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Every Screen is a Window and a Mirror: How Social Media Strengthens Ties Within the LGBTQ+ Community

Jourdan Sadir Pérez
Bard College

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Every Screen is a Window and a Mirror:
How Social Media Strengthens Ties Within the LGBTQ+ Community

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Jourdan Sadir Pérez

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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DEDICATIONS

(in alphabetical order)

Personally, I owe many people many thanks for getting me to this point. And so, thank you to...

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I. INTRODUCTION

The internet has become increasingly accepted as a valid tool for communication over the last 25 years. Since the age of internet-based chat rooms and instant messaging services provided by the likes of America Online (AOL), more and more people have become comfortable with the idea of interpersonal connection through a screen. Beginning in the mid-2000s, the popularity of these chat rooms and instant messaging services began to decline as they were rapidly replaced with a more technological-advanced competitor: the social media platform.

Merriam-Webster defines social media as “forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos) (Merriam-Webster n.d.)” Facebook, currently the most popular social media platform, has led the charge since its founding in 2004. Accessible and familiar to all ages, the site is primarily used to maintain already-established connections. If you have a Facebook account or know someone who does, they probably use it to keep in touch with friends and family. “How’s grandma doing? I haven’t seen her since the wedding?” “Oh, my old classmate has just posted photos from her vacation; how nice.” That sort of thing. With just a few tweaks to its original model, Facebook became the prototype for a new wave of online interaction.

Naturally, as technologies develop, so do their users. Throughout the years that Facebook evolved into the platform we know today, it inspired a few competitors such as Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr, Pinterest, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and others. Like Facebook, these platforms have amassed hundreds of millions of users worldwide since their inception. As one can imagine, the user base skews younger, with the majority of millennials and younger generations being much more active on these platforms than their Generation X and older

counterparts. This trend makes sense given the fact that millennials are the first generation of “digital natives,” or “native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet” (Helsper and Eynon 2010:504).

Digital natives, as the term coined by Marc Prensky suggests, are incredibly adept at navigating the online world. They use the internet and its resources for all of their whims and desires. Going through childhood and adolescence with the internet available at their fingertips, one can imagine the role that this technology plays in shaping young lives during these crucial developmental stages. These stages include the times when individuals begin exhibiting desires for independence and exploration outside of the world they are already familiar with. Here, a large part of identity formation occurs. Who am I? What are my interests? Who are my friends?

Thanks in large part to social media platforms, digital natives typically look towards the internet to answer these questions. The pool of potential connections for these individuals now includes all active users on these platforms. Some of these users are bound to find people they enjoy speaking with regularly—creating a relationship that lasts longer than a single interaction. These connections allow social media to act as a “third place” (Oldenburg 1999) between the familiarity of the home and the rigidity of the workplace (or the school, in relation to children and teenagers). Paul Hickman (2013) says the following about Ray Oldenburg’s description of third places:

Their defining feature... was [their] '[ordinariness]'—they were not special, but simply (unassuming) places where people could hang[]out. Oldenburg highlighted other functions of third places. They were places where people could have fun socially. They were also ‘ports of entry’ for in-movers to an area; ‘sorting areas’ where residents ‘found’ people; identified people they liked and disliked; and... somewhere that united the neighbourhood. (Hickman 2013:223)

Third places provide opportunities for informal connection and function as sources of community-based identity formation. In light of this definition, social media platforms can be viewed as a collective virtual third place that maintains itself through interconnected cross-platform networks (these cross-platform networks exist as digital natives are likely to be active on more than one social media platform at a time). As users find people and make connections, they begin to develop their identities within these third places in ways that affect their lives outside of them.

For this reason, third places can be important for identity formation on both a micro (individual) and meso (distinct group) level. The construction of the individual identity within the context of the third place is based on how well the individual meshes with the distinct group identity. Group identity rallies around a shared identity shaped partly by the third place. Oldenburg's development of third place theory includes simple examples such as the gym or the local public library. These locations do not necessarily require an identity outside of that of a "person who enjoys exercising" or a "person who likes reading."

There are third places, however, that are frequented by members of a shared identity that is more central to the individual's life. For example, the LGBTQ+¹ community and the gay bar go hand-in-hand. These bars are locations where, yes, patrons can purchase and consume alcohol. But also where community members can go and meet their friends, catch up with the bartender, reminisce on what it was like to be new to the scene, and so on. These places can provide crucial opportunities for interaction among LGBTQ+ individuals. In doing so, members can develop their own identities based on the connections they form with others. While this process is happening, the LGBTQ+ community itself is strengthened both by sheer numbers—as

¹ LGBTQ+ is a catch-all acronym that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer—with the "+" signaling the inclusion of other identities that similarly fall outside of cisgender and/or heterosexual.

more people align themselves with the community and increase its statistical population—as well as through the relationships formed among the members that strengthen the bond and overall sense of belonging for queer individuals.

As with other community-fostering spaces, the wonders of technological advancement are largely considered to have stifled gay bars/spaces. With the ability to search for interaction and connection online (or at least to start that process), young queers² are turning to social media platforms and other app-based methods to meet and talk to others in the community. In fact, much of the socialization into LGBTQ+ history and experiences begins online for the digital native generation. Contrary to the beliefs of the proprietors of these brick-and-mortar community-fostering spaces, the rising preference for online connection amongst the younger generation of queer individuals is not inherently bad, nor is it indicative of the weakening of the overall LGBTQ+ community. Rather, this study hopes to show that the increased usage of social media to meet and form relationships with other queer individuals could quite possibly be the best tool for connection that the LGBTQ+ community has had to date.

How does social media affect the process of identity formation and community building and thus inform the experiences and the culture of the LGBTQ+ community and its members, particularly as the concept of queerness continues to evolve? This is the question that this study seeks to address. Recognizing the capacity of the internet and social media platforms to function as third places, I analyze the role that such platforms have had since adolescence for LGBTQ+—identifying Generation Z individuals by drawing on a variety of psychological, anthropological, and sociological concepts and theories.

² “Queer” is used interchangeably with “LGBTQ+” throughout this paper. I acknowledge that some individuals within the community have negative associations with the word “queer”. To this, I emphasize the reclamation of the term as a neutral-positive identifier within recent years.

To develop my analysis of the development of identity during and after adolescence, I primarily looked to Erik Erikson's (1968) text centered around the subject—specifically, his chapter on adolescence as a crucial point for an individual's identity—as well as interpretations of his work by other authors. Following this, I move into a discussion of the role of personal relationships in informing a sense of belonging and community among all of the members of the relationship network. In doing so, I engage with the idea of what constitutes a personal relationship in the first place and the appeal of the family as the most desired and the most intimate relationship network. My review of familial identity and development begins with the biological/traditional family before moving into fictive kinship theory or attempts to replicate the traditional family among groups with strong ties to each other. These ties inform the identity of all individuals involved in the network as well as the overall group dynamic. This is seen in the development of the LGBTQ+ community and patterns of interaction within the group—especially the tendency for queer individuals to rely on the community as one of their primary forms of support alongside (or, at times, in the absence of) their biological families.

Data collection for this study occurred via in-depth interviews with current 20–25-year-olds who were both active on social media platforms throughout their childhood and teenage years and were still active in a significant capacity at the time of their interview. The content of these interviews was analyzed to study the effects of social media usage on the development of individuals' queer identities. Specifically, I looked for how the individual understood the LGBTQ+ community both as a whole and in relation to oneself prior to their involvement with social media. This was then compared to their online experiences with the LGBTQ+ community and the development of their own identity as a result of these experiences.

The paper closes with reflections on my research in addition to suggestions for the development of further studies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Theories and Conceptualizations of Identity

The development of theories concerning identity spans the field of social sciences, with each discipline maintaining its niche in addressing the subject. There are extensive studies centered around identity as a concept and its influence on individuals throughout their lives. However, all of these disciplines agree that identity formation occurs on both an individual and social level. In this section, I will break down the dominant theories of identity formation in the academic fields of psychology, anthropology, and sociology before offering the definition of identity that informs my study.

The psychological approach to identity development emerged from Erik Erikson's (1968) *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. Erikson's extensive development of identity theory is profoundly influential to further research on the topic, especially his theory of the eight stages of psychosocial development that occur throughout an individual's life. Michael Nakkula (2020) summarizes the model:

...each stage ushers in a unique 'crisis' or critical task to be negotiated. Successful negotiation of the task creates a critical opportunity for positive ongoing development; unsuccessful negotiation results in progressively heightened challenges. (Nakkula 2020:14)

The completion of each critical "crisis" or task and the subsequent completion of the stages contributes to the identity formation process. The adolescent stage—what Erikson considers to be the most crucial stage in one's development—is the period where an individual attempts to determine who they are for themselves by using their experiences in early childhood and applying that knowledge to their present experiences. During this time, the individual's task is to explore different "roles" or identities and see how others react to their assumption of those roles

as well as how they themselves react to them. The roles that the individual considers to define them are then blended into one coherent identity for the individual, allowing them to achieve “identity consciousness”:

...[I]dentity formation employs a process of simultaneous reflection and observation, a process taking place on all levels of mental functioning, by which the individual judges himself in the light of what he perceives to be the way in which others judge him in comparison to themselves and to a typology significant to them; while he judges their way of judging him in the light of how he perceives himself in comparison to them and to types that have become relevant to him. This process is...for the most part unconscious except where inner conditions and outer circumstances combine to aggravate a painful, or elated, “identity-consciousness.” (Erikson 1968:22–23)

Erikson’s work in 1968 had a tremendous impact on the anthropological and sociological sciences and guided their respective research on identity. Anthropological conceptions of identity assert that one forms their identity in accordance with their interactions with, and sense of belonging to, a community. In other words, a combination of collective identities informs the individual identity. Identity is ever-changing in the sense that how you describe yourself in a social context depends on a variety of factors. However, these unspoken aspects of your identity do not simply disappear. They are just not called to attention during that specific circumstance. This idea is put simply by anthropologist Matthew Engelke (2018), who states that “[i]dentity is relative. It is calibrated to the other” as you attempt to meet another individual at a common ground for both of you to understand each other and begin to form a connection (Engelke 2018:167). This common ground is typically found through various socially constructed concepts of language (Fuller 2007; Kroskrity 1999); religion (Csordas 1999; Owens 2000); racial/ethnic identity (Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Powell 2012; McGavin 2017); sexual identity (Ferguson 1981); and kinship relationships (Goode 2014; Norbeck and Befu 1958). All of these aspects of identity operate as opportunities for social connection—an intrinsic part of human desire.

The desire to interact with and connect with others forms the basis of the sociological study of identity formation. Georg Simmel and Everett C. Hughes (1949) explore this desire in their theory of sociability, which states that humans are social beings that engage in a “play-form of association” guided by “amiability, breeding, cordiality, and attractiveness of all kinds” (1949:255). This association is the backbone of interactions that can then bloom into the formation of relationships. Such relationships require repeated exchanges that can only occur through frequent close proximity among individuals. For example, the dynamism of familial relationships between individuals who reside in the same household exists because they sleep under the same roof, share meals, walk past each other through hallways, and so on. Their interactions—whether they are exchanging simple pleasantries or arguing over who left the dishes in the sink—inform the context of their relationship and create a shared history between the parties.

Through repeated interactions with particular individuals, identity formation can occur as theorized by sociologist Émile Durkheim (2005) in what he refers to as the “dualism” of human nature. This dualism is a reflexive relationship between the individual and society and is composed of two states: the purely individual and the social. The individual state only concerns matters directly related to the individual’s own body or person. The social state is a collective consciousness that forms the basis of our interactions and connections. We pour our individual selves into the social state: we introduce ourselves, tell our experiences, and add our personal meanings to a general knowledge bank which is then interpreted by others and pulled into their individual selves and informs their consciousness. Once others add their interpretations back into the collective social consciousness, we begin the process again. As we are social beings, this process is continual. The constant reinterpretation of the social (un)consciousness strengthens

our connections to others and ourselves as these meanings compose our social and personal identities (Blumer 1969; Durkheim 2005; Erikson 1968).

Returning to Simmel and Hughes, the interactions found in sociability require intimacy as a “means to maintain the liveliness, the mutual understanding, [and] the common consciousness of the group” (1949:259–60). Given Durkheim’s theorization of the reflexive nature of human interaction and Erikson’s seeming agreement as to how such a process informs one’s own identity, I am adopting Simmel and Hughes’ words to offer the following definition of identity for the purposes of this study: identity is the assumption of a position within a group that is 1) predicated on repeated interaction and a mutual understanding of others within the group and 2) contributes on any scale to the common consciousness of the group. When analyzing the participants' responses in this study, I used this definition of identity to discuss both their personal development as queer individuals and their connection to the greater LGBTQ+ community.

The Development of Identity Through Adolescence & Relationships

The development of identity is integral to the full participation in and recognition of an individual by society, but how is this identity developed over the course of one’s life? As identity is formed through a continuous reflexive process, it is fluid and dependent on how one defines themselves in relation to others at any given moment. Childhood development research has organized identity formation into stages in which individuals slowly learn to participate fully in the world around them (Eccles 1999). One crucial stage is that of early adolescence, as children start to advance past navigating the rules of the world and begin to figure out the role that they play in society, whether it is adhering to the rules laid out before them or exploring beyond them. As such, participation in “adescing” (Erikson 1968:128) is to be in a stage of constant identity

confusion. Erikson goes on in the chapter to explain that identity formation in adolescence is the pursuit of “a true and mutual psychosocial intimacy” (1968:135). For this reason, identity is essential to developing a sense of belonging.

A desire to belong typically develops in individuals with an “achieved identity” status (Nakkula and Toshalis 2006:38–39). Expanding upon Erikson’s original model, James E. Marcia thought of identity development in terms of statuses rather than stages in order to emphasize that how one identifies and relates to others does not occur in a sequential order until they reach their final identity, but rather development could potentially require a person to return to a previous status as they their identity continues to be informed by new experiences:

Styles...are not necessarily linear. [Styles] describe the dominant issues, concerns, or developmental experiences during a particular era in one’s life...The status one inhabits depends on the peculiar sets of experiences and support structures available and the ways in which these structures are understood by the individual. (Nakkula and Toshalis 2006:29)

The achieved identity status is therefore “the result of a period of high exploration and experimentation” in which an individual “still [desires] connection and affirmation” while maintaining “autonomy and personal control” (Nakkula and Toshalis 2006:38). As an individual explores the innumerable experiences and characteristics that shape their identity, they use these same things to orient themselves within their relationship to others. As they move closer to and eventually obtain this achieved status, relationships become even more critical to the individual; they help to continually affirm the individual’s identity while also allowing space for it to evolve. To understand this possibility, we must understand how a relationship functions in the greater context of social development.

Relationships are composed of patterns of interdependence that emerge from repeated interaction between two or more individuals. Over time, relationships become “personal” and are

composed of the aforementioned patterns of interdependence as well as justice, emotions, private culture, and the interpersonal construction of the self (Blumstein and Kollock 1988:475–76).

Justice refers to compromise and a feeling of sufficient mutual exchange in which both sides feel acknowledged and cared for (Blumstein and Kollock 1988:477–78). Emotions are caused by a reaction to stability or disruption in the relationship and can take on a positive or negative character (Blumstein and Kollock 1988:478–79). Private culture is the “norming” of the relationship and involves the creation of a routine, familiarity, and validation (Blumstein and Kollock 1988:480); this is what enables the involved parties to regard each other as something more than strangers as their interactions become predictable and effortless. The final component of the interpersonal construction of the self refers to both the validation of the traits that an individual brought into the relationship as well as the new traits that are formed as a result of the relationship (Blumstein and Kollock 1988:480); the self is reflected in the relationship and the relationship is reflected in the new self. This process, however, does not occur in a one-to-one vacuum. Instead, it occurs within an individual across many simultaneous relationships on varying levels. While the relationship between an individual and their mother may have vastly different nuances than the one with their neighbor or the barista of the café that they frequent, all of the interactions they have with these people can affect them just the same. For this reason, one’s social network is one of the most essential structures of their life.

Families & Fictive Kinship

A network of personal relationships can take many forms. The most intimate and familiar form is that of the family. One’s relationships with their family members are often their introduction to navigating social life and communities. While there are numerous sociological

theories on the development and role of families in society, I will focus on the structural functionalist and symbolic interactionist theories, which are the most relevant to this study.

The structural functionalist view of the family (specifically the nuclear family³) theorizes that the family as an institution (Axinn and Yabiku 2001; Gillespie 2014; Laslett 1973; Waite 2000) has two main functions: “the primary socialization of children so that they can truly become members of the society into which they have been born” and “the stabilization of the adult personalities of the population of the society” (Parsons and Bales 1955:16). In spearheading the socialization of children, “families provide members with a sense of self and identity, as well as a set of beliefs and attitudes” that inform their interactions with others (Newman and Grauerholz 2002:90). The symbolic interactionist view of a family asserts that “[y]ou can’t really see a family. You can only see people and infer...whether or not they can be considered a family” (Newman and Grauerholz 2002:93). Symbolic interactionism⁴—at least within the view of sociologist George Herbert Mead—considers institutions to be “habitually organized forms of group or social activity...[that] require socially responsible patterns of individual conduct, but only in a broad and general sense, and so afford scope for originality, flexibility, and variety” (Hinkle 1994:246). If these patterns of conduct within a group of individuals are assigned “socioculturally specified values” (Hinkle 1994:235) that align with the common perception (i.e. societal) of a family, then that group has then earned the title of “family”. As such, there is then an expectation that the “younger”, or inexperienced members of

³ The nuclear family is a unit “consisting of parents and their still dependent children” (Parsons and Bales 1955:10). Traditionally, this unit is isolated from the extended relatives of the family, both by physical proximity (i.e. living in a separate residence) and financial independence (e.g. not relying on grandparents to support the parents and their children).

⁴ The specific term “symbolic interactionism” was coined by Herbert Blumer, who was heavily influenced by sociologists W.I. Thomas, Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead, and others within the field. In a general sense, this particular school of thought asserts that individuals develop their personalities, behavioral patterns, and language from repeated interactions with others. Eventually, these interactions are assigned meaning, and it is these meanings which allow for the constitution and replication of society. For a more detailed explanation, see Hinkle (1994:232–72).

the group, are to be socialized into the culture of the group itself as well as the culture of the greater society.

Since the family structure plays such an important role culturally and functionally in both an individual's life (Goode 2014) and the maintenance of society as a whole, there is no surprise that there have been attempts to emulate the structure among other relationships. A study by Edward Norbeck and Harumi Befu (1958) is one of the earliest in the social sciences to explore relationship networks that informally model the institutional family structure; the authors refer to this as "fictive kinship." Fictive kinship networks, such as the one in Norbeck and Befu's study, seem to have all of the components of personal relationships as defined by Blumstein and Kollock. An essential part of fictive kinship networks is the respect these "family members" have for one another, which may follow the seniority relationship model of the institutionalized family. While individuals recognize that their fellow members do not hold actual legal status in their lives, colloquial usage of terms or other forms of recognizing their relationship to one another is integral to upholding the network (Schneider and Homans 1955). Such terminology conveys close social connections within the family as well as to larger society, allowing a clear boundary to be recognized as to who falls within the in-group and who is in the out-group.

Broadening the scope of the in-group and out-group as it pertains to families, communities—composed of numerous social units of families or groups akin to families—operate differently from their subunits. Whereas the specific values of the families or subgroups are unique to that unit, the community can form a collective idea of what it means to be a member. These communities, as Ray Oldenburg (1999) theorizes, have "third places" in which the health and structure of the community can be maintained as individuals interact with these spaces. As I explore Oldenburg's theory in the next section, I will offer my own extension of the

third place theory to suggest that communities themselves can be considered as such in their own right.

The Third Place

Third places are what sociologist Ray Oldenburg refers to as “core settings of informal public life” (1999:16). He expands upon this definition in his book:

The third place is a generic designation for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work...[The term “third place”] underscores the significance of the tripod and the relative importance of its three legs. Thus, the first place is the home...It is the first...environment of the growing child and the one that will have greater effect upon [their] development...The second place is the work setting... (Oldenburg 1999:16)

This study focuses not on the second place (the workplace or school, in the case of children and teenagers) but rather on the first and third places. More specifically, it looks at how the experiences in the third place (public, communal settings with a primary or secondary goal of fostering and strengthening connections between the people that frequent them) present themselves in the first place (home) and other social situations.

What exactly *is* a third place, and how is one classified as such? Ray Oldenburg provides the eight characteristics of the third place, which he summarizes as follows:

Third places exist on neutral ground and serve to level their guests to a condition of social equality. Within these places, conversation is the primary activity and the major vehicle for the display and appreciation of human personality and individuality. Third places are taken for granted and most have a low profile. Since the formal institutions of society make stronger claims on the individual, third places are normally open in the off hours, as well as at other times. The character of a third place is determined most of all by its regular clientele and is marked by a playful mood...Though a radically different kind of setting from the home, the third place is remarkably similar to a good home in the psychological comfort and support that it extends. (1999:42)

As for the benefits that emerge from these environments, third places allow for the congregation of diverse individuals and conversation topics that somehow manage to promote the collective association of all of these variables. The spirits of all within the space are raised as they build new relationships and strengthen old ones (Oldenburg 1999:43–65).

As the name of the book suggests,⁵ cafés, coffee shops, bookstores, bars, hair salons, and other community-based locations all constitute different examples of third places. However, these places primarily cater to adults—or at least to individuals old enough to be permitted to traverse their neighborhoods without parental supervision. As Oldenburg puts it: “An earlier generation of parents might not have been fond of the corner store in which their kids hung out...But the adults knew where the kids were and the kids had a place to go” (1999:283). The argument here is that third places are essential to a community's health and allow individuals to find others like them with whom they can connect. In that case, it makes sense that those who do not have such spaces would try to create their own if the existing options are not attractive.

Children and teenagers are not the only forgotten group carving out their own congregating spaces. Marginalized communities also look for their own places to be free outside of social obligations and expectations (i.e., oppressive structures). Third places can be formed along the lines of race (Childs 2005; Johnson 1984; Kapac 1998; Madibbo 2007), ethnicity (Harrison, Hoggett, and Jeffers 1995; Liu 2009; Logan, Zhang, and Alba 2002; Luk and Phan 2005; McGavin 2017; Portes 1987), gender (Galab and Rao 2003; Klein 2016), accessibility (Cameron 2016; Ladd and Lane 2013), and other characteristics of the individuals that occupy these spaces. Such spaces may look different or go unnoticed, especially considering the low-profile quality of third places that is meant to serve as a “protective coloration [to dissuade]

⁵ The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community (Oldenburg 1999).

strangers or transient customers” from interacting with the space (Oldenburg 1999:36). Nevertheless, these spaces still serve the same important function as third places that are not meant to cater to any specific identity. The ways that “forgotten” groups craft their own third spaces and the evolution of these spaces beyond a physical location into one that is internalized into the regulars’ beings and sense of selves undermine Oldenburg’s overall argument. He asserts that: 1) third places are largely absent in the vast majority of the United States and 2) the number of such places is shrinking. In the case of the LGBTQ+ community, this third place can range from being precisely what Oldenburg initially envisioned—a physical (and possibly safer) place to exist and interact with other queer individuals—to the more intimate definition of the term: a place that is “more homelike than home” (Oldenburg 1999:39).

“LGBTQ+” as a Community, an Identifier, and a Third Place

Before addressing how the LGBTQ+ community might operate as a third-place structure, it is important to understand it as a community. Psychologist Seymour B. Sarason (1974) first introduced the concept of a “sense of community,” which was then expounded upon by psychologists David W. McMillan and David M. Chavis (1986).⁶ McMillan and Chavis were dissatisfied with Sarason and others who acknowledged that such a phenomenon existed without adequately defining the term and its characteristics. To ratify this, McMillan and Chavis provide a definition and the four elements that embody it:

Our proposed definition has four elements. The first element is membership. Membership is the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness. The second element is influence, a sense of mattering, of making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members. The third element is reinforcement: integration and fulfillment of needs. This is the feeling that members’ needs will be met by the resources received through their membership in the group. The last element is shared emotional

⁶ McMillan uploaded the original text of the article to his website in a blog post format, which is cited here.

connection, the commitment and belief that members have shared and will share history, common places, time together, and similar experiences...In a sentence, the definition we propose is as follows: **Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together** (McMillan 1976); emphasis added).⁷

Throughout the rest of the article, the psychologists further develop the scope of the elements. When referring to membership, McMillan and Chavis state:

Membership has five attributes: boundaries, emotional safety, a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment, and a common symbol system. These attributes work together and contribute to a sense of who is part of the community and who is not. (1986)

Influence—the second element— matters because it promotes conformity of the members to their group, strengthening the group's cohesiveness. In this sense, the “[i]nfluence of a member on the community and influence of the community on a member operate concurrently” (McMillan and Chavis 1986). The cohesiveness of a community is seen in the third element's integration and fulfillment of needs, as the shared values between members allow for them to consider not only their own needs but also the needs of their peers as they operate within the context of the community (McMillan and Chavis 1986). The final element is a shared emotional connection:

A shared emotional connection is based, in part, on a shared history. It is not necessary that group members have participated in the history in order to share it, but they must identify with it. The interactions of members in shared events and the specific attributes of the events may facilitate or inhibit the strength of the unity...Future research should focus on the causal factor leading to shared emotional connection, since it seems to be the definitive element for true community. In summary, strong communities are those that offer members positive ways to interact, important events to share and ways to resolve them positively,

⁷ While this 1976 work by McMillan is cited in the bibliography of this study, it is an unpublished manuscript and as such cannot be found in circulation.

opportunities to honor members, opportunities to invest in the community, and opportunities to experience a spiritual bond among members. (McMillan and Chavis 1986)

With the (sense of) community defined, we can begin evaluating how our community of focus measures up. Historically, the LGBTQ+ community has both fostered fictive kinship relationships and functioned as a third place (physically and metaphorically). Beginning with fictive kinship networks, such relationships emerged following the ostracization of LGBTQ+–identifying individuals from their biological families and childhood communities. The LGBTQ+ community has strengthened relationships between those who identify with different genders and sexualities (Muraco 2006; Weston 1991), creating a unique shared history and private culture that does not depend on the homogeneity of the group but rather an acceptance and celebration of their departure from the out-group (the institutionalized cisgender and heterosexual⁹ society) as well as the differences between the sexual orientations and genders themselves. As a smaller social realm in which definitions and experiences related to sexuality and gender are redefined as The Community¹⁰ grows (i.e., more people “come out”), non-cisgender identities become grounds “of common experience rather than a quintessentially personal domain” (Weston 1991:123).

The Community does not intend to operate as a unified subculture by any means. Instead, the term explains how individuals have organized themselves both physically and metaphorically along a minority that encompasses physical locations (Hanhardt, Crawford-Lackey, and

⁸ Muraco and Weston use this version of the initialism in their respective works. When referencing either author’s work, I also adopt this practice to honor their decision.

⁹ After this point in the paper, I use the portmanteau ‘cishet’ when referring to ideas and people that simultaneously represent both the normative cisgender and heterosexual identities. Similar to “queer,” the term has entered modern LGBTQ+ lexicon to the point where I feel it is acceptable to use it in this paper.

¹⁰ When referring to the LGBTQ+ community, I use either the aforementioned term or its shortened form “The Community”. Queer individuals tend to colloquially use the latter term when speaking intracommunally to acknowledge the shared identity that they feel bounds them to each other (without a need for it to be explicitly stated). I adopt that practice here.

Springate 2020; Harris, Crawford-Lackey, and Springate 2020; Stein 2000), relationships (Simula, Sumerau, and Miller 2019), kinship/in-group terminology (Bailey 2011; Dewaele et al. 2011; Kubicek et al. 2013; Monk 2016), and a shared source of historical activism (Duberman 1994; Garretson 2018). Kath Weston's (1991) book details the formation of The Community alongside the traditional (institutionalized) family to supplement the lives of LGBT-identifying persons who either have lost the support of their family or feel that their family cannot adequately support them due to their lack of understanding. The Community is a response to these feelings. As a re-imagination of the family structure, it allows LGBT individuals to regain a sense of belonging as they rally around a shared identity and history.

How is this shared identity formed, and why is it important to the LGBTQ+ community? In regards to the former, this answer lies in Henri Tajfel and John Turner's social identity theory, which posits that "it is the desire to hold *positive* group-based identities—ones that have prestige and are esteemed—that encourages individuals to think of themselves as group members and to engage in behaviors associated with their groups, including collective action" (Garretson 2018:81; emphasis in original). This theory answers the latter question. Just as the concept of community takes the LGBTQ+ community from a simple configuration of interpersonal relationships maintained by proximity, the social identity theory takes community from a non-directed conglomeration of members to one that operates with a purpose towards continually achieving a collection action.

The purpose of The Community is to confront the idea that the acknowledgment and discussion of sexuality is taboo. But why is *this* the purpose? Perhaps queer individuals agree with Michel Foucault (1978):

[W]e have found it difficult to speak on the subject [of sexuality] without striking a different pose: we are conscious of defying established power... Something that smacks of revolt, of promised freedom, of the

coming age of a different law, slips easily into this discourse on sexual oppression... Tomorrow sex will be good again. (Foucault 1978:6–7)

To “make sex good again” is to reintroduce the discourse of sexuality into the public conversation. It is to extend this conversation past the bounds of the recently-founded heterosexual nuclear family that queerness stands in opposition to (D’Emilio 1993). This is accomplished through the structuring of the LGBTQ+ community as a metaphorical third place that is supplemented by tangible sub-places with it. Because the collective identity of The Community is maintained through these sub-places, they must be easily and simultaneously accessible by as many queer individuals as possible—whether they are situated inside buildings behind a door or binary code behind a log-in screen.

Social Media Platforms as a Third Place

In the modern age of technology, it makes sense that the generation of digital natives would seek to carve out third places online. Laurel Anderson and Deborah Brown McCabe’s (2012) study centers on how youths use the internet to engage in self-socialization, which hinges on independence and control over their own socialization efforts/process. The internet provided three things for these individuals: a parent-free zone, a broadened context, and anonymity. The parent-free zone emerged as the adolescents of this time realized that the internet was the one location where their parents could not claim expertise (Anderson and Brown McCabe 2012:243–44). Many parents are simply not as knowledgeable about the ins and outs of the internet as their children are. In today’s age, where children tend to have their own internet-connected devices, parents are even more hopeless when it comes to keeping tabs on their children’s activity. The second aspect, the broadened context of the internet, emerges by way of its relative ease of access. Generally speaking, millions of people worldwide have access

to the internet and can access the same websites and connect with other users of these sites (Anderson and Brown McCabe 2012:244). Finally, the anonymity of the internet provides individuals with opportunities to act in a manner that differs from their “real-world” selves. Thanks to this anonymity, the individuals within the study were able to “experiment[] with different identities, be[] less shy, and be[] more ‘real’ and less concerned with being judged” (Anderson and Brown McCabe 2012:244). These three aspects of the internet allowed adolescents to achieve their goals concerning freedom (independence, removal of real-world restraints) and connection (expansion of cultural knowledge and relationship formation) (Anderson and Brown McCabe 2012:245).

Naturally, not everyone views the internet as positively as Anderson and Brown McCabe (who also offer their concerns about adolescent social media usage later in the paper). The biggest concern is—rather obviously—the heightened potential for bullying as the anonymity of the screen protects the would-be perpetrators (Kessel Schneider et al. 2012). A study by Krauft et al. (1998) to assess the negative impacts of internet usage on adolescents found that for the participants, there were significant decreases in the amount that one interacts with their family and the size of their offline social networks. What did increase was the participants’ feelings of loneliness and depression. Krauft et al. provide two theories for why he and his team may have seen such results. The first is that adolescents have replaced the time that they might have otherwise spent having offline interactions with passive internet browsing. The second is that they may have been seeking to replace their offline weak tie¹¹ connections (Granovetter 1973)

¹¹ Granovetter’s (1973) weak tie theory argues that weak ties, or a relationship between two individuals that is not particularly strong (i.e., the two contacts are acquaintances), carries more weight within a person’s social network than their strong ties. “Bridges” are lines of connection that provide the only opportunity for communication/the relaying of information between two individuals (e.g., a middleman, “C”, whose strong relationships with both “A” and “B” allow them to be aware of one another and for each to receive information from the other without being A and B having a substantial relationship with each other). Granovetter’s claim is that the “strength” of weak ties lies in the idea that because A and B are not in close contact with one another, each is likely to have a number of connections outside of the other’s social network that can potentially provide the outsider with useful information.

with stronger connections that they can foster and maintain easily without leaving their homes. The authors, however, do not feel that their results strongly support either of these hypotheses.

Proponents of adolescents using the internet as a primary source of connection and interaction understand the nuances of the internet and how the potential for adverse outcomes like the ones mentioned above do not undermine the positives that the internet and internet-based interaction can bring. While the Krauft study occurred in the early ages of social media, more recent studies (i.e., studies in the 2010s and 2020s) suggest that a preference for internet-based connection does not mean that individuals will become more isolated from the world. In fact, quite the opposite occurs as the world shifts to a predominantly technology-based world and people adapt to this change. Ruth Allen and Peter Buzzi (2020) report that multiple studies found that “online networking and social media use are likely to enhance positive social behaviour in both the online and offline worlds,” citing the “social network theory which implies that the more a person socialises in a traditional sense, the more they will socialise online...and vice versa” (2020:115–16). The reason for this, Allen and Buzzi continue, is that “[s]ocial media can create relationships that cut through formal power and status hierarchies in ways that go beyond the mental health experience, expanding social capital, social connections and knowledge transfer” (Allen and Buzzi 2020:126). For these reasons, social media platforms satisfy Oldenburg’s conditions for classifying as a third place.¹² But how exactly does this relate to the LGBTQ+ community?

LGBTQ+ youth are not immune to the pull of social media. Such platforms are likely to be their preferred method of communication as the internet makes it much easier to find others like them, especially if their current living situation does not allow for easy access to queer

¹² See page 16.

people/culture or is explicitly anti-LGBTQ+. Online queer youth span the range of social media platforms.

Tumblr is a social media platform that allows users to create blogs on which they can post content (or repost others' content) and have other users interact with this content or even follow them to stay updated on the blog if they are really interested. As a mix of a text-based and a media-based platform, Tumblr caters to everyone, and the content produced on the website is quite vast and varied. With no shortage of the types of content available on Tumblr, different communities form and maintain their spaces with which to find others like them (McCracken 2017). The LGBTQ+ community has quite a presence on Tumblr, with Robards et al.'s (2020) Australia-based study finding that "...when compared to general population surveys of young social media users—[LGBTQ+ youth] were five times as likely to use Tumblr." Furthermore, the researchers found that "[f]or Tumblr users, 65 percent said their primary motivation was to communicate with 'people who are like me'" (Robards et al. 2020:284). The type of community-building that occurs via social media platforms enables it to be another third place in which queer individuals can go to interact with others like them.

Tumblr is not the only social media platform that queer individuals frequent. Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, Twitter, YouTube, and pretty much any other social media platform all have a steady stream of queer content creators and even more queer content consumers (Osmond 2017; Ridder and Dhaenens 2019; Somvichian-Clausen 2019; TikTok 2019; Wexelbaum 2019; Wong 2015). How LGBTQ+ individuals use these social media platforms and how this contributes to both the self-actualization of their identities and how they view the larger LGBTQ+ community thanks to their experiences in these spaces are the focuses of this study. As I interviewed my participants, I expected to hear them say that not only were they positively

affected by their experiences on social media¹³ but also that the platforms significantly contributed to their perception of queer identities in relation to themselves and other queer individuals. With this study, I hope to add to the research on the effects of social media usage by analyzing the positive benefits that virtual community-building can have on the development of one's identity and relationships with others.

¹³ As was one of the criterion for participation.

III. METHODOLOGY

For this project, I wanted to analyze queer individuals' perceptions of queer communities on various social media platforms and how their own identities evolved because of their interactions with such communities. I conducted interviews over the course of a seven-week period beginning in mid-February 2023 and lasting until mid-March 2023. The interviews were one-on-one sessions conducted over the video communication service Google Meet and lasted 57.2 minutes on average. The questionnaire I developed for this study asked participants about 1) the development of their identity as it relates to the LGBTQ+ community; 2) their social media usage patterns; and 3) relationships or interactions that originated on, or owe a significant portion of their development to, social media platforms. For the complete list of questions I used in this study, please see the interview protocol listed as Appendix 1.

To recruit participants, I posted an Instagram story on my personal account announcing my study and requesting individuals to contact me should they be interested in participating (Appendix 2). A number of individuals who saw my story then reposted it onto their own stories, broadening the number of potential participants I could reach. Through this method, I was able to recruit all nine individuals.

When recruiting participants for this study, I sought out individuals who: 1) were between the ages of 20–25 years old;¹⁴ 2) identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community¹⁵ 3) were active on at least one social media platform during their adolescence; and 4) continue to be active on social media as an adult. Furthermore, I sought out participants who believe that their LGBTQ+ identities have been enhanced through their engagement with social media. All of these identification criteria were self-reported by the participants. Working with participants who not only are currently active on social media but were also active during their adolescence allows me to track changes in the individuals' perceptions of themselves and their queer identity over the course of their lives as they may have been influenced by social media. Aside from the above, there were no other limitations to who could participate in the study. As such, the participants represented a range of racial/ethnic identities, socioeconomic statuses, identities related to disability, faiths, and other backgrounds. All participants, however, identified as women, were assigned female at birth,¹⁶ or otherwise did not identify as men.¹⁷ Due to the lack of data from male participants (or those who identify strongly with experiences consistent with

¹⁴ As I am using portions of Marc Prensky's digital natives theory that asserts that this comprises Generation Z individuals and younger, I only consider participants eligible if they were born between 1997–2002 (current 20–25 year-olds). I've selected 1997 as the oldest eligible birth year as this year is widely agreed to be the first birth year of the Generation Z cohort. I selected 2002 as the youngest birth year cohort of participants that I would seek out as 20-year-olds tend to have at least some significant experience of exercising independence. Extending the age range any younger, even to current 18-year olds who are technically adults in the United States and in most parts of the world, runs the risk of having participants who have not had enough experiences with independence to properly assess their post-adolescent development. In addition to their beginning adulthood experiences, 20-year-olds are up against the tail-end of individuals who are likely to have at least some of their early childhood development occur without being heavily influenced by the internet and social media (before we get to what has been colloquially termed "the iPad generation").

¹⁵ I did not require individuals to identify with a certain identity under the LGBTQ+ umbrella, nor did I reject any participant who represented an identity that I had already collected data from. In aiming for a purposeful sample of the LGBTQ+ community, I hoped to observe commonalities across the different identities within the community as well as commonalities that may be unique to any one identity.

¹⁶ I only note this due to the different forms of gender socialization that individuals receive during their childhood/adolescent years. I recognize that due to the ideas of masculinity and patriarchal values that are pushed onto those who are assigned male at birth from a young age, they may have had different responses to questions related to their conception of the LGBTQ+ community and other experiences during their adolescence.

¹⁷ The lack of men in this sample prevented me from obtaining and analyzing data from gay, queer, and transgender men, hindering my ability to adequately represent as many identities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella as possible.

queer men/masc-identifying people) and the small sample size, the findings of this study are limited in both the number of responses collected as well as what can be extrapolated from the participants and applied to the greater LGBTQ+ population. These findings can, however, provide insight into how LGBTQ+ identity develops throughout one's adolescent years and how the "younger generation" of individuals who identify as queer are finding community amongst themselves and what they even consider to constitute "community" in the first place.

Throughout my interviewing period, I was able to interview nine individuals. I did not require that participants be based in the United States; however, eight participants were residing within the United States at the time of their respective interviews, and one resided in Japan. These individuals represented a vast range of identities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella: three identified as lesbians, three identified as nonbinary, three identified as pansexual (one identified as panromantic), two identified as queer, and two identified themselves as falling under the spectrum of asexuality. (Table 1, under the "Findings" heading, details my participants' identities and backgrounds.)

When analyzing the participants' responses, I coded for information related to: their perception of their own queer identity as well as the community as a whole; purposes for engaging with social media platforms; experiences and emotions related to the queer community and occurring as a result of social media; and support and isolation within the community. (The full list of codes used can be found in Appendix 3.) All interviews were independently coded (Strauss 1990) by myself, and the findings were reviewed by Professor Michael Sadowski, an Associate Dean at Bard College and the faculty advisor for this project.

IV. FINDINGS

There were two main “pathways” that emerged from participants’ responses throughout the interviews: 1) the development of how they conceptualized the LGBTQ+ community and identities under that umbrella as a whole, and 2) the development of how they considered their own identities within the context of the LGBTQ+ community. At times these pathways overlapped or seemed to inform one another directly. As participants’ understandings of the vastness of LGBTQ+ identities evolved due to social media usage, many of their own identities shifted in some way. Even if their identities ultimately remained the same, they still went through periods of exploration and questioning before settling into what they felt to be the correct label(s)—if they settled on any label at all.

Table 1. Participants' Information.

Name¹⁸	Age	LGBTQ+ identities¹⁹	Age at first social media platform	Time spent on social media during adolescence	Time spent on social media as an adult
Calloway	25	panromantic, demisexual/gray-asexual, nonbinary gendervoid	14	Every day, 10 hours/day	Every day, 9 hours/day
Gwen	23	genderfluid, lesbian	12	Every day, "multiple hours a day"	Every day
Harem Madik	22	queer	13	Every day, 8 hours/day	Every day, 4 hours/day
Jade	22	queer	12	Every day	Every day
Kimmy	25	pansexual	Unsure, at some point during middle school	Every day, "like when I woke up to when I went to bed"	Every day
Raven	22	pansexual	12	Every day, "for hours"	Every day, 3 hours/day
Rose	22	lesbian	11	Every day, "a few hours a day"	Every day, "a couple hours"
Spice	21	pansexual, demisexual, genderqueer nonbinary	9	Every day	Every day
Sunflower	21	lesbian	11	Every day	Every day

¹⁸ All participants were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. They were given the option to either choose their own or to have one assigned to them.

¹⁹ These identities, as is all of the information (with the exception of names) reported in Table 1, were self-reported by the participants during the interview. As part of the interview protocol, I asked, "If you are comfortable sharing: what is your identity as it relates to this community?" All participants provided a response, quoted verbatim in this column.

Pre–Social Media

Inherited Knowledge

HAREM MADIK: Well, I knew queer people existed just like...in the world, in New York City. I knew that gay children existed because, like...we all know someone, you know? Anyway [laughs], I just knew that queer people existed as a whole and I didn't need to be on social media to find that out. It wasn't a shock to me, I guess.

ROSE: I had little to no knowledge . . . LGBTQ+ and queerness wasn't around my circle growing up. So it took like a while for me to like, even, you know, see queer people on the street or, like, hear of people who are queer.

As Harem Madik and Rose demonstrate, participants had a variety of conceptions about the LGBTQ+ community prior to their introduction to social media. These ideas represented a number of viewpoints along a positive–negative continuum. Jade—a 22-year-old queer person—had positive impressions about queerness as they were introduced to their mother's coworker at a young age. As Jade explains, the fact that the coworker and her partner were both women was not something that was considered noteworthy: “So I was aware of queer identity, but it wasn't really portrayed as something othering. If that makes sense, it was just something that existed.” Because of this, Jade did not fully understand the prejudice that existed towards queer people until they grew up and were able to learn more about the social issues surrounding The Community.

Other participants reported having a somewhat more neutral experience. They did not report having a notable relationship or interaction with a queer individual like Jade did. However, similar to Jade, their families did play a hand in introducing them to such identities. Sunflower, a 21-year-old lesbian, “heard some rumor of Justin Bieber being gay.” When asking

her mother what being gay meant, her mother matter-of-factly said, “‘It means he likes men.’ And I was like, ‘Oh, is that bad?’ And she was like, ‘No.’”

Raven—a 22-year-old pansexual person—and Gwen—a 23-year-old genderfluid lesbian—both remembered hearing their families discussing queerness in hushed tones and not explicitly affirming LGBTQ+ identities in a direct manner. Raven recalls hearing “[conversations] amongst family members and trying to figure out what they were talking about.” However, because they were too young to be included in those conversations, they did not fully understand the context surrounding the discussions.

Gwen’s experience was more negative than those mentioned above:

Before social media, it was just one of those things people didn't talk about. Like, I had a auntie who everyone, like, categorized her as a lesbian, but [it] later turned out that she's bi. Like, that was it, and then you know, they would just talk about her, and you would hear stuff, but it was not anything that was, like, really discussed.

Nonetheless, while their family did discuss the aunt amongst themselves, none of those conversations led to a direct conversation with Gwen about LGBTQ+ identities. This caused them to understand that “it was something that you didn't really talk about. Something that, like, people were afraid of...” Despite being denied a solid foundation of what queerness is, Gwen still had a solid foundation of what it meant to be an ally to their peers who were out:

I had a gay best friend in seventh grade who I defended to the end because, you know, being in middle school and being different, being gay...[K]ids talk shit...I feel like that was also another big thing, like people started treating you like a pariah when you [came out of the closet]...

Calloway and Kimmy occupied the opposite end of the spectrum: those who were taught that being queer is bad or were otherwise aware of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment. Calloway, a 25-year-old who identifies as a “panromantic, demisexual/grey-asexual, nonbinary gendervoid”

person, learned of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments as a child: “There was a lot of hatred towards the queer community...Just Obama being like, ‘I don't like gay people,’ because that way he'd win the Democratic vote [during the 2008 United States presidential election].”

Kimmy, a 25-year-old pansexual woman, was actively taught that being gay was bad. ‘Gay’ is used here deliberately as Kimmy’s knowledge of LGBTQ+ identities around middle school was limited to that of gay men, “as if girls or women couldn't be gay.” While the hypothetical queer identity of girls/women was deemed nonexistent, Kimmy received very clear information about where her family stood on queerness in men. Men were denied their queerness outright—it was wrong for men to be gay, and that was that. For both of these participants, proper representation of and information about LGBTQ+ identities were elusive prior to social media.

The varying levels of awareness about queerness and queer identities seemed to have little correlation with whether or not participants began questioning their identities before they began interacting with social media platforms. Seven participants (Harem Madik, Jade, Kimmy, Raven, Rose, Spice, Sunflower) had inklings that they were “different” but were too young to have the proper terminology to firmly identify themselves as queer. Only four had introductions to the idea of queerness that were neutral or positive; Raven and Rose were passively denied information, while Kimmy was actively taught that identifying with queerness was bad. Of these seven participants, six (Harem Madik, Jade, Kimmy, Raven, Rose, and Sunflower) experienced crushes or feelings that they either realized then or realize now were different from what their peers²⁰ may have experienced at that age. Harem Madik, a 22-year-old queer woman, captures these sentiments as she details her own confusing, unnamed thoughts as a child:

²⁰ “Peers” based on their assumed gender identity at that time, regardless of whether or not the participant’s gender identity has changed.

I had best friends where I was like, ‘I feel like I’m in love with them.’ But, I thought that was just friendship, but I was like, ‘Mmm, maybe not.’ [laughs] Because it feels more intense than other relationships people have as friends. But...I never called myself anything because I was a kid. I don’t think I had the wherewithal or the introspective awareness to call myself anything.

Despite what she was taught, Kimmy still expressed her queer identity to her peers even if she did not have the language for what she wanted to convey. When reflecting on how she experienced attraction compared to her middle school peers, she says:

I knew something was off. In the sense of like, my eyes wandered places that it shouldn't have wandered...I think what became even more formative for me in terms of recognizing that girls can be not straight was that one of my friends, she had come out of nowhere and was like, “Oh, I like girls.” And I was like, “Oh, I like girls, too.” And she was like, “No, no, no, like, I *really* like girls,” but we didn't really understand what it [was] that we were trying to say...I didn't have a name for that...Like, everybody was talking about boys, right? ... And I'm over here like, ‘I like that boy, too.’ But I was like, ‘What about the girls?’ And everybody's like, “Huh?”...“...That's a different type of ‘like’. We're talking about who we want to be in a relationship with.” And I was like, “Am I not talking about that?”

Spice—a 21-year-old “pansexual, demisexual, genderqueer nonbinary” person—differed from the other participants who reported having a neutral or positive conception of LGBTQ+ identities. Despite knowing “about queer history from media based on the TV shows that were coming out centering gay storylines,” thus signaling some knowledge of the community, they stated that the evolution of their own queer identity occurred only after they had begun using social media:

I got on social media when I was pretty young, like middle school—maybe elementary school—and I didn't think I was queer then. I also didn't know a lot about queer labels then. So that definitely happened after social media, but not because of social media.

Entering Social Media

The participants began using social media²¹ at slightly varying ages averaging 11.75 years old.²² Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, and YouTube were the most frequently mentioned platforms, all with different levels of significance. While five participants mentioned having Facebook accounts at some point, the platform was only mentioned offhandedly and did not play a significant role in the development of their queer identities. Instagram was mentioned by eight out of nine participants. However, only two—Jade and Rose—reported that the platform was instrumental in the development of their queer identities rather than simply a way to maintain contact with friends, family, and acquaintances. For Jade, Instagram helped them develop their political views regarding leftist politics and the intersection of topics centered around different identities and the rights afforded to them, such as “racial justice[,]...indigenous sovereignty, and...queer liberation.” When looking at content on the platform that focused on queer identity, what they found useful were the explanations of the “different sexualities and all the stuff that they meant.”

Rose, a 22-year-old lesbian, stated that she consumed Instagram as a source of support early in the development of her identity:

So I realized I was queer basically when same-sex marriage was legalized. So that was 2015. And so once that thing popped into my head, I was like, “Okay, I know that I cannot come out yet because I would not have any support.” So social media was where I came for support.

²¹ Some interviewees had questions concerning what platforms are being considered ‘social media’ for this project. After some debate with a number of participants, and in order to allow for a well-rounded insight into the development of their queerness, I’ve decided that the platforms that they considered to be social media will be deemed as such in the context of this paper.

²² This calculation considers the response of only eight of the nine participants. Kimmy was not figured into this number as she did not provide an exact age for when she considered herself to have begun seriously using social media.

Consuming this content in an unsupportive household helped Rose reach a point where she is able to be out: “I am more comfortable with my identity, so I'm basically the same person in person and online, except when I'm home, and I'm like, back [to hiding my sexuality].”

Rose—along with Raven—stated that in their younger years, YouTube provided them with some forms of representation and introduction into the community. They were able to watch content from queer creators—videos featuring their friends, family members, and partners. Watching this content, they hoped that—as Rose puts it— “one day I can be somewhat happy or be on the same level as them and have that support.” Four participants mentioned Tumblr as one of their prime platforms for queer content and interactions with other queer individuals. Calloway best represented the sentiments of the other Tumblr users when describing the platform as a “safe space where you can find other people who are kind of just, like, cocooned,...and letting that be just a really safe and stimulating place mentally.”

The “Safety” of the Internet

SUNFLOWER: I mean, it was obviously easier to hide behind a screen and talk about my sexuality. There were just more people that were out online. In person, in [my middle school] at the time, like 6th, 7th grade, nobody was gay—or nobody was talking about being gay. So like, I'm not gonna talk to these people.

These social media platforms that afforded queer individuals a level of safety in which they could feel comfortable enough to explore their identities, were vital to the participants. Without this space, their access to certain types of affirming LGBTQ+ content may have been limited—impeding or completely halting their journeys as they grappled with both queerness in relation to themselves and their queer selves in relation to the larger community. They needed to feel safe, and to be ‘safe’ on the internet was to be able to explore their emerging queer identities without prying eyes, minimizing the potential of them having to—as Harem Madik put

it—“answer so many questions about myself that I didn’t want to answer.” The anonymity of the screen enabled them to do that.

For many of the participants, “internet safety” did not mean “don’t talk to strangers.” In fact, many did quite the opposite. Gwen used Kik—an instant messaging app that did not require any personal information to create an account and allowed people to create usernames—as their primary social media platform:

I would try to delve into talking to other women. But it didn't last long because, again, of that shame and being scared that someone would find out. I wouldn't [attempt to talk to women] on like Facebook, or Instagram, or Snapchat, like not on sites like that. But more so like the ones where people didn't have to necessarily know who I was.

Harem Madik, who maintained a similar anonymous approach to her social media experience, echoed Gwen’s sentiments. She enjoyed that Tumblr, which lets users decide how much personal information they want to make public, allows for easy detachment from people and situations:

I never said my real name. It was purely, like, curating this little digital space where I could basically stalk people, you know? Um, yeah, so it felt safe for me ‘cause you don’t have to travel. You don’t have to actually meet up with people in real life. If people end up being creeps, okay great, I just unfollow them. They don’t know my name. I probably don’t know their real name.

Rose, who spoke about her social media accounts in which her personal information is public, said that she only allows people that she personally knows to have access to those accounts. In this way, she can be confident that her accounts remain a safe space and avoid potential harm offline: “In real life, it's like more scary. Especially, like, expressing my sexual orientation.”

Both Raven and Jade expressed their idea of internet safety as being able to express their creativity. Jade states that the ability to write and publish fiction anonymously allowed them to explore ideas in writing that may not have been feasible in the real world:

I think there's a lot more room to just, like, think about ideas. And also writing doesn't have this moral imperative. Like, I'm not preaching to people. So I can write stuff that I find to be compelling and interesting.

With Jade's ability to have this safe space to write and explore ideas under an anonymous account, they were able to establish their own writing community first and foremost. Jade attests that queerness was a big part of the writing community, both in terms of the authors' identities and the stories they were creating. Through their connection to this community, Jade was able to experience significant growth in their queer identity.

The other participants also experienced growth in their identities as they interacted with their niche interests and engaged with queerness in that way. As the participants began using social media for the private exploration of their queer identities and what queerness entails in the first place, over time, they began to develop their own online queer community (or communities, when representing different parts of themselves on different platforms).

Communities Within 'The Community'

CALLOWAY: The Community is something that, like, if you can find it online, and it's there supporting you, then fuck yeah, that's like one of the best parts of the internet.

The common goal for all of the participants was to find others like them on social media: people who were also queer and could help them navigate their newfound and ever-evolving identities. Different methods were used to accomplish this goal. Some looked for spaces that, while not explicitly for queer individuals, were popular among this crowd, making it relatively easy to interact with other members of the LGBTQ+ community. Some valued connections to The Community that were simultaneously grounded in both queerness as well as other identities

that they felt were equally important and informed the types of relationships and content they wanted to consume.

Regardless of the rationale behind these more intentional interactions that the participants sought, the open acknowledgment and acceptance of queer identity within these spaces were meaningful. During the interview, I asked participants if they felt that having a shared identity makes it easier for people to search for support from one another. Many of them answered affirmatively. Although they may not approach every new social situation specifically seeking out queer people to talk to, participants like Sunflower agreed that “something about being queer just makes me like someone more. I feel like now we have another level we can relate on.” This other level was significant in the development of the participants’ identities. When interacting with different types of content and communities online, the addition of queerness added something meaningful to their online safe spaces. Whether a shared interest, a shared hobby, or a shared characteristic, the ability of the participants to immerse themselves in a community within a community enhanced their connection to The Community and contributed to a better understanding of themselves as well.

There were several ways that participants expressed ideas relating to community. Two main threads evolved: 1) the formation of community based on their queer identity (and its evolution) and 2) the maintenance of community through social media interactions and social media-based relationships. Both of these threads explored participants’ ability to feel connected to others within the LGBTQ+ community in addition to cementing a deeper understanding of themselves and their own identities.

Fandom

Interacting with “fandom”²³ content on social media contributed to the development of three participants’ (Sunflower, Calloway, and Jade) queer identities. Sunflower shared that when she was twelve years old, her safe haven was the *Glee* (2009–2015)²⁴ fandom:

...[I]n 7th grade—or 8th grade, whatever. I was just, like, too scared to say that I didn’t like boys...I think I was super into *Glee* and I was always looking at Santana and Brittany²⁵ content. And I was like, “You know what: if Santana Lopez is a lesbian, then I can also be a lesbian and be fine.”

For Sunflower, the show itself and the fandom-generated content she consumed on social media played a part in her accepting her identity during middle school.

Jade and Calloway also offered specific examples in which the groups they engaged with on social media platforms helped them feel supported in their identities and connected to others within the community. As discussed earlier, Jade’s connection to an online writing community helped them to connect with queerness. Through writing about fandom-related content, Jade was able to connect with people who are their age and older. Jade appreciates the older queer members of the writing community as they “think it’s beneficial in part to hear the perspectives of people who are older than me, and also...had more experiences prior to the rise of social media and the internet.” In having notable moments in the development of their LGBTQ+ identity, these older individuals “have a different perspective on queer history,” which Jade appreciates.

²³ ‘Fandom’ refers to online subcultures that have an enthusiastic group of supporters (regardless of the number of supporters). These subcultures span film, music, video games, theater, and literature. Although engagement with fandoms is not specifically a queer phenomenon, a lot of queer individuals engage with different fandoms at some point in their lives.

²⁴ *Glee* is a scripted musical comedy TV series centered around high schoolers that covered various social issues throughout its original run. A main aspect of the show is the queer identities of numerous characters and how they, and others, responded to it as they navigated and graduated from high school.

²⁵ Santana Lopez and Brittany Pierce are two of the main female characters in the series. Over the course of the show, both of them come out as queer women and enter into a relationship with each other.

Calloway's fandom community emerged in 2018 from interactions with a band that has a lot of young, queer, neurodivergent fans (according to Calloway). Over time, Calloway was able to develop friendships with the lead singer of the band, and they sometimes chat about topics related to queerness and gender exploration. Calloway was also able to develop friendships with other "really wonderful friends from that space that are also queer." Aside from this band, Calloway was also a part of the One Direction fandom on Tumblr. Band member, Harry Styles, was particularly instrumental in Calloway's exploration of gender and gender expression:

I was in Uniqlo with my mom and I was about to transfer schools and I just wanted to, like, completely leave the like, hyper-sexualized femme energy that I was in at 14 and 15...and wanted to just go completely neutral. And there was a moment where I was like, 'Mom, I want to go shop in the men's section.' And she was like, 'No, it won't fit, like, your body correctly.' I just remember saying, like, 'No, if my hero, Harry Styles, is wearing women's Gucci suits, I can wear men's clothing. That's how this is gonna work.' And she agreed. And then I looked like a little neutral baby...But I think from Harry and just like these fashion blogs that would dissect his outfits and be like, 'These are women's outfits on a man,' that was really, like, life-changing for me.

Anyone can participate in fandoms and engage with their content. In theory, fandoms are for everyone who identifies strongly with the object of the subculture. In a way, this mirrors the LGBTQ+ community as a whole: you're here, and you're queer. That's all that matters. However, fandom communities and the LGBTQ+ community as a whole do exist within a larger societal context and alongside other non-queer-related experiences that inform how different individuals curate their own queer experiences.

Intersectionality-based Communities

For some participants, their queer identities and experiences were greatly informed by their other identities. As such, they made it a point to seek out content and experiences that affirmed these other identities as well.

For most who reported such curation attempts, their community formation occurred on either racial-based lines, gender-based lines, or both. Sunflower expressed that the general online community of queer people helped her substantially, albeit indirectly as she passively perused content from queer women. Specifically, she shows gratitude to the Black female queer community:

As a Black woman, you are like the most undesirable. So when I would see content...back when I was very unconfident...and [when] my love life was in the trenches. I would see things on Twitter or something and it would not make me feel better, but make me feel less alone in that other people are going through the same thing and you know, sometimes it would give me hope that—you know, just like...I'm not ugly. You know what I mean? I'm not ugly.

Even though Sunflower is referring to the times when she would appreciate seeing others' negative experiences and the connection she would feel to them by resonating with their stories, there was more of an appreciation for the fact that they existed at all.

Seeing “realistic and humanizing stories,” as Gwen puts it, enhanced participants' understanding of the vastness of the experiences that come with being queer. Not only are the grand, heart-warming stories of perseverance and trailblazing LGBTQ+ stories obviously important, but so are the mundane everyday experiences of queer people who post about things like shopping for groceries with their partner and other simple things that cis het individuals experience without scrutiny. Rose, who described herself as consuming a lot of lesbian content on YouTube, shared that she “used to be very, very scared of what my family, my parents would

think.” However, seeing the everyday lives of lesbian individuals and couples gave her hope that “although my family may be unsupportive, they may come around. It won't stay in this negative spot forever.” Both Rose and Sunflower agree that the gender of the person whose queer content they are interacting with matters somewhat. They both prefer to see content from other queer and lesbian women because that is the section of the community that they most strongly identify with.

Sunflower was not the only individual to whom the intersection of race and LGBTQ+ identity was important. In fact, most participants who identified as people of color mentioned experiences that conflated queerness and race with each other. Seven out of nine participants were people of color, and only one did not mention race at all during their interview. Those who did mention race wanted their interactions with the LGBTQ+ community to be informed by the racial identities that they and their peers held. This is important for those like Harem Madik because “there are perspectives that can only be produced by queer people of color” that white queer individuals can only empathize with. As such, Harem Madik feels that because there are a host of experiences that white queer individuals do not share with her, she can never fully be in community with them. Or put more simply by Gwen: “Even if we're in [a] queer place, I'm not talking to no white queer. What do I have to talk to you about?”

The participants' different experiences informed how they entered into the LGBTQ+ community within the realm of social media as well as how they began developing their own identities within this community. Once they found their footing in their various platforms, they began to form their own communities and attach themselves to ones that further helped develop and affirm their identities. In order to have such development and affirmation, however, they had

to commit themselves to queer subcommunities and relationships that aided this process and remove themselves from ones that did not.

“A very open and loud and easy-to-find queer community online...”

After the participants found their entry points into the queer community on social media, they sought out deeper connections with both the community as a whole as well as the people within it. These connections—ranging from simply perusing through an individual’s or subcommunity’s content to establishing significant relationships—were largely centered around support. Having what Spice calls “a very open and loud and easy-to-find queer community online that are very proud to label themselves and educate...” makes the journey of the radical acceptance of one’s self much easier than navigating such feeling alone. Much of this ease is owed to the role that support plays in not only relationships in general but also in the LGBTQ+ community. It is not just others accepting you as you come to them but also as you evolve through this ever-expanding and never-fully-complete idea of queerness and how it fits you. The participants both provided and received support from the spaces they interacted with through passive and direct interaction with queer spaces on social media. In doing so, they further understood their place in the community—the bounds they were comfortable aligning themselves with and operating from.

By receiving support from individuals within The Community in some way, the participants were able to feel more confident in their identities and how they relate to others within the community. By feeling like other queer individuals had their back while figuring themselves out, they felt better equipped to do the same for others who needed it. For many participants, support came in the form of representation and positive depictions of queer individuals that participants felt were hard to find elsewhere. Rose mirrors this opinion: “So for

queerness, I consume social media by watching videos and stuff. And so seeing that, like my lesbians, people who I identify with, happy, that gave me tons of hope that I can live a similar happy life.”

For the participants, seeing others share parts of themselves on social media helped them to feel less alone. While Spice acknowledges that “queer TV media has changed so much in the past three years” and strides have been made to improve the stories shown on the small screen, they still wish they saw more queer representation within popular media. As they wait for traditional media to progress and reflect the more modern and expansive queer community, Spice appreciates how social media is able to bridge the gap in the meantime. In their experience, “Queer social media allows you to see [different stories] in a much larger and faster quantity, allowing people to “get even more specific with the people...and the identities that you're seeing online.”

By sharing and seeing others share parts of themselves on social media, many interviewees felt less alone as they navigated social media. For Calloway, there were moments when not feeling alone simply had to do with the ability for online friends to be at the right places at the right time, making them reachable in a way that their offline friends might not be when they are needed:

There is this lovely aspect of the online friends where if I just say something online, like, “fuck, like, sad news”...my physical, in-person friends aren't going to see that. So they're not going to know that, like, I'm in my room all day doing nothing. My Twitter friends are going to know that sooner, if not immediately and then kind of show up and be like, “I'm always here for you,” or whatever. And I have such a deep appreciation for that, like, quickness that we have with each other. If you're having an emotion that doesn't feel good, or like you're going through something, I'm here, I see it.

In addition to this emotional aspect that came with interacting with others' stories and queer discovery journeys, there was a practical component as well; seeing others with varying identities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella helped the participants to develop their vocabulary and broaden their understanding of the community, which in turn informed their own identities.

While all of the participants had formed surface-level or passive connections to various queer subcommunities on social media, there was an almost even split between the participants in terms of who has (or had) relationships that began and are largely maintained via social media and those who do not (or have never had one). Jade talked about their most substantial social media-based relationship that originated in the writing community they frequently participate in:

Occasionally we'll send each other packages, just like inspiration socks and stuff for writing purposes. But yeah, so it's interesting because like, she's been a really good friend. We have different ages. But we kind of met through this sort of queer media, right...It's just interesting because she's not actually queer, but she knows that I am.

When ruminating on what makes relationships formed on social media different from those formed offline, they had the following to say:

Online friendships are kind of backwards...Normally when you meet somebody, you learn their name first and you know what they look like. And that's, like, the last thing that you find out in an online friendship, and you learn what their interests are and maybe their true identity and what they like to read and write and you know stories about their inner life...before you find out their actual name and their face.

Because of this backward flow that online relationships tend to take, having this deep connection with someone online and then finally getting to meet them in person and put a face to the username can be very rewarding and exciting.

There are, however, instances where finally meeting up with an online friend can have the opposite effect; instead, these meetups may be lessons in why sometimes your online community needs to remain online, as Calloway once discovered:

There was one friend I met up with in person, and I had loved them online. Like they were so kind and we were just so, like, I don't know, like, happy together, I guess, very supportive... And then when we met up, I just could not. Like I left crying, cause it was draining the life out of me... Like, we didn't talk about me at all, and we hung out for five hours. And [they] talked for 30 minutes straight... so that, like, completely just shut down that friendship. Some friendships I like keeping at a distance because... I can keep it in like a safe place... I don't necessarily need it to go deeper because I have a lot of people in real life that I already go really deep with.

Because of this experience, Calloway learned to create boundaries in online relationships. Gwen and Spice, the two other participants who had or have substantial online relationships, operated similarly. Both of them expressed having limits to the type of support that they would provide to an online friend—a position that differed significantly from those who have never had an online friendship and feel that there are no bounds to the support that they would give. Regardless of their feelings towards the limits of support, many participants reported providing some form of support to a fellow queer person at some point during their self-discovery journeys.

Paying It Forward

While Calloway's experience was negative, giving support is as equally inherent to The Community as receiving it is (provided the circumstances are healthy for all involved). For those who did not have substantial support growing up as queer children and teenagers, finding queer community was instrumental in the development of their identities and their connection to the community. For Kimmy, her motivation to find support from other queer people was primarily informed by her first job assisting queer Black men who were recently released from prison:

My first ever job was that I was working with gay men who recently came out of prison... to help them acclimate back into society... It was just more so... learning what support looked like for different people... There was a lot about... how do [queer] Black men... receive [support without knowing what that

looks like]? And it got me thinking a lot about the fact that I didn't have a support system either. So I'm being a support system...[and] I don't even know what that would look like, because I've never had it for myself.

When helping these men, Kimmy approached them from the lens of what she imagined proper support would look like had the loved ones in her life provided that for her. “They”—like Kimmy—“needed somebody who wouldn't judge them, somebody who wouldn't, like, ostracize them, and [would] try to help them [exist within] society in a way that would work for them.”

As other participants reported feelings that echoed these desires throughout their own interviews, they reflected on how they best provide support to other queer individuals. Most participants stated that they supported other queer individuals on an interpersonal level. For Gwen, Harem Madik, and Jade, this support was not anything out of the ordinary. As Jade casually puts it, they supported their queer friends “as friends support each other... And we just happen to be queer.” Spice provided support in the form of representation for younger queer students on their campus:

I'm in the performing arts division. So pretty much everyone there is queer. So I'm, like, very out, and in a happy, healthy relationship. And I'm like friends with all the other young, queer kids. So I feel like just knowing that I exist: a blessing.

Calloway, Raven, and Sunflower are all very present in the development of their friends' queer identities. All three of them found themselves being approached by people who were beginning their own self-discovery journeys. By being open about their own queer identities, the participants became safe to confide in. Calloway's approach differed from Raven and Sunflower's. Instead of waiting to be approached about a queer crisis of identity, Calloway preferred to hurry people along:

I used to have a problem where I'd just be like, “Nah, you're queer. You'll come out someday,” and clocking people a few years ahead of time. But that's, like, not really respectful to do, so I don't do that to

people anymore...I, you know, make conversation or talk about my own queerness, talk about queerness in general...And that, I think, has provided safety for friends to come out to me or just exist without having the feeling of needing to come out.

“Clocking”²⁶—as Calloway uses the term—is one of the more useful tools of the queer community. It allows queer individuals to identify others within The Community without either party having to outwardly state their identity first (albeit based somewhat on stereotypes).

It is rather unlikely (especially considering today’s political climate surrounding LGBTQ+ issues) that an individual will explicitly announce themselves as queer upon first meeting somebody—regardless of whether or not they consider themselves to be out in general. If few people announce “I’m queer” to every room they walk into, then there must be implicit methods allowing queer people to find each other. During the interview, Calloway provides an example of how queer coding²⁷ might be used by queer individuals to help others identify them: “...queer coding is such a language. Like, if I’m cuffing both my fucking pants and my shirt. Like, that’s really intentional. That’s not just style.”²⁸

While actively clocking another queer person can only be done once an individual has a solid grasp of queer culture (typically through online queer spaces), there are instances where

²⁶ To “clock” someone is to recognize them as being a member of the LGBTQ+ community without knowing if they actually identify as queer or them explicitly stating so. The term originated within the ballroom scene amongst Black and brown transgender women (and others who ‘walked’ categories related to expressing undeniable femininity). It carried a negative connotation, as it infers that the person who was clocked did not blend in well enough with the cishet women that they hoped to embody (i.e., ‘passing’). Today, the word has expanded beyond the bounds of ballroom and entered popular LGBTQ+ lexicon. While the term can be considered neutral depending on the context, it still carries those negative connotations.

²⁷ “Queer coding” typically refers to the practice of movies and television shows presenting a character in such a way that those familiar with or a part of the LGBTQ+ community are likely to identify as queer. When done in this way, the sexuality/gender identity of the character is not explicitly stated to be queer. However, the character’s adherence to fashion choices, mannerisms, and language that are widely considered to be reminiscent of queer subculture might be read as a nod to their possible queer identity. Calloway uses the term in reference to queer individuals adopting such techniques to convey their actual queer identity to others—the most popular example of which might be the Handkerchief Code, created to indicate kink preferences among gay men (Anon. 2019; J. Raúl Cornier 2019).

²⁸ Cuffing the ends of one’s pants and/or T-shirt is widely considered to be a part of “bisexual (or general queer) culture”. Asserting this fashion choice as such can be done seriously in reference to the evolution of modern queer fashion and ways of signaling one’s LGBTQ+ identity (e.g. gay men piercing only their right ear) (Stringham 2020). However, it is usually done in jest (Haney 2022; Hubbard 2022).

participants found that they somehow managed to find other queer people before either of them even began questioning their identities. Six out of nine participants reported at least one situation in which they developed a relationship with a queer person before knowing that they identified as such. When describing their experience with sudden new queer friends, Raven stated that they think “at least like a good 98% of my friends: all queer. And...when we met, we didn't know [that we identified that way]...And then all of a sudden, we're just like, ‘hey...hey, queer, hey.’”

The other participants shared similar experiences; they felt drawn towards individuals for one reason or another before realizing that they were already in community with each other without realizing it. When thinking about why they might have been drawn towards certain people and being comforted by the simple awareness of another queer person in the room, participants stated that they felt more at ease in these situations. Spice elaborated that for them, social situations are “a little bit more comfortable” when you know “that you have some[one] that you can relate to.” When thinking specifically in the context of social media, they appreciated how “it's made finding my identity a lot easier [as well as] finding other people who identify the same way.”

For the participants, these subconscious connections proved the existence of a common community among LGBTQ+ individuals. “Some things,” as Harem Madiq puts it, “are non-verbal.” As with inside jokes between good friends, it is not necessary to explain your identity and your experiences to those who are in the know. In fact, having friends that share your queer identity is preferable as it removes the need to explain or defend yourself to non-queer individuals constantly. Gwen elaborates on this idea:

There's only so much you can explain to people who haven't been through similar situations or lived their life in similar ways...So I definitely think when you find a community, like, you stick to it, because it's like

your home and it's good to have people that you don't have to constantly explain things to in detail because that shit is tiring.

For many of the participants, there were points in their queer journeys at which they did not know *what* they wanted to explain, much less how to convey that to others. During these moments, the support they received from other queer individuals helped them better understand The Community and themselves in relation to it. Navigating these moments online was not only safer for these individuals, but this experience also allowed them to explore the vastness of the queer community and settle into an identity that they felt best suited them.

Labels

JOURDAN: Please note that I use the terms 'LGBTQ+' and 'queer' interchangeably throughout the conversation unless you have a preference for one term over the other. But let's get started.

SPICE: I think I prefer queer. LGBTQIA is a lot to say all at once again and again.

One commonality that eight out of nine interviewees shared was that as they continued to engage with the LGBTQ+ community on social media, how they related to labels shifted. Regardless of how they identified themselves at the time of the interview, these eight had undergone tremendous periods of transformation to get to their current selves. While Spice was being half humorous in the quote above, they express a growing point of view among younger LGBTQ+ generations: the initialism is just not as engaging as it once was. Earlier political LGBTQ+ equality campaigns seemed intent on getting as many people to be recognized under the umbrella as possible. In an attempt to define every non-cishet possibility, the initialism stretched so considerably that it almost became impossible to say in one breath (e.g., LGBTQIA,

LGBTQ2S+, LGBTQIP2SAA²⁹). Today, politically-engaged queer individuals are less focused on categorizing the community in order to justify it to the mainstream cis/het world. As activists realized how expansive the community is to the point that one cannot possibly include every identity in a single term, they began to reclaim queer in a return to the political messaging of direct action groups of the 1990s.³⁰ To be queer or a part of the queer community is to define yourself outside of the cis/het expectations that individuals hold on to as they begin their self-discovery journeys.

Only two participants identified themselves as “queer”³¹ as a catch-all for the ways that they conceptualize their sexuality, their gender identity, or both. Harem Madik appreciates social media for providing her with language that she could use to “describ[e] myself in terms of my sexuality.” While none of the specific terms she learned fit her exactly, she is still thankful for the more profound understanding of the queer community that she gained from her experience. Jade echoes this in their own experience, concluding that “there's a lot more flexibility and fluidity in stuff than I think people tend to talk about in mainstream media and in real life.” Because of this, “queer” best fits the fluid and expansive journeys that both individuals’ identities have taken them through.

Two individuals, Rose and Sunflower, started and ended³² their queer explorations with the same identity they started with when they first came out. For them, identifying as a lesbian

²⁹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual,, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual; Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Two-Spirit; and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Pansexual, Two-Spirit, Asexual, Ally respectively (Indian Health Service n.d.; Zak 2013)

³⁰ See The Queer Manifesto (1990) developed by Queer Nation, an activist organization created by four members of ACT UP.

³¹ See Table 1.

³² “Ended” in the context of the evolution of the individuals’ identities as it relates to this study, where their “end” is the point in their journey at which they were interviewed—regardless of whether or not they believe it will change in the future.

conveys their identity perfectly. Sunflower details the evolution of her identity over the course of her life, beginning with her lightbulb moment as a child:

I was too young to really put a word to it but...I know the exact moment I was really like, “Wow, I like women,” but it might be a little inappropriate...I was in fifth grade, and my teacher bent over right in front of me and I saw her boobs and I was like, “Okay, yeah.”

Continuing the story into her eighth-grade year, Sunflower talks about the beginning of her queer identity crisis as she flip-flopped on whether or not she was indeed attracted to men as she was to women. While she managed to once again settle on a lesbian identity, she underwent another identity crisis thanks to the “lesbian Google doc”³³ that explores “a bunch of ways that comphet³⁴ gets you into thinking that you’re not a lesbian.” Despite this period, Sunflower came out on the other side fully confident of her lesbian identity. Having this specific identity is important to her as she felt that she was greatly affected by compulsory heterosexuality, which delayed her acceptance and recognition of her queer identity.

The other seven who laid claim to one or more letters were ultimately much less concerned with finding the perfect label than they were at the beginning of their journeys. In Kimmy’s case, she first encountered the term “pansexual...through chat rooms that were geared towards bi people.” Encountering the “hearts, not parts” definition that was used primarily before the term fully entered into the mainstream queer lexicon, Kimmy describes her experience as the following:

So I was like, oh, pansexuality, you have an emotional connection, and then that leads to the sexual connection. And that's what I understood for a very long time...[Learning this,] I was like, “So why are we

³³ Sunflower is referring to the “Am I a Lesbian?” (Luz 2018) masterdoc that became popular within lesbian circles on social media beginning around 2020. The masterdoc explores the different ways lesbians might deny themselves their identity out of fear that they are faking it somehow.

³⁴ “Compulsory heterosexuality”, often shortened to “comphet”, is the idea that because heterosexuality is the norm, it is forced onto everyone in a way that harms queer individuals. Invented by Adrienne Rich (1980) in her look at comphet and its effect on queer women, the term is almost exclusively tied to lesbian identity and culture.

not including trans individuals in that?” Because if it's about emotional connection,... it just matters that they're a human being who's a good person, and wants to be a better person and wants to be with you at the same time. So it's like, “yeah, I'm pansexual,” because emotional connection can happen with anybody.

As Kimmy learned more about the queer community through social media, she began to understand and embrace her pansexual identity fully. However, Kimmy felt that queerness—at least as it was portrayed online—looked a certain way and was performative in a sense that she simply did not care to participate in. While pansexuality was the identity that she aligned with, she did not feel a need to embody or display that at all times:

And it's through those conversations online and reading how the terminologies were shifting, and how those terminologies was understood [at my alma mater] as well, had made me kind of say like “Okay, I'm still pansexual, but I'm still trying to figure out like, what does that mean for me?” So that's kind of like how social media helped me understand myself... One thing I realized is that I will always be part of the queer community, but I recognize that I will always be considered or seen as a straight person... Like, I'm straight-passing... and I think that that was the struggle that I had with [interacting with queer content] online where it's just like, queerness looked a certain way. And I felt that I just couldn't do that because that was just not me... I'm just [Kimmy]... I'm just chilling.

Participants' methods of forming and maintaining queer communities were more about general experiences or instances in which the various queer communities on social media aided the participants with their own identities. As they situated themselves with these communities and continued to engage with social media in general, they began developing ideas about online relationships. They wondered whether or not close, sustainable relationships are viable when those they want to connect with are locked behind a screen. Some of the participants succeeded in building these close connections, while others did not.

“Queer Diasporic Wars”

The last major theme that some participants touched on was what Harem Madik termed “queer diasporic wars.” The distinct examples provided by Jade and Gwen on these “wars” give some context to Harem Madik’s concern. Jade touches on the internal policing of The Community by members who feel that there are individuals who are not performing their labels correctly or are otherwise giving queerness a bad name. The example they use is about the internal controversy surrounding kink-related imagery at Pride events (especially the parades, where minors are likely to be in attendance):

...There's a lot of policing of the community in terms of things that aren't considered socially acceptable, such as kink and other stuff like that. And so, one of the things that I've learned a lot, just from, like, being around people and talking about them is that if you censor that sort of thing at Pride...you know, like anyone who's just kind of outside of the norms of “socially acceptable queer,” right? If you don't still maintain solidarity with those people, too, then, it's actually harmful to the community as a whole...People who dislike queer existence don't differentiate between an innocent queer kiss and somebody, like, wearing a collar in public, you know what I mean? So ultimately, queer liberation has to come from everyone, and it has to liberate everybody and not just queer relationships that cishet people see as socially acceptable at Pride, right?

This idea is expanded upon in Gwen’s interview:

At the end of the day, boo, we all getting misgendered, we all get harassed. Because especially like, if you're open and out, like [those who are anti-queer are] coming for you...At the end of the day, these laws that people are passing, affect all of us.

When considering this perspective on discourse (“infighting”) within The Community, it becomes clear that none of these participants want to engage in this type of exclusion of their fellow queer people. Instead, their commitment to The Community and the safety that it can provide prompts them to ruminate on the same thing that Harem Madik does:

Like what is constructive to keeping a community together? Some of [the topics brought up by individuals within the community are] disruptive and not...thought through before putting it out into the queer sphere or whatever. And then a couple years down the line, we're like, "Ooh, that had repercussions that maybe as a community we should have thought about..." The "wars," they have my head spinning a lot... There's mini-wars, and then there's big wars, and y'all have to keep track of all of them. But through that is where we find the nuggets of goodness that we hold onto."

V. DISCUSSION

Socialization of Identity

While the participants began their self-discovery journeys at various levels of understanding and knowledge about the LGBTQ+ community, they all ended up at relatively the same place in their journeys at the time of their interviews. They were all much more comfortable with themselves, and as their conception of queerness expanded, they also felt much more secure in their place within The Community. The fifth stage of development in Erik Erikson's (1968) theory—Identity vs. Role Confusion—³⁵ played out as expected in each participant's queer identity journeys. During their adolescent stages, the participants did not quite know *what* they were chasing in terms of understanding where they fit into the world, but they knew that they were chasing *something*. This chase, the desire to connect with others in a meaningful way (Simmel and Hughes 1949), is the basis for the creation of social networks that satisfy the individual by bringing them closer to the achieved identity—that critical point that turns identity from a concept into something tangible: community.

This community, the web of relationships and experiences that inform one's being, was necessary for the continued development of the participants' queer identities. Without access to the “social consciousness” (Durkheim 2005) of the LGBTQ+ community, the participants' growths would have been stunted. There would be no well of knowledge or meanings to draw from, and they would forever remain unfulfilled in their identities. It would always be a question of “what could have been.” However, because they were able to form relationships with other queer people and feel like they belonged to the larger queer community, the boundaries of what they thought to be queerness evolved, and so they were able to evolve with it. As Calloway puts

³⁵ See page 8.

it: “My queerness is always evolving, and it's just at this point about what makes me feel good and comfortable in my body on my own timeline and not for anyone else to judge.” Here, Calloway asserts “*my* queerness.” Queerness exists as a concept, as a culture, as a community, and so on. However, Calloway’s is unique; no one will ever experience queerness as Calloway has. And understanding that is how queer identity is fostered within individuals. Access to the language and culture that shapes the LGBTQ+ community is only the first step to achieving a queer identity. The rest of the journey depends on the individual. This does not mean that the journey has to be completed alone. However, only the individual alone can assert their identity for themselves.

Fictive Kinship Experiences

Returning to Ray Oldenburg’s assertion that third places can sometimes be “more homelike than home (1999:39),” the online LGBTQ+ community squarely embodies that idea. With online queer subcommunities operating akin to extended relatives, it is not difficult to see why so many LGBTQ+ individuals regard The Community so fondly. The support structures within online queer spaces could be considered reminiscent of the parent-child relationship. The “children,” in this case, are the queer individuals who are just beginning their self-discovery journeys, much like our participants during their childhood and teenage years. The “parents” are those who have spent a significant amount of time figuring themselves out and have had enough experience within The Community to reach a point where they feel comfortable with themselves and their identities.

The LGBTQ+ community is only able to exist as long as the “children”/newcomers are committed to giving back to The Community and adopting the “parent”/mentor role once they feel they are ready to do so. Yes, there will be some queer individuals who get all that they need

from The Community and choose not to interact with it in a significant capacity past this point. Those who do choose to stay, however, become part of what Oldenburg terms the “regulars” of third places:

The third place is just so much space unless the right people are there to make it come alive, and they are the regulars...Every regular was once a newcomer, and the acceptance of newcomers is essential to the sustained vitality of the place. (1999:33–34)

These regulars maintain the culture of The Community and continue to develop it as the queerness concept expands due to the new meanings that enter the LGBTQ+ knowledge bank to be reinterpreted and accepted. Spice demonstrated the clearest evolution from “child” to “parent” within the queer community. They longed for extensive queer representation within popular media, and when these sources failed to provide that, they searched online for more specific and intentional representations of LGBTQ+ identities. Now, in their university’s performing arts division, they are able to be the representation they craved for others. As most students within the division are queer (according to Spice), it functions as a sub-community within the broader LGBTQ+ community, and it is here that Spice can step into their parent role. While Spice was only half-serious about their value within that space, their presence may very well be a blessing to those younger students—especially if their exposure to queerness was minimal before attending this university.

The commonalities seen between the interviewees support the positioning of the LGBTQ+ community as a re-imagining of the family structure. While each person’s journey was unique, they developed similarly and operated under the same culture, history, and traditions which is true of any family and its members. Again calling on Oldenburg’s “homelike” comparison, while The Community generally got along, there were and still are issues that not every queer person sees eye-to-eye on. This is seen in intra-community debates—as Gwen,

Harem Madik, and Jade touched on—about the “proper” way to present The Community to outsiders in order to have a successful equal rights campaign.

Sociologist Joshua Gamson (1998) explores this via a content analysis study of the popular tabloid talk shows (e.g., Jerry Springer, The Jenny Jones Show, Maury, etc.) during their heyday during the 1990s and early 2000s. Playing the ratings game, producers wanted topics and guests that would generate controversy, thereby heightening the entertainment value of these shows and increasing the number of viewers. During this time, LGBTQ+ individuals and their stories were considered to be very valuable for this purpose. In the name of sensationalism, the producers sought out “freaks” and their stories³⁶ for episodes. LGBTQ+ guests who chose to go on these shows and provide such sensationalist content (for their own entertainment or their 15 minutes of fame) were negatively viewed by LGBTQ+ activists who wanted to go on these shows to portray the image of “normal” queer individuals to garner support for equal rights by showing that queer people are capable of adhering to cishet values and lifestyles in their own way—to show that they were just like everyone else.³⁷ Those who might hold a limited view of queerness or disdain for those who, as Jade puts it, are not “socially acceptable queers,” may opt for this subdued portrayal of the LGBTQ+ community and plead for their fellow members to follow their lead when talking about this cultivated space to outsiders (Goffman 1990).³⁸

Others—as seems to be the case with the participants of this study—may not care for tactics

³⁶ Crossdressers, transgender individuals, men who cheated on their wives/girlfriends with other men, dramatic falling outs between gay/lesbian lovers and friends all fit the sensationalist criteria. Gamson describes talk show episodes with these themes and more in his book.

³⁷ This rarely worked out in the activists’ favor. As Gamson explained, such guests were either threatened to have their segment cut completely if they did not play the game, or their segments were edited in ways that diminished their point or made them look more irrational than they actually were.

³⁸ I invoke Goffman (1990) here for his dramaturgical analysis of human social behavior. In his book, Goffman theorizes that humans determine their behavior based on their audience, whom they aspire to impress. With the argument that LGBTQ+ individuals consider The Community to be an extension of themselves, it follows that activists who utilize respectability politics in the struggle for equal rights would want their fellow members to act in a manner that appeases their cishet audience rather than a manner that alienates them.

utilized by those who believe in respectability politics, as they operate under the belief that queerness is meant to be inclusive, not exclusive.³⁹ Returning to the ideas of McMillan and Chavis (1986), to be as inclusive as possible and fully embody the spirit of a community, The Community must attempt to maximize access. This idea, and the rationale of the “pro-exhibitionist” crowd, is summarized by pedagogue William F. Pinar (1998):

Queer is not a neutral term, even though it wants to be a term of coalition between lesbians and gay men. (Stephen Murray, 1996, prefers “lesbigay”[,]. . . a neologism that constructs “us” as a “quasi-ethnic group[.]” . . . Queer has been criticized, accused of effacing specific subject positions occupied by these two broad and diverse groups. Queer theorists and activists have pointed to the perceived classism, racism, and Eurocentrism. . . of the terms gay and lesbian, suggesting that queer may need the queer position from which to speak. Queer has become the chosen term for many who have come to be dissatisfied with what they perceive to be the assimilationist politics associated with the terms gay and lesbian. (1998:3)

Social Media’s Third Place

Social media has created a new discursive space that offers everyone the voice and the space to tell their stories in YouTube videos, blogs, tweets, Facebook posts, likes, Diggs, images and infographics and so on. This can be part of transforming conversations from hierarchical ‘expert to patient’ consultations to collaborative formulations between professionals and experts by experience. (Allen and Buzzi 2020:117)

Allen and Buzzi begin to explain how social media platforms are a necessary tool for the LGBTQ+ community to assert agency in modern times. McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) definition of a shared emotional connection and a shared history⁴⁰ necessitates the agency of the queer community to identify the unit as a community and themselves as community members. If the group cannot do that for themselves, they stand to fail as time goes on. For our participants, exercising agency was easiest through a screen: they were able to decide who and what they

³⁹ Which, As McMillan and Chavis (1986) emphasize, should be the goal of any community.

⁴⁰ See page 19.

interacted with and when. While this may seem like an exclusionary tactic, as participants did not wish to engage with every queer individual (see: Gwen’s aversion to white queer individuals)⁴¹ or every piece of queer content (Sunflower expressed disdain for white lesbian content during her interview), this was for the best. These individuals—and The Community as a whole—need to set such boundaries for themselves. If they did not, they would be unable to feel safe within The Community, thus negatively affecting their ability to establish the sense of belonging needed to maintain The Community’s spirit.

Using the safety of the internet, the participants were able to dip their toes into The Community’s pool and submerge themselves at their own pace rather than being overwhelmed by a sudden push or, perhaps worse: never getting the water at all. Continuing this pool metaphor, they sought out (or happened upon) subcommunities that acted as life preservers and supported them as they moved toward the deep end, or closer to actualizing their queer identity. This shows that young queer people are still interested in building and maintaining a larger community, and as such, the worries of LGBTQ+ individuals like the ones in Handhart et al.’s (2020) study—who believe that fellow queers’ steady usage of social media to connect with others in The Community will harm its overall presence—are unfounded:

In the summer of 2012, posters reading “MORE GRINDR=FEWER GAY BARS” appeared taped to signposts in numerous gay neighborhoods in North America, from Greenwich Village in New York City to Davie Village in Vancouver, Canada. The signs expressed a brewing fear: that the popularity of online lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) social media—like Grindr, which connects gay men based on proximate location—would soon replace the bricks-and-mortar institutions that had long facilitated LGBTQ community building. (Hanhardt et al. 2020:1)

Communication and congregation methods must change with the times. As technology-based communication continues to be the new dominant method of connection and

⁴¹ See page 42.

relationship maintenance, third places must adapt to this change in order to survive (Soukup 2006). The increased accessibility of the virtual third place that supplements everything else that makes the third place safe keeps the LGBTQ+ community connected through this change. In fact, it enhances The Community through its ability to facilitate interactions between old friends and acquaintances alike. Through social media, relationships are strengthened within the LGBTQ+ community, and in turn, The Community is able to remain a community.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Self and Community/The Self and...the Self

The findings of this study—while not representative of a large population of the LGBTQ+ community—provide insight into how younger generations may continue to interpret queerness as a concept and maintain its culture through community. The participants did not begin their self-discovery journeys with the same knowledge they had at the time of their interviews. Such knowledge took their entire adolescence to cultivate, and even still, they find that there are things they hope to learn from others within The Community and about themselves and their identity. The expansive nature of queerness means that they may never feel that they have learned all there is to know about either of the above. However, the ability to seek out LGBTQ+ information and individuals that they can connect with—to have that window into this queer world—helps them to remain in community with others who occupy these sub-communities within this virtual third space that they have created. While they are themselves first and foremost, as their identity belongs to them only, they also carry The Community within them. The meanings, the language, the history, the struggle. All of these things are provided to them by the LGBTQ+ community. But how they understand these things as they are reflected back to them and how they choose to utilize this information is what makes them, well...them.

For future studies that examine how younger generations of LGBTQ+ people are forming connections and maintaining relationships with one another, perhaps (or rather, certainly) the most useful research tool would be access to more LGBTQ+ individuals who identify with a range of terms under the umbrella. Having only nine participants that just so happened to share very similar experiences could be largely due to coincidence. Even Kimmy, who stated that she

feels less connected to The Community than she would like, agrees that she is grateful for the ability to come into her own identity because of what she was able to find out online about pansexuality and queerness. Her research allowed her to understand herself better and acknowledge that she does not have to perform queerness to be queer and to find other queer individuals. And as she graduated from college and fully entered adulthood, she did, in fact, establish her own queer social network that accepted her and her queerness for what it was.

It is possible that a tenth participant would have said that their social media experiences helped them to realize that they *do not* want to seek out other queer individuals—that they would rather have their queerness exist as it is without the affirmation of a larger community to bolster it. And that is completely fine. However, these nine individuals—all with different formative experiences—found value in having a connection to the queer community and presumably, a large number of LGBTQ+ individuals feel similarly. I also want to retake the time to acknowledge the lack of representation from those assigned male at birth or those who are men. I believe that the socialization of gender beginning in childhood and the greater context of a patriarchal society both contribute to how queerness in boys/men is viewed (even Kimmy points this out during her interview⁴²). A larger sample to work with would have captured that key demographic and seen how it measured up with those assigned female at birth or those who are girls/women. But alas, The Community is likely to remain strong for many years to come, and as new generations of queer individuals emerge, so will the potential research opportunities.

⁴² See page 33.

Appendix 1: Interview Protocol

Please note that I use the terms “LGBTQ+” and “queer” interchangeably throughout the conversation unless you have a preference for one term over the other.

Section I | Identity & Community Prior to Social Media

1. What knowledge did you have of LGBTQ+/queer identities and the community as a whole prior to your use of social media?
2. Did you consider yourself to be LGBTQ+ in any way prior to your introduction to social media— regardless of whether your exact identity has evolved or not?
3. Did you ever have a sense of “not belonging” or feeling “different” from your peers when you were younger that you either knew or now know was due to your queer identity?
4. What kind of support systems did you have or did you wish that you had as a queer child or teenager?
5. How do you provide support for other queer people? This doesn’t have to be strictly activism-related. Something as simple as listening to a queer friend’s relationship troubles counts.
6. In your opinion, does having a shared identity make it easier for people to search for support amongst one another?
 - 6.1. Probe: How so?
7. Do you tend to gravitate towards people who you perceive as sharing any aspects of your identity, especially in situations where you don’t know anyone?
 - 7.1. Whether you personally interact with them or not, is the simple presence of an individual who shares aspects of your identity comforting to you?

Section II | Social Media Usage Patterns

8. At what age did you make your first account on any social media platform?
9. What platform was it on and how did you first use it?
10. Did you intend to use social media as a way to further your offline/“real-life” connections or did you hope to explore a world outside of the people and experiences you already knew?
11. Why use social media for that purpose? Did the platforms offer anything that you felt was unattainable in the offline world?
12. Are there ways of expressing yourself that you feel more comfortable doing online as opposed to in real life?
13. Did you specifically seek out queer content online as a child/teenager?
14. How much queer content would you say that you interact with on social media?

Section III | Social Media Connections and Effect on Identity

15. Do you have any positive/meaningful relationships that started online?—friendships or otherwise?
16. When thinking about online relationships, do you consider them less than, equal to, or greater than the relationships you have “in the real world”? This can be in terms of authenticity, interactions with each other, commitment, and so on.
17. Would you provide the same forms of support to an “online friend” that you would to any other friend that you know offline?
18. Do you tend to curate your social media experience by following or interacting with a lot of queer people and content?
19. Do you consider other factors or further qualify your experience based on your other identities? For example, it may be important to a disabled queer person to interact with accounts/content from other disabled queer individuals.
 - 19.1. Do you feel more connected with these types of queer content compared to general LGBTQ+—content?
20. What are some positive emotions that come up for you when you think about your interactions with queer people on social media?
 - 20.1. What are some of the downsides?
21. Do you find that there is a disconnect between your social media life and your offline life?
 - 21.1. Do you ever feel isolated from the queer community when you log off?
22. What have you learned from interacting with queer people on social media that you feel like would have been harder to learn without this experience?
23. Who is someone that you know from social media who you’ve found to be influential in your queer identity?
 - 23.1. Why?
24. How has your queer identity evolved throughout your life?
 - 24.1. How much of this is owed to your experiences on social media?
25. What influence do you think interacting with the LGBTQ+ community on social media has had on your identity compared to other introductions to the community such as via movies and television, things your parents may have told you, general online searches, and so on?
26. How has the online queer community supported you? This can be directly related to queerness (e.g. literally helping you come out) or in other ways (e.g. simply fostering new connections)?

Demographic Questions

- I. How old are you?
- II. Do you identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community?

- III. If you are comfortable sharing: what is your identity as it relates to this community?
- IV. Do you consider yourself as having spent a significant amount of time on social media as a child and/or teenager?
 - A. Probe: If you had to estimate?
- V. Do you consider yourself as spending a significant amount of time on social media as an adult?
 - A. Probe: If you had to estimate?

Appendix 2: Recruitment Flyer



LOOKING FOR PARTICIPANTS
SENIOR PROJECT

Hi! I'm looking for LGBTQ+ people who've spent a lot of time on social media since their childhood/teenage years and consider their experiences to have been positive and influential to their identity.

Sounds great! I'm happy to spare an hour to speak with you! :)

**JOURDAN'S SOCIOLOGY
SENIOR PROJECT**
Interested? Contact me at:
jp0679@bard.edu

Appendix 3: Coding List & Example

CODES USED: activism; community; comphet; conceptualization of queerness pre-social media; content now; content then; different; evolution of identity; family; fandom; first social media; gender; infighting; internet safety; isolation; joy; labels; language; learning; perception of social media relationships; queer representation; race; sex ed; social media relationships; subconscious connection/clocking; support given; support received; Tumblr; unspoken understanding; YouTube

CODING EXAMPLE:

“isolation” (bold = quote appears in at least one other code | italics = this quote is a negative or contradicts this code)

SUNFLOWER:

***INT:** Do you feel that there is a disconnect between your social media life and your offline life? Like do you feel isolated from the queer community when you log off?*

***S:** No, definitely not, just because I surround myself with queer people. Not on purpose, but it just happens [laughs]. So there's a queer community online and then I turn off my phone and all my friends are queer. It's a little queer community in my friend group.*

CALLOWAY:

Yeah, I definitely wish I had more support and more people seeing me as, like, valuable or worth their time. It's interesting because I was bullied a lot with a lot of, like, queer slurs that were there before I even realized or ever came out or like, saw my--came out or like before that became something in my awareness that like maybe I'm not like "girly pop". So...assigned girly pop at birth, that's crazy. Yeah, I definitely, like, just throughout my entire life wish I had more support in all areas. I feel like I was fighting for support, whether that was like for having ADHD or being bullied or just, you know, family dynamics...emotional needs and yeah, so always. I think that's something I'm struggling with. So like, right now I have amazing support. Like, it is great. And I'm like, you know, stuck on that. Is it ever enough? Or like, am I enough?

JADE:

Sometimes I think that's true. I would say that, definitely, I would like to meet more queer people and hang out with them in real life. I mean, like, I've been in a kind of like a transient state in my life, right now. Just because graduating from college and then going somewhere else for grad school. And being at home in between that. So it's definitely like, like, part of establishing queer community also has to do with establishing, like a home base, right? Just a, like, even that sort of community is like a home. And so definitely, I don't think it's the same way on social media, like, you have people that kind of affirm who you are, and respect you and uplift you and that kind of thing. But it's not the same as getting together in somebody's house. And just like being like physically being with people. And I think, like, while the pandemic, like, while more people were actually observing the social distancing protocol of the pandemic. Like social media is really good. And things like this are way more accessible to people now than they were before the pandemic started, right. But at the same time, like, I think people did feel that loss of being in person, and in like, actual space with, like, other queer people. And that's something that I would like to look for. Just in my life going forward...Yeah, just people to actually be present with because, yeah, there's a difference.

SPICE:

Um, I think growing up queer is like isolating even if you don't like realize it. Because things that you feel like you should be attracted to, like, based on heteronormative standards, you're like, not attracted to. Like, boy bands, or like, pink or anything super hyperfeminine. You'd like...I didn't feel like I enjoyed or like could take a part of so it was kind of isolating, but I didn't know why I felt like I was being isolated.

ALL OTHER PARTICIPANTS: N/A

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