EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF NON-HETEROSEXUAL MEN'S SEXUAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION CONSIDERING THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Professional Doctorate The University of Salford Health and Society: Social Sciences 2024

noah sisson-curbishley

Contents

List of Figures	7
List of Tables	8
Acknowledgements	9
Declaration	10
Abstract	11
Chapter One: Introduction	
Introduction	
Researchers Background	
Chapter Two: Literature Review	21
Purpose of the literature review	21
Literature Search Strategy	22
The History of LGBTQ+ Communication	27
Being LGBTQ+ in a heterosexist and heteronormative world	27
Connection as Protection – the history of LGBTQ+ communication	
Identity - Theoretical Considerations	
Theories of Self and Identity	
Empirical Studies of Identity	
Self and Identity	
Social Identity	
Sexual Identity Development - Theoretical Considerations	41
Queer Theory	41
Minority Stress Theory	44
Intra-Minority Gay Community Stress Theory	44
Sexual Identity Development – Theoretical Considerations	45
Non-heterosexual Identity Development - Empirical Literature	
Social Capital – Theoretical Considerations	53
Social Capital – Empirical Evidence	54
Constructing Sexual Identity Online	56
Intersectionality - Theoretical Considerations	
Assemblage Theory	59
Intersectionality and LGBTQ+ Research	60
Summary	63
Chapter Three: Methodology	65
Research Aim	65
Research Objectives	65

65
66
68
70
71
71
74
74
76
78
78
81
84
96
96
96
97
100
102
104
106
106
112
112
112
113
114
115
117
119
121
122
122
123

Adam1	125
Donald1	27
Chris1	29
Zain1	29
Summary1	130
The Performances	39
Introduction1	39
Splitting1	39
Adam1	40
Zain1	42
Kurt 1	44
Chris1	45
James1	47
Synthesising 1	47
James1	48
Adam1	150
Zain1	152
Kurt1	54
Chris1	156
Summary1	159
A Journey to Acceptance	66
Introduction1	66
Ignoring – Resisting1	66
Adam1	66
James1	67
Zain1	68
Kurt1	69
Donald1	170
Chris1	71
Acceptance from Others1	171
Adam1	72
James1	74
Zain1	175
Kurt1	177
Donald1	179
Chris1	80
Acceptance of Self	80

Adam	
James	
Zain	
Kurt	
Donald	
Chris	
Summary	
Empowerment	
Introduction	
Empowerment of Self	
Donald	
Zain	
Kurt	
Chris	
Adam	
James	
Empowering Others	
Zain	
Kurt	
Chris	
Adam	
Summary	
Luck	
Summary	
Social Stressors	
Introduction	
Adam	
Chris	
James	
Kurt	
Donald	
Summary	
Minority Stress	
Adam	
Chris	
Donald	
Kurt	

Zain	
James	
Summary	
Intra-minority Gay Community Stress	
Adam	
James	
Zain	
Kurt	
Donald	
Chris	
Summary	
Threshold Concept	
Summary	
Chapter Five: Discussion	
Introduction	
The Experiences	
Awareness Of Difference and Challenging Interactions with the World	
Gaining Knowledge of Identity	
The Performances	
A Journey to Acceptance	
Empowerment	
Luck	
Existing Theories Found in the Study	
Social Stressors	
Minority Stress, Intra-minority Stress and Negative Mental Health	
Threshold Concept	
Summary	
Chapter Six: Integration of Findings – The Model	
Construction of the Model	
Social, minority and intra-minority stress	
The Experiences	
Awareness of Difference and Challenging Interactions with the World	
Crossing a Threshold Concept	
Gaining Knowledge of Identity	
The Performances	
A Journey to Acceptance	
Empowerment	

Interaction of Experiences
Chapter Seven: Conclusion and Future Research
Limitations
Strengths
Future Research
Conclusion
References
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A - Database Search Results - Complete (2021)
APPENDIX B - Database Search Results – Re-Run 2024
APPENDIX C - Ethics Approval Email
APPENDIX D - Online Survey Consent Form
APPENDIX E - Participant Information Sheet
APPENDIX F - Social Media Recruitment Post
APPENDIX G - Offline Study Recruitment Poster
APPENDIX H - Online Questionnaire
APPENDIX Ha – Data set for questionnaire
APPENDIX I – Interview Consent Form
APPENDIX J - Interview Schedule
APPENDIX K - Samples of Transcript and Analysis
APPENDIX L – Participant Themes
APPENDIX M – Personal Reflexivity
APPENDIX N – Sample of Journal Entries416
APPENDIX O - Researcher Answers the Study Questions
APPENDIX P – Current research compared to Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

List of Figures

Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram outlining details of the literature search strategy24
Figure 2. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs55
Figure 3 - Flowchart Documenting Recruitment into the Study73
Figure 4 - Emerging Sexual Identity Model Constructed from The Research Data290
Figure 5 - Diagram showing the layered levels of stress on non-heterosexual people – Social Stress; Minority Stress and Intra-Minority Stress
Figure 6 - Diagram showing the awareness of difference occurring offline from bi-directional interactions with society
Figure 7 - Location of the threshold concept and the unidirectional movement across296
Figure 8. Position of the experiences within the model
Figure 9 - Model Showing the interaction of experiences in the model

List of Tables

Table 1. Search Process of Sourcing Relevant Literature for Review
Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the database search
Table 3. Other methodological approaches considered and rationale for not using them in this research
Table 4 - Table outlining validity and reliability within this research process
Table 5. Participant Demographic
Table 6. Table setting out the stages of IPA and the analysis process conducted in this thesis
Table 7 - Superordinate Themes Across Participants 92
Table 8 - Comparison of Awareness of Difference to Other Sexual Identity Development Models
Table 9 - Comparison of Exploring and Understanding Experiences to Other Sexual Identity Development Models 134
Table 10 - Comparison of The Performances of splitting and synthesising Experiences toOther Sexual Identity Development Models
Table 11 - Comparison of A Journey to Acceptance - Ignoring-Resisting / AcceptingExperiences to Other Sexual Identity Development Models190
Table 12 - Comparison of Empowerment Experiences to Other Sexual Identity Development Models

Acknowledgements

A great many thanks are needed for the execution and production of this research. I would like to first and foremost thank the participants who agreed to share their experiences of sexuality and social media – without you this work would literally not have happened -thank you. I hope your work and support of those in need and marginalised in the community continues – it is much needed. Hearing your experiences have been, and will remain, a very humbling and enlightening process; you have helped in changing our knowledge and understanding of the LGBTQ+ community and how we embrace and accept sexual identity in all its forms and constructions.

I would like to thank my family, my surrogate family and friends, who have put up with me put up with this – for the past three and a half years. Thank you and I will try and not go on about it as much anymore (but I can't promise).

I want to acknowledge my colleagues and friends in the counselling and psychotherapy department at the University of Salford – Vee, Laura, India, Helen G, Amanda, Callum, Sue in particular – who have been, or are going through this process; your direction, advice and reassurance have been immeasurable.

I would like to thank my husband; not only have we been through a lot since this started but I think we have both grown as people and as a partnership. Thank you for your patience, your feigned interest and your continued input into all the things that I couldn't do because my time was spent doing this – you stepped up for both of us and for that I am truly grateful. We can now move on to a new chapter in our lives.

Finally, thanks to my supervisory team, Dr Rod Dubrow-Marshall and Dr Cristina Vasilica. Your edits, your ideas and achievements are an inspiration and something that I will strive for in my own career.

Declaration

I, noah sisson-curbishley, declare this thesis, "Exploring the experiences of non-heterosexual men's sexual identity construction, considering the effects of social media" conducted for the qualification of Professional Doctorate at the University of Salford, is my own, and an original piece of work conducted under the supervision of Dr Rod Dubrow-Marshall and Dr Cristina Vasilica. All sources have been appropriately cited and acknowledged.

Date: 15th October 2024

the granding Signed:

Abstract

People who self-identify as non-heterosexual have been amongst some of the most marginalised groups throughout millennia. Much scholarly literature aimed to understand the process and interactions that occurred for these marginalised individuals in forming sexual identities against cultural expectations of normative sexual behaviour, which preference different-sex attraction - however none consider the effects of social media on the construction of minority identities, a contemporary communication and source of (mis)information sharing. This study recruited six (n=6) non-heterosexual men through online recruitment and conducted semi-structured interviews analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis to explore a contemporary approach to sexual identity construction considering the effects of social media engagement. Findings revealed a complex interaction of social, minority and intra-community stresses resulting in poor mental health outcomes. Superordinate themes of Awareness of Difference and Challenging Interactions with the World; Gaining Knowledge of Identity; The Performances; A Journey to Acceptance all interacting and creating varying degrees of Empowerment fuelling social change and positive mental health outcomes linked to non-heterosexual identity. Findings reveal social media does not create non-heterosexual identities but provides individuals with connections to other non-heterosexual people, education and support. A model of this process is presented for visualisation with conclusions, and future research identified.

Keywords: Sexual Identity, Non-heterosexual, Identity, Social Media, Intersectionality

Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction

People who self-identify as LGBTQ+¹, non-heterosexual² or gender non-conforming have been amongst some of the most marginalised groups throughout millennia (Foucault, 1979; Connell, 1987; Somerville, 1997; Marks, 2006; Barwick, 2013; Colangelo, 2024). Today there are multiple pieces of legislation across the globe seeking to erase, ignore and/or repeal the rights of LGBTQ+ people in a plethora of ways. The state of Florida's "Don't say gay" federal bill banning the discussion of sexual diversity in primary schools (Lavietes, 2022) is analogous to the U.K's, Section 28 legislation from 1980's Thatcher government (Local Government Act, 1988; Todd 2016). Additionally, the U.K.'s controversial position to ban conversion therapy for lesbian, gay, bisexual and other sexualities but not for trans identified people is further oppression of sexual and gender minorities (Gallagher and Parry, 2022). The rise of support and election, for far-right political groups across Europe – particularly, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Spain and France – which oppose gay rights (Henlely, 2022) – are all of grave concern and harken to regression in human rights and safety of minority groups (Colangelo, 2024).

¹ LGBTQ+ person means an individual who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* or queer, with '+' symbolising other denominations of gender and/or sexual identity variance including asexual and intersexed individuals. Trans* has a truncation inserted to include transsexual, transgender, transmasculine, transfeminine, non-binary and any other gender self-description which does not fall into the normative gender binary of male and female.

² A non-heterosexual person is someone who sits on a continuum of sexual orientation with homosexual and heterosexual orientations sitting at opposite ends with bisexuality in the middle. A non-heterosexual person is someone who engages in some form of sexual behaviour with another person of the same sex or gender however frequently and/or engages in same-sex fantasy.

Somerville (1997) highlights the relatively modern identity label categorisation of the 'homosexual' – and by extension the 'heterosexual' – and acknowledges a shift in sexuality during the nineteenth century as a direct correlation to the changes of gender ideologies at the time.

Although many people choose to recognise and accept the value, contributions, and rights of these groups, there remains significant stress exerted on this minority from the general population, both covertly and overtly (Meyer, 1995, 2003), resulting in poor physical (Scott, 2015; Filice, Raffoul et. al., 2019) and mental health outcomes compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Scott, 2015; Spittlehouse, Boden & Horwood, 2019; Pachankis et. al., 2020).

Negative attitudes towards the non-heterosexual community are rooted in historic religious and socioeconomic structures underpinned by patriarchal systems which celebrate and affirm male, heteronormative, gender-conforming discourse and rejects identities and nonconformist behaviours as weak, inferior and – ironically – threatening to patriarchal dominance (e.g. Connell, 1987; Butler, 1990; Szymanski & Carr, 2008; Scott, 2015; Eltahawy, 2020; Harvey, Fish & Levatino, 2020; Cleghorn, 2021). I note at this point that whilst there are interconnecting associations between the LGBTQ+ community and non-heterosexual people, the following study focuses on non-heterosexual men in isolation. This is not to discount, dismiss or minimise the experiences of other members of the LGBTQ+ community or privilege non-heterosexual men, but respectfully acknowledge that the experiences of other groups within this community deserve the totality and focus the limits of this study will not allow.

Much scholarly literature aims to understand the process and interactions which occur for marginalised individuals who form sexual identities against cultural expectations of normative sexual behaviours, which preference different-sex attraction (the most recognised and influential being Cass, 1979, 1984; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1990, 2005; D'Augelli, 1994, 1994b; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015); normative sexual behaviour and attraction for example, is someone born of male sex, socially presenting as masculine, engaging in romantic and sexual behaviours with someone born of female sex who socially presents as feminine, reproducing and parenting children who follow these same biopsychosocial normative ideals (Fausto-Sterling, 1992; Plummer, 1995; Stock, 2021).

Although existing research has helped identify some processes of non-heterosexual identity formation to support mental health professionals and non-heterosexual people in understanding their identities (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Levy, 2009; Zubernis, Snyder & McCoy, 2011) the literature is not without its limitations, as the following analysis will elucidate.

Whilst I, as a researcher, acknowledge there are a multitude of further studies which explore sexual identity development, these have not been the focus of this study due to samples including various genders and sexualities (e.g. Diamond, 1998; Brown & Rich, 2002, Corlis, et. al, 2009; Calzo, et. al., 2011; Dirkes, et. al, 2016), collating participants into age related cohort comparisons (e.g. Dubé, 2000; Dunlap, 2016) or focusing on youth and adolescent populations (e.g. Floyd & Stein, 2002; Fisher & Kennedy, 2012). This study has purposely chosen theories which are most often cited and referenced when discussing sexual identity development in other academic works (e.g. Rivers, 1997; Wilkerson, Brooks

& Ross, 2010; Zubernis, Snyder & McCoy; Grossman, Fodd & D'Augelli, 2014; Moreira, Halkitis & Kapadia, 2015; Homick & Platt, 2021), literature (e.g. Davies & Neal, 2003; Savin-Williams, 2005; Kort, 2018) and which are most well-known and taught in the field of counselling, psychotherapy, and clinical/counselling psychology.

Many of these grand theories of sexual identity development are more than twenty years old (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1990; D'Augelli, 1994; McCarn and Fassinger, 1996; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000³), and these studies do not consider the impact multiple intersecting identities have on an individual's sexual identity – a contemporary focus in the research of minoritised groups (Bowleg 2008; Pagkas-Bather et. al., 2024); nor do they explore the effects social media⁴ (SM) applications (apps) have on sexual identity development – a contemporary form of communication and connection.

Moreover, much of existing research into app use over the past 10 years for sexual minorities focuses on gay men (see Gudelunas, 2012; Race, 2015; Jaspal, 2016; Chan, 2017; Wu & Ward, 2018; Conner, 2019; Talbot, Talbot et. al., 2020) where contemporary expressions of sexual identity have become more fluid than the static labels of heterosexual/straight, homosexual/gay or bisexual identities (Savin-Williams, 1990, 2005; Lovelock, 2014; van Anders, 2015) and research samples acknowledging and focusing on these fluidities have been underrepresented in this area.

³ Savin-Williams and Cohen (2015) extended Savin-Williams and Diamond's (2000) sexual identity model to include Feeling different, Questioning assumed heterosexuality, Romantic relationships and Self-acceptance / Synthesis.

⁴ Social media in the context of this study includes general social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat but also specific same-sex dating and networking apps including Grindr, SCRUFF, Growlr and apps where same-sex attraction preference can be stated such as Tinder.

In previous research, Sisson-Curbishley (2020) found in navigating contemporary platforms of communication, non-heterosexual men presented themselves though SM in ways that were often incongruent to their offline selves by editing, omitting, and filtering data (e.g. personal details, free text, and images) to create greater connections by conforming to societal and cultural norms based on patriarchal expectations of beauty and masculinity (Scott, 2015). Sisson-Curbishley's (2020) research noted users experienced discrimination on SM apps due to their intersecting identities including ethnicity, age, and body type. Through this research, a gap in knowledge was identified - as users of SM apps navigated on- and offline identities, how did this influence how they came to identify as nonheterosexual? By extension did other identities influence sexual identity and how or if these were prioritised and presented through SM apps?

There now exist generations who never experienced a world without the internet, mobile apps or social media and these have become a main source of information sharing and platforms for individuals to interact and present to the world; therefore, contemporary research must consider the effect these interactions have on sexual identity development (Dhoest & Szulc, 2013; Manago, 2014; Davis & Weinstein, 2017).

Social and digital media have become integral to the lives of billions of people across the globe for communication and information sharing or seeking – this has inevitably led from excitement and euphoria at the development of this new technology, to moral and social panic, to finally settling on normalisation and integration of the technology in beneficial and supportive ways (de Zúñiga & Chen, 2019; Büchi, 2024). Social and digital media are platforms on which groups co-ordinate mobilisation yet simultaneously these platforms spread the divide between socio-political factors, creating misinformation and polarised

perspectives, the implications of which result in public unrest and violence (de Zúñiga & Chen, 2019). There is nothing inherently harmful or beneficial about social and digital media, however they play a role in the wellbeing of how individuals perceive themselves and their world (Büchi, 2024). The challenges faced with empirically identifying the impact of social and digital media on the wellbeing and interaction of users is the lack of valid and reliable measurement tools, strong theory or formal models (Büchi, 2024).

This research will present a narrative review of the literature considering effects and uses of social media, how this medium has been a vital tool for communication of ideas and connections for global populations, particularly the non-heterosexual community. This minoritised and oppressed group develop various identities within social structures of patriarchal oppression, threat and victimisation. Although this research focuses on sexual identity, it is noted that sexuality cannot be considered without gender (Butler, 1990; Jagose 1996) and as discussed later, sexual identity must, by extension, consider other minoritised identities simultaneously (Hill-Collins 2019; Eltahawy, 2020).

Considering factors outlined here, and unable to find a contemporary sexual identity development model considering the effects of social media, a research question arose – how are sexual identities constructed for non-heterosexual men with the influence of social media particularly for individuals who hold multiply marginalised identities?

The following thesis aims to coherently present a process in answering this question. There follows a recognition of my background as a healthcare professional and my position for taking up this research. Following this a review of the existing literature will be presented which separates where appropriate the theoretical concepts from the empirical research. This both identifies the gap in the knowledge and brings to the fore the appropriate, relevant information in this area of research including the development of communication and rise of social media, sexual identity development models and social identity theory. I then present the methodology of how the research will be conducted including the ethical considerations and appropriate methodological approach to answer the question. Findings will then be presented. These will follow the experiences of participants as they presented during analysis including 1) Awareness of Difference and Challenging interactions with the World, 2) The Performances, 3) Gaining Knowledge of Identity, 4) A Journey to Acceptance and 5) Empowerment. A discussion of the findings in relation to existing knowledge will be presented followed by the production of a model of sexual identity construction which articulates and visually maps the process within which participants of this research followed. The research will draw conclusions, areas for future research, the impact and dissemination routes drawn from this project.

Researchers Background

As a qualified, accredited and practicing psychotherapist, I specialise in working with sexuality and gender diverse clients. I have had multiple LGBTQ+ clients who experience validating interactions via SM where they express sexual identity and/or reinforce an identity formation through connection and acceptance of self; they do, however, encounter negative interactions including direct comparisons of Self to others on the platform, overt abuse and being blocked or ignored, which they recognise as stressful and damaging to selfesteem and self-worth; they subsequently engage in various behaviours to mitigate negative emotions. These behaviours include changing personal information, carefully selecting images or even changing settings to become invisible to others on the platform (Sisson-Curbishley, 2020). As a self-identified queer person and therapist, I must bracket my experiences growing up queer as much as possible throughout this research to reduce any bias that may occur. As a researcher, interpretations of participant experience will likely come from the author's own understanding and lived experience of situations and environments and, whilst this needs to be acknowledged during data analysis of interviews, being reflexive on this perspective can lead to deeper empathic and empowering interpretations (Crotty, 1998; Silverman, 2014).

I come from a generation which experienced a world both with - and without - the internet and mobile communication and have subsequently experienced sexual identity validation and development offline though face-to-face interactions and also online through internet communication, SM and dating apps. I had to make meaning from both these on- / offline interactions about how I felt about myself and my place in the world – as well as how I was or wasn't seen – to understand my sexual identity.

My professional role and academic background give me pre-existing knowledge in sexual identity development models and key theories pertinent in the creation of this thesis and will be drawn on and referenced as appropriate.

The aim of this research is to explore the perceived effects of social media on sexual identity development for multiply marginalised non-heterosexual men (including but not limited to queer, sexually fluid, pansexual people and people who do not identify as only heterosexual).

The research will search existing literature to identify gaps in the current knowledge into and then use semi-structured interviews to explore participant experiences into the phenomenon which will then be analysed using an interpretive phenomenological analysis

(IPA) approach to answer the question – how are sexual identities constructed for nonheterosexual men through the influence of social media, especially for individuals who hold multiply marginalised identities?

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Purpose of the literature review

The following narrative literature review aims to identify existing research which contributes to the field of sexual identity development, considering social media and intersectional identities. Aveyard (2023) defines the literature review within a wider piece of research as the presentation of existing knowledge about the subject, aiming to identify gaps in knowledge and therefore the rationale for undertaking the proposed research. A thorough literature review is vital for generating new awareness, giving background and rationale to the existing study, identifying appropriate methods, highlights limitations and gaps in current knowledge. Without a complete and effective literature review, any new study risks biases and inappropriate or ineffective results (Brettle & Gambling, 2003). A narrative review has been chosen due to a broad subject area, however with this comes the risk of potentially biased sources which were considered throughout reviewing the literature (Gregory and Denniss, 2018). Grant and Booth (2009) position narrative reviews as those which have analysis of literature by themes, chronology or concepts which may or may not have been sourced through a comprehensive search.

The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of non-heterosexual men's sexual identity construction considering the effects of social media. The objectives of this study are to explore existing literature identifying gaps in research into sexual identity construction for non-heterosexual men then conduct a qualitative study through semi-structured interviews with as diverse population as possible of non-heterosexual men to understand

how social media platforms and offline interactions construct sexual identities in this population.

Literature Search Strategy

Gregory and Denniss (2018) position narrative reviews as an approach that creates a structured and thorough exploration of existing literature whilst including researcher's existing knowledge. It was important to refine and collate appropriate and relevant sources from reliable database searches, conducted in a methodical and robust manner to avoid confusion, duplication of research or irrelevance (Gregory and Denniss, 2018). Figure 1 presents a PRISMA flow diagram to explicate the literature search. Although I recognise a PRISMA flow diagram is traditionally used for a systematic review, the presented PRISMA flow diagram identifies the number of papers and the type of literature used in this narrative literature review to show a methodical approach. The research aims to explore non-heterosexual men's sexual identity construction considering the effects of social media and the search took a trimodal approach in searching for relevant literature (Table 1).

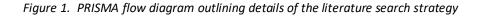
Initially databases searched included PsychINFO, ProQuest, MEDLINE, Web Of Science and CINAHL to find current literature and the process used Boolean operators (OR, AND, "", *) refining the search to find existing, relevant qualitative papers. This process filtered the results to focus on recent literature and sources relevant to this study including social media, sexual identity development and intersectionality (Appendix A). The search was rerun in the summer of 2024 (Appendix B) for further contemporary literature and to confirm the gap in knowledge was still present.

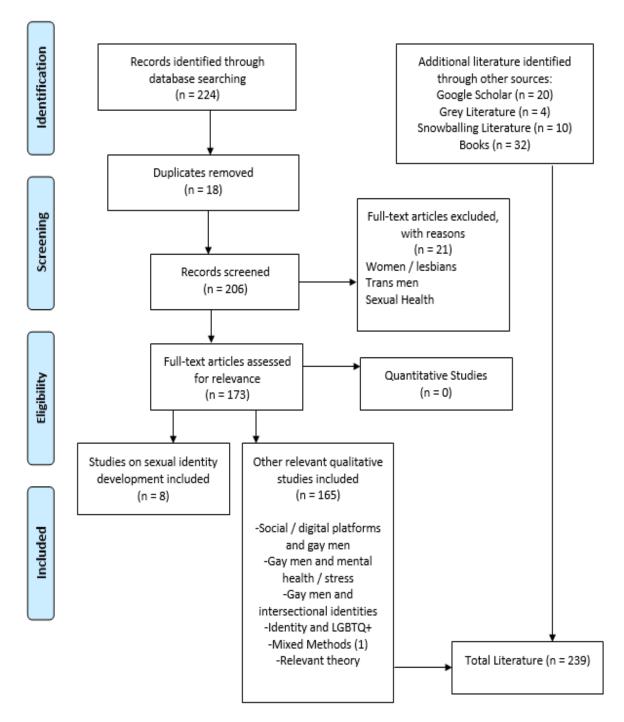
The search applied filters to include literature from 1967 onwards - this year was chosen as the Sexual Offences Act commenced, legalising sexual acts between consenting people of the same sex (Sexual Offences Act, 1967 c. 60). This meant studies into this population and its culture became more prominent, with participants being open to engaging in research due to the lack of criminal consequences they were now afforded.

Filters included peer reviewed papers written in English, up to and including 2022 – and subsequently 2024 (Appendix B). Due to the nature of the subject matter and importance of lived experience of the topic, qualitative studies were the focus of the search strategy. Papers were screened for relevance to the research topic with inclusion / exclusion criteria (Table 2) applied by literature title, abstract and methodology to keep the search as focused as possible.

This systematic database search was conducted to find relevant literature from which as a researcher, I could identify both the gap in the knowledge and the current positions of existing research.

Any literature from the database search then snowballed with further sources being found within relevant papers' bibliographies, through Google Scholar and general University of Salford Library searches. Although Gregory and Denniss (2018) advise the narrative review refine searches to up to ten years old, the relevant theoretical underpinnings of identity and sexuality are decades old, so the main focus of the question were searched including, "sexual identity development models", "identity theory", "intersectionality" and "social media and gay men" (Appendix A).





	Systematic Database Search	Snowballing	Generalised Literature Search
Objective	To find existing, relevant and current perspectives and thoughts on the research topic, seek gaps in knowledge, check for existing or similar research in a methodical way.	To utilise further and potentially more obscure or specific literature that would be relevant to the existing research topic	To include general or grand theories related to the research question – identity theory, sexual development, social media and communication
Process	Database searches – CINHAL, Medline, PsychInfo, ProQuest, Web of Science	Scanning and selecting potentially relevant papers, books and material in the bibliographies of papers drawn from the database search.	Explored any material from the snowballing process, searching on Google Scholar, Google Searching relevant books, authors, further theories and developments of theories (such as assemblage theory – Punar, 2007 – as an extension of intersectionality.)
Results	No existing papers or studies into this research's specific question and relevant demographic – identifying a gap in the knowledge		
Prior Knowledge	None	Some based on reading the previous papers from database search results	Some based on previous research at MSc level, professional work and reading previous papers

Table 1	Search Process o	of Sourcina	Relevant	Literature	for Review
TUDIC 1.	JCurch 11000035 0	j Sourcing	nerevant	Litterature	

Subsequent literature included journal articles, theoretical/academic books which I had previously utilised due to professional need and previous master's dissertation research, autobiographies and non-fiction publications due to the qualitative nature of the study (Table 1 & Figure 1). As the literature is varied caution has been used considering biases that may have been present.

Table 2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the database search

Inclusion	Exclusion
Sample over 18yrs	Sample under 18yrs
Self-identified men or trans men	Sample including women and trans women
Social Media users (including dating apps)	Non-binary Individuals
Sample includes gay, bi, curious, pansexual, sexually fluid, queer and any other non-	HIV/AIDS and sexual health
heterosexual sexual identity	
Any marginalised identity along with sexuality	Heterosexual sample
including disability, age, gender, ethnicity,	
religion, class, socioeconomic status.	
Sexual identity development offline	Non / Ex Social Media users
Sexual identity development online	Internet only studies
Qualitative Research	Websites with no mobile application

The History of LGBTQ+ Communication

Being LGBTQ+ in a heterosexist and heteronormative world

Non-heterosexual people are born into the world like everybody else – in a state of helplessness and dependent on caregivers to protect and provide both physically and emotionally. The need for belonging is a powerful evolutionary drive innate in human behaviour and imperative for positive physical and mental health outcomes (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1988; Downs, 2006; Ainsworth et. al, 2015).

Many Western industrialised societies are dominated by white, heterosexual, male, genderconforming masculine men, whose positions of power privilege them over others who do not fit with a similar discourse or overtly reject it. These 'others' form minority groups including (but not limited to) women, people of colour, people with disabilities and those who are gender non-conforming or non-heterosexual with each minoritised individual potentially holding multiple intersecting minority identities simultaneously (Crenshaw, 1991, 2013; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Hill-Collins, 2019).

Non-heterosexual people face disproportionally higher social, personal and psychological challenges than the general population, directly relating to the stresses exerted on them (Chakraborty, McManus et. al., 2011; Spittlehouse, Boden & Horwood, 2019) from the threat of actual, or perceived, rejection and attack from a patriarchal heteronormative, heterosexist society - including family and friends - based on their marginalised sexual identity, resulting in poor mental health outcomes (Pachankis, Goldfried & Ramrattan, 2008; Cohen, Feinstein et. al., 2016; Pitman et. al., 2022; Malik, et. al., 2023; Joyce, et. al. 2024) and increased internalised homonegativity (Feinstein, Goldfried & Davila, 2012; Hong et. al., 2023; Plumas et. al., 2024; Zheng & Fu, 2024) leading to higher rates of self-harm (Guo et.

al., 2023; Kapatais et. al., 2023), depression, and anxiety (Pachankis, Goldfried & Ramrattan, 2008; Cohen et. al., 2016; Pachankis, Sullivan, Feinstein and Newcomb, 2018; Lattanner et. al., 2022; Lin et. al., 2022; Marbaniang et. al., 2022), suicidal ideation and attempt (Savin-Williams, 2005, 2016; Todd, 2016; Marchi, et. al., 2022; Germanaud et. al., 2024 Okanlawon, 2024) substance abuse and risky sexual behaviour (Race, 2015; Scott, 2015; Gaspar et. al., 2022; Lisboa et. al., 2023).

Non-heterosexual people are caught in social and cultural structures between multiple intersecting discriminatory sources including religion, healthcare and the media which contribute to experiences of adversity and stress (Pachankis, Sullivan et. al., 2018; Spittlehouse, Boden & Horwood, 2019; Thai, 2019).

Through environmental interactions and engagement, non-heterosexual people experience a world where sexuality and gender roles are assumed, and explicitly defined, through culture and society; non-conforming individuals feel tension between who they *are* and who they are expected to *be* (Simonsen et. al., 2000; Payne, et. al., 2008; Szymanski & Carr, 2008; Telingator & Woyewodzic, 2011; Carastathis, et. al., 2016). Pillard (1982) highlights [gay] people are an invisible minority whose behaviours, mannerisms and appearances can be changed and adjusted in given social interactions to protect the individual from harm. Therefore, sexual identity can be hidden, and a false or alternate sexual identity presented, thus changing the version of 'self' experienced by others – however this cannot always be achieved, and not all identities conform to malleability in this way (e.g. race, ethnicity, visible disability) – to navigate racist, ableist, heterosexist, heteronormative environments.

Connection as Protection – the history of LGBTQ+ communication

Globally – both historically and presently – non-heterosexual men maintain safety physically, socially and culturally, by hiding their identities for fear of persecution, attack and even death (Humphreys 1970; Levine, 1998; Downs, 2006; Miller, 2015; Todd, 2016, 2019). They learnt from an early age not conforming to standards and expectations of culturally crafted gender norms is viewed by society as abhorrent, shameful and punishable, so developed coping strategies and sub-cultures to covertly defy these overt patriarchal structures (Humphreys 1970; Levine, 1998; Downs, 2006; Todd, 2016, 2019; Eltahawy, 2020).

Historically non-heterosexual men have gathered in offline spaces for numerous types of connections such as friendships, relationships and sexual encounters (Miller, 2015); these include spaces such as bars, clubs, specific geographic areas in towns or cities, saunas and bathhouses, public toilets or parks (Humphreys 1970; Levine, 1998; Downs, 2006). Connections brought self-acceptance, increased self-esteem and validation to individuals; for those men exploring their sexual identity, these vital spaces helped in understanding the Self at a deeper level, leading to more fulfilling lives (Döring, 2009; Graciyal & Viswam, 2021).

However, these offline spaces brought a degree of danger, not just from physical or verbal attack and arrest but the risk of being seen by others whilst frequenting these spaces potentially resulting in loss of career, home and family (Humphreys, 1970; Levine, 1998; Downs, 2005; Todd, 2016). As an invisible minority (Pillard, 1982) non-heterosexual men have often engaged in real-world (mal)adaptive behaviours to distance themselves from homophobic gay stereotypes of thin, effeminate, flamboyant males through appearance

altering behaviours such as anabolic steroid use, gym fixations and excessively musculature physiques, aggressive and risky sexually dominant behaviour and being driven by success and power to navigate their world safely and with control (Levine, 1998; Downs, 2005; Miller, 2015; Todd, 2016; Londyn, 2017).

During the 1990's, commercial rise of dial-up internet made it affordable and easier to connect with people across a global arena from the safety and comfort of home (Grov, et. al., 2014; Miller, 2015). No other demographic embraced this new technology like the LGBTQ+ community due to immediate connections with added protection from harm. Internet chat rooms allowed non-heterosexual men the opportunity to connect with others facing similar experiences in a way that afforded them the privilege of disclosing as much or as little about themselves as they wanted, without the increased risk of physical attack or persecution (Grov et. al., 2014; Miller, 2015).

The once isolated minority individual was no longer alone, even if they valued the safety of being a loner (Turkle, 1995), and as technology rapidly developed the bulky household family desktop computer was replaced by individual portable laptops, giving people even greater agency and privacy over their internet content. The slow dial-up internet quickly upgraded to wireless (Wi-Fi) broadband connections with faster speeds and the ability to share large files, swap images and engage in real time video calling (Grov, et. al., 2014).

Technology became faster, smaller and smarter - the revolution of the 'Apple' iPhone in 2007 and the iPad in 2010, changed the landscape of personal communication forever (Grov, Breslow, et. al., 2014; Kozinets, 2020). Although there had been similar devices previously, such as the Palm Pilot and the Blackberry, which brought mobile communication to a wider audience, these were predominantly for business use and could initially only

receive text communication (Grov, Breslow, et. al., 2014; Kozinets, 2020). The iPhone and iPad were commercial, personal devices which gave users access to a unique library of downloadable applications (apps) which could be selected at will to meet a perceived present need and added to the iPhone or iPad through Wi-Fi or using mobile phone data (Mowlabocus, 2010; Grov, et. al., 2014); these included banking, videos, news, social interaction or weather (Grov, et. al., 2014). Two years after iPhone's release, Android phones (which are phones still classed as smart phones but run on an operating system that is not 'Apple') were produced, and within four years had the same number of apps available as the iPhone (Grov, et. al., 2014).

This meant the individual could now access both uni- and bidirectional communication, information and entertainment wherever they were, whatever they were doing, at any given time, creating and editing their lives and presenting them as they preferred (Gudelunas, 2012; Jaspal, 2016).

There is an ease, accessibility, anonymity and relative safety about communicating online (Miller, 2015; Todd, 2016; Londyn, 2017), so for non-heterosexual people it became the ideal media to engage with others to meet friends, connect with sub-cultures and celebrities, meet for romantic engagement or sexual encounters and present the Self and one's offline life to the online world whilst simultaneously absorbing the lived experiences of others - thus beginning a process of comparison – as the world became bigger and more accessible, individual lives became magnified (Ross, 2005; Beier, 2017).

Turkle (1995) cites the term 'user' (p.30) as associated with excessive drug and/or alcohol use, however the term is also used for the interaction one has with technology and highlights the addictive nature of online engagement.

Individuals use various social media platforms, some with both internet and mobile interface, to relay information and ideas, connect to others and stay informed (Giray, 2021; Huang, Fan & Zheng, 2021; Ostic, Qalati, et. al., 2021) through personal computer or mobile phone.

This aligns with Madianou and Miller's (2012) concept of polymedia which identified communication through a variety of media depended on need and suitability of task and is no longer based on accessibility or affordability. MacKee (2016) highlights it is now impossible to understand one platform in isolation, as each are entwined to others and therefore one must take social media and social networking as a whole – popular social media platforms include Instagram or Snapchat; examples of social networking platforms include Facebook or more niche platforms for non-heterosexual men such as Grindr or Tinder, with blogs, forums and microblogs such as 'X' (formerly Twitter) however all these are included under the social media umbrella for this research. The users of these platforms are therefore polymediatic (MacKee, 2016). Beier (2017) cautions that too much online interaction reduces the ability to be aware of one's internal world and creates not only addictions to media but anxiety and depression, as individuals turn to technology for answers and support in their lives but end up feeling empty and alone and in an existential crisis of meaninglessness and isolation (Yalom, 1980). Crowson and Goulding (2013) counter this argument and believe, like Erikson (1963), technological interactions actually speed up identity formation through interpersonal connection.

For non-heterosexual men and others within the LGBTQ+ community, social media apps help create a sense of safety, acceptance and validation (Miller, 2015; Dhoest & Szulc, 2016), reduce feelings of isolation, boost self-esteem and create a sense of empowerment

(Pingel, Bauermister, et. al., 2012); however, with this comes opposing experiences of lowered self-esteem (Filice, Raffoul, et. al., 2019), anxiety and depression (Beier, 2017), bullying, victimisation (Conner, 2019) and sexual objectification (Anderson, Holland et. al,. 2018).

In previous work Sisson-Curbishley found in their literature review (2020) the use of mobile apps contributed to non-heterosexual men's self-esteem both positively and negatively as individuals found acceptance, strength and validation through online interactions. However, it was noted non-heterosexual men navigated identity through interactions occurring simultaneously online through mobile apps and offline through face-to-face interaction, proposing further research was needed into identifying these dual identity presentations to resolve psychological tension aligning these on and offline identities.

Whilst some of the literature utilised here is autobiographical (Eltahawy, 2020) or comes from literature affirming the struggle non-heterosexual men, and those within the LGBTQ+ community experience, which are written by members of the LGBTQ+ community (Levine, 1998; Downs, 2005; Todd, 2016; Londyn, 2017) these are important to consider and do contain factual and empirical literature (Todd, 2016, 2019; Eltahawy, 2020). Whilst some of the literature could be seen as outdated (Humphreys 1970; Levine, 1998) it is important to give the context and lived experiences from those historic individuals to witness the progress and development of community treatment and engagement with wider society. The age of the empirical data shows the consistent chronic mental health struggles of LGBTQ+ people regardless of the socio-political developments through the decades and is therefore just as important and relevant though caution must be taken in the homogenous

experiences of participants who potentially hold multiply marginalised identities, but these are not considered within the findings.

Whilst the literature presented here into the impact and development of digital communication for non-heterosexual men is inevitably out of date due to technological developments (Grov, et. al., 2014) and the diversity of identities, nevertheless given the nature of this research is feels important to set the background for the rise of digital platforms, many of which are even more popular today.

Identity - Theoretical Considerations

Theories of Self and Identity

Consideration of theories related to the research question and pertinent in the field of identity are now presented.

Goffman's (1959) Dramaturgical approach to identity, considered individuals as having multiple selves, any one of which comes to the fore dependent on a given situation and individual need in the world. The individual's selected Self performs behaviours and creates appearances to ingratiate themselves into the group in which they wish to belong in any given moment, and changes across the lifespan. Blumer (cited in Williams, 1986) critiques Goffman's theory as individualistic and ignores the macrocosm in which the micro-level concerns are placed. Dawes (also cited in Williams, 1986) critiques Goffman's model as one of confusion and contradictory where individuals both try to control their situations by presenting significant identities to the world whilst simultaneously engaging in "psychic withdrawal" (p.353, Williams, 1986) leading to confusion of the individual's position as to which Self represents the individual. Gouldner (1971) extends this critique raising concerns Goffman has failed to consider the hierarchical and institutional structures within which

individuals exist and to which they have little influence. Therefore, when considering Goffman's dramaturgical theory of self as a performance within this research one must consider the limitations cited as these critiques relate to the experiences of minoritised groups particularly.

Gergen's (1991) Multiphrenia theory states multiple selves risk creating an individual with an inauthentic Self with no "knowable characteristics" (p.7). Renner and Laux (2000) critique Gergens theory of the multiphrenia – the 'saturated self' (p.831) – as one which neglects the coherent whole of the individual and raise the question of how can an individual contribute to a society when multiphrenia aligns with "multiple personality disorder"? (p.832). They continue for advocating using the concept of the person as *Unitas Multiplex* – multiple unity. This concept presented by Stern (1930) captures the unity of diversity within the individual to function within a social setting.

Although these critiques are important, I propose both Gergen and Goffman's use of the word Self or selves is aligned with the concept of *identity* or *identities*. Multiple identities create a holistic sense of being, which compliments socio-cognitive approaches like Self-Categorisation Theory (Turner & Oakes, 1986; Hogg & Turner, 1987).

Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT) proposes that people are both group members and individual members dependent on time and location. The process of categorising self to a group comes from the social interaction the individual has with the world, the group to which they wish to belong and the interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences which occur.

Social identity theory (SIT) offers a foundational understanding into how belonging to a group affects the desire for esteem and a reference for social behaviours (Tajfel & Turner,

1979; Kalin & Sambanis, 2018). Social identities are the interpersonal networks which operate between people who choose to interact with others based on characteristic similarities or alternatively avoid members of groups who are different to themselves (Kalin & Sambanis, 2018) and take the view of social identity by considering how identifying with social groups also affects behaviours. Hornsey (2008) highlights a limitation to SCT is the increase in individuals self-identifying with multiple subgroup identities and the complex interaction of personal and collective identities. Another limitation to this theory is SCT can be reductionist and too individualistic. These critiques are important considerations given the nature of this research focusing on individuals with multiply minoritised identities. A limitation for SIT from Huddy (2001) is the empirical base for information on identities are "relatively weak or nonexistent" (p.148) prior to the experiment in which they were created. Hogg, Terry and White (1995) highlight SIT as being more effective with intergroup interactions and the sociocognitive creation of identity details, which aligns with the aim of this research.

Belonging to various groups is a way for non-heterosexual people to feel accepted, safe, valued and allows the distinction of labels to occur through social categorisation and social comparison, resulting in understanding one's place within society and where one's salient group sits in comparison to other groups within societies hierarchical social structures – thus each person belongs to a multitude of different groups simultaneously (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Trepte, 2013; Trepte & Loy, 2017). Crusius, Mussweiler and Corcoran (2022) highlight social comparison theory relies heavily on subjectivity where a group or individual positions themselves – this has cultural, historic and even biological considerations. Social

comparisons facilitate faster critical judgments of others and therefore influence others to behave, think or present versions of themselves which may not be accurate.

Empirical Studies of Identity

Self and Identity

It feels necessary to outline and differentiate between one's 'self' and one's 'identity' as although often related, the two are separate contexts and cross both spiritual (Johnston, 1973; Tolle, 2005; Eswaran, 2007) and psychological (Goffman, 1959; Turkle, 1995, 2011) paradigms.

It is my view that Self, embodies who we are in essence, unchanging and existing from birth, often lost under multiple identities but remaining constant to give a complete sense of inner awareness (Tolle, 2005; Eswaran, 2007; Orsatti & Riemer, 2015).

Bulter (1990) and Orsatti and Reimer (2015) propose identities are constantly socially constructed active parts of who we are, in relation to living lives with social interactions – identities are multiple, never complete, presentations vary and are situationally dependent, reinforcing Gergen's theory (1991) that we never truly know our-selves. Laing (1967) states:

"...what we think is less than what we know: what we know is less than what we love: what we love is so much less than what there is. And to that precise extent we are so much less than what we are." (p.26)

The premise of lacking ability to truly grasp who we intrinsically are, is backed up in Kay's (2018) research into online identity formation which found heavy users of the internet lacked a clarity of self; it may be hypothesised that because identities are constantly in a

cycle of "re-/de-/construction" (Jourian & McCloud, 2020, p.733) individuals lack a knowable constant truth about themselves.

There is greater acceptance that both biological (essentialist) and socially influenced (nonessentialist) factors contribute to the development of non-heterosexual identities (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Warner & Shields, 2013).

Orsatti and Riemer's paper (2015) highlight the importance of moving away from rigid essentialist perspectives when researching identity through social media and taking a nonessentialist approach. The modernist perspective of an essentialist identity frames the individual's inner being as separate from the external world; identities are co-created throughout the lifespan not just through interactions with others or how individuals make sense of themselves from these interactions, but also how they are perceived by others in a feedback loop.

This relates to Goffman's (1959) metaphor of identity-as-performance on stage for an audience, echoed in boyd's (2010) presentation of Self through online media as "performance of social connection" (p. 45); however, unlike real-world theatre, online performances have a much larger "imagined audience" (boyd, 2010, p. 50) critiquing the individual's identity behaviours, and if presentation is relevant and/or acceptable; poor performance can lead to rejection from the community one wished to connect with.

This aligns with Suler's (2004) Online Disinhibition effect – where an individual's online interactions are different to offline engagements due to the intersecting and isolated behaviours of dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection,

dissociative imagination and minimising status and authority – with the online, imagined (but simultaneously very real) audience critiquing an individual's performance of identity.

Identity changes throughout the lifespan due to interactions with others in multiple contexts and situations both on- and offline (Orsatti & Riemer, 2015). The current research question therefore positions itself within a post-modernist view taking a non-essentialist, social constructionist approach to identity. How people narrate their lives and form identities depends on social engagements, actively creating multiple, flexible identities based on stories we share with others via active, passive, practical engagement and interactions with the world around us.

Given that structures, language and symbolism are culturally, historically and subjectively determinant, this research lends itself to a post-structuralist perspective where structural binaries are interrogated and challenged, whilst simultaneously being aware post-structuralism acknowledges the observer will ultimately affect anything being observed through their personal experience, history and culture, thus objective truth becomes impossible (Hawkes, 1977; Palmer, 1997).

The aim of this research is to explore the subjective experiences of participants who situate themselves outside heteronormative socio-cultural binaries considering the influence of social media on their sexual identity.

Social Identity

Ellemers, Spears and Doosje (2002) position social identity as context dependent which can lead individuals to self-identify at individual or group level with commitment to the group often enduring and increasing during stressful or negative social situational factors, and

behaviours are subsequently adjusted or adapted to meet the needs of the individual remaining as part of the group identity.

Non-heterosexual people maintain and create connections to others by selecting identities dependent on social context rooted in interactions within the community or those externally from it – through on- and offline platforms – meaning multiple identities in each individual are selected, curated, and presented dependent on the expectations of the environment and motivations the individual holds (boyd, 2010).

Once a group identity is integrated into an individual's self-concept through validation from others within the in-group, coupled with feelings they belong to that group, the individual holds both interpersonal and intergroup values with the aim to reinforce a sense of belonging and increase self-esteem (Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Trepte, 2013; Pachankis, Clark, et. al, 2020).

With this in mind, we must consider social identity being directly related to the self-concept, derived from the position held within positive or negative comparisons, where categories change (the 'TQ+' – trans and queer/questioning – of LGBTQ+ acronym being a relatively recent addition), the relationship to other categories change and features defining the group alter (Trepte, 2013).

Comparison to other groups occurs with the motivation to be seen positively by these groups being a constant activity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Trepte, 2013; Trepte & Loy, 2017).

Considering non-heterosexual history with the victimisation, harassment and abuse this marginalised group face, it is clear dominant social structures put this group lower in hierarchical status than its heterosexual, male, gender conforming, healthy counterparts

(Scott, 2015). Yet many of these invisible minority (Pillard, 1982) have utilised identities and behaviours to belong to other groups finding safety, acceptance, reduce stigma (Levine, 1998; Miller, 2015) and to "mitigate their loss of social capital" (Scott, 2015, p. 20).

Much of empirical research cited focuses on the demographic most affiliated and common within the LGBTQ+ community - gay men; however given the nature of the non-essentialist, post-structuralist position this research takes, it seems salient to remove the binaries of gay/straight men and include all non-heterosexual men (including bisexual, pansexual, queer and other self-identified terms where a man identifies as anything other than heterosexual) as excluding these identities is minimising, invalidating and underrepresented in other research. I have refrained from using the terms MSM, M2M (men who have sex with men) and homosexual – all medicalised terms (MacKee, 2016) and one which holds the binary of homo/heterosexual and gives little room for fluidity of experience. Nonheterosexual (and the LGBTQ+ community generally) people are more than just binary socially constructed individual labels, therefore it is important to consider an intersectional lens when approaching this research through a social constructionist epistemology.

Sexual Identity Development - Theoretical Considerations

Queer Theory

As a researcher, I initially considered a Queer theoretical perspective for this study given the nature of the subject; however it was decided to reject this position - the reasons are multiple. Although queer theory deconstructs, rejects and challenges labels, pushes scholars to think more deeply about social discourse and asserts identities are fluid and the fixed sense of Self is a construct of heteronormative society (Barnard, 1999; Green, 2007) – all of which I believe to be valid and valued in identity construction – when examining a

sense of identity (as this research proposes) although I reject the solely essentialist view of sexuality (Richardson, 1984) it is necessary to return to an interpretivist epistemology which ultimately lies within a hierarchical social structure, as an intra-psychic experience (Green, 2007) and therefore is not compatible with Queer Theory.

Morandini, Blaszczynski, and colleagues (2015) identify that "most gay men embrace a mixture of essentialist and anti-essentialist beliefs" (p. 421) around development of sexual identity; Barnard (1999) rejects Queer theorists' standpoint due to it failing to consider racialised sexualities, the Eurocentric white academic privilege of Queer Theory scholars and removing identities such as race or ethnicity is to deny cultural and socio-political experiences and meaning which constructs a multitude of identities in one person. In evidence to this position Somerville (1997) questions whether it is,

"...merely a historical coincidence that the classification of bodies as either "homosexual" or "heterosexual" emerged at the same time that the United States was aggressively policing the imaginary boundary between "black" and "white" bodies?" (p.38)

And continues to question the segregated position of both race and sexuality considering the perceived "perversion" (Somerville, 1997, p.45) of interracial relations (specifically Black men desiring white women – ignoring white men's desire for Black women) were understood through emerging models of sexual orientation; what are not explored are the intersections of oppression and privilege within socio-historical contexts in relation to sexual orientation.

Hill – Collins (2019) addresses the limitations of theoretical models aimed at understanding marginalised identities by referencing queer of colour critique towards critical race theory as a male of colour dominant, gender conformist heteronormative ideology and highlights

"cross-fertilisation" (p. 103) of feminist and queer theories' results in the failure to recognise the social issues of the people whose multiple intersecting identities remain outside white, middle-class, cisgender men and women's identities, of which feminism and queer theory privilege.

Queer of colour critique includes Muñoz (1999) and Ferguson (2004) who position civil rights movements (e.g., women's rights, black power) as suppressing gender and sexual identities by ignoring the multiple intersecting identities in the individual and therefore interrupted the expectation of identity as a "goal" (Ferguson, 2004, p.126) and used the space between the identity labels to construct and manoeuvre identities based on the critiques of the binary;

> "Smith deploys "lesbian" outside the boundaries of identity. She defines "lesbian" not in terms of identity, but in terms of a set of critiques of heterosexuality and patriarchy...a set of social relations that point to the instability of heteropatriarchy." (p. 127)

Thereby allowing a fluidity and existence between recognised and accepted labels it thus only seems logical this research position itself from a social constructionist perspective, where social interactions of marginalised groups develop and maintain identity constructs and behaviours away from the expectations of binary labels and within social hierarchies and connection.

This study aims to consider intersectionality by selecting participants with multiply marginalised identities to consider how these may influence sexual identity development considering the effects of social media.

Minority Stress Theory

Meyer's (2003) Minority Stress theory identified social, psychological and structural contributors to mental health inequalities in sexual minority men. Comprised of distal stressors such as prejudice and discrimination placed on individuals from the environment, and proximal stressors, such as fear of rejection or internalised homophobia. These result in higher rates of anxiety, depression, even leading to self-injury and suicide.

One of the limitations of this theory is the focus on the narrow experiences of minoritised groups rather than a focus on what social support and coping strategies individuals engage with (Diamond, 2003; Savin-Williams, 2008). Pavalko, Mossakowski and Hamilton (2003) questioned whether minority stress can demonstrate causality as correlation does not imply causation. Whilst Bailey (2021) highlights the importance of considering genetics and temperament when discussing stress, believing a biological component to stress in nonheterosexual people is overlooked.

Intra-Minority Gay Community Stress Theory

Extending from Meyers (2003) theory, Pachankis and colleagues (2020) identified further levels of stress exerted on non-heterosexual populations who held further marginalised identities (race, disability, age etc.) from within the minoritised communities they belonged. This in itself leading to mental health challenges for multiply-minoritised people. The stressors placed upon members of the non-heterosexual community came from those in the community who were seen to reflect the majority population – White, able-bodied, masculine, muscular, young men. These stressors can lead to risky sexual behaviour, disordered eating and body dissatisfaction (Soulliard, Lattanner & Pachankis, 2024). Limitations to this theory are the small sample size used to derive the Gay Community Stress Scale outcome measure. It is also a self-reported measure and therefore is open to subjectivity and positioned itself within the United States and is temporally dependent given the social nature of change and advancement may mean the experiences of stigma and rejection abate through social justice and change movements (Pachankis, et. al., 2020).

Sexual Identity Development – Theoretical Considerations

Theories of development assume there is a process of improvement which occurs within an organism, through drive behaviours, based on ideals and expectations of environmentally and socially imposed 'good' or 'bad' states; the organism is situated in an ever changing environment, therefore even if an ideal state were reached, it can never be a final state as the environment and social structures change and thus the organism itself will need to transform due to the previous ideal state being obsolete and in need of revision (Sugarman, 1986).

For decades theories of sexual identity development have been proposed to explain and predict the journey of development for people with same-sex attractions (e.g. Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1990; D'Augelli, 1994; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000, Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015). Not only is this demographic expected to navigate physiological developmental stages of age and external societal progress (Erikson, 1963) but simultaneously embark on a private, sometimes threatening internal journey of discovery, after the individual realises there is a fundamental difference in the Self to wider societal expectations of sexual attraction (Cass, 1979, 1984; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015).

Many of these theories propose that once a difference in sexual attraction is identified an inevitable process occurs where a fully functioning synthesised identity emerges by moving

through and resolving separate stages, departing a heterosexual identity and moving to inevitably embrace a homosexual one (Cass, 1979, 1984; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989).

Using Butler's (1990) concept of identity being constructed and in constant state of 'becoming' (p.xxviii), and Ferguson's (2004) queer of colour critique of the goalless identity, it is salient for this research to reject the paradigm of sexual identity *development,* with its chronological, unidirectional stage based assumptions, and re-author within this research sexual identity *construction,* thereby allowing for fluidity, adaption and enquiry which is unique to individual experience across time and location. The term 'development' will remain in relation to other theoretical positions, research and models, but for this study the term sexual identity construction will be used.

Existing stage models of sexual identity development (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1988) have been criticised for the problematic aspect of linear development resulting in a 'goal' of healthy adaption (Levy, 2009; Halkitis, Kapadia, Bub, et. al, 2015; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015). Although this has been rejected with acknowledgment individuals can move more freely through the process of identity formation, a stage model inadvertently implies a linear development (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000; Horowitz & Newcomb; 2002; Savin-Williams and Cohen, 2015). Stage models in this field do not account for the complexities of sexual identity (Rivers, 1997) nor intersectional aspects of identity including socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity and ability, amongst others (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2002; Levy, 2009; Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014; Halkitis, Kapadia, Bub, et. al, 2015; Goodrich & Brammer, 2021).

Theories proposed by Savin-Williams (1990, 2015), D'Augelli (1994) and McCarn and Fassinger (1996) do suggest a more fluid and interconnected approach in their phases of

development, acknowledging the process happens throughout the lifespan as individuals gradually come to a positive self-acceptance of sexual identity over time and through social change (Owens, 2017), yet McCarn and Fassinger created the only model considering group and individual factors, linking identity / social identity theories and social capital theory. These fluid theories rely heavily on the input and interaction of others from within the LGBTQ+ community (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019) yet Horowitz and Newcomb (2002) highlight some individuals assume an LGBTQ+ identity without influence or interaction with the LGBTQ+ community.

It would be ignorant and biased to maintain the perspective of White Western assumptions of sexual identity development when the global south holds LGBTQ+ experiences that intersect more frequently with culture, religion and other social hierarchies (Adams & Philips, 2009; Pandya et. al., 2013; Tomori, Srikrishnan et. al., 2018; Song, Xie, et. al., 2021; Liow, Chong & Ting, 2023).

Pandya and colleagues (2013) critique these western perceptions of sexual identity development which do not capture the nuances of Indian socio-cultural influence and highlights Indian academics' focus on sexuality in relation to HIV prevention and sexual health rather than the development of non-heterosexual identity itself.

It is pertinent to consider the culture and socio-political climate of how these existing studies came to be. These models have been created in developed western countries which, until 1973 pathologised homosexuality as a mental illness (Croucher, 2014); during the 1960's onwards a rise in LGBTQ+ activism including the Homophile Movement and Stonewall Riots in the United States (Todd, 2019) meant increased visibility and demand for civil rights, on par with heterosexual others. Despite eventual shifts in legislation legalising

homosexual acts – reference to the United Kingdom in 1967 (Sexual Offences Act, 1967) – society still showed outward persecution and hostility towards the LGBTQ+ community (Todd, 2019). This might be considered a bias which previous researchers held within their own sexual identities and consider unresolved or unexplored homonegativity, heteronormativity and/or heterosexism.

However varied, many of these grand theories do share common limitations including not taking into consideration the process of identity development in the past twenty years (with exception to Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015 extending the Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000 model) and do not consider influence from digital communication, as well as having heavily biased samples such as highly educated, homosexual/bisexual, cisgender, white, men and women (Parmenter, Galliher, et. al., 2020).

Non-heterosexual Identity Development- Empirical Literature

Shakespeare's famous 'Seven Ages of Man' monologue from 'As You Like It' (Shakespeare, c.1598 – 1600), charts development from birth through death using the metaphor of a theatrical production where each person must play "many parts" during a lifetime (Act II. Sc 7, p.87). This is analogous to Goffman's metaphor of performance of identity and, as Shakespeare states, "All the world's a stage..." (Act II. Sc 7, p.87).

The monologue's acknowledgement of change and expectation to perform one's duty through societal expectation and standing is clear but sensitively highlights the way individuals adapt and change given specific social interactions and needs. The play explores character expression of gender and sexual identity in complex and subtle ways (Jamieson, 2020) and as such reinforces the notion that gender and sexuality are socially, culturally and temporally dependant and the homosexual identity was not recognised in the sixteenth century, in the same way it is today (Connell, 1987).

Shakespeare's ages of man are reflected in Erikson's (1963) model of psychosocial development which contains eight stages across the lifespan. Like Shakespeare, Erikson acknowledges the individual is navigating a changing societal environment where adaption and resolution of development is required at each stage and if unsuccessful, although damaging, can be attempted again at a later time in life and thus the damage partially repaired; completion of one stage is not required in totality to move into the next stage of development (Erikson, 1963; Sugarman, 1986).

The stage model of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1963) and other aspects of human life-span development (Maslow, 1968, 1971) seem to be the pre-cursor for other models of human development, including sexual identity. Erikson viewed identity development as a lifelong process (Erikson, 1963; Sugarman, 1986; Davis & Weinstein, 2017) and Leung (2021) highlights the adolescent stage of 'Identity vs. Role confusion' (Erikson, 1963, p.252) is where non-heterosexual people begin to disclose their non-heterosexual identity to Self and others – aged around thirteen to twenty-one years old. However, Leung also finds that nonheterosexual men's sexual identity development extends beyond this age range and Erikson's theory of development is often rejected due to the complexity of identities that change and develop at differing rates across a lifespan whilst influencing one another (Leung, 2021).

Kort (2018) claims a predominant biological rational for any LGBTQ+ identity citing hormone levels in-utero, genetic factors, and even structural differences within the brain as

causations of heterosexual, homosexual and gender diverse identities, however none of these are definitive.

Non-heterosexual men develop multiple identities to navigate the world from birth and are constructing a sense of Self through identity formation through interactions with others, (e.g., child, student, partner, White, Muslim, queer) creating a unique self-concept (Stets & Burke, 2000; Hornsey, 2008). As previously discussed, social structures determine where a group sits in comparison to others, however individual identity comes with role expectations within a group, exhibiting behaviours which are performed and internalised to socially constructed values (Butler, 1990; Stets & Burke, 2000; Hornsey, 2008). The role identity, such as 'boy', will come with social expectations such as engaging in masculine games and sports, men having male friends, being encouraged to wear masculine clothes (e.g., trousers and trainers) and become interested in the opposite-sex for emotional support and physical intimacy. For many non-heterosexual men a sense of identity – the inner feeling of who they are - is often felt to be 'different' to the role expected of them, but never fully understood at a young age (Downs, 2006; Kort, 2018) resulting in bullying, harassment and abuse during formative years creating a felt sense of defectiveness (Plummer, 1989; Downs, 2006; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015; Spittlehouse, Boden & Horwood, 2019).

These experiences lead non-heterosexual men to hide their true identities and feelings which are seen as unsafe, negatively impacting their self-concept and self-esteem. The world, society and social groups - overtly and covertly - tell non-heterosexual men their identity is wrong and must be resisted and hidden or suffer rejection, humiliation and assault (Pachankis, Sullivan et. al., 2018; Spittlehouse, Boden & Horwood, 2019). The stress

exerted on this minority group leads to internalised homo/biphobia (Meyer, 1995, 2003; Feinstein, Goldfried & Davila, 2012; Hong, et. al, 2023; Plumas, et. al, 2024; Zheng, et. al., 2024), internalised heterosexism (Carastathis, Cohen, et. al., 2017; Liu et. al., 2023) rejection sensitivity (Pachankis, Goldfried & Ramrattan, 2008; Maiolatesi et. al., 2023) and poor mental health outcomes including suicidal ideation and attempts (Savin-Williams, 2005, 2015; Todd, 2015; Germanaud et. al., 2024; Okanlawon, 2024) poor self-esteem (Filice, Raffoul et. al., 2019; Thai, 2019; Bridge et. al., 2024), risky sexual behaviour and drug use (Race, 2015; Scott, 2015; Carastathis, Cohen, et. al., 2017; Gaspar et. al., 2022; Lisboa et.al., 2023).

Pachankis and colleagues (2020), Cascalheira and Smith (2019) and Conner (2019) all found that social hierarchical structures which create minority stress (Meyer, 1995, 2003) are present within the LGBTQ+ community generally – with samples focusing on gay men – where White, Western, able bodied, masculine, cisgender, muscular, healthy men were bullying, harassing and victimising people from other intra-minority groups such as queer people of colour or trans and gender-diverse people (Pachankis, Clark et. al., 2020). It is assumed this behaviour enhances the perpetrator's sense of superiority, confidence and self-esteem and falls into the realm of toxic masculinity (Parent, Gobble & Rochlen, 2019).

Research found marginalised groups with intersecting identities display higher levels of resilience and were able to access more social support due to cultural and ethnic intersections (Vu, Choi & Do, 2011; Thomsen, 2021). This is corroborated by Roccas and Brewer's (2002) findings that immigrants who used both hyphenated identities (e.g., African American) and/or spoke two languages in separate social settings, had unique ethnocultural identities within the adopted nation and competence navigating both cultures. This

is contrasted in Bhugra's (1997) research that gay people of ethnic heritage did *not* feel they belonged to either ethnic heritage nor gay community and compartmentalised their identities. Bhugra's findings are analogous to Thomsen's (2019) study of gay men of ethnic heritage who used "narratives of convenience" (p.1016) to compartmentalise their sexuality from the wider community and extended family for protection by creating fictitious narratives about aspects of their lives which maintain a heteronormative presentation and hide non-heterosexual identity.

Bullying behaviour from a dominant group in the LGBTQ+ community – such as White gay men – evidence over compensatory hegemonic masculine actions for the stereotyping beliefs wider society holds for gay men being weak, effeminate and at risk of becoming unwell from HIV/AIDS, which in and of itself, is detrimental to mental health outcomes (Pachankis, Clark, et. al., 2020). These experiences of minority (Meyer, 1995, 2003) and intraminority stress (Pachankis, Clark et. al., 2020) placed on non-heterosexual men and the wider LGBTQ+ community, reflects wider social imbalanced power dynamics leading to poor mental health outcomes in sexual minority groups (Chakraborty, McManus et. al., 2011; Pachankis, Sullivan, et. al., 2018; Pitman, et. al., 2022; Malik, et. al., 2023; Joyce et. al., 2024).

These types of unbalanced power dynamics are a significant aspect of the 'Power Threat Meaning Framework' (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018), which challenges traditional psychopathology and psychiatry in proposing emotional distress (e.g., anxiety, depression) and troubled behaviours (e.g., suicide attempts, drug use) are directly attributed to cultural and social discourse rooted in wider social structures and socioeconomic contexts of privilege and oppression (Bulter, 1990; Johnstone & Boyle, 2018; Cleghorn, 2021) meaning

the narrative non-heterosexual men make about their place and treatment within society creates shame and inadequacy based on multiple intersectionalities including gender, disability, childhood adversity, social class, poverty and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 2013; Johnstone & Boyle, 2018).

Social Capital – Theoretical Considerations

Interpersonal dynamics and interactions have been termed social capital and of which, there are three functions – bonding, bridging and linking (Putnam, 2000; Woolcock, 2002).

Bonding social capital is connections between in-group members; bridging social capital is between-group members for connection, support, allyship, networking (Putnam, 2000) whilst linking social capital is a subset of bridging, where connections are made between people in different groups connecting various levels in social hierarchy (Woolcock, 2002; Claridge, 2018). Putman's (2000) social capital model of bridging social capital – where connections formed outside the group – create inclusive networks, distribute information and form broader identities across other groups.

Bonding social capital creates exclusive in-group loyalty, solidarity and emotional connections (Putman, 2000). Bridging and bonding social capital can be simultaneous, for example LGBTQ+ Pride celebrations form connections outside the community with non-LGBTQ+ people and businesses normalising diverse sexuality and gender identities whilst simultaneously allowing bonding to occur for members of the LGBTQ+ community within a designated space and time. Woolcock (2002) highlights the downside of linking, bonding and bridging social capitals as supporting strong intra-communal ties subsequently justifying abusive/erasing behaviour against minoritised groups and/or women or linking social capital

between various strata within a group can create oppression, resulting in perpetuation of servitude.

Lin, Cook and Burt (2001) point to the assumption that social structures are pyramidal / hierarchical in shape. Therefore, social capital can only exist within socially hierarchical structures. Subsequently societies without this pyramid structure cannot apply social capital. Within the context of this research, being from a Western Capitalist social perspective, it can be assumed that social capital will inevitably be a factor.

Social Capital – Empirical Evidence

Huang, Kumar and Hu (2018) identified that men in particular were more inclined than women to be motivated with bridging social capital - particularly on social networks - to meet others, build new relationships and increase contacts for success, however, nonheterosexual men may not have these same motivations. Scott (2015) highlights nonheterosexuals use social networking to connect sexually and romantically in safe and nonstigmatising ways, described as bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000).

Belonging is the psychological state of building positive connections to others through integration and social acceptance leading to a positive identity and sense of self. Belonging is situationally and environmentally dependent but when there is a strong sense of belonging, outcomes include reduced depression, suicidal ideation and anxiety and increased motivation (Eickers, 2024; Matsick, Sullivan et. al., 2024). Maslow's hierarchy situates belonging as analogous to love and includes friends, family and sexual intimacy (Figure 2; Maslow, 1968). Non-hetreosexual people experience stigmatisation and struggle to feel belonging within social structures and institutions, through legislation, among peers

and family, resulting in actual or perceived loneliness and isolation (Eickers, 2024; Matsick, Sullivan et. al., 2024).

Eickers (2024) identified feelings of belonging on digital spaces had not been sufficiently explored; the study findings showed LGBTQ+ representation helped individuals from this group feel less alone and supported them in figuring out their identities to feel and find where they belonged in the world. However, this comes with caution that LGBTQ+ people are not a homogenous group and are exposed and vulnerable to individuals who may discriminate and marginalise, leading to risk of mental health decline; online closed forums and communities are often safer online spaces (Eickers, 2024). The quality of connection to others varies from online to offline and it must be considered that only specific parts of one's identity are represented online – the argument could be physical connection cannot be substituted through digital spaces (Eickers, 2024).

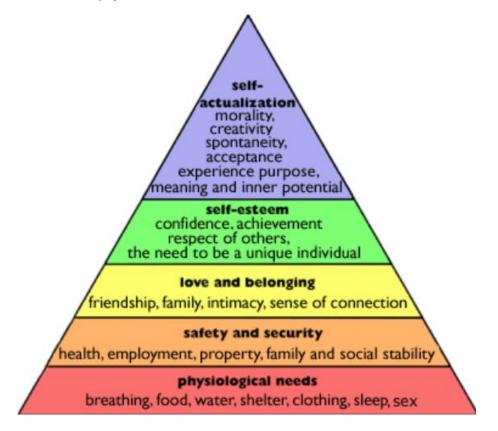


Figure 2. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Constructing Sexual Identity Online

Today individuals explore their world via multiple mobile and internet platforms to understand and construct their understanding of the world with greater privacy, safety and control (Miller, 2015; Filice, Raffoul, et. al., 2019; Giano, 2021).

Kay (2018) highlights the challenges emerging adults face being "digital natives" (p.265) where individuals experience a lack of clarity and confusion around identities due to exposure of various cultures and beliefs from across the globe, all immediately accessible online, some of which are in direct conflict with who and where the individual develops offline, culturally and socially. Miller (2017) also uses the term "digital natives" (p. 522) to describe emerging adults but with the caveat that this group "require extensive media literacy and education on the benefits and risks of online engagement" (p. 522).

Dhoest and Van Ouytsel (2023) conducted the only mixed methods approach exploring the importance of social media and the internet in sexual identity construction across four generations of non-heterosexual men. The study recruited men for a quantitative survey (*n*=684) and found that the different generations explored their sexual identities around the same age but in very different contexts socially and the media. The older generations explored their sexual identities and social media but played a part in exploring their sexual identities later in life when social media became available. Social media for the younger generations fulfilled the need for connection and information sharing. However the study looked at gay men and no other intersections of identity (gender or class) and therefore homogenises the experiences of the population and also creates fixed boundaries between the generations. The study is also a retrospective reflection and is therefore not as reliable as present day experiences.

Having conducted the literature search for this study a number of times, this was the only paper which utilised any kind of quantitative approach in measuring the perceived importance of online platforms. There was no quantitative research into the influence social media had on sexual identity construction for non-heterosexual men and this could be an area for future research.

Online interactions give individuals experience, confidence and expectations of offline behaviours including using terminologies, slang and nuances in navigating a new culture (Crowson & Goulding, 2013; Dhoest & Szulc, 2013; Harper, Serrano, et. al., 2016), nonetheless online interactions open up these same people to a degree of risk, exploitation and sexual objectification where self-esteem and self-worth are attached to offline sexual interactions potentially leading to risky sexual practices (Race, 2015), pressure to engage in sexual behaviours, a fragile sense of self-worth and lowered self-esteem (Crocker & Park, 2004).

Other scholarly research into sexual identity formation and the disclosure of one's nonheterosexual identity to others offline, return both positive and negative results in both behaviour and psychological outcomes (Morandini, Blaszczynski et. al., 2015; Lemke & Weber, 2017; Giano, 2021). Whilst an individual may present in an offline environment one way, they can access applications and websites to present another – sometimes completely opposite – aspect of identity (Owens, 2017; McConnell et. al., 2018).

This limited existing research into experiences of non-heterosexual men's sexual identity development considering online (and offline) interactions have limitations regarding an intersectional approach including samples from university settings meaning higher levels of education and more affluent populations (Craig & McInroy, 2013; Bates, Hobman & Bell,

2020; Talbot, Talbot et. al., 2020), using predominantly white participants (Craig & McInroy, 2013; Bates, Hobman & Bell, 2020; Talbot, Talbot et. al., 2020), samples including those who were definite and open about their sexuality whilst navigating safe, accepting environments (Bates, Hobman & Bell, 2020; Parmenter, Galliher et. al., 2020), those from emerging adult populations – 18- to 25-year-olds (Szulc & Dhoest, 2013; Bates, Hobman & Bell, 2020) and studies which included samples across the whole LGBTQ+ community which do not consider the complexities of sexuality, gender or fluidity in identity construction (Craig & McInroy, 2013; Bates, Hobman & Bell, 2020).

When people identify and connect with the in-group for increased validation and self-worth, a carefully curated identity needs to be presented to the world, both on- and offline. A balance between being accepted by one group whilst simultaneously not being rejected by another, needs to be met (Stets & Burke, 2000; Hornsey, 2008; Trepte, 2013). This can be challenging based on multiple minoritised intersectional identities residing in one individual.

Intersectionality- Theoretical Considerations

Crenshaw (2013) coined the term intersectionality, highlighting multiple interlocking identities and experiences of black women who did not meet the feminist ideals of womanhood which were created from white, Eurocentric, racially biased, middle classed experiences of privilege. Although the term intersectionality was used by Crenshaw (2013) the roots of the theory can be identified with African American feminist scholars of the 19th century such as Sojourner Truth (c.1851) and Anna Cooper (c.1892), who highlighted that the movements of women's suffrage and racial equality did not adequately address the oppressions felt by women of colour (McCormick-Huhn et. al., 2019). Bowleg (2008) cautions the use of intersectionality in qualitative research analysis, to not approach data with an additive lens (e.g., black + lesbian + women) but rather an intersectional one (e.g., black lesbian woman) given minority social identities are interdependent to one another, not exclusive components. The rise of research taking an intersectional lens is evident given the social justice movements across the globe such as #metoo and Black Lives / Black Trans Lives Matter. It has helped in understanding the layers of political, social, religious and cultural exploitation within capitalist societies (Nayak, 2023). The importance of recognising the multiply marginalised identities which exert pressure on the individual and further stress as a collective is vital in considering during this research which aims to recruit a sample of non-heterosexual men with multiple marginalised identities such as ethnicity, age, disability and class.

However, within research, intersectionality has its limitations. Nayak (2023) highlights intersectionality failing to identify the fluidity of power relations within a capitalist society. It does not look at the roots of exploitation and oppression, nor does it identify the struggles of violence and exploitation within and outside communities. Warner and colleagues (2020) raise concerns that intersectionality can lead to unidimensional views of identity and further segregation of minoritised groups leading to greater separation and support for those multiply marginalised individuals.

Assemblage Theory

An extension of intersectionality which allows for "interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space and body" (Punar, 2017, p. 212) is assemblage theory. Assemblage theory rejects essentialising identity, e.g. a queer trans man, and considers interconnecting factors against "linearity, coherency and permanency" (Punar, 2017, p. 212) – the social and

historical context along with geographic location contribute to the identity experience (Delanda, 2006).

However, Assemblage Theory is not without its limitations. Buchanan (2015) raises the issue of Assemblage theory focusing on the "complex and undecidable" (p.382), it benefits something or someone outside of assemblage itself and the components of the assemblage are always known and intentional – which inevitably as human beings is often not the case.

Intersectionality and LGBTQ+ Research

Given intersectional analysis of data requires a researcher to interpret findings within the context of sociopolitical structures of inequality, the implicit experiences of oppression and privilege need to be made explicit (Bowleg, 2008; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008) so that multiply marginalised identities within already marginalised groups can be made visible (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008) whilst acknowledging there is no framework for analysing through an intersectional lens, therefore, a hermeneutics of suspicion approach is required. As Josselson (2004) states, to approach data with hermeneutics of suspicion (or demystification) seeks to reveal the untold story beneath the told one. The interpretive analysis of qualitative data from this position "tear away the masks and illusions of consciousness, to move beyond the materiality of a life to the underlying psychic or social processes that are its foundation" (p.13).

That is not to say the participant is deceptive or intentionally expressing themselves in ways that are to be disbelieved. Subjects are often giving as accurate account as possible to their experience however, within a framework of oppressive experiences within a social hierarchy the understanding and detailed awareness of these structures often go unnoticed (Josselson, 2004). Limitations in existing LGBTQ+ research continually point to the lack of diversity within samples (Craig & McInroy, 2013; Chester et. al., 2016; Owens, 2017; Bates, Hobman & Bell, 2020; Brandt & Carmichael, 2020; Talbot, Talbot, Row & Briggs, 2020) which are dominated by white, cisgender, gay, healthy, educated, rich, young men and women. McCormick-Huhn and colleagues (2019) highlight this as the overrepresentation of WEIRD (White/Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) participants in psychology research.

Scott (2015) found research into LGBTQ+ people often either eliminates identities as a deconstructive approach to labelling or focuses on a specific marginalised, oppressed identity in isolation, thereby ignoring other interconnected inter-related experiences.

Viewing research through an intersectional lens reveals and addresses power dynamics within social structures and social comparisons (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Trepte, 2006; Hill-Collins, 2019; McCormick-Huhn, et. al., 2019), it identifies the invisible nuances of a whole person (Crenshaw, 1991; Leung, 2021) and dissolves assumptions and biases researchers may have about a particular demographic (Hill-Collins, 2019; McCormick-Huhn, et. al., 2019).

Current research exploring specific intersecting identities in relation to non-heterosexual men include being a gay male with lower socioeconomic status (Flowers & Buston, 2001), being a gay male within a religious denomination (Bhugra, 1997; Shilo, Yossef & Savaya, 2016), being a gay male and holding an immigrant status (Thing, 2010; Dhoest, 2016; Huang & Fang, 2019) and being a gay male person of colour (Choi, Han, Ayala et. al., 2017; Calabrese, Earnshaw et. al., 2018).

The findings from these studies, found being gay mattered but was not the *only* thing that mattered (Thomsen, 2019), that gay identities are multi-layered and interwoven with other identities and backgrounds (Thing, 2010) and communities exist outside of the dominant gay community where marginalised non-heterosexual people gather to create/exchange shared experiences of being marginalised gay minorities (Choi, Han, Ayala et. al., 2011).

However, Warner and Shields' (2013) critique of intersectionality in psychology state although awareness is brought to these multiple identities, it does not address the fluidity of identity and by accepting this essentialist perspective, it feeds into the hierarchical structures it aims to address. This is echoed in Warner, Kurtis and Adya's (2020) paper which creates a unidimensional experience for minority individuals and intersectionality continues to segregate "subjects into ever-dividing oppressed groups" (p.265) where intersectionality allows people to fall into the dualistic position of privilege and oppressed and does not account for individual agency or power in other social, historic and geographic contexts.

Assemblage theory creates an understanding that heterogeneous bodies connect to one another through these social, historical and geographic positions and rather than remain fixed with identities that can be broken down into parts, acknowledging fluidity of identity that subjects positioned within social structures will always be developing and unfolding identities (Gergen, 1991; DeLanda, 2006; Warner, Kurtis & Adaya, 2020).

Therefore, a further gap in research is identified for sexual identity construction considering the intersectionalities of non-heterosexual people and their influence and presentation onand offline. It is acknowledged that the flexible aspect of identities as assemblages are a possibility (Punar, 2007) with people who do not adhere to the binary of homosexual men

including those who self-identify as non-heterosexual (pansexual, bisexual, queer, sexually fluid or men questioning their sexual identity) men, including trans men, are missing from samples.

Summary

For decades researchers, LGBTQ+ people and others have questioned and explored the causality of sexual identities that pertain to be something other than heterosexual. The need to understand the process which underpins the drive to reject a socially accepted identity and embrace another, less acceptable one, bringing social risk, threat and alienation, none the less demonstrates strength and resilience. Whether biological, environmental, social or a combination of influences, it is apparent that sexual identity must be constructed in conjunction with other intersecting identities each with its own privilege and oppressive factors. However we must now consider the technological influence that exerts itself on minority groups and how technology can support individuals to navigate and construct a unique sense of self, particularly where multiply minority identities are presented simultaneously.

The literature presented here articulates a marginalised demographic facing pressure and stigmatisation from society at large and prejudices mirrored within the minoritised communities, policed from the apex by White, gay, cisgender, masculine, young, healthy men. The rise of social and political activism across the globe, via technology, such as the Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and the Black Trans Lives Matter movements have begun to push back and highlight the privileged experiences of those people consciously and unconsciously oppressing the multiply marginalised who sit outside the binary structures of society (Eltahawy, 2020).

This literature review reveals gaps in the knowledge in multiple areas including a dearth of research into multiply minoirtised populations within the LGBTQ+ community and how these identities both present and potentially change over time, and the lack of consideration the communication and information sharing age has had on sexual identity construction for non-heterosexual men. Therefore this research is vital in bridging the gap to understand the influence social media has on sexual identity construction for non-heterosexual m

Chapter Three: Methodology

Research Aim

The aim of this study is to explore the experiences of non-heterosexual men's sexual identity construction considering the effects of social media. The research will be using an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, giving an in-depth understanding of participant processes and interpretation of both inner and outer experiences.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

- Explore existing literature to identify gaps in current research into sexual identity development for non-heterosexual men.
- Engage in a qualitative study through semi-structured interviews with as diverse population as possible of non-heterosexual men to understand how social media contribute to construction of sexual identities.

Introduction

This chapter will briefly outline the ontological and epistemological position in relation to the research and subsequent rationale for the chosen methodological approach. The research design will be presented including the recruitment strategy, the sample and the methods of data collection and data analysis. The ethical considerations and challenges of engaging in a study of this kind will also be presented.

Overview of Methodology

Research design falls into three distinct approaches: quantitative (numerical data), qualitative (data of observations and unique experiences of individuals) and mixed method approaches (a combination of both qualitative and quantitative data).

Leung (2015) states the importance of positioning research within an epistemology that aligns with the methodology appropriate for the study's purpose – if it is not aligned, the results and findings will subsequently be flawed. As this research is exploring the experiences of non-heterosexual men, their subjective experiences of reality will be unique and take a relativist ontology. Asking participants to make meaning out of their experiences lends itself to constructionist epistemology, particularly due to the engagement with social media and other interpersonal interactions. This type of phenomenological exploration would be suited to a qualitative approach and one which focuses on ideographic experience.

A qualitative approach was seen as the most appropriate design for this study because qualitative research focuses on the lived experience of participants and data collected is rich and deep (Cresswell & Poth, 2016; Robinson, 2023). Although not generalisable, it enables a detailed understanding of an individual's experiences as they go through or experience an event or time in their lives (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009; Crotty, 2015; Robinson, 2023).

Postmodernism is a rejection of the modernist perspective on existence. Postmodernism moves away from knowing the world with certainty, order and clarity and into understanding reality as relative, ambiguous and fragmented (Crotty, 2015).

Cresswell and Poth (2016) state postmodernist ontologies are unique knowledge about the world, created through societies' structures of multiple hierarchies involving power and

control. These hierarchies include intersectional identities such as class, ethnicity and gender. Taking a post-modernist position allows creativity. The de-centring of subject matter and prizing 'non-identity' (Crotty, 2015, p.185) aligns with the purpose of this research.

Given that post-modernist ontology allows for the reality of experience to be relativist, the epistemology for this study positions itself as constructionist, where individuals engage with their world and make meaning out of this engagement using their minds. Meaning is therefore constructed by the individual rather than an external objective truth be found (Cresswell & Poth, 2016; Crotty, 2015). As human beings exist within social structures and social hierarchies, the concept of social constructionism posits the individual will actively create meaning about themselves and their world based on the interactions they have with others, rather than being a passive recipient of knowledge. Ergo this research looks at the phenomena of social media and would best fit a social constructionist epistemology. As a development and extension to social constructionism, the theoretical position of this study takes a phenomenological stance whereby the experiences of the world are unique to the individual and no two experiences will be the same (Cresswell & Poth, 2016; Silverman, 2014; Crotty, 2015). The methodology chosen for the study aligns with a post-modern relative, social constructionist view which is appropriate for meeting the aim of exploring the experiences of non-heterosexual men's sexual identity construction considering the effects of social media. Other qualitative methodological approaches were considered (Table 3) however using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), where individuals make meaning of their worlds from their unique experiences to understand how their lives

have been influenced by social realities (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) seems the most

appropriate and relevant.

Qualitative Approach	Description of Approach	Appropriateness for this research
Ethnography	Used to capture cultural practices, beliefs etc. Observations of a culture – religious members, ethnic groups.	Research was not on a culture or belief systems so would not answer question. Observations of the demographic would not give information on the subjective intrapersonal experiences of sexual identity construction.
Grounded Theory	Often used to understand problem- solving, decision making and types of behaviour	This was considered in using a constructivist grounded theory approach. However, hypotheses felt inappropriate, and there is already a number of theories and pieces of literature / research which can be in opposition to the blank canvas required to build up theory.
Narrative Research	A framework to understand aspects of human experience and the meanings assigned to said experiences. Data is collected and results presented in a narrative.	Narrative analysis finds objective level of analysis in assessing a person's life experience looking at patterns in the individual's life which has led to their current position in chronological order. This would not be suited due to the idiographic and unique subjectivities not necessarily in chronological order.

Researcher's Epistemological Position

Gaining deeper understanding of myself through counselling, yoga, meditation, and through working with clients in a psychotherapeutic capacity, it is my belief that all individuals have unique lived experiences and no two people will experience an event in the same way. I believe these experiences cannot be quantified or measured, nor can they be generalisable and take a positivist stance. My ontological view is post-modern, relativist believing that multiple realities can exist at once. Given the nature of how human beings understand themselves, their world and their place within it through interactions with others, the epistemological position of this study is social constructionist (Silverman, 2014; Crotty, 2015). I recognise my world view aligns to the same ontological and epistemological approach of this research. This was not intentional but a decision which was made to most accurately align with answering the research question. As highlighted, other approaches were considered but the IPA approach feels more appropriate to answer the research question.

The qualitative nature of the study includes in-depth interviews, meaning as a researcher I will be immersed in the participants' worlds. Given the very nature of the topic and my own identity as a queer person, it will be important to recognise my own biases, experiences and how these may have shape how I felt whilst immersed in the participant's world and subsequently how the data has been interpreted. Smith (2011, 2017) recognises personal lived experiences participants bring often resonate with the researcher and therefore the researcher must bracket (Crotty, 1998; LeVasseur, 2003) their experience and consider a double hermeneutic approach to the analysis of data. The researcher is trying to interpret the world of the participant as the participant is trying to interpret their subjective experience.

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community with my own intersecting minority identities, now being a researcher I needed to bracket (Crotty, 1998; LeVasseur, 2003) my experiences, getting as close and impartial to the world of the participant as possible. LaVasseur (2003) advises caution when expecting bracketing to occur in phenomenology as the individual's subjective understanding, their unique experiences and their interpretation of the world and those around them are inextricably linked. Therefore a process of acknowledgement, recognition and reflexivity about the researcher's experiences are more realistic and transparent.

Although every effort has been made to recognise and bracket my experiences from those of each participant, Cresswell and Poth (2016) and LaVasseur (2003) highlight no matter how thorough the bracketing process, the researcher will always bring their own subjective perspectives, values and beliefs into the research at various stages. I worked on my experiences to understand my identities (*See* Reflexivity – *p.405*), my dominant narratives, intersectionalities and the importance of being transparent in the research process.

Reflexivity

Jamieson, Govaart and Pownall (2023) state the incorporation of reflexivity into research is one of the clearest differences of qualitative and quantitative work. Reflexivity is the vital examination of the researcher's understanding of themselves and the way in which their experiences position and guide their work (Jamieson, Govaart & Pownall, 2023). Reflexivity is the inner dialogue that leads to transforming Self and transforming practice. (Hofer, 2017; Jamieson, Govaart & Pownall, 2023).

As a practicing psychotherapist, my role requires consistent reflexive consideration of client experiences, how I may be impacting work with clients and my role within any therapeutic dynamic. The consideration of, and skills used, for reflexive professional practice place me in a solid position to think deeply about the research, act accordingly and appropriately. Reflexivity on the process was maintained with journal entries, discussion with the supervision team, and engagement with the same questions as the participants for transparency (Appendix O). Intracoding the data at different times occurred for consistency; intracoding does not necessarily make qualitative research reliable, but promotes reflexivity (O'Conner & Joffe, 2020).

Method

The following qualitative study utilised Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This methodology, rooted in phenomenology, gives participants the opportunity to explore their lived experiences in relation to how social media has influenced their non-heterosexual identities (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009; Smith, 2011, 2017).

Recruitment Strategy – Into the study

Recruitment of participants was through both online and offline avenues (Figure 3).

Recruitment online occurred through posting information for the study via two social media platforms ('X' – formerly Twitter – and Facebook as these are most populated). A partly snowballing recruitment sample resulted as the e-poster (Appendix F) could then be forwarded and re-posted through other users' pages. Other social media apps were considered which focused on people with a non-heterosexual identity, such as Grindr and SCRUFF, however these apps would only allow promotion of the study by paying for advertising space.

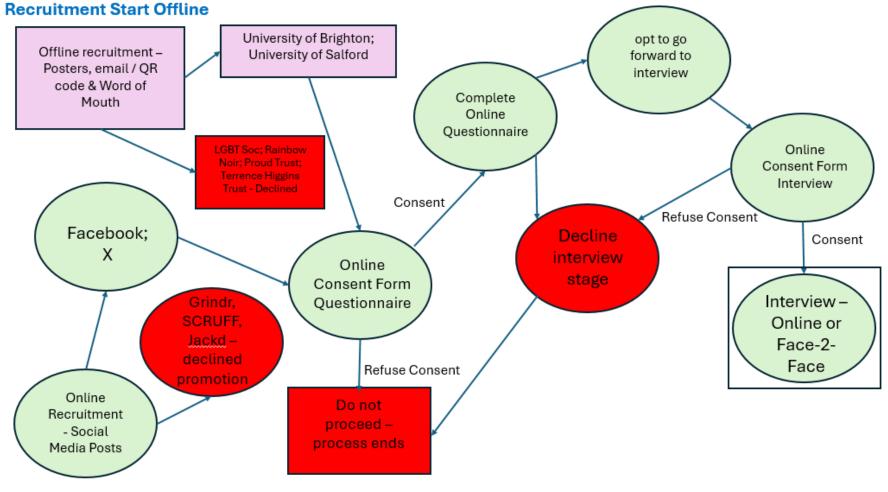
As social media is a fast-moving flow of information, it was important to repeatedly post the e-poster and study information on social media platforms every other day so as many people as possible had visibility to the e-poster.

Social media accounts for these mobile apps were set up using my student email address and used solely for this study; they did not contain any personal information or personal views, maintaining boundaries and professionalism.

Recruitment simultaneously occurred offline by approaching LGBTQ+ specific

organisations and charities including Terrence Higgins Trust, Rainbow Noir, Proud Trust, LGBT Foundation, George House Trust, Bi Pride UK, and Sparkle. These organisations have both physical offline locations (such as offices and community spaces) and social media platforms including e-mailing lists, so the study could be presented to multiple people simultaneously, capturing as wide a range of participants as possible – these organisations declined promotion directly or did not engage (Figure 3).

If an individual wanted to know more information about the study, participants could click the e-poster or scan the QR code on the offline poster (Appendix G) taking them directly to the participant information sheet (Appendix E). This was located in a specific secure domain within the University of Salford's hub dedicated to this project. This added a layer of consent to the study as participants were choosing to move through the initial stages of the process. Participants either rejected the study and navigated away from the page or remained and moved on, thereby giving implied consent. Figure 3 - Flowchart Documenting Recruitment into the Study



Recruitment Start Online

Recruitment Strategy – Questionnaire

Participants had the opportunity to read the participant information sheet (Appendix E) and if they wanted to participate they moved on to the next form which was the consent form (Appendix D). This created yet another layer of consent.

The consent form had multiple statements each of which the participant had to answer and submit to take them on to the questionnaire. Failure to answer all statements with 'agree' did not grant them access to the questionnaire.

A questionnaire was used as a way of collecting data about participants' identities and backgrounds in relation to their sexual identity (Appendix H). This method of collecting data gave an overview of how individuals identify in relation to gender, ethnicity, age, class, disability status, level of education and religion (not exhaustive list). It gave an overview of participant characteristics and presented an optional, self-selecting way to gather data for participants who wanted to engage in the semi-structured interview stage of the research.

Questionnaire Sample

It was decided a maximum sample of sixty (*n*=60) participants would complete the questionnaire which would give a substantial number of participants who may have wanted to participate in the interview stage. This was a self-selecting sample. The questionnaire was extensive for the purpose of collecting as much personal data as possible to purposefully select as diverse a sample as possible for the interview stage. Existing research omits highly diverse samples which consider multiply minoritised identities. Particularly excluded are participants from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Moscrop and colleagues (2019) state socioeconomic background is a key determinant for an individual's health, health care access and health outcomes but socioeconomic circumstances are rarely gathered in data collection. Wilson and colleagues (2020) found housing instability, food insecurity, high family debt, unemployment and transport challenges all contributed to lower socioeconomic status in majority populations. LGBTQ+ people faced additional factors including mental health issues, discrimination, limited access to services and substance use as contributors to lower socioeconomic status. Mueller and Parcel (1981) highlight the most appropriate way to identify socioeconomic status is through individual occupation due to fluctuation and variation of wages based on geography and highs or lows of fiscal markets including periods of recession, interest and inflation rates. Therefore, whilst it is recognised the questionnaire is highly personal, gathering this data for understanding social class felt important to understand participants' socioeconomic positions.

The data is presented (Appendix Ja) to give overview of individuals who participated in the questionnaire. On reflection, the level of personal information gathered for the purpose of this study was likely too detailed and perhaps even intrusive, however this was done for the purpose of selecting a diverse interview sample. Removing questions focusing on participant annual income and parental occupations would have been more appropriate and is something I would consider much more closely in future research. On reflection I wonder if the lack of uptake into the interview stage was due in part to the depth and intrusiveness of the online questionnaire and a simplified, less intrusive questionnaire would have been more appropriate for greater uptake of the interview stage.

The majority of participants were White British (n=32); eight (n=8) identified as Other;

Black African (n=5), two (n=2) Asian / Chinese; two (n=2) Asian / Pakistani; two (n=2) Middle Eastern and one (n=1) Black Caribbean. Most were of British (n=40) nationality. American participants (n=10) were the second biggest participants with one participant each from Indonesia (n=1), Zimbabwe (n=1), Ireland (n=1) and mixed (n=1). Some participants declined to answer these questions.

Of participants declaring a disability, most frequent (n=7) was Learning or Developmental. The dominant religion was Christian (n=17) followed by Agnosticism (n=12). There were Muslims (n=6), Spiritual (n=3) and Pagan (n=1) participants. Most of the questionnaire sample identified as gay (n=22) with bisexual (n=12) queer (n=4) and pansexual (n=3)participants. Most identified as men or trans men (n=42), non-binary (n=5) and three (n=3) as other gender identities. Interestingly the majority of the sample were educated to undergraduate level (n=18) and the same number had post graduate qualifications (n=18) with one person (n=1) holding a doctorate. Thirty-nine (n=39) were in full or part time work and some (n=7) were self-employed. The majority (n=22) earnt above £40,000 and fourteen (n=14) earning within the bracket (£21,000 - £40,000). The UK national average is around £30,000. Growing up, the majority (n=30) lived-in privately-owned homes, ten (n=10) in privately rented homes, five (n=5) in social housing and one (n=1)participant spent time in emergency accommodation.

Recruitment Strategy – Semi-structured Interviews

The questionnaire asked participants if they wanted to be considered to continue with the research and participate in a semi-structured interview with myself as researcher. Those participants at questionnaire stage who stated 'yes' were then collated and a purposeful sample selected from these consenting individuals considering a range of intersectional

identities other than white, western, cisgender, able bodied, masculine, gender conforming individuals. An added question at the questionnaire stage asked any participants if they were current counselling / psychotherapy students or staff members at the University of Salford. Any participant who answered yes to this was then filtered away from participating in the interviews and moved to the feedback page of the questionnaire. This was to avoid any conflicts of interest arising, given I am a member of staff at the University.

Using a qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews meant gathering rich subjective data for transcription and analysis using interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). Semi-structured interviews give participants the opportunity to explore in detail their sexual identity journey and how sexual identity for them has been created in relation to other aspects of their identities, disclosed at questionnaire stage.

It was also a chance to gather data about their social media use, how or if social media influenced their sexual identity and how sexual identity is presented online and offline. This again aligns with a social constructionist epistemology.

Semi-structured interviews explored individual experiences of sexual identity construction considering intersecting identities, therefore interview questions asking about superordinate aspects of sexual identity (e.g., tell me about being black in relation to...; tell me about being trans in relation to...; tell me about being bisexual in relation to...) would have been inappropriate (Calabrese et. al., 2017).

Approaching the interviews in a holistic format (e.g. How have your identities effected

your sexual identity construction? What identity do you feel has the biggest / smallest effect on how you identify your sexuality? How do you present your sexual identity on social media whilst incorporating other aspects of yourself?) included all identities and recognised them within a hierarchical framework of oppression (Appendix H; Liu, 2017).

Interview Sample

A sample was purposefully selected for the semi-structured interview stage. The sample consisted of six (n=6) participants, over eighteen, who identified as men or trans men (men with a trans history) who were non-heterosexual and held a social media presence. Participants were chosen who had a number of intersecting identities including being older in age, from racially minoritised groups, living with disabilities and being non-Christian amongst others.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis – Analysing Interviews

The research took an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach to analyse verbatim transcripts of semi-structured interviews to identify themes around participant experiences and any relation to intersecting identities toward sexual identity construction. This methodology gives a deeper understanding of the phenomena non-heterosexual men face, allowed for the diversity and variations of queerness. This also uncovers the historic, socio-political and temporal challenges this demographic faces (Chan & Farmer, 2017).

Feminist and queer theory considers the deconstruction of labels to be fundamental in the understanding of marginalised groups (Butler, 1990; Stock, 2021). However, the paradox of intersectionality is to understand the position of oppression/privilege within a social context, labels need to be understood and identified to shift the balance of power to an

equilibrium (Warner & Shields, 2013; Stock, 2021). Throughout the study participants were asked to consider their experiences in relation to their intersecting identities and how these are expressed and influence sexual identity construction through social media and in offline interactions given they are corporeal beings. IPA therefore positions itself as an appropriate methodology given the naure of sexuality where the approach can challenge understandings of 'othering' individuals (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009, p.143).

The analysis of qualitative data followed the framework laid out by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). The first version of IPA (2009) was taken for the methodological approach as this was most current when analysis began of the transcripts began and continued to be used to remain consistent throughout the research. The second version (2022) would be utilised in any further IPA research.

As per the IPA guidelines (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), each transcript was copied into a table with a column for emergent themes and a column for exploratory comments (Appendix K).

Reading and re-reading each transcript individually helped me familiarise with content, the participants phraseology and pauses to internalise the participant's voice helping in analysis.

Initial noting detailed anything of interest within the transcript giving a deeper connection to, and understanding of, the data through a line-by-line analysis looking at linguistic, descriptive and conceptual comments.

To reduce the volume of detail but retain the depth and complexity of the data, the notes and comments were cross referenced and emergent themes created which held the

connections, patterns and relationships between notes and original transcript.

The emergent themes were then grouped together where it was felt there were connections and links between emergent themes. These themes were then collapsed into superordinate themes. Some of the superordinate themes contained subthemes. The process was repeated for each transcript individually with the aim of bracketing subthemes and superordinate themes from the previous data. Once this had been completed for all transcripts separately, superordinate themes were grouped together across the cases making superordinate themes across cases (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

IPA "prioritizes engaging with participants' thoughts, emotions and feelings" (p. 455, McCoy, 2017) and therefore boundaries needed to be maintained to meet ethical standards.

IPA allows for a combination of approaches to data analysis. Smith (2004) states that the suggestions for engaging in IPA are just that – "suggestions" (p. 40) – and therefore a combination of other approaches or applications could be used simultaneously to give a richer understanding of participant experience.

IPA will give a deeper and more nuanced view of how non-heterosexual men make meaning of their place in society, the worlds they inhabit, how they begin to self-identify as non-heterosexual, how they present this to others in their online and offline worlds and how sexual identity construction is experienced along with other intersecting identities having helped/hindered their lives/construction in relation to power dynamics of privilege/oppression.

Analysing the data in this way helped to identify themes and experiences of sexual identity construction through an intersectional lens helping explore the contemporary sexual identity construction process considering multiply marginalised groups, which was the aim of this study.

Validity, Trustworthiness and Reliability in Qualitative Research

Ahmed (2024) highlights qualitative research as a growing trend and one that is vital for exploring nuance of individual experiences within their world and the services they access. Yet concerns are raised over the rigour and trustworthiness of qualitative research design. The fundamental pillar of qualitative research is to accurately present participant experiences. This research attempts to meet the need for qualitative research to be trustworthy, reliable and valid through various approaches. Much literature stresses the need for validity, trustworthiness and reliability in qualitative research (e.g. Rolfe, 2006; Adler, 2022; Ahmed, 2024; Nobel & Smith, 2025) and all present similarities for achieving these important conditions during qualitative research, especially during data collection and analysis in this study (Table 4).

These conditions will continually be attempted in this research through 'Truth Value' (Sandelowski, 1986; Nobel & Smith, 2025) - recognising the existence of multiple subjective realities, including my own, and presented through reflexive work, will bring awareness to any methodological subjectivity, preconceptions and personal biases (Ahmed, 2024). Bracketing these experiences allows for greater objectivity.

It is vital participants' accounts and experiences are presented both accurately and clearly. This aligns with Ahmed's (2024) approach of 'Credibility' - interviews will not be hurried and the analysis and immersion in individual data builds researcher rapport and allows for

deeper understanding of unique experience. Following completion of the study, postdoctoral research can be undertaken using other data sources such as focus groups or further interviews, to cross-verify any findings. Given the time and word constraints in this study, triangulation in the study may come from existing sexual identity development sources.

The research will maintain 'Consistency' (Sandelowski, 1986; Nobel & Smith, 2025) - the process, steps and analysis of the data showing connections both to the methodological approach of IPA and to the decision-making process when arriving at themes.

Sandelowski (1986), and Nobel and Smith (2025) state validity and reliability require 'Applicability' where findings can be applied to other groups, contexts or settings but the sample and findings in the study represent a relevant and current population aligned with the research question.

The transcripts for all participants; the tables of transcripts, exploratory notes and emergent themes (as outlined in Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009); and the spreadsheets holding analysis and groupings of themes for each participant, leading to identified superordinate or subordinate themes can all be available on request.

Table 4 - Table outlinin	a validity and reli	ability within thi	s research process
	g		

Truth Value / Validity	Reflexive work
	 Emergent themes and themes reviewed by the wider supervisory team Journalling, reflexive writing, personal therapy, supervision
	Representativeness of the findings
	 Sample of 6 participants who were open and willing to share in-depth exploration of their experiences Data collected from participants of different perspectives and backgrounds adding to credibility of findings Semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed allowing for immersion in the data allowing for revisiting the data and allowing for an iterative process to occur whilst remaining true to participant experience Use of thick, rich, verbatim extracts from participant interviews allows for transparency of aligning themes to participant experiences Page numbers used after exracts to demonstrate validity and build trustworthiness
Consistency / Reliability	Auditability
	 Clear description of the research process from the ethics application through to reporting findings Emergent themes, sub- and superordinate themes discussed with the supervisory team with decisions challenged and justified with the supervisory team reading through the findings and having access to the data
Applicability /	Application of findings to contexts
Generalisability	 Rich and thick detail of situation, context and detail of participants which evaluated the study and allows transferability to other groups within the population

Summary

The qualitative approach to this study gives a deeper, more nuanced understanding of identities in relation to sexual identity construction considering the effects of social media including rich thick experiential narratives in how identities are presented. At no time were participants under duress to share information nor will there be any identifiable information used in the study, as anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained (unless there are risks to the participant or from the participant to the wider public). Consent was obtained at each stage prior to moving the study forward. The research aims to be transparent, trustworthy and reliable.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Salford's Ethics Committee (Appendix C).

The ethical considerations for the questionnaire stage of the recruitment process were considered as an opportunity to gather data for recruiting as diverse a sample as possible. I considered non-heterosexual men who held multiply marginalised identities beyond race / ethnicity and into more historic and hierarchical minorities including disability and class.

I thought factors contributing to social class would come from historic experiences of homelife including parental occupations and accommodation tenancy status. Diemer and colleagues (2012) highlight in the field of psychology, socioeconomic status is often measured through "educational attainment and occupational prestige" whereas sociologists rely on "economic resources, such as income, earnings and wealth" (p.5). On reflection it might have been more appropriate to ask a direct question about where participants viewed themselves socio-economically within class demographic and not ask such probing questions around income and occupation.

I had to remember I was a researcher – and not a therapist – therefore it was important to make the interactions as balanced as possible even though there may be the assumption that the researcher could be the expert, however the participant was the expert in their experience. Awareness of these considerations were managed/maintained through regular academic supervision and through clinical supervision – a compulsory component of maintaining psychotherapeutic accreditation in which personal experiences can be discussed and challenged in a confidential and therapeutic space.

Considering the research explored the experiences and behaviours of non-heterosexual men recounting sexual identity construction as influenced by social media and how their identities were received in a patriarchal, heteronormative, heterosexist environment - in combination with this population having higher than average mental health challenges (Scott, 2015; Spittlehouse, Boden & Horwood, 2019; Pachankis et. al., 2020) - there could have been adverse emotional reactions to past experiences/trauma including physical/verbal bullying and abuse, racism, homophobia, transphobia and discrimination.

This could be triggered by reflecting on past experiences as participants narrated their lives, it could also be a current experience for some.

As such while the interviews were conducted in a supportive and semi-directional manner it was possible participants may have experienced a degree of discomfort. If this were to occur, participants would have been offered the opportunity to pause and/or end the interview. None of the participants displayed a reaction of this type.

I am a practicing, accredited psychotherapist and have experience in the field of mental health crisis, safeguarding, risk assessment and complex case management. I needed to be conscious to position myself as researcher and not in a therapeutic position if distress occurred. I could have drawn on my knowledge of risk assessments and crisis management in extreme cases. These risks were therefore mitigated by:

- Keeping a record of national crisis numbers which could be disseminated to
 participants at the start of the study and signposted / redistributed if participants
 needed them (e.g. Samaritans, Papyrus).
- Signposting individuals to national charities or services focused on LGBTQ+ mental health (e.g., Terrence Higgins Trust, LGBT Foundation)
- Screened at PIS / CF for diagnosed severe mental health conditions prior to interview.
- Researcher could also signpost participants to a list of qualified counsellor/service who can deliver online and face-to-face counselling (Counselling Directory and British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy directory).

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I have my own experiences and trauma in relation to my sexual identity journey and intersectionalities. I was conscious that I needed to bracket my experiences in conducting this research and that I might have identified with the experiences brought up by participants. I had access to personal counselling services as well as academic and clinical supervision to help manage and support this process.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

Participants in the study (Table 5) predominantly identified as gay (n=6) with one using the identity of queer simultaneously to gay. The majority held higher education or postgraduate qualifications (n=4). Half of the participants (n=3) were from Middle Eastern, South Asian or East Asian heritage and half of the participants (n=3) identified with having a disability recognised under the U.K. Equality Act (2010). Most participants (n=4) were aged between 26-35 years old with the oldest participant in the 46 – 55 age range. Most participants used Facebook (n=5) and Instagram (n=5). It could be assumed the majority of the participants were from middle-class backgrounds based on privately owned childhood home (n=5) and parents with middle-class roles which required qualifications and allowed opportunity for career progression (n=4). The majority of participants' income met or exceeded the average UK salary of £36,963 according to the Office for National Statistics (n=4); one participant was excluded from this due to their residence in the United States of America. A conversion of currency to American dollars showed the participant was under the average salary for the United States, which is \$65,470, according to the Bureau of Labour Statistics. The sample was as diverse as possible inclusive of nationalities, ethnicities, disabilities and religions. However, all identified as gay men, the majority were in the 26 – 35 age range (n=4) and most had postgraduate degrees (n=4) and came from assumed middle-class backgrounds (*n*=4).

Table 5. Participant Demographic

	Kurt	Chris	James	Donald	Adam	Zain
Ethnicity	White British	White British	White British	Asian British Chinese	Iranian - American	Asian British Indian
Age	36-45	26-35	26-35	26-35	26-35	46-55
Faith / Religion	Spiritual	Agnostic	Atheist	Agnostic	Muslim	Muslim
Sexual Identity	Gay	Gay	Gay	Gay	Gay	Gay
					Queer	
Disability	Chronic Condition Learning disability	-	Learning disability	-	-	Chronic Condition
Highest Qualification	A Level's	Master's degree	Master's Degree	Master's Degree	Master's Degree	-
Income (before tax)	£0 - £20,000	£41,000 - £60,000	£21,000 - £40,000	£21,000 - £40,000	(£21,000 - £40,000)	£21,000 - £40,000
					\$26,550 - \$50,560	
Current Job	Bar Supervisor (and	Psychotherapist	Wellbeing	Paralegal	PhD Candidate	Independent Living
	Undergrad student)		Practitioner			Officer
Parental Jobs	Accountant /	Administrator /	Receptionist / Train	Accountant	Graphic	Housewife / Writer
	Engineer	Engineer	conductor		Designer/Doctor	and activist
Childhood Property	Privately Owned	Privately Owned	Privately Owned	Privately Owned	Privately Owned	Council Housing
Status						Privately Owned
Social Media	Facebook, Instagram,	Facebook,	Facebook, LinkedIn	Instagram, Grindr	Facebook, Instagram,	Facebook, Instagram,
Platforms	Twitter	Instagram,			Twitter, TikTok,	Twitter
		Twitter, TikTok,			SnapChat, Grindr	
		Grindr				

An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was applied to the transcripts with a systematic and methodical approach as outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). Each transcript initially read and re-read with note taking occurring during this time. Transcripts were analysed in detail, line by line, identifying linguistic (highlighted blue), descriptive (highlighted green) and conceptual comments (highlighted red - see Appendix J for examples). Often comments incorporating two or all of these categories were identified in the transcript by highlight and underlining / bold font. Emergent themes came from the data by encapsulating and summarising the essence of the statement(s) keeping close to the transcript and exploratory notes as possible. Table 6 gives a clear breakdown of the process undertaken to analyse each transcript.

Stage of IPA (from Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009)	Evidenced in the study
Reading and Re-reading	Transcripts created following the interviews. These were created by hand, not from transcription software. This gave a deep dive into and familiarity with the content, the tone, nuances, the stresses and the inflections of the interview.
Initial noting	Initial noting picked out anything which felt important and/or things in relation to the question. Things/experiences which have meaning to the individual – these were placed in the exploratory comment's column. Comments were either conceptual (highlighted red), linguistic (highlighted blue) or descriptive (highlighted green). Where there were overlap text was highlighted and also font bold or underlined. This was done electronically using the table outlined in Smith, Flowers and Larkin (p.85, 2009). Original transcript in the middle, exploratory comments on the right (Appendix K)
Developing emergent themes	Reducing the volume of detail down to a word or short phrase whilst closely staying with the exploratory comments which also aligned with the transcript to create emergent themes. The table these were in the left column (Appendix K).
Searching for connections across emergent themes	Emergent themes were placed into an Excel spread sheet and given colours / moved around to group emergent themes together which held similar meaning giving a coherence to the data beyond chronological recall. These created superordinate themes – putting 'like with like' and creating a new name for the cluster. These were called abstractions (e.g. Splitting) and some came from subsumptions where the emergent theme – such as 'Exploring' takes on the superordinate theme and brings other emergent themes together. As discussed in the thesis, there was a polarisation between the superordinate themes which went together well, such as 'Ignoring-Resisting / Acceptance'.
Moving onto the next case	Attempting to bracket the themes and ideas which came up in the previous transcript / analysis and repeat the process $1 - 4$ for the next transcript.
Looking for patterns across cases	The superordinate themes for all participants were then analysed and grouped together to form clusters of similar/linked themes. There were themes, such as 'luck', which stood out but were not necessarily connected to others. There were themes such as 'Awareness of difference' which was clearly something all participants shared and was mentioned a lot. There were themes such as 'Conforming' and 'Performance of identity' which had to be renamed after consideration of what the difference a performance to conforming was, and where the authentic Self was expressed in their world. These became part of the superordinate group 'The Performances' with 'Splitting' and 'Synthesising used as subthemes which captured the themes more accurately.

 Table 6. Table setting out the stages of IPA and the analysis process conducted in this thesis

The emergent themes were grouped together where it was felt there were connections and links between emergent themes. These created larger themes which were superordinate themes. The superordinate themes contained subthemes, for example those based on polarities of experiences such as Exploring and Understanding. The process was repeated for each transcript individually with the aim of bracketing subthemes and superordinate themes from the previous data. Once this had been completed for all transcripts separately, individual superordinate themes were grouped together across the participants, making superordinate themes across cases.

The initial experience participants felt was an internal 'Awareness of Difference' to their peers, conflicting with social expectations. These always occurred offline as participants are corporeal beings and 'Awareness of Difference' occurred because of the challenging bidirectional interactions the external world was having with the internal felt sense of the individual.

Participants experienced 'Gaining Knowledge of Identity' by Exploring and Understanding their identity. They engaged with 'The Performances' by Splitting and Synthesising their identities based on location and audience. Participants progressed on 'A Journey to Acceptance' through an initial Ignoring-Resisting their non-heterosexual identity, and eventually experienced acceptance from others which subsequently helped them accepting themselves.

Through these interactions participants felt empowerment in themselves and engaged in activities which empowered the communities in simultaneous and interactive ways in both offline and online interactions.

As the individual is the centre of their world and continuing the social constructionist position that participants create meaning from their world as they exist within it, existing theoretical components were identified from the data.

Social Stress, minority stress and intra-community stress, based on individuals' minority or multiple minoritised status were identified. These factors created experiences of oppression and prejudice leading to negative mental health outcomes seen consistently across the study.

Additionally the pedagogical concept of 'Threshold Concept' was used to present the point at which participants' curiosity resulted in knowledge that was irreversible, uncomfortable, liminal and needed to be integrated to their holistic self. Participants, in a very human way, wanted to understand themselves more fully, so questioned their internal experiences against the external messages received from the world through a feedback loop and in doing so realised their difference was based on same-sex attraction.

It was noted that subordinate themes held oppositional qualities which held a fluidity, existing on a continuum along which these experiences simultaneously interacted with one another.

The following findings demonstrate detailed experiences of participants presented through superordinate themes 1) Awareness of Difference and Challenging Interaction with the World 2) Gaining Knowledge of Identity 3) The Performances 4) A Journey to Acceptance 5) Empowerment and 6) Luck. The existing theories of social, minority and intra-community stress, did not hold subthemes but nevertheless created feelings of negative mental health and oppression. Threshold concept is discussed to conclude.

Table 7 - Superordinate Themes Across Participants

	Zain	Adam	Chris	James	Kurt	Donald	Subordinate Themes			
	Superordin	Superordinate Theme Across Cases - Theme 1: Awareness of Difference and Challenging Interaction with the World								
Individual Superordinate Theme	Consciously Different to Majority	A Life of Feeling Different	Language of others highlights my difference	I'm different in this other way as well	l was always different as a child	Different in more ways than one				
	Superordinate Theme Across Cases - Theme 2: Gaining Knowledge of Identity									
Individual Superordinate	Questioning	Search for answers	What does it mean to be gay?	How do I figure this all out? / Questioning	Searching and exploring	Exploring self through others	Exploring			
Theme	Experiences	Understanding	Coming to terms with identity	Realisations	It clicked	Discovering	Understanding			
		Super	ordinate Theme	Across Cases - The	me 3: The Perfor	mances				
Individual Superordinate Theme	Separating parts of self	Hiding Authenticity	Curating parts of my self	Performing in secret	Performance and the alter ego	Curating	Splitting			

	Zain	Adam	Chris	James	Kurt	Donald	Subordinate Themes
Individual Superordinate Theme	Synthesis	Integration	Bringing sexuality into the world of others	Creating a genuine whole	I'm coming out	<i>Complexity of the whole</i>	Synthesising
		Superoro	linate Theme Acr	oss Cases - Theme	4: A Journey to A	cceptance	
	Approval of Self	Connections and Accepting My Diversity	Acceptance of self	Healing myself through the role models I see; Live your life and find your positivity	Acceptance through popular culture	Authenticity and shared feeling create normalisation	Accepting Self
Individual Superordinate Theme	Connection and support from others	Acceptance from others	Accepted by other people	Appreciation and Support	Supportive – surprising - others	Acceptance by others	Acceptance from others
	Negativity and Denial	Denial, distortion	Avoidance & Control	I'm not sure how this feels	Resistance	Avoidance	lgnoring- Resisting

	Zain	Adam	Chris	James	Kurt	Donald	Subordinate Themes		
		Superordinate Theme Across Cases - Theme 5: Empowerment							
Individual Superordinate	Connection and support towards others	Supporting Others	Supporting Others		Giving back	Connections	Empowering others		
Theme	Positivity	Empowerment	Hear my voice	Empowerment	Empowerment	Empowerment	Empowerment of Self		
		I	Superordinate T	heme Across Case	es - Theme 6: Luck	(
Individual Superordinate Theme	Luck	Luck	Luck	Luck	Luck	Luck			
	Existing Theories: Social Stress, Minority Stress and Intra-Community Stress								
Individual Superordinate Theme	Negative Feelings	Negative feelings	Negative emotions	Negativity	Negative Psychological Effects	Poor mental health	Negative Mental Health		

	Zain	Adam	Chris	James	Kurt	Donald	Subordinate Themes
Individual Superordinate Theme	Discrimination and abuse from others	Discrimination	Discrimination	Discrimination Prejudice Oppression	Discrimination Prejudice Oppression	Discrimination Prejudice Oppression	Oppression
	Existing Theories: Threshold Concept						
Individual Superordinate Theme		Ask Google	The struggle		lt suddenly clicked		

Awareness of Difference and Challenging Interactions with the World

Introduction

Awareness of difference was the conscious awareness that the individual felt, and/or behaved, differently to their peers. These feelings and experiences were held in contradiction to social and familial expectations, usually around gender role behaviour, emotional connections and attraction towards others of the same sex. Findings show experiences of feeling different always occurred offline in reality, as people are corporeal beings and feelings are embodied (Gendlin, 1996; Turkle 2011).

Participants in the study recalled having an awareness of being different to their peers as children but not having the language or education in understanding what that difference was. The difference was routinely and overtly highlighted to the individual through challenging interactions by society, peers or family members by violence or slurs, internally experienced through responses to microaggressive behaviours (e.g. to shame and belittle a person or action that is seen as socially unusual or unpopular; Nadal, 2013). Through these experiences fear, isolation, difference and discomfort in self, occurred and a negative selfconcept emerges.

Kurt

For Kurt his awareness of difference was something that had been present as an inner knowing, "...I just thought like, I was different..." (p.1) as he realised "...that I liked the look of guys and not girls" (p.1) and by the time he "...realised that I was gay which was around age 10, 12..." (p.3) society around him rejected LGBTQ+ people at a socio-political level through legislation such as the infamous Section 28 (Local Government Act, 1988).

Due to this lack of understanding and any formal education on his feelings of difference, Kurt experienced a harrowing sense of aloneness,

"...I felt like I was, you know, a freak, you know, literally, that's the only word I could use to describe it, it felt like I was on my own. There must be something...medically wrong with me because no one else is like this..." (p.1)

His experience of sexuality was interpreted within societies framework in the treatment of, and intolerances toward, non-heterosexual people, including alienating terms he internalised and the medicalisation of his experience, is one that reinforces pathology of sexual minority groups.

The innocence and lack of understanding that Kurt expressed around feeling different leaves

him vulnerable to oppression and verbal attack as he remembers other peoples' comments,

"...being born in [my home city], a faggot to me is a big meatball. So, you know, when people were calling me a faggot, I thought why you call me a, a gravy meatball, you know [laughing], so it just didn't click..." (p.4)

These verbal assaults are recalled with laughter as the challenging experiences are seen with humour from the perspective of a naïve, inexperienced young person, whilst potentially being used as an emotional defence in the moment.

Zain

Zain always felt a sense of difference but never understood what that specifically meant,

"...even as a young boy, I just knew that I was different, but I didn't realise how different I was... I knew from the age of three [that he had same sex attraction] ..." (p.5)

Regardless of Zain's South Asian culture and Islamic faith, feelings of same-sex attraction occurred, and Zain commented that 'everyone's really shocked' (p.5) he knew he had samesex attraction from such a young age. The assumption from others being that people from South Asian Muslim families would not experience same-sex attraction, especially so young, due to socio-religious teachings.

Zain recalled his, "teen years in particular...trying to figure it all out...conflicts, inner conflict, mental anguish...a lot of anxieties and depression..." (p.5) as the sense of difference began to affect him psychologically, emotionally and feeling pressure carrying "religious guilt" (p.5) from the socio-cultural and religious teachings towards same-sex attracted people. This resulted in a decline in mental health,

"...I did have a lot of anxieties and depression, but I've, again, I didn't have any words for it...because even then, um, mental health on its own, was very much a taboo subject matter..." (p.5)

Zain's poor mental health was exacerbated by a lack of understanding, knowledge and fearing the taboo subject of mental health difficulties, compounded by his same-sex attraction, only reinforced his sense of difference. Zain commented on the multiple oppressive factors which reinforced his sense of difference and alienation from society,

"...so, if you combine all that together [laughing], it's quite a, looking back now it's quite toxic isn't it, because you've got mental health, you've got sexual orientation, you've got religion, you know, very toxic..." (pp.5 – 6)

Zain is describing an overwhelming level of stress and oppression from social structures over which he had no control. These repeated, multiple stressors had a strong negative influence on him and only with hindsight, Zain understood that,

"...the term you use though is internalised homophobia isn't it? So I had an awful lot of that to contend with..." (p.23)

Internalised homophobia was the consequence of repeated negative experiences society had towards Zain. The interactions he was having with others in society only shamed and reinforced his sense of difference, leaving him vulnerable to discrimination,

"...all my life I've kind of had it, even before I knew I was gay myself people were saying, oh, we think you're gay..." (p.20)

Zain felt he was different to his peers and deviated social role expectations; simultaneously the world told him he was different but there was a lack of experience or knowledge to validate or confirm these external observations. He knew he had same-sex attraction, but because of risk, vulnerability and oppression he used strategies to help manage these feelings,

"...I knew I had these feelings, it's about suppressing them, and not having anyone to talk to about it, and even if you did, it would have just, I think it would've just kind of ended me to be honest..." (p.23)

Zain was in a position where even if sexual identities were discussed and usualised through support and education, given his intersecting minority identities, it would have been overwhelming and something to be feared so deeply it threatened his existence so an avoidance of discussing with others was preferred. He recalled,

"...I kind of knew from a young age that, this was my life..." (p.23)

Zain's sense of isolation, powerlessness and being stuck in a situation he could do little about is reflected in this short sentence as he tolerates his experience at the time.

Adam

Adam's awareness of difference comes very early in life and extends to multiple spheres of identity. With Adam's Middle Eastern heritage he felt different to others in his community from a young age,

"...my grandpa's Iranian, my dad's half Iranian so I'm a quarter, um and that...has made me feel different growing up...er, in addition to being to being gay..." (p.1)

Adam is describing holding multiple minority identities, which he was unable to separate as they are 'in addition' to one another as he had to navigate these multiple aspects of difference within the wider community. Adam's feelings of difference relate to his sexuality and Iranian heritage. This feeling includes himself but extends across the paternal side of his family,

"...my dad and...and my grandpa... I felt like we never, I felt like we never fully fit into that community [American white Christian] ..." (p.11)

Adam was expressing an intergenerational experience of feeling othered and displaced within a community that was a,

"...very white place, like, and when I say white, I mean, like Christian, um, Evangelical, like these are people whose families have been Lutheran for generations - they're like, Swedish and German..." (p.4)

The awareness of being ethnically different to those around him was a factor in Adam

embracing his difference after growing up in a white Christian community,

"...that's always been something that I've wanted to question and a part of what has made me feel different growing up, especially in a very heavily Christian conservative community, so um, in college, you know, I had the chance to explore more about that and um, yeah, I learnt more about Islam and it made sense to me...'' (pp. 21 – 22).

Adam made a conscious decision to explore other aspects of his identity, specifically his Iranian / Muslim identities to move away from the "conservative" insular Christian community he was part of. The explicit identity which accentuates Adam's difference to others in his community was compounded through his surname and his family – he recalls these factors "made me stand out" (p.4) and created exposure and vulnerability within the community.

Adam had to simultaneously manage understanding his sexual identity and feelings of difference in being attracted to same-sex others further compounding his feelings of difference,

"...I always felt different because I kind of like had...I was different from the other guys, like I didn't [clears throat] all my friends were girls..." (pp.3 – 4)

Not only did Adam feel different because of his racial and ethnic identities, there was a social difference with who he chooses to be friends with, demonstrating atypical gender behaviour. Whilst rhetoric of gay males having predominantly female friends reinforces a gay stereotype, for Adam, surrounding himself with others who felt less intimidating or threatening was important,

"...I was always friends with the other, like, nerdy kids who were into Pokémon and...anime and...um Yeah, because like, I think, you know, they were people who also felt different...in some way..." (p.5)

There was community and collective safety in being around others who perhaps did not fit the mould of social expectations, others who Adam describes as 'nerdy'.

Adam's awareness of difference and realisation of his sexual attractions, meant he was becoming withdrawn, causing concern to his parents who booked an appointment with the school counsellor. Here Adam was able to express his awareness of difference,

"...so she did what she could to say that this is normal and to, to reassure me and that did feel good, it was helpful to have an adult say that even though they didn't explicitly say like "it's okay to be gay", um, so that helped me feel a little bit more like...normal, I guess more, less, less anxious about these feelings that I was having that made me feel very strange." (pp.9 – 10)

Although there were no acts of overt support, validation nor a labelling of identity, these conversations with an adult around his experiences helped counter mental health challenges and usualised same-sex emotions which initially made him feel 'very strange' and isolated.

James

James experienced a sense of difference from a position of sexual identity and disability. The intersection of identities in James were inextricably linked and James "couldn't differentiate them two. They were...they went together" (p.5). He stated,

"...it's like, it feels like taking two pieces of clay, different colours, but rolled them up into a ball to the point where the colours have blended together." (p.5)

Any experiences of him as an individual are never from the perspective of one identity but from multiple inseparable identities simultaneously – using the clay analogy – have blended together to create a totally unique colour. Holding these multiply marginalised identities, James realised the world was an isolating place,

"...I had...been diagnosed with learning difficulties. So with them...with being gay as well, it was like trying to find somewhere to just fit..." (p.2) James' lack of belonging, connection and interaction with similar others amplifies his difference and increased his challenging experiences of finding a community.

Whilst James felt his identities were inextricably linked, they were constructing and being understood at different rates and in different ways,

"So, even while I'm trying to explore my sexuality, I'm still not 100% because I still know that there's other things that...I'm still kind of...not necessarily accepting..." (p.5)

James straddled two minority groups and lacked connection and belonging to others as his difference was constructed in a heteronormative neurotypical society, in which he experienced the challenges of interacting with individuals. He recalled,

"...in this world where it doesn't treat you so kindly - that there's always going to be a label thrown on you as much as you want to tear it away, someone will put it back on you and say, so you're a gay person with learning difficulties or, not in those words but that's how you internalise it. I'm a gay person with learning difficulties. Well, no - but I'm, I've got learning difficulties and I'm gay and it's like, oh no, wait, but that's still two labels. You can never shun 'em away and be like, I'm just [James]...I'm just [James]." (pp.5 – 6)

James wanted to get away from labels which he viewed as compartmentalising, reductive and something internalised but felt society wanted to understand others through identifying categories, not seeing him as a complex whole person.

James mentioned a world that didn't treat each other well based on identifying features which are different to the general population. This is reinforced in his experience with other males,

"...So while I'm trying to f-, you know, figure all of that out I've obviously got other, other boys taking the piss – understandably, I'm quite an effeminate guy...there was just one time where I think I, yo-, you tolerate until you tolerate no more. I remember one guy just would not leave off and I think I basically...just came out [chuckles] in the most angriest way, 'cause I was just pissed off, I just wanted you to back off and I think it was, it was so much prodding." (p.3)

The experience of bullying for not performing a stereotypically masculine role deemed appropriate by society for the role of male, made James vulnerable to abuse and attack from others for being different. Interestingly James agreed with the focus of abuse saying it is understandable because he didn't fit social gender ideals being 'quite an effeminate guy'. It was clear from his response to this relentless behaviour that the oppression and abuse could only be tolerated for a time before a breaking point occurred where his response was anger and threatening the perpetrator, which in itself would bring risk.

Donald

Donald recalled before secondary school his sexuality was not in his awareness,

"as a primary kid...I didn't really think much about sexuality" (p.3)

However, the onset of puberty meant he began to notice sexual attractions which seemed to be dormant prior to physiological development. He stated,

"I think it's because of puberty as well. You've got that sexual...desire in you like...and, and puberty kind of like pushes you..." (p.7)

Donald seemingly had no control or choice over developing feelings of attraction and recognised the difference in attraction to his peers. Being in close proximity to them was a catalyst where identity realisation began,

"...when I went to secondary school, I, with other boys, I kind of felt like, oh I'm more sexually attracted to them compared to other woman..." (p.3) There was greater awareness of difference in regard sexual feelings because of being in the environment of an all-male school and bonding with other males,

"...you can feel the connection and it's much easier in that setting as well especially [when] you're surrounded by guys..." (p.3)

Sexual awareness linked to environment felt like they symbiotically influenced one another but there was risk being in this space. Being in an all-male school meant stereotypes and performances of masculinity were important, and those who did not conform to these ideals were vulnerable and targeted. Donald said,

"...boys like they make fun of each other, especially if you got a particularly more feminine side of you, like would make fun of your femininity and, erm and they would call you names like faggot or or, like perv..." (p.4)

There was a sense of Donald accepting the normality of boys making fun of atypical, gendered behaviour, policed using highly derogatory and homophobic slurs with the association of femininity displayed by a male overtly managed with disdain, prejudice and discrimination. These experiences impacted Donald's mental health and value of Self at this important formative time trying to understand his sexual identity,

"...being called like those names, of course, I'd be, those names got like a negative impact on you..." (p.4)

Although Donald does not directly refer to himself experiencing name calling, by mentioning these challenges from a third-party perspective, it demonstrates the potential negative effect verbal abuse had on sexual identity and its construction.

Chris

Although Chris did not express direct feelings of being different, his recollection of experiences with peers using homophobic language and microaggressions, demonstrated his unease. He remembered,

"...when I was at school, there was like, there's, there's, there's a real big difference to kind of going 'Oh, you watch Blue Peter, that's so gay', which now no one would ever say. There's a real big difference between that and going like 'fuck off you fucking faggot', something like that...they might have been the former but never the latter. So maybe I felt uncomfortable around my friends because of, you know, language like that but they were never you know, they weren't beating gay people up or bullying..." (p.25)

This statement was reflective of Chris having an internal awareness of being different at the time but hindsight brought rationalisation to derogatory language. This created a hierarchy of abuse, with recognition and acceptance of gay slurs being part of the vernacular of young people – even though it created an inner sense of discomfort – in comparison with violent and targeted attacks based on sexuality. Regardless, these comments potentially negatively influenced Chris' sense of Self and a confidence in his newly constructing sexual identity.

Summary

These findings correlate with the initial stages of existing models (Table 8) of sexual identity development of Cass (1984), Troiden (1988), McCarn and Fassinger (1996) and Savin-Williams and Cohen (2015) with direct reference to participants being aware of their difference to the social majority in relation to sexual identity (Table 8). For D'Augelli (1994) and Coleman's (1982) models of sexual identity development, although an awareness of difference is not explicit, there are nuanced expressions such as "...they conceive of themselves in the same way society portrays homosexuals – different..." (Coleman, 1982, p.

3) and "...personal and social recognition that one's sexual orientation is not heterosexual" (D'Augelli, 1994, p.325). It can therefore be assumed that whilst awareness of difference is not explicitly part of the experience in these models, it is none the less an experience worth noting. Savin-Williams (2005) cautions that feelings of difference during childhood are an unpredictable measure of future non-heterosexual identity, with many individuals who identify as non-heterosexual in fact did *not* feel different in childhood, and individuals who identify as heterosexual *did* feel different during childhood.

Anecdotal reports and empirical studies, as well as this research, have shown many individuals who eventually express non-heterosexual identity acknowledge an awareness of difference from a young age (Troiden, 1988 Flowers & Buston, 2001; Ratigan, 2001; Fann, 2003; Downs, 2005; Persson, Newman et. al, 2020; Hall, Dawes & Plocek, 2021) but of not having the language or education to understand the inner sense of difference compared to peers, and their resistance to social expectations around attraction and gender (Ratigan, 2001; Fann, 2003, Hall, Dawes & Plocek, 2021). It is again important to acknowledge feelings of difference always occur in reality in corporeal form, even if the realisation of difference to social roles occur through online interactions.

For all participants in this study, the construction and expression of a non-heterosexual identity occurred in spite of the stresses occurring externally – whether from education, religion, community or family – where reinforcement in the risk of choosing a sexuality other than heterosexual could result in rejection or harm.

Whilst it is pertinent to acknowledge the intersectional identities of participants, the emerging and constantly constructed aspects of identity across the lifespan demonstrates the ability for an individual identity to change due to fluidity (Punar, 2007; Warner &

Shields, 2013; Toft, Franklin & Langley, 2019; Warner, Kurtis & Adya, 2020) all of which add to the experience of being different in relation to Western culture and mainstream society, historically taking an essentialist position on identity, particularly sexuality (Richardson, 1984).

The intersections and identity fluidity of each participant adds to the complexity to which a non-heterosexual identity is constructed (Thing, 2010). The majority of participants disclosed being part of a multiply marginalised group creating feelings of difference – all identifying as gay or queer but also with disabled, non-Caucasian, non-Christian identities existing within the hierarchical structure of a White, Western, able bodied/healthy, neurotypical, heteronormative, gender conformist Christian culture. As Kennedy and Dalla (2014) discuss, individuals who identify with both an ethnic minority group and a nonheterosexual identity, experienced same-sex behaviours and sexual identity formation in the same way as their White non-heterosexual counterparts and was not culturally dependent. Tremble, Schneider and Appathurai (2013) postulate that all adolescents, regardless of ethnic background, engage in a number of challenges in the process of coming out: deciding whether or not to tell the family their newly understood identity, finding a place to belong amongst the LGBTQ+ community and synthesising a non-heterosexual identity with other aspects of self. Therefore, the considerations and process for constructing a non-heterosexual identity are similar regardless of background and heritage, as too are the experiences, feelings and awareness of difference in relation to others.

Table 8 - Comparison of Awareness of Difference to Other Sexual Identity Development Models

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
Superordinate Theme	e: Awareness of Differen	ice and Challenging Inte	eractions with the World (takes place offline <i>only</i>)
	Awareness of Difference	Fear / Faulty / Risk / Vulnerable / Depression / Anxiety / Guilt / Loneliness	Hiding / Suppressing / Refuge / Seeking Commonality / Tolerance of abuse
Existing models			Emotions / Behaviours
Cass	Stage 1: Identity Confusion		Questioning behaviours / feelings / thoughts / low self-esteem / incongruence

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
	Stage 2: Identity Comparison		Alienation / Seeking / Commonality
Coleman	Pre-Coming Out		Reject / Dismiss / Negative Self-Concept / Concealment / Depression
Troiden	Stage 1: Sensitisation		Marginalisation / Difference / Abuse / Bullying
D'Augelli	Exiting Heterosexual Identity		Personal and Social Awareness that not heterosexual
McCarn and Fassinger	Phase 1: Awareness		-Awareness of difference / same-sex thoughts and feelings (I) -Realisation of community / Confusion / Bewilderment / Epiphany (G)

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
Savin-Williams and Cohen	Feeling Different		Denial / Suppression of feelings and behaviours

Gaining Knowledge of Identity

Introduction

Gaining Knowledge of Identity gave participants opportunity to understand themselves and their non-heterosexual identity more fully through interactions with online and offline worlds. Participants recognised their feelings of difference through the feedback loop with the world. Once this difference is acknowledged, participants did not know where to place themselves within this new world, nor how to navigate the assumed heterosexual world they were leaving. Questioning begins in how to become a part of this emerging culture. Gaining Knowledge of Identity, comprised two polarised subordinate themes, Exploring, and Understanding.

Gaining Knowledge of Identity continues throughout the lifespan, occurring pre- and post coming out because culture, language and social positions shift over time.

It is recognised there will be concepts within both Exploring and Understanding which hold the same qualities as a threshold concept (irreversible, integrative, transformative, troublesome, liminal (Meyer & Land, 2003). As new understandings about the world occur, they are integrated into existing knowledge and further (de-/re-) constructs the existing identity of non-heterosexuality.

Exploring

Exploring is the exploration, research and questions which occur in extension to the realisation sexual identity does not align with assumed heterosexuality. To Explore brings Understanding of a non-heterosexual label in relation to other non-heterosexual people and wider social constructs. It is the experience of seeking terminologies, labels, behaviours, language, culture, others' identities and experiences which feed into positioning the

individual in relation to (sub)cultures, physical presentations, sexual preferences, interpersonal interactions and wider society.

Kurt

Exploring a newly discovered group meant identifying with a term or label that the individual feels most resonated with them. As Kurt recalls, "…once [he] had a term…" (p.4) he was able to explore further terms and expand his knowledge of sexual identity and make connections to others with similar identities. Yet there was resistance in connecting with LGBTQ+ people through the LGBTQ+ society at college due to the reactions of wider social acceptance of this group at the time. Jurt recalled,

"...there was an LGBT society, but they had like a small office which was downstairs in this basement and they used to get like eggs thrown at the door and...everything. It was part of the fear of coming out was...if I come out I've got to be associated with this group..." (p.7)

In exploring his sexual identity there was an awareness of great risk and potential harm from others because of a non-heterosexual identity. He expressed an aversion being associated with similar others which reinforced social prejudice and might fuel internalised homonegativity. Kurt used online methods to connect with others through chat rooms and web searches using college computers,

"...I did manage to get onto a couple of like, gay sites and I remember being in, er college once and I clicked like what I thought was a gay chat room and it was actually a gay porn room and it popped up with all these pictures and I was quickly trying to shut down my computer [laughing], you know, in college before I got caught...you know, it's...definitely a risqué...situation..." (p.2)

There was still a level of risk involved in connecting with LGBTQ+ people online - particularly online within an offline educational space. Subsequently, sexually explicit images that

inadvertently appeared not only revealed a non-heterosexual identity but would have been in contravention of college rules and legislation of minors accessing sexually explicit material.

James

Once the idea a non-heterosexual identity had become recognised, investigation aimed for deeper exploration in navigating this new culture, to further the construction of identity and where James fitted with the in-group. The feeling of fitting in with the wider LGBTQ+ community felt an important part of identity construction for James who expressed multiply marginalised identities. James recalled,

"...in the [LGBTQ+] community you have your labels don't you, have your twinks, you have your bears, and you have your cubs and all of this, and you always found an ideal picture of what one represents. So in that, in that way, I was thinking, okay, well, where, where do I fit in here then?..." (p.1)

When James began to explore and construct an identity within the LGBTQ+ community and navigate an environment of new terminologies and social behaviours, he began learning the stereotypes and categorisations of individuals by appearance, body type and age (amongst others). This led him to question where he positioned himself – or was positioned by others – socially particularly if he did not fit aesthetic ideals and lacked the knowledge at the time to make that decision himself. These categorisations and qualities were based on stereotyped characteristics, and for James his learning difficulties challenged his sense of belonging. He wondered,

"...where do I box myself? Because I didn't know...what this was about..." (p.2)

James asked a rhetorical question showing his confusion and feelings of isolation where his social identities intersected. The identity based on the majority of members within the ingroup (identifying as gay) was situationally dependent, and the other identity (learning difficulty) made his social positioning highly complex, creating alienation and otherness. James recalled exploring these two identities simultaneously but in different ways,

"...I basically sat in two minorities but I didn't know exactly where I was firmly put, d'ya know what I mean, it felt as though I was jumping...to and fro. So, even while I'm trying to explore my sexuality, I'm still not 100% because I still know that there's other things...I'm gay...But I'm also still going through the learning difficulty side..." (p.5)

James stated he felt confused holding multiple marginalised identities both being constructed simultaneously and impacting each other. James was aware his learning difficulty was still being constructed and was not fully understood. He was aware that whilst he accepted both these identities they were not constructed at the same rate, and an intrapersonal dynamic was occurring between the two identities.

Adam

Adam, recalled secretly using social media platform 'Tumblr' to explore his newly constructing identity, giving safety and anonymity that was not afforded to him in his offline life. He remembered,

"...that was a place where I felt really safe to explore sexuality and like queerness in a way that felt more open than...my offline life. Um, so Tumblr was big for that because I was relatively anonymous on there..." (p.3)

Although there was not *total* anonymity on this platform, this felt like an open space and accepting community where he could explore nuances about who he was as a nonheterosexual person and the community he was becoming part of. Some of Adam's online exploring progressed into the offline world. Through his exploring he developed a confidence and certainty in his identity which brought interactions that began online, into the offline world to further explore his sexual identity. Adam said,

"I remember going on...Craigslist...when they had like a personals section...I met up with one or two guys that way and those were not good experiences...because I felt like...it was like me being anonymous and like scared teenager like trying to have a date with someone...the guy who was a little bit older, maybe in his early 20s...it was kind of creepy. I was a little unsure of how to get out of that situation but I ended up like just driving away...so after that, I was like, mmm, this whole like meeting up with someone offline like trying to do the online dating thing what I had access to at the time – um, yeah it was like ooh, that's just kind of scary, I don't like it... I didn't do a whole lot of that until I went to college" (pp.7 – 8)

The experience was facilitated through technology that was available at the time -

'Craigslist' – to explore and interact with another non-heterosexual person on a more intimate and romantic level. With hindsight the situation felt premature and Adam's level of maturity and safety was not as developed as he had initially thought. The realisation he was in a risky and dangerous situation was evident at the time. However, he could remove himself and subsequently his behaviour changed following this event. Adam waited until going to University before trying this approach again as a more mature and experienced adult – the event had not stopped the drive for same-sex connection. With maturity and distance being away from home gave Adam a freedom and allowed him space to explore his identity more fully. Adam stated,

"I moved away. I was away from family. I felt like okay this is my time to like really explore who I am" (p.8)

This permission and release in familial pressure allowed Adam to accelerate his sexual identity construction and engage in more genuine and open connections with others to

understand himself more. This was in contrast to his limited experiences at home whilst trying to make sense of his world.

Adam used online images and pornography to explore his sexual identity,

"...you have of course, like finding porn and, and you know all images of guys online." (p.2)

'Finding porn' was utilised in the exploration of sexuality, reinforcing and educating Adam in sexual behaviours whilst managing his sexual desires which he had no outlet for in the offline world.

Simultaneously, Adam's experience of exploring his sexual identity did include offline interactions with peers. He recalled one friend he confided in about his feelings of same-sex attraction and his newly constructing identity. Adam said,

"...one of my closest friends ended up being bisexual so I felt really comfortable sharing with her...she was the first person I came out to...that was great, and like I remember...talking with her about, I had these feelings, "what does it mean?" Like you know, "are you feeling things like this too?" (pp.6 – 7)

The acceptance and openness from a peer within the LGBTQ+ community gave Adam positive bidirectional interactions which allowed for a space to explore and share emotions and experiences, making him feel less alone as he navigated this new social group and identity.

Donald

Donald's experiences of exploring his non-heterosexual identity emerged during his secondary school education, a time of physical development and subsequent psychological awareness. Donald said,

"I think it's because of puberty as well. You've got that sexual...desire in you...and puberty kind of like pushes you...you know physically..." (p.7)

Donald had no control or choice in physical development (puberty) which increased awareness of sexual feelings. This appeared to be the catalyst for his exploration of new feelings of physical attraction. Part of Donald's experiences of exploring his sexual identity came from witnessing sexual behaviours and physical arousal,

"I watched, um [laughs] pornography like many other people [laughs]...But like pornography I'm saying it's like a big part in exploring a sexuality as well, especially no matter sort of like sexual orientation." (p.5)

Donald's use of pornography was a way to explore sexuality and something he believed all people did, regardless of sexual identity. This was a powerful medium to explore attractions, sexual interests and subsequent sexual positions, functions and terminologies. Pornography is readily accessible online and something that is often found freely with a range of categories.

The construction and exploration of a non-heterosexual identity involved peers, and he had a collective of gay male friends at school he felt supported him in exploring more about his non-heterosexual identity,

"...talking to other gay guys...at school...they really helped me...in my group of like, gay friend group at school. So like you could tell, like, each other...all gays and then you're just like, sticking in the same group, like that sort of...support within that group, really helped me like exploring my sexuality" (p.4)

The acceptance and support of friends gave Donald the confidence to construct his new identity to the fullest. Even at home, Donald experienced a sense of freedom in exploring his identity,

"...I wasn't so...um, oppressed in a way that...I was like, forced to act certain ways, especially like my parents, like they weren't particularly religious - to be fair, they weren't religious at all. So, I...was given like the space to explore" (p.6)

Despite having a religious education, this was not imposed at home. Donald's parents were not religious and can be assumed had values and morals not overtly rooted in religious doctrine. The assumption being because of this lack of religious focus, home felt like a safer and more accepting place than school to live authentically.

Zain

Being away from family and the community in which Zain grew up felt like an important time and space for him to explore his non-heterosexual identity,

"...as a student in particular, as well, thinking, you know, am I homosexual? You know, if I'm homosexual, it's a sin. I'm gonna, it's all hell, fire and damnation kind of thing. Um, then it was slowly beginning to experiment in London..." (p.5)

Experimenting and being in a freeing environment, away from immediate intrusion by family and community felt beneficial for Zain. The exploration into his sexual identity occurred 'slowly' and not a radical shift. Despite the fears and risks his religion had imposed on him, his non-heterosexual identity was explored and constructed. Instead of ignoring these risks and rejecting religion and religious teachings, Zain decided he would explore the source of the narratives he had been taught throughout his lifespan,

"...everyone had quoted the Quran and one story in particular, was the story of Lut or Lot and I just thought let me read for myself so that's what I did, I actually read the Quran, and the Bible, to make better sense of it all and I realised that there wasn't any reference about homosexuality in the Quran at all, which helped me. So that instilled confidence and so gave me reassurances to say, you know, I'll use the Quran as kind of like a moral compass for guidance..." (p.12) Zain embraced the holy texts to better understand himself in the context of a religious and social position in his community. Through exploration he gained confidence and reassurance that his identity was not something wrong or forbidden in his interpretation of holy texts and he came away integrating the teachings more deeply into his life as a source of moral guidance.

Earlier in his journey of exploring his sexuality, with limited information, resources or material to understand himself – and with no internet available – his sexual desire and curiosity pushed him to take a risk and break the law. Zain recalled,

"...I couldn't contain myself and I stole a magazine from a newsagent; [laughs], I got caught, highly embarrassing...in the family house and my dad screaming at me and shouting at me saying, how could you get caught and, you know, out of all the dirty magazines that you picked up some men's? What is this? What does this mean?" (p.23)

Although these direct questions are asked of him at the time, he did not tell his father about his sexual identity until much later in his life. In this stressful situation Zain had inadvertently revealed his sexual identity to others and been shamed and humiliated for both stealing and for the content he stole.

The feelings Zain experienced, both physically and emotionally, around his sexual identity he managed alone through reflexivity and real-world connections. He felt there were never any role models for him (and other LGBTQ+ racially minoritised groups) when he was growing up. He remembered,

"...I didn't have any role models when I was younger, there was no one to look up to..." (p.2)

"...when I was younger, I didn't have any role models..." (p.3)

These repeated statements reinforced Zain's isolation growing up when he felt he needed support, education and reassurance to understand what was going on for him but there was no one to turn to, emphasising his feelings of loneliness.

Chris

An important aspect of Chris' experience in exploring his non-heterosexual identity came with the distance afforded him by moving away from the family home. Chris stated,

"...at the time I was living in Brighton so, I was very open in my real life..." (p.5)

He expressed being open in his 'real life' as opposed to his online presentation of Self in his virtual or online life. This privilege was due to Chris being in an environment – in his case a very diverse city on the south coast of the U.K. – which gave validation and acceptance to various sexual identities due to the high population of LGBTQ+ people and other marginalised groups residing in the area. Chris was,

"…living in Brighton, which is a fairly accepting place which was very helpful." (p.7)

There was caution not to portray the city as unquestionably accepting with the use of the word "fairly", given there is always risk of discrimination in all regions of the world. Chris found being immersed in this environment supportive and beneficial in exploring his sexual identity with more freedom and less judgment or threat,

"...it was freeing moving to Brighton ..." (p.10)

Suggesting that prior to this experience of moving to this diverse and accepting city, he felt contained and limited in how he could explore his sexuality.

Understanding

Experiences bring understanding, a sense of clarity of identity and belonging to the wider ingroup(s). Understanding includes realisations of both what aligns with the individual and also what they reject, which inevitably requires further exploring for greater detail and connection. The process of Exploring leads to Understanding and subsequently further questions arise which need exploring to understand the world and Self. A continual process.

Kurt

Kurt experienced a lack of safety and risked punishment whilst trying to understand his identity in greater depth through online interactions. He recalled meeting other LGBTQ+ people through offline interactions, "in college...I actually started...meeting other LGBT...people" (p.1) which boosts his reflective and curious nature around his identity. He said,

"...when I was at college, I was very curious... I've always been very open-minded for some reason... even after I come out, I...went out with a trans person, I went out with two lesbians...I went out with a bisexual guy, bisexual girl; um, I tried transvestitism for a while - I've literally tried every combination of sexual...intercourse and everything you can imagine. [I], did it for about three, four years like, for a while and you know, really confused my mum because obviously I just come out as being gay like "I thought you said you're gay but you got a girlfriend" and I was like well I am gay, I'm just experimenting." (p. 13)

Although there was a fixed and owned identity, he explored other identities and experiences of relationships, gender and sexual behaviours in order to understand himself more deeply. These behaviours appeared malleable whilst consistently identifying as gay over the span of years. Kurt paraphrases a quote from the musician and LGBTQ+ icon and ally, Madonna, "..." how do you know what you are unless you try everything else...at least once", you know and she's basically on about like sexuality and...it stuck with me as a kid I think, it kinda like got ingrained in my mind for some reason and I thought yeah, that's true...how do I know I'm gay if I haven't tried bisexuality, or how do I know I'm this if I haven't tried that..." (p.13)

Kurt used experiences of other sexualities to understand, confirm and validate his sexuality as a gay man. The influence of this came from a statement by a source outside himself from a pop-culture celebrity - Madonna.

James

James' experience of being alone in understanding his sexual identity in conjunction with his learning difficulties, having no guide or mentor, brought feelings of being lost, exacerbating his feelings of not fitting in. Through his exploring and curiosity he found a source of support in further constructing his sexual identity and sense of belonging. James remembered,

"...learning about Freddie Mercury...people...in the music industry that were very androgynous...stood up for the LGBTQ, just in their own way, who didn't necessarily say I am standing up for LGBTQ, but they're aesthetic and the way they presented was [alluding] to it. So you had, Freddie Mercury, you had Annie Lennox, you had...Prince...even Jimmy Hendrix to a degree - ... these iconic people and I was like...their confidence is something obviously that you know, all did that through their music and their creativity. And so that's I suppose what I was thinking, was well I've always been good at art - I've been okay at art; how do I make that work?" (p.7)

James took interest in the arts and creativity for formulating and understanding his identity presentation through inspiration of successful musicians. His understanding of identity through musicians was further extended in the form of contemporary celebrity role models who were from the LGBTQ+ community. One person in particular, "Adam Lambert. Yeah, 'cause he was everything I identified as... I was like this guy is incredible and so literally everything that he looks like I was trying to incorporate my own." (p.15)

The realisation that James was not alone in constructing a non-heterosexual identity but was given permission to express himself in more gender fluid ways based on the confidence, visibility and personality of a celebrity who affirmed the acceptance of a non-heterosexual identity, that did not conform to social norms of gender and sexuality. James recalled,

"...I wasn't as confident as he was. So he could pull all this off. I'd only just found it so I was like well I can dabble in a few things like, a few spikes on the shoulder or you know like a, like a ripped-up denim jacket and things like that; and that's where I started even getting interested into make-up and how you could look so, so good make-up on a guy and I was like, that is amazing". (p.15)

James experienced freedom of expression through presentation of Self which aligned with the appeal of this pop-culture musician. To James, his expression and confidence in presentation of Self was repeated with other celebrity LGBTQ+ role models to understand his identity and the nuances of the community he was entering. James would,

"...look to role models to ultimately replicate what it is they might have felt like what it is, how they stood...what they said, what they believed in to see if I fit with any of that. Um, so that's all I basically...had. I don't know whether it was a matter of, um whether it was just at the time that there wasn't a lot or if it was because I just wasn't willing to go as far and deep dive into it and I was happy being like I'm just dipping my toe in the water..." (p.21)

James experienced hesitancy and uncertainty about how expressive he could be presenting an authentic version of himself. He understood there were elements of protection and safety in easing himself into adopting these various traits. James acknowledged his valuing process, morals and beliefs and needed validation for them by aligning to and mirroring role models to understand who he was and understand his place within the community he was navigating.

Adam

Adam recalled much of his activity though social media was about trying to,

"...learn more about what it means to be gay and...I remember yeah like following accounts about like, this is what it means to be asexual, you know, or like learning all these terminology like 'top' and 'bottom' and 'bisexual' or 'trans', you know? Like, it was a whole world of terminology and concepts and ideas that I'd never been exposed to before. And...yeah, that was like my...queer education was...Tumblr..." (p.7)

Once a non-heterosexual identity was internalised, further understandings of this new culture and community needed exploring. Tumblr was seen as an educational tool for Adam where a 'whole world' of new concepts and language were presented to him in a way that felt accessible. Even though there were concepts and terms that did not apply to constructing his identity, he could understand what did not resonate with him and understand other denominations experiences. All these contributed to galvanise and affirm his identity.

The reach afforded him via social media platforms, connecting with marginalised and multiple marginalised groups, was one that could not be as accessed in the offline world. Adam recalled,

"I guess being online...and seeing other people...that interact and other people online...there's more space for um...maybe thinking through alternatives or minority perspectives or ideas that might have, that might not otherwise be visible. Like if I look at media things you see on TV or in, you know, movies that are released in the theatres, the, the concept of being gay is in many ways similar to like straightness, like you know love is love, we're all the same...but I don't think that reflects the actual reality and range of options and range of realities that exist...within sexuality and gender expression. So, for me...those online spaces are where that kind of, that, that lives um, because I've looked in many places...where, um, I think like the dominant like heteronormative kind of [Western] society's...just everywhere um, if I were to try to seek out...um...a more queer, like politically queer community, it's hard for me to think of where I could do that except online." (p.16)

Adam recognised these online interactions allowed him to learn about himself and alternative views to heteronormative, gender conformist expectations placed upon nonheterosexual people through society and media. To identify as queer for Adam was a political position as well as a sexual identity, incorporated into his self-concept at a later life stage in addition to his gay identity. He revealed,

"...what social media has done is exposed me to the range of...things that are out there, like the range of options, the range of language that's out there, um, so...queerness ...I like that because it's, it's a political stance as well...and it reflects something that I think is important about being gay, and that's like this experience of being different...experience has made me question a lot of...social norms and realities that we're told are the case. So... queerness...that's like, oppositional or always being on the outside or like resisting normativity, and...resisting just accepting tradition because it's tradition. ...being a part of these online communities where people are talking about queerness and what that means...is part of the reason why it resonates with me...queerness comes in where it's like building alliances with other marginalised communities" (p.15)

This example of Adam's online interactions with hard-to-reach populations further constructed and altered his identities and led him to embrace a 'queer' identity as an extension of his gay identity. The drive for social justice and change supports other marginalised groups and connected him to similar others. Adam was part of,

"...community organisations that actually serve both queer and Muslim communities, so I've been to some of their events and met, a lot of people actually...through that and...it's been really affirming on a personal level... I worked with them for like a year, year and a half actually online um, and then, yeah I got to meet them in person." (pp.22 – 23) These online interactions and connections lead to offline experiences which further affirmed and reinforced his identities as a queer Muslim man. As he learnt about experiences of others he understood more about himself in the process.

Adam engaged with various forms of media to gain deeper understanding of his identity and the world he was becoming a part of. Adam said,

"Definitely like movies, yeah, I would try to find movies um, that touched on queer themes. A lot of that was me watching them [laughs] on my computer alone...old queer movies that you could watch, you know, streaming illegally online..." (p.7)

Engaging with media, such as film, alone in secret whilst simultaneously breaking the law demonstrated a level of risk and disregard to consequence in getting his needs met. The interaction with this media gave Adam further nuanced and usualised experience understanding non-heterosexual lifestyles, language, relational dynamics and behaviours within the context of wider social structures.

Donald

Understanding a non-heterosexual label is analogues to a portal or gateway into a different world view. Donald made the point that,

"...I knew the basics, I knew what I liked, I knew what I wanted, but then did I know everything about like, for example homosexuality? - I think that was a clear, no..." (p.23)

Although a non-heterosexual identity was owned and accepted, there were levels of understanding and awareness into sexual identity and LGBTQ+ culture which remained unknown. Evidently there was an inner understanding of likes, dislikes, desires and attractions prior to engaging with others who also identified as non-heterosexual. However, understanding at a deeper level lacked. The nuances of identity, the context in which the identity is positioned socially, historically and culturally, through language and relationships remained unknown.

Experiences of others from the LGBTQ+ community who identified with a sexuality other than gay were important for Donald understanding more about himself and the prejudice which often came from within the communities' groups. He stated,

"...I met, like, bisexual person, like, through um, like a social event, and I managed to talk to her a little bit more about her experience, and then I realised Ooh, I never knew that or...I never thought you know, if I said that it would, it could be considered as offensive like to like a bisexual person" (p.12)

The importance of communication and connection with others of different identities was important as it brought awareness and understanding, allowed him to empathise and grow as a person. This interaction gave him more compassion and positioned himself with more certainty in his own identities.

Donald used social media to connect with others from within the LGBTQ+ community who also had multiple intersectionalities, to broaden his awareness of the community of which he was a part. He recalled,

"...on Instagram...I follow this guy, he's like this American guy, he is a gay disabled person. And I never, before I started like following him...I never followed one person, like one gay disabled person ...I came across his video on YouTube and then I watched his story, how he got disabled, and then how he...talked about his identity as a disabled gay person. And that was like, so awakening in a way that...people are very mean, even, like gay people like towards, like disabled gay fellow gay men..." (p.11)

Donald's initial lack of awareness for other multiply marginalised people within the LGTBQ+ community and their experiences of oppression and discrimination added to his

understanding of his non-heterosexual identity and how he was constantly learning through these interactions with others on various platforms.

Chris

The media and particularly the 90's television show 'Queer As Folk' was a source of information for gay or questioning youth about gay culture – Chris' simple phrase,

"I learnt this stuff. Erm,...it certainly wasn't from TV - apart from 'Queer as Folk'" (p.10)

Identified the significance of the media, including sources like drama series, which answer a number of questions and create understanding around one's sexual identity in more subtle and safer ways of engagement.

Zain

An important source of understanding his sexual identity came from what might be seen as an unlikely place for Zain. His Muslim faith helped clarify the religious position on homosexuality which brought an understanding to his identity. He remembers when he realised,

"...that there wasn't any reference about homosexuality in the Quran at all, which helped me. So that instilled confidence and so gave me reassurances to say, you know, I'll use the Quran as kind of like a moral compass for guidance..." (p.12)

Being able to use the holy text as a source of guidance and way in which he would live his life was an affirming process in understanding himself. Seeking out the information he required brought a reassurance and confidence about his identity and understanding himself more deeply.

Summary

For the participants in this research, after the initial - even tentative - recognition and association with the in-group identity (non-heterosexual), further exploration and understanding occurs to gain knowledge of their identity and position themselves within the in-group hierarchy as well as to other groups they belong, constructing a unique selfconcept (Stets & Burke, 2000). It is important to acknowledge, with all the experiences, they exist along a continuum. The experiences of Exploring will inevitably bring in Understanding and when participants understand themselves they inevitably explore.

The experience of 'Gaining Knowledge of Identity' is reflected in D'Augelli's (1994) Phase 2 -Developing a Personal Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Identity Status - with an acknowledgment that sexual identity cannot be confirmed until there has been contact with others from within the group. Learning must occur though interaction to understand how the community functions and counter any prejudices around non-heterosexual peoples' lifestyles and relationships which have been entrenched through stereotypes and discriminatory behaviours in societies narratives and social interactions prior to holding a non-heterosexual identity.

These findings (Table 9) show online interactions are an easier, quicker and safer for contact with the newly found community and for a wider range of experiences to be heard, understood and assimilated into the awareness of the individual (Chester, Sinnard et. al., 2016; Harper, Serrano et. al., 2016). Contemporary interactions and learning experiences merge beyond online, to offline interactions, even if they may have begun online.

Coleman's (1982) Stage 3 - Exploration, takes this stage for the individual to be experimenting with a new sexual identity when they interact with the gay and lesbian community. It is a time to learn new interpersonal skills, behaviours and language and not just social, but sexual exploration. Coleman sees this as analogous to adolescence and a time for adventure but one of awkwardness, shyness and intensity – these findings validate this stage of Coleman's model.

These findings align with two stages in Cass' (1984) model. Stage 3 – Identity Tolerance, where the individual seeks out homosexual company for fulfilment of sexual, emotional and social needs; Stage 4 – Identity Acceptance, with the individual no longer questioning if they are non-heterosexual and develop a network of non-heterosexual friends.

Cass states at this stage the individual will know where they belong, but findings in this research show that during the experience of 'Gaining Knowledge of Identity', some participants did not remain fixed in their sexual behaviour even after strongly identifying as gay (Kurt) or felt they did not know where they belonged (James, Adam, Zain) even after accepting a non-heterosexual identity due to their intersectional minoritised identities. All participants begin to interact with members from the LGBTQ+ community after resonating with a non-heterosexual identity by experimentation of sexual behaviours, relationships, friendships and media engagement.

Troiden's Stage 3 – Identity Assumption, posits that at this stage the non-heterosexual identity is tolerated, rather than accepted but there is an element of social and sexual interactions to fulfil specific needs. Troiden states,

"...Self-definition as homosexual may occur just before, at the same time as, or shortly after first social contact with other homosexuals...Only a minority of gay

males...appear to self-define as homosexual without having direct contact with one or more...homosexuals. Youths who define themselves as homosexual during early adolescence may be exceptions to this rule. In these cases, homosexual self-definitions may grow out of media presentations of homosexuality..." (p.109)

As we see in these findings, Kurt, Zain and Adam all experienced same-sex attraction long before contact with another non-heterosexual person. It is the lack of language, education and fear of repercussions which prevent accurate self-definition of a non-heterosexual identity even when their difference became apparent.

Findings reflect (Table 9) parts of Troiden's Stage 4 – Commitment, where adopting a nonheterosexual identity as a way of life and the identity as valid is important in making further connections to others including friendships and relationships. Acknowledgment that this stage may be dependent on legislation within society for a non-heterosexual way of life to be engaged with and accepted by the majority.

McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) model, Phase 2 – Exploration, brings into consideration development of both individual and group identities within the individual. Although this is a model for lesbian identity formation, it is nonetheless pertinent for acknowledgement that both group and individual identity are "…reciprocally catalytic but not simultaneous…" (p. 521) in the construction of a non-heterosexual identity.

McCarn and Fassinger (1996) state,

"... there is a process that involves individual sexual awareness and identification (Am I lesbian/gay?); then there is a process involving reference group identification (What does it mean to be lesbian/gay in society?) ..." (p.519)

Where examination and exploration of questions in the first phase (Am I lesbian/gay?) are conducted in the exploration phase and examined in more detail, positioning Self in relation to the group occurs in terms of attitude towards the group and place within the group.

Findings from this research show having moved from questioning one's sexual identity and resolving or beginning to resolve the question – in the McCarn and Fassinger model, questions such as 'Am I lesbian/gay?' - one moves into positioning oneself within the ingroup through education, understanding and interrelating online and social media platforms as well as through offline spaces such as bars, clubs and societies. A contemporary combination of both interactions existing simultaneously.

Findings reflect Savin-Williams and Cohen's (2015) milestone, 'Questioning Assumed Heterosexuality' where questioning sexuality leads to experimentation through secret sexual and romantic same-sex encounters. 'Gaining Knowledge of Identity' also aligns with 'Sexual Behaviours' from this model as the individual tries to understand their feelings – it is noted here (and in Troiden's stage three) that non-heterosexual virgins exist, so sexual behaviour is not a pre-requisite to holding a non-heterosexual identity for a multitude of reasons, including wanting to be in a relationship before sexual behaviour occurs but still Exploring and Understanding their non-heterosexual identity. 'Romantic Relationships' milestone are motivating same-sex attracted people to engage in romantic relationships earlier and explore these relationships more fully due to a relaxation of legislation and a usualisation of same-sex relationships in wider society.

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
Superordina	ate Theme: Gaining Knowledge of Ide	ntity (Occurs on- and offline)	
	Subordinate themes: Exploring Understanding	Risk / Curious / Reflective / Confusion / Realisation / Affirming / Fear / Sinful / Freeing / Confidence / Reassurance / Supported	Connecting / Understanding / Resolving / Communicating / Learning / Distancing / Sexual Behaviours / Experimenting

Table 9 - Comparison of Exploring and Understanding Experiences to Other Sexual Identity Development Models

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
Existing mod	Existing models		Emotions / Behaviours
Cass	Stage 3: Identity Tolerance		Tolerance / Socialisation / Passing
	Stage 4: Identity Acceptance		Positive view of homosexuality / Socialisation / Passing / Coming Out
Coleman	Exploration		Socialisation / Experimenting / Awkwardness / Confusion / Intensity / External Validation / Depression / Frustration / Shame
Troiden	Stage 3: Identity Assumption		Disclosing / Experimentation / Socialisation / Solidarity
	Stage 4: Commitment		Integration / Empowerment / Self-Acceptance

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
	Developing a Personal Lesbian- Gay-Bisexual Identity Status		Social Interaction / Rejecting myths of NH identity
D'Augelli	Developing a Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Social Identity		Social Support / Affirmative

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
	Developing a Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Intimacy Status		Same-sex relationships
	Entering a Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Community		Commitment to political and social action / realisation of inequity / empowerment through awareness
McCarn and Fassinger	Phase 1: Awareness		-Awareness of difference / same-sex thoughts and feelings (I) -Realisation of community / Confusion / Bewilderment / Epiphany (G)

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
			Exploration of sexual feelings / Questioning / Strong emotions or
	Phase 2: Exploration		relationships (I)
			-Active pursuit of knowledge / Anger / Guilt (G
	Questioning Assumed		
Courin			Uncertainty / Secretive
Savin-	Heterosexuality		
Williams			
and Cohen	Sexual Behaviour		Experimentation / fun / sexual exploration
	Romantic Relationships		Peer Support / fun / Secretive

The Performances

Introduction

'The Performances' are analogous to Goffman's theory of identity as performance (Goffman, 1959). The individual will behave, act and express themselves in various ways to ingratiate into a specific audience. 'The Performances' are divided into experiences of Splitting, and Synthesising. Performance of identity are apparent in all participants. Some participants performed their non-heterosexual identities after splitting away from the family home and from any environments or people where they are assumed heterosexual. Participants synthesised their non-heterosexual identity into their heterosexual world as the individual integrates their relationships, friendships, culture and other non-heterosexual characteristics into the wider world and awareness of those who once assumed heterosexuality in the participant.

Splitting

Experiences of Splitting occur in the individual's life to explore their newly constructing sexual identity in privacy whilst reducing the risk of rejection and attack from those who are unaware of these new feelings or behaviours. Splitting *is not* analogous to the Kleinian concept of Splitting, where the mental separation of "good" or "bad" parts of Self result in the repression of aspects that are undesirable (Soreanu, 2018). Splitting in the context of this research is the participant engaging with behaviours offline by attended spaces and events associated with non-heterosexual/LGBTQ+ individuals, and online through chat rooms, internet engagement and social media associated with non-heterosexual people and organisations. There is a level of deception and secrecy in Splitting behaviours, not rooted in malice, deviance or fault but from fearing the reactions of others.

Adam

Adam discussed the importance of having an online space which was entirely separate, not just from his offline life but from online platforms where his offline relationships were maintained. He recalled,

"...[Tumblr] was a place where I felt really safe to explore sexuality and like queerness in a way that felt more open than...um, my offline life...relatively anonymous on there and I kind of like built my own persona..." (p.3)

An online space away from the visibility of those in real life allowed Adam to create an identity not afforded to him in offline circles. Adam talked of building 'my own persona', likely from understandings he had of himself in relation to interactions with others online and through observations. The persona was constructed based on freedoms he experienced online and which was his own, crafted without imposition and expectation from others. Adam was unable to explore and express his sexual identity online through platforms where offline connections also resided, as this may have brought unnecessary risk of rejection and/or attack. There were also conscious efforts to split aspects of himself from others on the social media platform Facebook. He recognised,

"...all of my friends in real life or offline life, you know...were there, my family...l...you know, didn't do anything, you know...queer there..." (p.3)

On Facebook his offline and online worlds merged and it was not a platform to express his experiences or feelings of queerness, nor to gain knowledge of his constructing sexual identity. Adam split himself from friends and family to better understand his feelings by exploring other social media platforms such as Tumblr. There was a safety aspect related to splitting himself from those closest to him. Adam split his identity, "...because I felt like I was all alone...I didn't have anyone in my family who I felt safe talking to...and none of my friends I felt safe talking to..." (p.6)

This was an isolating and lonely time for Adam. He was aware of his emotional state which needed discussion but lacked the security and assurances needed to vocalise these, further isolating and distancing him from family and friends.

Adam's only source of information gathering and connection at this time was online in various ways. He recognised he,

"...was doing a lot of the stuff online where I was still, visiting websites and trying to...learn more about what it means to be gay..." (p.7)

Evidently a large part of 'Gaining Knowledge of Identity' intersected with Splitting, as without having separate, private spaces to learn more about being gay and internalising or rejecting the nuances of the culture, the identity could not continue construction. The space this occurred in was important. Adam physically removed himself from family and offline others to engage with the newly discovered world connected to his identity and reflect on his experiences in the privacy of his room utilising media, such a films with queer themes. Adam recalled these times,

"A lot of that was me watching them [laughs] on my computer alone..." (p.7)

"...in reality I was just on like Tumblr [laughs], you know, in my room, I wasn't studying all the time..." (p.10)

Adam shut himself away from intrusion and judgment of offline interactions, consequently adding to his isolation and creating an added challenge of online connections and films only satiating his experience for so long and to a certain level. His sexual identity wished to experience more, even if there was a risk to safety. Despite these risks Adam remembers, "In terms of offline connections, I remember going on...Craigslist [laughs]...I met up with one or two guys that way...this whole like meeting up with someone offline like trying to do the online dating thing - what I had access to at the time – um, yeah it was like ooh, that's just kind of scary, I don't like it..." (p.8)

Adam further constructed his sexual identity via offline experiences and interactions with others within the non-heterosexual community. The online and offline merged, he could only do this with 'what [he] had access to at the time' as a minor, yet the drive for intimate connection overrode this limited accessibility, education and awareness to the risks associated with a young person using online methods for in-person connections. Adam split himself where he had an offline life his family and friends knew nothing about, adding secrecy and risk to his experience. Although Splitting experiences could be seen as secretive and risky, it could be seen as vital and particularly pertinent for non-heterosexual individuals who may not have access, or safety, to engage with subcultures or communities that exist only in major metropolitan areas. Reflecting Adam stated,

"If I were to try to seek out...a more queer, like politically queer community, it's hard for me to think of where I could do that except online." (p.16)

The need and motivation to engage with likeminded others can only be done through online engagement due to the geographical and political challenges meeting offline could bring. To synthesise these aspects of identity require various situational, environmental and temporal shifts from others.

Zain

In an early experience Zain felt the need to hide and exclude his non-heterosexual identity in public settings. He mentioned,

"...somebody said something really negative about gay people...as a gay person, I needed to have more confidence in myself to speak up and say, 'actually, I find that highly offensive and I'm gay as well'..." (pp.6-7)

Zain lacked confidence in accepting himself and his sexual identity and felt silenced and powerless, needing to split his identity in that moment. Acceptance of self, speaking up and challenging negative associations of the LGBTQ+ community felt like it came with maturation and life experience. When he decided to create a social media profile at around age thirty-three, he omitted reference to his sexuality – an intentional splitting of identity. Zain stated,

"...if I was going to have a social media profile, that to keep my kind of, my gayness out of it all..." (p.1)

His sexuality was an identity kept hidden from his online persona. His ethnicity and heritage would be hard to remove due to the visual cues and presentations. Safety brought an aspect into this decision, where personal qualities he could not omit due to their visibility (ethnicity/race) this could create conflict and challenges if synthesised with a non-heterosexual identity from people within the multiple communities he intersected.

Zain felt for an individual to reach their full potential, a time of splitting roles in their life rather than embracing all aspects simultaneously can be vital. He said,

"...if you can be yourself...in the workplace or in your home life...you're gonna flourish in whatever shape or form..." (p.21)

The importance of finding a space where you could be authentic meant a natural evolution and growth, in whichever way that felt right and unique for the individual. Zain expressed if you cannot be authentic at home, you may be able to be at work. This brings in the idea that splitting identities based on environmental factors give a freedom and expression not afforded in some areas of life, potentially an important part of an identity construction.

Kurt

Kurt's splitting of his non-heterosexual identity created distance in connection and communication to others, particularly those in close relationships to him. He recalled expressing to his mother the divide that occurred in their relationship, "...you don't even know me nowadays..." (p.6) just before he disclosed his non-heterosexual identity to her. This divide occurred over time and Kurt intentionally split his sexual identity from his mother through his behaviours. Kurt recalled doing this on nights out as he and his friend,

"...used to pretend we're going downtown, you know, straight clubbing and we used to wear shirts and, you know, smart gear...I used to meet [my friend] and I'd like have other clothes as well. So like as soon as we drive around the corner, we used to get out the car halfway...up to [the other city] in a...lay-by, get changed into like tight white crop tops, you know, and you know, that was the era and, you know, literally went from straight looking to gay looking just to go up clubbing and then drive back, you know, get changed back and say oh yeah...it was good." (p.8)

This behaviour demonstrated the lengths of protection and secrecy needed to fulfil the desire to experience a night in an environment for non-heterosexual people. Kurt was communicating his sexuality through clothing and his appearance was an integral part of the overall experience. Covert behaviour was required to experience two worlds safely and there was an added physical distance between Kurt's family and where he socialised. Kurt remarked that he felt he had to,

"...have this complete alter ego that you know nobody knew about...after I come out when I got talking to my mum she said yeah it was a blatantly obvious what you were doing because you used to come back and I used to find all your crop tops, so I washed them..." (p.8) This disclosure revealed Kurt's behaviours were not as clandestine as he believed. Unknowingly he revealed his split identity to others and those others never discussed it with him. His mother carried on her usual actions of washing clothes in what could appear to be silent unwavering support of her child.

Situations arose during childhood which Kurt recalled as being much more private and removed from public display – physical exploration and intimacy with a male friend. He remembered,

"...we'd kind of got up to things but we used to cycle out into the middle of the countryside..." (p.9)

This physical and geographical splitting from others and relocating to an isolated area likely for the purpose of safety and privacy, away from condemnation or interruption, was important in understanding himself and his feelings more deeply.

Chris

Social media played a large role in Chris presenting his values and identities to others. Identifying as non-heterosexual online meant filtering and curating shared images and text, based on which of his contacts had knowledge of his non-heterosexual identity. Chris remembered,

"...actually, for me it felt like...somewhere where I had to self-edit more than in real life, erm in those early stages. So I remember kind of, like making posts and being like, 'okay, make sure' - you know, when you can kind of add the privacies..." (p.5)

Social media privacy settings proved an important part of Chris managing his sexual identity disclosure online. There was methodical and controlled utilisation of social media settings

and editing of images preventing anyone learning of his sexual identity before he had decided to disclose his non-heterosexual identity.

Chris expressed behaviours which outlined a stressful experience with consequences at stake should information be learnt before he was ready to share it. Particularly,

"...on social media it felt like I had to really manage which side of myself I showed to different people because I wasn't ready and I didn't really want anyone, especially not people that were close to me, to find out that way." (p.5)

Chris protecting others – and himself – was driving his social media editing behaviours. He talked about how he managed presenting sides of himself to specifically chosen others, only revealing identities in specific controlled ways. Particularly in presenting his nonheterosexual identity. This alluded to the concept that some identities were invisible and unknown to some individuals as they had been intentionally, carefully and systematically hidden as a means of protection for Self and for or from others.

Chris' contacts on social media were not just online and there became an intersection where his connections offline were suddenly and radically moving to join his online world. He stated,

"...when I went first, went to uni and joined Facebook, the online and the offline world...were...You know, if there was a Venn diagram, there'd be two circles pretty much [draws circles in the air and intersects the two]...And pretty much everyone I knew and saw, and was open to was also online...as Facebook then...expanded and you know, I ended up...with my old biology teacher on there, my auntie [on there], [people] from Italy, my grandma...dad's friends...you know what I mean? But...that circle of people that had access to, what originally was quite...I got like, you know, a closed circle...suddenly really, really increased. And that's when I think I started to...think differently about what I was putting on there." (p.9) Chris changed the way he interacted with social media and how he used it because of the wide range of people on the platform. He became more guarded and presented a refined and socially acceptable generalised version of himself, which he presented in person to older, influential social and family members.

James

For James the experience of Splitting came with mixed feelings. He was able to express himself, explore and feel genuine in his presentation online. James felt his presentation,

"...[online] it was feminine, it was flamboyant but offline I was very much like, well I can't be that person in real life, because of the implications it would mean..." (p.4)

The reality of presenting himself in-person as he did online would have consequences, likely around safety and risk. His interactions whilst online were not seen as real and social media was an escape where his disinhibited behaviour felt unchallenged and distanced from others.

Synthesising

Individuals synthesise their non-heterosexual identity into other areas of life such as with family, friends, work and academia at various rates and in different ways. Synthesising occurs after Understanding themselves, the community and their place within it. Synthesising their non-heterosexual identity came with finding acceptance of themselves and gaining acceptance from others, giving them confidence in who they are. Synthesis is the integration of the non-heterosexual identity into the connections and relationships predating the self-disclosure or coming out as non-heterosexual.

James

James recalled getting negative comments on social media for how he presented, however his offline experiences helped him to manage these situations. He remembered,

"...when there was a lot of backlash on...social media, I want to say it was easier to come back, but it also felt no different to what I would feel like in school - that lashing, I was still being my genuine self... I would end up, you know, saying...a few harsh things and what not." (p.9)

His response to online threat felt manageable and something he would cope with offline at school. This emphasises not just discrimination and the challenges he faced during his youth, but that he became resilient and hardened to societies negative reactions, making it easier to retaliate in these circumstances. He synthesised his real-world experiences by bringing them into the online world for protection as he realised, "I've got no one to defend me but me..." (p.11).

The disclosure to his mother of his non-heterosexual identity gave James permission and acceptance for exploring and expressing his identity in much greater depth online and using social media. James mentioned,

"...as soon as I'd basically said, to my mum, you know, I, I don't like girls...that's when I started really going into it, really going into it [social media]. I don't think me mum even today knows how much time...I spent on it...she knew...I was on it, but she didn't exactly know the fixation I had on it, you know, the fixation and the obsession over it..." (p.14)

James talked of a 'fixation' and 'obsession' with social media which is analogous to an addiction of a substance by a user – with his mother having no comprehension of the situation. James became open with his mother about his sexual identity and begun to synthesise his non-heterosexual identity in his offline world, yet continued splitting his online and offline identity presentations, where – with hindsight – his online engagement became an "obsession".

James's high-level engagement with social media constructed two identities – one for online interaction and the other for real world engagement. James remembers these two identities being,

"...very different personas because I didn't know how this persona was meant to be taken offline...I was unapologetic online...when that...character started seeping into the real world...people started reacting in a very different way than I thought they would react, and that's when I was like, Oh, okay, I can actually, I can be that person and it's...absolutely fine. No one...gives a shit like really, no one cares. And that's when I started to get the...two together..." (p.16)

The qualities and characteristics of his online persona were explored and expressed as James referred to the online persona as an 'unapologetic...character' and one that only appeared and remained online for fear of repercussion and reaction in offline interactions like the character in a film. The online persona began to influence the offline world through slow and gradual changes as James synthesised his two identities in ways that occur effortlessly and were noticeable to others. James's fears and anxieties abated when there was acceptance and validation from others about this newly constructed identity, giving him the impetus and permission required to synthesise the two more openly offline. James talked of,

"...Merg[ing] the two together...I started basically displaying this character. Ultimately sounds like drag, which is funny...because drag is kind of...it's an alter ego. It's a different character, isn't it? So I suppose you could probably say I was [laughing] ultimately like a drag queen online...if we're gonna go along the lines...of drag, I incorporated my drag character into my real life and...people's responses to it...were great...no negativity. Of course you always had the odd person going, oh he's so loud or...he's so opinionated...I still use that character even to this day..." (pp.16 – 17)

James's recognition of the alter ego being analogous to a drag queen is something which relates back to the idea of a character – or caricature – with a hyperbolic presentation of specific identity features. James's experience of synthesising the two aspects of himself came with negative reactions but was generally received well and the value of this persona endured, giving James a voice even if others perceived it as 'loud' and 'opinionated'.

Adam

Adam synthesised his non-heterosexual identity into everyday life, except with his family due to a breakdown in his maternal relationship after disclosing his sexual identity before leaving home (an example of Splitting). Through maturity and with more controlled experiences after moving away from home, Adam's sexual identity became more robust. At this point, Adam decided to synthesise his sexual identity into the family unit. He remembered,

"...meeting my current husband, um, we'd been dating for a while...and I brought him home to meet my parents...he was the first person I ever brought home, who I was dating; the first boyfriend who I introduced to my parents..." (p.14)

This was a milestone moment for Adam. He was confident in his relationship and wanted to integrate that into his family unit. This felt like a number of firsts; for Adam, for his partner and for the family. There was an ownership of identity, a solidarity and a commitment in the couple's relationship. This connection between Adam and his partner affirmed and (re)connected him with his mother,

"...for her seeing him and seeing the fact that like, he's a person, like we love each other...I think she was just so worried about me, um, like seeing her, seeing me with him, like, calmed her down..." (p.14) Synthesising the non-heterosexual identity through the same-sex couple integrated Adam's sexual identity into the parental dynamic and the family. For Adam it was the usualising of the relationship, the newly introduced partner, the commitment and love between the two which helped to synthesise and rebuild lost connections and abate fears to transcend potentially a very anxious experience for all involved.

For Adam there were other aspects of his identity that he wished to synthesise with his sexual identity. For Adam this was about,

"...feeling that I kind of have to minimise like the spirituality, or the heritage, um, that's becoming less true as I meet more people here in New York who are able to bring both together." (p.25)

Adam identifies as Muslim and had been brought up in a mixed Middle Eastern / White heritage Christian family. The repeated experiences of othering resulted in the minimisation of his heritage and the need to separate, deny and/or reject the multiple marginalised aspects of himself. For Adam, synthesising religion with sexuality was a process he acknowledged could have been a struggle for many religious LGBTQ+ people. He acknowledged,

"...there's like an active rejection [in the LGBTQ+ community] of anything religious and I think I was in that space for a little bit in high school and college, but I...do find meaning in spirituality and want to have some relationship with spirituality..." (p.23)

Adam referred to the initial rejection of religion but the want to embrace and hold connection to spirituality and integrate it into his life alongside his sexual identity. This could mean moving away from structured institutionalised systems common in religion, including practices and beliefs and into more individualistic expressions connecting to a higher power, giving purpose and meaning intrinsic to living a moral life.

Having concealed and split sexual identity from others for so long whilst growing up, synthesising meant freedom to integrate multiple aspects of life including academic, professional and personal experiences for his benefit. Adam stated,

"...I'm very out about being gay, a lot of aspects of my life...my work, my dissertation, um, the fact that I'm married to [a man], you know, I have a husband, um, like, I'm pretty open, and out as a gay man, um, as a queer person. I don't like to hide aspects of that um, so I feel like...a full member of the LGBTQ community..." (p.25)

Here Adam simultaneously identified as a gay man and a queer person showing flexibility and assemblage of terms where identities are not fixed or isolated. Adam talked of being "a full member of the LGBTQ+ community" likely engaging and immersing himself in culture, community and bringing sexual identity into other areas of his life such as work, family life and academia in a way that feels seamless and usualised.

Zain

Zain mentioned that he knew he felt different at three years old but only later understood that difference to be sexual identity. It wasn't until a situation where someone observed his authentic enduring sexual identity, that he realised how authentic and important his sexual identity was to him. He remembered,

"...I didn't realise properly until...one contestant said, 'you're gay like through and through gay man, aren't you?' And I was like, 'what do you mean?' and she said well you've never kissed...another girl or never been with a girl or anything, and yet everything is very much gay and I kind of laughed, and I was like, 'yeah, you're right, I am very much a gay man', you know, you can't take that away...and all my life I've kind of had it..." (p.20) Zain could not separate his sexual identity from his sense of Self - now, nor at any point throughout his life. Whilst there were aspects of his identity he could split when presenting himself to others (including omissions and overt disclosures of his sexuality), now he approaches it differently. Zain said,

"I do make it clear to people that...I'm a gay man, you know, at some point in the conversation..." (p.21)

Zain now synthesised his sexuality into conversations with others in open and transparent ways during daily interactions. The passage of time and familiarity with the interactions on social media brought confidence and disinhibition in disclosing his identities simultaneously online. He recalled,

"...as time went on, especially with Twitter...I started to say that I'm gay and I started to say a gay Asian Muslim...but I made it very clear in my bio, profile that I'm gay Muslim...because I felt that there weren't any role models at all, there's no representation..." (p.2)

Despite the risks of abuse, discrimination and attack, Zain expressed his identities fully for the benefit of others who needed representation from marginalised individuals as role models. Specifically using the platform Twitter (now 'X') he expressed and usualised his gay identity within a racialised minority group integrating aspects of faith, heritage and culture, allowing others from marginalised groups to look to him and realise synthesising identities was possible. Zain continued,

"...I can also have a decent relationship if I wanted, or I can also navigate my life with my parents, or in particular trying to reconcile their faith with their sexual orientation, and gender identity." (p.2) The synthesis of sexuality with religion felt important for Zain in living an authentic life. Synthesising Zain's sexual identity into his family unit came over time and with the support of others in his life. A pivotal moment for Zain was,

"...when they [his parents] came round...to meet my partner, and they said you've got the best relationship we've ever seen of our children, and it's a beautiful home..." (p.12)

The support of his partner and the strength of their relationship was embraced and synthesised into his parents' lives and this brought with it validation and acceptance from others and simultaneously towards himself.

Kurt

An unknowing authenticity demonstrated during childhood shows an innocence of synthesis that was witnessed and created assumptions from others. Kurt remembered,

"...even from like a young age, my mum used to say I was showing signs of you know, being gay...I drew a massive heart around him [a picture of a band member in 'Culture Club'] and, you know...like stuff like that and, you know, pictures and put make-up on..." (p.5)

Although this was construed by others as behaviours stereotyped as 'being gay', they

revealed a childhood of expressing non-conforming behaviours through innocent play.

As he grew older, Kurt felt expressing his non-heterosexual identity was important and

came in synch with legislative changes. Kurt was,

"...planning on waiting until I was 21 which was the legal age then...to come out, but they [the U.K. government] changed it to 18 and as soon as they changed it, I come out 'cause I felt like that was only safe thing...to do..." (p.2) Kurt mentioned feeling like the 'only safe' thing to do was coming out which would openly and actively synthesise his non-heterosexual identity into his life situation. Once there was legislation that validated and acknowledged this part of himself, it gave him permission and protection to embrace, own and share his sexuality with others.

The act of coming out brought a relief to inner turmoil and stress. This was a challenging process as Kurt recalled,

"I was even like thinking about committing suicide at the time, you know, because I look back and there was thoughts that like go through my head and I'm thinking, you know...I'm a freak...and then you suddenly come out and realise actually, what was I worried about... looking back, I see, you know, coming out is actually quite an easy thing in comparison to like, other things [that] have happened in my life." (pp.10 – 11)

Although there appeared to be an ease in the acceptance of non-heterosexuality and the disclosure to others, this was a retrospective view. The challenges and pejorative language used towards the Self at the time still held distress and emotion. The resistance to synthesising his sexuality with other areas of his life was profound, but the challenge of this experience appeared dwarfed by later disclosures and experiences throughout his lifespan.

Whilst this was not the experience for all non-heterosexual people, for Kurt synthesising his non-heterosexual identity into his existing world and relationships, including his family dynamic, resulted in his stepfather immediately taking supportive interest in Kurt's disclosure. He recounted his stepfather,

"...asked me if I had a boyfriend and I said, no, not the moment and he said, well I know a young guy at work your age who's gay, I'll introduce you..." (p.6)

This demonstration by Kurt's stepfather actively encouraging and exploring Kurt's relationship status with the view to facilitate connection to another non-heterosexual individual, aimed to create intimacy and romantic interaction, demonstrating synthesising the non-heterosexual identity into the family unit by others and acceptance from others.

Once synthesis began it became a lifelong process where symbolic and overt interactions on- and offline, communicate his sexual identity. A recent event Kurt recalled was,

"...A couple of weeks ago I was actually on Channel 4 with Joe Lycett for his Pride 50 celebration, which...was quite a bit nuts, and my social media actually went nuts..." (p.17)

His participation in an LGBTQ+ Pride event on television presented an assumed nonheterosexual identity to a wider public audience. The association with an LGBTQ+ celebrity and connections between the two on social media synthesised his sexuality with other aspects of his life simultaneously.

Chris

Chris could not openly maintain the truly authentic presentation of Self he once had online and offline. He stated,

"...in the beginning [of his social media, Facebook use], it felt like a club, it felt like a secret club... when I joined you had to have an academic email to...join...so it really kind of felt...like a forum for your peers...and...it's kind of expanded to everyone and their gran. Erm, so when I think back to what I used to write very publicly on there [laughs], I kind of cringe a bit...it felt much more private." (p.2)

Social media historically felt a unique space he once shared with his peers which was positioned away from judgments and attacks from strangers and / or family. It felt like this period was a more disinhibited time where he was able to express himself freely and openly

– even if there was a discomfort or embarrassment with hindsight. The popularity and commercial use of social media – in this case Facebook – meant he could no longer maintain the privilege of privacy or authenticity.

Whilst this expansion of social media had proven to be a challenge for Chris, his offline experience was one of beginning to live in a more authentic and open way. Chris was,

"...living in Brighton so, I was very open in my real life..." (p.5)

Therefore, he was able to synthesise his non-heterosexual identity into his life in an accepting and inclusive environment such as Brighton, situated away from social media and its rapidly expanding audience. This location appeared to affirm his identity as a non-heterosexual man. In doing so, experiences and events offline with LGBTQ+ people and themes, inevitably became part of his online presentation. Chris reflected,

"...actually I'm, I'm sure if they click through the photos that were on there that they would have figured it out... Very kind of explicit photos of... you know, photos of pride, photos with people who were clearly gay." (p.6)

Chris was stating the environment and symbolism in images were suggestive of his sexuality by association, rather than from any explicit disclosures. He presented himself – either through his own images or his appearance in the images of others – in an authentic way and his sexuality was implicitly disclosed through social media to people he had not explicitly told. Recognition that should they connect the presentations a formal disclosure of nonheterosexual identity would not be required. As Chris continued to synthesise his sexual identity in this way, there was a recklessness towards others finding out. He recalled, "...I remember being you know very pro-gay marriage on there and stuff...I think subconsciously part of me was like 'fuck it - I don't actually care [about people finding out my sexuality]'..." (p.7)

His expression online of LGBTQ+ equality and values revealed his sexual identity by association. As he reflected, there may have been an element of disinhibited behaviour coming through - 'fuck it' - and offline he began disclosing his sexual identity to others. He stated,

"...I just started dating a man and...introduced him to everyone, really...I came out to different people at different times..." (p.4)

This experience of connecting and introducing a same-sex partner to those around him felt like a reserved, natural way of 'coming out'. As Chris mentioned,

"...it wasn't a kind of...burst out of a cake, post it on social media, call the papers." (p.4)

It was an unassuming, quiet process and one that happened over a period of time. There was an assumption that coming out experiences are loud, sudden and dramatic, but for Chris his experience was the opposite. The synthesis of his non-heterosexual identity was a gradual and methodical process that was measured and controlled.

Synthesising his offline and online presentations meant he was more authentic in his experiences as he no longer "...hide parts of myself like I used to [on social media] ..." (p.14).

It was clear Chris synthesised his non-heterosexual identity as he incorporated various aspects of his life into his environment, professional, personal life and family. There were multiple points of synthesis for him,

"...I work in an LGBT organisation and have had similar places in the past, lots of gay friends, er, you know, very open friendship group, my nan loves 'Drag Race'..." (p.23)

The reach, synthesis and influence the LGBTQ+ community has had on him and those around him is evident, with the juxtaposition reference to his gran – an older female – loving the popular television show 'RuPaul's Drag Race' showcasing the world of LGBTQ+ female impersonation full of LGBTQ+ terminology, struggle and diversity which one may not associate with elderly people.

Summary

'The Performance' experiences in this research (Table 10) align with Troiden's (1988) model - stage three, 'Identity assumption,' where individuals lead 'double lives' (p.110) and the sense of belonging to this new group identity boost feelings of connection and reduce isolation. It also aligns with - stage four, 'commitment,' where non-heterosexual identity is embraced as a way of life. In stage four, individuals begin to openly reveal the nonheterosexual identity to others who are heterosexual, however, here findings for Adam, James and Zain showed regardless of disclosing a non-heterosexual identity to others, there was still a splitting of identities in various circumstances with gradual integration of partners and additional aspects of the individual's life (e.g. friends, personality traits, humour, physical presentation, home) included family at a time when they felt acceptance and particularly parental adjustment.

'The Performance' experiences align with Fassinger and McCarn's (1996) phase three, 'deepening/commitment,' and phase four, 'internalisation/synthesis'. The individual began to become more assured about who they are through experiences with others from the community, resulting in self-acceptance and a conscious decision of when, where and with whom to be open about their non-heterosexual identity. Some individuals in the Fassinger and McCarn model choose to remain silent about their sexuality but nevertheless understood what being a lesbian in society meant for them.

Cass's (1984) model is reflected in 'The Performances' experienced in stages three, four and six. In stage three, 'Identity Tolerance,' individuals maintained two split identities - one nonheterosexual in private and heterosexual in public. Stage four, 'Identity Acceptance,' created more connections and friendships in the community and a positive view of their non-heterosexual identity; stage six 'Identity Synthesis,' incorporated sexual identity into other aspects of the individual's life and sexual identity is no longer hidden.

Experiences of 'The Performances' were similar to Coleman's (1982) 'Exploration' stage of exploring and experimenting with the newly constructed sexual identity through deeper and more sustained contact with the LGBTQ+ community. Splitting experiences in the current research gave participants opportunity to explore and understand experiences often occurred in private. Coleman's stages of 'Frist Relationships,' and 'Integration,' are both reflected in Synthesising experiences of participants in this study, however, Coleman focuses on intimate, romantic relationships and the sustainability of these connections as markers of development which is not the case in these findings. However, findings show close, intimate and/or romantic relationships are affirming and supportive (Zain, James, Donald and Adam), yet is not necessarily the requirement for synthesising non-heterosexual identity into the previously lived (assumed) heterosexual life.

The D'Augelli (1994) model encompasses the experiences of 'the Performances' in the phase 'Exiting Heterosexual Identity,' - whilst there had been no disclosures made offline, online there have been disclosures either overtly or by association through chat room

engagement or behaviours conducted in secret (Kurt, James, Adam). The D'Augelli model aligned with this study in 'Developing a Personal Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Identity Status' where interactions between participants and others in the community occurred both onand offline. This subsequently aligns to D'Augelli's 'Developing a Lesbain-Gay-Bisexual Social Identity' phase as the individual connected to, and retains, others who know of their non-heterosexual identity. 'The Performances' experienced from these findings also encompass D'Augelli's 'Becoming a Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Offspring' as synthesising nonheterosexual identity is formulated, adjusted and integrated into the family unit having previously been assumed to be heterosexual.

'The Performances' contain aspects of Savin Williams and Cohen's (2015) milestone of 'Self-Identification' - same-sex attraction is valid and interactions with others from the community bring gratifying experiences often done in secret. 'Disclosure' milestone is analogous to the synthesising aspect of this research as overt expression of nonheterosexual identity occurred to family and friends – often with parents last to find out due to their status in the individual's life (Zain, Kurt, Adam). 'Self-acceptance and synthesis' are analogous to synthesising experiences in these findings where integration of sexual identity occurs in multiple aspects of the person's life and is no longer the all-consuming part of their lives.

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours			
Superordina	Superordinate Theme: The Performances (Occurs on- and offline)					
	Subordinate themes: Splitting Synthesising	Empowering / Authentic / Relieving / Unapologetic / Disinhibited / Alone / Cautious	Withdrawal / Integration / Performance / Opinionated / Introducing / Incorporating / Clarification / Role Modelling / Hiding / Passing			
Existing models			Emotions / Behaviours			
Cass	Stage 3: Identity Tolerance		Tolerance / Socialisation / Passing			

Table 10 - Comparison of The Performances of splitting and synthesising Experiences to Other Sexual Identity Development Models

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
	Stage 4: Identity Acceptance		Positive view of homosexuality / Socialisation / Passing / Coming Out
	Stage 6: Identity Synthesis		Anger / Pride / Integration / Peace / Stability
			Socialisation / Experimenting / Awkwardness / Confusion / Intensity /
Coleman	Exploration		External Validation / Depression / Frustration / Shame
	First Relationships		Intimacy Seeking / Stability / Possessiveness / Lack of Trust
	Integration		Confident / Assured / Successful Relationships
Troiden	Stage 3: Identity Assumption		Disclosing / Experimentation / Socialisation / Solidarity
	Stage 4: Commitment		Integration / Empowerment / Self-Acceptance
D'Augelli			Recognition of NH identity / Coming Out / Clarifying
	Exiting Heterosexual Identity		

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
	Developing a Personal Lesbian-		
	Gay-Bisexual Identity Status		Social Interaction / Rejecting myths of NH identity
	Developing a Lesbian-Gay- Bisexual Social Identity		Social Support / Affirmative
McCarn and Fassinger	Phase 3: Deepening Commitment		Awareness of Value & Oppression of Group (Grp) / Pride / Rage (Grp)/ Deepening Self-Knowledge (Ind) / Anger / Sadness (Ind)

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
			Complete self-exploration / Consistency (I)
	Phase 4: Internalisation /		
	Supthoric		Fulfilment / Security / Socially Aware / Dedication (Grp)
	Synthesis		
Savin-	Self-Acceptance and Synthesis		Integration / acceptance of holistic self
Williams	Disclosure		Support / fear / multiple identity challenges / generally positive
and Cohen			
	Self-Identification		Stigma management / interpersonal closeness

A Journey to Acceptance

Introduction

Saeed (2024) recognises the process towards acceptance of a non-heterosexual identity is a journey of self-discovery moving through internal struggles towards a place of authentic acceptance. Findings from this research demonstrate this journey. Participants resisted or ignored the awareness that a non-heterosexual identity was becoming a part of their self-concept. The journey to reach a place of authentic acceptance comes from a feedback loop of being accepted by others, leading to further and deeper self-acceptance of the non-heterosexual identity. There is most often an origin point of Ignoring-Resisting the non-heterosexual identity but, as with the polarity of all experiences, to ignore-resist something ultimately means an acceptance it exists. 'A Journey to Acceptance' has the following subthemes – Ignoring-Resisting; Acceptance from Others and Acceptance of Self – which map the journey participants embarked upon, and in some cases still experience but to lesser extremes or frequencies.

Ignoring – Resisting

The process of ignoring – resisting a non-heterosexual identity in these findings show participants denying, distracting or behaving in ways to avoid focusing on non-heterosexual feelings. With some participants (Zain, Adam, Kurt) the internalisation of stigma and negative associations with a non-heterosexual identity brings mental health challenges including rejection, denial and disgust with self.

Adam

For Adam, Ignoring-Resisting his non-heterosexual identity drove a need to find friendships and inclusion from others who were different for various reasons. He said,

"...I was always friends with the other, like, nerdy kids who were into Pokémon and...anime and...um Yeah, because like, I think, you know, they were people who also felt different um in some way...." (p.5)

Adam's self-categorisation of 'nerdy', and connecting with others who 'felt different', through cartoons such as Pokémon was potentially both a distraction from his feelings of sexual identity difference and diversion from being vulnerable and labelled with sexual identity difference by others. Wanting to feel belonging to a group was important and a self-identification of 'nerdy' also demonstrated his keen interest in education. Adam coped by,

"...being into school um, being kind of nerdy, err, actually like, I could kinda hide behind that [chuckles] in many ways. You know, like just focus all my attention on school... I think that was kind of a mask that allowed me to...not have to confront being gay in some ways..." (p.10)

Hyperfocus on school and a non-threatening, non-sexual presentation of himself as 'nerdy' was Adam's strategy in resisting confronting the reality of his feelings of same-sex attraction. The 'mask' served as protection by hiding from others through a performance of 'nerdy' which was less vulnerable than the reality of a non-heterosexual identity in a conservative religious school.

James

When James presented himself to others in the offline world later in life after disclosing his sexual identity to others he felt awkward. He recalled resisting his authentic behaviour,

"...when I would meet men later on it, whether they were straight or gay, I always felt, felt threatened and almost like I had to hide myself..." (p.19)

It was specifically men whom James feels threatened by. The overt, gender fluid and expressive identity he shared and introduced through social media and to his family which

achieved acceptance and validation, became hidden in these offline situations and he felt introverted and changed his behaviours.

The recognition of a non-heterosexual identity did not automatically remove the resistance of integrating a holistic self. James remembered,

"...by the time I was at university, I'd been out for a long, a long time, but I still wasn't comfortable in my own skin. It's taken me, years and years and years to be comfortable in me own skin..." (p.4)

The process of integrating his marginalised intersections where he felt happy and truly accepted who he was, occurred over a number of years.

Zain

Zain coped with his feelings of same-sex attraction as a youth by ignoring and resisting them in any way he knew how. Zain felt that,

"...even though I knew I had these feelings, it's about suppressing them, and not having anyone to talk to about it, and even if you did, it would have just, I think it would've just kind of ended me to be honest..." (p.23)

This statement is paradoxical. Zain had no one to confide in about his inner-world, yet if there were this would feel threatening and brought immense fear, like his existence would have ended, so expression was avoided. Before disclosure of a non-heterosexual identity the level of stress on the mental health of Zain is evident. He recalled the pressure and angst due to his cultural and religious background,

"...I carried what I call religious guilt at that time... I did have a lot of anxieties and depression, but I've, again, I didn't have any words for it..." (p.5) The lack of terminology or understanding emphasises the loneliness Zain felt. The experiences of a young person managing their feelings which are seen as culturally or religiously wrong or inappropriate created mental health challenges. Zain recognised,

"...coming through my teen years in particular, sort of trying to figure it all out, you know, conflicts, inner conflict mental anguish..." (p.5)

This demonstrates a combination of challenges creating confusion and emotional complexity, all of which were resisted and ignored due to lack of understanding and education.

The lack of understanding about his feelings of same-sex attraction created resistance to accepting a non-heterosexual identity being constructed as Zain internalised negative feelings.

Kurt

Internalised homophobia was apparent in the distress and the isolation Kurt felt along with the loathing he felt for himself. Kurt remembered,

"...I was even like thinking about committing suicide at the time, you know, because I look back and there was thoughts that like go through my head and I'm thinking, you know, I'm, I'm a freak. I'm not this and, you know, [the] only way out for me is, you know, literally out and, you know..." (p. 10)

The experience of feeling trapped in a situation where he felt alone, unwanted and isolated in his experience, pushed Kurt to consider death by suicide was the only escape from his feelings of being so different. He believed he was a 'freak' from of what nature intended.

Donald

Donald held concerns about how his parents might react to his disclosure before he came out to them,

"...I saw my parents being accepting to gay people before I came out...in the way they treated other people, or the way they reacted to the media that they watch, but there's like a voice in your head thinking that they could be different if that happens like to them themselves, like their son. So you would be, I had this concern before I came out, so I think that was like another struggle as well. No matter how liberal you think your parents are, like a side of you, like one of your concerns could still be, would they react differently if that indeed happens to them..." (p.22)

He expressed a resistance to disclosing his non-heterosexual identity to his parents, yet this was not resistance to, or ignoring of, his same-sex feelings. Evidently Donald was fearful of his parents treating him differently to how they treated LGBTQ+ people outside the family unit. There was trepidation and suspicion, likely based on social expectations and messages, that regardless of his parents' liberal socio-political position, rejection by them could have been a real possibility.

Donald recalled little resistance to, or ignoring of, constructing a non-heterosexual identity in his early years. Consideration of his liberal culture and environment, protection of characteristics and acceptance from family and friends enabled him to accept his nonheterosexual identity freely, fluidly and more completely than those who resided in environments where overt oppression and discrimination occurred. That was not to say discrimination or oppression towards LGBTQ+ people in Hong Kong culture did not occur, but the importance of a home and social connections in constructing and exploring identity in a full and accepting way came in part through acceptance from others.

Chris

Before accepting his sexual identity, Chris stated he "...struggled with it...[he] did struggle with it..." alluding to the potential resistance of a non-heterosexual identity and strategies were utilised to ignore or avoid his feelings of difference. One of these behaviours he mentions was,

"...when I was closeted I kind of tried to stay away from gay people..." (p.10)

Here was an active avoidance of gay people prior to accepting his sexual identity.

Much like a process of grief, his acceptance of sexual identity came over time, reflected in how disclosure to others occurred – not rapidly or simultaneously, but a gradual process. Chris was,

"...coming to terms with my identity..." (p.11)

Chris used the phrase which was analogous to the process of loss and grief where an individual mourns whilst simultaneously existing in the present and preparing for an alternative future to one they had assumed. Being comfortable around others is aligned to feeling accepted by them as he was in Brighton; gradually feeling confident and comfortable others would still accept him when a non-heterosexual identity was disclosed.

Acceptance from Others

Acceptance from others comes after self-disclosure of a non-heterosexual identity is made. The risk and anxiety of rejection prior to any disclosure of non-heterosexual identity is a lifelong experience (Rostosky et. al., 2021). Initial disclosures, particularly to parents, is met with heightened anxiety and uncertainty around how the disclosure will be met (Donald, Kurt) even when the parents are outwardly supportive of non-heterosexual others. Findings

showed that there were some unexpected reactions from parents (Kurt, Adam). There was however a consistent figure in the individual's life (such as friend, partner or other parent), who showed unconditional love towards the individual boosting their self-esteem and selfworth (Adam, Zain, Kurt, James).

Adam

For Adam there was one place where disclosure of his feelings became validated and accepted. He recalled,

"...I met the school counsellor...and we talked, and...I just remember her being very supportive and being like, you know, this is great, this is normal. These feelings are normal. Like you're, you're fine. Don't worry about it. Um, and now looking back, I kind of feel like she was trying to be as affirming and supportive of me...I think she could tell I was gay, um, but you know, because for a position at, in the school, she couldn't actually come out and support me. And so she did what she could to say that this is normal and to, to reassure me and that did feel good, it was helpful to have an adult say that even though they didn't explicitly say like "it's okay to be gay", um, so that helped me feel a little bit more like...normal, I guess...less anxious about these feelings that I was having that made me feel very strange..." (pp.9 – 10)

This was a valuable and validating space for Adam – surprising in the school ethos and background rooted in conservative Christianity. Adam found an ally in the counsellor and acceptance, reassurance and usualisation of non-heterosexual feelings allowing him to feel more 'normal', reduced challenges with his mental health and becoming more accepting of himself.

When Adam disclosed his sexual identity to his parents, the rejecting and negative reaction from his mother – telling him to leave the family home – was surprising and traumatising, but he had a space to feel safe with his paternal grandparents. Adam said,

"I don't know if they really knew what was going on, um, but I just knew they were people that I could always, you know, come and, and stay with them. And they would love me and support me..." (p.13)

Although there was ambiguity whether his grandparents knew of his sexual identity or the family breakdown, he felt comfortable in their space and regardless of the situation he would be loved and supported even if his mother rejected him. The paternal side of the family – whether because of firsthand experience of rejection and oppression by social majority others – rallied and supported him unquestioningly. Adam recalled the following day, his father came to see him. He remembered his father said,

"...I love you; I support you, you're still my son. I accept you being gay. It's fine. Um, you need to come home, like we'll deal with your mum together, and so like he...brought me back, home, which was great. So my dad has been supportive in that way from, from the very beginning..." (p.14)

The overt acceptance of Adam, and his sexual identity, was a powerful act. Adam recognised he was not alone and his father would support and accept him, bringing him back to the family unit. Even though there was a rupture in the relationship between Adam and his mother, there was consistent internal awareness and acceptance of himself as a non-heterosexual individual after disclosing his sexuality, which created connections and relationships. Adam recalled a turning point in the maternal relationship when he brought his partner home to meet his parents. Adam recalled his mother's response,

"...for her [mother] seeing him and seeing the fact that like, he's a person, like we love each other...I think she was just so worried about me...seeing me with him, like, calmed her down. And, um, you know, I remember her coming to our wedding, and like crying tears of happiness 'cause like it was a good day and she was there...supporting us..." (p.14) Witnessing her child experience happiness and love from another person seemed to be the catalyst for change in Adam's situation. The maternal relationship strengthened from the first meeting of the partner, bringing support, happiness and peace.

James

When James disclosed his sexual identity to others, an almost immediate and instantaneous acceptance occurred. He stated,

"...then I suddenly got this...name for myself that was like, I was, I was no longer gay boy and stuff like that, I was [James]..." (p.3)

The disclosure humanises James as he is addressed by his name, creating self-confidence and surety for accepting himself. He recalled receiving acceptance and unconditional love from his family who were pivotal in the construction of his sexual identity. He recalled having a discussion with his mother about relationships,

"...I went I don't even think it's meant to be with girls and she went...Okay. Then it's not meant to be with girls. And so from that moment I was like, right - there wasn't, no big deal was made out of it..." (p.13)

Through this open communication, no judgment or fear, the first disclosure of his nonheterosexual identity occurred and was received as accepting and supportive from his mother. James went on to state,

"I would say family really did help, um because they've always been quite openminded and quite grounded..." (p.19)

Openness and non-judgment toward his choice and experiences created a source of strength and security for James, supporting him to remain stable when experiencing challenges. These qualities positively affected James' acceptance of self. Despite validation and acceptance from family about his sexual identity, James talked about the drive to gain validation and acceptance from others – particularly through social media – hoping to increase his self-worth. James felt it important to express himself authentically including his gender fluidity, realising who would accept him regardless of how he presented. He remembered,

"...it was met with a lot of appreciation, like you, that looks amazin', what colour is that and things like this. And I was like, oh my god like that, that feels, that really feels really good..." (p.8)

James achieved what he set out to do – gain appreciation, connection, engagement and acceptance that boosted self-worth, based on presenting the version of himself that gained most validation. The gender non-conforming presentation of self, received acceptance from others online, allowing James' self-worth to increase.

Zain

Zain recalled his experience as one of loneliness and isolation and spoke of others as if relating to his experiences. Zain stated "...it's important that they do have that connection, and if they don't have it, it's kind of quite a terrible dark place to be in sometimes..." (p.4), recognising that acceptance and support of another person – in whatever capacity – was vital in boosting confidence and sense of worth. For Zain he believed,

"...even if you don't have a partner, it's important to have at least an ally or a friend who can give you that confidence or that reassurances to say, you know, it's going to be okay, if I didn't have that feeling of hope or understanding, I think I would have buckled many years prior to that..." (p.8)

Connection with a person accepting of his sexual identity brought confidence, support and more importantly, hope, that things in life would change and improve. The use of the word

'buckled' highlighted an intensity and pressure he felt in life when his sexual identity was unknown to others. The relationship Zain had with his partner gave him strength in being authentic,

"...I only came out after I had met my partner, and I told my mum, um but I was really fortunate that my partners very, very supportive..." (p.6)

Security in the relationship and unconditional love was the impetus to accept and value himself which was felt when disclosing his non-heterosexuality to others, specifically his mother.

The support and security of having a partner helped navigate the complexity of disclosing a non-heterosexual identity to close family members and acted as a refuge emotionally and potentially physically. Without his partner Zain may not have disclosed to his mother at all.

The direct and overt acceptance of Zain as a non-heterosexual person - from his parents in particular was important. Zain recounted,

"...she [mother] responded was in a very positive manner. So that kind of instilled confidence in me..." (p.6)

"...when I told my mum about a year or two later, about me meeting somebody, I fell in love...her response to that was you know whatever makes you happy makes me happy, and if I can't share in that happiness, what kind of mum will I be? So again, having that kind of level of unconditional love, that gave me something, it added to, I had already..." (p.12)

These expressions of acceptance, being received with positivity and unconditional love appear to be the foundations of a more confident Acceptance of Self which gave him permission to live more authentically,. The effect of parental acceptance continued in a later statement. Zain said, "...when you're growing up and you come from quite a religious family background in particular, you want that level of acceptance, you know...most importantly from your parents more than anything...if you don't have that level of love, it feeds into confidence, self-esteem, self-worth, self-value..." (p.13)

Zain reflected on how the impact not having acceptance from his parents could have negatively affected his self-worth, confidence and mental health.

The power and strength of love was mentioned as the qualities Zain experienced from his parents and partner, allowing for reinforcement of his non-heterosexual identity and acceptance of himself. He recalled,

"...that is the catalyst for change to think my parents brought me into this world, they accepted me and my partner, and...that galvanised me to think I can be who I want to be, that's it and it didn't really matter after that about whether people accepted me or not, it was the fact that my parents brought me in and I take that all my life now..." (pp.12 – 13)

His parents' acceptance of his non-heterosexual identity – and by extension his partner – created confidence, reassurance and strength to feel empowered. The love and support from those closest to him, particularly parents, gave a freedom to live openly within and outside the cultural and religious community he straddled as a gay Muslim South Asian man.

Kurt

Kurt's experience of self-acceptance was affected by his family who supported him following non-heterosexual identity disclosure. Kurt said,

"...after I come out um, my mum and dad were basically...my best friends after I come out..." (p.5)

"... [my (step-)dad] actually turned out to be more supportive from day one than probably the rest of my family with that and it actually bought us so much closer together..." (p.7)

These statements demonstrate immediate acceptance of Kurt's sexual identity from his caregivers which brought deeper connection and support with the dynamic of parent-child relationship becoming an adult interaction. Kurt's extended family showed support by planning on bringing him closer into their own family unit should a hostile reaction occur from his step-father and exclude him from the home. He remembered,

"...we told my auntie and she was fine about it, she had foster kids um so we smuggled some clothes down in a suitcase, you know, and said, right, you know, if he kicks him out he can live here, it's all fine..." (p.6)

This disclosure resulted in support and a refuge created should there be hostility and physical/emotional rejection following Kurt's further disclosure. The auntie accepted Kurt regardless of his sexual identity, as the auntie's home was a refuge for foster children.

Kurt's reflection that his family were supportive but his challenge came from his inner dialogue which created experiences of fear and anxiety. Kurt recalled,

"...my whole family, um as I said were quite supportive in the end and everything. I think the only challenge I probably faced was actually myself 'cause it's like when you come out, half, most of the fear in yourself is actually from yourself..." (p.10)

These obstacles amplified fears which likely came through internalised homophobia due to a lack in education, lack of knowledge and social rejection of LGBTQ+ identities and ideas. It felt important to acknowledge this reflection in hindsight and with the privilege of maturity and life experience.

Despite these statements of acceptance and pride around integrating sexual identity into a holistic self, Kurt was cautious online about who he allowed onto his social media platforms;

"...I only befriend people that I know are either like me or accepting of me..." (p.24)

Connecting through lived experiences – such as a non-heterosexual identity – reinforced feelings of safety in being accepted by others and reduced the risk of discrimination and attack.

Donald

Donald talked of the benefits of people expressing themselves within the bounds of an accepting culture when he stated,

"...if you grew up in liberal culture that allows you to, you know, that tells you being gay is not a sin, then you would definitely feel more comfortable in living in your own skin..." (p.9)

The statement highlighted the complexity of intersections between religion, culture, society and sexuality in the Western world. The legal position of a culture or society supersedes religious beliefs in the west. Whilst there may be opposition to a practice or identity from religious groups, societal law governs conduct and equity of all within a given society. Even if religion is rejecting of an identity (or the individual rejects religion), socially there will be some degree of protection and acceptance through legislation – this is a very Westernised perspective. These legislative acts allowed those within society – and specifically Donald's peers – to embrace and accept themselves as non-heterosexual people, being open to others within social groups early on in their lives. Donald recalled feeling,

"...the environment and space at that time in that period, to be able to explore that side of mine. Um, so I got some close, friends, like luckily when I was in secondary school as well, who are extremely accepting...I was kind of, like, in my group of like, gay friend group at school. So like you could tell, like, each other [things]...all gays and then you're just like, sticking in the same group, like that sort of...um...support within that group, really helped me like exploring my sexuality I think..." (p.4)

Donald acknowledged the experience of acceptance and support from others – particularly non-heterosexual people at school – allowed him to feel validated in Exploring and Understanding his sexual identity more fully. The validity, visibility and security of being around similar others moved the acceptance of non-heterosexual identity forward, enabled by social interaction with others who helped him construct his sense of identity.

Chris

Evidently the importance and value having accepting others around him includes both friends and family. Chris said he had,

"...lots of gay friends, er, you know, very open friendship group, my nan loves 'Drag Race' erm, yeah, like I luckily don't have many unaccepting people around me." (p.23)

Not only are there friends who hold similar identities to the participant but the acknowledgement of 'nan' – likely a generationally older female who potentially held more traditional values, morales and life experiences – engaging with and loving 'Drag Race' presented an image of openness and acceptance towards the LGBTQ+ community and by extension the client's sexual identity.

Acceptance of Self

The process of self-acceptance comes from both intra- and interpersonal interactions. Participants' levels of self-acceptance and increased self-esteem came from the positive feedback experienced after disclosing a non-heterosexual identity to others. Acceptance of Self also occurred through the Exploring and Understanding experiences participants had with the world through online and offline sources.

Adam

The journey Adam has embarked on allowed him to reach a place of acceptance of his sexual identity which integrated many aspects of his life and brought an openness and confidence to his life. He felt,

"...like I'm very out about being gay, a lot of aspects of my life, like, my, my work, my dissertation, um, the fact that I'm married to [a man], you know, I have a husband, um, like, I'm pretty open, and out as a gay man, um, as a queer person.
I don't like to hide aspects of that um, so I feel like, err yeah, a full member of the LGBTQ community..." (p.25)

This statement strongly recognised Adam's sexuality, how it is interwoven with work, academia, his personal life and the fluidity of labels which exist simultaneously and freely within the same person, with a transparency within Self and within the wider community.

James

James recognised through acceptance from others, and over time, he had changed and the process of (de/re) constructing his identities meant looking back he could have an,

"...appreciation of who I was then and who I am now; because I can guarantee you that the guy back then is nothing like who I am now...we'd be two completely different people..." (p.17)

Although James believed the two versions of himself are vastly different to one another, each version of himself is important in the process of accepting his non-heterosexual identity.

Zain

The confidence and unapologetic nature of embracing and aligning his sexuality and other identities - regardless of assumptions, discrimination and negative behaviours of others - Zain maintained dignity and determination through the acceptance of his parents and from

a source many assume would be opposed to same-sex relationships, his faith - Islam. Zain stated,

"...I had heard so much about, you know, being gay and how it was not allowed in our religion...because everyone had quoted the Quran and one story in particular, was the story of Lut or Lot and I just thought let me read for myself so that's what I did, I actually read the Quran, and the Bible, to make better sense of it all and I realised that there wasn't any reference about homosexuality in the Quran at all, which helped me. So that instilled confidence and so gave me reassurances to say, you know, I'll use the Quran as kind of like a moral compass for guidance..." (p.12)

Zain took it upon himself to explore and understand the religious position on non-

heterosexuality to support feelings of acceptance and validation. Zain interrogated whether

his behaviour was wrong from a religious and cultural position, resulting in the integration

of sexual identity and faith - which he utilised to accept himself even more. He realised,

"...although I had same sex attraction to men, I just thought as a human being, I can do this, I can do what Allah wants me to be, you know, so that gave me that level of, inner strength..." (p.12)

Aligning aspects of identity that were areas of intersectional dissonance, created empowerment and strength, where there once was tension and struggle. Zain's statement, 'as a human being' emphasises the shared experience of being human with the drive to feel loved, supported and safe. Zain summed up the experience of accepting himself, and being accepted by others when he stated,

"...being gay hundred percent is, it's become everything - it's gone from being nothing when I was younger to everything in my life now." (p.14)

"...I do make it clear to people that...I'm a gay man, you know, at some point in the conversation..." (p.21)

The acceptance he had of himself makes sexual identity no longer 'nothing' and being ignored or resisted. His sexual identity is now a holistic, all-encompassing, valued and important identity characteristic at the forefront of his life. He is unashamed, unfiltered and overt in his disclosures about his sexual identity.

Kurt

The damage of the HIV/AIDS crisis on the LGBTQ+ community in the 1980's and early 1990's endured within, and outside the LGBTQ+ community for decades. For Kurt, being HIV positive was something he integrated, accepted and much like his non-heterosexual identity, was utilised as an experience to empower himself and others. Kurt stated,

"...I'm HIV positive, um an advocate about it, I speak openly about that as just as, so I do the same as I'm gay and I'm quite proud, the, the fact that, you know, I can put my hand up and say yes, I'm HIV positive..." (p.21)

"...I speak up now and I'll quite happily say, yes, I'm HIV. You know, I'm actually quite proud of it now, you know. Yes, I'm HIV. Get over it, you know, it's not my problem it's yours..." (p.23)

There was strength and security in himself, which enabled Kurt to be open and visible about his HIV status, even when there was risk of rejection and shaming - to be an 'advocate' for others and demonstrate the normality of being an HIV positive non-heterosexual person with acceptance.

Kurt used the word 'now' a number of times in relation to his HIV status, implying an integration of HIV identity was needed prior to acceptance and pride in his HIV status, where once they may have been no acceptance or pride.

Donald

Accepting a non-heterosexual identity – or any identity oppressed in majority culture – can be galvanised and validated through legislation. It was legislation which helped Donald accept his sexual identity as he mentioned being raised in Hong Kong. This was,

"...a very liberal place to live in as like a homosexual person....gay marriage is not legal, but like the gay culture is accepted...it's like one of the social policy being protected like nowadays by the law as well, so you're not supposed to be discriminated against just because you're a gay person, so um, growing up there, I didn't feel like...um, particularly like discriminated or being like a target group as part of the bigger culture..." (p.3)

There was a confidence and assurance for Donald that should anything happen to him because of his sexual identity he was protected by legislation and people within society should abide by these laws. The assumption can be made if non-heterosexual identity was a protected characteristic from discrimination, society at the highest level had accepted nonheterosexual people, recognising their value and identities. Despite same-sex people being protected from discrimination, legislation did not recognise same-sex marriage. Although there are some protections, simultaneously exceptions occur based on heteronormative experience and acceptance.

Chris

Chris felt accepted by others because of his location and environment, which was important in self-acceptance and integration of his sexual identity. Whilst he was going through the process of constructing a non-heterosexual identity and before disclosing this to others, he recalled,

...at the time I was living in Brighton, which is a fairly accepting place which was very helpful..." (p.7)

"...it was freeing moving to Brighton..." (p.10)

Brighton, on the south coast of England, is known for its diversity, as an accepting place to live and has a large LGBTQ+ community. Whilst Chris was not open about his sexual identity whilst living with his family, the distance from them allowed him freedom to explore, integrate and construct his non-heterosexual identity into other aspects of his life to feel more accepting of himself.

As his sexual identity continued to construct through interactions with the environment, the more accepting he is of himself. It got to a point where Chris recalled he,

"...kind of remember[s] that kind of 'Oh well fuck it,' mentality..." (p.11)

Where the pressure and energy of splitting multiple aspects of Self becomes too much with the risk of others finding out and a recklessness developed where the inadvertent disclosure of non-heterosexual identity would be welcome.

Summary

Findings (Table 11) show individuals experience apprehension of accepting a nonheterosexual identity due to behaviours of individuals around them and overt / covert social messages communicated to non-heterosexual people despite simultaneously striving to be fully authentic in accepting themselves and their newly constructed sexual identity (Vincke & Bolton, 1994). The majority of participants had at least one person in their life who allowed them to feel autonomous, supported and able to incorporate their nonheterosexual identity into a positive experience in accepting themselves (Adam, Zain, James, Donald, Kurt). Some participants reflected on Ignoring-Resisting experiences which seemed

to occur earlier in life prior to sufficient Exploring and Understanding experiences to galvanise the idea of holding a non-heterosexual identity.

These findings are analogous to Cass's (1984) 'Stage 4: Identity Acceptance' with the individual developing a positive and integrated view of their sexual identity through social interactions with others from the LGBTQ+ community. Yet there remain situations where non-disclosure occurred for important reasons such as safety and stability. This experience also aligned with Cass's 'Stage 6: Identity Synthesis', where sexual identity disclosure was no longer a concern and occurs readily.

Cass discusses the act of 'identity foreclosing' (p.150) where the homosexual identity is rejected and the non-heterosexual identity is not explored any further. Although somewhat unexplored in the literature, this is similar to the experiences of ignoring – resisting, however as findings show, experiences of Ignoring-Resisting are often temporary and more aligned with stigma management strategies (Troiden, 1988).

Findings correlate with Troiden's (1988) 'Stage 3: Identity Assumption' where the individual discloses the non-heterosexual identity to others, but these disclosures are done with other non-heterosexual people. Troiden posits this stage occurs just before or soon after having direct contact with other non-heterosexual individuals. If these initial contacts are positive, acceptance of a non-heterosexual identity and its disclosure to others occurs more rapidly. Connections to other community members occur and boosts sense of belonging and reduces isolation.

Findings reflect Troiden's (1988) 'Stage 4: Commitment'; marked by the individual embracing a non-heterosexual lifestyle with satisfaction and a security in a non-

heterosexual identity this increased alignment of aspects of identity to the nonheterosexual parts of self, an increase in validity of their identity and increase in selfesteem. Externally demonstrated by frequent and less censored disclosures to others with reduction in stigma management strategies.

Experiences of ignoring – resisting in the findings are similar to those in Troiden's (1988) 'Stage 2: Identity Confusion' with behaviours including denial of same-sex feelings, avoidance of LGBTQ+ people or places and an over identification and engagement with heterosexual people, activities and expressing anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric.

D'Augelli's (1994) phase of 'Developing a Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Social Identity' aligns with these findings. The gathering of social support from others within the community brings an affirming quality to the individual's non-heterosexual identity. The Phase of 'Becoming a Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Offspring' assumes parental relationships are ruptured, however only one participant reported this and was with one parent (Adam). D'Augelli (1994) acknowledges a family support network must be affirmative for an individual to construct a healthy sexual identity.

D'Augelli (1994) did not discuss experiences prior to accepting, nor following, disclosure of a non-heterosexual identity. Whilst there are no experiences of ignoring – resisting within the D'Augelli model, stressors exerted on individuals are clear.

Coleman (1982) places the 'Pre-Coming Out' stage as a time when stressors are indirect rejections toward the individual resulting in a lowered sense of self-acceptance, active resistance and dismissal of feelings of same-sex attraction. In the 'Coming Out' stage, Coleman states the individual makes 'peace' (p.473) with their non-heterosexual identity

prior to telling others. At this point Coleman believes acceptance from others at this stage is 'powerfully positive' (p.473) and that multiple positive reactions from others creates a strong resistance and resilience to negative responses.

McCarn and Fassinger (1996) align with these findings in their Individual branch of the model – 'Phase 3: Deepening/Commitment' where the individual examines aspects of the Self which subsequently leads to a deepening acceptance of identity. As this phase continues, the next phase, 'Phase 4: Internalisation/Synthesis' accepts same-sex attraction more fully and embraces it into the self-concept. It is during this phase that the individual goes through a long period of self-exploration and emotional work.

McCarn and Fassinger (1996) do not comment on any ignoring – resisting experiences and whilst there discuss Exploring and Splitting experiences, the newly constructing identity using stigma management behaviours are unclear.

Savin-Williams and Cohen (2015) found the 'Feeling Different' milestone as a time in youth where there is suppression and denial of same-sex erotic feelings and perhaps even a pretence of different – sex relationships. This is a time of policing of gender behaviours, particularly in boys. The milestone 'Questioning assumed Heterosexuality' is a period of hope that a heterosexual identity will eventually return if same-sex feelings have occurred. Construction of denials about sexual attractions and romantic interests happen. 'Selfidentification' and 'Self-acceptance and Synthesis' are milestones focusing on the gradual shifts from an internal understanding to external integration of identity into the world, and into the whole person, rather than the sexual identity being the most important identity.

The models presented here are predominantly focused on the disclosures to others and interactions with supportive others within the LGBTQ+ community about disclosure of a non-heterosexual identity. Interestingly some of the more contemporary models (D'Augelli 1994; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996) do not address ignoring – resisting behaviours of individuals prior to these disclosures.

It is interesting to consider that whilst connections to similar others are hugely beneficial and important in acceptance of a non-heterosexual identity, the support given by heterosexual friends, family (particularly parents) and colleagues moved the individual to a deeper level of self-acceptance and affirmation of their non-heterosexual identity. Findings presented here show participants on a journey to acceptance include experiences of ignoring – resisting and accepting a non-heterosexual identity based on the disclosures made within specific environments and situations to maintain an element of control. Nevertheless the experiences of ignoring – resisting and accepting do not exist in isolation and interact and intersect other experiences Gaining Knowledge of Identity helping in Exploring and Understanding and The Performances which included Splitting and Synthesising the non-heterosexual identity.

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
Superordina	e Theme: A Journey to Acceptance (Occurs on- and offline)	
	Subordinate themes: Ignoring – Resisting Accepting Self Acceptance from others	Denial / Avoidance / Abnormal / Loss / Anxious / Isolated / Supported / Accepted / Valued / Loved / Empowering / Validation / Confidence / Self-Accepting	Manipulation / Avoidance / Validation Seeking / Disclosing / Passing
Existing models			Emotions / Behaviours
Cass	Stage 4: Identity Acceptance		Positive view of homosexuality / Socialisation / Passing / Coming Out

Table 11 - Comparison of A Journey to Acceptance - Ignoring-Resisting / Accepting Experiences to Other Sexual Identity Development Models

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
	Stage 6: Identity Synthesis		Anger / Pride / Integration / Peace / Stability
Coleman	Pre-Coming Out		Reject / Dismiss / Negative Self-Concept / Concealment / Depression
	Coming Out		Reconciliation / Self-Acceptance / Rejection Risk / Parental Disclosure
Troiden	Stage 2: Identity Confusion		Anxiety / Confusion / Isolated / Guilt / Denial / Avoidance

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
	Stage 3: Identity Assumption		Disclosing / Experimentation / Socialisation / Solidarity
	Stage 4: Commitment		Integration / Empowerment / Self-Acceptance
D'Augelli	Becoming a Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Offspring		Complex familial adaption / Reintegration into family
	Developing a Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Social Identity		Social Support / Affirmative
McCarn and Fassinger	Phase 3: Deepening Commitment		Awareness of Value & Oppression of Group (Grp) / Pride / Rage (Grp)/ Deepening Self-Knowledge (Ind) / Anger / Sadness (Ind)

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
			Complete self-exploration / Consistency (I)
	Phase 4: Internalisation / Synthesis		Fulfilment / Security / Socially Aware / Dedication (Grp)
	Feeling Different		Policing behaviours / denial / performance of heterosexuality
Savin-			
Williams			
and Cohen	Self-Acceptance and Synthesis		Integration / acceptance of holistic self / peace
			5 · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · · ·
	Questioning Assumed		
	Questioning Assumed		Secret behaviours / meaningful realisation
	Heterosexuality		

Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
Self-Identification		Stigma management / interpersonal closeness / positive social
		interactions

Empowerment

Introduction

Experiences of empowerment occur in response to the other experiences – Gaining Knowledge of Identity, The Performances and A Journey to Acceptance. Empowerment facilitates a sense of achievement, inner strength and galvanises participants to identify more positively and completely with their non-heterosexual identity. Empowerment is both self-empowerment and actions to empower others in the LGBTQ+ community. Definitions of empowerment are plenty but the most appropriate is the process in which people (re)gain control over their lives, engage in participation with their community, live within the community through democracy and ability to critically understand and appraise the society in which they reside (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995).

Zimmerman (1995) highlights the issue in defining and measuring if empowerment has occurred when there are multiple definitions of, and subjective qualities to, the experience. Zimmerman further identifies themes one would expect to see for experiences of empowerment are "mastery and control, resource mobilisation, and sociopolitical context and participation," (p.585). All can be applied to these findings.

Empowerment can at times feel frightening and pushes the individual out of their comfort zone - sometimes with negative consequences. These experiences are learnt from, refined and result in positive outcomes for participants' mental health, connections, sense of selfworth and increased self-esteem (Zimmerman, 1995). In turn, importantly, empowerment experiences in this study pushed against oppression and discrimination that was exerted on individuals from the social structures in which they reside.

Empowerment of Self

Adams and Adams (1996) argue before empowering others, individuals need to feel empowered themselves. The individual "who feels and is empowered, is more likely to have the motivation and capacity to empower other people," (p.43). Adams and Adams highlight Self-empowerment as a neglected aspect of empowerment theory. Every approach to selfdevelopment, self-education, self-help and self-instruction leads back to feeling and being empowered. These findings demonstrate this. Participants felt empowered within themselves particularly through self-development and self-education as seen in superordinate theme, Gaining Knowledge of Identity. Self-help and self-instruction align with other superordinate themes, The Performances and A Journey to Acceptance, both of which involved feedback from others.

Donald

A sense of empowerment for Donald came through the awareness he was protected by legislation that governed his culture (Hong Kong). He said this was,

"...a very liberal place to live in as like a homosexual person...gay culture is accepted...it's like one of the social policy being protected...by the law...so you're not supposed to be discriminated against just because you're a gay person..." (p.3)

This confidence in his authentic Self and the ability for exploration of identity was enabled and empowered by legislation for protection of characteristics including sexual identity. For Donald, being,

"...in [a] liberal culture that allows you to, you know, that tells you being gay is not a sin, then you would definitely feel more comfortable in living in your own skin." (p.9) Donald recognised empowerment and value as he experienced acceptance from others and towards himself, which came in contrast to his awareness of other LGBTQ+ individual's experiences. Those from less liberal countries stood out for him as he recalled,

"...[meeting] people, they grew up in...countries that absolutely do not accept like homosexuality but they still managed to find their own ways to...approach their sexuality, but of course, in a more difficult way because you would have to hide yourself, you will have to hide everything that you, that you see...you speak..." (p.9)

Here Donald referenced a high level of threat, showing LGBTQ+ individuals had to hide and protect their sexual identity through splitting behaviours. Evidently, despite these risks, a non-heterosexual identity still emerged, sought self-actualisation and fully experienced the world.

Donald reflected on his privileged experience which contrasted to oppressed individuals, and included the benefits being in a homogenous group of,

"...all gays and then you're just like, sticking in the same group, like that sort of...um...support within that group, really helped me like exploring my sexuality I think..." (p.4)

The act of exploring sexuality underpinned by the group of similar others created empowerment, connection and consolidation which enabled Donald to be authentic and accept himself more fully. Donald reflected that,

"...at this age...feel[s] so much more comfortable with my masculinity because, like masculinity, as you know more about the definition of it, it's not just about all like manhood and being manly and stuff...it can also...include...femininity as well..." (p.5) With maturation, the passage of time, understanding and educating himself this resulted in embracing all aspects of his sexuality, and gender. This empowerment came from supportive interactions he had with the world. Donald's outlook considered experiences of others from within the community and how these subsequently influenced his perspective. He said,

"...if that person is gay as well, and if you got this point of view, towards like his sexual orientation, it kind of like inspires me in a way that, may, should - maybe I should start looking things in that way..." (p.22)

The clear expression of a (re)constructing identity based on the inspiration, influence and interaction with others within the community who have shared commonality of sexual identity, proved to be an empowering influence on Donald.

Donald's experiences of empowerment did not always result in such positive and constructive outcomes. There had been first hand experiences of discrimination on 'Grindr' (gay dating app) through disinhibited behaviour from others. Donald found empowerment in being able to use the blocking facility on the app. He stated,

"...on the dating app [Grindr], people wouldn't say, I at least...if I came across, like people, people who said like very mean things about me, I would just say block them..." (p.14)

Using the 'block' facility may be seen as a rejecting, discriminatory and oppressive tool in some instances, but for Donald it was utilised as empowerment and control over abuse from others within the non-heterosexual space. Donald's refusal to experience discrimination and abuse as one of powerlessness and lack of control was evident. He tried to, "...remind myself...not to victimise myself too much because...there are situations when you feel like 'oh, is that discrimination. Is that not?' But I [try] to push myself like to towards...the idea of no, that's not discrimination, not because...I want to convince myself like that's not discrimination but I give another person...the benefit of doubt." (p.15)

Although Donald stated he was not minimising experiences of discrimination online, his strategy for reducing feelings of victimisation were integrated in the lack of knowing or understanding of the individual's background and experiences. The approach to remove himself from the role of victim into one of empowerment was achieved through allowing the other person's ignorance or lack of empathy and understanding to be a rationale for their disinhibited behaviour.

Zain

Important in Zain's experiences of empowerment were his reflections following negative interactions with heterosexual others which became the impetus for growing in confidence and feeling empowered. Zain remembered,

"...when I got home after that course, that's when I decided that I need to champion who I am and...as a gay person, I needed to have more confidence in myself to speak up..." (pp.6 – 7)

Even though this was a retrospective reflection, this seemed to be the tipping point where oppressive and prejudiced narratives he experienced for many years – overtly and covertly – shifted his self-worth, recognising himself as an individual with multiple marginalised identities who was entitled to challenge others and be heard. As an activist his influence was wide ranging and about connection to facilitate change within and between communities. For Zain's strength and sense of empowerment to occur, feelings of

confidence came from those closest to him. Zain was able to champion others because he was championed by others,

"...that kind of installed [sic] confidence in me having that support from my partner and loyalty and that feeling of love, being loved and reassured..." (p.6)

One of Zain's biggest champions and sources of support was his partner, and Zain evidently felt empowered and confident in himself, his activism and his visibility because of the connection the two shared.

Kurt

For Kurt, experiences of being empowered and publicly disclosing a non-heterosexual identity began through legislation changes allowing reduction in the age of consent for same-sex sexual relations. He recalled,

"... [the government] changed it to 18 and as soon as they changed it, I come out 'cause I felt like that was only safe thing...to do, come out..." (p.2)

There was assurance and confidence which came through legislative support of protected characteristics. Recognition of his sexual identity through equality legislation, aligned with heterosexual others felt like a social milestone and he felt 'safe' enough to be open about his sexuality.

Kurt reflected on the coming out experience as both empowering and simultaneously one filled with fears. Kurt spoke about,

"...when you come out...most of the fear in yourself is actually from yourself coming out and that is...[a] very big thing to admit... to put your hand up and say actually I'm gay...I like men or...if you're a girl you like women...to make your sexuality or gender identities [known]...is a massive thing..." (p.10) Kurt recognised the 'massive thing' came from social discourse which inflicted oppression and discrimination towards non-heterosexual people creating an internalised fear of rejection and attack, leaving the individual likely disempowered. Somebody disclosing and owning their sexuality may likely experience trepidation and anxiety.

Kurt felt empowerment through his status as an HIV positive gay man. He stated,

"...I'm HIV positive...an advocate about it, I speak openly about that as just as...I do the same as I'm gay and I'm quite proud...the fact that, you know, I can put my hand up and say yes, I'm HIV positive..." (p.21)

His advocacy meant he placed himself in positions of vulnerability and was exposed to judgment and rejection from others both within and outside the LGBTQ+ community by putting his 'hand up'. There was both risk and empowerment in doing this, an example of pride and acceptance of his minoritised identities. Although he was empowered by his HIV status, there had been negative experiences through social media which were disempowering. Kurt remembered,

"...as soon as I...put in that I'm HIV, you know, I just got blocks, you know, and...it's quite hurtful because it...makes you think...why am I even still alive then..." (p.22)

Repeated rejection and discrimination through social media because of his HIV status began to have extreme negative consequences for Kurt where he was questioning his purpose in life and the contribution he made to the world. Due to these negative interactions Kurt stated that,

"...I only befriend people that I know are either like me or accepting of me..." (p.24)

This conscious filtering and higher-level awareness around personal connection is located in protection of Self, not allowing himself to feel vulnerable and risk experiencing discrimination and rejection. If contacts hold similarities and existing connections this lowered the risk of attack yet could not eliminate it.

Chris

For Chris, empowerment came from the experiences of being autonomous and free to be authentic in true nature and expression of identities. Chris stated, "it was freeing moving to Brighton" (p.10) which showed this period of exploration and understanding brought a feeling of empowerment which underpinned / emerged from these experiences.

The multifaceted experiences of life, maturity and aging brought resilience and determination in how to manage adversity. Chris stated,

"...not that I'm old...but I guess a bit more battle hardened, a bit more resilient...I guess...those things come with adulthood and just being around the block a bit...so I don't get as distraught when I hear negative things..." (p.26)

Chris acknowledged he was mature and had experienced situations which had likely been challenging, had learnt from them and grown as a person. He was now able to prepare himself for adverse events and meet them with resilience. Chris implies that with age he naturally experienced feelings of empowerment and things that may have affect him in the past, are no longer as impactful to him.

Adam

The interactions Adam had with the offline world helped him construct and value his identity as a non-heterosexual person and gave him a sense of empowerment through interacting with others at school. During this time he remembered,

"...that was like the first time...I had like openly gay kids in my class, and so that was awesome to see that...I felt like I could finally...be who I am and...start to make some of the...connections that I wanted to make...to blossom into the kind of person I wanted to be because there was more freedom there..." (p.6)

Using words like 'awesome', 'blossom' and 'freedom' reflects the shift which occurred from his previous feelings of restriction at school. It was apparent the environment facilitated confidence and empowerment in him.

Physical distance from family allowed for exploration and understanding of his identities, yet empowerment underpinned the experience *because* he was away from family and able to explore who he was whilst being autonomous and authentic in his presentation.

As the non-heterosexual identity continues in its construction, pressure placed on existing values and beliefs forced a reconstruction of other identities created from social expectations and previous schema. Adam said,

"...the experience has made me question a lot of...social norms and realities that we're told are the case. So...I think queerness or something that's like, oppositional or always being on the outside or like resisting normativity, and, you know, resisting just accepting tradition because it's tradition." (p.15)

Rejecting and moving against what was seen as socially acceptable or expected was an act of defiance and empowerment against the white, heterosexual, patriarchal hierarchy of social structures. Although this inevitably came with risk, the value Adam saw in this behaviour and subsequent results, were important for change and a redefining of what was socially accepted without question or challenge.

There were online interactions which felt like Adam was in control, and in turn these ended up being positive and fulfilling. Adam, "...started using Grindr and like hooking up that way...and yeah...that felt a little bit more...'cause I was older, you know...that felt, that felt really good actually, like I met a lot of people and had a lot of good experiences, some not so good experiences..." (pp.8 – 9)

There was something important about the need for maturity and life experience to feel fully comfortable in using the platform, 'Grindr'. Adam acknowledged there were fewer positive experiences but seemed overall he had remained in control and held the ability to make conscious decisions about his choices, which subsequently gave him confidence and an increase in self-esteem. Adam's mixed heritage was something he felt could be utilised to gain attention and validation from others on the platform. Adam knew,

"...it's fetishising on some level but it also feels kind of good to be seen by people..." (p.19)

Although he recognised he was objectifying himself through his mixed heritage – something inherently damaging, with its roots in racial discourse – Adam valued and embraced the visibility his difference afforded him within the platform, to gain sexual attention and boost self-esteem.

James

An important and empowering moment for James in his offline world were the disclosures he made to others about his sexual identity. These events differed based on situation and the receiver of the disclosure. He recalled,

"...there was just one time where I think...you tolerate until you tolerate no more. I remember one guy just would not leave off and I think I basically...just came out [chuckles] in the most angriest way, 'cause I was just pissed off..." (p.3)

What appeared to be bullying from one individual, placed stress and pressure on James. The anger and threat response within James increased to an exponential level with his sexual identity being persecuted and harassed to the point where an emotionally violent reaction occurred. This reaction transpired to be a positive and empowering moment,

"...that's my bulletproof now, even though beneath it all I was like oh my god, I can't believe I've just done this but I thought, I just fucking done it... it kind of did a favour for me because then I suddenly got this...name for myself that was like...I was no longer gay boy and stuff like that, I was [James]..." (p.3)

His sexual identity went from being a vulnerability and source of ridicule and attack, to his 'bulletproof' and an identity that he could use as a means of protection and strength. James was humanised through his sexual identity disclosure to others, using his name rather than slurs and derogatory terminology. This situation was one of empowerment through adversity and one that connected to the superordinate themes The Performances, and A Journey to Acceptance.

His engagement on social media brought a sense of empowerment in being heard and feeling visible, not afforded to him in offline spaces. James felt,

"...social media ultimately gave me like a voice, a voice that I was quite fearful of using in the real world... I would be very opinionated...I'd be very carefree...then I would start using the hashtags of like...gayboy and all that stuff...just to see if it was going to get any attention. If there was any...validation coming from it I suppose and yeah...I was getting attention. Was it the best attention? Probably not..." (pp.1 – 2)

James took advantage using online spaces to express himself without fear or apology. The offline world was a fearful one in which to express his authentic Self and his online experiences clearly made him feel powerful. Reclamation of the term 'gayboy', once used by others to attack him, was being used by James to empower himself, retain a sense of ownership of the expression and to gain attention from others for his language. Disinhibited online behaviours appear to elicit reactions from others seen as attention, rather than responses, which he acknowledged as 'probably not' the best attention, therefore could be viewed as negative or derogatory.

Empowering Others

Conger (1989) highlights the practice of empowering or offering a sense of power to others is the foundation of effectiveness in organisations particularly during times of transition and transformation. He goes on to highlight individuals feel powerful when they can cope with the environmental stresses such as events, people and situations.

Bandura (1977) identified four main qualities needed to empower others: positive emotional support during times of anxiety and stress, positive persuasion and words of encouragement, through having role models of success with whom people could identify and by mastering specific tasks successfully. Findings in this study align with these foundational qualities offered by both Conger (1989) and Bandura (1977).

Zain

Being open, expressing himself and sharing aspects of his life felt an important thing for Zain, to give hope to LGBTQ+ South Asian people. He said,

"...I make it very much known that I'm a gay brown Muslim male in a same sex relationship of 30 years..." (p.4)

This statement demonstrated explicit and intentional usualisation of the stigmatising negative tropes presented by heterosexual individuals rooted in homophobic homonegative biases – that non-heterosexual people are white, non-religious and promiscuous – erasing diversity within the community. This pride of owning his identity incorporated and demonstrated empowerment in reaching others from similar backgrounds. Even though this demonstrated experiences of empowerment he referenced attacks he experienced online. He experienced,

"...high levels of abuse and death threats...I can block, report or delete...it gives me strength because it enables me to think, Yes, I'm doing the right thing and this is why I'm doing what I'm doing, because I'm trying to change people's attitudes and mindsets..." (p.11)

Here were a steadfastness and online strategies which might not be afforded to him in the offline world, supported by the functions of blocking, deleting and reporting inappropriate engagement from others. These experiences of online attacks are reframed to reinforce his purpose and reflect the prejudice he was challenging.

Kurt

Although coming out felt like a relief, Kurt experienced isolation and a lack of support, preand post, coming out and subsequently wanted to empower others. He remembered that,

"...one of the things I do nowadays is actually run [a charity]. And like, when...people say to me...well why do you do this?...the one answer I give them is because I never had it there myself...So making sure that...people that do come out have something now to come out to, and they can meet people...you know just saying actually you know you are normal, this is the normal." (p.7)

Here is an assumption that when an individual comes out, they are immediately embraced by the non-heterosexual community in solidarity and support but this did not happen for Kurt. This left a motivation to create a space to facilitate connections, empower others, prevent feelings of loneliness and isolation in non-heterosexual individuals when finding support and community. Feeling empowered through his charity work where he was making a difference to others, and Kurt experienced validation as the events are necessary and vital in connecting people. He acknowledged that, "...I'm basically giving people what I didn't have...making sure that...the world is a better place because people can actually be who they are and...know that they've got support there and there are other people out there that are exactly the same as them..." (p.21)

His work was giving back to the community and creating space he lacked in his experiences growing up. Kurt did not want people to feel alone, isolated and disempowered and created familiarity and connection to these multiply marginalised groups, helping increase visibility and authenticity.

Due to his charity work he felt acknowledged and recognised for the work and events through social media messages and posts,

"...the flood of thanks and gratitude's come in...it is social media that they come in on..." (p.20)

Social media was utilised for feedback which resulted in knowing that he was doing work which empowered others and in doing so, he too felt a sense of empowerment.

Chris

Chris' profession focused on working psychotherapeutically with others,

"I luckily get to work with a lot of young people...in my profession; I was working on a young people project 17 to 24..." (p.26)

"I spend my life working with...transgender people that I'm trying to help..." (p.27)

Using his qualifications and skills to support and empower people from marginalised groups enabling them to lead as fulfilling and healthy lives as possible. This was a life of commitment.

Adam

Adam demonstrated empowering others through his engagement with a multiply marginalised community, to which he belonged. He talked of connecting with a charity which specifically supported this group. Adam worked,

"...with [the charity organisation], so I joined the board of [the organisation] in 2020, um, it's an organisation that started over in the UK, actually...I joined the board then and I've been active, you know, this is during the pandemic...the fact that here in the city, like there are a couple organisations that serve this community that like simply don't exist anywhere else that I'm aware of...community organisations that actually serve both queer and Muslim communities...it's been really affirming on a personal level..." (p.22)

Joining a charity and working on the board of trustees to support this community during a global pandemic showed a commitment and desire to be involved with this community which would have likely been more deeply impacted, socially, physically and emotionally by the challenges of the pandemic. This work had been supporting and empowering others but in doing so had given him a deeply affirming personal experience in his own identity and connection to the community.

Summary

Empowerment experiences (Table 12) are similar to D'Augelli's (1994) phase of 'Entering a Lesbian – Gay – Bisexual Community' where there was commitment to social and political action as individuals confront social norms, barriers and a commitment to resist oppressive practices. However, D'Augelli cautions that not all members enter this phase where sexual identity remains an internalised aspect.

Troiden (1988) found in 'Stage 4: Commitment' individuals who open up about their nonheterosexual identity faced oppression and stigmatisation, however by informing others of the positive contribution's the LGBTQ+ community made to society they engage in behaviours which elicited political change for themselves and others. This correlated with Empowering experiences discussed in this research.

In Cass's (1984) model, the stages analogous to empowerment experiences discussed in this study are 'Stage 5: Identity Pride', where individuals confront heterosexual others and promote the importance and validity of homosexual contributions to society. 'Stage 6: Identity Synthesis' as the individual no longer hides a non-heterosexual identity and their sexuality is no longer the overwhelmingly primary identity.

For McCarn and Fassinger (1996), 'Phase 4: Internalisation/Synthesis' is the time for the individual, as part of the group, to become socially aware of the oppressive nature of society on the non-heterosexual community. McCarn and Fassinger express the importance of 'directed anger [and] dedication' (p.525) as an experience of the Phase 4 process.

For the participants in this study it was important to acknowledge the process that occurred in their experiences, where interactions on social media - and offline - allowed individuals to access resources and knowledge to construct their sense of identity and share realisations and constructions with others; individuals gained a sense of control over their lives, particularly online, where they have the benefit of disinhibited interpersonal interactions (Suler, 2004) and the exhibition and enactment of otherwise hidden identities (Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin, 2008) and the value of understanding their sociopolitical position that has been (de/re)constructed through community engagement.

Savin-Williams and Cohen's (2015) milestones that align with findings of empowerment include 'Self-identification', creating individual realisation that there is meaning in a non-

heterosexual sexual identity. It was a time of transcendence and rejection of labels and social norms.

'Disclosure' milestone empowered the individual seizing the chance to share their new identity with people closest to them (not necessarily parents), and this was seen as a time of support from friends, family and parents. Positive media representation, interactions with LGBTQ+ friends, relatives and co-workers, specifically supported parents and family at this time. 'Romantic Relationships' were a milestone where individuals were developing autonomy and a homonormativity comparable with heterosexual counterparts. Those in relationships were less anxious and depressed so a strengthening of mental health occurs due to these connections forming a positive identity during this time. Finally 'Selfacceptance and synthesis' brings empowerment for people who reached this milestone (some people may not) as the individual holds self-esteem and life satisfaction outcomes similar to heterosexual counterparts, the non-heterosexual identity was not the main focus for the individual and this created peace, authenticity and positive social interactions.

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours			
Superordina	Superordinate Theme: Empowerment (Occurs on- and offline)					
	Subordinate themes: Empowerment of Self Empowering Others	Comfortable / Self-Actualising / Resilience / Power / Anger / Rationalising / Confidence / Reassurance / Love / Open / Strength / Validation / Free / Autonomous / Visible	Open / Vocal / Challenging / Resisting / Motivated / Role Modelling / Helping / Supporting / Self-Disclosing			
Existing mod	iels	Emotions / Behaviours				
Cass	Stage 5: Identity Pride		Pride / Loyalty / Anger / Confrontation			

Table 12 - Comparison of Empowerment Experiences to Other Sexual Identity Development Models

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
	Stage 6: Identity Synthesis		Anger / Pride / Integration / Peace / Stability
			Socialisation / Experimenting / Awkwardness / Confusion /
	Exploration		Intensity / External Validation / Depression / Frustration /
Coleman			Shame
	Integration		Confident / Assured / Successful Relationships
Troiden	Stage 4: Commitment		Integration / Empowerment / Self-Acceptance
	Entering a Lesbian – Gay – Bisexual		Commitment to political and social action / realisation of
D'Augelli	Community		inequity / empowerment through awareness
D Augelli			
	Developing a Personal Lesbian- Gay-Bisexual Identity Status		Social Interaction / Rejecting myths of NH identity

	Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
	Becoming a Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Offspring		Complex familial adaption / Reintegration into family
	Developing a Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Social Identity		Social Support / Affirmative
McCarn and Fassinger	Phase 4: Internalisation / Synthesis		Complete self-exploration / Consistency (I) Fulfilment / Security / Socially Aware / Dedication (Grp)
Savin- Williams and Cohen	Disclosure		Support / fear / multiple identity challenges / generally positive

Experience	Emotions	Behaviours
Self-Acceptance and Synthesis		Integration / acceptance of holistic self / peace
Romantic Relationships		love / acceptance
Self-Identification		Stigma management / interpersonal closeness / positive social interactions

Luck

Although only mentioned in passing and therefore scarce in evidence, something of note arising for all participants was their perspective on their experiences of sexual identity construction in relation to luck or fortune.

Donald referred to being lucky in where he was raised and who he was surrounded by,

"...luckily Hong Kong is, er, compared to other Asian countries, is like a very liberal place..." (p.3)

"...luckily I got, um, I got the environment and space at that time in that period, to be able to explore that side of mine. Um, so I got some close, friends, like luckily when I was in secondary school as well..." (p.4)

The culture around him and people supporting him allowed exploration of his sexual identity finding out what authentically aligned for him. Donald's statement was reflective and self-aware of his experience constructing a non-heterosexual identity being very different to others in the LGBTQ+ community who had different backgrounds living in different countries. Donald said,

"...luckily, in my case again, I wasn't so...um, oppressed in a way that I had to, I was like, forced to act certain ways..." (p.6)

In environments where oppression is felt and control removed from individuals so an inauthentic presentation is utilised to survive. The experience of luck within this research surfaced when participants talked about being accepted by others. Kurt mentioned,

"...I was probably one of the most luckiest people because I was, I was you know, really accepting family in the end." (p.5) Zain mentioned being fortunate with acceptance from others for his non-heterosexual identity,

"... I was really fortunate that my partners very, very supportive..." (p.6)

"...I was fortunate to have my partner to stand by me and support me and I do realise that not everybody does have that..." (p.8)

Zain recognised the privilege having support from his partner the way he did and from his parents. James reinforced this point when he stated,

"...family really did help, um because they've always been quite open-minded and quite grounded. And I count my lucky stars in that. That's what I got because I'm so aware that it's not as easy for everybody..." (p.19)

Chris felt he was lucky for his professional role,

"...I luckily get to work with a lot of young people in my, in my profession..." (p.26)

Which allowed him to feel current and connected to a generation he would otherwise feel

disconnected from who undoubtably are a source of current and culturally popular

information.

Adam's experience following expressing his non-heterosexual identity to his parents was

traumatic and was asked to leave the family home by his mother. Yet he maintained the

perspective,

"...it could have been a lot worse. I'm so thankful for my dad, for like coming and taking on the role bringing me back into the family 'cause I don't know where I would be without that." (p.14) The awareness participants had of their privileged positions in having support and family that accepted them – even when it was one parent – came with recognition that members of the LGBTQ+ community globally – including the United Kingdom – experienced isolation, punishment and even death for identifying as non-heterosexual.

Luck extended to intersecting identities – for example Kurt's HIV was left untreated for a decade but he highlighted "...luckily, I had a good immune system..." (p.21) and Zain felt lucky in how negative and damaging online interactions were managed,

"...it's fortunate now that we have the block or the delete button..." (p.10 - Zain)

The experience of luck or fortune is one that came with the privilege in living inside a culture of freedom, expression and legislation which validated same-sex relationships and attraction without systematic structures of punishment or abuse.

Summary

Epstein (1988) identifies luck playing a pervasive role in our lives. Multiple aspects of individual experience from birth and throughout life – regardless of hard work, genetics or environment – are determined on the basis of factors often beyond our control. Brouwer and Kloeg (2025) explore luck egalitarianism through two main characteristics – brute luck and option luck.

'Option luck' (as explained by Dworkin, 1981 cited in Brouwer & Kloeg, 2025) is the change in value of stock bought on the stock exchange. This is a calculated risk that has been made with choice and hold options of increase or decrease in financial return. 'Brute luck' on the other hand is the individual who is struck by a meteorite with an unpredictable course. The

fact of whether something would have happened regardless of choice or control (or lack thereof) over the situation is debated (Brouwer & Kloeg, 2025).

Schillinger (2019) presents multiple theories of luck, including that of Aristotle in which luck are things done through accidental cause by the individual and not through some external force or fate. The recognition that a multitude of factors contribute to the outcome of a situation, some of which one has no control over and some over which one has control, is the foundation for how someone or something is subjectively perceived as either lucky or unlucky.

The findings presented here include a variety of philosophical positions on what constitute luck for participants as they construct non-heterosexual identities. It could be argued that brute luck positions all participants within their socio-cultural environments. The fact that an infinite multitude of factors – legal, social, environmental, temporal, familial (to name a few) – have contributed to participants being accepted by others, have the environment in which to explore with relative safety, the ability to communicate and engage with their worlds are just some aspects which align with 'brute luck' over which they have no control or choice.

This therefore positions the participants' experiences within legal, social and environmental structures over which they have no control but nevertheless are factors which they experience and respond to.

Social Stressors

Introduction

External events and environments which elicit responses of powerlessness, loss of control and an inability to hold autonomy, create negative internal reactions – these are social stressors (Aneshensel, 1992; Wheaton et. al., 2013). Social stressors affect every individual in a society but undoubtedly affect some more than others. Stressful situations are subjective and the level of stress felt is directly proportional to the ability to adapt, level of support and social position (Kundalini Research Institute, 2021). Whilst stress can be situationally acute there are situations where stress is chronic and involve, disability, violence, barriers to achievement, lack of resources, poverty and challenges to expectations of role (Aneshensel, 1992; Wheaton et. al., 2013). The following findings demonstrate participant experiences that expressed social stressors.

Adam

Adam mentioned the atrocities of September 11th World Trade Centre attack which undoubtably created stress for the global population due to the high level of violence and death which occurred on mass, left millions of people feeling vulnerable and thousands experiencing loss in many forms. Adam recalled,

> "...especially after 9/11, um you know, I started to get more comments, not many, I wasn't like, ever, really, really bullied..." (p.4)

This experience of vulnerability and stress following a terror attack was impactful for Adam as an American citizen but due to his mixed heritage of being Iranian – American these created challenges at the intersections of ethnicity and religion. He played down being

'really, really bullied' but this nevertheless alluded to him experiencing bullying to some degree reinforcing a powerlessness.

For Adam there was a significant stress around the majority community's religious position of role expectations, in which he resided as a child. He felt this was a,

> "...conservative evangelical American style of Christianity that I found very limiting..." (p.3)

Although Adam was part of the religious community it was not something he chose and subsequently led to feelings of powerlessness and lack of autonomy. Expectation placed upon those in the community to conform to role expectations of being a good Christian, roles of men / women and following these values and morals was challenging. Adam saw this perspective as a drastically narrow outlook towards diversity in the world.

Chris

Chris mentioned a loss that could have created significant impact for him,

"...not my father, he passed away..." (p.9)

This situation may have created challenges to family role expectations and had an impact on finances, support and resources for Chris and the rest of the family following this significant loss.

James

The experience of having a biological father leave the family unit, like other loss, is a factor of social stress and may have created feelings for James such as grief and questioning – not just about the separation but deeper enduring questions. James recalled,

"...my dad had ended up leaving... and I thought if my dad was around, would it have changed my sexuality..." (p.3)

The event left James wondering whether having a heterosexual male role-model in his life longer term might have altered his sexual identity. The loss may have affected the practical side of the family unit in more immediate ways where role expectations change, financial stability can be shaken and support removed for the family left behind. However, it must be considered that homelife with the father present may have created tension and conflict such as violence (verbal, physical, emotional) which would also impact the experiences of James.

Kurt

Similarly to James, Kurt mentioned his, "...step-dad of like 27 years..." (p.5), thus implying the loss of his biological father – either through death, estrangement/separation or divorce – which, although the repercussions of this are unknown and are beyond the reach of this study, was an experience Kurt navigated as a young person. Much like James the experiences prior to his father leaving home may have created stress on a young person and the subsequent loss impact's role expectations, finances and family cohesion.

Donald

Donald attended Christian schools through his formative years,

"...I went to Catholic primary school, and I went to a Protestant um, secondary school..." (p.3)

And much like Adam, a religious environment omitted, created and enforced moral expectations and values contrary to the inner sense of what felt aligned with the individual emerging identity. Donald expressed,

"...it's like a religious school, so people, don't talk about, erm, sexuality...it was sort of like a taboo, like that's because it's like a religious school..." (p.4)

So these environments contributed to oppression and stress exerted on the participant but created role expectations and systems of oppression.

Summary

Grieger (2006) highlights the emotional and behavioural change in individuals through being in proximity to the location of previous terror attacks. September 11th, 2001 damaged the psyches of many Americans (Lempinen, 2021) with many significant numbers (64%) permanently changing the way they lived their lives (Galston, 2021). Bauer and Schulze (2022) found social cohesion subsequently affected communities because of terror attacks with levels of education, social and political positions being the biggest factors for trusting and positively viewing individuals with immigration status or histories.

The death of a parent during the period of adolescence can lead to increased levels of psychological distress including, depression, low self-esteem and anger (Raveis, et. al, 1998) – internalisation of these symptoms, poor family functioning and lower socio-economic status were predictors of poor mental health outcomes and maladjustments for individuals. In contrast, adolescents who had more stable family functioning, greater expression of emotions and coming from higher socio-economic backgrounds had higher self-esteem and lower levels of anger and depression (Raveis, et. al., 1998; Stikkelbrock, Bodden et. al.,

2015). Biank and Werner-Lin (2011) reflect the stress experienced by adolescents following the death of a parent, focusing on the inability for the young person to fully complete the mourning process due to age. Biank and Werner-Lin (2011) identified the bereaved young person required nurturing, guidance and assurance as the death of a parent can be one of the most stressful things a child can experience, and one that endured, with feelings of powerlessness and lack of autonomy towards life events. As Aneshensel (1992), highlights the shift in roles in the family, in example Chris' father's death, contribute to social stress, as the surviving parent will ideally take on a mirroring, nurturing and consistent role as the sole parent.

A subsequent and no less impactful role shift follows divorce or separation – a further contributing factor of social stress. Amato (2000) highlights the increase in divorce rate to nearly half of all marriages ending in divorce with contributing factors including economic independence of women, the decline in men's earnings who have no degrees, social acceptance of divorce and the expectation of fulfilment within the marriage, which is both socially and personally misunderstood.

Social stressors experienced by the majority of participants in this study all involved events and circumstances out of their control. Powerlessness and vulnerability of participants who experienced death, terrorism, separation, role expectation and divorce, subsequently coped and adapted to maintain connection and safety and feel acceptance from the wider community. However, as mentioned in the case of Adam, a compounding factor in stress and struggle are the intersecting minoritised identities which enmesh to create further vulnerability.

Minority Stress

The prejudice and stigma society directs at gender diverse and sexual minority groups creates a variety of specific stressors and poor mental health outcomes than those in general populations (Meyer, 2003; Frost & Meyer, 2009, 2023). Much like social stress theory, minority stress recognises the importance of coping strategies and need for support for minority individuals to help navigate the effects of oppression, stigma and prejudice from the wider population. Being an invisible minority (Pillard, 1982) non-heterosexual people have little to no support or coping strategies from home, family or community, whereas other groups (e.g. religious or ethnic) have support from others within the community itself and/or at home to help deal cope with minority stress. It is important to highlight that minority stress for non-heterosexual and gender diverse people can be compounded with multiply minoritised intersections e.g. class, disability or educational accessibility (la Roi, Meyer & Frost, 2019) and is supplementary to stress felt in addition to social stressors (Aneshensel, 1992) thus the more intersecting identities an individual holds, the greater the compounded stress experienced. The following findings present stress experiences of being a sexual minority where some participants, held multiply marginalised identities.

Adam

Even though being Iranian-American in a White Christian community, having an Iranian surname and coming from a household where his paternal grandfather was Muslim, Adam recalled his sexuality was the most challenging of his intersectional identities,

"...being gay, um, was the thing I struggled with the most, because I felt like I was all alone..." (p.6)

The feeling of aloneness was the most prominent emotion in his struggle to understand sexual identity whereas in his other marginalised identities (e.g. ethnicity, religion) Adam had places for support in his family. As Aneshensel (1992) highlights in social stressors, it is important in minority stress to adapt and cope (Toomey, et. al., 2018). Adam developed,

"...coping mechanisms or strategies I used...So, um I was still, you know, pretty nerdy..." (p.6)

The ability to perform an alternate identity distanced from his sexual identity meant he coped through having a 'nerdy' exterior as a protective factor to distance him from having sexual emotions, which was something afforded to him through his academic abilities.

Chris

Initial experiences of minority stress for Chris came from his social circle whilst at school, rather than something more contemporary; the use of microaggressions in common vernacular at the time, referred to something or a behaviour as 'so gay' which took a pejorative position. Chris recognised,

"...maybe I felt uncomfortable around my friends because of, you know, language like but they were never you know, they weren't beating gay people up or bullying..." (p.25)

There was recognition that this term affected him and perhaps his self-concept around nonheterosexual feelings at the time, but he rationalises this derogatory language by recognising his friends were not physically violent or intentionally focused on hurting gay people.

Donald

During his secondary education in Hong Kong - a religious, all boys school - verbal slurs and verbal attacks towards non-heterosexual people appeared to be a common occurrence. Donald stated,

"...if you got a particularly more feminine side of you, like they would make fun of your femininity and, erm and they would call you names like faggot or, or, like perv..." (p.4)

To deviate from a masculine male presentation of identity was evidently policed harshly with individuals shamed and verbally attacked, with heterosexual others exerting stress on the individual based on their atypical gender behaviour associated with non-heterosexual identity.

Kurt

Growing up in the south-west of the United Kingdom, Kurt experienced physical violence because of his sexual identity. Kurt stated,

"...I've been beaten up three or four times in my hometown, which is why I left there in the end..." (p.7)

The constant threat and reality of attack and violence was so prominent it became a factor for Kurt to cope by removing himself from the environment which held risk. Kurt highlighted wider social oppression towards sexual minority groups, which occurred in his youth, through legislative policies systematically removing recognition, knowledge and understanding of non-heterosexual identities. He remembered restrictions from,

"...section 28, the Thatcher government there wasn't any information around it [homosexuality]..." (p.1)

Such legislative actions left non-heterosexual youth without understanding, connection or protections, resulting in the social majority feeling justified for their stigmatising and violent behaviours toward this minority group.

Zain

The experiences of non-heterosexual people with multiply marginalised intersections of identity show the compounding effects of minority stress and was evident in Zain's experiences throughout his lifetime. He recollected,

"...looking back now it's quite toxic isn't it, because you've got mental health, you've got sexual orientation, you've got religion, you know, very toxic..." (pp. 5 – 6)

As well as privately recognising his sexual identity difference, the added layers of stress being overtly exposed as different – in ethnicity, mental health and religion – to the majority, added to the complexity of navigating social interactions based on multiply marginalised identities.

Zain added out of the multiply marginalised identities he held,

"...it's more about me being gay, that creates more negative comments than anything else, you know, and especially being gay and Muslim... it is more so that the gay and Muslim from other Muslims" (p.16)

His sexual identity – and more importantly its intersection with his religion – was the biggest source of discrimination, stigma and prejudice which occurred mostly from people within the Muslim community. As he expressed later, there was also discrimination for his religion and ethnicity from those within the LGBTQ+ community.

James

The effects of minority stress on James, created a state of feeling unsafe around others,

"...when I would meet men later on it, whether they were straight or gay, I always felt, threatened and almost like I had to hide myself..." (p.19)

Not only did James feel the need to hide himself in the presence of other men but held a continued sense of threat and therefore an assumed anxiety response, later in life – this was due to the effects of stress placed on him in his younger years for how he presented to males. However the felt threat came from both out-group (straight) and in-group (gay) males demonstrating discrimination that occurred between members within the same, or similar, groups.

Summary

Minority stress is the effects of discrimination, prejudice and oppression – both overt and covert – placed upon individuals from those in the majority group. Findings show impacts of minority stress from identifying with, and belonging to the group, include isolation, fear, feeling wrong or other, physical and verbal attack and for some participants, growing up as a minority youth meant there was limited or no support from authorities or families.

Meyer (1995) outlines multiple factors imposed on gay people which create chronic stress and subsequent psychological distress. The stigmatisation of minority individuals through social processes, institutions and structures (Dürrbaum & Sattler, 2020) creates adverse effects on self-esteem through stigma, prejudice and internalised homophobia (Goffman, 1963; Meyer, 1995). The amalgamation of psychological, anthropological and sociological theories of compounding experience are felt through multiple stressors from minoritised individuals (Stephenson & Finneran, 2016). The proximal stress presents as internalised homonegativity and the distal stress as homonegative experiences from external sources including actual or perceived rejection, victimisation and attack (Toomey et. al., 2018).

Although this concept is over thirty years old the relevance of minority stress endures, and research has extended the effects of this specific theory and the adverse mental health outcomes in contemporary LGBTQ+ populations (Fingerhut, Peplau et. al., 2010; Guschlbauer, Smith et. al., 2019; Dürrbaum & Sattler, 2020; Camposano et. al, 2024).

Emerson (2024) echoes Adam's experience of American White evangelical Christianity as a religious space which silences and oppresses those who are not a part of privileged White American heritage and highlights tokenism of people of colour and ethnic diversity within Christian congregations. Although this could be classed as minority stress given Adam is from mixed Middle Eastern and White heritage, but as he mentions in later sections he can pass as White ethnicity, and still the expectation to conform to this White evangelical Christian role weighs heavy.

Abu-Ras and Abu-Bader (2008) found Arab Americans feared hate crimes, threat to safety, isolation, stigma and loss of community – all concepts in social stress – following terrorist attacks so attempted to restore their lives and communities through education, withdrawing into their communities more, connecting more deeply to their faith and finding forgiveness for persecutors and terrorists.

Christianity forms the foundation of many existing social structures, social roles and institutions including law, politics, family and education in the Western world and these social structures influence all populations in a Western country (Banner, 1998; Bialecki,

Haynes & Robbins, 2008). Adam, as an Iranian-American living in a White Christian community, reinforces Marvasti's (2006) research into identity negotiation for Middle Eastern Americans by using humour, education, defiance ,and the Goffman concepts – defensive cowering (the behaviour of going along with the negative stereotype creating powerlessness) and passing (the ability to change outward presentation of Self to conform with the majority population for safety; Goffman, 1963) to navigate social stress.

Jackson, Mohr and colleagues (2020) highlight how racially minoritised people (specifically Black people) face stigma from both the LGBTQ+ community for their race and the Black community for their non-heterosexual identity. This is reflected in Zain's experience, "…it is more so that the gay and Muslim from *other* Muslims…who would sort of er, troll me…" (p.16) and the need to challenge and educate racist comments made within the gay community.

Botha and Frost (2020) extend the minority stress model to include people with autism and found similar behaviours and feelings to those experienced by gay populations. Everyday discrimination was correlated to rejection; being open about their neurodiversity created higher numbers of discriminatory acts where one situation being out was safe and therapeutic and in another setting being open about a neurodiverse diagnosis was risky. These multiply marginalised identities coupled with the stress experienced for being nonheterosexual therefore leads to an even more complex personal narrative and risk management.

Consequently, experiences of minority stress occur in addition to the social stressors experienced by the general population or large community groups and those with multiply marginalised identities will have compounded chronic stress experiences received from both

in-group and out-group members and none more so than the LGBTQ+ community which is a concentrated and refined microcosm of discrimination, prejudice, privilege and oppression of wider society.

Intra-minority Gay Community Stress

Intra-minority Gay Community Stress (or Intra-minority Stress) focuses on the gay community's contribution to non-heterosexual men's negative mental health outcomes (Pachankis et. al., 2020). The LGBTQ+ community mirrors the hierarchy of social statuses with White, able bodied, healthy, masculine, muscular, educated, wealthy, socially attractive men at the top (gay men in this instance) who exert stress – both directly and indirectly through oppression and discrimination – on individuals who do not meet socially accepted identity norms. For individuals who divert from these identities at the apex of the LGBTQ+ community, oppression and policing occur from similar members through rejection, shaming, discrimination and exclusion to maintain dominance over the social group (Cascalheira and Smith, 2019; Pachankis et. al., 2020). The following articulates examples of these behaviours in the current study.

Adam

Online gay spaces – particularly dating apps – are places Adam had experienced discrimination and rejection by others from within the gay community. He stated,

"...discrimination or rejection, that makes me think immediately of Grindr [laughs] or other dating apps, hook-up apps, um, because there's a lot of that on there..." (p.18) These spaces are synonymous for rejection and are places where discrimination and abuse occur towards individuals who hold identities and atypical gender presentations which are seen as undesirable to the hierarchical structure of the LGBTQ+ community. For Adam his religion is something that he feels was often not accepted by others within the community. He said,

"...it can be frustrating to interact with [LGBTQ+] people who have that really just strong, closed off-ness, to anything religious..." (pp.23 – 24)

Whilst there is a recognition within the LGBTQ+ community that religion has persecuted people based on non-heterosexual identities for millennia (Anu, 2012; Todd, 2016), the judgement Adam experiences from members of the community, based on his faith beliefs, means he experiences frustration trying to amalgamate his sexuality and religious identity into everyday life.

James

James experiences a lack of belonging and uncertainty about where he could find a place with non-heterosexual others who held an intersecting minority of disability. James had,

"...learning difficulties and been diagnosed with learning difficulties. So with then...with being gay as well, it was like trying to find somewhere to just fit..." (p.2)

The learning difficulty is an invisible disability, like a non-heterosexual identity, and stress is felt in not knowing where or how to find a sense of belonging amongst the non-heterosexual community which may create loneliness and othering for James.

Zain

Zain mentioned low confidence prevented him from speaking up when there were discriminatory comments about non-heterosexual people from heterosexual others, however he now challenges stigma and prejudice when it arises. Zain said,

"...as a gay Muslim man, I find that a lot over the years, especially in gay spaces, that, the constant challenging of behaviours or perceptions or stereotypes..." (p.22)

This behaviour sounds prolific within gay spaces, with 'constant challenging' and spaces containing prejudiced and discriminatory behaviours, stereotypes and perceptions of gay South Asian Muslim people which appear to be unchallenged and therefore enabled, reinforced and potentially encouraged through silence.

Kurt

Kurt discussed his experiences of rejection and discrimination within the LGBTQ+ community based on disability and chronic health conditions. Kurt stated,

"...as soon as, you know, they [other non-heterosexual people] see my HIV [positive] status I've been called riddled um diseased, erm, you know, everything um yeah a couple of times it's literally made me feel worse than it did from, I probably say coming out..." (p.22)

The stress and negative emotions leading up to disclosing his non-heterosexual identity to his parents – an experience based on minority stress – comes secondary in levels of stress and rejection felt through disclosing his HIV positive status to members from within the LGBTQ+ community. This was met with overt rejection, abuse and negative response to the disclosure, resulting in potential damage to his mental health and self-worth.

Donald

Donald expresses his experience of rejection and abuse on dating apps specifically for nonheterosexual people. Donald mentioned,

"...like on the dating app, people wouldn't say, I at least, like, when I came across, like people, people who said like very mean, things about me, I would just say block them..." (p.14)

So Donald has experienced others on a dating app platform being overtly mean and he used the blocking function to prevent these people from making further contact with him, evidently a coping strategy utilised to protect his mental health and prevent damage to selfesteem.

Chris

Chris' experience of intra-community stress is one of a community without cohesion nor a supportive group, but a collection of people who share similar marginalised identities but don't actually engage or support one another. He said,

"I don't really see an LGBTQ community...I think, there are gays, and there are lesbians, and sometimes they have Sunday dinner together. Um, but there's not much in common there. Erm, Trans feels very separate. And, erm, I guess bisexuals, erm, kind of join [laughs] whichever..." (p.28)

His description is one that implies separation, lacking integration and likens the process to a fractured family who occasionally share a meal but in the bigger picture are living very separate lives. Interestingly, and likely unintentionally, the simplified response of bisexuals joining 'whichever' group could be seen as discriminatory in and of itself and reinforces the misunderstanding and lack of compassionate awareness occurring between these groups (Weiss, 2011). Weiss (2011) goes on to identify discrimination against bisexuals from

members of the LGBTQ+ community as heterosexism and Barker, Richards and colleagues (2012) discuss the experiences of bisexual denial, invisibility, exclusion, marginalisation and negative stereotyping all negatively impact bisexual people's mental health.

Summary

Burton, Clark and Pachankis (2020) identify non-heterosexual men both compete with, and draw from, this demographic for sexual and social reward. The hegemonic expectation of normative presentation as masculine male includes body type, age, HIV status, race / ethnicity and masculinity (Burton, Clark & Pachankis, 2020) aligned with the social majority to be accepted in the LGBTQ+ community.

Patel (2019) found discrimination from White LGBTQ+ people towards queer South Asian women came from the disbelief South Asian women could perform queerness and that the western notion of queerness was not assimilated by South Asian women, leaving them feeling disconnected and disengaged from the LGBTQ+ community as a whole and furthers the oppressive experiences of this group. Similarly, Giwa and Greensmith (2012) identified behaviours and changes to social interactions that can reduce and highlight racist abuse in the LGBTQ+ community, one of which was 'Speak Up!' (p.178) where racist and derogatory language was challenged which is analogous to the behaviour Zain demonstrated in his experience of racism from within the LGBTQ+ community.

Much like the rejection and discrimination felt through racism from within the LGBTQ+ community, the levels of discrimination and rejection of HIV positive non-heterosexual men from HIV negative non-heterosexual men is problematic, as experienced by Kurt. Smit, Brady and colleagues (2012) found although HIV stigma is unfortunately common since the

AIDS crisis of the 1980's, the rise of discrimination and rejection of HIV positive nonheterosexual men by HIV negative non-heterosexual men is on the increase and subsequently affected HIV positive men's mental and general health, sexual and romantic relationships and overall wellbeing. Although the previous study is twelve years old, Burns, Klukas and Colleagues (2024) still recognise the stigma and prejudice faced by HIV positive people and the complex intersections of identity which add to levels of discrimination – particularly HIV positive gay men of colour.

Vaughn and colleagues (2015) found lesbians with a disability found it hard to integrate into the lesbian community with a disability and vice versa with the disabled community and individuals attempted to hide their disabilities and / or sexuality from others until they felt comfortable in the disclosure. This subsequently impacted sense of attractiveness, selfesteem and general wellbeing along with relationships and integration socially with these identities.

Additionally, compounding the experiences of LGBTQ+ people with disabilities, Hillier and colleagues (2020), note the research for those who identify as having autism and as being LGBTQ+ is minimal. Similarly to previous findings and reflected in the behaviours of James in this study, the experience of holding dual identities was challenging and came with managing multiple minority stressors which was impactful and lead to individuals isolating themselves from the community due to lack of education and understanding. Miller and colleagues (2020) found participants with autism and who identified as LGBTQ+ engaged with online spaces where they found their complexity of identity was embraced for learning, acceptance and validation.

Wlicox's (2006) essay highlights the rejection and misalignment of sexuality and religion which is reflected in Adam's experiences with the "sifting" (p.95) aspects of religious practices and expectations and those aligned with minority sexual identity as a way of integration of two identities. Not only does the LGBTQ+ community reject many formal religions (Catholics and Mormons at a Pride parade being met with boos and silence, p.74) but theological discussion around same-sex people is often homophobic, erasing and heterosexist. Wilcox's observation that these spheres of academia and theoretical underpinnings of queer theory and religious doctrine are White, ableist and Western in the majority, where more experiences and intersectionalities need voices. This highlights a lack of diversity and complexity in the experiences of individuals in the LGBTQ+ community and the integration of religion and sexuality incorporates many further identities. Interestingly Wilcox (2006) argues the parallels of religious and sexual freedoms in the United States, with the use of religious symbolism in queer culture such as 'The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence', the use of Catholic symbolism in much of Madonna's music in the 1980's and 90's and fashion and accessories such as rosary beads, crucifixes and other religious paraphernalia.

From the findings presented here to be a multiply marginalised non-heterosexual individual within the LGBTQ+ community means navigating rejection, having to hide aspects of identity from the community therefore living an inauthentic life, feeling othered and having constant experiences of needing to challenge discriminatory behaviours and perceptions. It should be noted that intra-community stress does not have to occur through engaging directly with the community but are the messages that the community puts out to the wider society

through media, adult films, advertising and other sources of information about the community that create in-group comparison for individuals.

Threshold Concept

Meyer and Land (2003) define threshold concept as a transformed way of understanding, viewing or interpreting information, that opens the individual up to a way of perception that has previously been inaccessible. The idea that threshold concepts are analogous to portals or gateways that can be, transformative – creating a significant shift in a subject; irreversible – will remain with the individual with little chance of unlearning or forgetting this new information; and integrative – the individual relates the new information into existing knowledge and understanding (Meyer & Land, 2003, 2005; Cousin, 2006). A threshold concept can also be troublesome for multiple reasons addressed below.

Meyer and Land (2005) suggest the shift in awareness and understanding will simultaneously extend language used by the individual as the new concept is expressed, communicated and reflected on, to Self and others, whether this is formal, natural or symbolic. The language and terminologies associated with the concept will come from interactions with communities, individuals and from within the practice or field associated with the concept. However, the language and terminology used in the discourse around a concept can be troublesome due to the privileging and particular representation toward a specific group, idea or way of thinking (Meyer & Land, 2003) ergo language used can be restrictive and limiting. A further troublesome aspect of the threshold concept is one of alien knowledge, where information and awareness learnt is in conflict with current understanding and beliefs, making it hard for the individual to accept this new reality (Meyer & Land, 2003). Meyer and Land (2005) argue the acquisition of threshold concepts within a particular field develop language and subjectivity changes which results in the redefining of Self and thus transfiguration of identity due to the interrelatedness of thinking, language, learning and understanding.

Kurt recalled, the messages he received from his environment meant his curiosity motivated him to independently utilise a traditional method of expanding and comprehending language to see if what people were saying of him were accurate. Kurt,

"literally searched a dictionary" (p.4 - Kurt)

However, this approach has a limited range of terminologies and may not account for context or slang terminology often used in pejorative ways. Kurt opted for an expansive search tool to understand himself and find answers to his curiosity,

"I did a search online and, you know, got a term for it, homosexuality, got the term gay, you know, and saw there was a load of derogatory terms as well and then it suddenly clicked why people called me faggot..." (p.4)

The derogatory terms lead him to a deeper understanding of Self but the terms are troublesome in that language used being oppressive and restrictive (Meyer & Land, 2003, 2005).

Evidently a contemporary source for learning and information assimilation came at greater depth when participants utilised online sources to understand themselves and pinpoint what it was that made them feel different. Adam remembered,

"...doing a lot of, like, Google searches like, "am I gay?", "what does it mean to be gay?" Like, "what does that mean?" (p.2 - Adam)

Adam was doing 'a lot' of searching to understand himself as he questioned his sexuality. This appeared to be a long process, and one that he repeats to validate, understand and be secure in his identity construction, rather than finding one source of information and arriving at acceptance. This assumes integrating a non-heterosexual identity is a gradual realisation rather than a sudden acceptance and aligns with the liminal position of threshold concept.

The relative anonymity and secrecy of questioning a search engine about a nonheterosexual identity was appealing when the offline reality for some participants around exploring sexuality was limited at best, and dangerous at worst. It was evident that feelings of being alone and isolated with an awareness of difference, lack of language and understanding as to why, were answered over time and through private, personal reflection and online exploration.

Adam talked of engaging in 'quizzes' online which put his lived experience and feelings into context. Adam said,

"...And then [laughs] at the time, they were all these online quizzes...Um, that were like, "how to know if you're gay", um, and so I did a bunch of those..." (p.2 -Adam)

Not only was Adam asking questions of search engines but he galvanised and validated his experiences through sharing his feelings and answering questions within a platform algorithm in an almost bidirectional relational interaction, as he began to move towards resonating with a non-heterosexual identity.

Cousin (2006) describes alien knowledge as a factor that inhibits a threshold concept becoming integrated. The concept may bring with it information and awareness that is

counter-intuitive to the individual and one which goes against long held beliefs and internal schema, as Chris mentioned through his process of realising he was not heterosexual. Chris said,

"I struggled with it... I did struggle with it." (p.4 - Chris)

The repeated use of the word 'struggle' reinforces a complexity and challenging nature of integrating the newly found awareness and understanding of a non-heterosexual identity and something that occurred over time. Cousin states that individuals who reverse or alter long-held beliefs will go through an emotional and uncomfortable repositioning of identity (Meyer & Land, 2005).

Summary

Curiosity and uncertainty of identity felt by participants came into their awareness through interactions with the world around them. The presentations of authentic identities that are socially atypical (gendered or sexuality) result in policing of behaviours and individuals wanted to learn about themselves to resolve uncertainties they felt - their inner world felt in conflict with social expectations placed upon them. Curiosity appears to be the motivation to resolve these conflicts and affirm or reject what the world told them about themselves. The threshold concept is crossed and is done (seen with the majority of participants) in a secretive, isolated and uncertain way, often with misunderstandings, fabrications and poor-quality information. As Kurt stated, once he had a "term for it" (p.4 – Kurt) this acted as a platform from which he could find further information and gain deeper understanding in greater detail. Participant understanding of Self came through the experiences: Gaining Knowledge of Identity, The Performances and A Journey to Acceptance.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Introduction

The aim of this research was to explore sexual identity construction for non-heterosexual men considering the influence of social media. Findings reveal a dynamic and complex interaction of collective experiences narrated through participant interviews that intersect and diverge dependent on environment, need and social connection.

Following transcript analysis, several superordinate themes were identified: Awareness of Difference and Challenging Interactions with the World; Gaining Knowledge of Identity which included subordinate themes Exploring and Understanding; The Performances included subordinate themes Splitting and Synthesising; A Journey to Acceptance included subordinate themes Ignoring – Resisting, Acceptance of self, and Acceptance from others and Empowerment included subordinate themes Empowerment of Self and Empowering Others. The subordinate themes existed on a continuum and were in relation to lifespan experiences of situations and events. This moved the identity between Exploration to Understanding, between Splitting the identity to Synthesising it into the life as a whole, and between Ignoring-Resisting the identity to a place of Acceptance of Self and feeling Acceptance from Others.

These experiences consequently created feelings and behaviours of Empowerment, of Self and for the wider LGBTQ+ community, counteracting negative emotions and stress exerted on individuals and the minority group from wider populations, pushing back discriminatory and oppressive behaviours and facilitating social justice and change.

Data also highlighted participants functioned within social stress, minority stress and intracommunity stress resulting in oppression, discrimination and prejudice. Subsequently participants experienced negative emotional responses, resulting in challenging behaviours including suicidal ideation (Olesen, et. al, 2017) depression, anxiety and other mental health challenges (Olesen et. al., 2017; Spittlehouse, Boden and Horwood, 2019; Pachankis et. al., 2020; Jaspal et. al., 2023), isolation (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Olesen et. al., 2017) feelings of otherness and difference (Troiden, 1988; Flowers & Buston, 2001; Pachankis et. al., 2020).

The Experiences

Awareness Of Difference and Challenging Interactions with the World

Participants experienced being oppositional to societal expectations of masculinity, creating an awareness of difference whilst simultaneously lacking knowledge and understanding as to why. Through interactions with others/environment, self-categorisation occurred placing the individual within a non-heterosexual group. As Kurt stated, "I did a search online and, you know, got a term for it, 'homosexuality', got the term gay..." (p.4) - so consolidating and verifying this minority identity began.

Compulsory heterosexuality assumes all people are heterosexual, with gender roles and behaviours expected to follow binary sexed characteristics which reinforce gender normative expectations of masculine or feminine (Connell, 1987; Szymanski & Carr, 2008; Robertson, 2014; Kowalski & Scheitle, 2019; Modrakovic et. al., 2021). Violating these norms – particularly for males – is seen as weakness and disrespectful to patriarchal power and privilege (Simonsen et. al., 2000; Payne et. al., 2008; Szymanski & Carr, 2008; Fields, Bogart, et. al., 2015). As sexuality and gender are socially intertwined any young men who diverge from expectations of gender are seen as deviating from heterosexuality and are

quickly policed, shamed and punished by society, family and peers (Kaufman & Raphael, 1996; Downs, 2005; Robertson, 2014; Kowalski & Scheitle, 2019). Many young males internalise expectations of compulsory heterosexuality because of societal pressures and realise they are different because of their emotional attractions to same-sex others (Robertson, 2014). Zain stated,

"...even as a young boy, I just knew that I was different, but I didn't realise how different I was... I knew from the age of three..." (p.5)

There are added layers of oppression for two participants (Zain and Adam) who hold South-Asian or Middle-Eastern heritage and who held Muslim heritage within a White, Western environment. These differences were "in addition to being to being gay" (p.1 - Adam) and further amplified stress and isolation in majority White Christian society.

Jaspal (2015) highlights non-heterosexual British-Asian men face poor psychological and social outcomes due to their sexual identity. British-Pakistani men in particular are seen as having low social capital as ethno-cultural/ethno-religious representations of homosexuality are portrayed negatively, increasing pressure performing heterosexual and gender conforming roles often resulting in heterosexual marriage and reproduction (Bhugra, 1997; McKeown et. al., 2010; Jaspal, 2015). Interestingly Jaspal (2015) found British-Indian gay men with Sikh or Hindu identities did not hold these pressures and were more easily able to integrate their faith and community with non-heterosexual identity. However, Jaspal's research does not look at the relationship formation and maintenance within this group. Jaspal (2015) considers this to be the lack of vocalisation from these faiths around homosexuality and gender non-conformity, with belief that God is both a part of, and has created, all (Swami Prabhupāda, 1973; Singh, 1978; Wilhelm, 2004). Within Islamic

traditions there is an incompatibility with faith and homosexuality as God has created, but is separate from individuals, leading to anger, fear and shame, internally toward Self and externally from community (Bhugra, 1997; McKeown et. al., 2010; Jaspal, 2015).

Awareness of difference occurred during the biological transition of puberty for two participants – James and Donald – where they expressed no interest, consideration of sexual identity or feelings towards others of the same sex prior to onset of puberty. Donald felt that "puberty kind of like pushes you" (p.7) into same-sex attraction and subsequently awareness of difference, however, consideration would be towards any feelings of same-sex attraction prior to puberty. Puberty increases testosterone and masculinised traits in males (e.g. deeper voice, musculature, aggression) sexual maturation and interest in sex and sexuality (Grossman et. al., 2014; Stahl et. al., 2016), leaving those who do not meet standards of masculine ideals vulnerable. Policing of gender non-conformity and assumed non-heterosexual identities from peers e.g. "they would call you names like faggot or or, like perv" (p.4 - Donald) and "other boys taking the piss...I'm quite an effeminate guy" (p.3 -James) or "people were calling me a faggot" (p.4 - Kurt) are examples of pejorative terms used to punish, shame and oppress expression of atypical masculinity and non-heterosexual identities.

These negative interactions brought awareness to, or reinforced difference, as participants engaged with others both on- and offline, creating emotional responses and felt sensations from theses engagements. These occurred within corporeal form and were therefore always offline. Turkle (2011) highlights although we can perform and express emotion online, ultimately we have 'a human body and a human life' (p.287) and therefore no matter what or how the interaction, awareness of difference will always be felt physically.

This research contrasts with current sexual identity model expectations where individuals identify as heterosexual before rejecting the heterosexual identity (e.g. Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1988; D'Augelli, 1994). Participants in this study experienced their self-concept as faulty or deviant from what was deemed socially acceptable whilst still children - in some examples very young children – making them feel different (Zain, Adam, Kurt Chris). Peers and wider society policed these differences through threat, shame and attack, making individuals internalise their experiences, creating negative mental health outcomes. Society, culture, education and religion reinforced negative consequences of claiming a non-heterosexual identity and highlighted differences of sexuality through the removal of learning and understanding resources (e.g. Section 28 Local Government Act, 1988) which could have help feelings of difference, improving mental health outcomes in young people and older.

Gaining Knowledge of Identity

LGBTQ+ people construct identity through direct questioning, observations, experiences and internal reflections (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1990; Fox & Ralston, 2016). Gaining Knowledge of Identity through engagement with multiple avenues including experiencing culture, connections and sexual encounters/attractions and learning language/terminologies and identities (Dhoest & Szulc, 2013). Donald phrases this clearly,

"...I knew the basics, I knew what I liked, I knew what I wanted, but then did I know everything about like, for example homosexuality? - I think that was a clear, no..." (p.23)

Kort (2018) highlights the strength and courage needed for non-heterosexual individuals to explore the LGBTQ+ community in both offline and online spaces. While existing literature generalises the process of sexual identity construction via interactions with the group or community offline (Coleman, 1982; Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1988; D'Augelli, 1994; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Rhoads, 1994) it is not clear why or how nuanced interactions facilitate a deepening understanding, validation and assurance of a non-heterosexual identity.

Existing studies consider interactions in offline spaces, which brings risk of arrest, attack or persecution for non-heterosexual men (Humphreys 1975; Levine, 1998; Miller, 2015) whilst online interactions facilitate control and choice to be visible or invisible (Suler, 2004; Pingel et. al., 2012; Miller, 2015; Fox & Ralston, 2016), this study considered explorations occurring both online and offline.

Following the realisation a non-heterosexual identity – although a specific label may be vague in earlier processing – is the rationale for feeling different, the majority of individuals in this study began exploring what that meant via online engagement. As Kurt mentioned, '...once [he] had a term...' (p.4 – Kurt) he was able to explore the identity further and act out behaviours online associated with non-heterosexual identity (Fox & Ralston, 2016).

Nearly all participants in this study (Adam, Chris, Donald, Kurt) engaged with search engines to ask direct questions about same-sex feelings and social media interactions – whether unidirectional ('lurking') or bidirectional – allowed participants to explore options and possibilities of constructing an identity which closely aligned to their inner experience by witnessing other non-heterosexuals' lives through various platforms (Harper et. al., 2016). Adam stated his social media interactions were to find out,

"...more about what it means to be gay and...I remember yeah like following accounts about like, this is what it means to be asexual, you know, or like learning all these terminology like 'top' and 'bottom' and 'bisexual' or 'trans', you know? Like, it was a whole world of terminology and concepts and ideas that I'd never been exposed to before. And...yeah, that was like my...queer education was...Tumblr..." (p.7)

Coon Sells (2013) highlights the importance of online interactions with others in the LGBTQ+ community for construction of non-heterosexual identity including terminologies, behaviours and connections. Interactions aid and verify non-heterosexual identities through creating friendships, however online friendships rarely carried into the offline world. Online interactions helped retain the individual's identity whilst feeling part of a larger culture because social identity is vital to the feeling of connecting to community online (Donath, 1996; Coon Sells, 2013).

It was not just online interactions which helped to construct a non-heterosexual identity. Engagement with media, such as films,

"Definitely like movies, yeah, I would try to find movies um, that touched on queer themes." (p.7 - Adam)

Brought knowledge about a world that individuals might not have access to, due to age or geography. Media included pornography and music as avenues for Exploring and Understanding experiences of sexual identity. Similar to engaging search engines, participants engaged with media, such as queer films, pornography and online interactions, in private and although this brought with it safety (Pingel, et. al., 2012; Miller, 2015) it compounded feelings of isolation and aloneness (Giray, 2021; Ostic, et. al., 2021). With the physical distance from family and friends a splitting of identities occurred.

Sill (2023) highlights poor LGBTQ+ sex and relationship education in schools is leading nonheterosexual people seeking out information and education through online blogs, chat rooms and by watching pornography. Through interacting with these media, further questions are raised and participants seek search engines to ask questions, thus finding out further information; yet the level of online misinformation, misrepresentation and cyberbullying can be damaging to LGBTQ+ identities (Hatchel et. al., 2021; Garofalo, 2023).

In this study Donald and Adam both mentioned using online pornography to construct and understand sexual identity. Zain discussed finding heterosexual print pornography as a young person and realised his arousal looking at the male performer. Kurt and Chris mentioned currently using social media as a source of material for sexual gratification, but not in their youth. It is pertinent to consider the accessibility of pornography through social media and its influence on sexual minority youth, yet Böthe and colleagues (2019) and Giano (2021) concluded LGBTQ+ pornography use is driven by the unmet need for information around sexual relationships and is part of identity formation or identity rejection for non-heterosexual people.

Interestingly the effects of music performers on participants' sexual identity occurred. For Kurt he recalled the impact Madonna had on his sexual curiosity and embraced a time in his life where he felt more fluid and experimental with sexual behaviours based on witnessing Madonna's own sexual fluidity. His experience of drawing "a massive heart around..." (p.5 – Kurt) a member of the band 'Culture Club at' "a young age" (p.5 – Kurt) was a sign of his same-sex feelings and something he felt was a very natural behaviour at the time. Wasserbauer and Dohest (2016) found sexual and gender identities in LGBTQ+ people were influenced by music and performers. Gay men in particular used musical divas as a means of escapism and to connect their own life experiences to those of the performer – this was not just something aligned to young White Western individuals, but extended across ages, genres and cultures. The meaning performers hold in relation to an individual's sexual identity was both important and enduring to the individual (Downs, 2006; Todd, 2016;

Wasserbauer & Dohest, 2016). Whilst James did not have any sexual attraction towards a musician or his sexual identity influenced by a specific performer, he found inspiration and confidence in how he presented himself online through some legendary performers such as David Bowie and Jimmi Hendrix.

The influence of media on constructing sexual identity was an important one, often seen in isolation but integrated into an individual's life as they were drawn to, or rejected, various genres of film (including adult films). This also included music and performers based on their experiences and what aligned to their authentic self.

Participants engaged with the community which galvanised, constructed and reinforced experiences of what it meant to hold a non-heterosexual identity (Cass, 1979, 1984; Troiden 1988; D'Augelli, 1994; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Rhoads, 1994). Close friends were a source of support and participants discussed emotional and personal experiences with them to further understand their identities. Donald summed this up when he stated,

"...talking to other gay guys...at school...they really helped me...in my group of like, gay friend group at school. So like you could tell, like, each other...all gays and then you're just like, sticking in the same group, like that sort of...support within that group, really helped me like exploring my sexuality" (p.4)

And for Adam having a friend at school who turned out to be a part of the LGBTQ+ community, allowed freer discussion around emotions and experiences. Adam said,

"...that was great, and like I remember like talking with her about, I had these feelings, "what does it mean?" Like you know, "are you feeling things like this too?" ...I had someone in her that I could talk to...but also I was doing a lot of the stuff online where I was still, visiting websites and trying to...learn more about what it means to be gay..." (pp.6 – 7) These interactions usualised unknown feelings and brought a sense of connection, support and community to the pair – albeit small – whilst Adam simultaneously continued to engage online for further knowledge and understanding into his sexual identity. Today, much of the literature focuses on the importance of online socialisation support for LGBTQ+ individuals (McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Coon Sells, 2013; Harper et. al., 2016; Pingel et. al., 2016; Brandt & Carmichael, 2020; Bates, Hobman & Bell, 2020; Boyd & Wei, 2023; Hiebert & Kortes-Miller, 2023) but with participants in this study, offline connections to others with similar identities were important in Understanding and Exploring experiences of a nonheterosexual identity (Kiperman et. al., 2022; Worrell et. al., 2022).

Although much research focuses on the impact and experiences of sexual identity support and discussion of sexual identity construction through online methods, it is important to recognise socialisation and interaction will occur in social or educational environments simultaneously on- and offline. This is seen with Adam and Kurt when online connections result in offline friendships and interactions. Kurt recalled how online interactions,

"...definitely helped me coming out because I, you know, I managed to meet people um though it...I met [my friend] through an AOL chat room. Er, he turned into, you know, for many years, he was like literally one of my best friends, we still keep in contact now." (p.12)

This contradicts Coon Sells' (2013) position that online friendships never tipped over into the offline, with the two spheres remaining separate, and showed enduring relationships occur through initial online connections.

However, the risk of this is felt when Adam recalled an experience when trying to instigate romantic / sexual connections through online platforms. Adam remembered,

"I remember going on...Craigslist...when they had like a personals section...I met up with one or two guys that way and those were not good experiences...because I felt like...it was like me being anonymous and like scared teenager like trying to have a date with someone...the guy who was a little bit older, maybe in his early 20s...it was kind of creepy." (pp.7 – 8)

For Adam this deterred him meeting online connections until he went away to university and felt more autonomous. Participants (Kurt, Donald, Adam, James) had polarising experiences from online connections that moved into the offline world where situations felt either unsafe or negative but helped them understand their limits and boundaries as a nonheterosexual person within the culture.

Being away from home, family and community was a time – and space – in which half of the participants (Chris, Zain, Adam) felt comfortable and safe to explore and understand their sexual identities in more depth.

Chris moved to a city known for its LGBTQ+ community and diverse population where he felt more at ease to live an authentic life, free to explore the LGBTQ+ community and construct a more assured sexual identity. Adam and Chris used a change in educational institution – from secondary education to higher education – as time in which to explore and experiment finding out more about their sexual identity, away from families and community which might reject, punish or attack non-heterosexual people (Landolt, Bartholomew, et. al, 2004; Willis, 2009; Kozlowski & Power, 2022).

For other participants (Donald, James and Kurt), home and family were readily accepting of their sexuality after disclosure and they felt free exploring their sexual identities through various avenues within the boundaries of the family unit. Mohr and Fassinger (2003), Legate et. al., (2011), and Reed and Miller (2016) found non-heterosexual people who did not have the support of their families, in particular their parents, felt forced to hide their sexual identities and experienced poor mental, physical and sexual health outcomes. Although Zain and Adam did not report poor mental health currently, Zain openly talked about his experiences of depression and suicidal ideation as he explored and came to accept his non-heterosexual identity. Adam's initial experience of disclosing his sexual identity to his parents resulted in the ultimate rejection from his mother. He said,

"...I went to school the next day [after disclosing his non-heterosexual identity to his parents] and I got home...and there was a note on my door from my mum that said...um, 'I can't support this. You, like, this is sinful. You need to leave the house..." (p.13)

Although he remained in the family home, the maternal relationship broke down for some time and he was emotionally distanced from his mother and subsequently distanced himself from the family by going to university.

In summary, non-heterosexual people's use of online resources helped in answering questions whilst engagement on social media created more nuance of their place within the community, leading to further questions needing to be understood. These online sources of education and information giving helped build a more refined identity. Other media such as film, music and pornography were also avenues of education into sexual behaviour, connection and expression, with exploration of concepts, terminologies and behaviours. However, these avenues do not exist in isolation and engagement online became offline interactions as individuals had space, time and maturity to explore and understand offline lived experiences of what it meant to be a non-heterosexual person. Gaining Knowledge of Identity, involved connection and community, both online *and* offline, to manage these new connections through engaging with friends and supportive family away from heterosexual

others who were felt to be threatening. This was achieved through The Performances - a Splitting or Synthesising the newly constructing identity.

The Performances

The Performances contain polarised experiences of subordinate themes: Splitting, and Synthesising, the identity. Much of existing literature addresses experiences of Splitting and Synthesising in similar fashion (Cass, 1979; 1984; Troiden, 1988; Downs, 2005) at different distinct stages. Splitting was seen as hiding one's identity from select others for protection and safety factors, with both heterosexual and non-heterosexual identities performed in specific spaces and with specific others (Cass 1979; 1984; Troiden, 1988; D'Augelli, 1994; Pandya et. al., 2013; Liow et. al., 2023).

Synthesising was seen as integrating the non-heterosexual identity into the individual's holistic self-concept with minimal or no resistance or challenges (Cass, 1979; 1984; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1988; D'Augelli, 1994; McCarn & Fassinger, 1994; Pandya, et. al., 2013; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015; Liow et. al., 2023)

Findings demonstrate splitting behaviours of non-heterosexual individuals are performative in nature, conforming to social role expectations (a management factor of social stress). It feels pertinent to again reference Goffman's (1959, 1963) dramaturgical metaphor of identity-as-performance concept of Self (Pearson, 2009). Performing a version of Self in a specific environment based on the outcome desired, audience present and social values held, aligned with participants' presentations of identity.

An extension of Goffman's performance theory gives individuals multiple platforms (online /offline) and occasions in which to act out specific identities dependent on the circumstance

and need (Davis & Weinstein, 2017; Owens, 2017) with the audience often invisible and asynchronous (Suler, 2004).

Synthesising in this research was the integration of a non-heterosexual identity into a world where the individual once held an assumed heterosexual identity. For example LGBTQ+ friends, partners, music, events, films etc. will be brought into the lives of existing (likely majority heterosexual) friends and family, with two worlds interacting cohesively. It is the synthesising of culture, people and situations from non-heterosexual and heterosexual backgrounds. This is analogous to previous research where synthesis occurs at environmental, self-conceptual and political activism levels (Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1988, D'Augelli, 1994; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015).

In this research the act of splitting were behaviours, (inter)actions, events, locations, people and presentations of Self as a non-heterosexual person which were performed away from others, who were unaware of the non-heterosexual identity, both on- and offline.

The easiest and most apparent aspect of splitting was through online interactions and engagement due to its affordability of privacy, gave users ability to control their visibility and create a persona which would appeal to others and be less inhibited than their offline identity, whilst remaining safe and distanced from these interactions (Suler, 2004; Turkle, 2011; Miller, 2015). This can be witnessed with Adam's behaviour. Not only does he create a distinct online persona but one where he expresses his non-heterosexual identity, thoughts, feelings and desires away from family and friends, enabling him to feel free. He recalled,

"...[Tumblr] was a place where I felt really safe to explore sexuality and like queerness in a way that felt more open than...um, my offline life...relatively anonymous on there and I kind of like built my own persona..." (p.3 - Adam)

Yet paradoxically, to feel connection online he is detached from family and alone in his room – aloneness and isolation were emotional themes in his early years. James discussed creating a persona that was so impactful he likened it to a drag character which emerged online as protection and opposition to discrimination and oppression, and this was something his family did not know about. Suler (2004) categorises these online disinhibited behaviours as 'dissociative anonymity' (p.322) where real-world identities are hidden and online presentations can (to some extent) be separated from behaviours and acting out offline.

Online interactions can more readily be split through curating and managing content that is shared and to whom it appears visible. Chris expresses this when he used a Venn diagram example. Chris said,

"...when I went first, went to uni and joined Facebook, the online and the offline world...were...You know, if there was a Venn diagram, there'd be two circles pretty much [draws circles in the air and intersects the two]...And pretty much everyone I knew and saw, and was open to was also online...as Facebook then...expanded and you know, I ended up...with my old biology teacher on there, my auntie [on there], [people] from Italy, my grandma...dad's friends...you know what I mean? But...that circle of people that had access to, what originally was quite...I got like, you know, a closed circle...suddenly really, really increased. And that's when I think I started to...think differently about what I was putting on there." (p.9)

Initially people who knew about Chris' sexual identity existed both online and offline but small in number, and people who *did not* know about his sexual identity were predominantly just in his offline world. The rise of social media meant those who once had no online presence suddenly did, making the intersection of online-offline increase rapidly, meaning greater management of his social media presentation was required to maintain both online connection and expression to friends, whilst simultaneously shielding people who were now online but were not aware of his sexual identity. This changed his engagement with social media and utilising privacy settings and restrictions was required to be more guarded in presenting a refined version of himself that was accepted by others unaware of his sexual identity. Marwick and boyd (2010) describe this phenomena as 'context collapse' (p.122). People from both online and offline worlds converge on social media such as colleagues, family and friends. Context collapse means one singular identity is presented which is seen as acceptable to the entire audience. However, this generic presentation is often in tension with the multiple other aspects of identity, so individuals use private accounts, other platforms or privacy settings. Marwick and boyd (2010) highlight this is not a total solution, where even on separate platforms or accounts, groups of people will come together who will only have awareness of selected parts of the individual.

The more enduring historic actions of splitting have always been offline due to the very nature of in-person interactions. Concealment, or splitting of a sexual identity – otherwise known colloquially as 'passing' (Goffman, 1963; Ozbilgin et. al., 2021) – extends across culture, age, class and ethnicity, amongst other intersections (Cass, 1979, 1984; Troiden, 1988; Flowers & Buston, 2001; Pandya, 2013; Jaspal, 2015; Tomori, 2018; Liow, 2023). This safeguarding behaviour allows non-heterosexual individuals to merge into dominant sexual identity norms for protection, survival and safety (Miller, 2015; Downs, 2016; Kort, 2018).

Goffman (1959, 1963) theorises individuals perform differently in various settings to meet normative expectations and avoid stigma based on environmental conditions and social context. These performances, acted out on the stage of social interaction, are risk avoidant and help ingratiate individuals into dominant cultures by meeting social expectation. The role of 'heterosexual male' is performed by both Kurt and James as protection and the nonheterosexual identity is hidden or split. James stated,

"...then it obviously comes to high school and...you're faced with this normal [does air quotes] that you're supposed to have a girlfriend at this age. You should have a girlfriend at this age. You need to do this. You must do that...I didn't so much like her but it felt as though I needed to have a girlfriend regardless of how I felt and whether I wanted one..." (pp.11 – 12)

Individuals force themselves to perform behaviours aligned to the majority, seeking protection and conformity to social alignment with expectations of community (Savin-Williams, 2005; Owens, 2017). In private, these performances cease and an authentic presentation emerges aligned with Self, rather than meeting expectations of others (Ozbilgin et. al., 2021).

However, Splitting often occured away from family, friends, and increases risk to personal safety when participants connect with online others and decide to meet offline for friendship, dates or sex (Pingel et. al., 2012; Blackwell et. al, 2015; Albury & Byron, 2019; Byron et. al., 2020). Adam recalled the moment he met an older gay male in-person after chatting online. Adam said,

"...it was like me being anonymous and like scared teenager like trying to have a date with someone...the guy who was a little bit older, maybe in his early 20s...it was kind of creepy. I was a little unsure of how to get out of that situation.." (pp.7-8) This demonstrated risks taken and subsequent emotional distress having engaged in an offline interaction that began online. This aligns with previous findings that nonheterosexual people put themselves at risk in offline interactions, for dates and sexual encounters (Humphreys, 1975; Pingel et. al., 2012; Albury et. al., 2019; Byron et. al., 2020).

The majority of participants (Zain, Chris, Adam, James, Kurt) discussed experiences of Splitting the non-heterosexual identity from other identities in offline spaces – particularly identities closely tied to family and home life. Whilst living at home, Kurt engaged in what he believed were deceptive and covert behaviours. He recalled,

"...we used to pretend we're going downtown, you know, straight clubbing and we used to wear shirts and, you know, smart gear...I used to meet [my friend] and I'd like have other clothes as well. So like as soon as we drive around the corner, we used to get out the car halfway...up to [the other city] in a...lay-by, get changed into like tight white crop tops, you know, and you know, that was the era and, you know, literally went from straight looking to gay looking just to go up clubbing and then drive back, you know, get changed back and say oh yeah...it was good." (p.8)

Kurt was literally describing a costume change for a performance of a non-heterosexual identity, away from an assumed heterosexual identity/location. The non-heterosexual performance and environment – much like Adam and James online – Kurt described having "this complete alter ego that…nobody knew about" (p.8 – Kurt) which was created and utilised in various settings to align with the group for acceptance.

Though covert behaviours to experience an authentic non-heterosexual identity occurred, the behaviours cannot be kept hidden as various identities are unconsciously intertwined. Following Kurt's disclosure of his non-heterosexual identity to his parents, his mother revealed,

"...it was blatantly obvious what you were doing because you used to come back and I used to find all your crop tops, so I washed them..." (p.8)

Informing Kurt that she had been aware of his behaviour due to the seemingly insignificant clues that were encroaching into everyday family life without his awareness.

Synthesising integrated the non-heterosexual identity into a world where the individual once held an assumed heterosexual status. For example new LGBTQ+ friends, partners, music, events, films etc. will be brought into the lives of existing (likely majority heterosexual) friends and family with the two worlds interacting cohesively. Experiences of Synthesising appear in both milestone, and everyday events. Milestones such as introducing parents or other family members to a long-term, same-sex partner (LaSala, 2000; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015). Both Zain and Adam recalled very specific moments of integrating parents into the world of the same-sex couple. For Adam the ruptured maternal relationship was repaired through the introduction of his partner to the family. He said,

"...for her [mother] seeing him [partner] and seeing the fact that like, he's a person, like we love each other...I think she was just so worried about me, um, like seeing her, seeing me with him, like, calmed her down..." (p.14)

For Zain he recalled the time his parents,

"...came round...to meet my partner, and they said you've got the best relationship we've ever seen of our children, and it's a beautiful home..." (p.12)

This allayed parental fears and brought a profound sense of acceptance. Kort (2018) recommends the continued visibility and discussion of a non-heterosexual identity within the family due to a usualisation of the identity and reinforcement that the identity is not a

phase or a fashionable trait which will dissipate if ignored. LaSala (2000) found including a same-sex partner within family events helped strengthen the same-sex relationship and integrating the partner in this way was an important task in the construction of a non-heterosexual identity, which was echoed in this study.

Disclosing a non-heterosexual identity to others supported Synthesising experiences and was a milestone often referred to within other literature as 'coming out' (e.g. Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1988; D'Augelli, 1994; Downs, 2005; Savin-Williams, 2005; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015; Kort, 2018) with the process of synthesisation being life-long across multiple interactions and environments (D'Augelli, 1994; Levy, 2009) and one that was not a linear and progressive process (Zubernis, Snyder & McCoy, 2011; Grossman, Foss & D'Augelli, 2014; Belous, Wampler & Warmels – Herring, 2015). Kort (2018) discusses the 'back and forth' (p.125) of sexual identity disclosure as individuals tentatively express feelings and experiences of same-sex attraction, usually to close friends initially, after some time of experiencing Exploring and Understanding what it meant to be non-heterosexual.

The coming out experience is seen as a crucial part in constructing LGBTQ+ identity but for some multiply minoritised individuals, so much can be tied up in cultural, religious and ethnic intersections (Levy, 2009). This resulted in long lasting challenging and empowering experiences, effecting mental health and wellbeing both positively and negatively (Ryan, et. al., 2015; Monteza, 2022; Gerena, 2023); evidencing damage non-disclosures can have on long term mental health in multiply minoritised groups (Cain, 1991; Schrimshaw, Downing & Cohn, 2018; Lassiter, Brewer & Wilton, 2019). Contrasting studies showed religion, ethnicity and culture are insignificant in whether a non-heterosexual person disclosed their sexual identity to others (Reed & Miller, 2016; Huynh, 2023) and some research showed

participants never needed to disclose their non-heterosexual identity due to community and social acceptance of their two-spirit identity (Adams & Phillips, 2009).

Chris discussed no longer hiding parts of himself on social media as he did before coming out but recognised his current splitting behaviour between his professional and personal identities online. Bossio and Sacco (2017) found three variations to Splitting or Synthesising identities online – some individuals create both visible and private personal / professional accounts on social media (demonstrated by Chris in this study), others are organisationally required to hold only a professional social media account and finally individuals merge professional and personal identities and manage these under one account.

The experiences of Synthesising the non-heterosexual identity into everyday life interactions occurred in both conscious and unconscious ways. The majority of participants (Zain, Kurt, Chris, Adam) all worked professionally or voluntarily with sectors supporting LGBTQ+ people, and all discussed having LGBTQ+ friends and family members who were supportive of their non-heterosexual identity and some who actively embrace aspects of LGBTQ+ culture. Chris said,

"...my nan loves 'Drag Race'..." (p.23)

Reinforcing acceptance and closeness with family, where the non-heterosexual identity allowed the individual to be authentic and less filtered in their interests, their conversations and engagement with colleagues, family and friends (Guittar, 2013; Salter & Sasso, 2021). Simultaneously, Synthesising the non-heterosexual identity into everyday life brought with it a non-conformity to social expectations. It was Zain's activism for the LGBTQ+ South

Asian community which demonstrated non-conformist behaviours as his multiple intersecting identities are acknowledged. He stated,

"...as a gay Muslim man, I find that a lot over the years, especially in gay spaces, that, the constant challenging of behaviours or perceptions or stereotypes..." (p.15)

As a multiply minoritised individual, Zain's activism pushes back oppressive, discriminatory practices and behaviours of the majority, placing him in a position of resistance. Adam similarly expressed resistance through how he utilised his queer identity in extending or (re)constructing a state of fluidity. Adam felt,

"...queerness...for me...I like that because it's, it's a political stance as well...and it reflects something that I think is important about being gay, and that's like this experience of being different, and...for me, that experience has made me question a lot of like, social norms and realities that we're told are the case. So...I think queerness or something that's like, oppositional or always being on the outside or like resisting normativity, and, you know, resisting just accepting tradition because it's tradition" (p.15)

The sense of being different for Adam allowed curiosity and questioning to arise where he was not conforming to the expectations imposed on him by others. These homonormative expectations around sexuality or relationships from within the LGBTQ+ community, as well as society at large, are challenged (Hammack, Frost & Hughes, 2018) where part of synthesising a non-heterosexual identity was the ability to identify alternatively to the expected label of gay.

In summary, the experience of Splitting was something engaged in for safety and protection from risk of harm, rejection and attack. Splitting inevitably separates identities and whilst there are benefits to this behaviour such as acceptance, it can result in isolation and loneliness at a time with increased need for connection and support. Splitting allowed for creation of an authentic version of Self which aligned with the version the individual wished to present to the newly explored world – however small that may be. Splitting can be seen as a necessity in the process of identity construction and interacts closely with the experiences of Exploring and Understanding, particularly in the earlier stages of sexual identity construction. Synthesising comes over time and with space, as both factors give permission for a solid understanding of Self and a newly constructed identity. Synthesising incorporates family, friends, work, hobbies, events and interactions in an authentic, transparent and visible way. There was no longer the non-heterosexual identity and its engagement with the non-heterosexual world and the assumed heterosexual identity and its engagement with the heterosexual world. There is now a whole person, integrating the non-heterosexual identity into all areas of life simultaneously (Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1988; D'Augelli, 1994; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015).

A Journey to Acceptance

Ignoring-Resisting experiences are behaviours and strategies undertaken to deny and defend against the reality a non-heterosexual identity is becoming part of the self-concept (Downs, 2006; Kort, 2018). Behaviours include avoidance and denial resulting in damage to mental health, social connections and resulting isolation (Feinstein, Goldfried & Davila, 2012; Olsen, Campbell & Gross, 2017). Acceptance of Self comes through interactions with those who accept the non-heterosexual identity formed through a feedback loop. The level of social support and acceptance of non-heterosexual men directly related to the level of self-acceptance and fewer symptoms of depression (Vincke & Bolton, 1994; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Brandt & Carmichael, 2020) although online support was only effective when coming from others in the LGBTQ+ community (Brandt & Carmichael, 2020).

Zain recalled an emotionally and psychologically challenging experience of Ignoring-Resisting his non-heterosexual identity where "...even though I knew I had these feelings; it's about suppressing them..." (p.23). Adding complexity to Zain's experience was the layer of cultural and religious influence where he felt a considerable amount of "religious guilt" (p.5) resulting in significant "conflicts, inner conflict, mental anguish..." (p.5). This aligned with Dahl and Galliher (2012) who found participants from religious families felt inadequacy, guilt, social stress and depressive symptoms in childhood.

Experiences of mental ill-health and psychological challenges which occurred for participants who ignore - resist same-sex feelings, moved participants into places of emotional despair. Kurt recalled,

"...I was even like thinking about committing suicide at the time, you know, because I look back and there was thoughts that like go through my head and I'm thinking, you know, I'm, I'm a freak. I'm not this and, you know, [the] only way out for me is, you know, literally out..." (p.10)

This correlates with higher rates of suicidality in gay men through the decades (Saunders & Valente, 1987; Bagley & Tremblay, 1997; Kort, 2018; Pachankis, et. al., 2018) and whilst these previous studies cite causation being higher rates of depression and existing mental health challenges generally, contemporary findings from Spinks (2023) considers heteronormative masculinity and internalised homophobia as the cause for the rise in under 26-year-old non-heterosexual males' rise in suicidality.

To avoid feelings of difference and same-sex attraction, Chris recalled "...when I was closeted I kind of tried to stay away from gay people..." (pp.9 – 10) and during the process of understanding his non-heterosexual identity he "...struggled with it...I did struggle with it..."

(p.4) alluding to resistance of non-heterosexual identity and strategies utilised to ignore or avoid his feelings (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1988).

However Ignoring-Resisting experiences were reduced by gradual or immediate acceptance of the non-heterosexual identity from others in the individual's life, resulting in internalised acceptance and a non-heterosexual identity became an embraced aspect of Self.

Zain recalled he "...only came out after I had met my partner, and I told my mum, um but I was really fortunate that my partner's very, very supportive..." (p.6) and recognised "...it's important to have at least an ally or a friend who can give you that confidence or that reassurances (sic) to say, you know, it's going to be okay..." (p.8). Strength and support from one ally – regardless of the relationship – helped remove feelings of aloneness, isolation and fear. Chen and colleagues (2023) found individuals with allies in their lives had higher levels of self-esteem, greater subjective wellbeing, positive mental health and better quality of intra- and interpersonal relationships. Acceptance from families, and parents in particular, appeared to be the most emotionally and psychologically beneficial towards acceptance (Broad, 2011; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015) which was especially pertinent for those from strong religious and cultural backgrounds (McCormick & Baldridge, 2019). Zain stated,

"...when you're growing up and you come from quite a religious family background in particular, you want that level of acceptance, you know...most importantly from your parents more than anything...if you don't have that level of love, it feeds into confidence, self-esteem, self-worth, self-value..." (p.13)

This could be reflected in the high levels of negative mental health outcomes and rates of suicide for rejected LGBTQ+ people (Saunders & Valente, 1987; Bagley et. al., 1997; Feinstein, Goldfried & Davila, 2012; Cohen et. al., 2016; Carastathis et. al., 2017; Spinks,

2023). Rosenkrantz and colleagues (2020) determined religious parents struggled to accept an LGBTQ+ child and experienced a complex interaction integrating the LGBTQ+ child into religious doctrine. Some parents utilised religious practices and support in the process of acceptance, whilst others rejected specific antigay religious teachings or the religion altogether. Gonzalez and colleagues (2013) found parents of LGBTQ+ children learnt personal growth, positive emotions, activism, social connection and closer relationships following the child disclosing a non-heterosexual identity, supporting their self-acceptance. Rosenkrantz and colleagues (see also Ryan et. al., 2010) acknowledge the importance of parental acceptance in the health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ children.

For James his "...family really did help, um because they've always been quite open-minded and quite grounded..." (p.19); Adam's father told him "...I love you, I support you, you're still my son. I accept you being gay. It's fine...So my dad has been supportive in that way from, from the very beginning..." (p.14). Kurt's Step-Father stated "I know a young guy at work your age who's gay, I'll introduce you..." (p.6) and Zain's mother "...responded...in a very positive manner. So that kind of instilled confidence in me..." (p.6).

The power and strength of unconditional love and acceptance from those closest to participants (particularly family) helped build self-confidence and self-acceptance of the non-heterosexual identity allowing for more frequent, consistent and overt disclosures of the non-heterosexual identity to the world. An important factor in the coming out journey was self-acceptance (Franke & Leary, 1991) and existing models of sexual identity development (e.g. Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1988) hypothesise social rejection of non-heterosexual individuals occured after an individual had internally accepted the identity and disclosed to others (Franke & Leary, 1991). However, as discussed earlier, gender non-

conforming behaviours in males, are often rejected and attacked prior to a nonheterosexual identity being disclosed, creating internalised homophobia and poor mental health (Szymanski & Carr, 2008; Kowalski & Scheitle; Lewis et. al., 2020) resulting in the resistance of an integrated sexual identity.

Zain now does "...make it clear to people that...I'm a gay man, you know, at some point in the conversation..." (p.21). Self-acceptance of a non-heterosexual identity, including others' acceptance of the identity – particularly family – resulted in greater acceptance and pride towards other marginalised identities existing in the same individual. Similarly Kurt expressed,

"...I'm HIV positive, um an advocate about it, I speak openly about that as just as, so I do the same as I'm gay and I'm quite proud, the, the fact that, you know, I can put my hand up and say yes, I'm HIV positive..." (p.21)

Arístegui and colleagues (2017) found in HIV positive gay men and transgender women, the importance of psychosocial connections, control over situations, self-acceptance and having projects and focus on one's life were analogous to multidimensional models of psychological wellbeing (Ryff, 1989) which correlated to Kurt's experience of accepting his intersecting multiply marginalised identities.

Environment played a large part in the processing of self-acceptance of sexual identity. For participants in this study, acceptance of sexual identity came from experiencing or witnessing acceptance of non-heterosexual people by others, giving them the ability to disclose their identity to more people.

Chris felt that "...living in Brighton...is a fairly accepting place which was very helpful..." (p.7) and "freeing" (p.10) to accept his non-heterosexual identity through witnessing how other non-heterosexual people were received in that environment.

Donald reinforced this as he had "...the environment and space at that time, to be able to explore that side of mine. Um, so I got some close, friends, like luckily when I was in secondary school as well, who are extremely accepting...". Donald recalled witnessing his parents,

"...being accepting to gay people before I came out...in the way they treated other people, or the way they reacted to the media that they watch...I had this concern before I came out...No matter how liberal you think your parents are, like a side of you, like one of your concerns could still be, would they react differently if that indeed happens to them..." (p.22)

This was mirrored in how Kurt's parents, his step-father in particular, accepted his sexual identity, "...after I come out um, my mum and dad were basically...my best friends after I come out..." (p.5) and he stated, "...[my (step-)dad] actually turned out to be more supportive from day one than probably the rest of my family with that and it actually bought us so much closer together..." (pp.6 – 7). Prior to this, his step-father was overtly homophobic and reacted with disgust viewing same-sex interactions on the television.

Although there was a recognition that parents were accepting of others who are LGBTQ+ this was not necessarily a marker for their reaction when it was their child. Adam recalled feeling similar to Donald,

"...oh yeah, my parents believe in science, like they, they voted for Obama [laughs]. Um, they're gonna be okay with me being gay...my uncle, is gay and I've always known that and it's never been a secret and...I thought like, [mum] supported him..." (p.12 - Adam) Despite this liberal outlook towards others' sexual identity there was a severe relational rupture and rejection from Adam's mother. It cannot be assumed acceptance towards the out-group meant the non-heterosexual person will experience acceptance from the family, subsequently damaging the individual's emotional and mental health (Carastathis, Cohen, et. al., 2017). While other studies acknowledged the risk of rupture and rejection, over time recognition and an acknowledgement of non-heterosexual identity occurs (Ben-Ari, 1995).

In conclusion, the effects of Ignoring-Resisting the awareness of non-heterosexual feelings, thoughts, arousal or behaviour resulted in negative mental health outcomes. It could be argued these Ignoring-Resisting experiences and behaviours were a result of oppression and discrimination faced by individuals from wider society, including what they witnessed for others. Participants required acceptance and support from others – whether online or offline – to boost self-worth and contribute to a validated non-heterosexual identity. Acceptance of Self comes rapidly and easily when there was acceptance and validation through unconditional love from friends and family, particularly parents.

Through Exploration and Understanding, Splitting and Synthesising experiences, participants accepted themselves and were able to be accepted by others even if resistance to non-heterosexual feelings or relational ruptures occurred on their journey.

Empowerment

Despite stress exerted on individuals through majority and community hierarchical interactions, political and legislative frameworks protect individuals from discrimination and prejudice – and although not always successful and effective – give communities protections and rights afforded to society as a whole (Cain, 1993; Equality Act, 2010; Han & O'Mahoney, 2018). Legislation and changes in cultural and political views around non-heterosexuality, in

part created through empowerment by non-heterosexual people – for example the Stonewall Riots and ACT UP – are factors which further empower non-heterosexual individuals to feel confident and protected in expressing more authentic sexual identities (Behrens & Becker, 2023). Participants Kurt, Donald and Zain mentioned significant shifts in legislative positions, including the repeal of Section 28 (Local Government Act, 1988 c.9; Greenland & Nunney, 2008), the decriminalisation of homosexuality (Sexual Offences Act, 1967 c. 60; Han & O'Mahoney, 2018) and reduction in the age of consent for same-sex sexual intercourse (Sexual Offences Act (Amendment) 2000 c. 44; Waites, 2003; Han & O'Mahoney, 2018) were significant factors in how confident participants felt expressing their non-heterosexual identities in wider sociocultural contexts.

Empowerment came from connection to similar others, usually within the LGBTQ+ community, where clarifying and validating non-heterosexual experiences usualised feelings and created spaces of support and courage in others. Kurt mentioned his charity work being a place where LGBTQ+ people,

"that do come out, have something now to come out to, and they can meet people when you know just saying actually you know you are normal, this is the normal" (p.7).

Zain's work as a gay Muslim activist empowered others in the community to "say, I can also have a decent relationship if I wanted, or I can also navigate my life with my parents, or in particular trying to reconcile their faith with their sexual orientation, and gender identity" (p.2).

These interpersonal interactions and relationships bring education, usualisation and understanding at a time which feels overwhelmingly isolating when managed alone. Craig

and McInroy (2014) recognised LGBTQ+ people frequently sought role models and representation of identities through online searching. These interactions helped construct identity and re-construct existing understandings and perspectives about what it meant to be a non-heterosexual individual existing within intersections of multiply minoritised groups, allowing for reformulation of the identity or the maintenance of it and subsequent empowerment (Craig & McInroy, 2014; Bates et. al., 2020; Talbot, Talbot, et. al., 2020).

Parents reacting positively to disclosure of a non-heterosexual identity, particularly a mother, created feelings of empowerment through unconditional love, support and acceptance. Regardless of the intersections of community, religion or culture that may exist it can create closer bonds within the family (LaSala, 2000; Broad, 2011; Guittar, 2013). Zain remembered,

"...when I told my mum about a year or two later, about me meeting somebody, I fell in love blah blah blah, erm her response to that was you know whatever makes you happy makes me happy, and if I can't share in that happiness, what kind of mum will I be? So again, having that kind of level of unconditional love, that gave me something, it added to, I had already." (p.12)

Familial acceptance reinforces positive feelings the individual holds towards their sexual identity and empowers them to be authentic (Ryan, Russell et. al., 2010; Broad, 2011; Matthews & Salazar, 2012). The challenge with experiences of empowerment came when the individual with multiple marginalised identities (non-heterosexuality, ethnicity, culture, religion) sought out connection and support from others of similar backgrounds hoping to find a sense of community. Adam remembered he,

"... just felt very isolated from that and that didn't feel good because I kind of had an expectation that it finally, this is a place where like I can bring all parts of me to and like people will get it, [deep inhale] and like I'll get other people, but like, there was still a level of disconnection and distance." (p.24 - Adam)

This demonstrates a different experience of otherness where Adam did not feel he presented in an authentic *enough* way to be comfortable engaging within the group due to language barriers and/or his lack of lived Iranian experience, referring to himself as a 'poser' ('poser' being synonymous with someone fake, or trying hard to fit in with a group and believe their link to the community is tenuous) compared to Iranian nationals.

Techniques utilised for empowerment experiences online included using the block and/or report button on social media platforms (Blumenfeld & Cooper, 2010; Callander, Holt & Newman, 2016; Sisson-Curbishley, 2020), deleting comments or setting up alternative profiles away from the abuser (e.g. participant Zain; Callander, Holt & Newman, 2016). Offline this occurred by using humour and sharp wit against prejudice (e.g. participant James - Craig, Austin & Huang, 2018), redefining what non-heterosexuality was and reforming it with alternative non-heterosexual labels including the more political and multiply marginalised identity of queer (Adam) or connecting with people who held similar qualities and identities to the individual (Kurt).

It was apparent the level of stress and oppression, negative experiences and challenges individuals faced in their everyday, offline lives because of discrimination and oppression built up resilience and adversity over time, making challenging online interactions feel trivial in comparison. Zain said,

"...I've had enough shit you know, in some parts of my life to, to think, you know, I've experienced a lot worse in the real world, as opposed to the virtual..." (p.16 -Zain)

Participants experienced adversity and had no choice but to meet it and work through it. This increased a sense of resilience, determination and subsequently empowerment to push against and resist the oppression and discrimination placed on them through the stressors of the world they inhabit. This includes acts of varying degrees – charity work, professional work, social challenging, education – to facilitate social change and visibility for other LGBTQ+ people, creating positive experiences and mental health outcomes for themselves and others within the community.

Luck

Luck is something of an elusive phenomenon and hard to define but something which has been of interest in philosophy, psychology, sociology, law, ethics and philosophy of religion (Coffman, 2006). Luck for experiences of participants in this research has a) objective evaluative status, b) beyond direct control and c) held a large probability the event would unlikely occur (Pritchard & Smith, 2004; Coffman, 2006).

Whilst all participants mentioned luck or fortune in various ways, their comments were fleeting and were not the focus of their experience. This brings to the fore a recognition of the awareness of being privileged in their experience being able express and engage with others to define and reinforce their non-heterosexual identities however there also feels like the situation is out of their control and they cannot dwell on the idea. The concept presented here in the discussion is therefore somewhat of an outlier within the study. It presents both a source for future research but also the consideration around what privileges participants acknowledged to be a non-heterosexual person within the Western world.

Existing Theories Found in the Study

During the process of analysis, participants expressed experiences which aligned with a number of theoretical concepts highlighted within the literature review – Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003) and Intra-Minority Gay Community Stress (Pachankis et. al., 2020). All participants experienced interacting with the world and holding a place within hierarchical environments where they experienced oppression and discrimination. In addition to this were the stresses of life which affect all human beings to some degree at various times and the same was true for participants: disability, death, disease, violence, poverty and homelessness (Aneshensel, 1992; Tobin, Erving & Barve, 2021). The consequence of these stresses were negative mental health outcomes.

Evidently findings show participants do not exist in a vacuum and must engage and socialise with their wider environments and also confirms the social constructionist epistemology this research has taken. Participants therefore exist within the confines of social hierarchical structures where they are positioned based on their identities and minority, or multiply minoritised statuses.

Additionally, participants experienced particularly significant moments in their understanding and realisation of their non-heterosexual identity. These moments are analogous to the educational term of a threshold concept. A threshold concept is challenging and once realised there is no ability to unlearn the knowledge (Meyer & Land, 2003, 2005; Cousin, 2015). The following discussion explores these theories in relation to the findings.

Social Stressors

Aneshensel (1992) describes social stressors as circumstances external to the individual which obstruct or challenge the ability to hold autonomy and exist authentically in some way, creating a negative internal response. It is not external circumstances in isolation which create stress but the lack of resources and adaptability for the individual to manage the stressful load including lack of coping strategies, social position and support (Wheaton, 1999). Tobin, Erving and Barve (2021) discuss the socioeconomic and racial stress Black Americans experience compared to their White counterparts, leading to greater psychosocial resources in coping, including strengthened ties to family and friends and the chronic effects of oppression in early life created resilience not found in White populations.

Stressful events are subjective in nature, yet chronic stress includes barriers to life goals, resource deprivation, high effort expenditure to low or no reward, challenges of role expectations, poverty, violence (physical, emotional, sexual), homelessness and disability (Aneshensel, 1992; Tobin, Erving & Barve, 2021).

It is important to consider these factors are experiences participants in this study faced on various levels as illustrated in these findings. Social stressors echoed in participant experiences, as James recalled ", my dad had ended up leaving...so many years ago..." (p.3), Chris explained "...my father...passed away..." (p.9), James talked about his neurodivergence and Kurt, whilst not explicitly mentioning his biological father, touched on his relationship with his step-father, thereby assuming his biological father was not involved in the immediately family unit. Kurt also discussed his HIV positive status.

Participant social stress events presented here included disability, challenges to role expectations, violence, poverty, as well as death and illness (Aneshensel, 1992).

Relevant to current research are factors of intersectionality that exist for participants (e.g. religion, ethnicity, culture, gender, education and disability) which contribute to stress exerted on individuals from out-group members and within/between-group comparisons (Crenshaw, 1991, 2013; Schwartz & Meyer, 2010; Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015; Hill-Collins, 2019). Experiences of prejudice, oppression, trauma and discrimination occured, with adding layers of complexity to the constructing non-heterosexual identity through minority and intra-minority stress (Meyer, 2003, 2015; Pachankis et. al., 2020).

Minority Stress, Intra-minority Stress and Negative Mental Health

Minority stress theory proposes non-heterosexual people have higher levels of mental ill health than their heterosexual counterparts due to oppression, stigma and discrimination within environments in which they interact with heterosexual others (Meyer, 2003). Social environments create real or imagined expectations of rejection (or attack), internalised homophobia and behaviours of hiding non-heterosexual identity (Pillard, 1982; Meyer, 2003, 2015) to mitigate threat. Modrakovic and colleagues (2021) found minority stress increased depressive symptoms as non-heterosexual men tried to adhere to norms of masculinity, emotional stoicism and self-reliance – not the psychosocial coping resources mentioned by Tobin, Erving and Barve (2021) - strengthened ties to family and friends and the chronic effects of oppression in early life creating resilience.

Schools and educational institutions – youth's first major space of social interaction – parallel hierarchical social structures of dominance and oppression reflecting values and expectations of gender and sexual normative identities (Carragher & Rivers, 2002; Bryan, 2019). Schools engage and utilise anti-bullying and anti-discriminatory policies yet maintain barriers and inconsistencies, hindering positive effects of these well-intentioned strategies.

These include lack of training, education and support for teachers and school staff to enforce LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula and policies; barriers to delivering allyship, activism and support to LGBTQ+ individuals or groups; and challenges of community stress from withingroup differences based on ethnicity, class, religion, disability and gender (Bryan, 2019; Pachankis et. al., 2020; Leung et. al., 2022).

Non-heterosexual individuals experiencing bullying and discrimination from peers are at greater risk of self-harm, suicidality, increased mental health issues and lower levels of attainment at school (Abreu et. al., 2016; Bryan, 2019; Burton, et. al, 2019; Abreu et. al., 2023; Harris, et., al, 2023). Types of abuse range from physical assaults to verbal abuse, with the intersection of other minoritised identities such as race, ethnicity, class and – sometimes lack of – religious commitment being additional factors of discrimination compounding homophobic abuse (Huynh, 2022; Salerno et. al, 2022). Whilst minority stress theory is pertinent in this discussion, it does not consider intersectional identities held alongside non-heterosexuality, and because of this, experiences of stress will be multiple and complex (Hill-Collins, 2019), this correlated with experiences of all participants in this study.

An extension of Meyer's minority stress theory, by Pachankis and colleagues (2020) is intraminority stress, and examined discrimination and oppression arising from peers within the LGBTQ+ community. Pachankis and colleagues (2020) found these experiences served as a source of stress, with behaviours mirroring and reinforcing stigmatising hierarchies outside the community and which disproportionately affected single non-heterosexual men. Factors contributing to intra-minority stress from the LGBTQ+ community were based on

age, socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, body size and shape, presentation of masculinity / gender expression (Shepherd et. al., 2023) and HIV status (Conner, 2019).

Kurt uses a powerful example of how his HIV positive status results in discrimination and abuse from the LGBTQ+ community,

"...as soon as I like put in that I'm HIV [on dating sites], you know, I just got blocks...it's quite hurtful because it makes, makes you think...why am I even still alive then...I'm not even being accepted by anyone nowadays and, it, it can literally change your mental state so much, you know, for that type of rejection..." (p.22)

Heightened exposure to rejection by peers within the community can have immediate effects on non-heterosexual men's risk-taking attitudes and behaviours, demonstrating how stress originating within the LGBTQ+ community may influence sexual-risk taking with increased risk of HIV infection (Burton et. al., 2020; Shepherd et. al., 2023).

Young people without awareness of their non-heterosexual identity (and those who are) are subject to intra-minority stress by proxy, through media and communication outlets such as social media, print, film or television, with portrayals of White, able bodied, healthy, wealthy, masculine, muscular cis-gender men representing the LGBTQ+ community and erasing diversity of sexuality and gender identities which are policed by those within and outside the community (Morgan-Sowada & Gamboni, 2024).

Studies document effects of social oppression, prejudice and discrimination on negative mental health outcomes of non-heterosexual people (for example, Pachankis et. al., 2008; Parent & Bradstreet, 2017; Pachankis et. al., 2018; Thai, 2019). These include anxiety and depression (Feinstein et. al., 2012; Caratahis et. al., 2017) sexual compulsivity (Cohen et. al., 2018) self-harm, suicidal thoughts or attempts (Chakraborty et. al., 2018) alcohol and drug misuse or dependence (Spittlehouse et. al., 2019; Race, 2015).

Participants in this study discussed the impact oppressive experiences had on them. Zain "experienced anxiety, and depression...had suicidal ideation"; Kurt talked of "thinking about committing suicide" (p.10) and Adam felt "anxious" (p.10) because of the feelings that were emerging around sexual identity, contradicting the messages society portrayed around nonheterosexual people. Both Kurt and Zain discussed Section 28 legislation which erased and denied education and information to young people about non-heterosexual identities (Local Government Act, 1988).

Religion, culture, education, location and social role expectations create oppressive and limiting perspectives and beliefs, resulting in oppression and marginalisation (Russell & Richards, 2003; Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Fields, Boggart et. al., 2015) which could be felt profoundly for non-heterosexual people, leading to rejection of community, culture and/or religious doctrine.

Schwartz and Meyer (2010) identify the importance of considering within-group and between-group comparisons related to stress and mental health outcomes, considering the importance of intersectional attributes as factors in coping, managing and receiving support in times of stress - the lack of which results in poor mental health outcomes in comparison to those in the within-group who hold more socially privileged positions (e.g. gay Muslim men of colour compared to gay White secular men).

Acknowledgement of non-heterosexual people from the global south is vital, where sources cite additional challenges integrating a non-heterosexual identity into deeply religious

cultures and communities, including discrimination, rejection, oppression and attack as regular occurrences (e.g. Pandya et. al., 2013; Tomori et. al., 2016; Song et. al., 2021; Liow et. al, 2023). Yet many of these studies' samples come from experiences of the global south where dual legal systems did not exist (such as civil law *and* Sharia law; Liow et. al., 2023). Kong (cited in Stein & Kong, 2023) recalled growing up in Hong Kong in the 1980's as an environment of extreme homophobia, which was repressive and remained this way until 1990 when homosexuality was decriminalised in the region.

In contrast, Adams and Philips (2009) found in Native American communities where twospirit, lesbian and gay individuals' identities were accepted, integrated, usualised and celebrated, participants did not engage in behaviours to fit social expectations nor did they experience fear, isolation or rejection from the wider community and experienced more positive mental health outcomes.

Participants in the current study experienced general stressors from social situations and life events outside their control (e.g. death, illness, poverty), as well as multiple oppressive and discriminatory factors based on their non-heterosexual identity status from intersecting society, including religion, culture and education, and an even further layer of stress because of their minoritised identities from those within the LGBTQ+ community itself.

Threshold Concept

The educational notion of threshold concept is likened to a gateway leading to further knowledge and understanding about a subject or topic. Threshold concepts are transformative, irreversible and can be integrated into existing knowledge and understanding. They can also be troublesome, as language used to understand the new

information can be limiting or restrictive and the concept can sometimes be in conflict with existing knowledge about the world (Meyer & Land, 2003, 2005; Cousin, 2015).

Resulting from an awareness of difference, individuals internalised the sense of otherness based on the challenging interactions with the world. The individual therefore sought out verification and understanding whether what was being stated aligned with their internal experience and identity. Participants in this study sought out this validation, some "literally searched a dictionary" (p.4 - Kurt) to find out what discriminatory terms were such as 'faggot' (p.4 – Kurt) or a number used internet search engines to ask questions about themselves such as ""am I gay?", "what does it mean to be gay?" Like, "what does that mean?"" (p.2 - Adam). "I Googled; I searched like for those materials..." (p.5 -Donald) using the internet as a source to understand what these feelings of difference were and how they understood themselves through online literature "I do remember kind of reading online a lot about sexuality...it probably was more from searching on a search engine" (p.11 - Chris). The utilisation of "online quizzes...Um, that were like, "how to know if you're gay", um, and so I did a bunch of those" (p.2 - Adam) appear to be avenues helping in constructing and understanding how they felt aligned with the labels the world placed upon them. Due to the commercialisation of the home internet in the 1990's Zain did not have the luxury of using the internet when he was trying to understand his difference as a youth, yet the question still occurred "am I homosexual?" (p.5 - Zain) in his thoughts.

These factors point to a drive for answers and understating about the feelings which occurred within the individual. However, by searching online or through private reflections the underlying emotion of this period appeared to be isolation and aloneness. This is painfully recounted by Zain as he stated, "...even though I knew I had these feelings, it's

about suppressing them, and not having anyone to talk to about it, and even if you did, it would have just, I think it would've just kind of ended me to be honest" (p.23 - Zain), and Chris commented "I struggled with it...I did struggle with it." (p.4 - Chris).

These correlate with high levels of psychological distress and suicidality amongst LGBTQ+ teenagers before and during coming out, where aloneness is a predominant factor for poor mental health outcomes. The lack of supportive adults, role models and mentors, exacerbate feelings of isolation, rejection fears and social difference leading to internalised homophobia and a resistance to comprehend integrating a non-heterosexual identity (Goldfried et. al., 2008; Feinstein et. al., 2012; Cohen et. al., 2016; Carastathis et. al., 2017; Michaelsen, 2017).

When there *are* supportive others the move across the threshold concept appears to be less isolating and traumatic. James talked about discussing his sexual identity with his mother with a dialogue that was accepting and loving. He remembered that,

"...she said, okay then maybe it's not with this girl. And from that moment, I went I don't even think it's meant to be with girls and she went...Okay. Then it's not meant to be with girls. And so from that moment I was like, right, there wasn't no big deal was made out of it." (p.13)

Traversing the threshold concept was made easier and reduced troublesome aspects that came with new knowledge (Meyer & Land, 2003, 2005). Multiple studies show significant reduction in psychological distress when non-heterosexuality is usualised by family, community and others and increases the ability to integrate the non-heterosexual identity into an existing self-concept (e.g. Broad 2011; Reed & Miller, 2016). Studies from First Nations communities (Fenaughty & Harre, 2003; Adams & Phillips, 2009) identify integrating a non-heterosexual, gender non-conforming identity that is usualised by the support from community and family have an overwhelmingly positive effect on individuals' mental health and sense of identity and purpose. Counter to this, Grossman and Kerner (1998) found levels of satisfaction with social and familial support in Black and Latino/a non-heterosexual youth were insignificant at increasing levels of self-esteem and brought into consideration the ethno-religious/socio-cultural position of these communities in recognition and acceptance of non-heterosexual identities.

Curiosity led participants to discover how and why they were different, as the world policed them to understand themselves via online and offline avenues. Whilst crossing the threshold concept - in cases such as James' - meant beginning disclosing a non-heterosexual identity to others, many participants disclosed a non-heterosexual identity after the threshold concept had been crossed and internally recognised. At this point individuals understood their difference was about sexual identity, thus crossing the threshold concept; they continue constructing a non-heterosexual identity, aligning it with internal and external experiences before disclosing it to others.

This is analogous to Haimson's (2018) research. Although focusing on trans identified people, it considers social media as social transition machinery – and this is reflected in this research relating to non-heterosexual men. Much like threshold concepts, life transitions are "personal, contextual and alter people's identities" (p.63.3). Times of identity transition in a person's life do not happen simultaneously, nor do they occur in totality or in brief duration. Social media allows identity transitions to occur in multiple places online yet work together over extended periods of time. Users can present various identities simultaneously and one is no more authentic or important than the others – this is a luxury social media affords individuals not available to them offline.

Summary

The study showed participants experienced threefold discrimination through social stressors, minority stress and intra-community stress. Participants with multiply marginalised identities experienced greater levels of minority stress and intra-community stress based on their visible (race, ethnicity, gender expression, religion) and invisible minority statuses (sexual identity, religion, disability) both from within the LGBTQ+ community, wider society and specific communities of faith and/or culture. Despite research finding marginalised identities (race, ethnicity, religion) contributed adversity to sexual identity construction (e.g. Ganzevoort, der Laan & Olsman, 2011; Han, 2017; Thomsen, 2021) other studies showed integration of multiple minoritised identities created resilience (Huffman et. al., 2020), better mental health (Shilo, Yossef & Savaya, 2016), less rejection distress (Kennedy & Dalla, 2014) and greater community involvement (Reed & Miller, 2016)

With these compounding factors, it is clear to see negative mental health outcomes and an internalisation of homophobic narratives, anxiety, isolation and depression being created from negative interactions with the world, creating an internal awareness of difference without the robust education or understanding as to why.

Human curiosity is a natural process and the seeking of information at the edge of an individual's awareness pushes them over the threshold concept where new information is integrated in existing knowledge. This is troublesome, irreversible, transformative, language and terminology are extended and individuals find themselves in a space of liminality between certainty and uncertainty of their newly understood sexual feelings (Meyer & Land, 2003).

The experiences of Gaining Knowledge of Identity; The Performances and A Journey to Acceptance follow a complex and simultaneous interaction which creates empowerment of the Self and empowerment towards the wider community. These experiences of Empowerment push back negative mental health challenges and gave participants purpose and meaning in their lives – subsequently facilitating social change.

The following integration of findings presents a visual model following my process and understanding of findings in a visual way.

Chapter Six: Integration of Findings – The Model

The focus of this research was to explore the experiences of non-heterosexual men's sexual identity construction considering the effects of social media. The data presented findings across the sample which have been synthesised by illustrating a model which articulates the data and the process participants went through. These are presented in this chapter.

Emery and Anderman (2020) state studies utilising Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) are not to be framed in bodies of literature or existing theories and data should be drawn primarily from the experiences of participants. They conclude theories and interventions designed without the consideration of nuance from participant lived experience, particularly in marginalised groups, risk potentially failing in the understanding and development of theory.

Smith (1999), in his own IPA research, developed a theory of identity for motherhood in British women, proposing a process model derived from the data rather than theories grounded in existing literature. This model could be elaborated on and tested in further studies, making sure the model's construction came from across the participants and was not constructed by purposeful selection of individual subjective experiences.

I acknowledge that throughout the literature review, existing sexual identity models (Cass, 1979, 1984; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1990; D'Augelli, 1994; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015) were identified. Therefore I recognised and understood (and have subjectively experienced) an expectation of change across the lifespan in relation to sexual identity construction. Bracketing was utilised as far as possible but with awareness as to whether one can truly separate their experience from how data is

analysed (Husserl, 1999; Emery & Anderman, 2020) understanding the tension between detailing the lived experience of individuals and the generation of themes that others may have also experienced (Smith, 2004, 2010, 2017; Emery & Anderman, 2020).

It is acknowledged that some of the findings reflect stages or phases in existing sexual identity development literature however this was recognised *after* analysis of the data through comparison tables (see tables 8; 9; 10; 11; 12) and therefore I feel these findings reinforce existing literature rather than incorporate it, positioning and expanding existing theory though a contemporary lens.

In this chapter a synthesis of findings are presented to the reader following analysis and interpretation of the data, as a model of process outlining the journey for these participants. An awareness of being different to peers and other males in social contexts led to the realisation of a non-heterosexual identity through interactions with society. Subsequent experiences of Gaining Knowledge of Identity through Exploring and Understanding, The Performance of identity through Splitting and Synthesising, and moving from Ignoring-Resisting to Acceptance of Self and Acceptance from Others. These simultaneously interact creating feelings and behaviours of Empowerment of Self and for the wider community (Empowering Others), pushing back on negative mental health outcomes, discrimination and prejudice, in turn facilitating social change. All occurred within the effects of social stressors and growing up living within a patriarchal society whilst belonging to a minoritised group and the impact this had on negative mental health outcomes for participants.

Construction of the Model

The model presented here synthesises findings in a methodical and visual way, based on my visual learning style and interpretation (Figure 4). Whilst this may seem unusual or even

unorthodox to some from an IPA tradition, it enabled me to better understand the collective experiences of participants in their journey towards self-identification of nonheterosexuality.

It is pertinent to remember IPA is not seen as prescriptive (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009), the interpretation of data and how it is used once analysed holds flexibility, as seen in Smith's (1998) research into the development of identity from womanhood into motherhood. The model will be explored in detail starting with the social frameworks – social, minority and intra-community stressors considering these are the contexts participants live within. The model then presents the internal experiences and behaviours of participants and how these interact with the individual and the environment.

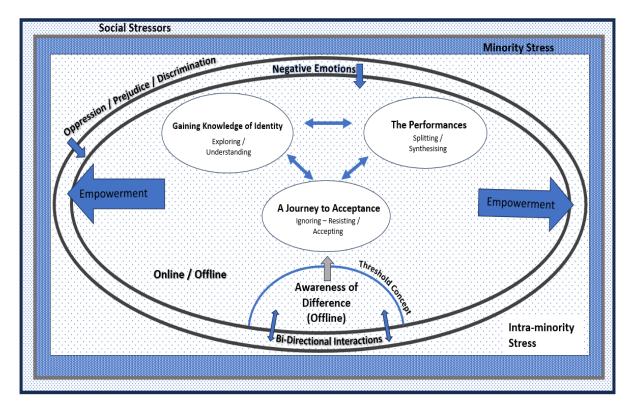


Figure 4 - Emerging Sexual Identity Model Constructed from The Research Data

Social, minority and intra-minority stress

Given human beings exist in corporeal form within social structures and hierarchies, it is fair to conclude that individuals – whether in a collectivist or individualist society – are at the mercy of death, illness, injury, violence, poverty, resource depravation, barriers and blocks to life goals in a multitude of forms (Aneshensel, 1992). The individual exists *within* hierarchal frameworks and social stressors and is therefore (identified as the oval in the model) placed *within* the frame of stressors which include organisations such as religion, culture, education, law and politics, and which generate stress and subsequent negative mental health outcomes for general populations.

Minority groups experience additional stress from general populations based on their minoritised identities (Meyer, 2003, 2015) however, as non-heterosexual individuals are seen as an invisible minority (Pillard, 1982) they face a level of protection from discrimination and attack based on appearance. Individuals (often youth) who are unaware of their non-heterosexual identity may display atypical gender behaviours to their heterosexual counterparts which reveal an assumed minority identity leaving them open to discrimination, oppression and prejudice (Meyer, 2003; Szymanski & Carr, 2008). The very present fear of attack, policing of atypical gender behaviours and rejection from wider society because of their assumed or known non-heterosexual identity leads to poor mental health outcomes in this group (e.g. Chakraborty et. al., 2011; Meyer, 1995, 2003) including internalised homophobia (Newcomb & Mustanski, 2010), maladaptive coping strategies, such as hiding identities, or risk-taking behaviours (Race, 2015). As well as navigating the non-heterosexual identity status some individuals in the community held other intersecting minority identities including disability, class, race, ethnicity or atypical gender presentation.

The third layer of stress exerted on non-heterosexual men was through Intra-minority stress (Pachankis et. al., 2020). The stress that occurs to members of the minority community which comes from within the minority community itself, based on the hierarchies and prejudices found in wider social structures and often based on multiply marginalised intersecting identities (Hill-Collins, 2019) including: body type, atypical gender presentation, socio-economic status, religion, ethnicity, race and disability (Scott, 2015; Conner, 2019; Harvey, Fish & Levatino, 2020). Therefore individuals experience oppression for multiply marginalised identities from both in-group and out-group members.

Participants in this study experienced levels of oppression, prejudice and discrimination based on minoritised identities negatively affecting their mental health. Figure 5 articulates the social stressors, minority and intra-minority stressors creating oppression and discrimination all pushing inward onto the individual resulting in negative emotions.

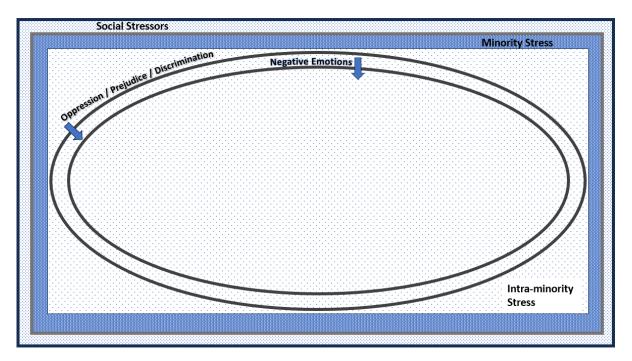


Figure 5 - Diagram showing the layered levels of stress on non-heterosexual people – Social Stress; Minority Stress and Intra-Minority Stress

The Experiences

As previously addressed, language used in development models around stages or phases in sexual identity have been rejected in this study. The use of the word 'stages' positions the identity as something which feels reductive and linear. Although it can be argued many stage models are not linear (e.g. Kübler-Ross, 1970; Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005 Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015), the assumption with stage models is that one must complete the tasks in one stage to move onto the next, are goal orientated, prescriptive and an individual has a correct way of being - a premise not aligned with the social constructionist epistemology of this thesis.

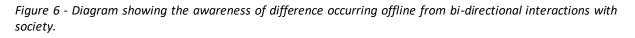
Although (it is assumed) unintentional, the use of the term 'phase' within the context of sexual identity construction, harkens to declarations of homophobic microaggressions involving rejection, denial and questioning someone disclosing a non-heterosexual identity with the sexuality a passing identity only to be rectified over time.

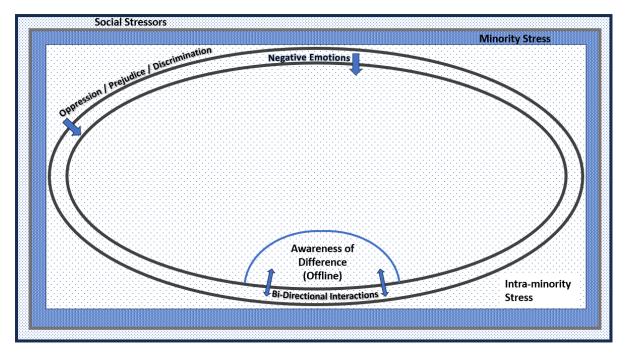
I present the following categories of sexual identity construction as 'Experiences' – not only is the word more flexible and encompassing, but allows for internal and external learning, behaviours, emotions, feelings and interactions with others and self.

Each experience exists along a continuum with individuals moving along the spectrum depending on circumstance, need and audience, occasionally being fully at one end or the other but never fixed and being free to move away from this point at any time for any reason.

Awareness of Difference and Challenging Interactions with the World

Humans are social beings that do not exist in isolation and engaging in the world is an important and inevitable social process (Stets & Burke, 2000; Hornsey & Hogg; 2000; Dembroff & Saint-Croix, 2019). Through social interactions minority individuals present with gender atypical behaviours and/or simultaneously feel an internalised experience of being different to their peer or community groups. However, they do not understand how or why they are different, due to limitations in knowledge and language. These differences are externally highlighted with individuals being labelled by the world. As corporeal beings, emotions are felt in reality offline rather than virtually, even if interactions occur online, so Awareness of Difference will always occur offline (Figure 6).





Li, Kung and Hines (2017) in a longitudinal study found children who displayed gender nonconforming behaviours were early indicators of non-heterosexual identities in later life. Children may exhibit feelings of difference through gender non-conforming behaviour but be unaware of how these behaviours made them feel different, how they are perceived as different, and the interactions and feedback they receive from society adds to, and/or brings into awareness, their feelings and behaviours of difference (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015).

Savin-Williams (2005) highlights feelings of difference stem from a non-heterosexual individual moving away from socially and culturally acceptable behaviours of a child identified as a specific sex, and subsequently socially constructed expectations of gender. For example gay boys reported being less aggressive, less stereotypically masculine and having a more overtly feminine side with interests in the arts (Carragher & Rivers, 2002; Savin-Williams, 2005) or presenting as more emotionally sensitive (Plummer, 1995).

Crossing a Threshold Concept

A threshold concept is transformative, irreversible and integrated into existing knowledge – it can be a troublesome time as information is hard to integrate and conflicts with current understandings of the world. Individuals find themselves in a liminal state accepting and rejecting new information (Meyer & Land, 2003, 2005; Cousin, 2006). Through these interactions with the world a drive for preliminary exploration and rudimentary understanding of their felt sense of difference occurs. Participants seek out validation, confirmation and understanding why the world is threatening to the individual and to make sense of their internal experiences. To cross the threshold concept is unidirectional and an unfolding of experiences occur to construct who the individual is and where they position themselves in both the LGBTQ+ community and the world, which is often yet to be made aware of their non-heterosexual identity status (Figure 7).

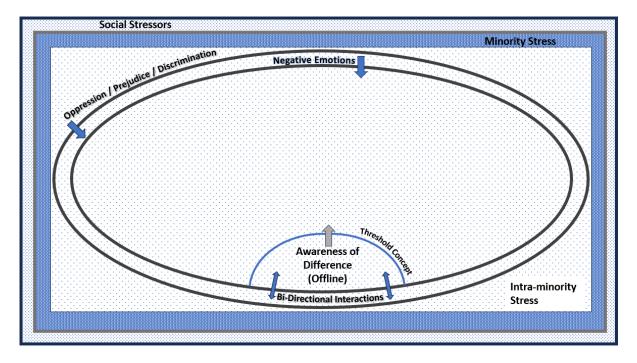


Figure 7 - Location of the threshold concept and the unidirectional movement across

Gaining Knowledge of Identity

To explore is the first step building one's knowledge of a topic where there is currently little understanding. When one understands what one has set out to explore this bridges the gap in knowledge and will have likely create further questions and reveal additional gaps in knowledge that must be explored to understand. This is a lifelong, situationally dependent process of gaining knowledge of identity.

It is the epistemological position of this study that individuals interact and engage with the world to formulate, navigate and understand their lives and the environments in which they live (Crotty, 1998; Silverman, 2014; Chan & Farmer, 2017). Much existing literature acknowledges non-heterosexual individuals engage with one another and their environments to understand themselves more fully (Humphreys, 1975; Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1988; Savin-Williams, 1990, Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015). The subordinate themes, Exploring and Understanding experiences occur in both offline and online spaces –

sometimes simultaneously – which can be for protection, privacy and connection to others with similar values or interests to gain understanding and knowledge.

Within the framework of this study, Gaining Knowledge of Identity includes exploring and understanding sexual attraction and behaviours, language and terminologies, social connections, dress and physical presentation of self, culture and media. This process is unique and highly nuanced with recognition that aspects of society/community are forever in flux and therefore constant (re-)exploration and (re-)understanding will be required over time linking to Sugarman's (1986) and Gergen's (1991) theories that identity is never complete. This also extends to the need to understand where one sits within the group and by extension in comparison to other social groups.

The social group is a collection of individuals who believe they share affective, behavioural, societal perspectives and experiences which align with others within the group. Belonging to a group also depends on others expressing the individual holds shared characteristics belonging to the group identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1978; Stets & Burke, 2000; Trepte, 2017).

The aim of group membership is to enhance self-esteem by developing a positive selfconcept towards social identity and association with specific groups can be valued as positive or negative (Tajfel & Turner, 1978). The group is part of a complex social structure of multiple groups which are in dynamic opposition to one another, each holding a balance of greater or lesser power, privilege and status (e.g. heterosexual / non-heterosexual; Black / White; men / women; Stets & Burke, 2000; Trepte, 2017).

Individuals are simultaneously members of multiple social groups and respond to one another depending on where they perceive the other person to be positioned socially (e.g. a

neurotypical gay man may perceive a neurodivergent gay man as not part of the in-group of 'neurotypical' because the subordinate category of neurodivergence is seen as inferior, even though they both identify with the in-group of 'gay' and 'men' – Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

The Performances

The Performances hold subordinate themes of Splitting and Synthesising in this research. Individuals split away from their assumed heterosexual identity / environment at carefully orchestrated times and move into spaces with people who align with their non-heterosexual identity to explore themselves, the new community and all it contains more fully. The purpose of splitting is for safety and protection as well as exploration. The research demonstrated a performance of identities of both non-heterosexual and heterosexual identities. Neither were more authentic but recognition that these changes occured over time, by environment, with experience and confidence in themselves and their newly found connections within the community.

Mead (1934) states individuals who experience a degree of anxiety around social or community interaction find certain activities impossible, "...two different selves result, and this is the condition under which there is a tendency to break up the personality" (p.143). Given participants touch on real and anticipatory feelings of anxiety, fearing rejection from family, friends and community following a disclosure of non-heterosexual identity (Donald, Zain, Kurt, Adam), it is not surprising a splitting of sexual identity occurs whilst remaining close to the family unit. Freedom and openness to synthesise sexual identity for many participants came when they were either over eighteen or away from the family home (e.g. Zain, Chris, Adam, Kurt). Social interactions create a need to present the most appropriate version of the Self we are going to be (Mead, 1934) and will be dependent on environment, circumstance and audience (Schlenker, 1986). Therefore splitting of identities occur in any situation for a particular benefit, and are analogous to a performance (Goffman, 1959) where behaviours acted out in isolation are done to an audience of Self (Schlenker, 1986).

When the individual has autonomy and self-assurance of sexual identity, acceptance and validation from significant others, as well as the safety and recognition of a nonheterosexual identity through culture and legislation, the individual synthesises the identity into a comprehensive self-concept.

The Performances subordinate themes of Splitting and Synthesising experiences for participants in this study are mirrored in parts of other models of sexual identity development previously discussed (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1988 etc.) however, these findings show splitting occurs more easily online in private spaces often within the same location as heterosexual others, usually in participants' homes. Online experiences, whilst exploratory and empowering were frequent, disinhibited and had potential to emerge offline.

Participants felt the need to split to further understand their newly constructing identities but were willing to synthesise more fully realised identities with those closest to them at a later time when they felt more self-assured and confident in their sexual identity.

Although not all people synthesise a non-heterosexual identity into their heterosexual environment (birth/guardian family unit, work, social groups etc.), many individuals begin to incorporate their non-heterosexual identity and values into existing dynamics – sometimes

unconsciously (seen with Kurt). The Performances occur offline and online – in some cases simultaneously (such as talking to LGBTQ+ friends through social media during a family event) – but disclosure is managed as to who is aware of the non-heterosexual identity and in how much detail.

A Journey to Acceptance

Some of the participants in this research, as confirmed with other studies (e.g. Coleman, 1982; Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1988 etc.) initially resist or ignore their non-heterosexual feelings. Whether this was an overt avoidance of anything or anyone associated with nonheterosexuality or expectations to focus away from relationships and romantic connections and towards socially acceptable distractions such as academic commitments (as seen with Adam).

People with non-heterosexual identities who maintained supportive and consistent individual or group connections held a greater sense of self-acceptance, self-expression, social action and solidarity with the community (Reed & Miller, 2016). Others who are more connected to their birth families and communities (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003) hold higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of anxiety (Grossman & Kerner, 1998) and lower levels of anger and depression (Grossman & Kerner, 1998; Legate et. al, 2011).

Although experience of accepting one's sexual identity is an internal process through experiences of Exploring and Understanding the environment and newly found culture, acceptance of Self was aligned and facilitated through overt and active acceptance from others towards the individual's non-heterosexual identity (Grossman & Kerner, 1998; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Reed & Miller, 2016; Li & Samp, 2019). Legate et. al (2011) found

individuals were more likely to accept themselves and disclose a non-heterosexual identity in environments that were autonomous and supportive than controlling or oppressive.

The movement along the continuum from Ignoring - Resisting towards a place of Acceptance of Self and experiencing Acceptance from Others, occurred over time with selfdisclosures and self-reflection cautiously interspersed. The interaction with the two other experience categories ('Gaining Knowledge of Identity' and 'The Performances') enabled individuals to feel accepted by others, be connected to others, feel (re-)connected to themselves, usualised their experiences and feelings whilst constructing a non-heterosexual identity and felt part of the community, of whichever demographic, gaining understanding of the world and helping synthesise their newly constructed identity into their lives.

Empowerment

Empowerment was a multi-faceted experience which encompassed the individuals' felt experience of power and the influence passed to others within the community and beyond to feel empowered in themselves whilst having permission to accept and express who they are both on- and offline.

Processes of individual psychological empowerment include engagement in a group or organisation; role modelling or leading the way as a functioning and integrated member within a group or organisation. This can incorporate the action of utilising social and political resources to highlight or defend an issue connected to social change and justice (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995).

Trethewey (1997) positions empowerment from a feminist perspective where resisting social expectations of behaviour are important in empowering the individual who then goes

on to empower the community. These empowering behaviours are not just engaged through resisting expectations but through validating and supportive responses from others within the community. It is therefore two-fold where community and individual have the ability to reformulate, refine and reinterpret everyday life and the conditions and behaviours occurring within it.

Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008) identified online interactions as a vehicle to express hidden and unexplored identities which empowered an individual's identity. These online interactions removed physical barriers that exist in the offline world such as stigmatising features, social anxieties and other blocks to engagement. Li and colleagues (2015) found active social media engagement attributed to psychological empowerment, however, the effect of social media was small due to the complex and varied contextual, social and individual factors – yet they stress not to overlook these small effects which can create substantial and dramatic social change.

Although empowerment contains psychological benefits and enhancements of increased self-esteem, control and self-worth it is not to be confused or compared to these qualities.

The feeling of empowerment is the antithesis of oppression and discrimination. This experience comes as a consequence of interactions between the other experience categories and from experience categories in isolation. For example, "Gaining Knowledge of Identity" means to explore and understand a topic which inevitably creates personal growth and development which can feel empowering. "A Journey to Acceptance" can create feelings of Acceptance of Self or feeling Acceptance from Others which is empowering and boosts self-worth and value as the individual moves away from Ignoring - Resisting their internal experience to an acceptance of it. As presented in findings, Empowerment

facilitates drive for social change countering negative mental health in individuals and pushing back oppression and discrimination. Further examples of simultaneous interactions between experiences and subsequent empowerment follow.

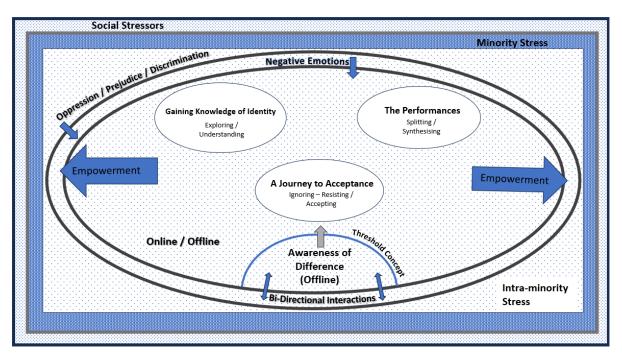


Figure 8. Position of the experiences within the model

Interaction of Experiences

The presented model highlight experiences which have a primary function (such as "Gaining Knowledge of Identity" through exploring and understanding) but includes secondary or tertiary experiences. The complexity of human nature, social interaction and identity construction means that – unlike existing models with phases or stages – an individual cannot be compartmentalised or reduced to a singular quality, whether linear or otherwise. Denman (2004) views sexuality as a biopsychosocial process and findings presented here hold biological, psychological and social aspects of sexual identity construction. It is in these interactions we see the uses of social media incorporated into the lives of participants, with each experience helping further construct their own – and subsequently others – knowledge

about what it means to be non-heterosexual. If an individual combines these experiences e.g. Gaining Knowledge of Identity by exploring a subculture through social interaction leading to connections (friendships, sexual, romantic) this is moving the person simultaneously to acceptance (of Self and/or Acceptance from Others) empowering them and strengthening their identity, self-worth and value (Figure 9).

If we take Adam's experience of using social media as a source of connection and place to explore his awareness of sexual identity difference. He said,

"...that was a place where I felt really safe to explore sexuality and like queerness in a way that felt more open than...my offline life. Um, so Tumblr was big for that because I was relatively anonymous on there..." (p.3)

The primary goal of this behaviour is exploration of his feelings of sexual identity difference through a safe platform. However – as he later mentioned,

"...in reality I was just on like Tumblr [laughs], you know, in my room, I wasn't studying all the time..." (p.10)

We therefore assume Tumblr was used anonymously, alone in his room, as a solitary activity. This highlights another behaviour where splitting of identities occurs as he performs the role, and/or learns the roles, of a non-heterosexual person through social media, thereby bridging the gap in his knowledge about what it meant to perform the role of a non-heterosexual person correctly. One may argue this further creates self-acceptance of, and understanding towards, his sexual identity and the combination of these experiences brought about feelings of empowerment and assurance his non-heterosexual identity was valid. Zain's primary experience exploring how awareness of non-heterosexual identity could be synthesised with his faith and culture occurred when he read the Quran, and Bible, to understand where homosexuality aligned with holy texts. It is assumed that – even if he was not reading the holy texts alone – the purpose of Zain reading the scriptures (finding how to integrate sexuality and faith) would be withheld from heterosexual others for fear of abuse or attack and thus must be done splitting his identities.

The understanding which occurred through exploration simultaneously brought acceptance of his sexual identity which he initially struggles with and "that instilled confidence and...gave me reassurances" (p.12) creating empowerment, positive mental health outcomes and ultimately was the catalyst for Zain to create social change through setting up his social media group for other South Asian LGBTQ+ people.

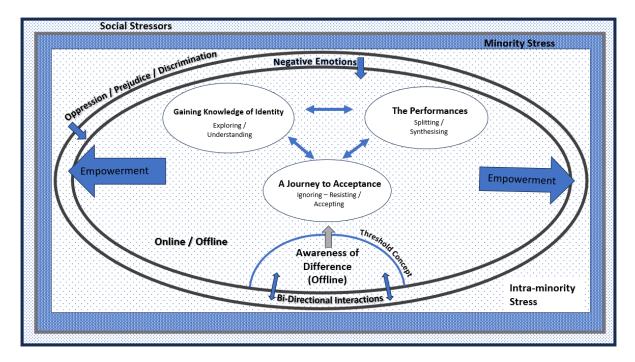


Figure 9 - Model Showing the interaction of experiences in the model.

Consider James' experience of using social media to create a persona which was analogous to a drag performance in both offline and online worlds. He explored his non-heterosexual identity, who he was and where he fit, through online engagement and created a character where lines became so blurred they merged and he "started basically displaying this character" (p.16) in his offline life with positive response. He had incorporated Gaining Knowledge of Identity and The Performances, subsequently leading to Acceptance from Others and Acceptance of Self, creating Empowerment and strength; the character which he stated is still used "to this day" (p.17).

Additionally, Donald and Kurt felt empowered through legislative changes which afforded them civil protections based on their sexual identities. Whilst this is not something they actively engaged with, it nevertheless expresses social acceptance at governmental level and may contribute to feelings of validation and acceptance of sexual identity. The hierarchies surrounding them have begun to soften and flex.

The distance Zain, Adam and Chris experienced between themselves and their families allowed them to incorporate Splitting and Synthesising, Exploring and Understanding and Ignoring-Resisting to an Acceptance of Self and Acceptance from Others which brought Empowerment for themselves and others through LGBTQ+ societies, charities and professional work.

Zain and James' expression of their complex interaction of intersectional identities,

"...taking two pieces of clay, different colours, but rolled them up into a ball to the point where the colours have blended together..." (p.5 - James)

"...it's quite difficult to separate the three...strands of my identity..." (p.16 - Zain) Show the experiences presented here mirror intersectionality and cannot be separated into isolated categories and must therefore be seen as polarities which should be honoured and

embraced in their diversity. To split one's identity must mean there is a space for synthesis. To explore identity means curiosity which inevitably leads to understanding of Self at some level. To ignore-reject an aspect of identity must mean there is an aspect of identity in awareness to ignore and these drive a liminal state forward for further clarity. It is therefore through time, social engagement both on- and offline and curiosity which results in varying degrees of empowerment, strength and subsequent positive outcomes no matter how fleeting or seemingly insignificant.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion and Future Research

This research set out to explore sexual identity construction for non-heterosexual men considering the influence of social media; the research has achieved this aim. Through synthesising findings the study presented a visual model mapping the journey of sexual identity construction for non-heterosexual men considering both on- and offline interactions. This study is a unique contribution to knowledge in the field of sexual identity construction and social media. Through the application of a subjective Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis methodology, an original model of sexual identity construction has been initially created. This study is the first of its kind in presenting a visual representation of sexual identity construction including theories of social, minority and intra-minority stress and the first to utilise the experiences of sexual identity construction using IPA with such a diverse sample.

The study showed social media does not *create* non-heterosexual identities but acted as a bridge across which individuals travel in liminality by exploring and understanding their identities. They learnt to accept themselves as non-heterosexual people, bringing the chance to seek out and connect to similar others, usualising and integrating their non-heterosexual identities into a healthy self-concept and pre-existing relationships. The research revealed social media was a tool, utilised amongst others including music, search engines, pornography, faith, community, family and friends to support individuals in constructing a valid non-heterosexual identity. This showed the importance of environment in exploring and understanding Self and all its identities. Concerningly, illegal activity, such as shoplifting and illegal downloads, were utilised to get needs met due to the lack of

candour about initial internal experiences with family / friends / peers and a lack of readily available, accurate education and information on non-heterosexual identities.

This research builds on existing evidence that non-heterosexual identities are potentially present from birth (Richardson, 1984; Morandini, Blaszczynski et. al., 2015), nonheterosexuality is not a choice (Rahman & Wilson, 2003) yet there are clear aspects of a non-essentialist social position to the construction of non-heterosexual identities (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Warner & Shields, 2013) around the nuance in which sexual identity is acknowledged, realised and explored by individuals. This raises the importance of accurate, robust and open LGBTQ+ education for informing non-heterosexual youth to usualise feelings of difference and mitigate risky behaviours and poor mental health outcomes. The utilisation of pornography as a learning resource for non-heterosexual youth is concerning given accessibility by minors and unhealthy associations with body image, self-comparisons and sexual behaviours.

The research highlighted the importance support and community have in the journey to self-acceptance and how, given optimum conditions, regardless of culture, faith, disability, ethnicity or background, a non-heterosexual identity can be synthesised into the self-concept and the lives of others, all contributing to positive mental health outcomes. Multiple marginalised identities are constructed at different rates and in different ways and are not a homogenous group which emerge together. The intersection of identities are places of both vulnerability and resources of support, to empower and benefit the holistic self. These are vital.

The factor of Luck in participants' experiences cannot be ignored. Luck is difficult to quantify or define yet it seemed to pervade all participants' experiences. Whilst there was a

within-group comparison occurring where participants knew some LGBTQ+ members had experiences more traumatic and rejecting than their own, it nevertheless felt their support and unconditional love was based on nothing more than chance from family values, location, faith and community, into which the non-heterosexual person was born.

Whilst this research sample is small and like with all IPA studies is not generalisable, it contributes to existing qualitative research in this area, reinforcing and adding to preexisting evidence. The study adds to the number of studies in this field, reinforces existing qualitative evidence and the importance of qualitative studies in research. This study shows that whilst the process of non-heterosexual identity construction has not changed in over three decades, *how* individuals are constructing their identities has changed – utilising digital platforms allowing for greater connection and understanding of Self.

Limitations

Although the research presented in this study reveals an innovative, contemporary and dynamic perspective on how sexual identities are constructed for non-heterosexual men considering the effects of social media, it is not without its limitations.

Whilst every effort was made to recruit a diverse sample of sexual identities, all participants identified as gay cis-gender males and a sample including pansexual, bisexual and/or sexually fluid participants would have given the study greater depth of experience. Many of the participants were educated to degree or post-graduate level and all were born and raised in Western society. The research does not contain participants who are transmen/men with a trans history or men from further diverse backgrounds (e.g. nationality). This would give a more intersectional perspective on experience, however the challenge with viewing research of this kind with an intersectional lens are the limitations to how

intersectionality can be interpreted due to the uniqueness of individual experience. Participants in the study were all open about their non-heterosexual identity and this does not represent those individuals who have never disclosed their non-heterosexual identity.

The study does not focus on experiences of gay/lesbian women and the sample is small and therefore not sufficient to generalise findings. The study was retrospective meaning recall of events and situations are both subjective and have the potential to hold biases and inaccuracies.

Another limitation is the study does not look at group identity development or collectivist cultures and although participants have intersectional identities, the study is situated within a Western socio-cultural context. The nuanced class, cultural and social structures of countries in the global south may reveal very different experiences and outcomes however, the global south is not a homogenous group and therefore experiences will differ by location.

The research was conducted by an individual researcher and therefore having other members of a research team would allow for greater robustness of analysis and reduce the biases of one individual.

Strengths

Whilst the research has its limitations there are a number of strengths. The research reinforces findings from existing grand theories of sexual identity development (e.g. Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1988; D'Augelli, 1994; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015), and the extends pre-existing theories into the consideration of both online and offline interactions. The integration of other theories including social stress, minority stress

and intra-minority stress help to frame and understand the source of negative emotional reactions of this minority group, whereas previous findings either fail or are limited in their expression of external stressors affecting this population. The sample size, whilst small, is diverse in and of itself and contributes to the growing studies considering multiply marginalised populations.

Findings have been presented as a model to detail the journey of individuals which previous models have not done and this could be utilised when working with non-heterosexual men to understand where they are in their sexual identity journeys, their emotions and behaviours aligned with each experience category and how they can reach or recognise moments of empowerment. The model, whilst not verified, could be utilised with non-heterosexual men from various cultures and backgrounds as the experiences could be seen as universal. The model could potentially be extended or adapted to be considered for other minority groups such as gender, race, disability for example and utilised in a psychotherapeutic context.

Future Research

Following the findings presented in this study it feels post-doctoral research is important to further this work by presenting the constructed model to non-heterosexual men through focus groups or academics in the field of sexual identity.

Gaining feedback and others' experiences in this way will allow for refinement of the model and future research can help understanding the model's application in helping nonheterosexual men, for those who support this group (counsellors, therapists, students, health care professionals, social workers etc.), to usualise and understand the process in constructing a non-heterosexual identity. It could be helpful to study the effects of parental response – reaction to sexual identity construction for non-heterosexual people given the weight of importance placed on acceptance from others and of Self in a healthy construction of sexual identity. Future research could also focus on the meaning and interpretation of luck within the non-heterosexual population and non-heterosexual men's experiences of social stressors. Given the dearth of literature in quantitative studies it would be beneficial to consider how more quantitative approaches might fill a gap in knowledge. Finally, a number of the 'coming out' disclosures of the non-heterosexual identity in this study occurred at times of stress or conflict which would be of interest to research further.

Conclusion

The study showed social media does not *create* non-heterosexual identities but acted as a bridge across which individuals travel in liminality, learning to accept themselves as non-heterosexual people, bringing the chance to seek-out and connect to similar others, usualising and integrating their non-heterosexual identities into a healthy self-concept and pre-existing relationships. It is now important to disseminate this research through journal publications and conferences to gain peer reviewed feedback.

The research revealed social media was a tool, utilised amongst others (including music, search engines, pornography, faith, community, family, friends) to support individuals in constructing a valid non-heterosexual identity.

The study raises the need for of accurate, robust and open LGBTQ+ education policy in informing non-heterosexual youth in usualising feelings of difference and reducing poor mental health outcomes at all levels but particularly in primary education. The utilisation of pornography as a learning resource for non-heterosexual youth was a concern given the

accessibility by minors and unhealthy associations with body image, self-comparisons and sexual behaviours.

The research highlights the importance support and community have in the journey to selfacceptance and how, given optimum conditions regardless of faith, disability or ethnicity, a non-heterosexual identity can be synthesised into both the self-concept and lives of others, contributing to positive mental health outcomes.

Multiple marginalised identities are constructed at different rates and in different ways and are not a homogenous group which emerge simultaneously. The intersection of identities are places of vulnerability and resources of support are required, which empower and benefit the holistic self.

Findings have been presented as a model to detail the journey of individuals, which previous models have not. This could be utilised when working psychotherapeutically with nonheterosexual men to understand their sexual identity journey, their emotions and behaviours. The model could be disseminated through conferences and CPD events with individuals from the helping professions (counsellors, psychotherapists, students, social workers etc.) being able to utilise the model for supporting this clients from this group.

The results of this research will fill an important gap in existing knowledge and in the approach to working with, and understanding, this marginalised group. As a therapist I hope this work can go some way in supporting the non-heterosexual journey to self-acceptance.

References

Sexual Offences Act, United Kingdom Government, 60 Cong. Rec. (1967).

Local Government Act: Prohibition on promoting homosexuality by teaching or by publishing material, United Kingdom Government, 4 Cong. Rec. § 28 (1988).

Sexual Offences (Amendment) Act, United Kingdom Government § UK Public General Acts (2000).

Equality Act, United Kingdom Government § UK Public General Acts (2010).

- Abreu, R. L., Black, W. W., Mosley, D. V., & Fedewa, A. L. (2016, 2016/10). LGBTQ Youth Bullying Experiences in Schools: The Role of School Counselors Within a System of Oppression. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, *11*(3-4), 325-342. https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2016.1214092
- Abreu, R. L., Lefevor, G. T., Gonzalez, K. A., Barrita, A. M., & Watson, R. J. (2022, 2022/05/09).
 Bullying, depression, and parental acceptance in a sample of Latinx sexual and gender minority youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 20*(3), 585-602.
 https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2022.2071791
- Abu-Ras, W., & Abu-Bader, S. H. (2008, 2008/12/22). The Impact of the September 11, 2001, Attacks on the Well-Being of Arab Americans in New York City. *Journal of Muslim Mental Health*, *3*(2), 217-239. https://doi.org/10.1080/15564900802487634
- Adams, H. L., & Phillips, L. (2009, 2009/09/30). Ethnic Related Variations from the Cass Model of Homosexual Identity Formation: The Experiences of Two-Spirit, Lesbian and Gay Native Americans. *Journal of Homosexuality, 56*(7), 959-976. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918360903187895
- Adams, R., & Adams, R. (1996). Self-Empowerment. Social Work and Empowerment, 43-53.
- Adler, R. H. (2022). Trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Human Lactation, 38*(4), 598-602.
- Ahmed, S. K. (2024). The pillars of trustworthiness in qualitative research. *Journal of Medicine, Surgery, and Public Health, 2,* 100051.
- Ainsworth, M. D. S., Blehar, M. C., Waters, E., & Wall, S. N. (2015). *Patterns of Attachment*. Psychology Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203758045
- Albury, K., & Byron, P. (2016, 2016/10). Safe on My Phone? Same-Sex Attracted Young People's Negotiations of Intimacy, Visibility, and Risk on Digital Hook-Up Apps. Social Media + Society, 2(4). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116672887
- Amato, P. R. (2000, 2000/11). The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 62*(4), 1269-1287. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.01269.x
- Anderson, J. R., Holland, E., Koc, Y., & Haslam, N. (2018, 2018/01/16). iObjectify: Self- and otherobjectification on Grindr, a geosocial networking application designed for men who have sex

with men. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 48*(5), 600-613. https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2350

- Aneshensel, C. (1992, 1992/01/01). Social Stress: Theory and Research. Annual Review of Sociology, 18(1), 15-38. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.18.1.15
- Annes, A., & Redlin, M. (2012, 2012/01). Coming out and coming back: Rural gay migration and the city. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 28(1), 56-68. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2011.08.005
- Anu, K. K.-R. A. (2012). Lifting the Spiritual Self-Esteem of the Lgbt Community: A Critique of Fabricated, Discriminatory, Judgmental, and Sexist World Religions. iUniverse.
- Arístegui, I., Radusky, P. D., Zalazar, V., Lucas, M., & Sued, O. (2017, 2017/10/26). Resources to cope with stigma related to HIV status, gender identity, and sexual orientation in gay men and transgender women. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 23(2), 320-331. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105317736782
- Bagley, C., & Tremblay, P. (1997, 1997/01). Suicidal Behaviors in Homosexual and Bisexual Males. *Crisis*, 18(1), 24-34. https://doi.org/10.1027/0227-5910.18.1.24
- Bailey, J. M. (2021). It is time to stress test the minority stress model. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 50(3), 739-740.
- Banner, S. (1998). When Christianity Was Part of the Common Law. *Law and History Review, 16*(1), 27-62. https://doi.org/10.2307/744320
- Barbour, R. S., & Barbour, M. (2003, 2003/05). Evaluating and synthesizing qualitative research: the need to develop a distinctive approach. *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice*, *9*(2), 179-186. https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2753.2003.00371.x
- Barnard, I. (1999, 1999/08). Queer race. *Social Semiotics*, *9*(2), 199-212. https://doi.org/10.1080/10350339909360432
- Barnes, D. M., & Meyer, I. H. (2012). Religious affiliation, internalized homophobia, and mental health in lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. *The American journal of orthopsychiatry*, *82*(4), 505-515. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.2012.01185.x
- Barwick, M. (2013). LGBT People, the Religions & Human Rights in Europe. *Human Rights Without Frontiers*.
- Bates, A., Hobman, T., & Bell, B. T. (2019, 2019/11/03). "Let Me Do What I Please With It . . . Don't Decide My Identity For Me": LGBTQ+ Youth Experiences of Social Media in Narrative Identity Development. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 35*(1), 51-83. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558419884700
- Bauer, H., & Schulze, G. G. (2022, 2022/12). Terror and social cohesion. *Economics Letters, 221*, 110922. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econlet.2022.110922
- BBC. (2022). Prime Minister Boris Johnson says transgender women should not compete in women's sport. BBC Sport Online. Retrieved 15th May from https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/61012030

- Behrens, P., & Becker, S. (2023). *Justice After Stonewall*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003286295
- Beier, M. A. (2017). The Shadow of Technology. In *Boundaries of Self and Reality Online* (pp. 141-157). Elsevier. https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-804157-4.00008-6
- Belous, C. K., Wampler, R. S., & Warmels-Herring, T. (2015, 2015/01/02). Gay Male Adaptation in the Coming-Out Process. *Journal of Gay & Compression Mental Health*, 19(1), 55-71. https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2014.921265
- Ben-Ari, A. (1995, 1995/12/17). The Discovery that an Offspring Is Gay: Parents', Gay Men's, and Lesbians' Perspectives. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 30(1), 89-112. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v30n01_05
- Bhugra, D. (1997). Coming out by South Asian gay men in the United Kingdom. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 26*, 547-557.
- Bialecki, J., Haynes, N., & Robbins, J. (2008, 2008/11). The Anthropology of Christianity. *Religion Compass, 2*(6), 1139-1158. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2008.00116.x
- Biank, N. M., & Werner-Lin, A. (2011, 2011/11). Growing up with Grief: Revisiting the Death of a Parent over the Life Course. *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying, 63*(3), 271-290. https://doi.org/10.2190/om.63.3.e
- Bilodeau, B. L., & Renn, K. A. (2005, 2005/09). Analysis of LGBT identity development models and implications for practice. *New Directions for Student Services, 2005*(111), 25-39. https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.171
- Blackwell, C., Birnholtz, J., & Abbott, C. (2014, 2014/02/07). Seeing and being seen: Co-situation and impression formation using Grindr, a location-aware gay dating app. New Media & amp; Society, 17(7), 1117-1136. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814521595
- Blumenfeld, W. J., & Cooper, R. (2010). LGBT and allied youth responses to cyberbullying: Policy implications. *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, *3*(1), 112.
- Bolter, J. D. (1997, 1997/03). Sherry Turkle, Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet (London: Weidenfeld & amp; Nicholson, 1996), 347pp. ISBN 0 297 81514 8. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies, 3*(1), 131-133. https://doi.org/10.1177/135485659700300112
- Bonner-Thompson, C. (2017, 2017/07/27). 'The meat market': production and regulation of masculinities on the Grindr grid in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK. *Gender, Place & amp; Culture,* 24(11), 1611-1625. https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369x.2017.1356270
- Bossio, D., & Sacco, V. (2016, 2016/05/03). From "Selfies" to Breaking Tweets. *Journalism Practice*, *11*(5), 527-543. https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2016.1175314
- Botha, M., & Frost, D. M. (2018, 2018/10/12). Extending the Minority Stress Model to Understand Mental Health Problems Experienced by the Autistic Population. *Society and Mental Health,* 10(1), 20-34. https://doi.org/10.1177/2156869318804297

- Bőthe, B., Vaillancourt-Morel, M.-P., Bergeron, S., & Demetrovics, Z. (2019, 2019/10/24).
 Problematic and Non-Problematic Pornography Use Among LGBTQ Adolescents: a Systematic Literature Review. *Current Addiction Reports, 6*(4), 478-494. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40429-019-00289-5
- Bowlby, J. (1969). Attachment and Loss: Attachment; John Bowlby. Basic books.
- Bowleg, L. (2008, 2008/03/21). When Black + Lesbian + Woman ≠ Black Lesbian Woman: The Methodological Challenges of Qualitative and Quantitative Intersectionality Research. Sex Roles, 59(5-6), 312-325. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-008-9400-z
- Boyd, A., & Wei, J. (2023, 2023/01/16). Stretched kinship: Queer female university students negotiating family and identity. *Sexualities*, *27*(8), 1493-1509. https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607231152598

boyd, d. (2010). Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications. In Z. Papacharissi (Ed.), *Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites* (pp. 39 - 58). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203876527-8

- Brandt, S. A., & Carmichael, C. L. (2020, 2020/10). Does online support matter? The relationship between online identity-related support, mattering, and well-being in sexual minority men. *Computers in Human Behavior, 111*, 106429. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106429
- Brettle, A., & Gambling, T. (2003, 2003/08). Needle in a haystack? Effective literature searching for research. *Radiography*, *9*(3), 229-236. https://doi.org/10.1016/s1078-8174(03)00064-6
- Bridge, L., Langford, K., McMullen, K., Rai, L., Smith, P., & Rimes, K. A. (2024). Acceptability, feasibility and preliminary efficacy of a compassion-based cognitive behavioural intervention for low self-esteem in sexual minority young adults. *Clinical Psychology & Psychotherapy*, *31*(1), e2911.
- Broad, K. L. (2011, 2011/08). Coming out for Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays: From support group grieving to love advocacy. *Sexualities*, 14(4), 399-415. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460711406792
- Brown, D., & Rich, E. (2002). Gender positioning as pedagogical practice in teaching physical education. In *Gender and physical education* (pp. 92-112). Routledge.
- Bryan, A. (2019, 2019/11/14). A Sociological Critique of Youth Strategies and Educational Policies that Address LGBTQ Youth Issues. *International Journal of Bullying Prevention*, 1(4), 255-268. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42380-019-00047-1

Buchanan, I. (2015). Assemblage theory and its discontents. *Deleuze studies, 9*(3), 382-392.

- Büchi, M. (2021, 2021/11/14). Digital well-being theory and research. *New Media & Society, 26*(1), 172-189. https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211056851
- Burns, P. A., Klukas, E., Sims-Gomillia, C., Omondi, A., Bender, M., & Poteat, T. (2022, 2022/10/03).
 As Much As I Can Utilizing Immersive Theatre to Reduce HIV-Related Stigma and
 Discrimination Toward Black Sexual Minority Men. *Community Health Equity Research* & amp; Policy, 44(2), 151-163. https://doi.org/10.1177/0272684x221115920

- Burton, C. L., Clark, K. A., & Pachankis, J. E. (2020). Risk From Within: Intraminority Gay Community Stress and Sexual Risk-Taking Among Sexual Minority Men. *Annals of behavioral medicine : a publication of the Society of Behavioral Medicine, 54*(9), 703-712. https://doi.org/10.1093/abm/kaaa014
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Vol. 3). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.7202/1065107ar
- Byron, P., Albury, K., & Pym, T. (2020, 2020/12/24). Hooking up with friends: LGBTQ+ young people, dating apps, friendship and safety. *Media, Culture & Society, 43*(3), 497-514. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720972312
- Cain, P. A. (1993, 1993/10). Litigating for Lesbian and Gay Rights: A Legal History. *Virginia Law Review, 79*(7), 1551. https://doi.org/10.2307/1073382
- Calabrese, S. K., Earnshaw, V. A., Magnus, M., Hansen, N. B., Krakower, D. S., Underhill, K., Mayer, K. H., Kershaw, T. S., Betancourt, J. R., & Dovidio, J. F. (2018). Sexual Stereotypes Ascribed to Black Men Who Have Sex with Men: An Intersectional Analysis. *Archives of sexual behavior*, *47*(1), 143-156. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-016-0911-3
- Callander, D., Holt, M., & Newman, C. E. (2015, 2015/04/16). 'Not everyone's gonna like me': Accounting for race and racism in sex and dating web services for gay and bisexual men. *Ethnicities*, 16(1), 3-21. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796815581428
- Calzo, J. P., Antonucci, T. C., Mays, V. M., & Cochran, S. D. (2011). Retrospective recall of sexual orientation identity development among gay, lesbian, and bisexual adults. *Developmental Psychology*, *47*(6), 1658-1673. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025508
- Camposano, G. A. A., Rodrigues, D. L., & Moleiro, C. (2023, 2023/10/31). Gay vs. straight? Implications of intergroup perceptions on minority stress and the mental health of lesbian and gay people. *Current Psychology*, 43(14), 12412-12420. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-05315-4
- Carastathis, A. (2023). Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory. Patricia Hill Collins. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2019 (ISBN 9781478005421). *Hypatia, 38*(4). https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2023.27
- Carastathis, G. S., Cohen, L., Kaczmarek, E., & Chang, P. (2016, 2016/04/19). Rejected by Family for Being Gay or Lesbian: Portrayals, Perceptions, and Resilience. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 64(3), 289-320. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1179035
- Carragher, D. J., & Rivers, I. (2002, 2002/07/01). Trying to Hide: A Cross-National Study of Growing Up for Non-Identified Gay and Bisexual Male Youth. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 7(3), 457-474. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104502007003040
- Cascalheira, C. J., & Smith, B. A. (2019, 2019/09/11). Hierarchy of Desire: Partner Preferences and Social Identities of Men Who Have Sex with Men on Geosocial Networks. *Sexuality & amp; Culture, 24*(3), 630-648. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09653-z

- Cass, V. C. (1979, 1979/04/24). Homosexual Identity Formation. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 4(3), 219-235. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v04n03_01
- Cass, V. C. (1984, 1984/05). Homosexual identity formation: Testing a theoretical model. *The Journal* of Sex Research, 20(2), 143-167. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224498409551214
- Chakraborty, A., McManus, S., Brugha, T. S., Bebbington, P., & King, M. (2011, 2011/02). Mental health of the non-heterosexual population of England. *British Journal of Psychiatry, 198*(2), 143-148. https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.110.082271
- Chan, C. D., & Farmer, L. B. (2017, 2017/10/02). Making the Case for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis with LGBTGEQ+ Persons and Communities. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 11(4), 285-300. https://doi.org/10.1080/15538605.2017.1380558
- Chan, L. S. (2016, 2016/06/07). The Role of Gay Identity Confusion and Outness in Sex-Seeking on Mobile Dating Apps Among Men Who Have Sex With Men: A Conditional Process Analysis. *Journal of Homosexuality, 64*(5), 622-637. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1196990
- Chen, J. M., Joel, S., & Castro Lingl, D. (2023, 2023/10). Antecedents and consequences of LGBT individuals' perceptions of straight allyship. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *125*(4), 827-851. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspi0000422
- Chester, M. R., Sinnard, M. T., Rochlen, A. B., Nadeau, M. M., Balsan, M. J., & Provence, M. M. (2016, 2016/10). Gay men's experiences coming out online: A qualitative study. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services, 28*(4), 317-335. https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2016.1221785
- Choi, K.-H., Han, C.-s., Paul, J., & Ayala, G. (2011). Strategies for managing racism and homophobia among U.S. ethnic and racial minority men who have sex with men. *AIDS education and prevention : official publication of the International Society for AIDS Education, 23*(2), 145-158. https://doi.org/10.1521/aeap.2011.23.2.145
- Claridge, T. (2018). Functions of social capital–bonding, bridging, linking. *Social capital research*, 20(1), 1-7.
- Cleghorn, E. (2021). Unwell Women: Misdiagnosis and Myth in a Man-Made World. Weidenfield & Nicolson. http://dx.doi.org/10.3399/bjgp21x716969
- Coffman, E. J. (2006, 2006/10/10). Thinking about luck. *Synthese*, *158*(3), 385-398. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-006-9046-8
- Cohen, J. M., Feinstein, B. A., Rodriguez-Seijas, C., Taylor, C. B., & Newman, M. G. (2016). Rejection Sensitivity as a Transdiagnostic Risk Factor for Internalizing Psychopathology Among Gay and Bisexual Men. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 3(3), 259-264. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000170
- Colangelo, A. J. (2024). The Emerging Crime of Persecution Based on Sexual Orientation. Northwestern Journal of Human Rights, Forthcoming, SMU Dedman School of Law Legal Studies Research Paper (592).
- Coleman, E. (1982, 1987/09/03). Assessment of Sexual Orientation. *Journal of Homosexuality, 14*(1-2), 9-24. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v14n01_02

- Coleman, M., & Dunn, P. (1996, 1996/12). Pink Therapy: A Guide for Counsellors and Therapists Working with Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Clients Dominic Davies and Charles Neal (eds) Open University Press, 1996; £16.99 pbk. *Probation Journal, 43*(4), 223-224. https://doi.org/10.1177/026455059604300414
- Colosi, R., Cowen, N., & Todd, M. (2023). Sexual and gender identity work on social media. *Sociology Compass, 17*(6), e13073.
- Connell, R. (1987). Gender and Power. Cambridge.
- Conner, C. T. (2018, 2018/10/26). The Gay Gayze: Expressions of Inequality on Grindr. *The Sociological Quarterly*, *60*(3), 397-419. https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2018.1533394
- Coon Sells, T. G. (2013, 2013/11). The Construction of Sexual Identities in an Online Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Bulletin Board System. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment,* 23(8), 893-907. https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2013.803452
- Cooper, R. M., & Blumenfeld, W. J. (2012, 2012/04). Responses to Cyberbullying: A Descriptive Analysis of the Frequency of and Impact on LGBT and Allied Youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 9*(2), 153-177. https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2011.649616
- Corliss, H. L., Cochran, S. D., Mays, V. M., Greenland, S., & Seeman, T. E. (2009). Age of minority sexual orientation development and risk of childhood maltreatment and suicide attempts in women. *The American journal of orthopsychiatry*, 79(4), 511-521. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017163
- Cousin, G. (2006, 2006/12). An introduction to threshold concepts. *Planet, 17*(1), 4-5. https://doi.org/10.11120/plan.2006.00170004
- Craig, S. L., Austin, A., & Huang, Y.-T. (2017, 2017/11/14). Being humorous and seeking diversion: Promoting healthy coping skills among LGBTQ+ youth. *Journal of Gay & amp; Lesbian Mental Health, 22*(1), 20-35. https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2017.1385559
- Craig, S. L., & McInroy, L. (2014, 2014/01). You Can Form a Part of Yourself Online: The Influence of New Media on Identity Development and Coming Out for LGBTQ Youth. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health, 18*(1), 95-109. https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2013.777007
- Crenshaw, K. (1991). Race, gender, and sexual harassment. s. Cal. l. Rev., 65, 1467.
- Crenshaw, K. (2013). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. In *Feminist legal theories* (pp. 23-51). Routledge.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.
- Crocker, J., & Park, L. E. (2004, 2004/05). The Costly Pursuit of Self-Esteem. *Psychological Bulletin, 130*(3), 392-414. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.130.3.392

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003115700

Croucher, R. (2014). Sexual Orientation: Royal College of Psychiatrists' Report.

- Crown, S. (1967, 1967/11). The Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise. By R. D. Laing. London: Penguin Books. 1967. Pp. 156. Price 4<i>s.</i> 6<i>d.</i>. British Journal of Psychiatry, 113(504), 1322-1323. https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.113.504.1322-b
- Crowson, M., & Goulding, A. (2013, 2013/09). Virtually homosexual: Technoromanticism, demarginalisation and identity formation among homosexual males. *Computers in Human Behavior, 29*(5), A31-A39. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.01.017
- Crusius, J., Corcoran, K., & Mussweiler, T. (2022). Social comparison: Theory, research, and applications. *Theories in Social Psychology, Second Edition*, 165-187.
- Dahl, A. L., & Galliher, R. V. (2012, 2012/08/19). LGBTQ adolescents and young adults raised within a Christian religious context: Positive and negative outcomes. *Journal of Adolescence, 35*(6), 1611-1618. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2012.07.003
- D'Augelli, A. R. (1994). Identity development and sexual orientation: Toward a model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual development.
- D'Augelli, A. R., & Patterson, C. (1994). *Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities over the lifespan: Psychological perspectives*. Oxford University Press, USA.
- Davies, D. (1996). *Pink therapy: A guide for counsellors and therapists working with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients* (Vol. 1). McGraw-Hill Education (UK).
- Davis, D. R. (1973, 1973/11). Separation, Anxiety and Anger (Volume Two of Attachment and Loss). By John Bowlby. London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis. 1973. Pp. xviii+430. Index 13 pp. Price £4.50. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, *123*(576), 600-601. https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.123.5.600-a
- Davis, K., & Weinstein, E. (2017). Identity Development in the Digital Age. *Advances in Human and Social Aspects of Technology*, 1-17. https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-1856-3.ch001
- DeLanda, M. (2006). *Deleuzian Social Ontology and Assemblage Theory*. Edinburgh University Press. https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9780748620920.003.0013
- Dembroff, R., & Saint-Croix, C. (2019, 2019/07/11). 'Yep, I'm Gay': Understanding Agential Identity. *Ergo, an Open Access Journal of Philosophy, 6*(20201214). https://doi.org/10.3998/ergo.12405314.0006.020
- Denman, C. (2004). Sexuality: A Biopsychosocial Approach. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dhoest, A. (2016, 2016/04/05). Media, visibility and sexual identity among gay men with a migration background. *Sexualities*, 19(4), 412-431. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460715604330
- Dhoest, A., & Szulc, L. (2016). Navigating online selves: Social, cultural, and material contexts of social media use by diasporic gay men. *Social Media+ Society, 2*(4), 2056305116672485.

- Dhoest, A., & Van Ouytsel, J. (2023). Negotiating Platforms and Sexual Identities: Digital and Social Media Use in Four Generations of Flemish MSM. *SAGE Open*, *13*(4), 21582440231218085.
- Diamond, L. M. (1998). Development of sexual orientation among adolescent and young adult women. *Developmental Psychology, 34*(5), 1085-1095. https://doi.org/10.1037//0012-1649.34.5.1085
- Diamond, L. M., & Butterworth, M. (2008, 2008/03/29). Questioning Gender and Sexual Identity: Dynamic Links Over Time. *Sex Roles, 59*(5-6), 365-376. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-008-9425-3
- Diemer, M. A., Mistry, R., Wadsworth, M.E., López, I. & Reimers, F. (2013). Best practices in conceptualizing and measuring social class in psychological research. *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy Analysis*, 77-113.
- Dirkes, J., Hughes, T., Ramirez-Valles, J., Johnson, T., & Bostwick, W. (2016). Sexual identity development: relationship with lifetime suicidal ideation in sexual minority women. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, *25*(23-24), 3545-3556. https://doi.org/10.1111/jocn.13313
- Döring, N. M. (2009, 2009/09). The Internet's impact on sexuality: A critical review of 15years of research. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *25*(5), 1089-1101. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2009.04.003
- Downs, A. (2012). The Velvet Rage: Overcoming the Pain of Growing Up Gay in a Straight Man's World. DaCapo Press. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2013.839922
- Dubé, E. M. (2000, 2000/05). The role of sexual behavior in the identification process of gay and bisexual males. *Journal of Sex Research*, *37*(2), 123-132. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490009552029
- Dunlap, A. (2016, 2016/01/02). Changes in coming out milestones across five age cohorts. Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services, 28(1), 20-38. https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2016.1124351
- Dürrbaum, T., & Sattler, F. A. (2019, 2019/03/28). Minority stress and mental health in lesbian, gay male, and bisexual youths: A meta-analysis. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 17*(3), 298-314. https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2019.1586615
- Easwaran, E. (2007). The Bhagavad Gita. Nilgiri.
- Eickers, G. (2024, 2024/02/06). Social Media Experiences of LGBTQ+ People: Enabling Feelings of Belonging. *Topoi, 43*(3), 617-630. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-023-09994-3
- Ellemers, N., Spears, R., & Doosje, B. (2002, 2002/02). Self and Social Identity. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53(1), 161-186. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.53.100901.135228

Eltahawy, M. (2020). The seven necessary sins for women and girls. Beacon Press.

- Emery, A., & Anderman, L. H. (2020, 2020/07/13). Using interpretive phenomenological analysis to advance theory and research in educational psychology. *Educational Psychologist*, 55(4), 220-231. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2020.1787170
- Erikson, E. (1963). Childhood and Society. Pelican Books.
- Fann, R. Q. (2003, 2003/12/12). Growing Up Gay in China. *Journal of Gay & Compression China and China and*

Fausto-Sterling, A. (1992). Myths of Gender: Biological theories about women and men. Basic Books.

- Feinstein, B. A., Goldfried, M. R., & Davila, J. (2012, 2012/10). The relationship between experiences of discrimination and mental health among lesbians and gay men: An examination of internalized homonegativity and rejection sensitivity as potential mechanisms. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 80*(5), 917-927. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029425
- Fenaughty, J., & Harré, N. (2003, 2003/09). Life on the Seesaw. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 45(1), 1-22. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v45n01_01
- Ferguson, R. A. (2004). Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique. U of Minnesota P.

Festinger, L. (1957). Social comparison theory. *Selective Exposure Theory, 16*(401), 3.

- Fields, E. L., Bogart, L. M., Smith, K. C., Malebranche, D. J., Ellen, J., & Schuster, M. A. (2015). "I Always Felt I Had to Prove My Manhood": Homosexuality, Masculinity, Gender Role Strain, and HIV Risk Among Young Black Men Who Have Sex With Men. *American Journal of Public Health*, 105(1), 122-131. https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301866
- Filice, E., Raffoul, A., Meyer, S. B., & Neiterman, E. (2019, 2019/12). The influence of Grindr, a geosocial networking application, on body image in gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men: An exploratory study. *Body Image*, *31*, 59-70. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2019.08.007
- Fingerhut, A. W., Peplau, L. A., & Gable, S. L. (2010, 2010/06/03). Identity, minority stress and psychological well-being among gay men and lesbians. *Psychology and Sexuality*, 1(2), 101-114. https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2010.484592
- Fisher, E. S., & Kennedy, K. S. (2012, 2012/07/26). Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Students and Families: Responsive School Practices to Support Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Students and Families. 1-6. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203829158-1
- Flowers, P., & Buston, K. (2001, 2001/02). "I was terrified of being different": exploring gay men's accounts of growing-up in a heterosexist society. *Journal of Adolescence, 24*(1), 51-65. https://doi.org/10.1006/jado.2000.0362
- Floyd, F. J., & Stein, T. S. (2002, 2002/06). Sexual Orientation Identity Formation among Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youths: Multiple Patterns of Milestone Experiences. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 12(2), 167-191. https://doi.org/10.1111/1532-7795.00030

- Foucault, M. (1979). *The Will To Knowledge* (Vol. 1). Penguin Books. http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/s0770451800014937
- Fox, J., & Ralston, R. (2016, 2016/12). Queer identity online: Informal learning and teaching experiences of LGBTQ individuals on social media. *Computers in Human Behavior, 65*, 635-642. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.06.009
- Franke, R., & Leary, M. R. (1991, 1991/09). Disclosure of Sexual Orientation by Lesbians and Gay Men: A Comparison of Private and Public Processes. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 10(3), 262-269. https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.1991.10.3.262
- Frost, D. M., & Meyer, I. H. (2009). Internalized Homophobia and Relationship Quality among Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 56(1), 97-109. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0012844
- Frost, D. M., & Meyer, I. H. (2023). Minority stress theory: Application, critique, and continued relevance. *Current opinion in psychology*, *51*, 101579-101579. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2023.101579
- Gallagher, S., and Parry, J. (2022, 1st April). *Conversion Therapy: Ban to go ahead but not cover trans people*. BBC News. Retrieved 15th May from https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-60947028
- Gallagher, S., & Parry, J. (2022). Conversion therapy: Ban to go ahead but not cover trans people. BBC News.
- Galston, W. A. (2021). Twenty years later, how Americans assess the effects of the 9/11 attacks.
- Galston, W. A. (2021). Twenty years later, how Americans assess the effects of the 9/11 attacks. Retrieved 17th September 2024 from https://www.brookings.edu/articles/twenty-yearslater-how-americans-assess-the-effects-of-the-9-11-attacks
- Gamboni, C., Parisian, E., & Morgan-Sowada, H. (2023, 2023/05/05). Body dysmorphia in gay male spaces: the double binds of knowing what you want and simultaneously rejecting it. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, *39*(2), 487-508. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681994.2023.2208528
- Ganzevoort, R. R., van der Laan, M., & Olsman, E. (2011, 2011/03). Growing up gay and religious. Conflict, dialogue, and religious identity strategies. *Mental Health, Religion & Conflict, 2011*, 209-222. https://doi.org/10.1080/13674670903452132
- Garofalo, R. (2023). Editor's Statement: Using Misinformation to Harm LGBTQ People Is Not New. *Transgender health, 8*(4), 300-301. https://doi.org/10.1089/trgh.2023.29001.editorial
- Gaspar, M., Marshall, Z., Adam, B. D., Brennan, D. J., Cox, J., Lachowsky, N., Lambert, G., Moore, D., Hart, T. A., & Grace, D. (2022). 'I was just doing what a normal gay man would do, right?': The biopolitics of substance use and the mental health of sexual minority men. *Health*, 26(5), 643-662.
- Gerena, C. E. (2023, 2021/10/25). The Coming Out Experience of Latino Gay Men. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services, 104*(2), 101-110. https://doi.org/10.1177/10443894211039836

- Gergen Kenneth, J. (1991). *The saturated self: Dilemmas of identity in contemporary life*. New York: Basic Books.
- Germanaud, E., Callahan, S., Revranche, M., Biscond, M., Pic, O., & Husky, M. (2025). Mental disorders and suicidality by sexual orientation status among first-year college students in France. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *72*(3), 462-477.
- Giano, Z. (2019, 2019/09/18). The Influence of Online Experiences: The Shaping of Gay Male Identities. *Journal of Homosexuality, 68*(5), 872-886. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2019.1667159
- Gibbs, J. J., & Goldbach, J. (2015). Religious Conflict, Sexual Identity, and Suicidal Behaviors among LGBT Young Adults. Archives of suicide research : official journal of the International Academy for Suicide Research, 19(4), 472-488.
 https://doi.org/10.1080/13811118.2015.1004476
- Gil de Zúñiga, H., & Chen, H.-T. (2019, 2019/07/03). Digital Media and Politics: Effects of the Great Information and Communication Divides. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 63*(3), 365-373. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2019.1662019
- Giray, L. (2021). Social media paradox: An exploration on the bright and dark sides of social media. Indonesian Journal of Education, Social Sciences and Research, 2 (2), 19-23.
- Giwa, S., & Greensmith, C. (2012, 2012/02). Race Relations and Racism in the LGBTQ Community of Toronto: Perceptions of Gay and Queer Social Service Providers of Color. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *59*(2), 149-185. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2012.648877
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Penguin Books. http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781003432272-7
- Goffman, E. (1964, 1964/10). Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity. *American* Sociological Review, 29(5), 770. https://doi.org/10.2307/2091442
- Gonzalez, K. A., Rostosky, S. S., Odom, R. D., & Riggle, E. D. B. (2013, 2012/11/29). The Positive Aspects of Being the Parent of an LGBT Child. *Family Process*, *52*(2), 325-337. https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12009
- Goodrich, K. M., & Kathryn Brammer, M. (2019, 2019/04/03). D'Augelli's Model of LGB Identity Development: A Critical Analysis. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 13(2), 152-171. https://doi.org/10.1080/15538605.2019.1597820

Gouldner, A. W. (1971). The coming crisis of western sociology. *Science and Society, 36*(1).

- Graciyal, D. G., & Viswam, D. (2021, 2021/04/23). Social Media and Emotional Well-being: Pursuit of Happiness or Pleasure. *Asia Pacific Media Educator, 31*(1), 99-115. https://doi.org/10.1177/1326365x211003737
- Grant, M. J., & Booth, A. (2009, 2009/05/27). A typology of reviews: an analysis of 14 review types and associated methodologies. *Health Information & Libraries Journal, 26*(2), 91-108. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-1842.2009.00848.x

- Green, A. I. (2007, 2007/03). Queer Theory and Sociology: Locating the Subject and the Self in Sexuality Studies. *Sociological Theory*, *25*(1), 26-45. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2007.00296.x
- Greenland, K., & Nunney, R. (2008, 2008/12). The repeal of Section 28: it ain't over 'til it's over. *Pastoral Care in Education*, *26*(4), 243-251. https://doi.org/10.1080/02643940802472171
- Gregory, A. T., & Denniss, A. R. (2018, 2018/07). An Introduction to Writing Narrative and Systematic Reviews — Tasks, Tips and Traps for Aspiring Authors. *Heart, Lung and Circulation, 27*(7), 893-898. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hlc.2018.03.027
- Grossman, A. H., Foss, A. H., & D'Augelli, A. R. (2014, 2014/01). Puberty: Maturation, Timing and Adjustment, and Sexual Identity Developmental Milestones Among Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, *11*(2), 107-124. https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2014.846068
- Grossman, A. H., & Kerner, M. S. (1998, 1998/02/13). Self-Esteem and Supportiveness as Predictors of Emotional Distress in Gay Male and Lesbian Youth. *Journal of Homosexuality, 35*(2), 25-39. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v35n02_02
- Grov, C., Breslow, A. S., Newcomb, M. E., Rosenberger, J. G., & Bauermeister, J. A. (2014). Gay and bisexual men's use of the Internet: research from the 1990s through 2013. *Journal of sex research*, *51*(4), 390-409. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2013.871626
- Gudelunas, D. (2012, 2012/01/14). There's an App for that: The Uses and Gratifications of Online Social Networks for Gay Men. *Sexuality & Culture, 16*(4), 347-365. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-012-9127-4
- Guittar, N. A. (2013, 2013/07/31). The Meaning of Coming Out: From Self-Affirmation to Full Disclosure. *Qualitative Sociology Review*, 9(3), 168-187. https://doi.org/10.18778/1733-8077.9.3.09
- Guo, J., Ying, J., Zhou, X., Wang, C., Lin, N., & You, J. (2023). Double hurt: The impact of interpersonal-level stigma on nonsuicidal self-injury among lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. *Current Psychology*, *42*(24), 21007-21020.
- Guschlbauer, A., Smith, N. G., DeStefano, J., & Soltis, D. E. (2019, 2017/12/12). Minority stress and emotional intimacy among individuals in lesbian and gay couples: Implications for relationship satisfaction and health. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 36*(3), 855-878. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407517746787
- Haimson, O. (2018). Social media as social transition machinery. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 2*(CSCW), 1-21.
- Haimson, O. L., Liu, T., Zhang, B. Z., & Corvite, S. (2021). The online authenticity paradox: What being" authentic" on social media means, and barriers to achieving it. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, *5*(CSCW2), 1-18.
- Halcomb, E. (2011, 2011/07/15). Doing a Literature Review in Health and Social Care A Practical Guide Second edition Helen Aveyard Doing a Literature Review in Health and Social Care A

Practical Guide Second edition McGraw Hil /£17.99170pp97803352388590335238858. *Nurse Researcher, 18*(4), 45-45. https://doi.org/10.7748/nr.18.4.45.s2

- Halkitis, P. N., Kapadia, F., Bub, K. L., Barton, S., Moreira, A. D., & Stults, C. B. (2015). A Longitudinal Investigation of Syndemic Conditions Among Young Gay, Bisexual, and Other MSM: The P18 Cohort Study. *AIDS and Behavior*, *19*(6), 970-980. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-014-0892y
- Hall, W. J., Dawes, H. C., & Plocek, N. (2021). Sexual Orientation Identity Development Milestones Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer People: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 753954-753954. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.753954
- Hammack, P. L., Frost, D. M., & Hughes, S. D. (2019, 2018/10/26). Queer Intimacies: A New Paradigm for the Study of Relationship Diversity. *The Journal of Sex Research, 56*(4-5), 556-592. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2018.1531281
- Han, C. s. (2017, 2017/08/02). Examining identity development among gay men of color. *Sociology Compass, 11*(9). https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12503
- Han, E., & O'Mahoney, J. (2018). British Colonialism and the Criminalization of Homosexuality. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351256209
- Harper, G. W., Serrano, P. A., Bruce, D., & Bauermeister, J. A. (2016). The Internet's Multiple Roles in Facilitating the Sexual Orientation Identity Development of Gay and Bisexual Male Adolescents. *American Journal of Men's Health*, *10*(5), 359-376. https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988314566227
- Harris, R., Wilson-Daily, A. E., Kemmelmeier, M., & Copsey-Blake, M. (2023, 2023/09/15). "You're just not real". LGBTQ+ youth and the struggle for identity in school. *Educational Review*, 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2254514
- Harvey, R., Fish, L. S., & Levatino, P. (2020). *Sexual Identity Development and Heteronormativity*. Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119438519.ch55
- Hatchel, T., Polanin, J. R., & Espelage, D. L. (2021, 2019/10/10). Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors Among LGBTQ Youth: Meta-Analyses and a Systematic Review. *Archives of Suicide Research*, 25(1), 1-37. https://doi.org/10.1080/13811118.2019.1663329
- Hausman, B. L. (1999, 1999/07). BOOK REVIEW: Roger N. Lancaster and Micaela di Leonardo, eds.<i>THE GENDER SEXUALITY READER</i> New York: Routledge, 1997. *NWSA Journal*, 11(2), 197-199. https://doi.org/10.2979/nws.1999.11.2.197
- Hawkes, T. (1977). Structuralism and Semiotics. Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203443934
- Henley, J. (2022). *Rise of the far right: will there be an election bonanza for Europe's populists?* The Observer / The Guardian. Retrieved 15th May 2022 from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/apr/09/far-right-europe-rise-elections

- Hiebert, A., & Kortes-Miller, K. (2023, 2021/12/02). Finding home in online community: exploring TikTok as a support for gender and sexual minority youth throughout COVID-19. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 20*(4), 800-817. https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2021.2009953
- Hill Collins, P. (2019). Intersectionality as Critical Theory. Duke University Press.
- Hillier, A., Gallop, N., Mendes, E., Tellez, D., Buckingham, A., Nizami, A., & Otoole, D. (2019).
 LGBTQ + and autism spectrum disorder: Experiences and challenges. *International journal of transgender health*, 21(1), 98-110. https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2019.1594484
- Hofer, B. K. (2017, 2017/10/02). Shaping the Epistemology of Teacher Practice Through Reflection and Reflexivity. *Educational Psychologist*, *52*(4), 299-306. https://doi.org/10.1080/00461520.2017.1355247
- Hogg, M. A., Terry, D. J., & White, K. M. (1995). A tale of two theories: A critical comparison of identity theory with social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 255-269.
- Hogg, M. A., & Turner, J. C. (1987, 1987/12). Intergroup behaviour, self-stereotyping and the salience of social categories. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 26(4), 325-340. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.1987.tb00795.x
- Homick, C. R., & Platt, L. F. (2021). Gender, Sexuality, and Psychological Theories of Youth Development. In Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1388
- Hong, C., Flinn, R. E., Ochoa, A. M., John, S. A., Garth, G., & Holloway, I. W. (2023). Internalized homophobia and social well-being among Black sexual minority men living with HIV: The mediating role of LGBT community connectedness and racial, gender, and sexual identity integration. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*.
- Hornsey, M. J. (2008, 2008/01). Social Identity Theory and Self-categorization Theory: A Historical Review. Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 2(1), 204-222. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2007.00066.x
- Horowitz, J. L., & Newcomb, M. D. (2002, 2002/04/30). A Multidimensional Approach to Homosexual Identity. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *42*(2), 1-19. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v42n02_01
- Huang, J., Kumar, S., & Hu, C. (2018, 2017/10/11). Gender Differences in Motivations for Identity Reconstruction on Social Network Sites. *International Journal of Human–Computer Interaction, 34*(7), 591-602. https://doi.org/10.1080/10447318.2017.1383061
- Huang, L., Zheng, D., & Fan, W. (2021, 2021/02/24). Do social networking sites promote life satisfaction? The explanation from an online and offline social capital transformation.
 Information Technology & amp; People, 35(2), 703-722. https://doi.org/10.1108/itp-03-2020-0143
- Huang, Y.-T., & Fang, L. (2019). "Fewer but not weaker": Understanding the intersectional identities among Chinese immigrant young gay men in Toronto. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 89(1), 27-39. https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000328

- Huddy, L. (2001). From social to political identity: A critical examination of social identity theory. *Political Psychology*, 22(1), 127-156.
- Huffman, J. M., Warlick, C., Frey, B., & Kerr, B. (2020, 2020/12). Religiosity, spirituality, gender identity, and sexual orientation of sexual minorities. *Translational Issues in Psychological Science*, 6(4), 356-371. https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000262

Humphreys, L. (1975). *Tearoom trade: Impersonal sex in public places*. Routledge.

- Husserl, E. (1999). *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology* (D. Welton, Ed.). Indiana University Press.
- Huynh, J. (2022, 2022/01/10). "Family Is the Beginning but Not the End": Intergenerational LGBTQ Chosen Family, Social Support, and Health in a Vietnamese American Community Organization. *Journal of Homosexuality, 70*(7), 1240-1262. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2021.2018879

Institute, K. R. (2021). Vitality and Stress Student Manual (3rd ed.). Kundalini Research Institute

Jackson, S. D., Mohr, J. J., Sarno, E. L., Kindahl, A. M., & Jones, I. L. (2020, 2020/05). Intersectional experiences, stigma-related stress, and psychological health among Black LGBQ individuals. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 88*(5), 416-428. https://doi.org/10.1037/ccp0000489

Jagose, A. (1996). Queer Theory: An Introduction. New York UP.

- Jamieson, L. (2020). *Cross-Dressing in Shakespeare Plays*. Retrieved 19th November from https://www.thoughtco.com/cross-dressing-in-shakespeare-plays-2984940
- Jamieson, M. K., Govaart, G. H., & Pownall, M. (2023, 2023/02/02). Reflexivity in quantitative research: A rationale and beginner's guide. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 17(4). https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12735
- Jaspal, R. (2015, 2014/12/09). The Experience of Relationship Dissolution among British South Asian Gay Men: Identity Threat and Protection. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, *12*(1), 34-46. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-014-0175-4
- Jaspal, R. (2016, 2016/10/14). Gay Men's Construction and Management of Identity on Grindr. Sexuality & Culture, 21(1), 187-204. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-016-9389-3
- Jaspal, R., Lopes, B., & Breakwell, G. M. (2023, 2022/08/13). Minority stressors, protective factors and mental health outcomes in lesbian, gay and bisexual people in the UK. *Current Psychology*, 42(28), 24918-24934. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-022-03631-9
- Johnston, W. (1973). *The Cloud Of Unknowing*. Fordham University Press. https://doi.org/10.5422/fso/9780823220748.003.0004
- Johnstone, L., & Boyle, M. (2018, 2018/08/05). The Power Threat Meaning Framework: An Alternative Nondiagnostic Conceptual System. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167818793289

- Josselson, R. (2004, 2004/07/01). The hermeneutics of faith and the hermeneutics of suspicion. *Narrative Inquiry*, 14(1), 1-28. https://doi.org/10.1075/ni.14.1.01jos
- Jourian, T. J., & McCloud, L. (2020). "I Don't Know Where I Stand": Black Trans Masculine Students' Re/De/Constructions of Black Masculinity. *Journal of College Student Development, 61*(6), 733-749. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2020.0072
- Joyce, E., Pratt, D., & Lea, J. (2024). "Where Is My Place?" A Qualitative Study of Gay Men's Experiences of Social Support, Relationships and Community in Relation to Psychological Wellbeing and Distress. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 1-27.
- Kalin, M., & Sambanis, N. (2018, 2018/05/11). How to Think About Social Identity. *Annual Review of Political Science*, *21*(1), 239-257. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-042016-024408
- Kapatais, A., Williams, A. J., & Townsend, E. (2023). The mediating role of emotion regulation on selfharm among gender identity and sexual orientation minority (LGBTQ+) individuals. Archives of Suicide Research, 27(2), 165-178.
- Kaufman, G., & Raphael, L. (1996). *Coming out of shame: Transforming gay and lesbian lives*. Doubleday Books.
- Kay, A. (2018, 2018/10/02). Erikson Online: Identity and Pseudospeciation in the Internet Age. *Identity*, 18(4), 264-273. https://doi.org/10.1080/15283488.2018.1523732
- Kenneady, D. A., & Oswalt, S. B. (2014, 2014/04/03). Is Cass's Model of Homosexual Identity Formation Relevant to Today's Society? *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, 9(2), 229-246. https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2014.900465
- Kennedy, H. R., & Dalla, R. L. (2014, 2014/10/02). Examining Identity Consolidation Processes Among Ethnic Minority Gay Men and Lesbians. *Journal of Gay & Constant Social Services, 26*(4), 465-501. https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2014.951817
- Kiperman, S., Schacter, H. L., Judge, M., & DeLong, G. (2022). LGBTQ+ Youth's Identity Development in the Context of Peer Victimization: A Mixed Methods Investigation. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(7), 3921. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19073921
- Kort, J. (2018). *LGBTQ clients in therapy: Clinical issues and treatment strategies.* . Norton. https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12372
- Kowalski, B. M., & Scheitle, C. P. (2019, 2019/09/23). Sexual Identity and Attitudes About Gender Roles. *Sexuality & Culture, 24*(3), 671-691. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09655-x

Kozinets, R. V. (2020). Netnography Today. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003001430-2

Kozlowski, D., & Power, I. (2022). Unpacking Backlash: Social Costs of Gender Non-Conformity for Women and Men. *Journal of Research in Gender Studies, 12*(2).

Kübler-Ross, E. (1970). On Death and Dying. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203010495

- Kübler-Ross, E., & Kessler, D. (2005). *On grief and grieving: Finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss*. Simon and Schuster.
- Kuyundzhich, D. (2021). Conspiracy and Autoimmune Suicide: September 11, 2001 Twenty Years Later. *Polylogos, 5*(№ 3 (17)), 0. https://doi.org/10.18254/s258770110017318-1
- Ia Roi, C., Meyer, I. H., & Frost, D. M. (2019). Differences in sexual identity dimensions between bisexual and other sexual minority individuals: Implications for minority stress and mental health. *The American journal of orthopsychiatry*, 89(1), 40-51. https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000369
- Laing, R. D. (1967). The Politics of Experience and The Bird Of Paradise. Penguin.
- Landolt, M. A., Bartholomew, K., Saffrey, C., Oram, D., & Perlman, D. (2004, 2004/04). Gender Nonconformity, Childhood Rejection, and Adult Attachment: A Study of Gay Men. *Archives* of Sexual Behavior, 33(2), 117-128. https://doi.org/10.1023/b:aseb.0000014326.64934.50
- Lasala, M. C. (2000, 2000/07/10). Gay Male Couples. *Journal of Homosexuality, 39*(2), 47-71. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v39n02_03
- Lassiter, J. M., Brewer, R., & Wilton, L. (2019, Jan-Feb). Black Sexual Minority Men's Disclosure of Sexual Orientation Is Associated With Exposure to Homonegative Religious Messages. *American Journal of Men's Health*, 13(1), 1557988318806432-1557988318806432. https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988318806432
- Lattanner, M. R., Pachankis, J. E., & Hatzenbuehler, M. L. (2022). Mechanisms linking distal minority stress and depressive symptoms in a longitudinal, population-based study of gay and bisexual men: A test and extension of the psychological mediation framework. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, *90*(8), 638.
- Lavietes, M. (2022). Here's what Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill would do, and what it wouldn't do. NBC News.
- Legate, N., Ryan, R. M., & Weinstein, N. (2011, 2011/06/20). Is Coming Out Always a "Good Thing"? Exploring the Relations of Autonomy Support, Outness, and Wellness for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Individuals. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, *3*(2), 145-152. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550611411929
- Lemke, R., & Weber, M. (2016, 2016/10/18). That Man Behind the Curtain: Investigating the Sexual Online Dating Behavior of Men Who Have Sex With Men but Hide Their Same-Sex Sexual Attraction in Offline Surroundings. *Journal of Homosexuality, 64*(11), 1561-1582. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1249735
- Lempinen, E. (2021). Shock, insecurity and endless war: How 9/11 changed America and the world. *Retrieved, 10,* 2023.
- Leung, E. (2021). Thematic Analysis of My "Coming Out" Experiences Through an Intersectional Lens: An Autoethnographic Study. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 654946-654946. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.654946

- Leung, E., Kassel-Gomez, G., Sullivan, S., Murahara, F., & Flanagan, T. (2022). Social support in schools and related outcomes for LGBTQ youth: a scoping review. *Discover education*, 1(1), 18-18. https://doi.org/10.1007/s44217-022-00016-9
- LeVasseur, J. J. (2003, 2003/03). The Problem of Bracketing in Phenomenology. *Qualitative Health Research, 13*(3), 408-420. https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732302250337

Levine, M. P. (1998). Gay macho: The life and death of the homosexual clone. NYU Press.

- Levy, D. (2009, 2009/12). Gay and Lesbian Identity Development: An Overview for Social Workers. Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment, 19(8), 978-993. https://doi.org/10.1080/10911350903126866
- Lewis, L. F., Ward, C., Jarvis, N., & Cawley, E. (2021, 2020/09/23). "Straight Sex is Complicated Enough!": The Lived Experiences of Autistics Who are Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Asexual, or Other Sexual Orientations. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *51*(7), 2324-2337. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04696-w
- Li, G., Kung, K. T. F., & Hines, M. (2017). Childhood gender-typed behavior and adolescent sexual orientation: A longitudinal population-based study. *Developmental Psychology*, 53(4), 764-777. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000281
- Li, Y., & Samp, J. A. (2019, 2018/11/25). Internalized Homophobia, Language Use, and Relationship Quality in Same-sex Romantic Relationships. *Communication Reports, 32*(1), 15-28. https://doi.org/10.1080/08934215.2018.1545859
- Li, Y., Wei, F., Ren, S., & Di, Y. (2015, 2015/05/11). Locus of control, psychological empowerment and intrinsic motivation relation to performance. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 30*(4), 422-438. https://doi.org/10.1108/jmp-10-2012-0318
- Lin, H.-C., Chang, C.-C., Chang, Y.-P., Chen, Y.-L., & Yen, C.-F. (2022). Associations among perceived sexual stigma from family and peers, internalized homonegativity, loneliness, depression, and anxiety among gay and bisexual men in Taiwan. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(10), 6225.
- Lin, N., Cook, K. S., & Burt, R. S. (2001). Social capital: Theory and research. Transaction Publishers.
- Liow, J. W., Chong, J. W., & Ting, R. S. K. (2023, 2023/04/02). Constructing Gay Male Identity in a Multicultural Society: A Qualitative Grounded Theory Study in Malaysia. *Sexuality & Culture*, 27(4), 1456-1480. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-023-10074-2
- Lisboa, C., Stuardo, V., & Folch, C. (2023). Sexualized drug use among gay men and other men who have sex with men in Latin America: A description of the phenomenon based on the results of LAMIS-2018. *PloS One, 18*(10), e0287683.
- Liu, B. C.-p. (2017, 2016/06/23). Intersectional impact of multiple identities on social work education in the UK. *Journal of Social Work, 17*(2), 226-242. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017316637220
- Liu, F., & Ren, Z. (2023, 2024/03/01). Internalized Homonegativity and Psychological Distress Among Chinese Gay Men: The Mediating Role of Loneliness and the Moderating Role of

Authoritarian Filial Piety. *LGBT Health*, *11*(2), 156-163. https://doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2022.0244

Londyn, A. (2017). *Grindr Survivr: How to find happiness in the age of hookup apps*. Self Published.

- Lovelock, J. M. (2014, 2014/07/03). Using the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid in Sociological Studies. Journal of Bisexuality, 14(3-4), 457-467. https://doi.org/10.1080/15299716.2014.946197
- MacKee, F. (2016, 2016/07). Social Media in Gay London: Tinder as an Alternative to Hook-Up Apps. Social Media + Society, 2(3). https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116662186
- Madianou, M., & Miller, D. (2013, 2012/08/22). Polymedia: Towards a new theory of digital media in interpersonal communication. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *16*(2), 169-187. https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877912452486
- Mahony, L. (2024). Living Well in the Aftermath of Separation and Divorce: The Role of Teachers, Schools, and Early Childhood Services. Springer Nature Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-97-1848-1_9
- Maiolatesi, A. J., Wang, K., Burton, C. L., Harkness, A., Esserman, D. A., Safren, S. A., & Pachankis, J. E. (2023). Rejection sensitivity and sexual minority men's social anxiety disorder: The moderating role of sexual identity strength. *Self and Identity*, 22(4), 563-591.
- Malik, M. H., Iqbal, S., Noman, M., Sarfraz, Z., Sarfraz, A., & Mustafa, S. (2023). Mental health disparities among homosexual men and minorities: a systematic review. *American Journal of Men's Health*, *17*(3), 15579883231176646.
- Marbaniang, I., Rose, E., Moodie, E. E., Hart, T. A., & Cox, J. (2022). Mental health services use and depressive symptom scores among gay and bisexual men in Canada. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, *57*(11), 2333-2342.
- Marchi, M., Arcolin, E., Fiore, G., Travascio, A., Uberti, D., Amaddeo, F., Converti, M., Fiorillo, A., Mirandola, M., & Pinna, F. (2022). Self-harm and suicidality among LGBTIQ people: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *International Review of Psychiatry*, *34*(3-4), 240-256.
- Marks, S. M. (2006). Global Recognition of Human Rights for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People. *Health and Human Rights*, *9*(1), 33. https://doi.org/10.2307/4065388
- Marvasti, A. (2005, 2005/11). Being Middle Eastern American: Identity Negotiation in the Context of the War on Terror. *Symbolic Interaction, 28*(4), 525-547. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2005.28.4.525
- Marwick, A. E., & Boyd, D. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. *New Media & Society*, *13*(1), 114-133.

Maslow, A. H. (1968). Toward a psychology of being. Simon and Schuster.

Maslow, A. H. (1971). The farther reaches of human nature. Viking Penguin Inc.

- Matsick, J. L., Sullivan, J. T., Todd, E., Kruk, M., & Cook, J. E. (2024, 2024/02/08). A social ecological approach to belonging in LGBTQ+ people. *Nature Reviews Psychology*, *3*(3), 181-197. https://doi.org/10.1038/s44159-024-00280-6
- Matthews, C. H., & Salazar, C. F. (2012, 2012/04). An Integrative, Empowerment Model for Helping Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Youth Negotiate the Coming-Out Process. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 6(2), 96-117. https://doi.org/10.1080/15538605.2012.678176
- McCarn, S. R., & Fassinger, R. E. (1996, 1996/07). Revisioning Sexual Minority Identity Formation. *The Counseling Psychologist, 24*(3), 508-534. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000096243011
- McConnell, E., Néray, B., Hogan, B., Korpak, A., Clifford, A., & Birkett, M. (2018). "Everybody Puts Their Whole Life on Facebook": Identity Management and the Online Social Networks of LGBTQ Youth. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 15(6), 1078. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15061078
- McCormick, A., & Baldridge, S. (2019). Family acceptance and faith: Understanding the acceptance processes of parents of LGBTQ youth. *Social Work and Christianity, 46*(1), 32-40.
- McCormick-Huhn, K., Warner, L. R., Settles, I. H., & Shields, S. A. (2019, 2019/08/12). What If Psychology Took Intersectionality Seriously? Changing How Psychologists Think About Participants. *Psychology of Women Quarterly, 43*(4), 445-456. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684319866430
- McCoy, L. K. (2017, 2017/06/09). Longitudinal qualitative research and interpretative phenomenological analysis: philosophical connections and practical considerations. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *14*(4), 442-458. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2017.1340530
- McKenna, K. Y. A., & Bargh, J. A. (1998). Coming out in the age of the Internet: Identity "demarginalization" through virtual group participation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *75*(3), 681-694. https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.75.3.681
- McKeown, E., Nelson, S., Anderson, J., Low, N., & Elford, J. (2010, 2010/10). Disclosure, discrimination and desire: experiences of Black and South Asian gay men in Britain. *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 12*(7), 843-856. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2010.499963
- McLean, K. C., Syed, M., & Manago, A. M. (2015). *Identity Development in the Digital Age*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199936564.013.031

Mead, G. H., & Strauss, A. L. (1934). The social psychology of George Herbert Mead.

- Merz, R. (2016, 2016/04/13). Turkle, Sherry (2011). Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other. New York: Basic Books. *merz* / *medien* + *erziehung*, 60(2), 91. https://doi.org/10.21240/merz/2016.2.33
- Meyer, I. H. (1995, 1995/03). Minority Stress and Mental Health in Gay Men. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 36*(1), 38. https://doi.org/10.2307/2137286

- Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin, 129*(5), 674-697. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674
- Meyer, J., & Land, R. (2003). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: Linkages to ways of thinking and practising within the disciplines.
- Meyer, J. H. F., & Land, R. (2005, 2005/04). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning. *Higher Education*, 49(3), 373-388. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-004-6779-5
- Michaelsen, A. (2017, 2017/11). Feeling differently together: The It Gets Better Project as an unlikely intimate public of LGBT peers. *Emotion, Space and Society, 25,* 144-149. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2017.07.008
- Michikyan, M., Dennis, J., & Subrahmanyam, K. (2015, 2014/04/24). Can You Guess Who I Am? Real, Ideal, and False Self-Presentation on Facebook Among Emerging Adults. *Emerging Adulthood, 3*(1), 55-64. https://doi.org/10.1177/2167696814532442
- Miller, B. (2015, 2015/10). "They're the modern-day gay bar": Exploring the uses and gratifications of social networks for men who have sex with men. *Computers in Human Behavior, 51*, 476-482. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.05.023
- Miller, B., & Behm-Morawitz, E. (2016, 2016/09). "Masculine Guys Only": The effects of femmephobic mobile dating application profiles on partner selection for men who have sex with men. *Computers in Human Behavior, 62*, 176-185. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.03.088
- Miller, R. A. (2017). "My Voice Is Definitely Strongest in Online Communities": Students Using Social Media for Queer and Disability Identity-Making. *Journal of College Student Development*, 58(4), 509-525. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2017.0040
- Modrakovic, D., Way, N., Forssell, S., & Calabrese, S. K. (2021, 2021/04). Moderating effects of minority stress on the association between adherence to norms of masculinity and psychological well-being in a diverse sample of gay male emerging adults. *Psychology of Men & Masculinities, 22*(2), 412-421. https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000339
- Mohr, J. J., & Fassinger, R. E. (2003, 2003/10). Self-acceptance and self-disclosure of sexual orientation in lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults: An attachment perspective. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *50*(4), 482-495. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.50.4.482
- Monteza, M. R. (2022). Coming Out of the Closet: LGBT Experiences. *Asian Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Researches* 2(3).
- Morandini, J. S., Blaszczynski, A., Ross, M. W., Costa, D. S. J., & Dar-Nimrod, I. (2015, 2015/07). Essentialist beliefs, sexual identity uncertainty, internalized homonegativity and psychological wellbeing in gay men. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 62*(3), 413-424. https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000072

- Moreira, A. D., Halkitis, P. N., & Kapadia, F. (2015, 2015/06). Sexual identity development of a new generation of emerging adult men: The P18 cohort study. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 2(2), 159-167. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000099
- Moscrop, A., Ziebland, S., Roberts, N., & Papanikitas, A. (2019). A systematic review of reasons for and against asking patients about their socioeconomic contexts. *International journal for equity in health, 18*, 1-15.
- Mowlabocus, S. (2010). *Gaydar culture: Gay men, technology and embodiment in the digital age*. Routledge.
- Mueller, C. W., & Parcel, T. L. (1981). Measures of Socioeconomic Status: Alternatives and Recommendations. *Child Development*, *52*(1), 13-30. https://doi.org/10.2307/1129211
- Muñoz, J. E. (1999). *Disidentifications: Queers of color and the performance of politics* (Vol. 2). U of Minnesota Press.
- Nadal, K. L. (2013). *That's so gay! Microaggressions and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community*. American Psychological Association. https://doi.org/10.1037/14093-000
- Nayak, B. S. (2023). Limits of Intersectionality as a Theoretical Framework. In *Intersectionality and Creative Business Education: Inclusive and Diverse Cultures in Pedagogy* (pp. 199-205). Springer.
- Noble, H., & Smith, J. (2025). Ensuring validity and reliability in qualitative research. *Evidence-Based Nursing*.
- O'Connor, C., & Joffe, H. (2020, 2020/01/01). Intercoder Reliability in Qualitative Research: Debates and Practical Guidelines. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 19*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406919899220
- Okanlawon, K. (2024). Suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, suicide methods, and correlates of suicidality among Nigerian LGBT persons: The role of minority stress. A narrative literature review. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 1-23.
- OlĂRescu, V., & Dicu, A. (2024, 2024/07/19). Causes and Consequences of Divorced Parents in Child Personality Development. *Journal of Innovation in Psychology, Education and Didactics,* 28(1), 7-16. https://doi.org/10.29081/jiped.2024.28.1.01
- Olesen, J., Campbell, J., & Gross, M. (2017, 2017/03/21). Using action methods to counter social isolation and shame among gay men. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services, 29*(2), 91-108. https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2017.1294518
- Orsatti, J., & Riemer, K. (2015). Identity-making: A Multimodal Approach for Researching Identity in Social Media. Ecis,
- Ostic, D., Qalati, S. A., Barbosa, B., Shah, S. M. M., Galvan Vela, E., Herzallah, A. M., & Liu, F. (2021). Effects of Social Media Use on Psychological Well-Being: A Mediated Model. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 678766-678766. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.678766

- Owens, Z. D. (2017, 2016/07/29). Is It Facebook Official? Coming Out and Passing Strategies of Young Adult Gay Men on Social Media. *Journal of Homosexuality, 64*(4), 431-449. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1194112
- Ozbilgin, M. F., Erbil, C., Baykut, S., & Kamasak, R. (2023, 2022/11/02). Passing as resistance through a Goffmanian approach: Normalized, defensive, strategic, and instrumental passing when LGBTQ+ individuals encounter institutions. *Gender, Work & Organization, 30*(3), 862-880. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12928
- Pachankis, J. E., Clark, K. A., Burton, C. L., Hughto, J. M. W., Bränström, R., & Keene, D. E. (2020). Sex, status, competition, and exclusion: Intraminority stress from within the gay community and gay and bisexual men's mental health. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 119(3), 713-740. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000282
- Pachankis, J. E., Goldfried, M. R., & Ramrattan, M. E. (2008). Extension of the rejection sensitivity construct to the interpersonal functioning of gay men. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 76(2), 306-317. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006x.76.2.306
- Pachankis, J. E., Sullivan, T. J., Feinstein, B. A., & Newcomb, M. E. (2018, 2018/07). Young adult gay and bisexual men's stigma experiences and mental health: An 8-year longitudinal study. *Developmental Psychology, 54*(7), 1381-1393. https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000518
- Palmer, D. D. (1997). Structuralism and poststructuralism for beginners. Red Wheel/Weiser.
- Pandya, A. k., Pandya, S., & das Nair, R. (2013). Same-sex sexual identity development in an Indian context. *Psychology of Sexualities Review*, 4(1), 40-52. https://doi.org/10.53841/bpssex.2013.4.1.40
- Parent, M. C., & Bradstreet, T. C. (2017). Gay, bisexual, and transgender masculinities. *The* psychology of men and masculinities., 289-314. https://doi.org/10.1037/0000023-011
- Parent, M. C., Gobble, T. D., & Rochlen, A. (2019). Social Media Behavior, Toxic Masculinity, and Depression. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity, 20*(3), 277-287. https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000156
- Parmenter, J. G., Galliher, R. V., & Maughan, A. D. A. (2020, 2020/06/25). An Exploration of LGBTQ+ Community Members' Positive Perceptions of LGBTQ+ Culture. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 48(7), 1016-1047. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000020933188
- Patel, S. (2019, 2019/03/25). "Brown girls can't be gay": Racism experienced by queer South Asian women in the Toronto LGBTQ community. *Journal of Lesbian Studies, 23*(3), 410-423. https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2019.1585174
- Patulny, R. (2009). *The Sociability of Nations: International Comparisons in Bonding, Bridging and Linking Social Capital*. Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781848447486.00036
- Pavalko, E. K., Mossakowski, K. N., & Hamilton, V. J. (2003). Does perceived discrimination affect health? Longitudinal relationships between work discrimination and women's physical and emotional health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 18-33.

- Payne, S., Swami, V., & Stanistreet, D. L. (2008, 2008/03). The social construction of gender and its influence on suicide: a review of the literature. *Journal of Men's Health, 5*(1), 23-35. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jomh.2007.11.002
- Pearson, E. (2009, 2009/02/25). All the World Wide Web's a stage: The performance of identity in online social networks. *First Monday*. https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v14i3.2162
- Perkins, D. D., & Zimmerman, M. A. (1995, 1995/10). Empowerment theory, research, and application. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *23*(5), 569-579. https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02506982
- Persson, A., Newman, C. E., Rasmussen, M. L., Marshall, D., Cover, R., & Aggleton, P. (2020, 2019/06/22). Queerying Notions of "Difference" Among Two Generations of Australians Who Do Not Identify Heteronormatively. *Sexuality & Culture, 24*(1), 54-71. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-019-09625-3
- Pillard, R. C. (1982, 1982/03). Psychotherapeutic Treatment for the Invisible Minority. American Behavioral Scientist, 25(4), 407-422. https://doi.org/10.1177/000276482025004006
- Pingel, E. S., Bauermeister, J. A., Johns, M. M., Eisenberg, A., & Leslie-Santana, M. (2013). "A safe way to explore": Reframing risk on the Internet amidst young gay men's search for identity. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 28(4), 453-478. https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558412470985
- Pitman, A., Marston, L., Lewis, G., Semlyen, J., McManus, S., & King, M. (2022). The mental health of lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults compared with heterosexual adults: results of two nationally representative English household probability samples. *Psychological Medicine*, 52(15), 3402-3411.
- Plumas, C., Le Vigouroux, S., Pietropaoli, M., & Charbonnier, E. (2024). The relation between internalized homophobia, coping, and psychological distress in French gay men. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 1-20.
- Plummer, K. (1989, 1989/07/06). Lesbian and Gay Youth in England. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 17(3-4), 195-224. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v17n03_01
- Plummer, K. (1995). Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds. Routledge.
- Prabhupāda, A. B. S. (1977). The science of self realization. Stranger Journalism.
- Pritchard, D., & Smith, M. (2004, 2004/04). The psychology and philosophy of luck. *New Ideas in Psychology*, 22(1), 1-28. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.newideapsych.2004.03.001
- Puar, J. K. (2007). Terrorist assemblages: Homonationalism in queer times. Duke University Press.
- Purdie-Vaughns, V., & Eibach, R. P. (2008, 2008/04/07). Intersectional Invisibility: The Distinctive Advantages and Disadvantages of Multiple Subordinate-Group Identities. *Sex Roles*, *59*(5-6), 377-391. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-008-9424-4
- Putnam, R. (2000). Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community, New York: Simon and Schuster 2000, 541 S. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-13213-2_95

- Race, K. (2015, 2015/03). 'Party and Play': Online hook-up devices and the emergence of PNP practices among gay men. *Sexualities*, *18*(3), 253-275. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460714550913
- Rachmad, Y. E. (2022). *Empowerment Theory*. Cáceres Conquistadores Publicaciones Internacionales Edición Especial.
- Rahman, Q., & Wilson, G. D. (2003, 2003/06). Born gay? The psychobiology of human sexual orientation. *Personality and Individual Differences, 34*(8), 1337-1382. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0191-8869(02)00140-x
- Ratigan, B. (2001). Growing up Catholic, Growing up Gay. *The Furrow*, 52(2), 90-100.
- Raveis, V. H., Siegel, K., & Karus, D. (1999, 1999/04). Children's Psychological Distress Following the Death of a Parent. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 28*(2), 165-180. https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1021697230387
- Reed, S. J., & Miller, R. L. (2016, 2016/03). Thriving and Adapting: Resilience, Sense of Community, and Syndemics among Young Black Gay and Bisexual Men. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 57(1-2), 129-143. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajcp.12028
- Renner, K.-H., & Laux, L. (2000). Unitas multiplex, purposiveness, individuality: Contrasting Stern's conception of the person with Gergen's saturated self. *Theory & Psychology*, *10*(6), 831-846.
- Rhoads, R. (1994). Coming Out in College. Praeger. https://doi.org/10.5040/9798400628900
- Richardson, D. (1984, 1984/04/18). The Dilemma of Essentiality in Homosexual Theory. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 9(2-3), 79-90. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v09n02_05
- Rivers, I. (1997, 1997/12). Lesbian, gay and bisexual development: theory, research and social issues. Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology, 7(5), 329-343. https://doi.org/10.1002/(sici)1099-1298(199712)7:5<329::aid-casp432>3.3.co;2-5
- Robertson, M. A. (2013, 2013/10/15). "How Do I Know I Am Gay?": Understanding Sexual Orientation, Identity and Behavior Among Adolescents in an LGBT Youth Center. *Sexuality & Culture, 18*(2), 385-404. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-013-9203-4
- Robinson, O. C. (2023, 2023/07/03). Probing in qualitative research interviews: Theory and practice. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 20*(3), 382-397. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2023.2238625
- Roccas, S., & Brewer, M. B. (2002, 2002/05). Social Identity Complexity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 6*(2), 88-106. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0602_01
- Rolfe, G. (2006). Validity, trustworthiness and rigour: quality and the idea of qualitative research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, *53*(3), 304-310.
- Rosenkrantz, D. E., Rostosky, S. S., Toland, M. D., & Dueber, D. M. (2020, 2020/03). Cognitiveaffective and religious values associated with parental acceptance of an LGBT child.

Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, 7(1), 55-65. https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000355

- Ross, M. W. (2005, 2005/11). Typing, doing, and being: Sexuality and the internet. *Journal of Sex Research*, 42(4), 342-352. https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490509552290
- Russell, G. M., & Richards, J. A. (2003, 2003/06). Stressor and Resilience Factors for Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals Confronting Antigay Politics. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *31*(3-4), 313-328. https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1023919022811
- Ryan, C., Russell, S. T., Huebner, D., Diaz, R., & Sanchez, J. (2010, 2010/11). Family Acceptance in Adolescence and the Health of LGBT Young Adults. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, *23*(4), 205-213. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6171.2010.00246.x
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68-78. https://doi.org/10.1037//0003-066x.55.1.68
- Ryan, W. S., Legate, N., & Weinstein, N. (2015, 2015/04/14). Coming Out as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual: The Lasting Impact of Initial Disclosure Experiences. *Self and Identity*, 14(5), 549-569. https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2015.1029516
- Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 57(6), 1069-1081. https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-3514.57.6.1069
- Salerno, J. P., & Boekeloo, B. O. (2022). LGBTQ Identity-Related Victimization During COVID-19 Is Associated with Moderate to Severe Psychological Distress Among Young Adults. *LGBT Health*, 9(5), 303-312. https://doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2021.0280
- Salter, N. P., & Sasso, T. (2021, 2021/09/03). The positive experiences associated with coming out at work. *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal, 41*(2), 224-240. https://doi.org/10.1108/edi-11-2020-0322
- Sandelowski, M. (1986). The problem of rigor in qualitative research. *Advances in nursing science,* 8(3), 27-37.
- Saunders, J. M., & Valente, S. M. (1987, 1987/01). Suicide risk among gay men and lesbians: A review. *Death Studies*, 11(1), 1-23. https://doi.org/10.1080/07481188708252171
- Savin-Williams, R. C. (1990). AIDS Prevention among Gay and Lesbian Youth. Springer US. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4757-9386-4_5
- Savin-Williams, R. C. (1990). *Gay and lesbian youth: Expressions of identity*. Hemisphere Publishing Corp.
- Savin-Williams, R. C. (2005). *The New Gay Teenager*. Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674043138

Savin-Williams, R. C. (2016). Becoming who I am: Young men on being gay. Harvard University Press.

- Savin-Williams, R. C., & Cohen, K. M. (2015, 2015/09/03). Developmental trajectories and milestones of lesbian, gay, and bisexual young people. *International Review of Psychiatry*, *27*(5), 357-366. https://doi.org/10.3109/09540261.2015.1093465
- Savin-Williams, R. C., & Diamond, L. M. (2000). Sexual identity trajectories among sexual-minority youths: Gender comparisons. Archives of Sexual Behavior, 29(6), 607-627. https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1002058505138
- Schlenker, B. R. (1986). Self-Identification: Toward an Integration of the Private and Public Self. Springer New York. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4613-9564-5_2
- Schrimshaw, E. W., Downing, M. J., Jr., & Cohn, D. J. (2018). Reasons for Non-Disclosure of Sexual Orientation Among Behaviorally Bisexual Men: Non-Disclosure as Stigma Management. *Archives of sexual behavior*, 47(1), 219-233. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-016-0762-y
- Schwartz, S., & Meyer, I. H. (2010). Mental health disparities research: the impact of within and between group analyses on tests of social stress hypotheses. *Social science & medicine (1982), 70*(8), 1111-1118. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2009.11.032
- SCOTT JR, E. D. (2015). CHAPTER TWO BIG, BLACK, TEENAGED QUEENS: NAVIGATING INTERSECTIONS AND UNDERSTANDING "NO FATS, NO FEMS" PHENOMENON. *Global youth: Understanding challenges, identifying solutions, offering hope*, 17.
- Shakespeare, W. (1623). As You Like It (1599-1600). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oseo/instance.00012919
- Shepherd, B. F., Maki, J. L., Zelaya, D. G., Warner, Ş., Wilson, A., & Brochu, P. M. (2023).
 Development and Validation of the Gay-Specific Intraminority Stigma Inventory (G-SISI):
 Initial Evidence Underpinned by Intraminority Stress Theory. *European journal of investigation in health, psychology and education, 13*(1), 170-186.
 https://doi.org/10.3390/ejihpe13010013
- Shilo, G., Yossef, I., & Savaya, R. (2015, 2015/09/01). Religious Coping Strategies and Mental Health Among Religious Jewish Gay and Bisexual Men. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 45*(6), 1551-1561. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-015-0567-4
- Sill, J. M. (2022, 2022/02/08). 'I wouldn't have ever known, if it wasn't for porn' LGBT+ university students' experiences of sex and relationships education, a retrospective exploration. Sex *Education*, 23(4), 379-392. https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2022.2036604
- Silverman, D. (2014). Interpreting Qualitative Data. SAGE.
- Simonsen, G., Blazina, C., & Watkins, C. E., Jr. (2000). Gender role conflict and psychological wellbeing among gay men. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 47(1), 85-89. https://doi.org/10.1037//0022-0167.47.1.85
- Singh, G. (1978). Sri Guru Granth Sahib: English Version. Allied publishers private limited.
- Singh, N. (1988, 1988/11). A Secure Base: Clinical Applications of Attachment Theory. By John Bowlby. London: Routledge. 1988. 180 pp. £8.95 (pb). *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 153(5), 721-721. https://doi.org/10.1192/s0007125000224197

- sisson-curbishley, n. (2020). *Hitting the Block Button: Negative online interactions and the effects on self-esteem for sexual minority men* University of Salford].
- Smit, P. J., Brady, M., Carter, M., Fernandes, R., Lamore, L., Meulbroek, M., Ohayon, M., Platteau, T., Rehberg, P., Rockstroh, J. K., & Thompson, M. (2012). HIV-related stigma within communities of gay men: a literature review. *AIDS Care, 24*(4), 405-412. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540121.2011.613910
- Smith, J., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). Interpretative phenomenological analysis. Theory, method and research., (Sage: Los Angeles).
- Smith, J. A. (1999, 1999/08). Identity development during the transition to motherhood: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 17(3), 281-299. https://doi.org/10.1080/02646839908404595
- Smith, J. A. (2011, 2011/03). Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Health Psychology Review*, 5(1), 9-27. https://doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2010.510659
- Smith, J. A. (2016, 2016/12/14). Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Getting at lived experience. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, *12*(3), 303-304. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2016.1262622
- Somerville, S. (1997). *The Gender Sexuality Reader* (R. N. Lancaster, & di Leonardo, M., Ed.). Routledge.
- Song, C., Xie, H., Alizai, A., & Chatterjee, J. S. (2021, 2021/10/28). "I did not know I was gay": sexual identity development and fluidity among married in China. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 24(12), 1681-1694. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2021.1996631
- Soreanu, R. (2018). The Psychic Life of Fragments: Splitting from Ferenczi to Klein*. *American Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 78(4), 421-444. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1057/s11231-018-9167-0
- Soulliard, Z. A., Lattanner, M. R., & Pachankis, J. E. (2024). Pressure from within: Gay-community stress and body dissatisfaction among sexual-minority men. *Clinical Psychological Science*, 12(4), 607-624.
- Spinks, N. (2022, 2022/11/10). Gay Men and Suicidality: The Development and Nature of the Critical Superego. British Journal of Psychotherapy, 39(1), 106-122. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjp.12794
- Spittlehouse, J. K., Boden, J. M., & Horwood, L. J. (2019, 2019/06/13). Sexual orientation and mental health over the life course in a birth cohort. *Psychological Medicine*, *50*(8), 1348-1355. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0033291719001284
- Stahl, M. A., Greydanus, D. E., Truba, N., & Cates, K. (2016). Adolescence: The issue of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. *International Journal of Child and Adolescent Health*, 9(3), 313.

- Stein, A., & Kong, T. S. (2023). "A very risky queer thing to do": In conversation with Ken Plummer. Sexualities, 26(4), 419-442.
- Stephenson, R., & Finneran, C. (2017). Minority Stress and Intimate Partner Violence Among Gay and Bisexual Men in Atlanta. American Journal of Men's Health, 11(4), 952-961. https://doi.org/10.1177/1557988316677506
- Stern, W. (1930). William Stern. Russell & Russell/Atheneum Publishers.
- Stets, J. E., & Burke, P. J. (2000, 2000/09). Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *63*(3), 224. https://doi.org/10.2307/2695870
- Stikkelbroek, Y., Bodden, D. H. M., Reitz, E., Vollebergh, W. A. M., & van Baar, A. L. (2016). Mental health of adolescents before and after the death of a parent or sibling. *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 25(1), 49-59. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-015-0695-3
- Stock, K. (2021). Material girls: Why reality matters for feminism. Hachette UK.
- Strauss, A. L. (2017). *Mirrors & Masks*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315124582
- Sugarman, L. (2004). Life-span Development. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203626948
- Suler, J. (2005, 2005/06). The online disinhibition effect. *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies, 2*(2), 184-188. https://doi.org/10.1002/aps.42
- Szulc, Ł., & Dhoest, A. (2013, 2013/01/28). The internet and sexual identity formation: Comparing Internet use before and after coming out. *Communications*, 38(4). https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2013-0021
- Szymanski, D. M., & Carr, E. R. (2012, 2008/01). The roles of gender role conflict and internalized heterosexism in gay and bisexual men's psychological distress: Testing two mediation models. *Psychology of Men & amp; Masculinity, 9*(1), 40-54. https://doi.org/10.1037/1524-9220.9.1.40
- Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. (2000). An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict. Oxford University PressOxford. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199269464.003.0005
- Talbot, C. V., Talbot, A., Roe, D. J., & Briggs, P. (2020, 2020/12/17). The management of LGBTQ+ identities on social media: A student perspective. *New Media & amp; Society, 24*(8), 1729-1750. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820981009
- Telingator, C. J., & Woyewodzic, K. T. (2011). Sexual minority identity development. *Psychiatric times*, *28*(12), 39-39.
- Thai, M. (2019, 2019/08/12). Sexual Racism Is Associated with Lower Self-Esteem and Life Satisfaction in Men Who Have Sex with Men. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 49*(1), 347-353. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-019-1456-z
- Thing, J. (2010, 2010/11). Gay, Mexican and immigrant: intersecting identities among gay men in Los Angeles. *Social Identities*, 16(6), 809-831. https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2010.524787

- Thomas, A. B., Ross, M. W., & Harris, K. K. (2007, 2007/06). Coming out online: Interpretations of young men's stories. Sexuality Research and Social Policy, 4(2), 5-17. https://doi.org/10.1525/srsp.2007.4.2.05
- Thomas Tobin, C. S., Erving, C. L., & Barve, A. (2020, 2020/11/17). Race and SES Differences in Psychosocial Resources: Implications for Social Stress Theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, *84*(1), 1-25. https://doi.org/10.1177/0190272520961379
- Thomsen, P. S. (2019, 2019/12/04). Coming-Out in the Intersections: Examining Relationality in How Korean Gay Men in Seattle Navigate Church, Culture and Family through a Pacific Lens. *Journal of Homosexuality, 68*(6), 1015-1036. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2019.1695423
- Todd, M. (2016). *Straight Jacket: How to be gay and happy*. Penguin Random House.
- Todd, M. (2019). Pride: The Story of the LGBTQ Equality Movement. Hachette UK.
- Toft, A., Franklin, A., & Langley, E. (2019, 2019/01/08). Young disabled and LGBT+: negotiating identity. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 16*(2), 157-172. https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2018.1544532
- Tolle, E. (1999). The Power Of Now: A Guide to spiritual englightenment. Yellow Kite.
- Tomori, C., Srikrishnan, A. K., Ridgeway, K., Solomon, S. S., Mehta, S. H., Solomon, S., & Celentano, D. D. (2016). Friends, Sisters, and Wives: Social Support and Social Risks in Peer Relationships Among Men Who Have Sex With Men (MSM) in India. *AIDS education and prevention : official publication of the International Society for AIDS Education, 28*(2), 153-164. https://doi.org/10.1521/aeap.2016.28.2.153
- Toomey, R. B., Ryan, C., Diaz, R. M., & Russell, S. T. (2018). Coping With Sexual Orientation-Related Minority Stress. *Journal of homosexuality, 65*(4), 484-500. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2017.1321888
- Tremble, B., Schneider, M., & Appathurai, C. (2013, 1989/07/06). Growing Up Gay or Lesbian in a Multicultural Context. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *17*(3-4), 253-267. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v17n03_03
- Trepte, S. (2013). Social identity theory. In Psychology of entertainment (pp. 255-271). Routledge.
- Trepte, S., & Loy, L. S. (2017). Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory. Wiley. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118783764.wbieme0088
- Trethewey, A. (1997, 1997/12). Resistance, identity, and empowerment: A postmodern feminist analysis of clients in a human service organization. *Communication Monographs, 64*(4), 281-301. https://doi.org/10.1080/03637759709376425
- Troiden, D. R. R. (1988, 1989/05/28). The Formation of Homosexual Identities. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *17*(1-2), 43-74. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v17n01_02
- Troiden, R. R. (1985, 1985/03/12). Self, Self-Concept, Identity, and Homosexual Identity. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *10*(3-4), 97-110. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v10n03_13

Turkle, S. (1995). Life on the Screen – Identity in the Age of the Internet. Phoenix Paperback.

- Turkle, S. (2011). Alone Together Why we expect more from technology and less from each other. Basic Books.
- Turner, J. C., & Oakes, P. J. (1986, 1986/09). The significance of the social identity concept for social psychology with reference to individualism, interactionism and social influence. *British Journal of Social Psychology, 25*(3), 237-252. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8309.1986.tb00732.x
- van Anders, S. M. (2015, 2015/03/14). Beyond Sexual Orientation: Integrating Gender/Sex and Diverse Sexualities via Sexual Configurations Theory. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 44*(5), 1177-1213. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-015-0490-8
- Vaughn, M., McEntee, B., Schoen, B., & McGrady, M. (2015). Addressing Disability Stigma within the Lesbian Community. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 81(4).
- Vincke, J., & Bolton, R. (1994, 1994/09). Social Support, Depression, and Self-Acceptance Among Gay Men. *Human Relations*, *47*(9), 1049-1062. https://doi.org/10.1177/001872679404700902
- Vu, L., Choi, K.-H., & Do, T. (2011, 2011/10). Correlates of Sexual, Ethnic, and Dual Identity: A Study of Young Asian and Pacific Islander Men who Have Sex with Men. *AIDS Education and Prevention*, 23(5), 423-436. https://doi.org/10.1521/aeap.2011.23.5.423
- Waites, M. (2003, 2003/11). Equality at Last? Homosexuality, Heterosexuality and the Age of Consent in the United Kingdom. *Sociology*, *37*(4), 637-655. https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385030374001
- Warner, L., Kurtiş, T., & Adya, A. (2020). Navigating criticisms of intersectional approaches:
 Reclaiming intersectionality for global social justice and well-being. *Women & Therapy, 43*(3-4), 262-277.
- Warner, L. R., & Shields, S. A. (2013, 2013/04/19). The Intersections of Sexuality, Gender, and Race: Identity Research at the Crossroads. *Sex Roles, 68*(11-12), 803-810. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-013-0281-4
- Wasserbauer, M., & Dhoest, A. (2016, 2016/11/07). Not Only Little Monsters: Diversity in Music Fandom in LGBTQ Lives. *IASPM@Journal*, 6(1), 25-43. https://doi.org/10.5429/2079-3871(2016)v6i1.3en
- Wasson, C., & Munoz, J. E. (2001). Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics. *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, *55*(1), 136. https://doi.org/10.2307/1348176
- Weiss, J. (2011, 2011/10/01). Reflective Paper: GL Versus BT: The Archaeology of Biphobia and Transphobia Within the U.S. Gay and Lesbian Community. *Journal of Bisexuality*, 11(4), 498-502. https://doi.org/10.1080/15299716.2011.620848

Wheaton, B. (1999). The Nature of Stressors (H. A. V. S. T. L., Ed.). Cambridge University Press.

- Wheaton, B., Young, M., Montazer, S., & Stuart-Lahman, K. (2012). *Social Stress in the Twenty-First Century*. Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4276-5_15
- Wilcox, M. M. (2006, 2006/12). Outlaws or In-Laws? *Journal of Homosexuality*, 52(1-2), 73-100. https://doi.org/10.1300/j082v52n01_04
- Wilhelm, A. D. (2004). *Tritiya-Prakriti: People of the third sex: Understanding homosexuality, transgender identity and intersex conditions through Hinduism*. Xlibris Corporation.
- Wilkerson, J. M., Brooks, A. K., & Ross, M. W. (2010, 2010/05). Sociosexual Identity Development and Sexual Risk Taking of Acculturating Collegiate Gay and Bisexual Men. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51(3), 279-296. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.0.0131
- Williams, S. J. (1986). Appraising goffman. British Journal of Sociology, 348-369.
- Willis, P. (2009). 'It Really Is Water off Our Backs': Young Lgbq People's Strategies for Resisting and Refuting Homonegative Practices in Australian Workplaces. *Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology review, 5*(3), 134.
- Wilson, B. D., Gomez, A.-G., Sadat, M., Choi, S. K., & Badgett, M. (2020). Pathways into poverty: Lived experiences among LGBTQ people.
- Windsong, E. A. (2018). Incorporating intersectionality into research design: An example using qualitative interviews. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology, 21*(2), 135-147.
- Wise, S. (2000, 2000/05). "New Right" or "Backlash"? Section 28, Moral Panic and "Promoting Homosexuality". *Sociological Research Online*, *5*(1), 148-157. https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.452
- Woolcock, M. (2002). Social Capital in Theory and Practice: Where do we Stand? Edward Elgar Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4337/9781781950388.00011
- Worrell, S., Waling, A., Anderson, J., Lyons, A., Pepping, C. A., & Bourne, A. (2022). The Nature and Impact of Informal Mental Health Support in an LGBTQ Context: Exploring Peer Roles and Their Challenges. Sexuality research & social policy : journal of NSRC : SR & SP, 19(4), 1586-1597. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-021-00681-9
- Wu, S., & Ward, J. (2018, 2018/01/15). The mediation of gay men's lives: A review on gay dating app studies. *Sociology Compass, 12*(2). https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12560
- Yalom, I. (1980). Existential Psychotherapy. Basic Books.
- Zaidi, M. (2020). A Dutiful Boy: A Memoir of a Gay Muslim's Journey to Acceptance. Vintage Digital.
- Zervoulis, K., Smith, D. S., Reed, R., & Dinos, S. (2019, 2019/11/01). Use of 'gay dating apps' and its relationship with individual well-being and sense of community in men who have sex with men. *Psychology & amp; Sexuality, 11*(1-2), 88-102. https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2019.1684354

- Zhao, S., Grasmuck, S., & Martin, J. (2008, 2008/09). Identity construction on Facebook: Digital empowerment in anchored relationships. *Computers in Human Behavior, 24*(5), 1816-1836. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2008.02.012
- Zheng, L., & Fu, C. (2024). Gender beliefs and internalized homophobia shape sexual self-labeling and partner choice in gay and bisexual men in China. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy, 39*(1), 20-34.
- Zimmerman, M. A. (1995, 1995/10). Psychological empowerment: Issues and illustrations. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23(5), 581-599. https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02506983
- Zubernis, L., Snyder, M., & McCoy, V. A. (2011, 2011/04). Counseling Lesbian and Gay College Students through the Lens of Cass's and Chickering's Developmental Models. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling, 5*(2), 122-150. https://doi.org/10.1080/15538605.2011.578506

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A - Database Search Results – Complete (2021)

	Keywords	Filter	CINAHL	MEDLINE	ProQuest	Web of Science	PsychINFO	Total
						50.0.100		
1	"Psychosocial Development" OR "Identity Formation" OR "Sexual Development" OR "Sexual Identity Development" OR "sexual identification" OR "identity" OR "identity development" OR "identification development" OR	1967 – 2022; English; Peer Reviewed	6,285	18,908	9,695	19,455	9,799	44,687
2	"Non-heterosexual men" OR "queer men" OR "pansexual men" OR "gay men" OR "homosexual men" OR "bisexual men" OR "bisexual minority men" OR "men who have sex with men" OR "MSM" OR "trans men" OR "transgender men"	1967 – 2022; English; Peer Reviewed	11,981	23,002	3,558	56,928	1,551	97,020
3	"Online identity" OR "online identification" OR "online presentation" OR "internet identity" OR "online	1967 – 2022; English; Peer Reviewed	132,930	712,593	389,807	3,775,676	119,392	5,130,398

	persona" OR "avatar" OR "online self" OR "cyber" OR "online" OR "mobile apps" OR "mobile applications" OR "social media" OR "social networking" OR "SNS" OR "applications" OR "Facebook" OR "Instagram" OR "Snapchat" OR "Twitter" OR "Tinder" OR "Grindr" OR "SCRUFF" OR "Growlr"							
4	"Offline identity" OR "self- presentation" OR "blended-identity" OR "offline self" OR "offline" OR "real world" OR "in- person"	1967 – 2022; English; Peer Reviewed	80,298	197,296	71,066	292,590	13,414	654,664
5	"intersections" OR "intersectional" OR "intersecting" OR "intersect" OR "intersectionality" OR intersect*	1967 – 2022; English; Peer Reviewed	8,937	31,402	39,042	160,836	15,230	255,447
1 A	1 AND 2 AND 3 AND 4 AND 5		0	0	2	1	0	3
1 A	ND 2 AND 3 AND 4		5	9	8	12	1	35
1 AND 2 AND 3 AND 5			0	2	12	6	0	20
1 A	ND 2 AND 4 AND 5		0	0	2	1	0	3

1 AND 3 AND 4 AND 5	3	5	12	7	1	28
2 AND 3 AND 4 AND 5	0	2	8	2	0	12
1 AND 2 AND 3	50	64	78	118	7	317
1 AND 2 AND 4	22	25	11	22	1	81
1 AND 2 AND 5	35	36	45	90	4	210
1 AND 3 AND 4	43	66	610	97	55	871
1 AND 3 AND 5	16	26	531	39	5	617
1 AND 4 AND 5	9	12	155	10	1	187
2 AND 3 AND 4	102	195	130	250	91	768
2 AND 3 AND 5	17	25	87	64	17	210
2 AND 4 AND 5	6	16	11	5	0	38
3 AND 4 AND 5	20	81	3,531	618	50	4,300
1 AND 2	473	642	278	914	173	2,480
1 AND 3	398	555	3,635	970	393	5,951
1 AND 4	221	504	879	164	44	1,812
1 AND 5	259	331	1,050	612	111	2,363
2 AND 3	1,253	2,159	1,078	5,214	1,140	10,844
2 AND 4	583	1,363	175	527	171	2,819
2 AND 5	178	278	203	650	134	1,443
3 AND 4	5,500	16,762	41,548	94,061	3,313	161,184
3 AND 5	430	1,817	18,940	15,274	411	36,872
4 AND 5	278	701	4,780	1,847	147	7,753

APPENDIX B - Database Search Results – Re-Run 2024

	Keywords	Filter	CINAHL	MEDLINE	ProQuest	Web of	PsychINFO	Total
						Science		
1	"Psychosocial Development" OR "Identity Formation" OR "Sexual Development" OR "Sexual Identity Development" OR "sexual identification" OR "sexual identity" OR "identity development" OR "identification development" OR	1967 – 2022; English; Peer Reviewed NOT – HIV/AIDS OR Sexual Health OR Youth OR Adolescence	6,823	20,407	33,779	21,321	8,420	90,750
2	"Non- heterosexual men" OR "queer men" OR "pansexual men" OR "gay men" OR "homosexual men" OR "bisexual men" OR "sexual minority men" OR "men who have sex with men" OR "MSM" OR "trans men" OR "transgender men"	1967 – 2022; English; Peer Reviewed NOT – HIV/AIDS OR Sexual Health OR Youth OR Adolescence	10,211	22,880	55,544	50,225	8,427	147,287

3	"Online identity"	1967 –	188,199	1,170,316	7,424,659	4,635,382	14,949	13,433,505
	OR "online identification" OR	2022; English;						
	"online presentation" OR	Peer						
	"internet	Reviewed						
	identity" OR "online persona"							
	OR "avatar" OR	NOT –						
	"online self" OR "cyber" OR	HIV/AIDS OR Sexual						
	"online" OR "mobile apps" OR	Health OR						
	"mobile	Youth OR Adolescence						
	applications" OR "social media" OR							
	"social networking" OR							
	"SNS" OR							
	"applications" OR "Facebook" OR							
	"Instagram" OR "Snapchat" OR							
	"Twitter" OR							
	"Tinder" OR "Grindr" OR							
	"SCRUFF" OR "Growlr"							
	Grown							
	// • 55 11							
4	"Offline identity" OR "self-	1967 – 2022;	39,267	139,939	931,312	429,476	2,558	1,542,552
	presentation" OR "blended-	English;						
	identity" OR	Peer						
	"offline self" OR "offline" OR "real	Reviewed						
	world" OR "in-	NOT – HIV/AIDS						
	person"	OR Sexual						
		Health OR Youth OR						
		Adolescence						

5	"intersections" OR "intersectional" OR "intersecting" OR "intersect" OR "intersectionality" OR intersect*	1967 – 2022; English; Peer Reviewed NOT – Women OR Sexual Health OR	11,937	49,380	691,804	203,369	3,537	960,027
		Youth OR Adolescence						
1	1 AND 2 AND 3 AND 4 AND 5		0	0	3	1	0	4
1	AND 2 AND 3 AND 4		7	15	0	13	10	45
1	AND 2 AND 3 AND 5		5	8	2	9	4	28
1	AND 2 AND 4 AND 5		0	0	1	2	1	4
1 AND 3 AND 4 AND 5		4	7	22	9	5	47	
2	2 AND 3 AND 4 AND 5			3	4	4	2	14

APPENDIX C - Ethics Approval Email

Ethics Application: Panel Decision

ethics To Noah Sisson-Curbishley Cc Rod Dubrow-Marshall



The Ethics Panel has reviewed your application: Constructing a contemporary sexual identity model for non-heterosexual men – including trans men – considering the influence of social media. Application ID: 5019

٠

The decision is: Application Approved.

If the Chair has provided comments, these are as follows:

You will no longer be able to edit your application in the system.

Link to the Ethics Application Tool: https://apps.powerapps.com/play/de0240e7-3d59-4974-849e-ba87d2541856?tenantId=65b52940-f4b6-41bd-833d-3033ecbcf6e1

APPENDIX D - Online Survey Consent Form Online Survey Consent Form

University of Salford – School of Health and Society

Exploring the experiences of sexual identity development for non-heterosexual men – including trans men – considering the influence of social media.

I confirm that I have read and understood the information presented to me in the participant information sheet, version 2 – dated March 2022, about the research that I am volunteering to engage in.

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and that any questions I asked the principal researcher about my participation, or about the study, have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am under no duress to engage in, or complete, this study.

I understand that I can withdraw my participation in the research at any time during taking part and do not have to give a reason. I understand that if I choose to withdraw from the study, I will incur no penalties or consequences for doing so.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw my data up to one month after taking part in the study for no reason, with no penalties or consequences.

I understand that the data collected about me will be kept in line with current data protection laws (also known as General Data Protection Regulation) and that any identifiable information about myself or others will be removed and/or changed to protect my/their privacy and maintain confidentiality.

I consent to any anonymised data collected for this research being used in publications, conferences, papers and other archiving databases along with sharing of information which does not breach participant privacy, confidentiality or any identifiable features/characteristics of myself or others in any capacity of my life.

I confirm that I am not currently suffering from a severe or acute mental health condition which might make it not in the best interests of my wellbeing to participate in this study.

Participant name	Date	Signature
Principal Researcher	Date	Signature

APPENDIX E - Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Exploring the experiences of sexual identity development for non-heterosexual men – including trans men – considering the influence of social media.

Noah Sisson-Curbishley – Principal Researcher

Salford University – School of Health and Society

Study Invitation

You are invited to take part in this study which aims to understand the effect social media and social networking mobile apps have on sexual identity development for nonheterosexual men and trans men. Non-heterosexual men include queer, pansexual, bisexual, plurisexual and sexually fluid; trans men are any individuals who identify as a man regardless of sex assigned at birth.

Before you decide if you want to continue, it is important to understand why the research is being undertaken and what taking part will involve. Please take your time to read this information sheet and discuss it with other people if you wish. You are free to contact the researcher using the contact information below, to ask any questions before deciding.

Participation is voluntary, meaning you are under no pressure to take part and are free to withdraw your participation at any time during taking part or up to one month after taking part by contacting the principal researcher on the details below and your data will automatically be deleted.

If you are suffering from a severe/or acute mental health condition, then it may not be in the best interests of your wellbeing to take part in the study.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

What is the purpose of understanding how social media and social networking apps effect sexual identity development in non-heterosexual men?

Sexual identity development is the personal feeling of attraction one person has towards another and develops over time through interactions with other people and the world around us.

Over the years there have been a number of researchers who have tried to map the reasons which influence a person's sexual identity, such as political and social movements, biology, or relationships, particularly in minority groups like gay men.

The purpose of this research is to consider the effect social media and social networking mobile apps have on non-heterosexual (this includes bisexual, sexually fluid, queer, questioning and trans) men's sexual identity development as there are many influences and interactions that occur through online media which may influence how a person understands and presents their sexual identity, so that mental health professionals have a new perspective in how to support this population with mental health and emotional challenges.

How will the research be conducted?

Participants will be asked to complete an online questionnaire and then some participants will be invited to engage in an interview with the researcher which will be audio recorded. The interviews may be done face-to-face, on the telephone or online through video platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Skype or Zoom. Participants choose which they would prefer.

With your permission it would then be helpful for you to select and share screenshots of your posts, on any of your social media/social networking accounts, with the researcher so you can talk about how your sexual identity has developed, been maintained, and presented through social media interactions.

What are the benefits of taking part in the research?

Participants may gain greater awareness into their sexual identity, the other aspects of identity which influence sexuality and understand how their interactions on social media have influenced their identification as non-heterosexual; however, this research may also benefit other people now and in the future.

What are the risks of taking part in this research?

Remembering past experiences as a minority individual may bring up challenging emotions and memories. Every care will be taken to support participant mental health and wellbeing

and sources of support will be distributed to each participant and they will be encouraged to access them if needed.

How will my information be collected and stored?

All information collected will remain anonymous by removing or changing any identifiable features - including names and place names - be confidential and stored securely by password protection in the University of Salford's servers. The information will be kept for a minimum of 6 years to allow for verification, this may be longer if the information is useful for researchers in the future. If the research leads to publications all information will be anonymous and no identifying features will be used.

Please note that your anonymised data (including any personal data and special categories of personal data processed according to conditions of article 6 (paragraph 1(a)) and article 9 (paragraphs 2(a) and 2(j)) of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018 respectively) will be used in the researcher's data analysis and dissertation as part of a doctoral degree, and potentially in any related publications or conference presentations.

Here is the link to the University's Research Privacy Notice that sets out details about the University's processing of personal information for research purposes: https://www.salford.ac.uk/privacy/introduction/research-privacy-notice

Confidentiality

The consent form will allow you to give permission for your words to be anonymously reported in the research outputs (e.g., 'I now understand how social media influences my interactions with other people'). This does not mean any of your identifiable information will be reported – just what you said.

The data will be kept securely at the University of Salford and will be shared in an anonymous format only once written up in the form of an accessible report, conference presentation or academic paper.

We will keep your contact details securely on a University-approved server.

However, we must highlight that if you do share anything that is highly illegal such as acts of terrorism, drug / people trafficking, money laundering, or suggest a risk to yourself or others including children and vulnerable adults, the researcher is duty bound to report it to the appropriate authorities.

What happens after the interview?

After the interview, the researcher may want to check or confirm aspects of information you have given have been understood correctly, so may contact you following the interviews to

arrange a convenient time to discuss these findings. Again, this may be over the telephone, face-to-face or on a video platform such as Microsoft Teams, Skype or Zoom. The findings may be shared with you over email and the document will be password protected.

Final findings from the research will be shared with all participants for transparency and the researcher can be contacted for questions and/or feedback about the results at any time.

You may also register your interest to participate in future studies leading on from this research.

Ethical Approval

This research has been reviewed and approved by the University of Salford's, Health and Social Science's Ethical Review Board.

Complaints

If there are any concerns or complaints at any point in the study, please contact the principal researcher in the first instance (Noah Sisson-Curbishley: <u>n.i.sisson-</u> <u>curbishley1@edu.salford.ac.uk</u>). If you feel your concerns need escalating, please contact the research supervisors:

Prof. Rod Dubrow-Marshall: r.dubrow-marshall@salford.ac.uk

Dr. Cristina Vasilica: <u>c.m.vasilica1@salford.ac.uk</u>

Or alternatively:

Prof. Andrew Clark, Chair of the Health Research Ethical Approval Panel, Room L517a, Allerton Building, Frederick Road Campus, University of Salford, Salford, M6 6PU;

Tel: 0161 295 4109; Email: a.clark@salford.ac.uk

Registering Participation

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact the principal researcher:

Noah Sisson-Curbishley: n.i.sisson-curbishley1@edu.salford.ac.uk

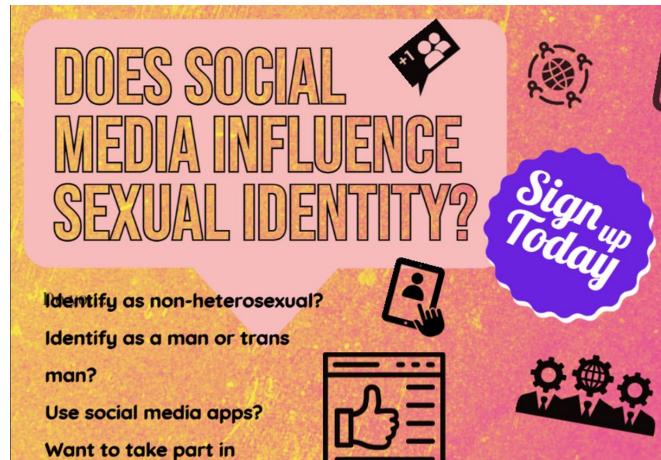
If you would like some time to consider taking part, please feel free to bookmark this page or copy the address and close the browser window.

If you would like to participate in the study, please follow the link to the consent form.

Many thanks for your time.

APPENDIX F - Social Media Recruitment Post

research?



If your answers were yes and you would like to take part in this research project to understand how social media influences sexual identity, we would love to hear from you. Follow the link below:

University of Salford MANCHESTER

https://bit.ly/SMaSIR

or contact: n.i.sisson-curbishley1@edu.salford.ac.uk



APPENDIX G - Offline Study Recruitment Poster

APPENDIX H - Online Questionnaire

Online Questionnaire

Section 1 – Demographic Information

Pronouns: they/them; she, her; he/him; other; Prefer Not To Identify (PNTI)

(Tick all that apply)

Age:

16-25; 26-35; 36-45; 46-55; 56-65; 66-75; 75+

Nationality:

(Free text); Prefer Not to Say (PNTS)

Ethnicity:

White

English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British

Irish

Gypsy or Irish Traveller

Any other White background, please describe (free text)

Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups

White and Black Caribbean

White and Black African

White and Asian

Any other Mixed / Multiple ethnic background, please describe (free text)

Asian / Asian British

Indian

Pakistani

Bangladeshi

Chinese

Any other Asian background, please describe (free text)

Black / African / Caribbean / Black British

African

Caribbean

Any other Black / African / Caribbean background, please describe (free text)

Other ethnic group

Arab

Any other ethnic group, please describe _____

Do you identify as having a disability, as defined by the Equality Act 2010? Yes / No

(If 'yes' > select category of disability / if 'no' > directly to next question)

Disabilities: (Tick all that apply)

Physical

Visual

Hearing

Chronic Condition

Learning/Developmental

Mental Health

Other: (free text)

PNTI

Sexual Orientation: (Tick all that apply)

Gay

Bi

Pan

Fluid

Queer

Asexual

Questioning / Unsure

Other: (free text)

PNTI

Gender:

Man / trans man

Woman / trans woman

Non-binary

Gender Fluid

Other: (free text)

PNTI

Sex assigned at birth:

Male

Female

Intersex

Other (free text)

PNTI

Religion:

Christian – incl. Catholic, Protestant, Methodist and other denominations

Muslim

Jewish

Sikh

Hindu

Buddhist

Pagan

Spiritual

Atheist

Other: (free text)

PNTS

Are your family of the same faith / religion as you?

Were you brought up observing this religion / faith?

Highest Qualification:

PhD

Postgraduate/Master's degree (MA/MSc/MPhil)

Postgraduate Certificate / Diploma

Undergraduate degree (BA/BSc)

A Level / AS Level

GCSE

Diploma

NVQ

Other: (free text)

PNTS

Employment Status:

Employed – full / part time

Self employed

Unemployed

Student – full / part time

Retired

PNTS

Salary (before tax):

- $\pm 0 \pm 20,000$
- £21,000 £40,000
- £41,000 £60,000
- £61,000 £80,000

£81,000 - £100,000

£100,000 +

Student Finance

Supported by parent(s)/partner(s)

Government assistance

PNTS

What is your occupation? (free text)

What were / are your parent(s) jobs?

Growing up, what sort of home did you live in? (Tick all that apply)

Council housing / housing association (flat or house) Privately owned home / flat (with or without a mortgage) Privately rented home / flat Care home Hostel or emergency accommodation

Homeless

Prefer not to answer

Don't know

Other

Section 2 - social media/Social Networking Use

Approximately how old were you when you first set up a social media account?

Which social media/Social Networking mobile apps do you use? (Tick all that apply)

Facebook

Instagram

Snapchat

Twitter

TikTok

Growlr

Scruff

Jack'd

Grindr

Tinder

Other (free text):

Starting with the app you spend roughly the most amount of time on, please list in order from most time spent to least time spent, the 4 apps you use the most? (Free text)

Select the reasons for engaging in the apps you use the most (as listed above – tick all that apply).

Connecting with/making friends

Connecting with family

Keeping up to date on news and current affairs

Sharing information about your life and experiences

Dating opportunities / romance

Sexual connections

Following celebs/brands

Networking for business/education

Learning skills/for education

Humour / entertainment

Boredom / loneliness

Other (free text):

Which celebrities or brands do you follow on social media based on their connection or relevance to the LGBTQ+ community (Free text)?

Which celebrities or brands do you follow on social media because it / they reflect your own identity (Free text)?

Are you open on social media about your sexuality?

Yes

No

Depends

Rather not say

Other

How do you express or present your sexuality on social media? (Tick all that apply)

Photos (e.g. nights out, romantic events)

Following LGBTQ+ accounts / people / icons

Comments and written word

Music

Memes

LGBTQ+ News and current affairs

Relationship status

- Symbols (e.g. pride flags)
- I don't / I avoid showing this part of myself

Are you open about your sexuality in real life / offline?

Yes

No

Depends

Rather not say

Other

(if 'depends' then > Who are you open about your sexuality with?)

In which of the following ways have you altered personal information you post on social media? (Tick all that apply)

Filter pictures using other apps (e.g. balance lighting, adjust body shape, even out skin tone)

Select pictures where I look my best

Change / edit personal information (e.g. write a younger age, change or remove ethnicity)

Select pictures I think other people will positively comment on

Purposely pose in pictures to hide parts of myself I dislike

Liked or commented about another post positively, even though I really disagreed or thought differently

Written a post / comment I knew was offensive or false just to get likes

Prefer not to say

None of these

Other

Do you have separate social media accounts or restrictions for family, friends, work etc. to prevent everyone seeing all aspects of your social media account?

Yes

No

Other

Are you currently a student or member of staff at the University of Salford?

Yes

No

(If 'yes' > go directly to end of questionnaire)

Would you like to take part in the next stage of this study which involves an audio recorded interview?

Yes

No

(If 'yes' > leave name, email and telephone with preferred method of contact being email, phone or text / if 'no' go directly to end of questionnaire).

End.

APPENDIX Ha – Data set for questionnaire

Age	#	Nationality	#	Ethnicity	#	Disability	#	Religion	#	Sexuality	#	Gender	#
16 - 25	9	American	10	Asian / Asian British Chinese	2	Chronic health condition	1	Agnostic	12	Asexual	1	Man / Trans man	42
26 – 25	27	British	40	Asian / Asian British Indian	1	Learning / Developmental	7	Christian	17	Bisexual	12	Non-Binary	5
36 – 45	11	Indonesian	1	Asian / Asian British Pakistani	2	Physical	1	Spiritual / Christian	1	Bi- /Pansexual	1	Prefer not to identify	1
46 – 55	4	Irish	1	Black / Black British African	5	Mental Health	1	Muslim	6	Bisexual / Queer	1	Woman / Trans woman	3
56 – 65	2	Mixed	1	Black / Black British Caribbean	1			Pagan	1	Gay	22	Other	3
66 – 75	1	Zimbabwean	1	Irish	1			Spiritual	2	Gay / Bi / Queer	1		
		1	1	Middle Eastern / Arabic	2				1	Sexually Fluid	1		
				White - English / Welsh / Scottish	32					Pansexual	3		

/ Northern Irish / British					
Other	8		Queer	4	

Highest Qualification	#	Employment Status	#	Annual Income	#	Housing	#	Social Media Platforms	#
A Levels	8	Full / Part Time	28	£0 - £20,000	9	Social housing	5	Facebook	47
BA / BSc	18	Student / Part Time	11	£21,000 - £40,000	14	Social / Private	5	Instagram	38
Diploma	3	Other	2	£41,000 - £60,000	11	Private home (mortgage)	30	Twitter	39
GCSEs	2	Retired	1	£61,000 - £80,000	5	Private home (rent)	10	TikTok	20
MA / MSc / MPhil	16	Self-Employed	7	£81,000 - £100,000	4	Hostel / Emergency Accommodation	1	Snapchat	17

PhD / Doctorate	1	Unemployed	3	£101,000 and above	2	Other	1	Grindr	10
Pg. Dip/PgCert	2	Prefer not to say	3	Supported by parents / partner	4	Prefer not to say	2	Tinder	3
Prefer Not To Say	4		<u> </u>	Prefer not to say	5		<u> </u>	Other	9

APPENDIX I – Interview Consent Form

Interview Consent Form

University of Salford - School of Health and Society

Exploring the experiences of sexual identity development for non-heterosexual men – including trans men – considering the influence of social media.

I confirm that I have read and understood the information presented to me in the participant information sheet, version 1 – dated January 2022, about the research that I am volunteering to engage in.

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and that any questions I asked the principal researcher about my participation, or about the study, have been answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and I am under no duress to engage in, or complete, this study.

I understand that I can withdraw my participation in the research at any time during taking part and do not have to give a reason. I understand that if I choose to withdraw from the study, I will incur no penalties or consequences for doing so.

I understand that I have the right to withdraw my data up to one month after taking part in the study for no reason, with no penalties or consequences.

I understand that the data collected about me will be kept in line with current data protection laws (also known as General Data Protection Regulation) and that any identifiable information about myself or others will be removed and/or changed to protect my/their privacy and maintain confidentiality.

I consent to any anonymised data collected for this research being used in publications, conferences, papers and other archiving databases along with sharing of information which does not breach participant privacy, confidentiality or any identifiable features/characteristics of myself or others in any capacity of my life.

I consent to being audio recorded during the research interviews.

I consent to sharing screenshots of my social media/social networking posts – selected by me, the participant - which may include pictures, text, gifs, illustrations and other media. I understand that any/all personal or identifiable information will be removed/blocked from these screenshots.

I understand that if at any point during the interview I feel low or stressed, additional external support it available as listed on mental health support sheet.

I confirm that I am not currently suffering from a severe or acute mental health condition which might make it not in the best interests of my wellbeing to participate in this study.

Participant name	Date	Signature
Principal Researcher	Date	Signature

APPENDIX J - Interview Schedule

Interview Questions

If we could start by you just telling me a little bit about your background and your history etc. and the experiences of social media you have and how you feel social media has affected your sexual identity in whichever way? (feel free to include all apps such as Grindr, Tinder etc.) This question initially may answer some of the follow up questions naturally anyway.

Childhood/Growing-Up

What part of your identity did you struggle the most with growing up? What was this like for you and how did you cope?

When did you start to realise you weren't "heterosexual" and how was this explored/understood?

As you moved through life situations and experiences, which aspects of your identity helped or hindered your sexual identity – as you understood it – (e.g., religion, culture, gender, body type), and why?

Social Media Use

Have social media apps influenced how you came to understand your sexual identity? If so, how (including when did this happen/over what time period/has your sexual identity changed because of these apps)?

- If not, how (and when) did you start to understand your sexual identity?
- Is your sexual identity quite fixed or has it changed through your life/situations?

Has connecting with others similar to you on social media helped you understand/affirm your sexual identity?

What parts of your online persona are similar to your real-world presentation? Or how do they differ? What are your motivations for presenting these aspects differently?

Who do you follow on social media who has similar identities to you?

What is it about these people/person that makes you feel connected to them?

Have you ever experienced reject / discrimination on apps due to any aspect of your identity?

Adult Identity

Which aspects of your identity (such as ethnicity, gender, religion etc.) are similar to the people you have in your real life, such as family, friends, groups, colleagues etc.?

How do you connect with or affirm these identities offline and/or online?

Which aspects of your identity (such as ethnicity, gender, religion etc.) are similar to the people you have in your **online** life, again such as family, friends, groups, colleagues etc.?

APPENDIX K - Samples of Transcript and Analysis

Zain

Coming out across the lifespan / over time	KQ: Um, well you know when I was	<u>Gradual process – not 'came out' as in one event – various times /</u> situations. Internal and external. He is still coming out.
-	<mark>coming out</mark> as <mark>a student</mark> , erm, I, I <mark>, I had</mark>	Student – living away from home, freedom and first step into adulthood and
Away from home/family		independence.
	heard so much <mark>about, you know, being</mark>	Repeated narrative 'heard so much' about being LGBTQ+ not being allowed — sinful; going against God 'not allowed'.
Collective narrative	gay and how it was not allowed in <mark>our</mark>	Our religion - collective responsibility, influence of one effects the whole.
		Does this link to the role modelling?
	religion. So, and I, because everyone had	Who is 'everyone'?
	quoted the Quran and one story in	'One story' – not the whole book – used for a specific reason. shame and
	particular, was the story of Lut or Lot and	scare participant perhaps?
	<mark>I just thought </mark> let me read for myself <mark>so</mark>	Explored religious texts to understand it for himself – not relied on others to inform him. First hand understanding, no misunderstanding.
Research and educate self – don't reply on others	that's what I did, I actually read the	Followed through for reassurance. Researched and explored the holy texts. Wanted to understand his sexuality and make sense of his experience from
don treply on others	Quran, and the Bible, to make better	the source. Puts himself through challenging experience (heavy reading) in
	sense of it all and I realised that there	order to understand a different interpretation to reassure self?
	sense of it all and realised that there	Realisation that homosexuality was not mentioned – it is his interpretation
	wasn't any reference about	of the story.
	homosexuality in the Quran at all <mark>, which</mark>	Reassured that sexuality and religion can align. <u>Synthesising religion and</u> sexuality.
Realisation through educating		

self	helped me. So that instilled confidence	'helped me' – real sense of being saved.
	<mark>and so gave me reassurances </mark> to say, you	Feeling vindicated, powerful and valid in his identity. Accepting self / identity.
Inner locus of evaluation	know, I'll use the Quran as kind of like a	Personal interpretation, personal use – using it to benefit him. A moral
	moral compass for guidance, and some of	guide rather than a definitive way to live life; moving away from a rigid tool to punish.
	the kind of, stories that were being	Collective culture of storytelling in religion. <u>Could this also be said for social</u> media?
	shared, you know, there was some kind	
Select what aligns to morals	of <mark>moral values</mark> to it, and a lot of it was	'morals' repeated. Religion is about how to life a life amongst others. <u>The root of the religion transcends punishment, sin, good and evil. This</u> <u>feels like the self is 'home' – it has found the values and characteristics of</u>
	about <mark>humanity</mark> , and being	what KQ wants from others and how he wants to treat others is here. (Reminds me of Conversations with God).
Humanity	compassionate <mark>and understanding, and</mark>	(Reminds the or conversations with God).
	respectful and to kind of, appreciate what	How I will live my life – self embraces religion. This feels hopeful.
Build confidence from morals	is around you and sort of, kind of <mark>, build</mark>	These qualities are the start of something bigger?
	on those foundations. So, that gave me	What is a good level of confidence?
		'some' then changed to 'a good level'
	some, a good level of confidence in some	Building up confidence and affirmative perspective on self – feeling validated and assured. Contrast to 'hell, fire and damnation' earlier.
	respects. I thought, you know, I can do	valuated and assured. Contrast to hell, me and damination earlier.
	this, you know <u>.</u> Erm, <mark>although I had same</mark>	
	sex attraction to men, I just thought <mark>as a</mark>	Strip back the labels and the identities and focus on the person – the human being will collective emotions. (Rogers quote about being connected by
Humanity		emotion).

Inner strength / meaning through religion	human being <mark>, I can do this, I can do what</mark> Allah wants me to be <mark>, you know, so that</mark> gave me that level of, inner strength I suppose. Erm, and then when I told my mum about a year or two later, about me	'I can do' – repeated. Positive affirmation, confidence, positive mindset. Externalising sexuality / identity – giving over to Allah. Is this justification? Protection of self by control of identity given to Allah. A test? Who has control over his choices and his life? Power, confidence and acceptance Synthesising the religion (external) to the sexual identity (internal). Again synthesis of god/religion and self. Wants to make sure relationship was secure
Unconditional acceptance from others (maternal acceptance)	meeting somebody, I fell in love blah blah blah, erm her response to that was you know whatever makes you happy makes me happy, and if I can't share in that happiness, what kind of mum will I be?	Interpersonal relationship – happiness of the child is an extension of the mother. Mother's happiness is reliant on child's happiness. Acceptance and non-judgment. Happiness is an important thing here – repeated variations of the word. What a mother is 'meant' to dowhat are maternal qualities?
Love and happiness <u>builds</u> confidence / self -worth	So again, having <mark>that kind of level of</mark> unconditional love, that gave me something, it added to, I had already.	'level' – are there tiers or levels of strength? <u>Unconditional love now from mother, on top of self-acceptance and</u> <u>partner's support/love.</u> <u>Building up positive internal qualities and reflections of self.</u> Positive <u>influences in life.</u>
Parental struggle (paternal) Grief	Erm, my <mark>dad was a different</mark> story altogether <mark>. He, it took him a long time to</mark> <u>come to terms</u> with who I am, erm and	Paternal response can be very different to maternal one. Not so accepting or flexible/understanding and unconditional in his support. A polarised view. What was this 'story'? Is this a process of grief? Loss/change of identity/expectation of another? Adjustment feels really important – 'come to terms'resistance?

Hindsight	that's something that I realised now, even	Self awareness has increased - over time? Is this a maturity thing? An
	now that <mark>when you</mark> come out to your	experience thing? Hindsight?
Transition / adjustment		Parents – 'closest' to the person that can reject the person most easily – 'or
	parents <mark>or whoever</mark> , you've got to allow	whoever'rejection can be painful whoever it is.
		Sympathetic to ad-reactions?
	them time to adjust to their own reality.	Acceptance and understanding of this 'new' identity.
	So, by the time both my parents had	
Time		Is acceptance a joint decision?
	mutually began to accept and understand	Accept and understand me - is this about re-introducing self to parents? Or
		parents getting to know this 'new' person?
Acceptance and understanding	me and offer their support, it was their,	'offer their support' – feels like a gift, a giving of something (support)
understanding	like not biblical spiritual blessing but	Moving away from the religious aspect – not spiritual or biblical.
	when they came round to the to meet my	Synthesising / incorporating family and sexuality.
Synthesis of worlds/identities	partner <mark>,</mark> and they said you've got the best	Validation from parents – pride. Relationship is the extension of self?
	particult one they baile job it got the best	Relationship galvanises the identity.
	relationship we've ever seen of our	Realisation or normalcy and comparison to others.
Relationship as extension of		Home / environment is important – is this a little materialistic to think a
self	children <mark>, and it's a beautiful home</mark> , that is	nice home equates to a strong and happy relationship? Does this mean
		beautiful home is extension of the relationship?
	the <mark>catalyst for change</mark> to think my	Synthesis of identities and worlds creates change – meeting of worlds is
Education	parents brought me into this world, they	powerful.
	parents brought me into this world, they	
Partnership	accepted me and my partner, and that	Acceptance of couple not just the individual – not alone.
		'And' stressed – the partner is an extension of the individual.
	was theThat was the, the, the, yeah	
		l

James

	Jesus Christ, erm, and <mark>it felt like I</mark>	Simplicity in how identity can be presented online.
Presenting on social media without	was just basically able to <mark>show a</mark>	Self has multiple sides / parts which can be presented in various arenas for different reasons.
committing to an identity	side of myself without needing a	'without needed a label' - Doesn't need to be fixed or to justify identity.
	label as, you know what I mean,	
	and so it was like yeah, it was, <mark>it</mark>	
Putting on a show online	<mark>was</mark> feminine <mark>, it was</mark> flamboyant	'feminineflamboyant' – sense of pride, unapologetic. Drama – putting on a show for others.
	but offline I was very much like,	
Splitting presentations of	well I can't be that person in real	Awareness of splitting self between on- and offline worlds.
self on/offline	life, because of the implications it	Offline carriers risks and danger if he were to present as his online self.
Offline risks danger	would mean, it, it, is almost,	
	ultimately like a disinhibition	Showing education and academic knowledge.
	<mark>effect</mark> - I wanna say, it's really	
	what it encompassed. Um, so	
	yeah, and then <mark>throughout my</mark>	University – distance from home and from family. Independence.
Distance from home allows for deeper	university years, I then started	
exploration of self	toying with <mark>Grindr</mark> . And, I was	'toying with' – playing with, experimenting, and using in a fun/non-committal way?

Isolation	<mark>very lonely</mark> , you know I was in	Very lonely – alone, isolated, sadness.
Independence developing	university, it was, I, <mark>I just moved</mark>	Self develops independence from family.
	<mark>out</mark> , I was, <mark>I was aware that's not</mark>	Hopeful for a relationship from the app and interactions online.
	as easy to get a, re-, you know,	
Platforms have different types of connection	relationship or anything, off	
	anything like that. Andit was,	'[chuckles] interesting' – chuckling at the strangeness of the interactions perhaps? Interesting is
Some interactions were unusual	um, it was [<mark>chuckles</mark>] <mark>interesting</mark> .	emphasised – is this a polite way of reinforcing the challenging and difficult nature of some interactions.
	I think I tried it twice and thought	Has tried the interactions and the connections but perhaps don't align with his values and what he
	that's, no, I don't like that <u>.</u> I don't	was searching for.
Interactions don't align with personal values	like these, these, one night stands	
	basically because through my	
	understanding in Grindr, there	
Apps for pop	was no <mark>no one was looking for a</mark>	Generalisation about the use of Grindr – some people will be looking for a relationship or more than just casual sex.
Apps for non- commitment	relationship, It was all for a hook-	than just casual sex.
	up. It was just to get, it was, it, I	
	got the impression that <mark>it was for</mark>	

Heteronormative	people who couldn't commit -	'couldn't commit' – is this a heteronormative expectation? What about those who don't want to
expectations of		commit?
relationships	and sadly, that was me at the	'sadly' – is there some disappointment in self here? An expectation he should be aligned to?
		'couldn't commit' - Self was in a different emotional / mental place – not wanting a relationship.
Heteronormative	timeI couldn't commitThat's	Sense of feeling bad about this – resisting and ashamed almost, about lacking commitment in
expectations create		relationship.
disappointment in self	why I was, I was there. Um but	
	by the time I was at university, I'd	
Being out does not bring	been out for a long, a long time,	Being out about sexuality doesn't automatically align self-confidence and self-esteem.
self-confidence		
	but I still wasn't comfortable in	Sexual identity is separate to self-worth / self – confidence. Awkwardness in self, hadn't grown
		into identity perhaps?
Self is awkward	my own skin. It's taken me, years	
	,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,,	'years and years and years' - long process, time and effort to understand self and build up self-
Long process to become	and years and years <mark>to be</mark>	confidence and comfort in self.
comfortable with self		
	comfortable in me own skin - like	
	I'm, well I walk around with	
		Presents self in a way that stands out, not usual hair colour. Wants to be noticed or different.
Confidence develops with	bright orange hair f-, for, for	Contrast to self from the past – wanted to blend in / disappear offline.
age / time		
-8-,	example. If, I wouldn't, I weren't	
	exampler nyr hoeldir c <mark>er neren s</mark>	
	gonna to be doing that like five,	
	banda to be doing that me me,	
	10 years ago, d'ya know what I	Becoming more comfortable with self-expression and self-presentation.
	mean. I wouldn't dream of it. So,	

Social media has positive qualities	I feel like social media has influenced me in tha-, in, in some	Social media has some strengths that are 'positive' in how they impact users.
Unable to sustain level of interaction	positive ways, but negatively because now it's got to the point where I am not on social media	'positive…negatively' – very binary language. Tipping point
Total deletion of all social media Facebook remains –	whatsoever, <mark>on <i>none</i> of it.</mark> I'm only on Facebook because me	'on none of it' – total exclusion of social media. Emphasised.
family pressure	mum mithers me to be on it [<i>laughs</i>] <u>.</u> And <mark>she doesn't need</mark>	Family pressure to engage with social media on some level – contradiction to above point, so he is still on some form of social media. Is Facebook not classed as social media anymore?
Purpose of social media has changed	me to be on it, she lives in [a] bloody [town near me] [<i>laughs</i>] she can come and see me, <u>d'ya</u>	Sense of social media being useful for those people far away to maintain connections rather than those close by who can engage with people more easily in person.
	know what I mean.	
	NSC: So you kind of mentioned something really interesting	

APPENDIX L – Participant Themes

James

Emergent Themes	Page of table	Key Words
Superordinate theme: I'm different in this oth	ner way as well	
Multiple minority identities	p.7/8	Being gay AS WELL, trying, just fit
Can't separate my differences	p.19/21	Couldn't differentiate, went together, pieces of clay
Where the hell am I?	p.20	Didn't know, firmly put
l've always been gay	p.86	It's always been gay
Superordinate theme: Accepting myself throu	igh the role models I see	
Connecting to celebrities to find my place	p.30	Iconic people, bringing the old school back
Adam Lambert changed my life	p.65	He was everything I identified as
I can incorporate his image into mine	p.66	Incorporate into my own
I am different people now and then	p.73	Appreciation, nothing like who I am now, completely different people

Superordinate theme: Live your life and	l find your positivity	
You can only relate if you live it	p.60	Try and relate, live it, don't understand
Role models	p.88	Social media influences and supports others
Fuck Everyone else	p.92	Sod a label, be happy, carry on doing what you're doing.
Superordinate theme: How do I figure t	his all out?	
Vulnerability	p.2	Dealing with sexuality
Social media confusion	p.3	Relationships? Community? Connection?
Stereotypes	p.3	Labels, ideals, where do I fit?
Confusion	p.7 / p.9	Box myself, exploring, confusion
Female influence	p.11	Am I mimicking girls? I am figuring it out
Jumping to and fro	p.20/21	Where I was firmly put, to and fro, trying to explore
Pack mentality	p.63	Assessed, where do you belong, they decide
Superordinate theme: Realisations	p.63	Assessed, where do you belong, they decide

Bye bye Grindr	p15/16	Tried it, not for me, don't like it
Role models were accepted	p.30/31	Androgynous, confidence, make this work, creativity
Realisation you are still alone	p.62/63	Should feel welcomed into community – still on your own
Adam Lambert changed my life	p.65	He was everything I identified as
I can incorporate his image into mine	p.66	Incorporate into my own, amazing, good make-up on a guy
Role models gave me my values	p.89	Replicate, what they believed in
Superordinate theme: Performing in secret		
Performing in secret	p.8	Parents didn't know
Performing in secret Disinhibited, feminine and flamboyant - online	p.8 p.15	Parents didn't know Carefree, Dramatic, Putting on a show
Disinhibited, feminine and flamboyant -		
Disinhibited, feminine and flamboyant - online	p.15	Carefree, Dramatic, Putting on a show
Disinhibited, feminine and flamboyant - online Situationally split identities – I'm me	p.15 p.24	Carefree, Dramatic, Putting on a show Gay and learning difficulties, I am just James
Disinhibited, feminine and flamboyant - online Situationally split identities – I'm me I have no one to defend me but me	p.15 p.24 p.51	Carefree, Dramatic, Putting on a show Gay and learning difficulties, I am just James Alone, isolated, vulnerable

Hindering my authenticity	p.84 / 85	Behaviours, speech alters around men – long time to build up trust
Superordinate theme: Creating a genuine who	le	
Exploding out	p.12	Tolerate, most angriest, pissed off, back off, prodding
Minority identities were always linked	p.20	Sitting in two minorities
Minority identities constructed as different rates	p.21	Still going through, two mixed pieces of clay
Lashing	p.40	Being genuine self, online was no different to offline
Integrating the online and offline personae	p.69	It started becoming similar
The merging of selves	p.69/70	Character started seeping – I can be this person and it's fine
Drag becomes reality	p.71/73	Alter ego, merge the two together, characters
Superordinate theme: I'm not sure how this fe	els	
Still uncertain	p.14	Toying with the sexuality after coming out
This skin doesn't fit	p.17	Still uncomfortable with self
Ignore my feelings	p.56	Regardless of how I felt or whether I wanted one

Superordinate theme: Appreciation and Support				
l am James	p.13	No longer gayboy, name for myself		
Appreciation online	p.35	A lot of appreciation online		
Online positivity	p.37	Amazing, positive feedback		
Abusers	p.45	Fighting, still here, don't stop, like it or not		
Mothers unconditional support	p.58	Then it's not meant to be with girls, no big deal		
Mothers love	p.60	Mum gave me all she could		
I know where I stand	p.75	Unapologetically themselves, encouraging, strong minded, bubbly		
We are family	p.81	Family, open minded, grounded		
Superordinate theme: Empowerment				
Social media was my voice	p.5	A voice, fearful of using in real world		
Exploding out	p.12	Tolerate, most angriest, pissed off, back off, prodding		
Bulletproof	p.13	That's my bulletproof now		
More than my labels	p.23	So much more to us		

Social media created confidence	p.25	Helped confidence
Sending out an inclusive message	p.32	You can be a boydo whatever the fuck you want
Doing it for me – no one else	p.34	Fuck it – I'm doing whatever the fuck I want
Silent Assassin	p.39 / 40	After coming out, bite your head off
Turning negative into a strength	p.40	Pent up anger, repressed for years
Fighting for my rights	p.42	I gotta fight for what I believe in
Anger as a tool for change	p.46	Use anger to be heard, seen, put my points across
I am absolutely fine with it	p.72	Loud, opiniated
Superordinate theme: Negativity		
Negative attention was still attention	p.5/6	Seeking validation, confidence, get any attention
No likey, no confidencey	p.8	Striving, feel validated
Parental separation	p.10	Questioning trajectory of sexuality
Social media toxic waste	p.25	So, so toxic, what would I do for a like?
Desperately seeking validation	p.27	I want likes, I want validation
Social media as a relationship	p.28	Fighting with social media

Social media as a narcissistic relationship	p.38	Conflicting, toxic, exciting relationship
I have no one to defend me but me	p.51	Alone, isolated, vulnerable
Superordinate theme: Discrimination Prejudice	e Oppression	
World is unkind	p.23	It doesn't treat you so kindly, enforced labels
Multiple minority identities	p.7/8	Being gay AS WELL, trying, just fit
I will get a lot of shite for this	p.36	Backlash, chased, hunted down, I'm gonna die
Not there for learning – wanted to make you feel like shite	p.41	I don't know who the person is, face behind the screen, suddenly on my doorstep with a knife
Oppressors	p.42	Oppression of LGBTQ+ community
Men are threatening	p.82/83	Difficult interactions, threatened, had to hide myself
Superordinate theme: Luck		
Lucky stars	p.39	Quick witted, have a mouth on me
Family dynamic	p.81	Really helped, open minded, grounded, I count my lucky stars
Grateful for privilege	p.82	Where I've come from

Superordinate theme: Questioning			
Perhaps, maybe, ifp.11Never a definitive			
Superordinate theme: Social Stressors			
Dad left	p.10	Dad ended up leaving	

Zain

Emergent Theme	Page of table	Key Words		
Superordinate theme: Consciously Different to Majority				
Retrospective awareness	p.17	even as a young boy, I just knew that I was different		
Working out the difference	p.18/19	Conflicts, inner conflict, anxiety, depression		
Cultural difference	p.21	he understood that culturally		
Self-awareness	p.76	I kind of knew it myself anywaythat I'm gay, and I'm quite proud of that fact		
Educating others through difference	p.80	developing that level of understanding and awareness		
Difference is felt within and offline	p.84	under the age of 10		
Life would be challenging	p.87	I kind of knew from a young age that, this was my life		
Awareness of difference	p.91	I always knew I was gay in that respect.		
	I	I		
Superordinate theme: Connection and sup	port from others			
Supportive Colleagues	p.2	Colleaguesencouraged me		

Partners influence	p.20	My partners very, very supportive	
Partners positivity	p.21	Loyalty, confidence, love, being loved	
Impetus to come out to family	p.20	I only came out after I had met my partner	
Connection to others	p.28	Ally or a friend	
Parental acceptance a gift	p.46	Accept, understand, support	
Superordinate theme: Connection and	support towards others		
Lacking support	p.22	No support groups	
Role model	p.31	Connecting with me and contacting me	
Support others	p.38	Utilise knowledge, my experience	
Recognise own achievements	p.49	Championed	
Superordinate theme: Questioning			
Gradual curiosity	p.18	Slowly beginning to experiment	
Self education	p.43	Let me read for myself	
Clarity	p.43	Make better sense of it all	

Lost	p.17/18	No words to itno frame of reference
Suffering	p.19	Anxieties and depression – I didn't have any words for it
Норе	p.28	Needed hope and understanding
Superordinate theme: Experiences		
Learning	p.40	Taught me
Out of comfort zone	p.54	Let me put myself through it so I can learn
Always learning	p.67	I'm learning now at age 52
Learning through others	p.75	I didn't realise properly until the one contestant said
Learning through others	p.73	I knowI talk to people and read about it
Superordinate theme: Separating par	ts of self	
Hide sexuality online	p.3	Keepgayness out of it

Separate wholeness	p.7	Trying to reconcile faith, sexual orientation and gender	
Distance	p.18	Student in particular	
Personal and Professional	p.16	Professional aspectstill remain gay	
Currentingto the max Curthonic			
Superordinate theme: Synthesis			
Incorporate sexuality and faith	p.9	It's OK to be gay and Muslim	
Remaining religious	p.14	Remain withinreligion	
Pride	p.14	Be who you want to be	
Integration	p.30	Combine the two	
Familial synthesis	p.46	Came round to meet my partner	
Validation	p.47	galvanised	
Superordinate theme: Negativity and	Denial		
Discrimination	p.19	So so negative	
Guilt	p.19	Carried what I call religious guilt	

ely oppressive	p.19	Stress and anxiety
ed with who I was	p.24	Struggle
, depressed	p.32	Isolation
s is abnormal	p.42	Deviant
ssion and silence, internalised hobia	p.87	Denial
s my life	p.87	Resignation
		Superordinate theme: Acceptance of
n be who you want to be	p.14	Acceptance
it known I am gay and Muslim	p.15	Vocal
nat all my life now	p.47	Enduring acceptance
nt	p.90	Confidence
ut, be unique	p.81/82	Individuality
ne confidence	p.53	Confidence
rength	 p.45	Security
JL		

Superordinate theme: Positivity			
Giving back	p.55	Set up social support group	
Giving others a voice	p.55	Connect LGBTQ+ SA people	
Positivity	p.39	People appreciate positivity that I put out there	
Social media as a tool	p.82	Sharing and connecting	
South Asian Connection	p.7	Someone they connect with	
Demanding change	p.41	I cant be having the same stories	
I'm proud of my intuition	p.75/76	Knew it myself anyway, proud of that fact	
Superordinate theme: Discrimination and a	buse from others		
Compounded systemic discrimination	p.20	Toxic, combination – MH, Sexuality, religion, very toxic	
Death threats	p.41	High levels of abuse and death threats	
Death threats	p.58	Being gay and Muslim	
Challenging discrimination from LGBT	p.81	Constant challenging behaviour, stereotypes	

Superordinate theme: Luck			
Luck	p.20	Really fortunate	
Fortunate	p.28	Fortunate	
Privilege	p.35	Fortunate now	
Avoided problems	p.57	Touched and fortunate	

APPENDIX M – Personal Reflexivity

Throughout this research I have been keeping record of my personal experiences and emotions. As a person who identifies as queer, who does not feel I sit with the gender binaries of men and women, who holds identities of neurodiversity and disability, I felt this needed to be kept in my awareness and understood to bracket and remove any bias – as best I could – moving through the process of interview, analysis and write up.

I found the research much more emotive and challenging than I perhaps initially expected. Conducting research on social media meant I joined or followed people from within the LGBTQ+ community and this quickly become an "echo chamber" of anxiety, distrust and overwhelm towards anyone who was not from within the community or an active ally of it. The recent shifts in political positions meant a number of legislative changes, both in the U.K. and internationally, stripped back the rights of LGBTQ+ people, leaving a vulnerable group even more vulnerable.

I therefore found it challenging to be posting my recruitment poster on social media. I felt like I was trying to utilise this very vulnerable group for my own gain – I am aware this is not as polarised as it may seem and my research aimed at helping the community – but there felt like a part of me was feeling guilt and shame whenever I posted recruitment ads because of the historic medicalisation and "research" into LGBTQ+ people which has gone before and was hugely damaging to the community and the fall out of which endures in HIV/AIDS misinformation, sexual health associations, the medicalisation of same-sex / gender attraction, misinformation about sex/gender and treatment of young people in gender clinics.

I had times where it was like watching a proverbial "car crash" on social media where posts of LGBTQ+ people with families, LGBTQ+ people generally or through being authentic, living a free life and expressing themselves was met with vile, abusive and damaging comments from others. I could not interject or comment as my role as researcher – though I therapeutically typed out responses only to delete them as I was aware responses were not ethical or appropriate – but seeing (usually cisgender men, but a number of women) comment about gender diverse people as 'it' or with pictures of a noose in the comments sections, comments about the person needing to kill themselves, catch AIDS etc. has actually left me feeling really emotionally drained and frightened that this is still the narrative taken by some individuals. Even during my work with children in a primary school, I have had to educate these children that using the term 'gay' in a pejorative context is inappropriate and offensive.

I found the communities I wanted to "access" to give a voice, were actually the hardest to connect with. I reached out to the moderators of groups to see if they could let me join the group to post my research and the answer was always no. I asked moderators of the groups if they could post my information for me, the answer was no. I thought about joining a group just to chat and make 'online friends' with other members with the intention to then recruit more subtly but this did not sit well with me ethically nor morally, as this was even more exploitative and many conflicts of interest.

To join specific groups the individual needed to answer questions such as disclosing ethnicity or if you have a disability or how old you are if you are joining a group but I did not want to lie or present aspects of my identity that feel very personal just to gain access, because again this is not ethical. However, this made me consider my participants, my privilege in areas of

my life and how challenging disclosing invisible, perhaps stigmatising, identities can be for all people.

I felt really frustrated by this as I feel like there are just blocks to people engaging with multiply marginalised groups but from what I have seen I can now totally understand why.

If I were to start this again now – or advice to give someone undertaking this now – I would definitely consider the impact this would have on your own view of the world. Stay on the sites as little as possible - almost like a metaphor of running through a haunted house to retrieve something and leave by the nearest exit. I feel it would be important for people to not get their hopes up because recruitment will be challenging and the willingness for others to engage will be hard because they are potentially suspicious and/or scared. I found people / organisations have 'liked' and reposted my recruitment information but have not completed it themselves and it felt a little bit like a false nicety or showing 'lip service' that they have done their bit through a like and that is all they need to do – this again made me consider further research into this behaviour of liking something on social media is enough.

Although it was clear in the information sheet that participants would have the option to share screen shots of their social media posts, something I found interesting was this seemed to put potential participants off engaging in the study altogether. This was something I wondered about, as participants would be comfortable posting information or thoughts – even one participant in the interview stage stated that he used social media like a diary or journal and would post things about medical appointments on there – yet when given the option to share these posts as part of the research process, people either declined or stopped engaging withdrawing from study participation so this was amended to remove this aspect of

the analysis and therefore fundamentally removing the Netnography component of the study.

This left me wondering what was behind this. Was there a fear of feeling judged or being exposed in some way or if there was discussion about one specific post it might be uncomfortable for the participant. If social media was seen almost as a diary was this not information and feelings usually kept private? If an individual could post online this information, what was the hesitancy or resistance to sharing and discussing posts in person? Is this an example of online disinhibition where the asynchronicity was removed and the person had no distance between the post and someone else? Again this brought up thoughts about area for further research.

Having engaged in the research process the experience has been somewhat different to what I expected. One of the most interesting experiences was that of the interviews themselves. One participant in particular made statements where I wanted to interject with and correct them, as they referenced research that was known to be flawed in relation to desistance of gender diversity in young people as they move into adulthood – an argument often touted by anti-trans people (and something the participant acknowledge themselves although they were not anti-trans – however I could not interject as that was not my role even though the information/education being disseminated was very poor quality and subsequently worrying.

Another participant pretended to be two people and did two separate interviews – they gave themselves different names and responded from two different email addresses. Although there could be no substantial proof this was the case, as they requested they conduct the interview with their camera off, the second interviewee referred to himself using the name of the first interviewee, and the second interviewee paused when answering some questions that the first interviewee answered without hesitation and the responses were very similar in both accounts. I felt the participant(s) had the same voice and the emails that were sent came from both participants within a few minutes of each other each time. The participant also kept repeating terminology from the PIS and consent forms and the answers felt vague and impersonal. I decided I either had to use both or neither interviews; considering I felt my trust had been broken, I felt using these interviews may skew the findings so decided to omit these interviews altogether.

I found myself in constant states of flux with this research across its duration. I found it really interesting, informative and exciting to be uncovering new ideas and relating them back to existing theories; I have however, found the process slow and have been impatient when things have been in the hands of others before I could move forward.

I found analysis of the transcript emotionally distressing at times and had occasionally been angry and aghast at how participants had been treated by society, by peers and in some cases by family. I was aware of challenges LGBTQ+ people faced on a daily or weekly basis (as I myself have experienced them) but after the repeated reading of transcripts, the addition of online abuse I witnessed to others in the community, as well as similar experiences I had which were recalled during this process, it often felt draining, overwhelming and challenging to say the least and I needed time away from the research process on occasion. Witnessing the online vitriol was a difficult thing to stomach in isolation, however, hearing participants multiple experiences from this small group of people in detail – the abuse, the violence, the rejection and discrimination that lead to mental health challenges, anxieties and even considerations of suicide became too overwhelming at times. One afternoon, having cried and feeling tired of focusing on the adversities of participants and reading more research

about the same such experiences, I had to leave the research and come back to it a week or so later.

A really light-hearted and fun experience in the research was realising that the experiences which emerged through analysis of the participant interviews were similar to those of Alice in the Lewis Carroll book 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland'. Having then gone away to read the book myself, I noticed that much like the participants' experiences, it held some dark and lonely times as well as some colourful and surreal experiences which correlated with the themes in this research (see Appendix P for examples). Having realised Kurt's statement "...one curiosity led to another led to another, led to another..." reminded me of Alice's statement at the beginning of chapter two,

""Curiouser and curiouser!" cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English)..."

I feel like I have loved the research, I am proud of my research and the findings, I feel like it is a unique take on something that has been missing in sexual identity theory, I am proud of myself for where this has come to.

Professional Reflexivity

As I have progressed through this process, researching and writing each chapter - each stage has brought with it many points of reflexivity for me as a professional.

Working psychotherapeutically with individuals from the LGBTQ+ community it is a humbling and enlightening experience to hear their challenges, resilience and recognise how this research aligns in various ways.

From an anti-oppressive practice perspective, the anxieties and fears that come into therapy sessions are reflections of the state of the world for LGBTQ+ people – what is happening out there is happening in the room. Realising and feeling my fears around the rise of far-right political groups across the world makes me fear for the LGBTQ+ community, and other marginalised groups, and I empathise greatly with clients sitting in front of me who speak of their concerns – what makes me sad is this is nothing new. As participants mention the oppressive Section 28 legislation of the Thatcher government, my worry for our social regression often comes into my own clinical supervision.

As an educator in higher education, delivering lectures on anti-oppressive practice in counselling I often feel like I am in a bubble or an echo chamber, safe and validated. Feeling driven by fire as I recognise my own experiences of oppression (and privilege) and how I, rightly, feel guilt and shame for my historic ignorance and somewhat poor behaviour in stereotyping minority groups and/or being discriminatory in my youth – however as Chris pointed out, this was a product of the time – but still not an excuse. In the past my own internalised homonegativity fuelled me to alter my own appearance to be a part of the hegemonic ideas of masculinity in the gay community and punch down on those with multiply

marginalised identities from my ivory tower, yet thorough personal therapy, life challenges, meditation, my spiritual path and deep personal and professional reflections, my own identities have changed aligning more authentically with who I truly am. This privilege has given me strength, determination, drive and certainty about who I am – I have often felt this is one of the reasons I work with this client group and whilst engaging in this research I also resonated with various aspects of each participant in various ways.

Having engaged in the literature review it has been another process which was both enlightening and infuriating. The repeated focus of the patriarchal structures of oppression, the rationale for it occurring and how it maintains the status quo for those in positions of privilege is something that I have used as reflections in my therapeutic work and within my academic role. These structures however do not just impact the lives of LGBTQ+ people but all those minoritised groups and those with intersectional identities. The reinforcement of the damage and abuses faced – even through historic studies meaning to embrace and support LGBTQ+ (mainly gay men and women) – sometimes made for uncomfortable reading. However, I come back to Chris' point, they were a product of their time and now, we (should) know better. The multiple stressors (social, minority and intra-community) are something that despite knowing prior to this research, are something I bring into client work – I feel like it is important for me to shine a light on these systemic issues to help client's realise it isn't them being difficult, it is the world being difficult towards them – and it isn't just one place but multiple places, institutions and organisations which hold these barriers and structures to oppress, minimise and invalidate (I speak not just of LGBTQ+ people but all minoritised groups).

Something I tried to locate and understand in this process were the sexual identities of the researchers who created these grand theories of sexual identity development – e.g. Cass, Coleman, Troiden, D'Augelli, McCarn and Fassinger etc. – how did they identify and what was it that drove them to focus on sexual minority / gay men and sexual identity development at the time they did? I could not find this information for many of the authors.

Personally, the position I take for the concept of 'self' is one of a more spiritual nature - we are born with an innate soul which is unchanging and is the connection to a higher being and the identities we shape and construct merely reinforce the ego (the pseudo soul) and stripping those back reveals the authentic self. Professionally I do not disclose this but with clients it is helpful to recognise the idea of identity as performance so understanding compassionately why, and how, they are performing roles to get needs met and realise all people are complex individuals – it has been helpful for clients to reflect on where and with who, they can be their most authentic self, which links in with the acceptance of self/from others, in findings but also feelings of empowerment and synthesis.

Chris' point - as a society we have forgotten how we can still be friends with people and disagree with their perspective on a subject —is something I have taken into consideration during my anti-oppressive practice lectures but also one that I reflect on with clients and in my own clinical supervision. To paraphrase Kurt, curiosity leads to understanding and if not understanding, further curiosity.

Something that has been a powerful process for my clients which has stemmed from this research was the importance of distance from family to explore sexual identity. From the concept of environment being a factor which can be helpful and supportive in finding out where an individual belongs (socially and in community), I have often worked with clients from various denominations in the LGBTQ+ community who either still live at home or reside in a space that doesn't reflect them, or who they are now.

I have worked with multiple clients to 'Queer the Environment' and change a room or a space however feels comfortable to them, which reflects their identity. A trans client I worked with still lived in the bedroom they had all their life which hadn't been decorated since pre-teen age and was not a reflection of the gender they are now. The changes in the room galvanised and validated their identity and they realised how much it helped them move forward. Another client lived at home with his parents and was out and open about his sexuality to them but his parents never spoke to him about it – he kept his LGBTQ+ 'stuff' in his room and his sexuality hidden – queering the environment gradually brought music, TV and literature from the LGBTQ+ community into other rooms in the house, included his parents and opened up conversations and shared experiences – again validating his identity but also synthesising it into the world of others. This has directly come from this research process which has been invaluable for clients in understanding themselves and the world around them.

APPENDIX N – Sample of Journal Entries

Have 2 interview lined up and in a little a little do Ind Intervier The use later at right and I appliedly hord a lot and Veally passionately about not expension but out at intesech and and was a good interview. FISV Merric Participant opour a lov - a lov of into about allar we knew about one topic & and bue topic value rand unout lis experiences of it were - learning part I make our I stress to falle sow into of their experiences. He was very police and intereoty and did matrin one informat oways so nor all low. Feel like anyo are dready Non-betero identry develops Attine. Activities and the enter that and englory. Internin finished lave & porscipul nas really nelfted with navy b dombard my stridy Couldn' deig property hips a chig up processing & recalling intertime subject et a. Fanuly RT - Superordinate Thenes. Control / Choice / Paver 5 Time Age / Matenty. Prinklye Oppression. Connection. / community Said Media of a relationship. Argieness of hittoena O Jelia Jaynes. - Metaphor Education / Knowledge Jawa Environment / distance @ Metaphor - PTM hangon. Acceptance of difforme - sut /over Up Tuesday. Month. Synthes: 3 Acel MA Acceptance Culture / Religion (4) Kuburt Enfavery Social redia uses. I developments. ADI) seely onhes Mg Abuse Ading Josep Connections Actry Development of Identity Cuch setty away Ree Pelipids pesove Reostince Eaturd Gender Question ately by hidy Onderty)



APPENDIX O - Researcher Answers the Study Questions Researchers Own Experience of Sexual Identity Construction

If we could start by you just telling me a little bit about your background and your history etc. and the experiences of social media you have and how you feel social media has affected your sexual identity in whichever way? (feel free to include all apps such as Grindr, Tinder etc.) This question initially may answer some of the follow up questions naturally anyway.

So, erm...I'm Noah, I'm the researcher in this study. Erm, and my background; so I, erm, identify as queer, and, A- kind of...gender neutral position. I don't know whether I identifies as er, ase-, agender or Non-binary or um, gender queer. Um, I don't use social media. At all. And I never really have.

So I grew up in a time when there was no internet. And, um I, Internet sort of came out when I was about 14, 13, 14, And I was quite lucky because we got that at home. Um dial up I remember - dial up internet. Um...And...Yeah, so social media, I wasn't really a big fan of social media, I found it quite intrusive. I never really understood it. I didn't really want to verbalized things to massive groups of people. So, um, Yeah, I stayed off it so I don't think it really affected my sexual identity. Erm but I did use things like dating apps, um but that was much later.

So I used that later on when, um I already knew my identity was initially gay actually. But then, I identified as queer because I think gay for me is quite - almost stereotypical and it's quite fixed and, for me personally, I have been in relationships with trans women um, trans men, um, other people identified as queer; and for me, queer is, um I remember when I was, about 14 or something um, and I had an argument with my brother, and my dad and my brother knew that I was gay and I remember shouting out the window at my brother he'd said something like, why did you do that? And I just shout out as a joke, I'm, because I'm queer; and um, I remember my dad going absolutely mad, Um and telling me to shut up and that I shouldn't be shouting, things like that out the window. Um, Yeah, so that's um, that's where I am with kind of my backgrounds. Yeah, so social media hasn't really affected my sexual identity I wouldn't say um it's something, I guess I'm quite privileged in the sense of my research and my Learning, and, and so that's come very much from academia, and, erm, I suppose there are some things on social...um...er, like searching on the internet and watching things on the internet and understanding things more about myself and a lot of personal reflection. So I obviously as a counsellor, psychotherapist I am, there is a lot of internal reflection and kind of processing. And I do also think that my practise of yoga and my spiritual practise has really kind of helped me to understand that actually, we are constantly in a state of change and nothing is ever fixed...And Why shouldn't that happen as well for sexuality. Yeah.

Childhood/Growing-Up

What part of your identity did you struggle the most with growing up? What was this like for you and how did you cope?

So the part of my identity, I struggled with the most growing up was my, my sexuality. My...I'm yeah, you know, white. I'm Male quite masculine presenting, so erm, and, but growing up, I

think I was quite like, quite feminine. Erm, I'm Had lots of friends that were girls. Liked art. Didn't do any sport at all.

I wasn't one of the lads or one of the boys, um, never played football anything like that. So, you know, I think I even played with dolls, and my mum - she died when I was 12 - but my mum didn't stop me from playing with dolls or like I had a Wendy house and erm, cooked and had a play kitchen and things like that which was seen a stereotypically more female toys.

So, Yeah, that was um, that was who I was and I think over the years, you or I learnt to kind of hide and repress that part of myself. So, had to very much become masculine, masculine to have a partner if I wanted it, if I wanted a male partner. Erm, I had to be masculine to be attractive I had to be, masculine to be accepted, I had to be masculine to be...as a protection. So Yeah. So well growing up very much my gayness and people would say 'Ooh your you gay' or 'you puff' and all that stuff um, there wasn't really anything you could do so like I kind of felt like it was, I used to feel a lot of shame, I used to feel humiliated erm, really awkward...you know, often like...Just felt very vulnerable; and I don't really know how a coped. I just think I put with it and then I think after my mum died, um it becomes, you know, I became quite not self-destructive but I became quite well, if I've, if this has happened this is like the worst thing that could have ever happened to me and now left with this man that didn't really kind of know very well and, my brother, erm who was a lot older than me. So you know, I think that kind of created resilience but it also created a sense of feeling like, um, I didn't care. Really. Um, so yeah. That's I guess how I coped.

<u>When did you start to realise you weren't "heterosexual" and how was this</u> <u>explored/understood?</u>

So, I kind of realised that I wasn't heterosexual -air quotes-, and I remember when I was three.

I was three years old and I was at Nursery. Um, and I remember, having...It wasn't attraction, I remember there was a person, another little boy. And i just wanted to spend all my time with him. I used to follow in round um...yeah, and I just felt this weird kind of longing to be with this person. Even though I still play with girls toys and played with dolls, and that stuff. It was still very much, I wanted to be around this, this little boy, and I couldn't, didn't know what it was but that's what it was. Just, I think looking back, that's what it was. It was a kind of attraction. Um, but always a lot of time with my sister. Again, my sister's a lot older than me. When I was young my mum. I spent a lot of time with them. So like my sister would have her girlfriends. So I'd spend a lot of time with them so I would Watch things...Like, I remember what-, watching Dirty Dancing. Like, and, an, erm, she kept, they catch on a pause, Patrick. Swayze, got out the bed and he had no like pants and you can see his bum and they kept trying to pause it and like laughing when they were trying to get to see his bum; and I was just kind of Okay, that wasn't I wasn't bothered about that, I didn't really care. And then, Yeah, I used to wear makeup and like women's clothes and stuff like that. And play dress up and things. So, I was always a very queer child, I think - a very queer kid um, and in some ways in some one respect, my mum was like, don't care that's fine , and another respect my dad wanted to take me out and play football, Um not because he wanted me to, he wanted to spend time with me but more because he didn't want me to become...like gay. And you know, since kind of growing up, it's kind of been told to me that my dad said to my sister, that it's her fault that I'm gay. Even though I don't identify as that but that's what he says, he's my thought it's her fault that I'm gay because she spent too much time with me and she used to let me dress up and play with dolls when I was younger. And that's yeah...

<u>As you moved through life situations and experiences, which aspects of your identity helped</u> <u>or hindered your sexual identity – as you understood it – (e.g., religion, culture, gender, body</u> <u>type), and why?</u>

So, I think. The aspect of my identity that helped me...with my sexuality - my sexual identity, is probably my gender, I think I'm quite lucky in that sense. I think my education also helped. Um my, you know, my gender at the time I suppose, because that's changed, but at the time, My sex, my gender presentation was more, masculine more male, and I think that put me in a privileged position, I think my ethnicity being white, it's really put me in a position of privilege. Um, and my education, you know, I went to a private school. Um, not that that's anything, but, you know, I think it puts you in a position where your pushed into things that, you know, you're expected to do the certain, to get certain grades and to do a certain level of you know, behaviour and a kind of expectation of rules following rules, and that source stuff.

So, I think that helped um and then what hindered my sexual identity. I don't know, I don't think it was any other part of me. I think um, I think as well actually what helped was, like I say my kind of spiritual beliefs and my kind of faith, I suppose or whatever you want to call it. I don't practice a religion but I think, you know, a read a lot about particularly eastern religions. Um, Buddhism Hinduism, and that really influences me from when I was about 12 after my, after my dad die- em – after my mum died, and there was a lot of literature around the house on Buddhism. So I just would read that; um, and that kind of extended into Hinduism. And it made quite a lot of sense to me, erm not to rationalise, the death, but over time it's kind of, made me think, Oh, Yeah. And, and I think it's one of the roots of those religions don't match the have much of a stance on homosexuality or gender non-conformity. The religion doesn't but I know from like kind of learning that the culture does in some places.

Erm, so yeah, so that helped but what hindered I suppose that nothing I can think of my identity hindered um, hindered it. I think the hindrance came from the lack of support and the lack of understanding, the lack of acceptance. There was always this kind of after I came out, I think I came out about 14 to my dad, um, and the first thing he said was it's fine as I just want it rubbed in my face.

So...You know. In a way, that was me kind of thinking oh, that's great, I'm being accepted but in hindsight that's not acceptance, that's erasure - that's oppressive, kind of speak of like, you know, I'm going to ignore it and I'm going to ignore you. Um, so that was never, that was never what I thought it was and over time you know I, I didn't hide it, um but I was, you know, 'it's a phase' was banded about – erm, he went through this weird phase of like, every time he would go to the toilet or go to the bathroom, he would announce it to me, like, I want to. Like I want to know. Um, so it made me feel really quite weird and a bit, not dirty, but just like I was, I was doing something wrong or I was something wrong. Um, you know, and that whole male crap about 'oh bums against walls' and, oh, I want to get in changing room and have a gay person in there and all that crap. Erm it was almost like touting that narrative. So...Yeah, it didn't feel very supportive erm, my mum's side of the family - my grandparents were very bigoted, so I didn't tell them. I was afraid that if I told my uncle, who's not bigoted, he would tell my grandparents so I didn't tell them. So I didn't really have anyone really to talk to about it. I told my dad, told my brother. Um, Yeah, and that was it. And then obviously my friends; so my friends were like a big source of support. Um, and yeah, they was people I could confide in um, and, and, you know, at that time, I would go out onto the, to the scene going to the village in Manchester um, meet people kind of, you know understand terminologies,

understand like, like how things worked like socially and things like that. Um like the different groups of people and you know, the popular crowd or whatever. Yeah, that's, that's what was.

Social Media Use

Have social media apps influenced how you came to understand your sexual identity? If so, how (including when did this happen/over what time period/has your sexual identity changed because of these apps)?

- If not, how (and when) did you start to understand your sexual identity?
- Is your sexual identity quite fixed or has it changed through your life/situations?

Has connecting with others similar to you on social media helped you understand/affirm your sexual identity?

What parts of your online persona are similar to your real-world presentation? Or how do they differ? What are your motivations for presenting these aspects differently?

Who do you follow on social media who has similar identities to you?

What is it about these people/person that makes you feel connected to them?

Have you ever experienced reject / discrimination on apps due to any aspect of your identity?

So, as I say, don't think social media's influenced how I've come to understand my identity, my sexual identity, because I don't use it...erm...Um, I think online, maybe has, erm, I would say online has, um through things like, you know, just exploring understanding, you know, even now sometimes if like I hear it terminology that's in a context of an LGBTQ+, thing, then I'll look it up, you know, since I was c-, I, since I came out there's been so much change in the community so it used to be the LGB community and then it changed the LGBT community and then it changed to LGBTQ. I, A - and then all the other letters, um that come after that. Um, so it's, it's become more inclusive, you know, I remember, er Pride - Gay pride used to be like a tiny thing and now it's this massive event.

Erm, every year, So, Yeah, there has been a lot of change. There's been a lot of change and so-, you know, socially there's been a lot of change, you know, gay marriage has come in, gay can adopt, um, you know, with HIV medications, so there's a lot of less stigma around that, um more awareness. So, Yeah, I wouldn't say social media's helped, but I would say that errr, online definitely has um, I think when I was younger, the thing that I, I can remember finding a video once in my brother's room and just playing it - and this was on my mum was still alive so I must have been about nine or 10, um and it was, it was porn. I remember being really attracted to the, the male performers. But I had to take it, take that off and so I kind of those things started to, you know, trigger kind of like alarm, not alarm bells, but like awareness, I suppose um, and I used to do dancing, and I remember once I was there all day, so went to a newsagents and I picked up a magazine, I didn't, so to read. I'd literally, I'd no idea - I chose it because I remember Mark Wahlberg was on the cover and I used to really fancy Mark Wahlberg and I must have been about 12 13, maybe a bit older um, and I remember taking about to dancing school and I was reading it and I realised, this is like a gay magazine. It's got lots of reference to gay stuff in it and shirtless men and um and I was thinking, oh my god, I've picked up this magazine but it was really kind of illuminating and it was a lot of it was a

lot of lightbulbs that went off. So, Yeah. So that was kind of my, my awareness of this stuff, and, and then, as you kind of, you know, get internet at home, you start to look at pawn or I did anyway, porn online erm and yeah, it was kind of validating or consolidating what I thought I knew, in to, you know, something that was really concrete. Yes this is, this is who I am. And, you know, I had friends who I'd told and erm, they were really supportive and they actually went out with me, um, to gay clubs and stuff, they're like, let's go and get you, you know, let's go and see if there's anyone that you can you know, connect with and stuff. So, you know, when I was like 15, 16, I think I looked about, 18, 19, so um, yeah, we used to go out in, go to clubs and stuff and, um, and I think a lot of that as, well, was me running away from how hideous things were at home. Feeling really ashamed of who I was so I'd take lots of of drugs and drink a lot and stay out all weekend - Um yeah, that was that was coping I suppose um which, in hindsight isn't, isn't healthy, obviously. But I think it was you know, I wouldn't change it because I had some really amazing experiences and met some great people and you know, it was fun and I think yeah, you know, I think a lot of teenagers might go off the rails and drink a lot or take drugs and stuff and that's part of growing up, I suppose. But for me, it was part of being away from that home and not feeling how I felt. You know, not wanting to feel like I wasn't good enough or feeling like I was wrong or like no one cared. Um, yeah, that's how that's how it felt. So, social media didn't actually, didn't actually define my sexual identity but, erm other stuff, online stuff definitely did. And remember using chat rooms and stuff er, and you could only type text, you like, you know, this was way before like webcams and images you could put online unless you scan them in, um like a photo you scanned in. So, this was you know, very basic stuff. Um, and I remember meeting someone um, from online on that and he had no photo, I didn't have a photo we met, and it was really awkward and um yeah, I think he came to the house actually, which is um my dad was away.

He came to the house which in hindsight is really dangerous and like you know, when yourself for 15, 16 It's not really the most safe thing to do. But yeah, I think it just wanting to experience stuff and yeah, I think a lot of risk-taking I suppose which comes into it. So erm, I think with the, the online stuff, the only kind of experience, I have a kind of apps and social media online is the, is through dating apps. And I always kind of presented myself in a very authentic way, I think. Well I'd hope, because I had had experiences of going online - on dating apps and meeting people who were not like their pictures. Who didn't look their age. You know their pictures were very old and things. And I always felt that that was really dangerous and quite unfair. So, I always try to present myself as authentically as possible. Um, Yeah. So on, on dating apps, but that I've not been on dating apps for years, I'm, you know, married, been married for six years. We've been together for about nine years, um, so it feels like that was a very, that's a very distant thing. And, but I do remember on those apps, you would have, like, you would like see very kind of discriminatory things on people's profiles, you would kind of experience, things, like, people just block you, or people would talk to you and then they just wouldn't, they just wouldn't message you back. So it was a very weird, it was a very weird place in some respects you, go from being a really exciting place because you'd feel really validated and you'd feel really attractive and people would like want to get to know you put on the flip side, you'd also get people who didn't want to get to know you or would be guite rude to you. Um, yeah. And then I think as well, I was a bit of a dick. I think I was kind of Intentionally, and sometimes, maybe unintentionally. I wouldn't be overtly like a racist, or abusive or anything, but you wouldn't find somebody attractive or somebody would be messaging you or you know, and sometimes people would message you over and over and over and over again, even if you said no you're not interested, so you would have to kind of block them um, and I think it got to point where, you know, people would message you and I

think you just become so, well kind of disillusioned with it all you just think, Oh, I can't be bothered to speaking to you, so I just would block them straight away. And now on, in hindsight, I think that's probably what other people would do. Erm, you know, hitting a block button is easier than saying, oh look I'm really sorry, I'm not interested and there's something in that as well about not, for me anyway, about not wanting to hurt people's feelings, or feel bad that I've said, no, even though people still feel bad because you've just blocked them, um, so yeah. Um, but through that, that's kind of I guess those interactions is kind of how I started to realise, actually I'm not, I'm not gay, or...I'm not this fixed identity.

So, yeah, it has changed, you know? When I was younger people say you gay and I deny it, you know, try and have girlfriends that you never did anything with um, then I think is I went older, I came out was gay, a gay man and then I'm still had sex with a woman, um after I was a gay man but I think that was more kind of like...but I don't know what that was about...um, and then, kind of developed into this kind of queer person and a kind of you know....sort of being attracted to people, being attracted to things and, and, you know, I do think that, you know, some of it was maybe kind of substance fuelled, erm, maybe it wasn't. But yeah, you kind of I think it's a lot more...I think it became a lot more experimental and the things I did experiment with kind of validated, or would kind of you know, validated my sort of non-heterosexual identity, my queer identity - either validated it or kind of it didn't. So, yeah - and I think queer is such a flexible term. Um yeah, that's kind of what it that's what it did, really?

Adult Identity

Which aspects of your identity (such as ethnicity, gender, religion etc.) are similar to the people you have in your real life, such as family, friends, groups, colleagues etc.?

How do you connect with or affirm these identities offline and/or online?

Which aspects of your identity (such as ethnicity, gender, religion etc.) are similar to the people you have in your online life, again such as family, friends, groups, colleagues etc.?

So, um yeah, I don't follow anyone on social media because I'm, I'm not on it. Yeah, and you know, reject experience, rejection and discrimination on on social. Not on social media, but on erm, dating apps. Um - So the aspects of my identity that are similar to people I have in my life, my offline life erm, I think the people in my life are um...I think they're very diverse. I have male friends, female friends trans friends - Um, people from South Asian heritage backgrounds, people, people of colour, erm, different ages. Yeah, so I think for me, it feels important to have this diversity because as an adult, I don't think I'm ever finished, you know, I think everything changes constantly. Um, and I think it's really important for me to have allies in particular, of, you know, people who are allies people who are accepting and actually, you know, as I've grown up and I realised that you know, I have had to kind of let family, my dad, my brother, who don't really align to how I am or who I want in my life. You know quite toxic people um quite damaging people. I had to kind of let them, let them go, erm, because ultimately, I want people around me who I can contribute to their lives and support them in the way that they contribute to mind and support me you know, that doesn't matter what gender, what ethnicity, what religion they are. Erm, but I think the people that are in my life, who do contribute and, and, and, I guess our a big part of my life, um, those people from South Asian backgrounds or kind of...Muslim faith or whatever, don't actually, there's nothing really fixed about them, if that makes sense. So, you know, I have friends who are Jewish, who don't, who don't observe Sabbath on like Friday night Saturday. I've got friends who a Muslim who drink alcohol. I think this for me is really important because I think the people

in my life are flexible with their identities um, where they can be. Um, you know, it's not about saying well I'm this and therefore, I can't do that - it's about saying I'm this and I can do that. Um and I think that's really valuable for me, because it gives me the, the knowledge and the support and the, the confidence to say, actually, I'm me and I'm this but I can actually also be that and I'm not fixed in this role and I can actually do this other thing. And I think for me, as I'm kind of reflecting on that now, that is something that I feel is really important, is that humanity and people are so diverse that you can't put them into boxes, and if I can witness somebody who is Jewish or who is in their 70s, or who is South Asian being queer or being empowered or being something other than what is prescriptively assigned to that person, by society, that makes me think, actually do you know what, fuck it, I can do this as well. Um, you know, I can do that, other thing I can go away on holiday on my own; and I know that's like a little stupid thing, but I think, confident people, people who, like, I'm just fascinated by people, and, and I think being surprised by people, you know. My husband is neurodivergent, and he never fails to surprise me and I've known him for a while. There is no box for him, in a lot of senses. Like he does what he wants and I love that, you know, the yeah, the clients I work with, you know, as a therapist working with clients from the LGBTQ+ community in particular, erm witnessing people's growth, people's change people's light bulb moments um, and I realised, it's not about fitting, it's about being comfortable to not fit being comfortable being other. Um, and that for me, I think is is the part that I absolutely feel is valuable that are people are similar to me in my life.

So, Yeah. How do I connect with or affirm identities? My identities online and offline. So...My spiritual identity. I have many friends who are spiritual um and, you know, I teach Kundalini

Yoga, so I have a community of people. So that really affirms my belief, And that's a really big part of my life.

Sexuality and gender I could say I've had lots of people around me that that aren't just nonheterosexual or gender non-conforming, but also people who affirm that and people who are allies for, for us, for the community, who are you know, I went to a wedding a while ago and there was a guy there, um, who his girlfriend was pregnant and he's straight and she's straight and he made a comment about um, he works for a company in America and they said, oh, are you gonna do a gender reveal and he was like, 'What? Why would I do a...do you mean a sex reveal? Because that's all that, that we'll know whether it's a male or it's female. And or maybe something, but it's something that's intersex'. And I was thinking, wow - that's such an amazing thing to hear from a straight man, that actually, they don't care what gender the child is, they don't, they don't want to do this, what is kind of socially expected, um they just don't care. And if that child is, a gender other than man, woman, masculine, feminine, that's okay. You know if the child is intersex, that's okay. Um, Yeah, so I think that was, that's been really nice.

So, what aspects of my identity are similar to the people have in your life online life.

Okay, so yeah, I don't really have any online, online connections really, and I think the people I do have online, so for my yoga classes, I teach in-person and um, have a Facebook, Facebook page that advertises classes and things, so the people that come that I connect with online, I meet offline. So, I don't actually have a group of online people, um, and again that goes into the kind of identity of my spiritual identity. Um, so I don't really have an online life really don't really have an online presence, so yeah.

So that's it, I think!

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland	Affect / Behaviour	Relation to current research theme(s)
"Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do: once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading, but it had no pictures or conversations in it, "and what is the use of a book," thought Alice "without pictures or conversations?"" Here the Queen put on her spectacles, and began staring at the Hatter, who turned pale and fidgeted. "Give your evidence," said the King; "and don't be nervous, or I'll have you executed on the	Social expectation, invisible patriarchy, oppression, gender normative behaviour / threat	Social Stress / Minority Stress
spot." The rabbit-hole went straight on like a tunnel for some way, and then dipped suddenly down, so suddenly that Alice had not a moment to think about stopping herself before she found herself falling down a very deep well. Either the well was very deep, or she fell very slowly, for she had plenty of time as she went down to look about her and to wonder what was going to happen next. First, she tried to look down and make out what she was coming to, but it was too dark to see anything; then she looked at the sides of the well and noticed that they were filled with cupboards and book-shelves; here and there she saw maps and pictures hung upon pegs. I almost wish I hadn't gone down that rabbit-hole—and yet—and yet—it's rather curious, you know, this sort of life! I do wonder what <i>can</i> have happened to me!	One direction, uncertainty / unknown, maps and images – location and appearances, unable to reverse travel, vulnerable, surrendered, risk, curiosity	Threshold concept

APPENDIX P – Current research compared to Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll

 when the Rabbit came near her, she began, in a low, timid voice, "If you please, sir—" The Rabbit started violently, dropped the white kid gloves and the fan, and skurried away into the darkness as hard as he could go. Alice took up the fan and gloves, and, as the hall was very hot, she kept fanning herself all the time she went on talking: "Dear, dear! How queer everything is to-day! And yesterday things went on just as usual. I wonder if I've been changed in the night? Let me think: was I the same when I got up this morning? I almost think I can remember feeling a little different. But if I'm not the same, the next question is, Who in the world am I? "I wish you wouldn't squeeze so." said the Dormouse, who was sitting next to her. "I can hardly breathe." "I can't help it," said Alice very meekly: "I'm growing." 	Rejection, confused, uncertainty, feeling different, loss of identity, changing	Awareness of difference
There were doors all round the hall, but they were all locked; and when Alice had been all the way down one side and up the other, trying every door, she walked sadly down the middle, wondering how she was ever to get out againshe knelt down and looked along the passage into the loveliest garden you ever saw. How she longed to get out of that dark hall, and wander about among those beds of bright flowers and those cool fountains, but she could not even get her head through the doorway; "and even if my head would go through," thought poor Alice, "it would be of very little use without my shoulders. Oh, how I wish I could shut up like a telescope! I think I could, if I only knew how to begin." The Queen had only one way of settling all difficulties, great or small. "Off with his head!" she said, without even looking round.	Stuck, blocked, barriers, oppression, marginalisation, excluded, discrimination, limits, restrictions	Social / Minority stress Exploring

However, this bottle was <i>not</i> marked "poison," so Alice ventured to taste it, and finding it very nice, (it had, in fact, a sort of mixed flavour of cherry-tart, custard, pine-apple, roast turkey, toffee, and hot buttered toast,) she very soon finished it off.	Risks, exploring, determination, drive, satisfaction, 'Fuck it!', getting needs met	Exploring / Understanding
"Well, I'll eat it," said Alice, "and if it makes me grow larger, I can reach the key; and if it makes me grow smaller, I can creep under the door; so either way I'll get into the garden, and I don't care which happens!" So she set to work, and very soon finished off the cake.		
"Curiouser and curiouser!" cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English); "now I'm opening out like the largest telescope that ever was! Good-bye, feet!" (for when she looked down at her feet, they seemed to be almost out of sight, they were getting so far off).		
"What <i>is</i> a Caucus-race?" said Alice; not that she wanted much to know, but the Dodo had paused as if it thought that <i>somebody</i> ought to speak, and no one else seemed inclined to say anything. "Why," said the Dodo, "the best way to explain it is to do it."		
and when she had tired herself out with trying, the poor little thing sat down and cried. "Come, there's no use in crying like that!" said Alice to herself, rather sharply; "I advise you to leave off this minute!" She generally gave herself very good advice, (though she very seldom followed it), and sometimes she scolded herself so severely as to bring tears into her eyes; and once she remembered trying to box her own ears for having cheated herself in a game of croquet she was playing against herself	Self-critical, low mood, emotional, frustrated, stressed, defeated, isolation	Negative Mental Health
she sat down and began to cry again.		

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," said Alice, "a great girl like you," (she might well say this), "to go on crying in this way! Stop this moment, I tell you!" But she went on all the same, shedding gallons of tears with a sudden burst of tears, "I do wish they <i>would</i> put their heads down! I am so <i>very</i> tired of being all alone here!"		
this curious child was very fond of pretending to be two people "Who are <i>you</i> ?" said the Caterpillar. This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, "I—I hardly know, sir, just at present—at least I know who I <i>was</i> when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then." "What do you mean by that?" said the Caterpillar sternly. "Explain yourself!" "I can't explain <i>myself</i> , I'm afraid, sir," said Alice, "because I'm not myself, you see." "I don't see," said the Caterpillar. "I'm afraid I can't put it more clearly," Alice replied very politely, "for I can't understand it myself to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is very confusing." "Not at all," said Alice: "she's so extremely—" Just then she noticed that the Queen was close behind her, listening: so she went on, "—likely to win, that it's hardly worth while finishing the game."	Imagination, being someone else, confusion, loss of identity, uncertainty, adaption, thinking quickly	Splitting
"I must be Mabel after all, and I shall have to go and live in that poky little house, and have next to no toys to play with, and oh! ever so many lessons to learn!	Criticism of others, classism, privilege, social comparison, social	Intra-community stress

This speech caused a remarkable sensation among the party. Some of the birds hurried off at once: one old Magpie began wrapping itself up very carefully, remarking, "I really must be getting home; the night-air doesn't suit my throat!" and a Canary called out in a trembling voice to its children, "Come away, my dears! It's high time you were all in bed!" On various pretexts they all moved off, and Alice was soon left alone.	capital, discrimination, microaggressions	
after a few minutes it seemed quite natural to Alice to find herself talking familiarly with them, as if she had known them all her life.	Commonality, new normal, change, acceptance of others	Understanding, Synthesising
Then they all crowded round her once more, while the Dodo solemnly presented the thimble, saying "We beg your acceptance of this elegant thimble;" and, when it had finished this short speech, they all cheered.	Community, support, adaption	Acceptance of self / from others
Alice thought the whole thing very absurd, but they all looked so grave that she did not dare to laugh; and, as she could not think of anything to say, she simply bowed, and took the thimble		
Then she went to work nibbling at the mushroom (she had kept a piece of it in her pocket) till she was about a foot high: then she walked down the little passage: and <i>then</i> —she found herself at last in the beautiful garden, among the bright flower-beds and the cool fountains.		
Very soon the Rabbit noticed Alice, as she went hunting about, and called out to her in an angry tone, "Why, Mary Ann, what <i>are</i> you doing out here? Run home this moment, and fetch me a pair of gloves and a fan! Quick, now!" And Alice was so much frightened that she ran off at once in the direction it pointed to, without trying to explain the mistake it had made.	Authority, violence, threat, verbal disrespect, arrogance	Oppression / Discrimination
"We must burn the house down!" said the Rabbit's voice		
"Really, now you ask me," said Alice, very much confused, "I don't think—" "Then you shouldn't talk," said the Hatter.		

This piece of rudeness was more than Alice could bear: she got up in great disgust, and walked off;		
There was no label this time with the words "DRINK ME," but nevertheless she uncorked it and put it to her lips. "I know something interesting is sure to happen," she said to herself, "whenever I eat or drink anything; so I'll just see what this bottle does. I do hope it'll make me grow large again, for really I'm quite tired of being such a tiny little thing!"	Risk taking, opposition, curiosity	Exploring
"What size do you want to be?" it asked. "Oh, I'm not particular as to size," Alice hastily replied; "only one doesn't like changing so often,		
She went on growing, and growing, and very soon had to kneel down on the floor: in another minute there was not even room for this, and she tried the effect of lying down with one elbow against the door, and the other arm curled round her head. Still she went on growing, and, as a last resource, she put one arm out of the window, and one foot up the chimney, and said to herself "Now I can do no more, whatever happens. What <i>will</i> become of me?"	Too much, uncomfortable, standing out, needing answers, wanting support and direction	Understanding
"Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat. "I don't much care where—" said Alice. "Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat. "—so long as I get <i>somewhere</i> ," Alice added as an explanation. "Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."		
<i>"That</i> you won't!" thought Alice, and, after waiting till she fancied she heard the Rabbit just under the window, she suddenly spread out her hand, and made a snatch in the air. She did not get hold of anything, but she heard a little shriek and a fall, and a crash of broken glass, from	Strength, arguing, self- defence, creative thinking, autonomy, aggressive, angry,	Empowerment

which she concluded that it was just possible it had fallen into a cucumber-frame, or something of the sort.	assertive, power, defiance	
She drew her foot as far down the chimney as she could, and waited till she heard a little animal (she couldn't guess of what sort it was) scratching and scrambling about in the chimney close above her: then, saying to herself "This is Bill," she gave one sharp kick, and waited to see what would happen next.		
the next moment a shower of little pebbles came rattling in at the window, and some of them hit her in the face. "I'll put a stop to this," she said to herself, and shouted out, "You'd better not do that again!" which produced another dead silence. Alice noticed with some surprise that the pebbles were all turning into little cakes as they lay on the floor, and a bright idea came into her head. "If I eat one of these cakes," she thought, "it's sure to make <i>some</i> change in my size; and as it can't possibly make me larger, it must make me smaller, I suppose."		
Alice felt a little irritated at the Caterpillar's making such <i>very</i> short remarks, and she drew herself up and said, very gravely, "I think, you ought to tell me who <i>you</i> are, first."		
"You should learn not to make personal remarks," Alice said with some severity; "it's very rude."		
they're only a pack of cards, after all. I needn't be afraid of them!"		
"How should I know?" said Alice, surprised at her own courage. "It's no business of <i>mine</i> ." The Queen turned crimson with fury, and, after glaring at her for a moment like a wild beast, screamed "Off with her head! Off—" "Nonsense!" said Alice, very loudly and decidedly, and the Queen was silent.		

"Stupid things!" Alice began in a loud, indignant voice		
"Don't talk nonsense," said Alice more boldly: "you know you're growing too."		
"If any one of them can explain it," said Alice, (she had grown so large in the last few minutes that she wasn't a bit afraid of interrupting him,) "I'll give him sixpence. I don't believe there's an atom of meaning in it."		
"Stuff and nonsense!" said Alice loudly. "The idea of having the sentence first!" "Hold your tongue!" said the Queen, turning purple. "I won't!" said Alice. "Off with her head!" the Queen shouted at the top of her voice. Nobody moved. "Who cares for you?" said Alice, (she had grown to her full size by this time.) "You're nothing but a pack of cards!"		
After a while she remembered that she still held the pieces of mushroom in her hands, and she set to work very carefully, nibbling first at one and then at the other, and growing sometimes taller and sometimes shorter, until she had succeeded in bringing herself down to her usual height. It was so long since she had been anything near the right size, that it felt quite strange at first; but she got used to it in a few minutes, and began talking to herself, as usual. "Come, there's half my plan done now! How puzzling all these changes are! I'm never sure what I'm going to be, from one minute to another!	Tools, balance, becoming used to, usualised, normality, certain of uncertainty, acceptance of difference	Synthesising
"I wish you wouldn't squeeze so." said the Dormouse, who was sitting next to her. "I can hardly breathe." "I can't help it," said Alice very meekly: "I'm growing."		

she pictured to herself how this same little sister of hers would, in the after-time, be herself a grown woman; and how she would keep, through all her riper years, the simple and loving heart of her childhood: and how she would gather about her other little children, and make <i>their</i> eyes bright and eager with many a strange tale, perhaps even with the dream of Wonderland of long ago		
"Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat: "we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad." "How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice. "You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."	Commonality, allyship, acceptance, inclusion	Acceptance from others
"Come on, then!" roared the Queen, and Alice joined the procession, wondering very much what would happen next.		
But her sister sat still just as she left her, leaning her head on her hand, watching the setting sun, and thinking of little Alice and all her wonderful Adventures, till she too began dreaming after a fashion		
That'll be a comfort, one way—never to be an old woman—but then—always to have lessons to learn! Oh, I shouldn't like that!"	Resistance to future, resistance to change	Denial - resisting