any advice would be much appreciated. 😃--

Confusion, concern and fear are evident in many threads discussing sexual identity, a theme that was continually introduced by both new and veteran members.

Relationships. The desire to find others with common feelings and interests and how to initiate a possible relationship is repeatedly discussed. Many seek to understand the dynamics of being gay and dating. Members also seek advice on established friendships and "coming-out" as well as developing new acquaintances. In addition to seeking information, members are quick to share their advice and self-disclose about personal experiences. The following chat extract demonstrates this recurring pattern initiated by a 15-year-old male:

BY: ive been looking for someone to do something with for about a year. I was close once, but was scared theyd tell other people about me and convinced them i was straight. I recently met this hot guy, my age that I

like a lot. He doesnt go to my school or anything, but we met online. He came to me. I was thinking we could maybe go to a movie or something and mess around there, but I'm not sure what to do. Where would you go for a first real meeting, and how far would you go on the first time? Tell me some of your first experiences, and how you decided where to meet.

TM: on a first meeting, I wouldn't expect to go far at all....Just focus on having as much fun as you can. So that both of you will have fun. That way, you two will learn alot about each other and if a second date comes along, then you can focus more on the more romantic stuff. That's just an advice though

IB: well ive found from past expirences that you wanna meet some place where u feel comfortable..... like the mall or an open placce where u feel safe ya know what i mean. i would recomend something active like bowling or laser tag or something like that movies are to quiet and arent good for talking and thats the point of a first impression. how far u are willing to go depends on u. dont do anyhting u will regret or that makes u feel uncomfortable. i hope this helps u at all feel free to message me with anymore questions and or concerns.

EM: On a first date, I would suggest getting to know the guy you are meeting. I mean, friendship should be first, then if you are comfortable with each other, then see what happens. Having fun, and being good friends is better, and lasts much longer than sex, so focus on the friendship. My opinion

EF: I don't know that I can improve on what the others have said, just maybe emphazise that you need to get to know this person first. ¡You should find out if there is a real attraction, physical, intellectual, just a plain old "click" that tells you it would be fun to hang out with this guy. I understand your wanting to go further, but too many times going further ends up with sadness, regret, sh*t like that. A mall, beach, fair with rides, activities where you can see how he acts and most of all where you can talk, a lot. Good Luck!

Not completely satisfied with the responses by others, BY rephrased his initial question to, "If you were to mess with a guy for the first time, other than each others house, where would you do it?" Members continued offering advice and underscoring the importance of being yourself (see Appendix G-2).

Self-esteem and suicide. It is not uncommon to happen upon a thread about how members of this forum struggle with their self-concept, personal appearance, and relations with others. Users comment regularly on their negative thoughts and overtly mention contemplating suicide. Disturbing threads labeled "Ugly Disease," "Suicide or Future Prostitute," and "Self Harm" are frequent throughout the entire forum. Numerous posts on the topic of "cutting" reveal the reality of this disconcerting behavior in many gay adolescents. The following thread illustrates the ease with which members of this community can speak about their experiences, as difficult and troubling as they are. This thread in particular highlights a conversation on cutting:

LL: I have lately been dealing with depression (I am 13) with my parents (they dont know) fighting with me etc. Has anyone here ever cut themselves too? I just wanted to let this out. Thanx.

EW: Well I have once on my arm. Me and some of my friends were just TRYING it out. Anyway cutting is bad os STOP. 😾

EL: First off, you are 13... WTF do you have to be depressed about, you could be sad, upset, or angry, but 13 is way to young to be going through depression. as for cutting i never did it because it does not solve anything... its like suicide. Does not solve anything accept your problem, but what about those left behind. I used to fight with my parents all the time. Let me guess, you are never wrong about what you are arguing with right? you know exactly what you are talking about and your parents are just out to get you? dont take this the wrong way, bt it is pretty much the complete opposite.

LL: I am a (as some would call it) a "goth" and when I am angry, I write very pecimistic and morbid poems and when my parents found one they were argueing with me about how I should be more "enlightened" and "brightful" and now they send me to Sunday School even though I am Wiccan (they dont know I am wiccan) and some of my friends have been ignoring me and plus I have this huge weight of trying to live with myself being gay. And also, I am getting a ton of homework. I just wish I could have a boyfriend but whenever I see myself in a mirror I just see a ugly zit-faced kid (even though my friends say I have like none...). I told some of

my friends and they just said that it "hurts the one we love" and all that kind of crap. I also feel horrible because I told a guy I had a crush on him and he turned me down, and now he tries everything he can to avoid me(he is straight but I thought otherwise...), but hasn't told anyone, he's kind of respectable that way. I am seeing my school counscellor but it only helps a little and I havent told her yet either that I am gay but tries to give me ideas on how I should relax myself besides cutting myself. Thanx for listening, any comments or tips will be appreciated...just because I do these things doesn't mean I am a quack or a really mean person, I am actually not that bad, try not to think less of me.

RC: I used to shive myself... I actually have a page in my journal from back then covered in my own krovvy. I stopped when someone saw my rock and was like 'cutting is such a teenage veshch to do.' But they were right... it's just something nadsats do to get noticed and have chellovecks be like "oh my bog! what's wrong?" While I did it, I found that it didn't help me with like any of my emotional to-do's, just multiplied them.

MS: OK i have to say something here. one i do cut and im 13 also. Im sorry that u guys think this way about people that cut. That we all do it for attention. Well not all of us do. If we all cut for attention then why do we hid them so no one will find out? We know its not right and that we should stop but have u ever gotten so deep into cutting that u couldnt stop? I think not. I have depression and its not due toanything its just depression. plus my freind almost commited suicied. Do u think this is depressing? I

think it is. Then trying to come out in a homophobic comunity where everyone is set in their ways. And then when i watch something with a gay guy in it my parents say look at them fags. And i say what about them why is it so wrong and they walk away. Thats how it all started. Im not much of an arguer but i had to get that out. Be cause u guys dont know how it feels to want to end your life. And you dont know how it feels to drownd your sorrows in blood. U dont know how it is to live my life. O just so u know im not always depressed but i am depressed half the time. I dont want u guys to get the wrong picture that im psyco freek.

This is just an excerpt of a continuous discussion (see Appendix G-3) by members contributing their personal stories, offering their advice, and posing more questions on the subjects of depression and cutting. Posts such as these demonstrate a pattern that points to the tumultuous experience many members face when negotiating a gay identity.

With the heightened visibility in the media of adolescent sexual minorities committing suicide, it is worth noting that suicide is one of the most commented-upon topics on Chadzboyz.com. Akin to many members of this community, I myself felt torn when fellow members expressed suicidal thoughts and appealed for guidance. As demonstrated in the following excerpt, called *I don't know another way out…*, members of this community respond quickly and supportively:

DN: So I'm sitting here contemplating suicide...I've tried before but obviously didn't succeed...I don't really know what else to say...I guess I need someone to talk me out of actually doing it (hopefully someone that

understands what I'm going through)...I've been thinking of fool proof ways to do it all day...my parents just found out I'm gay last night and wont talk to me now…so I just locked myself in my room and now I'm sitting here with my kit deciding whether I should or shouldn't end it...I've always been so careful so no one finds out...(yes I'm ashamed and hide it)...I've tried to change the way I feel but I can't...well anyways the biggest thing right now is my little brother thought it would be hilarious to post it on his webpage's...so now everyone knows...what am I supposed to do? I can't skip school forever and I can't move away for a couple more years...I don't really see another way out of this hell…

GA: First, you need to put whatever the kit is back in its secret place. While it's on hand then you won't likely change focus. Next, I want you consider the following: 'If you end your story now then you won't see what's on the next page nor get to complete a chapter. You won't find out what it's like to be gay, for instance. You'll have robbed yourself of the option.' You've tried before and part of yourself has kept you back. Furthermore, you have reached out by posting here. Both signify there's a part of you which still wishes to go on. No matter the pain or the assumed negative outcomes, part of you wants to live and wants to be heard. I have heard you, and despite not knowing you as an individual, I can definitively say that your life holds much yet to be written by your own hand. Continue to reach out, even in little steps. That's the way to ease yourself out of the darkness and away from the brink. What I have said is enough

to be going on with initially. There are CAT members here who will gladly listen to you and be of help. I will alert one on your behalf and you're free to PM any of them.

RW: what is posted above is true. If you wish to PM any of us if it is to personal to post please do so. We are here to listen and help. Keep going as things have a way of looking up.

RM: Life is your greatest opportunity, I understand that it may be hard at this moment. Well.. it was hard for me too so were not THAT different. High school/college can be extremely hard and pressuring for both of us, but there is a reward when school comes to end (MUCH, much bigger than lucky charms gold-pot). The "reward" is the time when it comes for INFINITE possibilities, it just takes patience and to be honest, it sucks to wait): . The best way to get to that moment is to keep your mind off negative things and think about optimism.

Though the pleas for help were unsettling in posts such as these, it was reassuring to read that many others who experienced similar feelings of despair, were able to find their way through times of hopelessness and contribute their insight and support to others of this community.

Sex. Members of Chadzboyz.com are not timid in introducing the topic and conversing about sex; it is a common thread in all forums and is frequently referenced in a variety of other threads focusing on various other subjects and concerns. Because sex is a highly popularized topic in this community, it is speculated that the Internet serves as a significant source of information for this

community over peers, parents, and teachers. This takes into consideration that adolescent sexual minorities are often information-impoverished because of the need for secrecy. The following chat extract reveals how gay youth are thinking about the complexity of sex and negotiating their identity with the confusion about sex and sex-related issues:

ES: ok this is my second topic here and unfortunately its another problem you see ever since the rape (you'd know if you read my old topic) ive got this disgusting feeling about sex and i strictly have no intentions of trying it again but still i want love but any guy i get to chat with asks me "bottom or top" "you prefer orals " and stuff like that but when i say im not interested in sex they go okay bye and thats it!!!! cant i be happy and also keep god happy or do as the saying says to gain something you must lose something 😦😦😦😦😦😦

EC: Love is not sex. Keep away from people who want to classify you as top or bottom. They can only be bad for you.

UE: [EC] is exatly right. You don't need to be around those people, there are others out there who want a relationship to be about something else other than sex.

IS: I know how u feel bout sex cos I feel the exact same way, i absolutly despise having sex. But i spose ill get over it eventually, my advice is to stay away from the guys who just want sex. Not a good idea. When you find the right one u might find that you want to have sex again, its mostly

just the fact ull get hurt again, once you know you wont get hurt im sure

you'll want to have sex again, hell i know i do 🙂

TD: hi there, i'm new to this group and i totally understand what you say!

but it feels weird for me too; i mean i am gay but on the internet ppl ask

me the same questions too, and all they want is to have Cyber with me!! i

find that awfull and sometimes i just wanna chat and they just go because

i'm "borring" just because i don't wanna have cyber... but also, another

fact about me is this: i also, when i chat on yahoo for example, ask if the

guy is top or bottom because that helps me imagine what kind of character

he is... it sounds weird but that helps... but i also have to chat with them

for a while before i get his "outlook"... But my suggestion is this... avoid ppl

like that; try to find someone who likes you for what you are and not

because "you have a cute butt" or "you're extremely hot" and stuff... i know

now, so i'll stop asking the top/bttm question from now on... i'm so glad i

came up to such a group... the chatrooms gave me a totally different

picture of the quality of people that are usually gay... now i know that such

think is not true! good luck.

AK: Well I agree with everyone here although I do like sex (well... kind of)

You really should avoid people who want nothing but sex, you will find a

guy who just wants you for you.

ES: thx for the advice i do try to stay away from ppl who just want sex but

.....lol the guys who even want a long term relation want sex too i

soooooooooooo wish i found such a guy but again i soooooooooooooo wish i wasnt gay 😳

The questions about having sex, not having sex, or meeting someone for more than sex were contemplated in lengthier threads. This specific excerpt changed focus to include the dynamic of the Internet as a place for people to only experience "cyber sex and quick turn ons" (see Appendix G-4).

Religion and homosexuality. Another emergent theme that has been passionately discussed and received a "Sticky" topic status is homosexuality and religion. Unlike many other subjects discussed in this community, individual responses to questions of religion and homosexuality are often much lengthier, including personal stories and opinions, cited material from others, and/or alternative locations where one could find more comprehensive or up-to-date information. I have found that universally, members are supportive of one another's being gay and religious, and tend to discuss the subject with more sophistication than other topics. The following excerpt, a conversation on Catholicism and homophobia, illustrates the supportive atmosphere that is commonplace when dealing with questions of religion in this community:

AS: You've probably heard this all before, but still, I really want to launch into a rambling story and hopefully get some advice...As you might know, I'm a Catholic, and I'm not really out (except to a few friends)- and sometimes I go online just to see what catholics say about gays and there's so much hatred and it makes me feel really alone and sometimes a bit scared that the ones who are supposed to be "close to god" are the

most judgemental arrogant bast*rds on the planet…I mean, I think I've found a great balance between my own spirituality and my sexuality and I am absolutely confident that god has no hatred or condemnation for gays but it frightens me that one day I'm probably going to be shunned by the people who are meant to help and love everyone and the abuse that they spout out really does make me want to cry- they say things like we're intrinsically disordered and we are suffering great moral evils, it really does hurt to hear all this. How are you supposed to put up with all this? How can I go to a church- where I can feel close to god but then feel completely isolated and hated over nothing? What do you do?

OR: with priests or churches or whatever it really depends on who you go to, even if you're catholic. the good priests will accept you if you feel you must be accepted by them. i cant find anything online but a particulary good priest whos been in the media here [web address] first 5 mins is about homosexual preists, rest is irrelevant. in other instances he's said he accept homosexuals, cant find it but.

AJ: personally, with my past experience, orthodox catholics are a little, well....loopy Thank God I'm a Lutheran! Lutherans are a lot more open and accepting. so you could always become a lutheran, they're practically the same thing, only the Lutherans are more liberal

DC: Lol I'm not out yet but I teach sunday school at a catholic church some how I think if they knew I would be out of a job lol

This conversation continues, with several others providing examples of their lives with the Catholic church (see Appendix G-5) while others suggested several pro-gay Catholic resources and websites one could check out.

Sexual health. Somewhat sensitive or embarrassing questions can be posted on the Sexual Health forum, which is housed in the Chadz Help Clinic. Topics such as masturbation, anal sex, sexually transmitted diseases, seduction, fetishes, and other specific questions pertaining to male anatomy are briefly discussed. Limited replies are posted from members, unlike the Advice Couch forum. As stated before, there were only 125 posts on 14 threads. There do not appear to be any experts or trained health communication specialists who reply to users' questions. Though it appears members do not use the Sexual Heath forum as readily as other forums, many of the topics covered in this area are also widely discussed in Advice Couch and Open Discussion (Chadz Community Center).

To summarize, the themes that emerged on the Chadz Help Clinic were the "coming-out" process, identity, relationships, self-esteem and suicide, homosexuality and religion, sex, and sexual health. Clearly, this part of the site allows members to express their predicaments and quandaries about general and personal issues, most surrounding subjects dealing with gay identity and behavioral concerns. In addition, however, this forum provides adolescent sexual minorities an immersive experience, where teens are able to communicate with their peers, and where asking and responding to concerning questions becomes interactive and social.

Chadz Community Center. Similarly to the Chadz Help Clinic, where members are able to solicit advice, the Chadz Community Center provides an opportunity for adolescent sexual minorities to socialize and to post questions and replies on a wide variety of general interests, including world events, religion, and breaking news. In this forum, there are suggested guidelines for members wishing to participate. First, it is requested that posts stay on topic; and second, above all else, that members maintain respect for others' opinions and views. In this anonymous environment, it is well recorded that members openly express their feelings, ask questions, and reply freely. To introduce the breadth of topics, Table 1 provides a small sample collection of titles that initially received a great deal of attention or were frequently reintroduced in the Chadz Community Center during the period of this study.

As Table 1 exhibits, the variety of subjects touched upon and discussed in this forum is immense and portrays the diverse interests adolescent sexual minorities find appealing. Though this interactive community utilizes this forum more than others to socialize, many of the subjects discussed here are similar to those found in Chadz Help Clinic. I found that gay teens chatted about enduring peer pressure, drugs, dating, sex, and coping with their daily struggles pertaining to sexual identity. Here they also talked about everything from school to hairstyles to media heartthrobs. They are charming, fascinating, funny, supportive, and vulnerable in many ways. The community created here has developed into one of trust and respect, where members can freely talk about all sorts of issues. It is noted, however, that not all members always agree with one

Compiling a list of all gay indicators.	What country?
First kiss.	Parents having sex.
Most expensive clothing you own.	Porn.
Sluttiest thing you've ever done.	Brothers.
What's your fetish?	Are you out?
The search for the best accents.	Have you had sex before 18?
Have any of you had crushes on girls despite being gay?	What triggers homosexuality?
What underwear are you wearing if any?	Size doesn't count but I'm curious.
Tell me about your balls.	How often do you curse?
Hottest dreams	What's your religious orientation or affiliation?
What type of gay are you?	Day of Truth: Day of Lies (Debate on Religion).
How old are you?	
Compliment Thread.	Gays and smoking.
Anal sex.	Gay Christian Question.
The 'Your status' Thread.	If I slit my wrists will it make me feel better?
Ever been walked in while masturbating?	After sex.
What's your weight height?	Why I'm an Atheist.
Showering in the gym.	Favorite body part?
Older or younger guys?	What makes you horny?
Virginity.	Vampires sexy or not sexy?
Circumcised or uncircumcised?	Do you shave down there?
What are you wearing?	What's under your BED!!
That celebrity is sexy.	Gay Gene.
Suck or be sucked?	How far have you gone?
Who here has a crush on a straight friend?	The God poll.

Table 1.
Sampling of popularized threads on Chadzboyz.com discussion forums

another and do from time to time engage in disagreement.

Given the array of subjects, it is effortless to become immersed into a discussion and find oneself consumed. It is equally fitting to say that one can also simply skim the surface of this forum and feel confounded where to commit time. A review of my notes revealed that my awareness of certain sections of interest overshadowed other areas that may only get a brief mention. I often found myself recommitted to observing alternate themes in this forum to sufficiently convey the breadth of discussion topics. The following categories offered here are broadly

and loosely labeled to provide a general insight into only three prominent and frequent topics that emerged in this forum. Central to many threads, excerpts for relationships, sex, and popular culture were carefully selected as representations of the many multifaceted discussions that were observed.

Relationships. Adolescent sexual minorities are no different from their heterosexual peers in their desire to form interpersonal relationships. The hope for intimacy, interpersonal attraction, and a quest for a committed relationship are common for both. However, the initial building and maintaining of relationships for gay teens entail unique challenges that are not experienced by other teenagers. Members of this community often discuss the dynamics of formulating an interpersonal relationship. The following example illustrates multiple factors unique to adolescent sexual minorities that influence the quest for a fledgling relationship:

> *MU: I'm not really sure if this thread is in the right area of the forum, and I apologize if it isn't, but I'm not sure where else to put it. Does anyone have any experience with finding a boyfriend while still in the closet? I know it's dumb, but I'm tired of being single/alone. If anyone can offer suggestions and/or advice on how to find someone without leaving the closet, it would be greatly appreciated.*
>
> *XP: I did a long time ago. I honestly don't remember how we met but even though he was a good guy we were both mostly in the closet so with all the lying and sneaking around, dating him was more stress than it was worth.*

XB: I think you really need to be out. my first boyfriend was not out......and it was fu&*%!g terrible.....we lasted about a month. But this is your call.

ND: Without coming out and saying that you're gay, the best way to find somebody is to get out and do things. Get involved in school clubs and volunteer opportunities in your community. The more people you meet, the more chance you'll have in finding someone.

XR: I never really thought about that stuff. My parents always told me to not date at my age, and like, there's no one I really met that I was really that interested in. I would think it'd be tough trying to find someone while in the closet though. xD Good luck if you're going to try to, it sounds like a complicated relationship imo though.

HW: I had my first gay experience at 13. Neither of us had any idea what was going on. At first it was brilliant, then it broke apart due to insecurities on both sides and well - I was devastated.

That's how I came across this site 😜 *It is possible, definitely possible to find love while still in the closet - but it proves to be more difficult. It's honestly a matter of chance and attraction - Risky business* 😛 *If you come out, you are more likely to set a reputation of your sexual orientation therefore, you are more likely to attract the desired gender* 😜 *Just take it easy, take a good long think - Feel free to*

come back and chat and refresh yourself. You'll be fine - If you decide to come out and need support, this forums always here for you! If you need any further advice I'd be more than willing to help!

UP: Its possible but tremendously difficult. While being in the closet, you are not secure of yourself. You can be yourself while in the closet and probably will feel like you are being watched all the time. Its risky to try to find a boyfriend while in the closet because you dont know if the other person is in the closet or out. You also have to take in consideration the other person's feelings and would probably like you to be out and proud of having eachother. To be able to accomplish this you would have to lie and sneek around and all that lying will just lead to more lying and you will just get tangled up in all those lies. I suggest you try to come out the closet. Be yourself and someone out there will love you for you. I wish you the best of luck

In this challenging pursuit for a relationship, members often become perplexed with questions of attraction, intimacy, and friendship. The next excerpt highlights an obstacle of negotiating love and attraction with situational boundaries of friendship:

EK: Is it just me or are there otheres, that fall in love with their best friend. I'm 17 years old and ive only had 3 best friends. All 3 still best friends. 2 out of the three ive fallin in love with. One of them knows and strangly enough hes striat, but is cool with it. Hes my number one friend. The

problem is hes extreamly good looking and im gay. witch somtimes causes strain in are relationship, becuz im over protective and exteamly jelous of any one. Any one els has that problem? The other friend is homophobic but once agin, oddly enough he still considers me his best firend and he knows i'm gay, he dosnt know that im kinda in love with him. Love is a strong word and i dont use it unless i mean it. Theres only about 10 people in my life that i actully love, thoes two are the only ones i love love. why did i fall in love twice with two people i will never have.

SB: I've fell in love with my 4 best friends, at first i kinda hated it, but now i don't care too much about it, because just being their friends means a lot to me, i'd love to have anyone of them as my boyfriend, i know it wont happen, but as long as i am their closest friend, is ok. They are perfect guys, i hope to learn a lot from them, they're so different and awesome guys. I'm suspecting on one of them, he might be bi, but even if he's, i

wont jump over him, unless he ask me 😠 *. (then i'd be the happiest boy on Earth =D), but that's one of my fantasies with them =/. I'm not jealous about who meets or get close to, sometimes, i get close with the ones they got close. We're so close that we have slept together (not sexually), dress together, camp together, etc. Sometimes its hard, because i love them, and I'm that close, but can't do anything about it... =/ But in the end, being their friend is what i care, and i love them with all my soul and heart but again, we're just friends, you get used to see him with girls all over him, and sometimes drunk, they get all funny xD and start to say " i love you*

man!!" and hug you and things like that xD its hilarious. (i'd never take advantage of someone drunk, when my friends are drunk, i drive them to their houses, or to my house (because their parents would get mad at them) and take care of him until he's sober). I know that 3 of them are straight, i have the problem too that they're really good looking, and me being gay doesn't helps that much...but friendship is first . LOL. i sometimes think that they are gay too, because we hug each other, jump over each other, there were a few times when 2 of them grabbed my ass

.but then i realize that those are things that best friends do, and i have to know the difference between love and friendship. Love is a strong word, i agree.

Ultimately, discussions on attraction and intimacy lead to multiple questions regarding love and sex. Themes of confusion regarding these two concepts were most prevalent.

Sex. Much as in the discussions found in Chadz Health Clinic, sex is a ubiquitous topic that is given a great deal of attention in this forum as well. Multiple observations have confirmed that when the discussion of sex is brought up or initially posted, members are not reluctant to self-disclosure. In fact, I was surprised to find that when members were prompted with the question, *Have you had sex before?*—which was the name given to a new thread—they responded openly. In this particular discussion, 305 members answered the question of whether they had had sex before. Ninety-eight (32%) indicated "yes" and 207

(68%) said no. The following excerpt illustrates the rapport between members and their discussion of this complex question about sex:

NE: dont know.. i have never done it though! waiting for a certain someone to suddenly become gay and attracted to me..

TA: It depends on your definition of sex, I guess.

JI: That's so weird, I was thinking of making the same topic a few days ago, because I get the same impression. No, I havn't. And don't see it in the near future, either. I don't even know any gay guys!

EM: What the hell is sex?

NN: sex in this context being penetration and ejaculation? i wish i could have sex... but i haven't... i think [EM] sums it up nicely:

SB: same here

IK: No. But I want to so badly . I wanna be a hoe.

NB: i guess you would be surprised how many straight guys want to have sex with other boys just to try it... i was lucky becase i was asked by one of my former classmates, and even after we did it, and i asked him if he wasnt gay or bi, he said he wasnt, that it was just curiosity. and i dont think he would lie after what we did...i guess you just have to ask the right person … honestly, i started experimenting with sex very early, in the time when i didnt even know what sex is! an older friend wanted to do it with me, i refused, but since he said that if i dont do it with him, hes not gonna play with me, and didnt want him to leave...so i agreed. i think its the reason that im bi, but i dont regret it.

In contrast to the above excerpt, when questioned specifically about oral sex, some members were a great deal more explicit with their responses and self-disclosed freely as revealed in this passage.

> *SS: Ok just wanted to know if you would ever give a blow job to a man or have already done so! If you have, please do explain how it went*
>
> *RR: Never have given or received oral sex....want to try so desperately though.LOL. Things will happen in their due time however,so I try not to rush things.*
>
> *RA: It was fine. I think the most important thing seems to be a variety. The same thing gets boring so you have to try different stuff and gauge his reaction. If he doesn't like it, obviously there's no need to do it again. If he likes it, then good, remember it for next time. It truly isn't that difficult.*
>
> *GA: This thread offers advice about oral sex. [provides link to thread]*
>
> *TF: Giving a blow job is a difficult thing to master (I'm not fond of it, and I'm not even very good at it but I know that no two guys want the same thing). You have to "play it by ear" so to say. Figure out what he likes if he doesn't tell you and go with that. If you don't like it though, it's not like you have broken a cardinal rule of homosexuality... there are a lot of other ways that two males can "get down."*
>
> *GA: I'll side with [RA]. BJs aren't difficult. Most of the sensitivity is in the head of the penis so concentration there, with variety, does much. Play*

around with other parts of your partner's body and you'll find the excitation just happens. As [RR] and [TF] both say, be mindful of your partner and open to their responses. Btw, watch your teeth.

IS: I also agree with [RA] - they're not difficult, however each and every guy is different and some like different things to others 😊 Personally, I am not a major fan of giving or receiving head...giving head for me is, idk...i just dont like it much for some reason. Not to say I dont do it occassionally, however. Receiving, well, some could argue that he may not be doing it "right" as I do not get overly excited or turned on by it...in saying that im more into hugs and kisses and touching 😊

It seems natural within this community and the use of this website that members are sometimes bombarded by provocative statements and confessions. Detailed narratives about sexual experiences have become increasingly popular, as demonstrated in the above excerpt (also see Appendix G-6). It is confounding whether this community is hypersensitized or desensitized to the issue of sex, creating fervor for the topic and perpetuating more self-disclosure. As stated by a member quoted below, the subject of anal sex has specifically been extensively addressed:

NG: I'm just curious as to how many gay guys actually like anal sex. I don't know if its strange but I personally dislike it. Does that mean something or.. Lol I don't know.

IT: I ve never had it but there are like a gazillion current anal sex threaads in the health section.

As previously reviewed, this member is correct that the number of conversations conducted on this topic in the Chadz Health Center forum was immense.

Popular culture. Popular culture readily embraces teenagers just as passionately as teenagers embrace popular culture. Music, movies, television programs, and celebrity fashions are equally of interest to adolescent sexual minorities as to their heterosexual counterparts. As I reviewed how this population seeks to define itself, I noted that they heavily reference and discuss pop culture and express their likes and dislikes. Interest in hair-styles and designer clothing, use of pop culture jargon, and an assumed knowledge of all things currently popular was observed.

ZA: this thread is for those who have a favorite teen celebrity or whatever. post away, i think taylor lautner or who ever plays jacob is hot.

AY: I have to say Jake gyllenhaal, for brokeback mountain and jar head. need i say more

TP: Except Jake isn't a teen. Annnd... Taylor does have a very yummy body.

ZA: yes i agree, too bad he isnt really gay

EV: Catholic all-boys' school. No one who goes there is Catholic. I despise organised religion: it's just so hypocritical and cringy. I don't wanna go off topic though

EH: just look at my pic and youll see who i like how can you resist taylor lautner. ohh.... and the angelic god, robert pattinsion(sp.) he just steals my heart. i noe its an overly dramtic statement but its true. If any of you watch the vampire diaries, the guy who plays damon, i think his name is ian, he is another true hottie.

ER: robert patterson is hideous. taylor lautner is goregous. but lets keep this a twilight free zone. lucas till is pretty.

TS: justin bieber? Idk i think of myself as a celeb, so ya myself.

TC: i think of myself as a celeb, so ya myself.Justin Bieber. Really. No, sorry, what, really?

TS: yah i think so. well, i think he's adorable, has a good voice. I don't think he's hot, because.. well that's pedoish.

TP: lol You're like... 2 years older than him. That's not even close to "pedoish".

NE: he looks like he's 5. ew. i don't really have any teen celebrities. i like the older ones

TS: im actually only 4 months older, but he looks 12, and it seems pedoish lol.

NE: haha by the "older" ones i mean ones that are in their 20's, making them no longer eligible for being a 'teen' celebrity.

As is common with many topics, members are often observed changing the subject, deviating from the initial topic, and introducing new ideas for discussion. Surprisingly, when members do deviate, they usually find themselves back on

subject or introducing a new thread for discussion. This was demonstrated in the previous excerpt as one member unsuccessfully tried to introduce a new topic about Catholic school while others were discussing popular culture.

Additionally, this thread provided an example of "urban" language/jargon with the use of the word "pedoish". Initially, stumped, I read and reread the thread to come to understand its meaning. A Google search did not offer any clarification. Urbandictionary.com, however, revealed that "pedo" was a term meaning "a person who is sexually attracted to children, short for pedophile." With further investigation, I've come to see this term being used by this particular culture to mean being attracted to someone who has yet to fully develop sexually.

Conclusion

As I have tried to successfully navigate my way through Chadzboyz.com and become in tune with this particular culture, I have observed adolescent sexual minorities experiencing sexual maturation with an increased interest in sex and relationships while exploring their sexual orientation. The Internet is an indispensable element in their lives, allowing them to socialize with other youth, seek information on various topics, and cement an identity. A list of their recurring themes and topics is closely examined in the subsequent chapter. Immersion into this community revealed that young sexual minorities spend a considerable amount of time interacting with other members of Chadzboyz.com. These interpersonal bonds have helped many formulate their identity as gay or bisexual (GB), while others exhibit difficulties with this development. In this

section, I have described my intermittent engagement with the website and looked at discussion threads of adolescent sexual minorities over an approximately five-year period. It has been recognized that chat forums are popular and invaluable tools for young sexual minorities to obtain information, be social, and aid in their identity growth. These findings have provided a frame through which to consider the cognitive and behavioral processes of gay teenagers. It is now time to consider and address the research questions that emerged from the literature review.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

No matter how far in or out of the closet you are, you still have a next step.

— Author Unknown

Introduction

The objectives for this dissertation were to contribute to the investigation of GLBT adolescents' information-seeking behaviors and self-identity development through a qualitative study of discourse of a teen chat forum. However, the focus for this community was centered more on gay and bisexual males. Specifically, the areas of homophobia, sexual identity development, coming-out processes, and Internet use of adolescent sexual minorities were considered. Questions emphasizing an understanding of the issues and challenges associated with young sexual minorities' coming-out experiences and identity development were a key focus. With respect to this focus, three research questions were proposed giving direction for this virtual ethnographic study. These questions—*How does a gay teen website function as a tool for adolescent sexual minorities' information needs and development of their sexual identity? What are the dominant topics members of a gay teen chat forum discuss and contemplate in conjunction with their sexual identity formation?* and *What are the revealed struggles and impacts of sexual prejudice on GLBT youth as discussed by members of a gay teen website?*—serve as signposts for this chapter and are explicitly addressed.

Gay Teen Website as Instrument for Information Needs and Identity Development

Introduction. Exploring Chadzboyz.com as a site to study adolescent sexual minorities has underscored that sexual identity development is a complex, multidimensional, and often critical task for adolescents. The goal is to achieve a coherent identity while avoiding identity confusion; nonetheless, there are several issues teenagers experience as they make this challenging transition from childhood to adulthood. The initial exploration of sexual identity for some members of Chadzboyz.com occurred with the presumption of heterosexuality. This is common because heterosexuality is socially reinforced, and most adolescents will identify and label themselves as heterosexual. However, many do not align their cognitions with heterosexuality and consider other sexual identities, creating different and distinct problematic issues with development. For example, identity confusion often occurs given that society commonly stigmatizes homosexuality. While many of the youth observed in Chadzboyz.com cope with the multifarious challenges and are successfully becoming healthy and productive adults, others indicate struggle owing to discrimination, family and peer disapproval, social rejection, and sadly, violence.

Information impoverished. In the context of the struggles gay youth experience, these stressors have forced many members of this website to suppress or hide their feelings of sexuality prior to joining Chadzboyz.com, thus impeding their identity formation. Many indicated feelings of isolation, confusion, and helplessness because they lacked someone to confide in, had limited

information about their sexual feelings, and were fearful of negative consequences if exploration of a sexual identity was discovered. In the language of Chatman's (1996) Information Impoverished Theory, these gay and gay questioning youth can be labeled as "information poor" because they lack the same opportunities for accessing needed information that is readily accessible to their heterosexual peers.

A key component of the Information Impoverished Theory that helps explain the information-seeking behavior of adolescent sexual minorities is secrecy. At one extreme, I found evidence that most members of this community guard themselves against unwanted exposure and work diligently to keep their true state of affairs concealed. This information-seeking fear, compounded with the lack of social support, creates a need for information and is the motivational drive for many to utilize the Internet as a valued instrument. Members of the gay teen chat forum wanted to learn about their sexuality while meeting others with similar predicaments. Analysis of the information-seeking activities of these youths has shown how the Internet made sense intuitively for them, because it could assist in their identity development, keep their identity secret (for those who wished to be anonymous), and make it somewhat easy to conceal their information seeking.

Findings revealed that most members of Chadzboyz.com have kept their information seeking and online communication within this site a secret from their parents. This is revealed in the following discussion thread labeled, *Do your parents know you are here?*

RM: WEEELLLL? Do they? Mine don't lol.

EV: lolllllll 'rents wouldn't understand. They're old.

KS: Haha no chance

OB: theres probably a 100% chance of having no parents on this forum except for maybe our old forum friend (oh i forget her username for the life of me, but she visited frequently and she had a baby :p that would probably be the only parent to have ever surfed this forum

OM: No, no, no. My mum would think I'm gonna get abducted. My dad would use it to spy on me. Considering some of my posts here too that would be very bad.

NT: Definitely not, I'd hate to have them find out about this site.

CC: To the best of my knowledge, no and I hope they never do. It would make for some uncomfortable conversations considering some of the topics I've posted on. I'm almost positive I've never visited the forums on the family computer. I think I've only ever been on them on my laptop, which I have password protected.

AL: Definitely not. I only visit sites like this on my own computer anyway, which is protected by a password. I guess I'm just a really careful person when it comes to stuff like this, with only one slip-up in the past. My parents are also completely unaware of me being gay/bi/whatever. They have always been pretty understanding about privacy, except for my stepdad a bit (moves stuff around in my room, I never know where

anything is!). If I ever come out, I doubt a place like this would be a big deal, they barely know what an internet forum is anyway.

HB: Oh lord no! If my mother knew I even had my picture on here she'd wrap me in tin foil and hide me in the basement with the Christmas ornaments to protect me from the "child predators." =p

ES: Nope. My Mom is pretty much sure that if I talk to people online that they can automatically find me and rape me and drag me off to become one of them. Old people should be barred from new technology. Especially when they just can't get it. They should just take their 8 tracks and stereos and VHS players and gather somewhere in a remote corner.

As indicated in the chat extract above (see Appendix G-7 for more) and in my readings of more than 159 posts on this topic over two years, it is surprising that the vast majority of members do not share their socialization and information-seeking behavior with their family members and feel quite confident with their deception.

At another extreme, it has also been observed that many members feel as if (and appreciate that) they can be themselves, without fear of repercussions, on this gay teen forum. The following response of a 16-year-old teen to the question of whether his mother knows he patronizes Chadzboyz.com illustrates this phenomenon:

RP: No, but she hardly knows how to use a computer. I don't even tell my friends (one exception because I used her computer) about this forum. I've considered inviting a few of my gay friends but decided against it. I like to

think of chadz as a place I can say exactly what I want without censoring myself and vent my frustrations. Parts of me I wouldn't feel comfortable exposing to people I know in real life.

Some users of this chat forum experienced a loss of inhibition because of the anonymity the Internet offers. This loss of inhibition allowed them to freely express feelings, ask questions, and reply without censoring their responses. This can overtly be seen in many of the excerpts in Chapter 4.

The use of Chatman's theory to explain the motivation of gay youth's participation in an online gay community addresses our questions about the complex social and cultural phenomenon of information-seeking behaviors of gay adolescents. Central information needs that are satisfied by Chadzboyz.com are associated with identify and self-labeling as gay, insight into consequences of self-identifying as gay, and answers to questions about relationships, sex, and sexual health. Members' participation within this culture illustrates a process of socialization and an acquired, more affluent understanding of their gay identity formation.

The significance of this online communication in the lives of sexual minorities can be observed in the following except, which demonstrates how often members socialize and seek information on Chadzboyz.com:

OT: I'm usually on every day, I just love helping you guys so much!

IK: 25 times a day :P Just got an internet phone… You ain't getting rid of me!

EV: I'm on whenever I'm at my computer… I log in, open Windows Media Player, MSN, Windows Live Mail, and Firefox… in firefox, I open three tabs; BBC New, Facebook, and Chadz.

MJ: sry I got a honey at MSN so i'm definitely nto all the time here in a week…

XB: Every day basically, but I don't always post. I like to come on here cause its entertaining. I like to read all the dumb moronic things people post. And I like to read, for fun, all the dumb moronic things I've posted. I'll look back and say, goddamn [XB] that was really stupid.

RW: I try to be on 2 times a day. Mornings and nights. I don't always post.

NE: I'm on just about once a day at least… sometimes multiple times. Yup. I have that much free time.

EM: I used to be online A LOT but I haven't been on in a good 2 to 3 years. I just pop up randomly. I'll be trying to get back into this place now.

ZG: This is the only place I get to talk to other LGBT teens.

In contrast to many who report being avid users, some members visit only intermittently or decide to withdraw from being active members as commented by members on others behaviors and by members who decided to return to this community. Some adolescents become overwhelmed by the task of sexual identity development and elect to leave Chadzboyz.com, whereas others become uninterested, or have found the site to have served its purpose and no longer find it useful.

YJ: Been unsure about sexuality, haven't been on in forevz, starting to cum back lol

RG: When I was new around I tried to post everyday, but then I just saw the forums, and I ended up coming only twice a month to see if there's anything different. But I still think it's a very cool community you guys have here, I guess I just don't feel part of it…

As demonstrated in the previous passages, members spend an extraordinary amount of time socializing with others in this community. The exchange of information on a seemingly consistent basis helps many formulate an understanding of their sexuality, which serves as a distinct function of their identity formation.

Identity formation. I analyzed identity development on this site using the Cass (1979) Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation (see Figure 7). To briefly review, this model posits the following stages: First, adolescent sexual minorities experience initial confusion, feeling different from their heterosexual counterparts, questioning their sexuality. Second, many seek to find like-minded individuals who can help them navigate their internal conflicts associated with a gay identity. Third, most salient within this population was the process of "coming out", the acceptance of a gay identity. Finally, differences were particularly noticeable in the expression of identity pride. How gay youth view and respond to the predominantly heterosexual culture after becoming active in a homosexual culture varies.

The first stage of the Cass model posits that gay youth will initially experience a perplexed feeling of uncertainty in conjunction with their sexual identity. Also known as *Identity Confusion*, this first stage is not as readily observed in the chat forums as other stages, but it is evident with many new
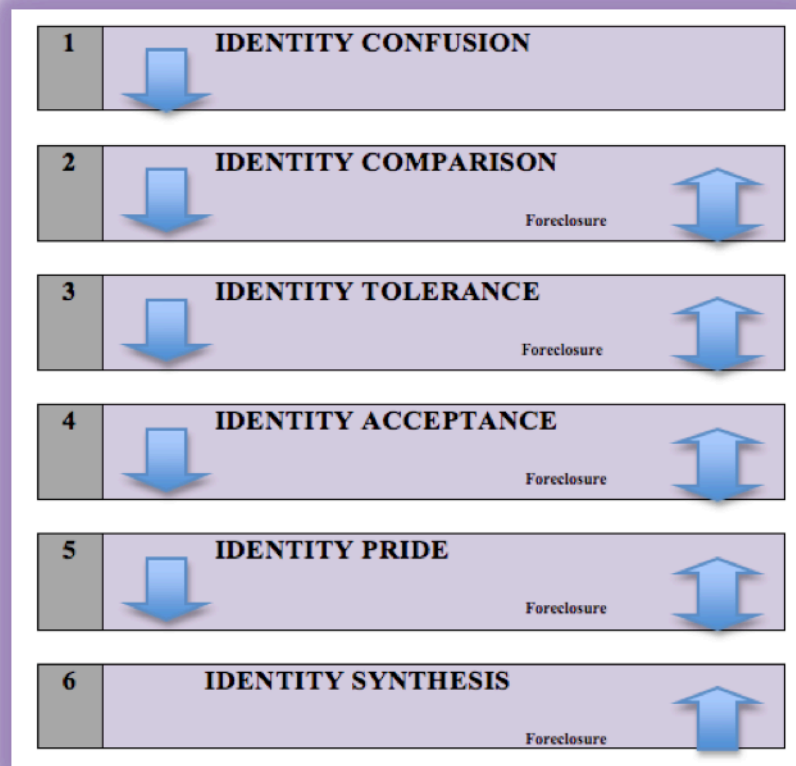
Figure 7. Cass Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation

members of ChadzBoys.com. Accurate information about homosexuality is imperative at this stage, and members of this site feel comfortable asking for information. Many indicated that they had become members of this community to help address their early feelings of a non-heterosexual identity:

> *I was online one night, looking for some kind of gay support group. I had*
>
> *just begun to realize the feeling I had, and was too scared to even talk to*

my school councilor, who was nearly my best friend at the time. I Googled, "Teen Gay Forum", and after searching through the list, I found this site. After looking around, I decided to sign up. A few days later, I became a full registered user.

The second stage of the Cass model, Identity Comparison, was prevalent in this community's discourse. This second stage is characterized by feelings of isolation as gay youth come to recognize their same-gender sexual feelings and suffer a sense of alienation from others. Individuals in this stage will continue to hide their feelings of homosexuality, trying to act as heterosexuals while comparing the two. One teenager described his thoughts and behaviors during this stage as follows:

If I was ever to come out, I myself would be shunned from the very home I live in and the people who mean most to me not only for being queer, but also the fact that I had lied to them for so long. I hid my self well, kept girlfriends most of the time and even bragged about how much I enjoyed having sex with them. I refrained from dressing the way I wanted to and even changed songs playing on the radio I truly enjoyed so that I was not to be perceived as a fag.

Several gay and gay questioning youth articulate struggles coping with the idea of a different sexual orientation, comparing themselves with heterosexuals and underscoring the tribulations of a gay lifestyle. This next teenager's outline about why he hates being gay exemplifies many members' thoughts during this identity stage:

1. Loneliness and emptiness. At times it seems that I am destined to walk the path of life on my own, while watching others get married, have families, and have someone to love, and others that are close to you fade away or pass away.

2. Doubt. The fact that you can never tell if someone is gay, bi, trans, or hetero. I wish everyone was bi, that way everyone could have a taste of both worlds.

3. False feelings. I hate when I start to develope feelings for a friend and they are straight, or straight to my knowledge. It seems so discouraging.

4. All the lies. When you live a life of a homosexual one of the first lessons in life you will learn is that you have to hide your identity at all costs, since it is frowned upon by our society. (I personally blame religion, although the mere thought of religion makes me laugh since it is obsolete and people still believe in it when it has no physical evidence or proof of anything). Anywho, back on topic.

5. Disappointment. I am tired of feeling like I am a disappointment to people since I dont want to get married to a woman, have kids, or go on a religious mission. Every day I have to put a smile on and act like I want to do all those things, although inside I am screeming and it feels like Im on the ledge of a cliff just waiting for th final push to send me into a dark hole that never ends.

These feelings of despair resonate with many and hinder their identity progression. Consequently, many withdraw from investigating their sexual identity further and enter into a state of Foreclosure. This has been illustrated when young sexual minorities lash out at others who identify as gay, revert to a state of confusion about their sexual feelings, and/or elect to discontinue all information-seeking behavior. It has been observed that some members of Chadzboyz.com who experience foreclosure eventually return to a previous stage and continue forward with their homosexual identity. To solidify a view of this problematic stage, the following except is offered:

The thing I hate about being gay is being gay. I hate everything about it essentially. I mean its harder to date and find love due to the fact that most of the guys that are out are pretty much girls with a penis and to me that is not attractive and the attractive guys are usually straight or are closeted which leaves you with the agony of crushing on someone with the constant wonder of whether or not they are gay. Not to mention the fact that even the flamers are scarce so the non-flamers are definitely hard to find. In addition to that you are not generally socially accepted, your family and friends view you differently (whether they admit it or not, they usually do), and the higher rate of HIV and AIDS among the gay community make it even harder. Maybe its just me because I am 17 and I am having a hard time dealing with this, but I just do not see one positive thing about being gay. It does not affect your life positively in any aspect. All it does is make life harder and more complicated than it already is. I am

just trying to learn to deal with it and get over it. There's also a depressing feeling that can never be completely shaken. It feels like no matter how many people tell me it's ok, that there's something wrong with being Gay. I'm not talking from a religious standpoint, just... in general, I can't help but feel that even if I have extremely strong feelings for someone of the same sex, that somehow, it's wrong.

Given the intensity of the Identity Comparison stage, Chadzboyz.com is an accommodating infrastructure that provides social support for most of its members. Numerous individuals indicated that without this community, they would be disconnected from anything gay and completely alone. Seeking social support from other adolescent sexual minorities demonstrates movement to the Identity Tolerance stage. It should be noted here that the movement from Identity Comparison to Identity Tolerance is blurred within this virtual community. The delineation of these two stages was not transparent and appeared to be one inclusive stage, as noted in Figure 8. The transitions from one stage to the next are not recognizable; they are more fluid and unpronounced. However, behaviors combating isolation by gay teenagers are readily observed as they utilize this site to meet their information and social needs. Many have reported that, because of the lack of exposure to gay peers and/or accepting "straight" friends, this online community fills a supportive void, which is instrumental in their identity development. The discussion forums allow for individuals to maintain a constant presence with a gay community, a community desperately sought after by many developing youth. This sexual minority population is diverse in its formation of an

identity; that is, not all members were observed as the same. For most, however, this participation in discussion forums strengthened their commitment to a gay identity, helped them acknowledge that there were similar others, and perpetuated further identity exploration.

1	IDENTITY CONFUSION
2-3	IDENTITY COMPARISON IDENTITY TOLERANCE — Foreclosure
4	IDENTITY ACCEPTANCE — Foreclosure
5	IDENTITY PRIDE — Foreclosure
6	IDENTITY SYNTHESIS — Foreclosure

Merged Stages   Rarely Identified Stage
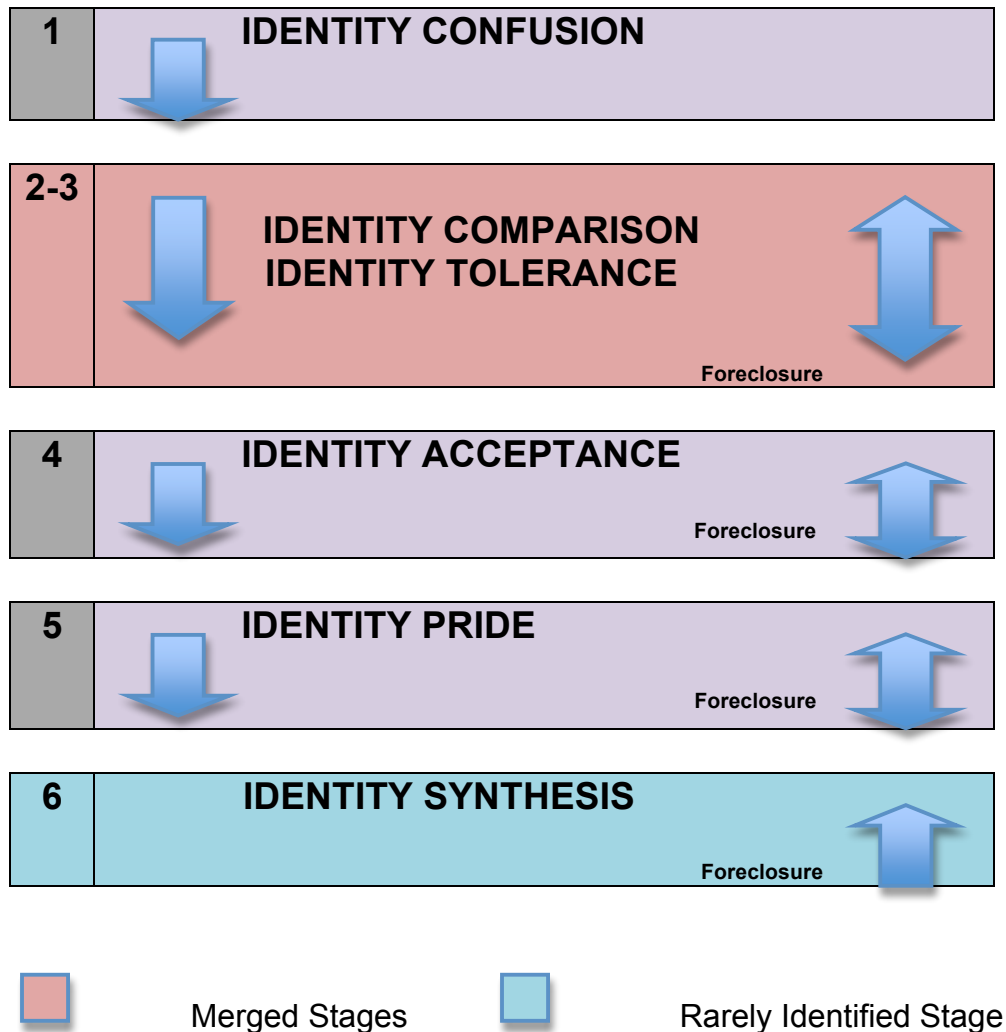
Figure 8.
Modified Cass Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation as observed in Chadzboyz.com

This next stage in the exploration of identity is labeled *Identity Acceptance*, according to the Cass model. Many of the youths observed in this

community fully accept their homosexual identity have begun to create a social network with other identifying young homosexuals, and have disclosed or are prepared to disclose their sexual identity to friends and family offline. The process of self-disclosing one's sexual identity to others offline has been observed as being both difficult and liberating, as reported by members of this community. This site has served as a support for many who prepare to self-disclose, a forum for many to share their successes of revealing their identity, and a refuge for many who experience negative consequences associated with "coming out" to others. The complexity of this stage of coming out varies from individual to individual, as noted in their posts. Some posts are lengthy, offering much insight into the process (see Appendix H), while others are poignant. What is a defining characteristic of Chadzboyz.com members during this period is their reliance on fellow members to provide advice and confirmation for their behavior. This community distinctively aids young sexual minorities during crucial points of their identity development.

For some, this process is gradual, fraught with fear and anxiety. Most members contemplate when, where, and with whom they wish to share this information, laboring to find the courage. The following plea exemplifies many discussion threads seeking advice:

> *I am so ready to come out but i just can't i don't know what i'm so scared of i just can't do it my friends are really open minded and stuff but i just can't. i hate lieing evryday of my life i need advice what should i do i need the courage to do it... but i don't know where to find it*

It is observed that many wish to reduce tension from being deceptive, yearn to develop genuine relationships, and think coming out will enable a positive result. Positive experience for some has led to a more positive sense of self, reduced stress, and propelled members forward with their identity development, as demonstrated in the following chat extract of two young males:

BD: Ok i need some information from all you guys who have either come out or been forced out. Right now i am partly out. I hav etold some friends but i have not told my family. I feel really wierd at the moment. Like i am hiding a dark secret (well i am but you know what i mean) i feel distant sometimes. I also feel that if i couldjust blurt out 'i am gay' at the dinner table to my family that i would feel much better. Some people have said that it takes a great weight off when you come out and that, providing it goes well of course, you feel much better. Is that true? I could really use some of your stories to go by. Thank you all.

DT: I went through the same bloody thing before. No fun! I first came out to my closest friends who were very supportive (and surprisingly dont freak when i say, "ooh he's cute!" haha). One day it came to the point that I just said to myself, "Why should I keep living this lie to everyone? It's not worth it!" I told another of my friends; one who just can't keep her mouth shut! And boy did I plan it perfectly! I told her on the bus on the way back from a french-cass fieldtrip, and we got back right before school let out at 2:30. By third-period the next day my ENTIRE class knew! I laughed so hard! Now I go to a catholic high school so I expected some crap to

happen. But I was surprised; only 3 people stopped associating with me (those whom I couldnt stand int he first place actually. . . yay!), and only two of them actually made any derogatory remarks toward me. And really, the worst thing the one could come up with was yelling, "Brokeback Mountain!" when I came up to kick the kickball during gym class. . . It went quite well! Then a few days later I decided to tell me parents during dinner. They were "devestated that I didn't tell them first", but OK with the fact that I am gay. So that's my story, don't know if it'll help or not! But good luck, and do what your heart tells you!

Numerous responses from members indicate that coming out is beneficial and a freeing experience. Many found their environment to be more accepting than expected and felt a huge sense of relief. Members of Chadzboyz.com are excited and freely share positive narratives with their peers of this community, as seen in the following coming-out story:

*Yep...last week. I was meaning to tell my mom after I had written a 2 and a half pg letter for me to use as guidance. I knew that If it hadnt written down my thoughts I would have probably just broke down crying. Unfortunately she had already gone to bed, so I decided to tell her in the morning. Stupid thing of me was is that I left the letter next to the computer *D'OH!* and she read it herself in the morning. She woke me up and told me she read it...and was totally accpeitng of it. She told me she loved me and that I was still me. she even told me she thought I was for a long time lol (isnt it amazing how some parents just know?) Im so thankful to be one*

of the lucky few who didnt go through a argument/breakdown with my mom. As for my cousin (who is gay) he was so happy for me lol. I have now told two of my best friends (both girls...both totally fine) and am going to tell my BF tonight over the phone (though I wish i could tell her in person).

Regrettably many do not have the same stories of acceptance, but instead provide descriptions of social intolerance toward their sexuality, detailing instances of rejection and hate when coming out to others. This stigmatization has various detrimental effects on the healthy identity formation of many members. These young sexual minorities are hampered with feelings of confusion, fear, and despair, as represented in the following chat extract:

EV: Well, I guess I'll make it short. -Came out to mom and sister (my only family members) -Got beaten up worse than usual -Got kicked out -I have no friends, so I had no place to stay -Spent a few nights at parks -Mom's ex bf said I could live with him and his son -Mom says that gays have mental issues, so she tells the school I'm crazy and she wants me to be in a psych ward. They laugh at her and say no, your son isn't crazy. Just because someone is gay, Doesn't make them crazy -She is convinced that I have AIDS because she thinks EVERY gay person has an STD -She says I'm just "experimenting" (which is bullshit. I've been gay my whole life) -Called her church and said that she wants them to "change" me.

This disheartening example is only one of many. The optimistic element in threads of this nature is the supportive follow-up by peers in this community and the continued dialog with young teens who find themselves in difficult situations.

> *EJ: I hate hearing about someone going through this. No one should have to endure any one of these things, let alone all of them. I'm glad someone offered you a place to stay. And even if you have no friends "in real life," you have friends here to talk to.*

This was the caring response given by a fellow member of Chadzboyz.com.

Many themes were revealed about self-disclosure to others. First and foremost, it is an imprecise process that varies for all. Many are burdened with questions and fear of an unknown outcome. Seeking advice about the advantages and pitfalls prior to coming out is commonplace. Many feel safer keeping their identity hidden and are resolute to only be "gay" via the Internet, whereas others find self-disclosing only to a close friend an ideal start. Regardless of how each member elected to progress through this stage, this website was a salient tool for many.

The stage of Identity Pride was varied in its demonstration in this community. This stage is characterized by becoming more actively involved in the homosexual co-culture, disclosing more to family and/or coworkers, and rejecting a heterosexual culture. Members of Chadzboyz.com exhibited many of these behaviors. Many emphasized pride in their gay identity, highlighting participation in GLBT clubs and organizations as well as involvement in activities that support gay awareness. Lengthy discussions about disclosure to family

members were a key topic; however, the nuances of anger toward non-homosexuals were only intermittently observed. One member stated, "I hate nothing about being gay. What I hate are the straight peoples acts of stupidity torwards gays." This dividing of the world into homosexuals and heterosexuals, or the "us-them" mentality, is somewhat exemplified in the following excerpt:

> *RB: The things I hate are just things, but I love being who I really am and if some homophobe can't accept it or learn to ignore it then screw them cause I'm doing it anyway. You can throw me in jail, I don't care. This is all about who we as a community of gay people love not who everybody thinks we should love. You poeple are looking at us just as the white people looked at their black slaves for over three-hundred years and that's not fair to us. Just because we're gay or bi or whatever doesn't mean we don't have equal rights, and that includes marrage.*

This excerpt was less as critique of heterosexuality as it was more of a critique of homophobia. Many, however, have not subscribed to the "us-them" mentality and feel as if they are simply unique among a heterosexual society. This could be attributed to the increased coverage of gay issues in the media, more visible GLBT role models, additional support systems for adolescent sexual minorities, and the Internet. Conversely, these influential factors could just as easily agitate one to feel even more distant and separate from non-homosexuals.

This community did not make integration with heterosexual counterparts noticeable, as the Cass model would predict as the final stage; however, the willingness to disclose their identity to all was accentuated by some members.

These two defining elements of the Identity Synthesis stage were not significantly represented on ChadzBoy.com, as indicated on the modified Cass model in Figure 8. It is posited that the probable explanation for this void is that members have yet to reach and experience this final stage of the Cass model. Arguably, this website caters to the first five identity formation needs of young homosexuals. Those who advance to Identity Synthesis may not find an online discussion forum useful for this stage and progress outside of this community.

Summary. Some members of Chadzboyz.com are initially information poor: They lack access to needed information about sexuality. This is best explained by Chatman's (1996) Information Impoverished Theory. The Internet at this point is considered a convenient tool for those searching for insight but wishing to be secretive in their information-seeking behavior. Joining an online gay chat forum has helped many young sexual minorities satisfy the information and socialization needs imperative to their identity growth. The specific community studied here found Chadzboyz.com exceedingly beneficial at vulnerable points in their sexual identity formation.

Utilizing the Cass (1979) Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation aided this study's exploration of identity development of homosexual youth. Though characteristics of all stages of this model were illustrated in this online community, a linear progression and use by all members was not supported. It is was not clear that members move sequentially move through the identity stages or whether they elect to skip and return to previous stages. Additionally, lines between Identity Comparison and Identity Tolerance stages were blurred. Given

the intermittent engagement of members, it was difficult to solidify movement as designated by the Cass model, although there were some indications of it. However, the website and discussion forums were discovered to be an integral vehicle in assisting members within each stage. The utility of this model helped explain the developmental process experienced by those in this community and revealed the social and psychological states of members.

Beyond reflecting these stages, the discussion practices of this community reveal dominant themes significant to young adolescents, which address the second research question.

Dominant Themes: Concerns and Discussions of Adolescent Sexual Minorities

In examining the key developmental concepts that have arisen from the discourse of sexual minority youth, it is apparent that these teenagers face unique challenges not encountered by their heterosexual peers, as illustrated in the previous section. Adolescent sexual minorities, however, also experience many of the same developmental issues experienced by heterosexual youths. The exploration of and experimentation with sexuality, struggles to identify oneself as an individual, and establishing a social network are salient issues for all adolescents. The analysis in this section highlights themes that were concerning for participating sexual minorities of a gay teen chat forum.

Chapter 4 provided narratives and discussion threads that express the complications, adversities, and satisfactions of gay youth. Drawing on my field notes and reflections, I concluded that the array of prevalent themes concerning

most adolescents were relationships, sex, popular culture, and sexual health, as illustrated in Figure 9. Additional themes that were observed as very prevalent to young homosexuals and salient were "coming-out" processes, sexual identity confusion, self-esteem, suicide, and conflicting religious beliefs. Though many of these
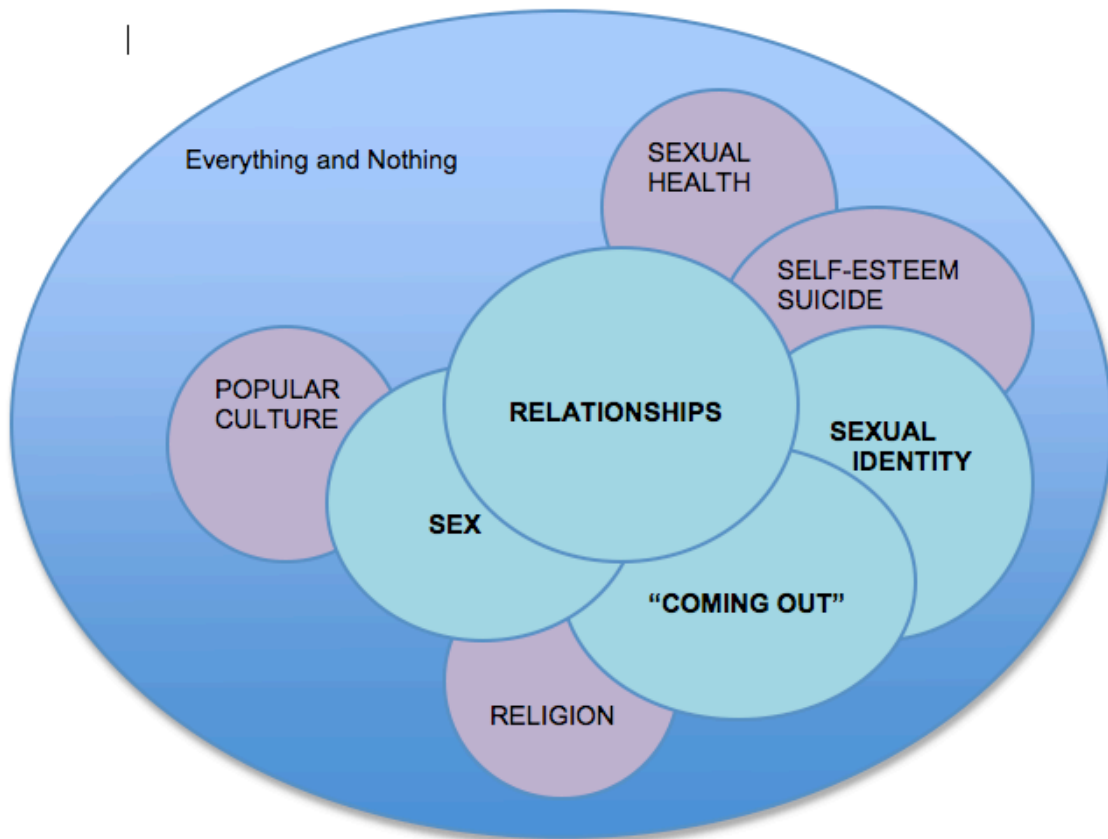
Figure 9.
Prominent discussion themes of Chadzboyz.com forums

themes provide a wealth of insight into our understanding of adolescent sexual minorities, the discussion here seeks only to highlight these categories; an in-

depth review of each is beyond the scope of this study. I first expound upon discussions of romantic relationships.

Romantic relationships appear to be central in adolescent sexual minorities' lives. It is observed the youth of Chadzboyz.com spend a great deal of time thinking about being in a romantic relationship and discussing the trials and tribulations of such relationships. My immersion into this community afford me exposure to daily discussions on this topic, as illustrated in the previous chapter. The importance of romantic relationships in the minds of adolescent sexual minorities is first and foremost a pressing issue in their lives. Youths' concerns about relationships varied from individual to individual. Many discussed yearning for a relationship, while others questioned their current relationship as healthy or unhealthy. Because relationships are a key ingredient in the identity formation of GLBT individuals, the popularity of discussion threads of this nature was not unexpected. These discussions revealed that relationships facilitate the process of many gay youth to gain a greater understanding of who they are. Given the nature of relationship exploration and experimentation, the prominence of sex-related threads was also no surprise in this community.

Adolescence is a time of exploration and experimentation; as such, sexual activity often takes place. As many youth reveal here, they are information-poor on the subject of sex and are especially inquisitive. Same-sex sexual activity piqued the curiosity of many; however, heterosexual sex was also frequently discussed. As an emergent theme, sexual activity was often explicitly expressed. Similarly to the concerns about romantic relationships, sex was accompanied

with a great deal confusion in the minds of gay youth in conjunction with their identity development. Homosexual activities for some members progressively contributed to sexual orientation identity, whereas others were observed becoming burdened with anxiety that resulted in foreclosure. Consequently, sexual identity confusion was copious for many.

Sexual activity as a frame through which some youth interpreted their sexual orientation is perplexing because many still questioned their sexual identity despite a sexual experience. This confounding feeling resides in the interplay between their sexual experiences and their continual divergence from self-labeling *as gay.* Identity as a multidimensional process and as a recurring theme discussed at length in these forums is of specific relevance to this study. Special attention was given in the previous section to the complexity of identity development and the "coming-out" process, and excerpts illustrating this discourse are found in Chapter 4.

Among the key expressions of adolescent concerns was the negotiation between religion and homosexuality. The process by which these youth reconstruct their sexual identity to include a formerly incongruent religious identity was disconcerting for some members of Chadzboyz.com. For many, their religious affiliation has created a sense of dissonance between their homosexual feelings and actions and their religious beliefs. The chat forums enabled youth to socialize and ask complex questions pertaining to religious viewpoints. In my observations, it was clear throughout the discussions that some members were actively seeking resolution, while others were deeply invested in helping them

negotiate abstract thoughts about religion. Youth incorporated their own opinions about the positivity of spirituality and the fear of condemnation, and passionately expressed their concerns of discernment pertaining to religion and homosexuality. A number of members experienced continual confusion regarding their religious beliefs, foreclosing on further information-seeking behavior. Many others, however, resolved to abandon their prior religious affiliations or renegotiated their religious beliefs to accommodate homosexuality. Adolescent sexual minorities indicated their concern about religion and homosexuality with multiple threads dedicated to the subject. Intertwined among threads of this nature and other dissimilar topics posed by this community was the inability to cope and manage the challenges of adolescence.

We have seen in Chapter 4 that some members have not developed the internal coping mechanisms or lack the social support to aid them in their struggles with relationships and sexual identity. The rejection by family and/or peers has created a sense of despair for many youth. Suicidal struggles owing to complications in sexual orientation identification, bullying, and sexual prejudice are distinctive to a segment of gay youth, in contrast to their heterosexual counterparts. For these youth, it is imperative to receive support and mental health assistance. It was notably observed that the Internet in general, and Chadzboyz.com specifically, offered means for this population to connect and find support from others. Members articulated that this provided support created a sense of comfort during their most tumultuous times. In an effort to further focus this discussion on youths' negative experiences, the following section is

presented to recognize, inform, and emphasize the struggles with sexual prejudice.

Sexual Prejudice: Experience, Resilience, and Despair

While trying to deal with all the challenges of being a teenager, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (GBLT) youth additionally have to deal with harassment, threats, and violence directed at them. It is not uncommon to hear anti-gay slurs such as "faggot," "sissy," and "queer boy" on a daily basis. As underscored in the literature review on homophobia and hate crimes, sexual prejudice is a pervasive problem. Additionally, it is suggested that homophobic bullying is a common source of abuse for many adolescent sexual minorities.

This study was an opportunity for me to scrutinize real concerns of sexual prejudice by immersing myself into this culture and examining first-hand the responses and pleas of adolescent sexual minorities. In agreement with the literature review, my findings here also demonstrate that gay youth are at high risk owing to sexual prejudice. Members of this community articulated that they had been threatened, verbally abused, and even injured because of their sexuality. The following excerpt illustrates one boy's experience with sexual prejudice, after his "coming out" to others at school:

The only really negative thing that has happened so far was when I walked back to my room after lunch (I go to a boarding school) I was walking by another boy's open door, and really loudly his friend asked him, "[Tony], did you sign that stupid paper agreeing not to make fun of fags today?" "Hell no, I love making fun of fags." Then they laughed and I

heard "That kid is so gay (me)" as I walked past. (If it wasn't clear, they

said all this because they saw me.)

Other members revealed being verbally abused to an extreme degree. The following harsh comments: "You motherfucking queer! Why the hell don't you just get aids and die? That's all you fu#%!rs are good for anyway! Punching bags, and motherfucking target practice! Get the @!#% out of here!" was aimed at a young boy during his gym period. Many emphasize being ostracized and hearing these types of comments daily: "I deal with homophobia on a regular basis." "Is it normal to have suicide thoughts on a regular basis too?" Comments and questions such as these reflect the powerful impact sexual prejudice has on vulnerable adolescents. This prejudice can cause great distress for many of them, as seen in the following excerpt:

Lately, I haven't been feeling too well... I'm having a hard time trying to

cope with my everyday life. From the drama of the idiots around me, to the

hatred they spout every single day, I've grown tired... And I don't know

what to do anymore.

Youths who discussed encountering persistent name-calling and teasing exhibited signs of lower self-esteem and indicated having fewer resources for support. For some, feelings of despair and thoughts of suicide were reactions to stress perpetuated by sexual prejudice. It is disturbing that many will later reflect on high school remembering bullying, name-calling, exclusion, and depression.

What I found to be most disconcerting were cases of gay youth as targets of serious hostility and hatred. Compelling narratives of some members recount

experiences of physical and sexual abuse. I chose to include only one account of physical violence provided by a brave teenager who, despite his traumatic ordeal, elected to share his story to comfort others in similar circumstances.

Life isn't easy being gay and out too. LOTS of people criticize you. Let's start from the beginning. October of 2007 was just like any other month. I finally came to my senses months ago about being gay but just wasn't ready to come out, until then. It was about mid-Oct. and I was just sick and tired of holding it in. I came out. Yeah, that was a mistake. Two weeks later, after I came out to everyone, I was wanting home from a volleyball game. Some seniors and a few juniors came cruising down the same street as I was talking. They pulled over, grabbed me, and pulled me into the car. They took me somewhere out north of town. They stopped grabbed me again and got out of the car. Then they started beating the crap out of me. When I couldn't even stand, they got back into the car and left, leaving me to "die." Lucky a farmer from a nearby field saw what happened and came over to me. "OMG! Are you ok?" he asked me. "No," I said painfully, "but I will be." He helped me stand. The moment he let go, I fell. I was in so much pain, I passed out. I woke up in the hospital about 2 hours later with a broken right leg and a fractured left arm. "If this nice man (the farmer) didn't see what happened, you probably would have died," said the doctor. Later that morning, a police officer came and asked me what happened. I told him everything and guess what, not one of the guys got in trouble. NOT ONE!

The resilience, courage, and strength of this young man to heal and forgive is evidenced in the conclusion to his narrative:

> *Even though we like the same sex does NOT mean that we are any different then any other human. Even though I spend two weeks in the hospital in pain, I forgave them. Why? Because even though they did what they did, they are still humans, and we all live on the same Earth. We, as gays, need to stand up for our rights, and be proud to say, "I AM GAY!"*

Requests for guidance from those who have been victims of bullying, threats, and violence receive a great deal of attention and thoughtful responses from fellow members. Chadzboyz.com is the principle gay teen support forum that takes the needs of any GLBT member fraught with despair seriously and does its utmost to provide support. Additionally, the bonds of friendship created by members on this site have been invaluable, assisting one another through difficult periods. It is my observation that sexual prejudice is an all-encompassing dilemma that clearly needs addressing. Sadly, a segment of this community is influenced by the discrimination and hatred of others placing them at risk. Yet, in much of what I have come to understand about members of Chadzboyz.com—their sense of who they are, their struggles with identity, and their challenges negotiating sexual prejudice—I find them to be a resilient and empathetic community.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The opposite of courage in our society is not cowardice, it is conformity.

— Rollo May

Summary of Findings

The research that informs this dissertation was an exercise in virtual ethnography, an ethnographic method that has increasingly become mainstream in the study of online behavior. The focus of this study was to examine the information-seeking behaviors and identity development of adolescent sexual minorities, a population that is difficult to locate geographically because of the need for concealment. Given that the Internet affords gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) youth a space to explore social and psychological needs in secrecy, Chadzboyz.com, a gay adolescent website, was an ideal setting for this research. The main research question was thus "How does a gay teen website function as a tool for adolescent sexual minorities' information needs and development of their sexual identity?" This main question was complemented by seeking answers to two additional questions about, first, the dominant issues members of a gay teen chat forum discuss and contemplate in conjunction with their sexual identity formation; and second, their experiences with sexual prejudice.

My findings show that in this virtual community, many members of Chadzboyz.com are initially information poor, lacking needed insight about sexuality, and they sought the Internet as a convenient tool that kept their

seeking behaviors relatively unknown. The Internet provided a context for information seeking and socialization for young adolescents, whereas, in mainstream society, many had difficulties interacting with others about their sexuality. Taking advantage of this virtual community, gay and gay questioning youth were able to achieve relative freedom in information seeking, posing an array of concerns and experiencing social support from others. As a result, online discussion forums were conducive in aiding the identity development of adolescent sexual minorities.

The most important contribution of this research was utilizing the Cass (1979) Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation to examine the ways in which a gay teen chat forum fostered GLB identity formation. Though the linear progression of this model and expression of some stages were in question, the model helped explain the developmental process experienced by those in this community, and revealed social and psychological states of its members. In hindsight, the Troiden (1989) Four Stage Sociological Model of homosexual identity development may have been an additional useful theoretical lens with which to observe the practices of an online community. This model was initially set aside because no specific studies have been conducted to validate it. Troiden's model shares similarities with the Cass model, but proposes only four stages: Sensitization, Identity Confusion, Identity Assumption, and Identity Commitment. These four stages were also observed in this study of adolescent sexual minorities.

Second, sexual minority youth face many of the same developmental issues experienced by heterosexual youth, such as exploration and experimentation of sexuality, struggles with identifying individuality, and ascertaining a social network. However, as revealed in the analysis of chat forum discussions, some salient concerns prevalent to the experiences of young sexual minorities were discovered. For instance, the "coming-out" processes, sexual identity confusion, and negative effects associated with homosexuality, such as self-esteem issues, suicide, and conflicts surrounding religious ideology, were among the most prevalent.

Finally, I found that sexual prejudice was a pervasive problem discussed by members of this community. The linking of homophobia with bullying and victimization was sadly, expressed by many young sexual minorities. As revealed in the analysis of discussion threads from this population, the findings of Murdock and Bolch (2005) stating that those who are sexual minorities appear to be at increased risk for physical abuse, verbal harassment, and exclusion were accurate. To concur with Espelage and Swearer (2008), it appears that bullying and peer victimization of adolescent sexual minorities has become a significant public health issue.

I have reviewed some of the questions that were raised as I embarked upon my ethnographic exploration of a virtual community. The members of Chadzboyz.com are not representative of all adolescent sexual minorities; they do, however, provide insight into a population that is difficult to locate. To this end, I believe membership in an online gay chat forum such as Chadzboyz.com

is an important venue for both adolescent sexual minorities and researchers who seek to examine the functions of a gay teen website and the well-being of GLBT youth.

Virtual Ethnography and Reflexivity

My decision to undertake this exploratory research to develop an understanding of current adolescent sexual minorities determined that I needed to immerse myself in their culture to explore and collect data. Recognizing the challenges of accessing this population, I proposed looking at the Internet as an intricate space for the study of young sexual minorities. Since the emergence of the Internet, ethnographers have adapted procedures for studying online communities. A virtual ethnographic practice afforded me the opportunity to become intimate with and sensitized to one GLBT community, and I posit that it is important to incorporate virtual research into our limited knowledge of this particular population. As Friedenberg (2011) states:

> Virtual ethnography should have a place in the ethnographic enterprise: The virtual counts as field site to the extent that it provides an inside perspective on topics considered relevant by natives, but it differs from conventional ethnography in that knowledge needs not be elicited by the researcher and is not contained in a physical space. (p. 277)

My initial entry into this location was with the belief that it would validate the Internet as a vehicle for building identity for the GLBT community. The self-consciousness of my initial thoughts brought about an awareness of my reflexive process. The boundaries between my subjectivity and objectivity were often

blurry. I acknowledged my role as a researcher, considering reflexivity with the production of this ethnography. With the creation and completion of the two important components, fieldwork and a written representation of this culture, it was my goal to provide insights while being sensitive and remaining faithful to this community.

My overarching feelings reveal a perceived value in Chadzboyz.com and its ability to aid adolescent sexual minorities. Additionally, I have come to empathize with many members struggling as they go through many physical, mental, emotional, and social changes. Though I have not actively created bonds with members, my immersion into this community over a prolonged period has prompted emotive responses in my discussions with others about gay youth. I have witnessed the development of members and their creation of friendships over the years. Many members of this culture have moved on from participating in this community, stating that it has served its purpose, while new members are continuously joining and beginning their socialization. Here I offer three last posts by members talking about their experiences on Chadzboyz.com. First, a veteran of the site:

> DL: I've stopped posting here because, well, I grew out of it. It really did serve its purpose; I feel more comfortable with my sexuality, and got through some tough times in my life, like coming out. However, now I am, soically in the best position of my life when it comes to the real world. I've really started making friends, not just acquaintances. So I just don't need Chadz that much anymore. (That's not meant to put down anyone here…

we all have different social requirements; I have less then some people, and just don't need both online friends and real world friends. With friends comes drama, and I have enough drama from my real world friends, lol.) I'm glad to see Chadz is thriving, or at least so its seems. Hopefully, its serving its purpose for other people now, just as it served its purpose for me.

This next excerpt is by a member who has been enjoying the forum for over a year and articulates his reason for continued participation in the forums:

TF: I felt alone, and didn't like it. Being from the south, and living in an old southern setting, it was a tad alienating. As I grew within the forum, I met all sorts of interesting people, and made some close friends (even got the privilege of going out to dinner with one from across the pond). I stay because the forum has been good for me, and I want others to be able to get as much out of it as I have. I like it here, and though some members come and go it is nice to log on in the evening to check in.

Finally, the last post is by a member who had recently joined:

ND: Hello. Forgive me for being shy, but I'm nervous because I've never joined a site like this before. My real name isn't [ND], but it is a nickname that I have picked up and I'd like to use it until I become more comfortable on here. These past couple of months have been hard because I came out for the first time to a couple of my closest friends (my profile says I'm unsure, but I'm actually pretty confident that I am Bi). At this point I am looking for more people that I can chat with about my sexuality, or maybe

just someone that I can relate to in other ways, and so I am here. I'd enjoy

to have a nice conversation, so ask me questions, and maybe I can slowly

open up to being on here. : D

The ongoing discussions attest to this culture's continual need for information, socialization, and support. What emerges is a picture of a gay teen website valued by its members and a significant resource for developing sexual minorities.

Limitations and Areas of Future Inquiry

Although providing new insights, this dissertation is not without limitations. Several of these limitations warrant attention and provide directions for future inquiry. One limitation of the present research is the collection of data from a single gay teen website. The results of this study are relevant to the current population utilizing this gay website, but generalization beyond this particular culture is limited to the extent that cultures differ in place and time. Though outside the scope of this study, future research could examine additional sites to corroborate and converge information on common findings. Consequently, the generalizability of this study is somewhat limited because the adolescent sexual minorities in this particular chat forum do not represent their population at large. Future research should explore multiple online forums designated for gay youth, investigating lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals specifically.

Though the use of the Internet is customary for many, it is noted that the Internet is not yet available to the masses. The positing that a gay teen website is a beneficial tool aiding in the sexual identity development of young sexual

minorities is reliant on only those who have access to the Internet, as observed in this study. Another potential limitation of the current study is that members of Chadzboyz.com were not formally or informally interviewed. Formal or informal interviews in the future could allow youth to define and describe their identity development using their own words and conceptualizations. These interviews could provide a further in-depth exploration into the stages of the Cass (1979) Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation.

Continual research should focus in far more depth on aspects of GLBT youth's behavior, eliciting and solidifying online relationships by connecting offline. Additionally, the results provided here identifying prevalent concerns of gay youth call for future and more comprehensive research to take into account the social and developmental context of adolescents' daily lives. Furthermore, future research should consider more aspects of traditional and modern sexual prejudice.

Finally, a strength of the current study that informs future exploration is that it examined identity development from the perspective of adolescent sexual minorities during their adolescence, as opposed to relying on retrospective reports from adults, a method that dominates the small amount of literature on this subject. The use of an online discussion forum provided a direct window into the expressions of adolescent concerns.

Conclusion

In sum, this virtual ethnography underscores the utility of the Internet as a social context for many developing sexual minorities. The versatility the Internet

offers affords this population the ability to negotiate the challenging transition from childhood to adulthood. Specifically, a gay teen chat forum is identified as an indispensable element in the lives of many gay and bisexual youth who are experiencing sexual maturation, seeking information, and formulating a sexual identity. This site has provided support and encouragement to many to enable them to develop into well-adjusted adults with a sense of worth and belonging. However, as resilient as this community is to cope with adversity and develop a healthy self-image, this research emphasizes that there are many who are vulnerable and need help. To this end, I hope this particular research provokes other inquiries that will result in aid for those practitioners, educators, and stakeholders whose aim is to support gay youth.

APPENDIX A

PHILOSOPHICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF THE MINDFUL INQUIRY

(Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 6-7)

1. Awareness of self and reality and their interaction is a positive value in itself and should be present in research processes.

2. Tolerating and integrating multiple perspectives is a value.

3. It is important to bracket our assumptions and look at the often unaware, deep layers of consciousness and unconsciousness that underlie them.

4. Human existence, as well as research, is an ongoing process of interpreting both one's self and others, including other cultures and subcultures.

5. All research involves both accepting bias—the bias of one's own situation and context—and trying to transcend it.

6. We are always immersed in and shaped by historical, social, economic, political, and cultural structures and constraints, and those structures and constraints usually have domination and oppression, and therefore suffering, built into them.

7. Knowing involves caring for the world and the human life that one studies.

8. The elimination or dimunition of suffering is an important goal of or value accompanying inquiry and often involves critical judgment about how much suffering is required by existing arrangements.

9. Inquiry often involves the critique of existing values, social and personal illusions, and harmful practices and institutions.

10. Inquiry should contribute to the development of awareness and self-reflection in the inquirer and may contribute to the development of spirituality.

11. Inquiry usually requires giving up ego or transcending self, even though it is grounded in self and requires intensified self-awareness.

12. Inquiry may contribute to social action and be part of social action.

13. The development of awareness is not a purely intellectual or cognitive process but part of a person's total way of living her life.

APPENDIX B

CHADZBOYZ.COM LETTER OF SUPPORT

Rocky Sulfridge
Wayne State University
Michigan, USA

Hi Rocky

We would be happy to have you make use of any forum or website material
for your study with the exception of any private and personal
information as noted in your request.

Our goal is to provide support and positive encouragement to GBLT youth
to enable them to develop into adults with a positive attitude, healthy
self image and sense of worth and belonging.

As you know this development can be slowed or sidetracked by homophobic
comments by others and feelings of low self esteem by the individual.
Any study that contributes to the knowledge and needs of the GBLT
community is a very welcome initiative and we heartily support your
efforts in this regard.

We would appreciate learning of the results of the study, if possible,
as I'm sure our members would be interested in your dissertation and the
observations made.

We wish you all the best in this important study and thank you for
undertaking this project.

Sincerely

Jack Candido
ChadzBoyz.com

APPENDIX C

IRB/HIC APPROVAL

WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

IRB Administration Office
87 East Canfield, Second Floor
Detroit, Michigan 48201
Phone: (313) 577-1628
FAX: (313) 993-7122
http://irb.wayne.edu

Full **AAHRPP** *Accreditation*
Association for the Accreditation of Human Research Protection Programs, Inc.
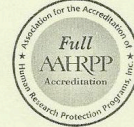
CONCURRENCE OF EXEMPTION

To: Rocky Sulfridge
Communication

From: Dr. Scott Millis _S. Millis, PhD_
Chairperson, Behavioral Institutional Review Board (B3)

Date: May 20, 2011

RE: IRB #: 047311B3X

Protocol Title: An Ethnographic Analysis of Adolescent Sexual Minority Website Usage: Exploring Notions of Information Seeking and Sexual Identity Development

Sponsor:

Protocol #: 1104009667

The above-referenced protocol has been reviewed and found to qualify for **Exemption** according to paragraph #4 of the Department of Health and Human Services Code of Federal Regulations [45 CFR 46.101(b)].

- Protocol Summary Form revised (received 05-17-11)
- A waiver of consent has been granted according to 45CFR 46 116(d) and justification provided by the Principal Investigator in the Protocol Summary Form. This waiver satisfies: 1) risk is no more than minimal, 2) the waiver does not adversely affect the rights and welfare of research participants and 3) the research could not be practically carried out without the waiver.

This proposal has not been evaluated for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human subjects in relation to the potential benefits.

- ° Exempt protocols do not require annual review by the IRB.
- ° All changes or amendments to the above-referenced protocol require review and approval by the IRB **BEFORE** implementation.
- ° Adverse Reactions/Unexpected Events (AR/UE) must be submitted on the appropriate form within the timeframe specified in the IRB Administration Office Policy (http://irb.wayne.edu/policies-human-research.php).

NOTE:
1. Forms should be downloaded from the IRB Administration Office website at each use.
2. Submit a Closure Form to the IRB Administration Office upon completion of the study.

APPENDIX D

CHADZBOYZ.COM HOME SCREEN

APPENDIX E

CHADZBOYZ.COM WELCOMING NARRATIVE

Hi, I'm Chad

Well it's sorta Chad. Actually it's Jonathon Chadwick but the guys all called me Chad or Chaddie or Chadz back in school. What the heck I answer to all of them -even Jon or Jonnie.

About 10 years ago, at age 15, I began a small website called chadzboyz.com to help support gay teens. Heaven knows how much some of these guys needed support. Far too many of them felt all alone and isolated and had feelings that they were all alone and nobody else was gay in their community. As well they were under pressure and even persecuted by parents, friends, schoolmates, and heaven forbid even the Church.

In 2004 we added a support forum to the site and this has grown greatly in the past 5 years to become the principal gay teen support forum. It is a very safe and very welcoming forum for young GBLT teens to support each other and to share ideas and concerns about their daily life.

The forum has a few adult supervisors but it is moderated entirely by the teen members who have worked up to a Moderator Position to keep the forum running smoothly. We also have a number of special members -kind of a welcoming committee- called New Member Moderators (NMM). It is their job to screen out any nasty predators and to keep the forum safe for our members. They are also there to help and answer any questions that new members may have. The forum is open to all teens and older who support gay teen youth and this includes straights as well as others who are gay friendly. The Open Discussion forum can be viewed without registering to give you a touch of the flavor of the forum but by joining there is so much more. I should also point out that this is NOT a sex forum or a pickup forum so if that is your intention please go elsewhere. There is no porn anywhere on our site or forum.

We also have "ASK CHAD" a kind of "Ann Landers" or "Dear Abby" for teen lgbt youth. Currently there are well over 1000 questions and answers.

Our BOYzone fashion zone contains numerous photo albums of young guys exhibiting the latest in teen fashions and accessories.

Want a place to post your gay fiction, poetry, coming out stories and similar items? This is the place for you and you can read what others have submitted. We welcome your stories and feedback.

Our CELEBzone features bio and photo galleries on 48 young male teen celebrities for your enjoyment.

That's not all! There's lots more fun stuff, gay related news, gay-themed book reviews. Is something missing? If so tell us what it is or better yet write it for us.

So if you're straight but gay friendly we want to hear from you also. We'd like to hear of your experiences with gay classmates and others. Ok, we're not talking about sex here. Sheesh! But what incidents have you seen? What did you do to help someone being bullied as being gay? How did you help make something turn out better because you were around?

Think about joining out community if what we have to offer appeals to you. We have the friendliest forum anywhere and we can prove it to you. We have it all and we DO have the best members anywhere!

APPENDIX F

DISCUSSION THREAD: *I'M JEALOUS OF OTHER GUYS*

Chadz LGBTQ Gay Teen Support & Advice Forum

Thread: *I'm jealous of other guys*

YA: I'm so jealous of good looking guys with great bodys. Somehow I get it in my head that people with good looks/great boys are better than me. And I really get jealous when these guys are smarter than me.
I just want to know what goes inside a cute guy's head. What does he think about people with lesser looks?

UE: Why do those guys have to be the epitome that we all want?
I personally find rock hard abs and all that to not look good.
Why can't people just be satisfied.

KM: Oh, I get that a lot too. But don't think that or you will eat yourself up and make yourself feel evan worse about yourself. I'm sure your not that bad either, and remember there is someone out there for all of us.

YA: I have someone but I am worried about keeping him. And I know hat there are always gonna be better looking people, but I want to be one of those.
And I'm not fugly, but I'm not a prize to look at either. I have a round face and a big nose and ginormous ears.
This isn't about wanting sympathy or anthing, I just want to know what you guys think.

XD: I'm like that too honestly. I see a really hott guy and I get really jealous. I can't tell you what goes on a cute guy's head since I'm nothing NEAR cute. I also wonder what goes on in their head. No one will ever like me…I'm so ugly on the inside and the outside. I live a life that is loveless, hopeless, selfish and lonely…and nothing will ever change.

YS: Yeah I know that feeling, that terror that out there there's someone julst like you but better in every way. And somehow if they're nice people that just makes

it worse.

Well knowing a couple of (very) pretty-boys myself I can honestly say they seem to be unbelievably insecure. Imagine you're defined by your looks, you KNOW that one day they're gonna disappear. You'll be smarter in thirty years, you'll be finnier, you'll bee richer and you'll know more about life. However, lets face it, you're not gonna look as good. Those people who rely on their looks are living on borrowed time and they know it.

And your boy-friend not gonna just jump you for someone better looking. Do you trust him? Then stop worrying. And if you don't trust him you seriously need to talk.

Everyone gets insecure, which is why the cosmetic industry's bigger than the arms industry!

OW: I won't lie when I get jealous I start to think of murdering the guy so I'll feel better. Its not like I've ever acted on those urges though….

YU: oh me too…
Except I have- hohohoho let's keep this a secret shall we
I am VERY VERY jealous person, mostly of other peoples looks. Even to the point of being cruel to them.

EP: ha ha… does urges
No I don't think murdering people for their looks is a good reason…
Anyways, I'm not a bag of good looks so I get jealous pretty quickly and then I start hating those peole, without any reason and I have a grudge on them but when they actually do talk to me I sorta ignore tem or even response in a mean way. I guess its just human nature

FS: I get jealous, especially when my school is filled with hot guys, seriously. But then after like a min I just start thinking about me+all of them in one room doing stuff, so I'm fine. Lol

TS: that's how I feel. He says I am awesome, its not all about looks that I look good anyways wheat am I worried about, etc….
But then I wonder, what if a guy comes along who looks better than me, has a better personality, is nicer and more interesting?
I suppose we just have to have faith in the fact that we have some attribute, however small, that we may not even know about, that keeps our boyfriend with us. Something distinguishes us from everyone else, even if we don't know it. We're all different.
And if you consider me cute, which some do, some don't, I'm just as insecure as you are. I don't know if that is a cute guy's thoughts or not, but that's how feel. There is ALWAYS someone better looking
And I find my boyfriend is just as worried about keeping me. And he IS cute.

UE: and there are always people who like you for who you are, and think you are

cute just because you are you

YA: [TS] you have nothing to worry about. You are probably one fo the hottest/cutest guys on here. I actually find it funny that you worry about your looks, but I guess everyone does.
And I really appreciate your comments. Most people wouldn't have given this thread a second glance, but I'm glad there is a place online where people care about each other. ☺

KQ: I'm the same way, only for some reason I'm attracted to guys I'm jealous of, not because they're good looking necessarily just because I'm jealous of tem I think I developed a complex somehow. Hmmm, any idea?

IK: hmm, well having had a look at most your guys photos which you've posted, everyone of you guys are cute ☺ and no, I'm not just saying that to suck up to you guys; each of you, honestly, shouldn't have any problems getting a boyfriend. [TS], honey, you've got a face and a body that I would love have; you're lucky to ave those looks and you shouldn't worry about a thing.

OW: I don't know [IK], pictures aren't the same as face to face. Not trying to be an asshole

IK: bah, my case, face to face meeting would probably turn 'not bad' into a 'JESUS CHRIST! HE NEEDS PLASTIC SURGERY! URGENTLY!

RK: I think some of those jealousy things can come from media, like mtv, E!, etc…I think you shoud stay clear of that. But if you don't watch that stuff then idk what to say.

CU: Well I'm nothing special but I admit when I see someone who's ugly than I usually feel better… it's the sad honest truth I guess it comes down to how good a person is.
Personally, I think everyone has these thoughts but doesn't act on them. I don't.

YB: I don't really get jealous. I feel intimidated(sp), but not jealous. (well, maybe a bit, but not much☺)

XF: The gay youth group I go to the guys there are cute but I'm not jealous of them

OW: damn them and their looks, we don't need em…. They can allll go ta hell!!!

MF: Almost every nitpicks at themselves, when they are actually very cute. Most people find other people's little idosyncrasies (I used spell check on Word, by the way) absolutely adorable. They keep life interesting and while some people laugh at them, its because they think that your soo cute. Im finding that they more I

accept my sexuality, I become more comfortable with my looks. I'm starting to loosen up around people a lot more and I love it. I'm not hiding myself so much. But yeah you shouldn't worry soo much about hw you look. You're going to find that special someone who wouldn't change anything about you. They will love you for who you are and hopefully you will be able to see that.

APPENDIX G

CONTINUED DISCUSSION EXCERPTS

G-1: The "Coming-Out" Process.

TS: Uh-oh, [EF]'s getting on the MOD's bad side now too... 😬

IK: LOL, you don't have to worry about me 🙂*you would have to try incredibly hard to get on the wrong side of me* 😬

OM: As for I, it takes less to irritate me. Well, I have a lot of patience but Respect is extremely important and anyone who lacks in respect will get on my bad side. However, no one on this board as gone overboard as of yet. I'm still cool with everyone. This is a good group 😎

AS: [EF]boy if people asking strangers for advice on an ADVICE forum is soooo infuriating to you then why are you here? (but i still RESPECT you 😬*) and to [CP] my friend if you need/want the support of your parents and the honesty coming out to them will bring then tell them coz lots of people have very paranoid parents and they survive, like me* 😬

*CP: yeah, thank you every one, and I think I will tell them very soon, and I think they might even know now, and they are not acting too different, though I think they know... by accedent I left the "email notice" for PMs on, and I share an email with my mom >_< there were three emails and one was read, so I think she might know. so if she does, no big problem! ^^*

G-2: Relationships.

BY: See, the thing is, he and I talk on the phone a lot... we have been for about a month... and im pretty sure we know how eachother acts and plus

we ask eachother those types of questions... and we send pics to eachother all the time, and we have a lot in common. He has done stuff with a guy before, and i want to do something like just feelin around or somethin on the first time.... let me rephrase my first question. If you were to mess with a guy for the first time, other than eachothers house, where would you do it?

GE: I saw a guy giving another guy head in a car in a 24 hour drug store parking lot at like 1 in the am... Didnt seem like a great idea.... especially since there was the whole empty parking lot and they parked next to one of the three cars there. lol I mean unless you wanna pay for a hotel room or something... a car or each others houses seems like the only options... you dont want to be places you can get caught obviously.

EF: BE YOURSELF, i cannot stress that enough people. Nobody's going to want to be with somebody who keeps changing themselves, you should be straight up wiht a person about who you are. As for sex, it's a first date, don't establish yourself as a slut...too quickly.

G-3: Self-Esteem and Suicide.

EW: lifeinashell, I am also gay wiccan lol. I dress goth but dont always act that way. Anyway, Lost One, yeah 13 y/o can get depressed. We arent stupid. PUBERTY must have started for you a little late. I'd like to bring you inside of a middle school. You'd be so wrong. 😼 Cutting doesnt solve anything. SOME peopel like it though. I dont. But me and my friends dont do it anymore. Kat might have a scar on her leg. About halfway around. 😼

RC: Do you have a reliable source for this information? Of course I've wanted to snuff it, I've shived my wrist open before, let the red red krovvy slip out.

LL: Exactly what I wanted to say. Also, another thing to add to my messed up list problems in my fu&*%d-up life, the guy who figured out I had a crush on him, is NOT so quiet and is know telling my whole grade😖

LL: im also 13 and i have also cut (was pretty into it like a year ago)but i look back now and i notice how it didnt really help. i mean sure it gave me a short term break form the pain but i mean it doesnt help long term. and after i noticed i stoped it was hard yea i had to practically throw away anything that was sharp or pointy but now i dont need to cut, i write or i go out and swim and stuff like that. and i really do think im better off and i dont regret cutting because i learned alot from that expirience. just concentrate on the good parts and the bad parts wont be so horrible and if u take ur life day by day and u dont worry what poeple will think then i dont think u wont be so depressed. well i hope everything goes well for u...

G-4: Sex.

TS: You should keep in mind that later on you will probably want sex. Just don't talk about it, and if they try, tell them you want to take things at your pace.

YC: It seems to me that a lot of people whenever their on the internet only care about cyber sex and quick turn ons. Especially if you go to like gay.com or something, people don't even really chat with you unless you

have a pic, even thens its the SSDD. I just try to stay away from chatrooms and the internet. then you can meet decient people. Be patient, you'll find someone. 😊

G-5: Religion and Homosexuality.

EM: I've gone to a Catholic school and they were actually pretty open. My Ethics teacher told us how homosexuality itself isn't wrong, it's just gay sex. And this is only because they believe any sex without the chance of producing children is wrong. She was really cool about it and talked a lot about acceptance and understanding. Made me more hopeful. Generally though, I just ignore the negative things people say. Many people think being gay is just a choice people make to call attention to themselves.

They don't understand crap. 😖

EJ: If you are comfortable with the balance you've come up with between your sexuality and your spirituality, that is what matters most. Don't worry about the anti-gay sentiments you hear from other Catholics, and especially what you see on line. I'm Catholic myself, and it is sometimes difficult when you're gay. But there is nothing in official Catholic teaching that says it is OK to hate anybody for being gay. Those who use their religious beliefs to justify that are twisting things around to suit their own biases. It happens in many churches, not just Catholic. But I know many Catholics who are supportive and non-judgmental toward me. So if your faith is important to you, don't give up on it because of the people who

make it difficult for you. I've said it on here before: being gay is not something you can change, so it can't logically be considered a sin.

RD: Hey, I'm in EXACTLY the same boat here buddy. I'm a Catholic, i believe in God, I'm an Alter Boy at my church an i think almost all the religion is good. Do you believe in it all? Or were you just born into it and now your stuck? Anyway, i always think, so long as i believe in God, thank him wen i should an all that Jazz, be 'a good catholic' boy, then God cant judge me for just being Gay. I searched the internet like you did, didn't really help, lowered my spirits a bit to be honest lol.

G-6: Sex (Oral).

TF: Lol the physical act of performing a blow job isn't hard. A good one though... that's a skill.

GA: Oral sex is like kissing? You flow with it, enjoy, can be playful and teasing, and can be passionate?

NT: I met up with this guy at night in 2009. I was in the 11th grade I had known him since I was in 8th and he was in 6th He used to be straight and a Christian. We went over to a place were these bushes were at and he said why dont you make the first move and I started making out with him till I started rubbing his dick then took off his clothes and blowed him… god his dick was big and amazing. I love giving head more then anything else.

G-7: Do Your Parents Know You are Here?

XX: My mum probs knows im on a forum, she just doesn't know what its about. And hell would be let loose if she knew what I post, and my pics and info on here, she would also "wrap me in tinfoil, and put me in the basement with the christmas ornaments"

DP: lol no, my parents would just freak out.

OZ: if they knew, i wouldn't be writing this lolmy own computer and 'auto-erase history' come in handy

SD: nope.... no one in my family knows that much about me

MJ: Nonononono...I don't know why I don't want them to know, but I haven't told them about Chadz.

DO: 100% No's so far! Me ... hell NO! Well, I don't know for sure. Do any of us? I have my own laptop, with a password, and I delete my history daily. Well, I guess that's a no.

ES: Yea, I just set my account to stay logged in, because its a real hassle to keep logging in. Plus, their is nothing that reallly gives away the content of the forum by the title of it or anything or the web address. ChadzBoyz could really be anything. Atleast its not "Gay Youth Forum!!!" Then I'd definetly ahve to clear everything off my computer before I leave.

APPENDIX H

DISCUSSION THREAD: *COMING OUT: THE INNER WAR*

Chadz LGBTQ Gay Teen Support & Advice Forum

Coming Out: The Inner War

PART ONE: CLOSETED FEELINGS

Well,my coming out story is quite convoluted and filled with a number of emotional twists and turns: read on and discover the war we all wage in our hearts,minds,and souls!

It all started when I was 17 y/o,I was starting to think more about my sexual orientation and what my future was.This was during a strange time in my life where it was the summer vacation after my entrance into Adult Education (I had previously dropped out) and I wanted friends to hang out with.This is too say that I was incredibly lonely,and desperate for companionship of some-sort.However,this was before I had,or possessed any interest in, a facebook profile (the easiest way to reconnect with classmates from the past years).I didn't really know where to go,or what to do,I had these feelings but that was it.

Looking back on myself,I realize that I was in some deep,*deep* denial.While I never was disgusted with my feelings for guys,I still couldn't honesty say that I was gay.During our younger years my brother would always tease me by saying that I was gay/homo because I didn't ever have a girlfriend at anytime in my life,post puberty.I would always brush him off and not think much of it-he may have had girlfriends in elementary school,but I do not put much emphasis on relationships that young.After all,doesn't real sexual attraction begin at 13? I was younger than him and as such did not think much of it.When puberty came,is when I would begin to have desires for women.

Well,puberty came and nothing changed.Perhaps I was distracted by all the erections and wet dreams,but I did not have any feeling for girls.Though I did,however,develop unknown feelings for guys.These feelings were mysterious and vague,as though it was an an occurrence that would come before the inevitable attraction to girls.I didn't know what to think.I didn't masturbate when I was young so self-discovery through that particular medium was unthinkable.

Years went by and I soon found myself at the tender age of 15 still thinking and wondering about when I was going to be attracted to girls.It's funny,but I actually remember one time-in homeroom,at school-that I looked at a couple of my female classmates and thought,"When am I going to be desiring them?" If you're laughing now,it simply means that you had a much easier time of it than me.

This great pit of denial even extended to when I did begin "touching myself." when I started Jacking I was new to the experience and just kinda went as fast as I can,while thinking of the

most erotic experience I could imagine.These thoughts were of course of guys doing stuff with others guys.It was actually pretty amazing;I was imagining two dudes giving each other oral sex and sometimes anal sex,and yet,still,I could not bring myself to think I was gay.To be fair I was no longer thinking about when I was going o start liking girls (so this would translate to me being in my "Questioning" stage),but I still wouldn't say that I was gay.

This period of my adolescence lasted for another year or so.A entire year of confused feelings and thoughts tricking my mind and leading me into places where I had no aid or help.I was alone and stranded.

PART TWO: DISCOVERY

Than,one day,I decided to get on the internet,and for some reason or another,I typed in the words "Gay Teen Support" and hit "search." I didn't know what I was looking for or what I wanted,but I possessed this overwhelming sensation that I should undertake this course of action.

My search lead me to here-Chadzboyz;a place where there where so many helpful things on homosexuality that I didn't know what to read first.There were articles on figuring out whether or not a person was gay,pieces on safe sex and STD's,Short stories centered around gay teens,gay news of a varied nature,wardrobe and fashion tips,and everything else you could possible imagine.In short I had discovered a gold mine of information.

I had always to some extent known I was gay,but nonetheless,when I was on Chadzboyz for the first time,it was like I was on a forbidden site;an area where I could suffer dire consequences if I was discovered.At the time,I wasn't active on the forum here (a truly great place to interact with others) and did all my peering into the gay world through the main site-the homepage.During this time of isolation,my feelings were confused and weird.It felt as though when I was on Chadzboyz,or any website dedicated to the Queer world,that I was entering into a world that was mine,but that was foreign and alien;as though it was a realm which was awaiting my return.When visiting Chadzboyz I felt energized,I felt hyper,like one does when you are engaged in a activity which you have always wanted to do,but for whatever reason,could not perform.My time on chadz' was akin to a time race-get on fast,and off even faster,for anyone could walk in and discover my history,see the material,and "out" me.It was akin to having butterflies in my stomach,only these butterflies were dangerous winged monsters capable of destroying my life.

Time went by,and I soon got myself an email address,the first thing I did was formally join the Chadzboyz forum.

It was amazing;the people,threads,discussions,and activity was like a beautiful dream.A dream where I could be with,and talk with other homosexuals, to know that I really wasn't alone out there in the big old,homophobic world.

However,time on a forum could only do so much for me.While I did meet many wonderful individuals,I still lacked a certain sort of center,an identity of who I was and what the queer universe was about.

The second great milestone of mine came from the most unexpected of places: Youtube.If you do not already know there is a wealth of "Coming Out" videos posted up there,begging to be watched.Every video is different and stars a different-normal-teen talking about his/her coming out process.As I watched these video my sense of self grew.I began to get a feeling of the wider world.While chadzboyz was great,these videos were awesome! They gave me courage and inspired me to do something,to not stand on the sidelines and remain passive while so many others activity show who they are free from doubt.I watched video after video,perhaps dozens,and with every video a new sensation developed within the recesses of my belly.I had now grown accustomed to the singular truth that I was gay,for it slowly dawned on me through all the interactions.that this was who I was.The sensation I speak about was,of course, the need to

act-the desire to come out.

Why did I want to come out? This is a good question to ask not only me,but yourself.I remember hearing stories of how people would remain their entire life in their mental closet,never telling their family.They would satisfy their inner cravings for love by strolling the night bars/clubs,then once done they would return home and try their best to hide their true self.They would be in their 40's,50's,and 60's without anyone knowing of their secret life-their homosexual life.

I didn't want this life.Who would?

I wanted to be able to tell my family and friends about who I was dating,I wanted to openly talk about the latest news stories regarding gay people,to be able to bring home a Partner (more commonly referred to as a boyfriend) to my family and tell them about him-meet and have dinner.However,most importantly,I wanted to be able to be myself and not hide my true desires.I wanted a life free from elaborate lies and deception-I wanted truth.

PART THREE: COMING OUT

Still,the big question remained-HOW!?

I didn't know at first,so I brainstormed and thought and gathered up energy/bravery for a classical coming out surprise (AKA Kid:"Guess what? I'm Gay!" Parents: *Stare dumbfounded*),that so many before me had done.However,even while doing this,I knew that there had to be a better way,a method which didn't involve me freaking out beyond my means to cope.I brainstormed and brainstormed.

While my mind performed Olympic level mental acrobatics,trying to figure out the best way to "spill the beans," my need for freedom-for truth-took me to another less challenging arena:coming out to my best friend.

Chris had always been my number one buddy since we had met (...before him there was another boy,but we had a falling out).Following the first summer vacation after meeting in school,we spent literally,almost everyday hanging out.We played Yu-Gi-Oh! cards,watched Dragonball Z and other Anime shows,rode bikes,and had plenty of sleep overs.Years later,when his parents divorced,I,on a regular basis,spent the weekend with him and his bother while they went to live with their mother.Needless to say,we had a tight relationship,one that I cherished.

So,naturally,when I knew I was gay,and was thinking of ways to come out,I knew that sooner or later I would have to tell Chris.There was only a slight stipulation,however,I hadn't seen him for several years at this point.This was when I had dropped out,and was finishing up my High School education in the Adult Education system.I had to convoy my thoughts through a medium which didn't involve me traveling inane distances to tell him.I of course couldn't simply wait,so I made the decision to tell him via text.

Luckily,he reacted well,and said that it was "unexpected," but otherwise didn't care.I was very happy that nothing would change between us.Immediately,when I thought about all the stress and anxiety that went into just sending that one little text,I couldn't help but thinking,"Well,that was easier than I thought!" I made a mental note to myself that all I have to be is sure of myself,and things will be okay in the end.

Resuming on my other task of conjuring up new thoughts for how to come out in person,I returned my brain to more deep thinking.While brainstorming,my noggin popped out a good idea for my activity side (the side of my consciousness which demanded that I take action).This idea was soon to become my path to coming out,it was,if I do say so myself,bloody brilliant!

The answer laid in the most obvious of places:Laziness...of a kind,or the feeling of displaying

something that those around you have no clue about.The solution to my need for "activity" was inn my face,quite literally,the entire time-wear a T-shirt! I took hold of a plain white short sleeved shirt,grabbed a permanent ink marker,and drew in the middle of the front and the back the Lambda.No words or phrases-just a single obscure symbol that represented gay pride the world over! The symbol the legendary Gay Liberation Front adopted as their own during the civil rights movement.

λ
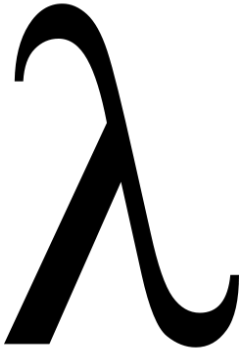
I wore the shirt for a long time,maybe around a month or so,and to my surprise nobody asked any questions.Yet,even so,I was happy-I was wearing something that said to the world,"I am who I am," and was proud even if they didn't have the foggiest idea s to what the symbol meant.However,time would prove mt original assumption of no one asking invalid,for soon the day came.

My mother asked the question: "What does that symbol mean anyway?"

How to respond? Should I be elusive and withhold the information? Make up something fake? Or,dare I,tell her truth-that she has a gay son? I choose the later!

I informed her that it was a gay pride symbol,I said...

ME: "Well,I guess that you'll find out sooner or later,so I should tell you now.It's called the Lambda-spelled L.A.M.B.D.A-and it is a gay pride symbol."

MOTHER: "A gay pride...? Curtis,are you...gay?"

ME: "Yes,I am"

Then ther was silence,and I continued cooking my spaggetti.But I knew that it wasn't over-I still had moe to do.My brother was up stairs playing a video game and I didn't wasnt mother telling him while they went to work-I had to tell him myself.So I quickly walked up stairs and said...

ME: "Did you hear me and mum's conversation?"

BROTHER: "I might of,but I can't remember."

ME: "Well,we were talking about the symbol on my shirt,and that I am gay"

Silence.I get up to walk out of the room;he probably needs time,like mother,to digest everything.But as I am at the door to leave,he says..."Well,I want to let you know that I don't think any differently of you."

This was a surprise.I hadn't expected him o reject me or anything,but for him to say something so

profound so quickly,was a curve-ball! I said "Thanks" and headed back down stairs to finish cooking my spaghetti.

I cooked my food,and began my famous process of piling the spaghetti sky-high-all of it in a single bowl! I had noticed that mother went into the living room,so after finishing making my mini leaning tower of Piza,I went in as well.To not only see if she had anything to say,but to also watch my than favorite TV show *Cold Case*.I watched the show,and eat up all my spaghetti and still no answer.Knowing that it was very near the time for her to head of to work,I reminded her of the homophobic tendencies of her co-worker and boss by saying, "Remember mum,your boss is a redneck,and your coworker is a religious zealot." She nodded something in agreement and said something akin to "Yeah."

Then they left for the next four hours for their shift.Not a single word had been said by my mother.Perhaps she just needed some time?

Their shift past,and they came home.As it turned out,this was one of the days when we were going grocery shopping.By now it was 7:00pm and I liked shopping at night,so I tagged along.It was only my brother and mother-father decided to remain home and sleep.

It was during this time of quit unknown,that my mother decided to speak.She said how she would always love me no matter what I was,and that she just wanted me to be happy.She didn't think any different of me,and she accepted me for who I was (in the following weeks,while we were alone on another car ride,she would actually share a story from her youth when she thought she might be a lesbian because she was always comparing herself to the other girls in her magazines.I said that I thought that as pretty normal behavior for young girls to do).So two down...one to go.

My father I didn't tell myself.My mom had asked me if I wanted her to tell him for me,and I said that I did.I still remember when they were in bed and I overheard my mum telling him.It was vague and fuzzy,but I remember hearing my father's sound of surprise,like a "huh" sound with an edge,as to connote disbelief.To this day me and my father have not formally talked about my sexuality,but our relationship hasn't changed at all.I don't mind if we don't talk about it,I just find it a bit odd that he didn't have anything to say.I knew that he took it rather hard though.When he was informed of "the News" the following night when we were at Wal-Mart,he was silent and acted a bit weird.You could tell that he was thinking and in a deep zone,an area reserved for serious issues,that demanded real attention.He accepts me,however,and that is fine.

Overall,my coming out battle was fairly easy going,especially when taken in comparison to the numerous tragedies that still occur on a daily basis the world over.I wasn't rejected or ridiculed,I was not called names or disowned,or kicked out of the house.It was a period of incredible self-discovery and worry,that faded back into the background when events normalized.I have profound respect for those who underwent a traumatic coming out experience,and still are proud to be who they are,who can proudly say,"I am gay and I make no apologies!" Sometimes things go well,and sometimes they do not.Mine went well,but not everyone is as lucky.I would urge everyone who is not out to come out and bring forth the revolution,but not before you are ready.Take your time,and godspeed!

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PART FOUR:HELP AND ADVICE

You might be reading this and undoubtedly have many different emotions swirling in your head,along with numerous questions.I don't claim to have all the solutions to these queries or even the talent to answer them,but what I can do is share with you what little I do know.

For all of us,the coming out moment is one we must do (if we wish to attain happiness) at one point or another in out lives.However,this point is different for everyone of us-for some it might be when they are 14,while for others when they are in their mid-to-late twenties or early thirties.The

main idea is to chose a date/time that is right for you.

This all depends on your life:Why do you want to come out? What do you hope to achieve? Is your family homophobic,or your community,and friends? Are there other out homosexuals in your area/how are they treated? Are you in a situation where you are dependent on your parents for support?

All of these factors need to be taken in when contemplating revealing your true self,otherwise you may end up in a situation where you are miserable.For instance-support from family.If you are in a rather expensive college and relay on your parents money in order to remain in school,than you might want to consider withholding the information until you have graduated.You do not want them freaking out and cutting off your tuition if they react negatively.

Likewise,in a certain sense with your friends,this tactic is true.Sometimes friends are extremely homophobic and do not take well to finding out that you're gay;they abandon you.Sometimes they call you names which hurt your feelings and makes you feel like a lower person,that your opinions do not matter-not like theirs anyway.Or they might remain "friends" with you,but constantly snicker every time you try and talk about your love life,or they might snap an unusual amount of gay jokes at you.All of these can build up...make you feel unloved,unwanted,like you are alone and cut off from the real world.

It is for these reasons that you should mentally survey your local community and try to gain some perspective on everyone.See what the general consensus is on homosexuals.Do this by asking teachers,friends,parents of classmates,and anyone in a position where you are able to talk with them.By doing so,you are thereby figuring out what the environment will be if you choose to come out at that time.

Also remember that many schools have a guidance councilor who's duty is to help you with your problems-socially and emotionally.Try confessing to them in a private session about your attraction to the same sex,and perhaps they can give you some words of advice.I have had nothing but pleasant experiences with these people,and find that they are nice and well mannered.While the policy is different everywhere,there are certain laws which prevent them from telling anyone who doesn't have your express permission.This means that whatever you tell your councilor is between you and him/her.Still,do so with a grain of salt,and be wary-but not too wary,for otherwise you will miss out on a potential alley.
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Coming out tips:I can only offer so much in the way of tips,but I can say the more basics ones which I have learned from people here at chdzboyz:

#1 Location: Pick a spot where you know that they will have to maintain a certain composure level.Try a public spot where if they react in a less-than perfect manner,they still will have to at least keep a cool head,lest they appear as bad parents to all the witnesses.

#2 Letter writing:I myself have used this technique twice when coming out to people.If you are unable to put your thoughts into words than at the very least consider writing a letter where all your emotions are said clearly and perfectly.This will ensure that not only your will be done,but also communicates it in a obscured fashion.

#3 Hints: Always consider dropping hints prior to actually coming out.This will give your target subject (parents,friends,etc) some food for thought,and could make the ultimate moment easier to digest.

#4 Prepare for the Worst: It is highly recommended that you prepare yourself if things go bad;if you are rejected.If you come out to a good friend and they do not enjoy the company of homosexuals,ensure that losing that friend will not be a deathblow to your will.

#5 Standing Strong: When you have finally revealed the truth do not-under any circumstances,fall back.Stick with your truth and hold tight.Sticks may break your bones,but words can never hurt you.

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For help in the cyber world,I could not recommend a better place than here at Chadzboyz.Not only are there tons of helpful,caring,and super nice individuals here,but there is also a CAT team which makes sure you are ready to face the challenges of the world.Included here is an advice forum:one for lesser problems,and another for urgent issues.Within these areas you will not only be treated with the respect that you deserve,but also the tender,loving actions which you need.

For immediate help call: *USA:Prevent Child Abuse: 1-800-CHILDREN - 1-800-244.53736 -*.Also remember that even if things take a turn for the worst,your life *will* get better-I promise.Suicide is never the answer.There is someone out there who loves you for being you,and if you end it all,how will you ever meet that fantastic person who loves you? You can't...power on through with the help of Chadz and friends,and happiness will be yours!

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ABSTRACT

**AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF ADOLESCENT SEXUAL MINORITY
WEBSITE USAGE: EXPLORING NOTIONS OF
INFORMATION SEEKING AND SEXUAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

by

ROCKY M. SULFRIDGE

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Advisor: Dr. Mary Garrett

Major: Communication

Degree: Doctor of Philosophy

This dissertation explores the website usage of adolescent sexual minorities, examining notions of information seeking and sexual identity development. Sexual information seeking is an important element within human information behavior and is uniquely problematic for young sexual minorities. Utilizing a contemporary gay teen website, this five-year virtual ethnography of GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender) youth demonstrates an understanding of the function of the Internet as an invaluable tool for exploring social and psychological needs while providing anonymity and keeping information-seeking behavior relatively unknown. The use of Chatman's (1996) Information Impoverished Theory and Cass's (1979) Model of Gay and Lesbian Identity Formation aids the analysis of this particular culture's information-seeking behavior and sexual orientation identity formation. As a result, a number of salient themes are revealed, including exploration of and experimentation with sexuality; struggles with identity; ascertaining a social network; the "coming out"

process; sexual identity confusion; and negative effects associated with homosexuality, such as low self-esteem, suicide, and conflict surrounding religious ideology. In addition, the findings suggest that sexual prejudice is a pervasive issue for this community and that the use of a gay teen chat forum is an effective means of ethnographic data collection. This dissertation concludes by identifying limitations and offering insights for further inquiry into the communication behavior of adolescent sexual minorities.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Rocky M. Sulfridge is a Full-Time Lecturer II in the Department of Communication, Media, and Theatre Arts at Eastern Michigan University. Additionally, he teaches multiple courses as an Adjunct Lecturer II of Communication and Media Studies in the Department of Language, Culture, and Communication at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He holds various Faculty Advisor positions at both institutions.

He received his MA from Eastern Michigan University in Interpersonal Communication and completed his PhD from Wayne State University in Communication.

Dr. Sulfridge's areas of concentration are Interpersonal Communication and Communication Education. His research interests include verbal aggression, stress and well-being and a concentrated focus on adolescent development, particularly within marginalized groups, such as GLBT youth. In his applied work he investigates academic service learning and diversity education. In addition, he is presently studying identity development in computer-mediated communication.