

Queer Heterotopias in Higher Education: LGBTQ Student Identity in Web Logging

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## **Abstract**

This study used a comparative case study method to explore online web logs (blogs) and vlogs of 7 higher education students who identify as LGBTQ. The researcher sought to examine (a) how higher education students who identify as LGBTQ navigate their school and daily life experiences in relationship with their identity on web logs; and (b) how these students reinforce or disrupt heteronormative assumptions regarding sexuality on web logs, potentially creating queer heterotopias online. The public domain web logs of the 7 participants were examined over a period of 1 year. D'Augelli's (1994) lifespan model of sexual identity development served as a framework for directed textual content analysis. A theoretical framework of queer theory was used to understand how the bloggers and vloggers reinforced or transgressed heteronormative conceptions of sexuality. Seven primary themes emerged from the findings: the presence of each of the 6 lifespan stages of D'Augelli's (1994) model, as well as a 7th theme focused on the university experience specifically. The heartfelt and courageous identity work that the bloggers shared revealed the importance of the online community to higher education students who are navigating an emerging LGBTQ life.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would truly like to thank all those who have challenged me to think and live outside of the boxes. This work was in part an intimate exploration of the self, as I, too, negotiated the complexities of living an out life and coming to terms with my own sexual identity as a queer person. It is integral to this work to thank everyone who challenged my own internalized assumptions, and who walked each step with me.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Higher education students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) experience challenges unique to their identity formation process as they progress throughout their young adult lives. As a marginalized group in a heterosexualized world, these students are at risk of heightened challenges relating to their mental health and social experience (D'Augelli, 1994, 2002; D'Augelli & Grossman, 2009; Wright & McKinley, 2011). Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Kenn (2010) emphasize that the identity development process is lengthy and complicated for young adults adjusting to non-heterosexual identity formations. For many students who identify as LGBTQ, the higher education years provide opportunities to explore multiple ways of knowing, thinking, and living (D'Augelli, 1994; Evans et al., 2010). Exploration of self and sexuality in higher education coincides with the broadening of one's identity during young adult life. It is important for educators, those who work in student services, and students themselves to be aware of how the higher education process may impact the identity development of LGBTQ students. For faculty, staff, and peers, heightened awareness of the unique challenges facing this group can result in the development and maintenance of a variety of student support groups, spaces, and services (Westbrook, 2009, p. 309). These options help students to navigate their identity development process throughout their educational careers.

For many students, the performance and maintenance of their queer identities is under construction during the college years. Newfound independence may encourage students to question their previously formed identity constructs. Youth and young adulthood is a time where many people initially "come out of the closet" and experiment

with different presentations of self (D'Augelli, 1994; Dentato, Craig, Messinger, Lloyd, & McInroy, 2014; Evans et al., 2010). Campus pride organizations may offer the first models of LGBTQ behaviour and relationships that many young people encounter (Evans et al., 2010). Given this period of transition, many young people may look to a variety of support networks and examples to navigate how to perform their identity as queer (Jones, 2009). MacIntosh and Bryson (2007) have indicated that the Internet is a space that emphasizes heightened identity performance. This “stage” on which identity performance plays out is used for a variety of purposes, including active resistance to norms. Higher education students may engage in identity performances that work towards creating “queer heterotopias.” Queer heterotopias are spaces that disrupt heteronormative and homonormative models of living. These are places where it is possible for people to challenge the dominant heteronormative power structure. Within these, one may be free to perform a non-binary identity without punishment (Foucault, 1984). Queer liberation occurs in these spaces, where queer bodies can “take power and be empowered” (Jones, 2009, p. 7). Online blogs and vlogs created and maintained by LGBTQ identified higher education students can be viewed as potential examples of efforts to create queer heterotopias. Many students who identify as LGBTQ may turn to the Internet to work through identity constructs, seek like-minded support networks, and advocate for equitable societal inclusion.

Through Internet participation, higher education students navigate their LGBTQ identities both personally and publicly. The Internet serves a variety of purposes for sexual minority users. Two significant avenues of observation regarding the identity development of LGBTQ higher education students are blogs and vlogs. Through web

logging or video blogging, students adjust their identity performances, receive feedback and support, and assume positions of advocacy (Gray, 2009; Mugo & Atonites, 2014). Users profess heartfelt realizations about their personal identity, daily lives as LGBTQ, and political alignments. Blogs attract a multitude of viewers and commenters, indicating their value to the online community. While many campuses include functioning “Pride” communities, the online world clearly provides fulfillment for many higher education students who identify as LGBTQ. This study examined how higher education students who identify as LGBTQ navigate and affirm their identities online, effectively dismantling heteronormative assumptions and creating queer heterotopias within Internet spaces.

### **Background of the Problem Situation**

During the higher education years, students begin to explore and develop their sexual identities. Increased independence and broadened experiences lead to an acceleration of sexual identity development (D’Augelli 1994, 2002; Evans et al., 2010). Many students live away from home for the first time, and are exposed to varied and diverse communities and patterns of thinking. Ellis (1996) indicates that as many as 10% of higher education students may identify as a sexual minority, and many more may continue to question their sexual identity (as cited in Evans et al., 2010). This student population should have access to specialized types of services on campus (such as Pride organizations, LGBTQ friendly counselors, and health services) to meet their diverse needs. Evans et al. (2010) stress the fact that those who work in student affairs must fully understand and be sensitive to the identity and environment based challenges that LGBTQ students face. Similarly, Wright and McKinley (2011) emphasize awareness surrounding student victimization and mental health issues for this marginalized

population. As students who identify as LGBTQ are at a vulnerable time in their identity development journeys and experience heightened stressors, informed student services personnel are essential to their success.

Students currently enrolled in higher education institutions are from a generation most-often referred to as “digital natives”—those who spent their formative years immersed in technology (Lupton, 2015). Lupton (2015) further described digital natives as those who “use digital technologies, particularly mobile phones and social media, avidly, often and with expertise” (p. 125). The Internet is a space where marginalized digital natives may seek community and support. It is also an avenue that allows them to affirm and advocate for their identity as LGBTQ (Gray, 2009; Gregg, 2008). Butler’s (1997, 2004) concept of performance can be applied to this phenomenon, as students engage in “mimesis” to assert certain identity performances and reject others. As is further discussed in the theoretical framework, performance occurs when deliberate behavioural acts are deployed in order to assert a particular culturally recognized identity. Current higher education students who identify as LGBTQ are also digital natives, and they use the Internet to navigate their identity performance and development (Gregg, 2008). In this regard, the Internet has become an avenue where heteronormative constructs of identity can be dismantled by rejecting rigid boundaries through a process of “queering” the online space.

The “net generation” of learners who currently occupy higher education campuses have particular preferences for learning and patterns of technology use. Valtonen, Dillon, Hacklin, and Vaisanen (2010) maintain that young people of the net generation experience being surrounded by “omnipresent technology” that has extensive possibilities

for communication and learning. A number of authors have described this technology submersion as contributing to a distinct subculture that relies on heavy use of online tools during daily life (Gregg, 2008; Lupton, 2015; Valtonen et al., 2010; Stern, 2011). Students who are digital natives “prefer learning through discovery and by creating something of their own” (Valtonen et al., 2010, p. 211). Stern (2011) has expanded on this idea, indicating that online participation has the potential to encourage minority voices to be heard. The online potential for marginalized voices to be heard works towards creating “queer heterotopias”—spaces that encourage fluid expression and resist rigid norms (Foucault, 1984; Jones, 2009). Blogging, in particular, offers students more control over their individual learning experience, which in turn may increase the social capital of marginalized populations and develop an inclusive environment (Stern, 2011). Digital natives are continuously submerged in a world of technology that has great potential for the dismantling of heteronormative understandings.

In order to develop the potential for online spaces to contribute to diversity awareness among digital natives, one must be familiar with the patterns of their technology use. According to Valtonen et al. (2010), students spend the greatest amount of their online time on social networking sites. This has implications for how student services personnel may address the needs of LGBTQ identified users, how educators might choose to address classes on topics related to social justice, and how higher education professionals understand the lives and development of the student population. The large amount of time spent on social networking sites by higher education students may contribute to their identity expressions in ways that are crucial to understand when supporting marginalized populations.

The work of D'Augelli (1994) presented a holistic, lifelong process of identity development for sexual minorities. D'Augelli's (1994) emphasis is on the fluidity of the LGBTQ identity development and formation process. Queer theory asserts that identity performances are not stagnant; they are ever changing (Butler, 1990, 1997, 2004). Earlier efforts by Cass (1984) were made to demonstrate six concrete stages through which individuals who identify as LGBTQ progress in order to affirm their queer identities. Cass's (1984) stages require a pre-determined passing through each step, which detracts from an understanding of sexuality as fluid. The six processes outlined by D'Augelli (1994) upgrade Cass's (1984) stage theory concept, while maintaining that these steps happen simultaneously and without particular order. As higher education students find themselves within the six stages of D'Augelli's (1994) model, they may engage in gender and sexual identity performance behaviours that serve to reinforce or question heteronormative and homonormative role expectations (Butler, 1997, 2004; Jones, 2013). This model is therefore useful in helping to understand how higher education students navigate their LGBTQ identities online to create queer heterotopias. The fluidity of the model reflects the fluidity of the LGBTQ identity development process. Therefore, D'Augelli's (1994) model is particularly well suited to understanding the identity development process of queer students in higher education.

Vivienne and Burgess (2012) emphasized the power of narratives as tools to engage in actively resisting hetero- and homonormative expectations, working towards creating spaces as queer heterotopias. The Internet is a political space, one through which young adults are able to perform their identities and shape perspectives. Jones (2013) asserts that "originally, the power of queer theory was that it fostered instability" (p. 8).

Online spaces can be used as an undercurrent to maintain this instability; they are a tool that can consistently function to question norms. Borrowing the concept of the “heterotopia” from Foucault (1984), Jones (2009) argued that:

Queer heterotopias are sites of empowerment. They always exist in relation to heteronormative spaces and are shaped by them. Queer heterotopias exist in opposition to heteronormative spaces and are spaces where individuals seek to disrupt heterosexist discourses. They are sites where actors, whether academics or activists, engage in what we might call a radical politics of subversion, where individuals attempt to dislocate the normative configurations of sex, gender, and sexuality through daily exploration and experimentation with crafting a queer identity. (p. 2)

Online spaces offer the opportunity for digital natives to engage in a “radical politics of subversion;” they provide a platform for young adults to speak about and demonstrate fluid sexual and gender identities. Digital natives may embrace this work towards creating queer heterotopias through their blogs and vlogs.

The unique circumstances of the digital native student population who identify as LGBTQ call for particular examination. Students increasingly use online spaces for learning and interacting, which impacts their daily and social experiences. The college years are a time of increased identity exploration and affirmation, and can be particularly challenging for members of the sexual minority population. As a result, care and understanding should be given to the identity development of this significant group. To date, there is relatively little available research on the online habits of sexual minority users (Downing, 2013). Valtonen et al. (2010), in reference to social software, emphasize

that “in order to better take advantage of the software we need more information about how students understand social software, for what purpose they use the software, and what the software means to them” (p. 218). This study examined how higher education students who identify as LGBTQ utilize social media in their identity development process, with particular focus on how they may contribute to the creation of queer heterotopias.

### **Statement of the Problem**

There is a wide variety of literature on how higher education students use Web 2.0 technology, and a moderate amount of literature on the identity development of sexual minority higher education students. A gap in the literature is noticeable when trying to investigate the role of Web 2.0 technology in the lives of higher education students who identify as LGBTQ. Downing (2013) indicates that relatively little is understood about the online habits of the queer population or about media designed specifically for them. Research available on sexual identity development in higher education has increased, however it primarily focuses on participation in online LGBTQ Pride groups or alliances (Evans et al., 2010; Dentato et al., 2014; Poynter & Washington, 2005; Westbrook, 2009). Students who attend higher education may be at varying levels of the “coming out” process, and a “Pride” environment might not always fit their needs adequately (Evans et al., 2010). As several authors indicate, students who are digital natives make use of online spaces for activism, support, and identity affirmation (Downing, 2013; Gray, 2009; Gregg, 2008). This phenomenon is valuable to understand more fully as it may impact the provision of campus services in promoting the mental health and well-being of students who identify as LGBTQ.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand the identity formation process of higher education students who identify as LGBTQ, and how they contribute to queer spaces online. As a vulnerable population on campus, LGBTQ students have unique needs, and the identity formation process may be accelerated by the higher education experience (Evans et al., 2010). The research examines identity performance and affirmation, navigation of daily interactions and experiences, and advocacy behaviours within the LGBTQ student population. LGBTQ identified young people engage in identity performance online, making both unconscious and purposeful choices about how they reinforce or disrupt norms (Butler, 1990, 1997, 2004). Engaging in these identity performances has the potential to disrupt a heterosexualized Internet. As a public space that is an extension of the cultural milieu, the Internet is a powerful tool that can reinforce performative social expectations or be used to advocate for a spectrum-based understanding of gender and sexuality.

The majority of the research on LGBTQ identities and online participation has been conducted using the qualitative research method, because qualitative research allows the researcher to investigate flexible and robust formats. Creswell (2009) describes qualitative research as “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). Using qualitative comparative case study and focusing on content analysis provides the best opportunity to gain an in-depth knowledge of “humanistic outcomes” and cultural experiences (Merriam, 1988, p. 30). Case study is the best qualitative research method to gain a multifaceted understanding of the complexity of the sexual identity development process

because it allows for exploratory examination of the individual experience. In order to examine the online identity affirmations and performances of LGBTQ identified higher education students, textual content analysis was the primary data collection method. The blogs and vlogs of seven higher education students served as the texts analyzed in this comparative case study. This allowed the researcher to consider data from multiple sources and develop a comprehensive analysis. The research questions that were used are outlined below:

1. How do higher education students who identify as LGBTQ navigate their school and daily life experiences in relationship with their identity on web logs?
2. How do higher education students who identify as LGBTQ reinforce or disrupt heteronormative assumptions regarding sexuality on web logs, and in what ways do these actions impact the potential of queer heterotopias?

### **Rationale**

Further investigation of higher education students' sexual identity development in relation to their online use is needed to optimize the success and mental health of this population (Downing, 2013; Gray, 2009; Valtonen et al., 2010). Gray (2009) highlights the importance of understanding the media use of young people who identify as LGBTQ by suggesting that it is the first avenue where they will "see or get to know LGBTQ people. In other words, media circulate the social grammar, appearance, and sites of LGBTQ-ness" (p. 1165). She urged researchers to examine the everyday media use and practices of young people who identify as LGBTQ to gain a better understanding of how they come to terms with their identity.

A thorough knowledge of how sexual minority students develop and navigate

their identities in higher education will help institutions to more fully support these members. The process of sexual identity development online is described as highly socially interactive (Gray, 2009; Mugo & Antonites, 2014). Similarly, Mugo and Antonites (2014) indicate that new online spaces where young people navigate their identity process are being developed regularly. Several authors suggested that students who identified as sexual minorities might not make full use of LGBTQ campus events or programs due to a fear of being labeled (Dentato et al., 2014; Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, & Hope, 2013). Students who identified as LGBTQ but who were not yet “out” felt some isolation and discomfort at making use of services (Dentato et al., 2014). Stern (2011) and Mugo and Antonites (2014) emphasize the value of online technologies to develop advocacy and combat heteronormativity. Understanding patterns of online use in relationship with the identity development process is essential for school personnel to effectively support the emotional, academic, and social well-being of sexual minority students. A more comprehensive knowledge about how students engage in efforts to create queer heterotopias will allow higher education staff to more robustly address LGBTQ identified students’ needs both online and on campus.

### **Scope**

This study examined seven higher education students who identify as LGBTQ. Their experiences with identifying as LGBTQ while in higher education were investigated. Five web logs (blogs) and two video blogs (vlogs) were analyzed closely using directed textual content analysis to determine how these students have developed and performed their identities in relation to their school experiences, social community, and efforts as activists. Within these blogs and vlogs, two female and five male

participants who identify along the spectrum as gay, lesbian, or bisexual were observed through their written and spoken public domain personal diary entries. Textual content analysis gave insight into how these students have come to terms with their identities as sexual minorities, how they dismantle or reproduce culturally developed sexual identity categories, and how they contribute to queer heterotopias through identity-based activism. Comparisons between the experiences of these varied students over 1 year of recorded entries will give a robust understanding of how the identity formation process coincides with higher education participation for LGBTQ identified young people.

### **Position of the Researcher**

In conducting qualitative research, researchers bring individual experiences and assumptions to their analysis process. Creswell (2009) and Merriam (1988) indicate that including the researcher's position in a study is valuable because it identifies how his or her worldview shapes data analysis. Creswell (2009) iterates that "this self-reflection creates an open and honest narrative that will resonate well with research" (p. 192). Merriam (1988) maintains that reflecting on one's own potential bias is essential to the process of qualitative research. As a queer researcher, I hold particular assumptions and have particular experiences that impact how I see the world.

My own higher education experience coincided with my process of self-realization and coming out as queer. Attending university was the first experience I had in which I was exposed to new and varied perspectives that allowed me to consider my identity. I was reluctant to access campus communities supporting LGBTQ students because I was not fully "out of the closet" for much of my university career. Additionally, for part of that career I was in an intensive and short teaching program that

did not allow for much integration into the university community. A lack of perceived support made my identity acceptance process particularly difficult. Not until graduate school did I feel that I experienced an open and accepting community, and made my first few connections with other LGBTQ identified students. During the time that I was coming to terms with my identity and coming out to friends, family, instructors, and classmates, I frequently accessed online blogs, vlogs, and websites to hear the stories of others who were “walking in my shoes.” These sources provided an example of what it meant to be queer, as well as a support community when I was not yet ready to access one in person. I began to notice the significant number of higher education students posting about and seeking these forms of identity expression. As these spaces were so valuable to my own identity formation process, an investigation of how they contribute to identity development for LGBTQ young people in higher education would provide necessary insight for school personnel, student peers, and support networks.

### **Outline**

Chapter 2 outlines the literature surrounding LGBTQ identity development in higher education, student use of Web 2.0 technology, and the definitions and purposes of blogging and vlogging for diverse users. Limited research examines the process of LGBTQ identity development in relation to higher education student use of online spaces. The chapter also provides a theoretical background for the study, presenting the work of Butler (1993, 2004) and Foucault (1978) on identity performance and maintenance. Queer theory was the primary theoretical framework used to examine how higher education students engage in constructing queer heterotopias (Butler, 1993). Theories of sexual identity development for the LGBTQ population are included,

demonstrating the work of Cass (1984) and D'Augelli (1994, 2002; D'Augelli & Grossman, 2009). D'Augelli's (1994) interactive processes of sexual identity development are used to frame the research, from a lens of queer theory. Chapter 3 presents an overview of the qualitative, descriptive, and comparative case study methods used to conduct this research and analyze data. It describes in detail how the content analysis of blogs and vlogs was conducted. The chapter provides information about the LGBTQ identified student bloggers and vloggers examined in this research study and their accompanying public domain spaces. Chapter 4 describes the process of directed textual content analysis and presents an accompanying analysis of themes. The chapter also discusses primary and secondary codes developed alongside the theoretical framework and relevant literature. Chapter 5 includes a summary of the study, discussion of emergent themes, and implications for future theory, research, and practice.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of literature regarding the topic of LGBTQ identity development for higher education students and related online use reveals particular themes. The significance of online use for higher education students and sexual minorities must be thoroughly considered in order to support LGBTQ students. Disrupting heteronormative spaces and practices within higher education institutions is essential for the inclusion of LGBTQ students. Online avenues are increasingly places where social interaction and higher learning occur. The literature reveals how and why LGBTQ higher education students use the Internet to assert queer identities and reclaim spaces. A detailed description of “blogging” (web logging) and “vlogging” (video blogging) is necessary to understand how students engage with these technologies on a regular basis; such a description is included early in the chapter. Blogging, vlogging, and online participation serve a variety of purposes in the lives of students, both in the general higher education population and for those who are part of the LGBTQ population.

While there is a significant range of information available on the use of Web 2.0 technology in higher education, as well as student well-being and identity development in higher education for sexual minorities, very little research considers the two factors in tandem. This research study aims to address this gap in the literature. The theoretical framework situates the findings and literature within a larger context. The study uses queer theory to facilitate an exploration of how higher education students disrupt heteronormative online spaces by asserting queer identities. The theoretical discussion outlines patterns and purposes of online participation for higher education students, particularly those who identify as LGBTQ.

## Theoretical Background

A consideration of the roles of social media in the lives of LGBTQ identified higher education students must include prominent theories in the areas of sexuality, gender, power, and identity. The literature points to social media as a space where many young people question, reinforce, and perform their identities. Platforms such as written blogs and YouTube vlogs are sites of performance and reproduction, and are examined using Butler's (1990, 1997, 2004) work on queer theory, performativity, and performance. The undercurrent of queer theory assumes that identity categories are unnecessary boundaries of social organization that must be dismantled. Young adults use the Internet as a tool to both maintain and deconstruct sexual identity boundaries. Representations on the Internet might only offer certain options for "what it means to be queer," thus reinforcing the concept of surveillance into hetero- or homonormative roles. Foucault's (1988) conception of "technologies of the self" can be applied to online spaces. "Technologies of the self" (which are further discussed in the theoretical background section) refer to spaces that allow the user to be active in the creation and maintenance of their self-managed identity. Using the Internet as a technology of the self contributes to the creation of queer heterotopias (Jones, 2009). The Internet provides a space to purposefully choose to live diverse queer identities out loud. LGBTQ bloggers and vloggers actively engage in identity maintenance in online spaces, reclaiming power and asserting queer voices. Considering these works, queer theory can be used to facilitate an understanding of online identity maintenance.

Butler's work on performativity and performance facilitates an understanding of the behaviours of LGBTQ identified young people online. Butler (1990) describes gender

as the “repeated stylization of the body” (p. 33), suggesting it to be a performance one constructs and maintains through observation and repetition of expected behaviours. She emphasizes that the binary organization of sexuality is not essential or authentic; it is a constructed effort to organize social actors (1990, 2004). While these categories are not rigid, Butler (2004) maintains that there are social consequences for identity performances that do not fit the “norm.” Language is embedded with immense power that can be used to reinforce binary sexual and gender categories or to dismantle them (Butler, 1990). In this way, what is said on social media platforms can serve to deconstruct heteronormative boundaries or reinforce them.

“Performativity” as outlined by Butler (1990, 1997) refers to those acts in which individuals engage that seemingly affirm identity categories. Performative behaviours are continually reinforced and reproduced cyclically, based on whether or not gendered behaviours are met with social approval. These behaviours may be conscious; however, they are oftentimes unconscious repetitions of existing gender discourses (Butler, 1997; Lloyd, 2007). Butler (1990) has emphasized that performativity operates to both produce and reinforce heteronormativity and gender norms. Along these lines, she mentions that “in this sense the social performative is a crucial part not only of subject *formation*, but of the ongoing political contestation and reformation of the subject as well” (Butler, 1997, p. 160). Discourse has the power to produce and reproduce normative roles. Using speech, individuals create and affirm categories of gender and sexuality (Butler, 1990, 1997, 2004). Asserting that individuals are “homosexual” or “heterosexual,” as well as “male” or “female,” produces identity categories that are ascribed with performative expectations. “Cultural intelligibility” refers to the conditions that determine whether

one's performance is recognized as legitimate (Butler, 1993; Lloyd, 2007). One engages in particular societally reinforced behaviours in order to be culturally intelligible to their community. Online spaces such as vlogs and blogs provide spaces to "try out" identity performances, and affirm those of others and oneself.

"Performance" refers to the decisions that individuals may make about how they present aspects of their identity. This concept concerns how individuals may choose to actively assert their sexuality or gender. Young people might look to social media based examples of LGBTQ identity performance, and replicate those performances through imitative acts of "mimesis." These identity performances serve to reinforce rigid constructs of hetero- or homonormativity. Therefore, while "performativity" is a process of assertion that is constantly functioning under the surface to reinforce norms, "performance" is a more willful process to either conform to or bend expectations. Butler (2004) indicated that having one's performance questioned as inauthentic is one way that oppression can function. In this uncertain, essentialized environment, young adults might feel pressure to perform their identity in specific, largely repeated, ways. They may also work to reject this rigidity and in the process progress to produce queer heterotopias in online spaces. Vivienne and Burgess (2012) maintain that narratives used to share personal stories of being queer can be tools to queer the Internet, and prevent heteronormative reinforcement online. The Internet can be used as a space of performance—one that can work to reinforce or dismantle norms related to sexuality. Social media can be used as a tool of queer resistance or regulation.

Butler (2004) also drew on the work of Foucault (1978), who sheds light on how power structures function within society. As social avenues, social media sites may

reinforce or work to break down heteronormative power structures. Foucault (1988) identified four technologies that dictate much of the human experience: technologies of production, technologies of sign systems, technologies of power, and technologies of the self. The latter two are particularly applicable to examining the themes in the blogs and vlogs of higher education students.

Power dynamics are present in all human interaction, including online avenues used for blogging and vlogging. Technologies of power “determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject” (Foucault, 1988, section I, para. 9). Relating to power, Foucault (1978) introduces the concepts of surveillance and normalizing judgment, both relatable to the online context. “Surveillance” can be used to describe the disciplinary measures used to police social members into normative patterns of behaviour. Media both produces and reflects social ways of knowing, and higher education students who identify as LGBTQ may engage in particular behaviours online that reinforce normalizing judgment. The Internet can be used as the ultimate tool of surveillance for young people to monitor one another’s performances of gender and sexuality. Stern (2011) maintains that “through constant training and surveillance we normalize our behaviour” (p. 249). The desire of young people to find examples of LGBTQ identified others indicates the tendency of social members to want to fit into a molded version of sexuality. Young adults may experience policing towards heterosexual presentations of self, as well as towards limited conceptions of LGBTQ identities as rigid and not spectrum-based. Through comments on blogs and vlogs, the performances of the bloggers and vloggers are monitored, objectivized, and either critiqued or reinforced. While social media sites may be used to

dismantle norms, they are also used to reinforce sexual categories and normative presentations of the sexual self. It is thus essential that individuals engage in a “knowledge of the self” process that encourages them to be active agents and not passive consumers.

Foucault discusses the concept of “the self” at length; in particular, his work on “the technologies of the self” can be applied to blogging. He argues that the historical idea of “care for oneself” has produced a “knowledge of the self” that enables personal self-awareness in actions (Foucault, 1978; 1983). In his work, he mentions that one learns dominant sexual discourses early, and that these are often reinforced and used to guide behaviours. Grant (1997) used the work of Foucault to argue that students “normalize themselves through self-discipline and the technologies of the self” (p. 109). The perception of continuous surveillance encourages individuals to strive towards an ideal in line with dominant discourse. This can be tied to Butler’s (1990, 1997, 2004) concept of performativity. Butler’s discussion of performativity also reiterates that norms around sexuality and gender are influenced by dominant discourses that are often unconsciously reflected in behaviours. Foucault maintains that while these unconscious influences exist, “knowledge of the self” permits individuals to engage in transformative thought processes and acts influencing their own identity creation and maintenance (Siles, 2012).

Through “knowledge of the self” one is able to become aware of their actions and make choices about their identity performance. Foucault (1988) has noted that there has historically been a connection between self-disclosure and self-renunciation; in the modern era, verbalization and self-disclosure have been used to constitute “a new self” rather than to engage in self-renunciation (section VI, para. 21). This can be related to the

concept of “performance” (Butler, 1990, 2004). Individuals who are self-aware may choose to engage in particular identity performances. Siles (2012) argued that blogs are an example of a “technology of the self.” They are spaces where individuals engage in processes of self-reflection, self-creation and self-transformation. By engaging in blogging and vlogging, young adults may be active in the process of constituting a new self.

Connections can also be drawn between Foucault’s (1978) particular work on sexuality, and the online behaviours of LGBTQ young people. He discusses the pressure that some may feel to admit to sexual practices and desires that might be considered deviant from the norm (Rak, 2005). Rak (2005), highlighting the work of Foucault (1978), states that “sexuality as an identity therefore has had the need for confession (or coming out of the closet) at its core, which based claims of sexuality on repeating and narrating experiences that ‘prove’ what one’s real identity is” (p. 169). This type of pressure motivates young people to affirm their identities repeatedly to both their immediate circles, and potentially the larger public online. Similar to Butler (1990), Foucault (1978) emphasizes the power of language to reinforce rigidly constructed identities; language asks its users to codify sexuality into binary options. The ways in which young people use language online to affirm their sexual identities have particular significance to how these categories are either further entrenched or broken apart. The work of Foucault on power structures and technologies of the self (1978, 1983) inform a theoretical framework focused on queer theory and queer heterotopias as presented in the following section.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Queer theory emphasizes the fluidity of identity categories, maintaining that the rigidity of gender and sexual categorical differentiation is an unnecessary and socially

constructed phenomenon (Butler, 1990, 1997, 2004; Pascoe, 2007; Teman & Lahman, 2012). Jones (2009) provides a valuable definition of the term “queer” by stating that it “was originally an unfixed category. It was used as an umbrella term that allowed for an actor’s agency in crafting new sexual and gender identities” (p. 1). She has argued that individuals must work to maintain the fluidity of the concept of “queer,” because as soon as it becomes a codified term, it is no longer representative of the original meaning. Butler (1993) emphasizes that “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes” (p. 308). Regulatory regimes are social norms which police bodies into particular patterns of behaviour (i.e., binary gendered behaviour). Therefore, the aim of queer theory is to destabilize social norms and categories. Berg (2013) asserts that “queer theory is a useful framework for reexamining dichotomies and heteronormative structures that are taken for granted” (p. 34). Because queer theory works towards deconstructing heterosexualized spaces and behaviours, it is a suitable framework for this study.

“Queer heterotopias” are spaces created when individuals work towards and succeed at disrupting heteronormative practices. Foucault (1984) refers to heterotopias as spaces in which cultural norms are counteracted. Heterotopias are places that, while located in the reality of society, function outside of the regulated structure. These sites are distinctly separate from utopias in that they are real, tangible spaces. They offer a counter-image of social norms and expectations while still existing within a larger culture. Foucault identifies two types of heterotopias: crisis heterotopias, and heterotopias of deviation. He has argued that heterotopias of crisis are disappearing from the modern world; they are being replaced with heterotopias of deviation. Crisis heterotopias are spaces occupied by those in a state of upheaval as determined by the society in which

they live. Heterotopias of deviation are spaces occupied by those who deviate from social norms and expectations. According to Foucault, there are six principles that define heterotopias. Firstly, he argued heterotopias exist within most every culture in the world. In addition, a heterotopia may be influenced by society to function in different ways over time. Thirdly, within a heterotopia it is possible that multiple sites, or environments, may be juxtaposed. As a fourth point, it is argued that heterotopias are time sensitive in relevance to the cultures alongside which they function. The fifth suggestion is that heterotopias are both isolated and penetrable; they are challenging to enter into. The sixth and most relevant point as pertaining to this research argues that heterotopias have a space that functions in relation to mainstream spaces. Drawing on this work, Jones (2013) proposes the idea of “queer heterotopias” as spaces that transgress gender and sexual boundaries and allow unregulated radical action. Foucault emphasizes that all societies regulate sex, therefore creating the hope of escaping these regulations (as cited in Jones, 2013). Queer heterotopias are an effort towards escaping regulated norms (Jones, 2009). Jones’s concept of queer heterotopias extends Foucault’s work on heterotopias, reconfiguring this concept through a queer lens. Queer theory as outlined by Butler (1990, 1997, 2004) and queer heterotopias as introduced by Jones (2009) are the theoretical focus of this investigation.

Jones (2009) identified queer heterotopias as “spaces for the ‘other’ to be transgressive, and which are located in real spaces” (p. 1). Within these sites, subversive acts of defiance occur through visibly crafting and living a queer identity. Daily acts to dismantle hegemonic assumptions of gender, sex, and sexuality contribute to the creation of queer heterotopias. Butler (1990) emphasizes that discourses around gender shape the

body's performance of gender. In response, Jones (2009) maintained that in order for queer heterotopias to be created and sustained, discourses must be reconfigured to allow for varied expressions of gender, sex, and sexuality. Online environments provide an avenue for these transgressive spaces.

Blogs and vlogs are spaces where young adults who identify as LGBTQ can work to dismantle normative expectations, in order to create queer heterotopias. Jones (2009) mentioned that simple behaviours such as “sex acts, to getting dressed in the morning, to body modifications, are ways individuals shape their queerness and in turn create queer heterotopias” (p. 1). This reinforces the notion that through small acts, such as blogging, queer heterotopias may be created. Through the process of working to create queer heterotopias, members of the larger society are asked to question norms and recognize queer bodies. Jones (2009) emphasizes that in order for queer heterotopias to succeed, varied, flexible expressions of identity must be continually visible. An aim of this study is to understand how individuals in higher education work towards creating queer heterotopias through particular identity performances.

### **Blogging and Vlogging**

Young adults are increasingly interacting in online spaces (Gray, 2009; Mugo & Antonites, 2014; Valtonen et al., 2010). In a study of LGBTQ youth, Gray (2009) found that online representations through social spaces were particularly important life examples. In order to more fully understand the value of online social spaces, it is important to have a clear knowledge of the terminology associated with different types of technological avenues. Several authors have offered definitions of blogs and vlogs (Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, & Pettaway, 2015; Nardy Schiano, Gumbrecht,

& Swartz, 2004; Solomon & Schrum, 2007; Tremayne, 2007). Solomon and Schrum's (2007) definition of a blog is succinct in stating that "a Web log, usually shortened to blog, is a set of personal commentaries on issues the author deems important" (p. 55). Additionally, they describe a "videoblog, or vlog" as being "a Web log that uses video rather than text or audio" (p. 56). Richards (2010) indicates that the value of blogs and vlogs is that they give average users a platform and personal autonomy to share their perspectives. In this way, users are not simply passively receiving information, but actively creating information that affirms or critiques identity expectations as well. He suggests that blogs are a type of "asynchronous discussion" that "take[s] place over time" (Richards, 2010, p. 516). Platforms such as blogs and vlogs allow for particularly diverse use. Purposes of blogs and vlogs can range from tutorials on tasks to emotional diary entries (Nardi et al., 2004). Blogs and vlogs are online spaces that allow users to be as varied with the information that they present as they would be in a personal diary entry, however the information is shared in the public domain.

Individuals begin and maintain blogs for a variety of purposes using written, video or mixed formats. Blogs may be used for the purposes of community building and engagement around particular topics (Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, et al., 2015). Solomon and Schrum (2007) suggest that "blogs promote open dialogue and encourage community building in which both the bloggers and the commenters exchange opinions, ideas, and attitudes" (p. 55). These online logging systems give a voice to those users who might not previously have had a space or an audience where others could listen (Herring, Scheidt, Kouper, & Wright, 2007; Nardi et al., 2004; Solomon & Schrum, 2007). Pachler and Daly (2008) note that the value of personal narratives is in organizing

and understanding one's world and experience within it. They argue that blogs are a particularly useful tool to use in examining the narrative processes of members of society. Nardi et al. (2004) identify "five major motivations for blogging: documenting one's life; providing commentary and opinions, expressing deeply felt emotions; articulating ideas through writing; and forming and maintaining community forums" (p. 43). People use blogs to navigate and organize their social, emotional, and life experiences in a way that reaches out to others for community.

Sharing narratives online has been found to be cathartic for many people (Nardi et al., 2004; Shyam Sundar, Hatfield Edwards, Hu, & Stavrositu, 2007; Vivienne & Burgess, 2012). In a study of LGBTQ identified young adults, Nardi et al. (2004) describe the experience of a graduate student (Katie) who said she "blogged to relate her life to others by telling her own personal story in close to real time" (p. 43). In this same study, other participants were also found to view blogging as an "outlet" where they could express their innermost thoughts and feelings in a way that might resonate with others experiencing similar circumstances. Rak (2005) notes that freedom of expression is particularly important to blog users. Vivienne and Burgess (2012) developed a digital storytelling project that found participants to value sharing their experiences in vlogs, while working towards activism to impact social change. In a discussion of Foucault's "technologies of the self" as related to blogging, Siles (2012) suggests that "extending the increasingly long list of revolutions associated with the Internet, the blogger identity is thus invoked to illustrate the potential that this technology, in the hands of a certain type of *user*, holds for society" (p. 408). Blogs are a tool, through self-expression, that can be employed by users to make meaningful

change. Pachler and Daly (2008) describe narrative sharing as a complex meaning-making process; they indicate that it helps participants to deconstruct their own social assumptions and develop new frameworks. Use of narratives in blogging or vlogging format serve the purpose of helping users to develop a reflective process.

Due to the sometimes highly personal nature of blogging and vlogging, participant emotional expression and health is strongly related to their blogging behaviours. Many researchers note the palpably emotional nature of blogs, as participants clearly used the spaces as outlets to discuss their feelings (Nardi et al., 2004; Shyam Sundar et al., 2007; Sim & Hew, 2010). Shyam Sundar et al. (2007) explain that people feel comfortable expressing deep emotional concerns on blogs because they provide a relatively anonymous platform for communication and support, depending on the settings one chooses to engage on their chosen blog provider. This is an appealing process to people, according to the authors, because it avoids the necessity of needing to build the complex relationships of in-person interaction in order to access support. Sim and Hew (2010), Shyam Sundar et al. (2007), and Nardi et al. (2004) note that coping with problems is a large motivator for blog users, in connection with using the blogging community to develop personal support. The authors incorporate the work of Turkle (1999) who identifies two online behaviours relating to mental health including “acting out” to express unresolved conflict, and “working through” their individual personal issues. Quantitative and qualitative research has indicated that many bloggers claim to blog “for themselves,” as well as to “help others” (Shyam Sundar, 2007). The literature reveals that blogging has a significant impact on emotional and mental health.

### **Blogging/Vlogging and Higher Education**

Higher education students are making use of blogs and vlogs in particular ways. Sim and Hew (2010) found that similar to the general blogging population, higher education students use blogging to express themselves emotionally. The authors also confirm that higher education students rely on blogs and vlogs to interact with others and develop communication. In their review of empirical research about university student blog use, Sim and Hew (2010) found that students confirmed blogging “reduced feelings of isolation because it helped knowing that they were not alone in facing certain problems or stress when they read each other’s feelings in the blog posts” (p. 154). Nardi et al. (2004) also indicate that students use blogging for emotional sharing purposes, while also using them to communicate about academic or personal interests. As an example, they described the experience of one graduate student who used his blog to post about current issues in science and health. Another student posted about her experiences living in residence from an emotional perspective. In higher education institutions, blogs and online spaces are also used for academic purposes and become extensions of the classroom space (Stern, 2011). Nardi et al. (2004) include an additional example of student use of blogging for purposes of political activism, and to converse on a wider scale across political perspectives. Students in higher education institutions today are often digital natives, who use online interactions in the blogging and vlogging world for a range of purposes.

### **Blogging/Vlogging and the LGBTQ Community**

Youth and young adults who identify as LGBTQ often make specific use of blogging and vlogging in ways that are particularly tied to their emotional wellbeing and

development. The literature consistently emphasizes that young people in the queer community appreciated the flexibility of blogging and vlogging for self-expression (Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, et al., 2015; Downing, 2013; Gregg, 2008; Stern, 2011; Vivienne & Burgess, 2012). Gregg (2008) emphasizes the varied formats that LGBTQ youth use to express themselves on blogs and vlogs, from humorous skits to serious diary-entry based choices. Mugo and Antonites (2014) suggest that some of the most beneficial features of social media tools are that they allow young people to share knowledge and experiences, build communities of support, and share content flexibly for very little to no cost. These benefits could also enhance the development of offline connection making between participants. Authors also indicated that these blogs have the potential to develop marginalized people's social capital because they provide spaces for their voices to be heard and united with others (Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, et al., 2015; Mugo & Antonites, 2014). Young people who identify as LGBTQ are using blogs and vlogs as spaces for connection building, empowerment, and personal expression.

LGBTQ young people use blogs and vlogs in ways that perform, affirm and challenge sexual identity boundaries. In a study of LGBTQ use of YouTube vlogging, Gregg (2008) notes that some young people upload literal "performances" of gender non-conforming behaviours to challenge the status quo. He describes another, vastly different genre of vlogs, that are used for addressing the daily experiences, emotions, and reflections of LGBTQ young people. Szulc and Dhoest (2013) assert that in academic literature, "the internet is generally considered to be a facilitator of the coming-out process" (p. 349). Similarly, Gregg (2008) also notes that LGBTQ "bloggers seem to be

coming to terms with their gay or lesbian sexuality, articulating their interior feelings and struggles” (p. 6). It was expressed that many young people may gain confidence from blogging and finding a community of others exploring their identities in a similar fashion.

Blogs allow users to have the experience of “coming out quietly or living loudly and everything in between” (Stern, 2011). In their work on using digital storytelling with LGBTQ populations, Vivienne and Burgess (2012) suggest that individuals who are queer engage in the “networked identity” process in four key ways, including when they:

1. Negotiate their position inside of or in relation to intimate publics and unknown or imagined publics;
2. Articulate who they are, how they’ve changed or grown, or how they will continue to change across a personal timeline and in relation to the other people in their lives;
3. Recognize and enact the possibility of active meaning-making in self-representation; and
4. Accept affirmation and reciprocate, giving affirmation that creates space for others to speak. (p. 375)

In these ways, young people who identify as LGBTQ use vlogging and blogging to negotiate their development and performance of identities as queer. Gray (2009) outlines (in a qualitative ethnographic study of LGBTQ young people) the story of Sarah who accessed and used blogging to relate to the experiences of others. She commented on the experience of reading blogs, saying: “I like personal stories...coming out stories...trying to be as much of a sponge as I can when it comes to other people and their situations... using their experiences as possibilities for my own” (Gray, 2009, p. 1173). MacIntosh

and Bryson (2007) also note that young queer women access these spaces when they aren't able to find these examples elsewhere. It is evident that for many young queer people, blogs and vlogs provide a space central to their identity development.

### **Public Spaces and Identity**

Blogs and vlogs are publically used spaces in which people represent themselves in multiple and varied ways. Siles (2012) indicates that one purpose of blogging is introspection, or self-knowledge. Individuals use this “technology of the self” in order to engage in self-construction, identity performance, and self-transformation. Openly telling one's story online, as occurs when blogging or vlogging, encourages online users to navigate the line of privacy and publicness carefully. In discussing the work of Turkle (1999), Shaym Sundar et al. (2007) outline how some online users may choose to represent themselves in a way that mirrors their identity performance in everyday life, where others may choose to construct a different identity display. Warner (2002) emphasizes that when one identifies as LGBTQ, the public and the private are blurred. Heterosexuality is assumed, and so having an identity as LGBTQ is at once relegated to the private realm. “Coming out” serves to disrupt this forced privacy, and many choose a public avenue to take this step (D'Augelli, 1994). In a similar sense, Singh (2008) notes that the act of blogging also blurs the traditional lines of publicity and privacy. Vivienne and Burgess (2012) indicate that the “public and private are continuously reconfigured over time from the earliest stages of contemplating telling one's story to managing that story's visibility long after it has first been shared” (p. 324). Thus, navigating publicity and privacy are complex as they relate to sexuality disclosure for LGBTQ identified bloggers.

Bloggers and vloggers choose to manage the public nature of their blogs to differing degrees, affixing more or fewer privacy settings. Steijn, Schouten, and Vedder (2016) maintain that in order to reap the benefits that online social media can have for socialization, relationship building, and identity development, a risk-benefit trade off must occur, because it is necessary for some level of personal sharing to transpire. Vlogs, as videos, are a more public medium where the user can be seen, whereas blogs allow the user more initial privacy. Singh (2008) notes that “many blogs are published anonymously, or, more specifically, pseudonymously” (p. 21). Pseudonyms are described as often being more than simply alternative names, rather, evolving into developed personas. Bloggers may choose to more easily adopt pseudonyms than vloggers if they so choose, depending on their desired level of privacy. Blogging and vlogging communities are an example of an “intimate public” where users share a common historical and emotional experience (Berlant, 2008, as cited in Vivienne & Burgess, 2012). Social media can both shape and disrupt heteronormative viewpoints. Gray (2009) suggests that these public sites are “the primary site of production for social knowledge of LGBTQ identities” (p. 1165). Blogs and vlogs constitute a public realm in which many users choose to share personal perspectives, thus both disrupting and shaping the course of public knowledge.

### **Sexual Identity Development Theories**

Pertaining specifically to the identities of the LGBTQ identified population, there has been an effort to develop theories regarding the sexual identity development process. The work of Cass (1984) and D’Augelli (1994) offer two theoretical understandings of how sexual identity progresses. Cass (1984) provides a stage-based model, suggesting

that each individual must progress past certain stages in order to fully affirm their identity as queer (Dentato et al., 2014). In contrast, D'Augelli (1994; Evans et al., 2014) presents a lifespan model, which indicated that the sexual identity development process could happen not in incremental stages, but in simultaneous steps. He argues that "Being lesbian, gay, or bisexual in our culture requires living a life of multiple psychological identities" (1994, p. 313). These psychological identities engage performances that may reinforce or disrupt heteronormative or homonormative expectations (Butler, 1997, 2004; Jones, 2009). Each model offers a vision for understanding the sexual identity development process of higher education students identified as LGBTQ. The models offered by Cass (1984) and D'Augelli (1994) indicate points of tension that one must overcome in order to affirm their LGBTQ identity. Dentato et al. (2014) argue that "the level of student outness likely coincides with stages of the LGBTQ identity formation process" (p. 486). Thus, using a sexual identity model based framework for the research allows a more thorough investigation of this process.

Cass (1984) researched how those who identified as LGBTQ progressed through a stage-based process of steps when affirming their sexual identities. Her stage model consists of six steps. Stage one, "Identity Confusion," is said to occur at the first perception of possible homosexual identity, causing the individual to question their heterosexual identity. The second stage involves a process of "Identity Comparison," which requires the person in question to face and overcome feelings of alienation and difference as a result of their sexual orientation. Stage three, "Identity Tolerance," occurs as the individual sought company from other homosexual individuals out of necessity for social contact with this community. The fourth stage, "Identity Acceptance," sees the

individual increasing their contact with the LGBTQ community and adopting a positive view of homosexuality. At this stage, the individual is still concerned with efforts to “fit in” to their heterosexual social circles. The fifth stage is “Identity Pride,” which involves a fierce loyalty to the LGBTQ community and pride in one’s identity as homosexual. Anger aimed at homophobic societal practices is characteristic of this stage. Stage six is the final stage, entitled “Identity Synthesis,” in which the rigidity of one’s world is relaxed and the individual is able to feel comfortable within their identity and the diverse and varied perspectives of the community. Cass’s (1984) model points out that each LGBTQ identified individual must pass through these stages in the order that they are outlined.

D’Augelli’s (1994) lifespan model of the sexual identity development process recognizes sexuality as a “life-long developmental process” (p. 315). This lifespan model offers a preferred multiplicitous view of sexual identity development that takes into consideration the complexities of the phenomenon. The path to sexual identity affirmation may be different for each individual, and could occur at different stages within one’s life. The model rejects the notion of a linear development process, and indicates that the components of the developmental process are often occurring together. His model considers the complex interplay of factors and interactions that influence individual sexual identity development. D’Augelli (1994) emphasizes that “The actions of an individual shape his or her development” (p. 322). Higher education students who blog and vlog take an active role in shaping their identity formation. Therefore, this model is valuable in examining how higher education students who identify as LGBTQ use blogs and vlogs to create queer heterotopias.

Six processes occur interactively when following D'Augelli's (1994) model, which will be used as a framework for the research. "Exiting Heterosexual Identity" involves recognizing that one's feelings may not be heterosexual, and are indeed same-sex attracted. This stage also involves "coming out" to one's social circles. "Developing a Personal Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Identity Status" is said to occur when one determines the relationship that their sexual identity will have with their daily life. At this point, the individual must confront and challenge myths about the LGBTQ population. Another component of the process is "Developing a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Social Identity," which involves creating a supportive community of those who are accepting of a diverse sexual orientation. This process can be impacted by changing reactions over time. "Becoming a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Offspring" is the process within which one "comes out" to one's parents and adjusts to the resulting reactions following disclosure. Evans et al. (2004) indicate that this step can be particularly challenging for higher education students who depend on their parents for emotional and financial support. When a student adjusts to developing a meaningful intimate homosexual relationship, this component is referred to as "Developing a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Intimacy Status" (D'Augelli, 1994). It is noted that this stage often occurs during the higher education years and can be complex due to the low visibility of lesbian/gay relationships within the society (Evans et al., 2004). Finally, "Entering a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Community" occurs when the individual involves his or herself in social and political action within the LGBTQ community.

These stages reflect the varied and diverse experiences of LGTBQ identified individuals. Using a non-linear design is preferred because of the complex, interwoven

nature of the identity development process. One may progress through multiple stages at a time, or reach certain stages and not others. The lifespan model presents a comprehensive non-linear design useful for considering the intricacies of the sexual identity development process over time.

Using queer theory as a framework in alignment with the lifespan model of D'Augelli (1994) is beneficial because of the emphasized fluidity of both theories. D'Augelli asserts that the stages of identity development occur across time, in a flexible interplay of factors; he emphasizes that “The issue of variability is essential to the development of sexual orientation” (p. 321). The six-stage model he presents is particularly suited to examining the ongoing performance process that occurs for young LGBTQ identified people online because the assertions of bloggers and vloggers change over time and are not fixed. Blogs and vlogs indicate a complex interaction between factors that contribute to an individual's stage development. Young adults may perform their identity in ways that contribute to homonormative versions of what it means to be “LGBTQ” at certain times, while rejecting and working to dismantle homonormative and heteronormative expectations at other times. The process is one that has plasticity, and queer theory emphasizes a fluidity of gender and sexual behaviours (Butler, 1990, 1997, 2004; D'Augelli, 1994; Jones, 2013). This fluid identity development process, as asserted by online LGBTQ identified higher education students, serves to work towards an ultimate goal of creating queer heterotopias. In order to create queer heterotopias, individuals must go through a process of deviation from the “unstated norm” of heterosexuality (D'Augelli, 1994). Through this process of identity development and deviation, individuals effectively queer the environments in which they find themselves.

### **Issues of Social Inclusion for LGBTQ Identified Higher Education Students**

Socially, the higher education years for young adults who identify as LGBTQ can be a pivotal time. Many students are experiencing newfound independence and differing perspectives. As a time when many first leave home, a positive social experience can be essential to the mental health of young people who identify as LGBTQ (D'Augelli, 1994). Students may begin to develop their first meaningful relationships, and will need to access and maintain support (Evans et al., 2010; Westbrook, 2009). Students' views of their campus experience may be greatly impacted by the level of support available and the attitudes that they encounter from staff and peers (Tetreault et al., 2013). It is also a time when many students will begin to question or affirm their identities as LGBTQ and "come out of the closet" (Dentato et al., 2014). These reasons all highlight the importance of a strong network of support and services, and indicate the sensitivity of being a queer young person in the higher education setting.

#### **Pride Involvement**

Campus Pride or LGBTQ Alliance organizations are an invaluable support network for those students who are able to access them. Within literature regarding the adjustment of young adults who identify as LGBTQ to higher education institutions, the most frequently emphasized area is involvement in campus organizations. Westbrook (2009) describes these organizations by summarizing that "LGBT campus centers are usually funded by the university and are often run by a full-time professional staff person. Centers function both within and beyond the LGBT campus community" (p. 371). Literature emphasizes three main functions of these communities, which include providing support, a place to socialize, and a place to engage in works of activism

(Poynter & Washington, 2005; Westbrook, 2009). Evans et al. (2010) spoke to the value of these groups for facilitating relationship development amongst the LGBTQ population; they suggest that “in addition to their other reasons for existence, groups like the LGBTQQA serve as places to meet potential romantic partners or to see models of same-sex couples” (p. 317). A representation of modeled identity is particularly important to many LGBTQ young people (Gray, 2009). These groups were noted as essential to providing students who were able and willing to access them with a sympathetic community. However, one concern is the potential inability of some populations of students to make use of these resources (Westbrook, 2009). Students who are not fully “out of the closet,” who are living within particularly conservative communities, or who are rural and/or commuting, may not fully benefit from the availability of these centers and groups. Throughout the literature, the importance of these groups for supporting the identity development process of LGBTQ identified young people is stressed.

A multitude of factors might influence one’s ability to be involved in the campus organizations available to LGBTQ identified students. Arguably, the most complex process of navigating one’s identity as LGBTQ involves “coming out of the closet.” Students on campus may be at different stages of the coming out process, and thus make different resulting decisions about accessing resources. The presence of resources such as campus LGBTQ centers is essential, although one’s personal coming out process may influence their comfort in making use of what is available. Warner (2002) laments that the “closet” is a socially imposed phenomenon resulting from an assumption of heterosexuality. It is a place that can hold a certain amount of protection given the homophobia that one may experience, however it is often “riddled with fear and shame”

(as cited in Vivienne and Burgess, 2012, p. X). Queer theory would also suggest that “coming out” is an unnecessary phenomenon, functioning to regulate binary behaviours (Butler, 1997, 2004). Warner (2002) notes that heterosexuality is such an embedded part of Western culture that it is unimaginable for it to not be so at this point in time. The binary cultural milieu puts those who identify as LGBTQ into the stressful situation of claiming themselves against this norm, and facing the values and judgments that accompany their exclamation of self. Gray (2009) suggests that the culture demands a “compulsory heterosexuality...until proven otherwise” (p. 1181). This reinforces the necessity of a coming out process, and for young adults this process is often simultaneously occurring with their higher education experience. Dentato et al. (2014) found that students were not likely to be out if they perceived a lack of support from other students. The results of their study also indicated that perception of a lack of support might influence students’ decisions about whether or not to “come out” publicly as LGBTQ. They indicate that this could also have a linked impact on their sexual identity development processes as a whole. While it is undeniably important to provide resources such as LGBTQ centers and resources, some students may be at a point in their personal journey that makes it difficult to make use of those options.

Students who are LGBTQ identified may be diverse in other ways that act to limit their inclusion in campus LGBTQ support organizations. Urban and suburban young people may be at an advantage compared to their rural peers in terms of access to campus or community supports (Gray, 2009). Gray indicates that while urban young people might have more access to visible support and social communities, rural young people may have to venture far outside their immediate surroundings in order to find such options.

This might complicate both the access to on campus resources, as well as lengthen the coming out process. The author notes that many young people may turn to online options to validate their experiences and find evidence of other LGBTQ identified individuals. Evans et al. (2010) echo this finding, commenting that rural young people often come out later than urban young people because they have less opportunity to find like-minded others to help them navigate the process. Waldo, Hesson-McInnis, and D'Augelli (1998) also found that young people were “more isolated from members of their cultural group who might provide support for their lesbian, gay, or bisexual identities” (p. 309). Therefore, rural young adults attending higher education institutions may be less likely to access resources due to the timeline of their personal process, as well as potential distance from a supportive environment. Tetreault et al. (2013) also discussed the work of Street (2010) who found that perceived support from educational institutions was a key factor in retaining students and preventing them from dropping out. Distance learners might have difficulty accessing campus supports and feel more isolated. While campus support organizations are crucial for LGBTQ identified students, physical access might not be possible for all diverse situations.

### **Mental Health Issues for LGBTQ Identifying Students**

The vulnerability of LGBTQ young people to societal stressors makes them more susceptible to mental health challenges (D'Augelli, 2002; D'Augelli & Grossman, 2009; Evans et al., 2010; Hillier, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2012; Waldo et al., 1998). On top of the stressors of adjusting to typical life changes such as social network and familial adjustments, young people who identify as LGBTQ face unique areas of difficulty related to their sexual identity development. The most significant stressor that they may face at

this time is coming out to their friends and family (D'Augelli, 2002). Navigating this process adds additional personal strain to the complicated higher education process, and puts young people at risk of high levels of anxiety (Evans et al., 2010). D'Augelli and Grossman (2009) found that young people who self-identified as LGBTQ are “at special risk for a range of health and mental health problems” (p. 37). Hillier et al. (2012) also place great emphasis on the added mental health strain experienced by LGBTQ identified young people. In an additional study, D'Augelli (2002) found that this population had a higher level of mental health symptoms than their heterosexual peers. He urges mental health professionals to develop strategies specific to dealing with the heightened needs of this population. Familial tension and social victimization are noted as areas that may provide significantly increased stress in the lives of young people who identify as LGBTQ (D'Augelli, 2002; Waldo et al., 1998). Victimization can have a significant impact on the self-esteem and resulting distress of young people who are queer, which then is a predictor of suicidal ideation (Waldo et al., 1998). Tetreault et al. (2013) found that students who were LGBTQ identified and had experienced homophobic victimization viewed the campus climate much more negatively than their heterosexual counterparts. Their perceptions were also more negative if they had felt the need to hide their identity, or had lost support from friends. These factors indicate that students who identify as LGBTQ need additional support as a result of increased risk of mental health problems.

Suicidal ideation is higher in young people who identify as LGBTQ as compared with their heterosexual peers. D'Augelli and Grossman (2009) indicate that a large percentage of suicides completed by young people were related to sexual orientation identity challenges. Young people who were LGBTQ identified also attempted suicide at

higher rates. This information was validated by Wright and McKinley (2011) who emphasize that queer identified higher education students experienced heightened levels of suicidal predictors such as fear, hypervigilance and emotional stress. They call on higher education personnel to not assume that LGBTQ identified students will feel supported by school policies and programs, and to thus be highly proactive in explicitly promoting health and social services. In a study comparing 1,205 university students who identified as LGBTQ with their heterosexual peers, Peter and Taylor (2014) found that queer students had significantly higher rates of suicidal ideation as an immediate health risk. Given this heightened risk, it is imperative that educational personnel at higher education institutions make explicit efforts to provide support to this vulnerable community.

### **Implications of Belonging Online**

Young people who identify as LGBTQ have particular patterns of behaviour and interaction online (Gray, 2009; MacIntosh & Bryson, 2007; Mehra, Merkel, & Peterson Bishop, 2004; Mugo & Antonites, 2014). Online communities fulfill certain social and emotional needs, as well as providing a platform for activism and community building (Mehra et al., 2004; Ybarra, Mitchell, Palmer, & Resiner, 2015). Castells (2000) defines a virtual community as one that is a “self-defined electronic network of interactive communication organized around a shared interest or purpose” (p. 386). Social media environments allow queer identified young people to interact in ways that they may not feel comfortable doing in their everyday environments. Victimization, culturally expressed homophobia, and differing stages of personal identity development might make online environments more accessible and appealing for this population (Lupton,

2015). Online options may also be a stepping-stone to “coming out” and “living out”. Social media has been found to provide “models” for an LGBTQ identity for young people, as well as bringing together those who seek an in-person community for activism and friendship (Dean, 2010; Gray, 2009). Online spaces hold particular significance for many young people who identify as LGBTQ.

While online spaces are largely perceived as outlets for LGBTQ identified young people, there are certain risks associated with Internet use for this marginalized population. One risk factor associated with increased online use for LGBTQ identified young people is the potential for inaccuracy of sought-out information. Mitchell, Ybarra, Korchmaros, and Kosciw (2014) found that young people who identify as LGBTQ search for sexual health information online more than their heterosexual counterparts, seeking it out mainly for privacy and curiosity. There is a risk that sexual health information gleaned from the Internet is not sufficiently accurate (Mitchell et al., 2014). Thus, it is important that higher education personnel are aware of these online-information seeking behaviours in order to encourage accuracy in information through online and on-campus sexual health initiatives.

Several authors indicate the potential for online spaces to be areas for victimization of young people who identify as LGBTQ (Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, et al., 2015; Rubin & McClelland, 2015, Varjas, Meyers, Kiperman, & Howard, 2013; Ybarra et al., 2015). Ybarra et al. (2015) and Varjas et al. (2013) indicate that information and communication technologies have the potential to be sites of cyberbullying, while also being spaces where young adults seek support. Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, et al. (2015) note a decrease in potential unwanted sexual

solicitations over the last ten years, due in part to more advanced blocking and monitoring options. Interestingly, LGBTQ identified young people were found to view in-person avenues as having the potential for greater risk than online avenues, while the opposite perspective was held by heterosexual young people (Hillier et al., 2012). One young adult participant in a study on Internet victimization spoke in reference to their own experience, saying: “You’re not as likely to get bullied online for being a gay-identified individual than you are in real life, I believe” (Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, et al., 2015). However, it is undeniable that the Internet could facilitate victimizing interactions. Information and communication technologies provide options for increased socialization skills, and every effort must be made to ensure the safety of the LGBTQ population as social Internet users (Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, et al., 2015; Ybarra et al., 2015). Faculty, staff, and students in higher education institutions must be given the tools to understand the risks and benefits of online use through campus services and initiatives.

### **Online Communities of Support**

One major factor of significance for LGBTQ identified young people using social media is to find and provide communities of support. Many youth and young adults who identify as LGBTQ find social media to be a beneficial space for making connections with others who identify as queer (Alexander & Losh, 2010; Gray, 2009; Lupton, 2015; Papacharissi, 2007). Gachago Condy, Ivala, and Chigona (2014) emphasize that listening to others’ stories can increase respect and sensitivity. On social media, many LGBTQ young people seek the respect and sensitivity that might not be accessible in their direct environment (Gray, 2009; Szulc & Dhoest, 2013; Ybarra et al., 2015). Vivienne and

Burgess (2012) note that social media spaces allow for marginalized voices that are traditionally silenced to speak up, using such tools to negotiate their own identities, a finding which is supported by those of Craig, McInroy, McCready, and Alaggia (2015). For people who identify as queer or transgender, the Internet might be the only safe opportunity for them to socialize with others openly about related challenges, while avoiding victimization (Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, et al., 2015; Lupton, 2015). In her study of rural young people, Gray (2009) emphasizes that “coming out” stories shared on social media were crucially important to users. For those that identify as LGBTQ, these stories “expand their sense of place, home, and belonging within queer social worlds” (p. 1182). One particular user included in this study found reading supportive social media accounts of others’ experiences as LGBTQ essential to her own identity negotiation process. Papacharissi (2007) and Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, et al. (2015) maintain that blogs, in particular, were demonstrated to be significant in developing and maintaining social contacts. Social networking sites remain an integral part in the positive identity affirmations and social community development of many young people who are queer identified.

### **Social Media Spaces as Avenues for Activism**

In addition to social media spaces providing community and support, they are also areas that are used by LGBTQ identified young people for activism. Mehra et al. (2004) mention that social media sites are often used by those victimized for “marginalized individuals to take charge of their lives” (p. 789). Social media may be seen as a safer avenue to work actively against homophobia than in many spaces used during daily life, where one might become a target of victimization. Becker and Copeland (2016) found

that engaging in connective social media activities was positively correlated with political consumerist choices for LGBT identified individuals. Dean (2010) emphasizes that blogs can be used as important political tools to give users a space to voice social change and meet other like-minded activists. Mugo and Antonites (2014) in a study of minority LGBTQ identified women's social media use, write that "social media tools can assist young people to transform expressions of activism related to sexuality...and create spaces to imagine the disruption of gender order" (p. 29). These spaces also provide needed access to LGBTQ positive information and resources (Alexander & Losh, 2010; Craig, McInroy, McCready, & Alaggia, 2015). Vivienne and Burgess (2012) warn that activism online still carries risk of self-disclosure that the user must always be aware of; nevertheless, it is a valuable and frequently used tool of activism for the LGBTQ community. MacIntosh and Bryson (2007) call for these spaces to be taken seriously as a "significant form of resistance" used by LGBTQ young people to claim and affirm their identities. In agreement, Siles (2012) notes that blogs give voice and personal agency to users, becoming spaces of cultural and political transformation. Social media tools are used not only to garner support, but also to make social change, reducing the impact of homophobia.

### **Performance of Identity and Online Spaces**

A third significant use of social media for LGBTQ identified young people is to negotiate, perform and affirm their identities as queer. Turkle (1999) notes that the Internet provides a space for people to address personal challenges and reach new understandings of self. MacIntosh and Bryson (2007) call the Internet a space that can be considered a "localized performative accelerant" where young people share aspects of

their identity and adapt to their own (p. 136). Mehra et al. (2004), in a study of 340 email messages posted from a mailing list for LGBTQ issues and events, revealed that LGBTQ identified young people found social media sites a positive contributor to their identity affirmation as queer. The work of Varjas et al. (2013) affirms this result, mentioning that young people use the Internet as a space of identity affirmation and maintenance.

Interestingly, Vivienne and Burgess (2012) also found that social media sites offered users a sense of freedom to participate in the construction of their own identities, as they recognized other users doing the same. Social media spaces where one can assert, construct and perform their identity as an LGBTQ identified individual are becoming widespread and easily available (Mugo & Antonites, 2014). Gray (2009) found that participants used social media spaces and the Internet at large to find others who could show them what it meant to be “queer.” These authors’ findings suggest that many LGBTQ identified social media users use the Internet to express their identities, but also to construct their identities. Warner (2002) suggests that the mass media is a very large contributor to individuals’ understanding of self. Central ideas about gender and sexuality are created and perpetuated within social media. Thus, social media functions as a unique platform for constructing and reinforcing identity understandings, as well as to dismantle steadfast boundaries relating to sexual identity.

### **Summary**

The identity development process of higher education students who identify as LGBTQ is a complex one, reflected by their interaction online. Many young people turn to social media as a platform to express their experiences as they navigate their identities as LGBTQ in contrast with the heteronormative assumptions of Western society. The act

of sharing one's experience online takes different forms, two of which are blogs and vlogs. For higher education students, this process is used to develop community, speak on issues of importance for the user, advocate for causes and political stances, and pursue academic goals. Those who identify as LGBTQ use blog sites to advocate for social change and resist heteronormative assumptions, find examples of LGBTQ identities, perform and affirm their queer identities, and offer and/or access social support. For students who identify as LGBTQ in higher education, their sexual identity development and use of social media often overlap. The LGBTQ identified population is at heightened risk for emotional and mental health challenges, including suicide; thus, particular efforts must be made to ensure the safety and wellbeing of these individuals as higher education students. These efforts can include provision of counseling services, sexual health information services, and social opportunities such as campus pride organizations. Social media websites must not be ignored as significant social spaces to the lives of these young people, as many students may use them either individually, or in connection with involvement in formal support mechanisms. These spaces can work to both reinforce and dismantle sexual identity assumptions. A clear understanding of how they function in these ways, and how they contribute to the identity development of LGBTQ identified higher education students, can be examined using the lifespan model presented by D'Augelli (1994, as cited in Evans et al., 2010). This study aimed to understand the unique relationship between diverse sexual identity formation and expression, blogging, and higher education students, with an emphasis on investigating how LGBTQ identified higher education students contribute to queer heterotopias online.

### **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGY**

This chapter outlines the methodology and procedures that were used to examine the blogging and vlogging behaviours of LGBTQ identified higher education students in connection with their sexual identity development. Also included is an initial description of the qualitative descriptive case study method chosen. The rationale for this method is outlined, including discussion of the credibility and strengths of the research design. Participant selection, data collection, and data analysis methods are described. The study used textual content analysis of public domain materials, therefore, ethics consultation was not required. The chapter also indicates some limitations of the study. The trustworthiness of the study is discussed, with particular emphasis on the measures taken to ensure robust credibility.

#### **Research Design**

This research study aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of how higher education students who identify as LGBTQ navigate their sexual identity development process using blogs and vlogs. It was conducted using qualitative, descriptive, comparative case study methods which aimed to gain a rich understanding of the individual blogging behaviours of LGBTQ identified students in higher education. Textual content analysis was used to identify themes and revelatory phrases relevant to the identity development process of LGBTQ identified higher education students. D'Augelli's (1994) lifespan model was used to direct the textual analysis, providing initial themes. Secondary themes were then developed using pattern matching; this process is further discussed within the chapter. A qualitative method was chosen because it "focuses on meaning and context" and "requires a data collection instruction sensitive

to underlying meaning when gathering and interpreting data” (Merriam, 1988, p. 3). The qualitative method was particularly appropriate because the study aimed to understand how LGBTQ identified individuals navigate and ascribe meaning to the blogging process (Creswell, 2009). The qualitative method is an effective choice for developing insight into the individual experiences of LGBTQ identified higher education bloggers because it is focused on rich descriptive investigation rather than hypothesis testing (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1988).

Case study is an effective research design when the author seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of an individual experience or set of experiences (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 2009, Yin, 2012). Yin (2009) describes a case study as an “empirical inquiry” that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 18). For LGBTQ identified higher education students who engage in vlogging and blogging, an approach that examines the phenomenon holistically is necessary. In the case of this research study, variables cannot be separated or held constant, and some variables may remain unknown to the researcher (e.g., type of student major, etc.). Yin (2009; 2012) also mentions that when there are a wide-range of variables of interest rather than fixed data points, a case study should be used. He indicates that prior developed theoretical frameworks can be beneficial as guides for the data collection and analysis process. Using the work of D’Augelli (1994) provides a comprehensive, research-based guide to frame this study and develop primary and secondary themes.

A qualitative comparative case study method allowed me to gain descriptive data rich with meaning from the blogs of LGBTQ identified higher education students from a wide range of locations and experiences. Tremayne (2007) notes the value of using web logs for research because the data is often in text form and archived. Descriptive studies are completed when it is not possible to manipulate the variables or when all the variables are unable to be fully identified or extracted (Merriam, 1988). The research examined a phenomenon at its current state, and descriptive data was recorded in a qualitative format using written word (Merriam, 1988). This study provided a detailed descriptive account of the blogs and vlogs of several LGBTQ identified higher education students. Using textual data enhanced the robust nature of the comparative case study. The qualitative, descriptive, comparative, case study method was chosen because it was able to give an in-depth account of a particular phenomenon at a particular point in time, impacting the lives of LGBTQ identified higher education students.

### **Participants**

Archival web logs in the format of blogs and vlogs were used for this research study. Merriam (1988) emphasizes that “personal documents are a reliable source of data concerning a person’s attitudes, beliefs and view of the world” (p. 112). The web logs included are personal accounts of the experiences of seven higher education students who identify as LGBTQ. It is important to note that three of the participants self-identified as part of a racial minority. Jessica Tay (2016) spoke about her intersectional identity as biracial. Bloggers Kevin (2012) and Matt (2011) spoke about identifying as Asian, as well as their experiences as part of Asian communities. The other four web loggers did not choose to comment on racial identity. All participant vlogs were gathered using a

combination of searching through search engines and snowball sampling. Blogrolls included on participant web logs were used during this process. The search engines “Google Blog Search” and “Search BlogSpot” were used to recruit blogs, and the search function on the website “YouTube” was used to recruit vlogs. Vlogs and blogs are public domain content, and thus Research Ethics Board approval was not required. Table 1 presents participants’ web log information.<sup>1</sup>

The candidates examined are referred to interchangeably as “bloggers/vloggers” and “participants” throughout this document. I have chosen to refer to the candidates as “participants” because they have made active decisions to participate in the online web logging space, thus taking part in communication aimed to support LGBTQ readers. As an active, choice-based term, the use of the term “participants” refers to the ongoing decisions of online users to partake in shaping online communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Date ranges for in-text parentheses reflect year-long period of study; Date ranges in reference page reflect total active period of web log

Table 1

*Participant Web Log Information*

Title of blog	Type	Date range (d/m/y)	Active period	Author name	Identifies as:	Age	Location	Higher education institution (program)
Adventures of a Masculine Gay Guy	Blog	04/08/2010– 03/08/2011	2010– 2017	Average Gay Dude	Gay	23	Florida, USA	Jacksonville College (Advertising)
Closet Car Guy	Blog	19/05/2011– 18/05/2012	2011– 2013	Matt	Bisexual	22	Vancouver, BC, Canada	University; not specified (Sociology)
Life as a _____ Medical Student	Blog	27/01/2012– 26/01/2013	2012– 2013	Kevin	Gay	25	Queens/ Long Island, NY, USA	Stony Brook University School of Medicine (Medicine)
My Double Life	Blog	10/04/2010– 9/04/2011	2010– 2014	SOCRKID17	Gay	19	Raleigh, NC, USA (school); Dallas, TX, USA (home)	Combined undergraduate/ major program (Business)
The Lesbian Saga: Tales of a Lesbian's Journey Through Life	Blog	08/06/2012– 07/06/2013	2012– 2013	Kris	Lesbian	20	New York, NY, USA	Not specified; (Health Information Management Technology)
AwesomeDudeErik	Vlog	18/04/2009– 17/04/2010	2009– 2014	Erik	Gay	23	Minnesota, USA	St. Cloud State University (Finance)
JessicaTayVlogs	Vlog	29/05/2015– 28/05/2016	2013– 2016	Jessica Tay	Bisexual/ Non-binary	21	Michigan, USA	Michigan State University (Communications; focus on Interactive Social Media)

Vlogs and blogs were chosen based on relevancy and currency. Participant web logs were considered based on discussion of higher education experience and sexual identity development. The blogs of students who identified as transgendered or genderqueer were not included, as this population has some specific challenges and needs that could be addressed in a future study. In order to increase validity, diverse web loggers were chosen.

### **Data Collection**

Initial searches for blogs and vlogs took place using search terms such as “LGBTQ”; “Lesbian”; “Gay”; “College”; “Higher Education”; and “University.” After the first blogs were collected, additional participants were found on accompanying blogrolls. For inclusion in the study, bloggers were required to post on a moderately consistent basis for a period of several months to several years during their experience as a higher education student.

Examining the blog entries of participants over a year-long period during their higher educational experience allowed the researcher to examine patterns over time. A year-long period was chosen because it gave insight into sexual identity development longitudinally. Relevant blogs were no more than 7 years old, ensuring currency. All included blogs were required to discuss experience as LGBTQ, as well as higher education experience. As an investigative entry point, the participants’ entry into higher education, and/or their discussion of a critical point in their sexual identity development was used to mark the initial starting point of the observation period. Web loggers in their late teens to mid-20s were chosen as participants. This choice was made because this period is a common time for individuals to have their first encounters with higher

education environments. North American web loggers were singularly used because their higher education experiences include some similarities that may not have been present for higher education students attending school on other continents. A small sample size was chosen because it allowed for a detailed longitudinal consideration of the web loggers' experiences with navigating their sexual identity development while enrolled higher education.

### **Data Analysis**

This study used qualitative textual content analysis as the primary instruments of data collection. Participants provided established web log content for analysis on public domain blog host websites such as YouTube, Blogger, and WordPress. The development of the primary research questions were based on themes found in the relevant literature surrounding blogging and vlogging, higher education, and LGBTQ identity development. Textual archival data from blogs and transcribed video data from vlogs were used. For blogs, textual archival data was coded directly across and within data sets. For vlogs, transcribed data was coded using developed themes through cluster analysis. First, the blogs and vlogs were examined for the presence of D'Augelli's (1994) six processes of sexual identity development. Then, pattern matching was conducted to develop salient secondary themes across and within the seven blogs and vlogs. Relevant sections of the vlogs were transcribed directly. Yin (2009) indicates that qualitative documentation typically consists of the direct data source as well as secondary relevant data. All sections of the blogs and/or vlogs were examined, including additional information sections such as "About Me" columns, links, and blogrolls. D'Augelli's (1994) six-component model provided the primary codes for analysis; these themes then provided the framework for

secondary codes developed through inductive pattern matching. Cluster analysis was then used to decipher relevant themes.

Data analysis and coding occurred simultaneously for this study. D'Augelli's (1994) six processes for sexual identity development functioned as primary codes. This directed approach to textual content analysis facilitated an additional inductive process in which related secondary codes were condensed under each primary code using pattern matching. Following this procedure, each code was analyzed using cluster analysis. The seventh theme explored the higher education experience specifically; this primary code was developed based on salient inductive pattern matching. While D'Augelli's (1994) lifespan model is an invaluable resource for understanding sexual identity development across time, particularly relevant points arose surrounding the higher education experience. Emergent themes were categorized and developed based on literature and the guiding framework.

Pattern matching is a valuable and credible data analysis technique outlined by Yin (2009) and Creswell (2009). Pattern matching consists of examining the data for emergent patterns at the individual, broad, and theoretical, literature based levels (Yin, 2009). In this study, salient secondary themes were identified using the aforementioned directed framework to provide the primary themes. Once a theme was established, it was assigned a code. Code consistency was established by using D'Augelli's (1994) lifespan model and related literature to develop definitions for primary themes. Each blog or vlog was examined across and within the text in order to compare the presence of code patterns, thus ensuring the relevancy of that theme. Every participant's web log was examined for individual patterns and compared with larger patterns noted within the whole. For each web

log, textual content analysis was completed separately within the case.

Qualitative textual content analysis is an effective data analysis method for this research because it is used to make meaning of large amounts of textual data. As this study draws from blog and vlog posts from multiple users over a period of 1 year, content analysis is an appropriate tool for use. Qualitative content analysis also allows the researcher to select particular, relevant texts (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005). Hsiu-Fang and Shannon (2005) describe content analysis by saying that “Research using qualitative content analysis focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text” (p. 1278). Zhang and Wildemuth (2005) emphasize that qualitative content analysis goes beyond surface quantitative interpretations, allowing the researcher to gain insight into the manifest and latent themes present within a particular text. A directed content analysis of data was completed by examining the texts for the presence of D’Augelli’s (1994) six stages within the lifespan development model. Directed content analysis uses pre-established research as a guide for qualitative inquiry (Hsiu-Fang & Shannon, 2005). Following this directed analysis, an inductive examination took place, using data gleaned from revelatory phrases. Each blog was examined for the presence of each theme separately. Afterwards, cross-case analysis of the texts occurred for each of the six themes. Manifest and latent themes were established within and across texts during the inductive research process. A qualitative content analysis approach provided a robust examination of the data.

After completion of individual case analysis, cross-case themes were established. Cross-case synthesis ensures more robust findings in qualitative comparative case-study designs (Yin, 2009). For each case, or blog, a directed approach established the presence

of D'Augelli's (1994) six stages of sexual identity development. This process, in combination with the research questions, facilitated the secondary inductive theme development. Salient points within the content of D'Augelli's framework, as well as more broadly across all blogs and vlogs, influenced secondary theme evolution. A seventh theme focused on the LGBTQ identified higher education student experience was revealed. Upon completion of coding, primary and secondary themes were outlined in Chapter 4.

### **Limitations**

There are a few limitations to consider with the present research study. One of the limitations of the study is a limited ability for the research to be generalized. The comparative case studies are reflective of particular individuals during a particular point in history, and therefore the potential for generalizability is somewhat limited. Yin (2009) emphasizes that case studies are “generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes” (p. 15). Therefore, Yin (2009) stresses that the goal of case studies should be to expand on theories rather than to find frequencies, as would be done in statistical generalization.

This study used analytic generalization, which uses a template based on a previously developed theory to compare results (Yin, 2009). Primary and secondary themes reflected the positions of the individual cases examined. These themes were considered and developed in relation to the sexual identity development theory of D'Augelli (1994). Cross-case analysis also aimed to reduce the effects of limited generalizability. Providing data from participants across varied locations, of different ages and programs, allows for some generalizability, as does using a theoretical

framework. Future research studies should focus on larger samples to glean more generalizable data.

While using the work of D'Augelli allowed for analytic generalizability, there are some limitations to using his theory as directed framework. D'Augelli's sexual identity development theory came to fruition prior to the current age of digital immersion. One must consider, how does the experience of online consumption shift the identity development process? This is a question explored throughout this work; one that also warrants further research. Additionally, D'Augelli's lifespan model, while flexible and shaped by individual experience, does not directly consider such factors as racial identity or specific social environments, including the university setting. For this reason, a complimentary inductive data analysis process was conducted using pattern matching to shed some light on factors that exist outside of the directed framework.

An additional limitation to this study is the presence of researcher bias. Merriam (1988) laments that because human participants are involved in the collection and data analysis of qualitative studies, the data collection and analysis procedures are coloured by the researcher's individual point of view. Using directed and conventional content analysis allows for researcher bias. Measures were taken to limit personal bias by using a theoretical framework from which to develop themes. Using D'Augelli's (1994) six stages theory as a deductive, directed framework for the initial phase of research provides an informed perspective, compensating for some of the researcher bias present (Hsiu-Fang & Shannon, 2005). I also aimed to clarify bias by providing a self-reflective section outlining my individual perspective and how it may influence the study. A qualitative

case-study method allowed me to gather richly descriptive data surrounding a complex phenomenon.

### **Credibility and Strengths**

There are some specific strengths and considerations regarding the consistency and dependability of the research study. Creswell (2009) refers to “qualitative reliability” as that which ensures that the researcher’s approach remains consistent. Merriam (1988) describes reliability as the ability of the study and results to be replicated. She maintains that due to the lack of possible external controls on qualitative research, reliability should not be the goal and is largely an impossibility. If the study were to be conducted a second time, different results would be gleaned due to extraneous factors and circumstances. Therefore, according to Merriam (1988) and Creswell (2009), the goal of qualitative research should be to ensure that the researcher employs procedures to maintain accuracy of findings and consistent, dependable presentation of results. This study has aimed to address issues of consistency and dependability by using D’Augelli’s (1994) six stage lifespan model to provide dependable, pre-established initial codes, as well as through coding web logs individually and across cases.

Ensuring internal validity was also an important consideration for the researcher. Merriam (1988) describes internal validity as the matching of one’s findings with reality; she encourages researchers to ask themselves the question, “Do the findings capture what is really there?” (p. 166). The focus of qualitative internal validity must be on interpreting the experience of the researcher, rather than on widespread generalizability. Creswell (2009) notes that threats to internal validity can occur when participants connect with each other about the study, and when they are chosen based on predisposal for certain

outcomes. The present study focused not on broad generalizability, but on the case experiences of some specific higher education students who identified as LGBTQ. Additionally, public domain content over a defined period of time starting and ending prior to the study was used to eliminate the risk of participant collaboration. Participants from a wide range of locations and backgrounds were chosen to avoid selection based on certain predispositions. Particular measures were taken to address issues of both internal and external validity, as well as trustworthiness.

The external validity of a research study must be considered to ensure that the study findings are not incorrectly represented (Creswell, 2009). Merriam (1988) and Creswell (2009) suggest that challenges to external validity can occur when the researcher infers findings to other circumstances incorrectly. Merriam (1988) maintains that broad generalizability should not be the focus of qualitative case study work. She mentions that within all disciplines generalizability weakens over time. For case studies, the specific nature of the research makes generalizing to participants who do not have the exact characteristics impossible (Creswell, 2009). Using a cross-case-study approach considers the unique experiences of each individual, as well as the overarching themes drawn from the case studies in connection with one another. Using analytic generalizability in a multiple case study analysis allows the results to provide strong support for a theory, even though findings might not be replicable (Yin, 2009). A cross-case analysis makes the case study method more robust for investigating the experiences of LGBTQ identified higher education students because it provides a wealth of information on relevant thematic realities that may be experienced by others in this unique circumstance (Yin, 2009).

A focus of this study, in considering credibility, is to achieve triangulation of data. Triangulation is referred to by Merriam (1988) and Yin (2009) as the use of multiple methods of data collection. Yin (2009) suggests that case studies lend themselves particularly well to multiple methods of collecting data. The present study used textual content analysis, transcribed web log comments, and observational textual asides from blog/vlog sections to justify themes. An additional strength of the cross-case-study analysis method is that multiple individual cases are both examined on their own and in comparison with one another. Yin (2009) maintains that investigating multiple cases and including data from multiple sources increases the corroboration of the phenomenon. A cross-case study design was used to increase triangulation and reinforce the credibility of the research.

Particular measures were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of this qualitative study. Guba (1981) shares strategies for implementing trustworthiness within naturalistic studies. These strategies included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). Using the content-analysis measures outlined by Zhang and Wildemuth (2005) and Hsiu-Fang and Shannon (2005) reinforces study credibility. Some additional specific measures were taken to increase study credibility. Use of D'Augelli's six stages model as a directed framework, including personal background reflection and attention to measures assuring triangulation all affirm credibility. Guba (1981) has argued that all social phenomena are context-bound; however, measures may be taken that allow investigators to transfer research findings to similar contexts. In order to consider transferability, specific details about participants and the researcher have been included, providing thick description. The processes of gathering

and analyzing data have been explained in detail to guarantee the study's dependability. Details about "the research design and its implementation, the operational detail of data gathering, and reflective appraisal of the project" have been included in the methodology and implications section (Shenton, 2004, pp. 71-72). Overlap methods were employed, using both directed deductive and inductive data analysis procedures (Guba, 1981). Confirmability is ensured through the use of D'Augelli's (1994) six stages model as a directed framework, thus addressing the potential bias of the researcher. Researcher predispositions have also been directly stated, allowing the reader to personally decide the acceptability of findings (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). Care has been taken to ensure that this qualitative study has been conducted with an emphasis on factors of trustworthiness.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Current debates exist about the use of the Internet for research (British Psychological Society, 2013; Eynon, Fry, & Schroeder, 2008; Weeden, 2012). The path to conducting Internet research with an ethical consciousness is not clear cut, and suggestions for responsible practice abound. According to the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and Humanities (NESH, 2012) "researchers can in general use material from open forums freely without obtaining consent from the parties covered by the information" (p. 4). Weeden (2012) mentions that "there remains no set formal standard of practice or official guidelines" for the ethics of Internet research (p. 41). Consideration has been given to the special circumstances that Internet research poses, as discussed below.

The present study does not involve human participants as a direct source of data collection; rather, it makes use of public domain data. Consent was not directly sought from the web loggers involved in the study. This conscious choice was made because the known presence of a researcher may have restricted my ability to access open and honest contributions from the participants, potentially colouring the nature of their web log posts. Obtaining this consent would not have allowed me to accurately observe how those involved honestly used their spaces as part of the identity development process. Weeden also noted that “considerable discussion has taken place regarding the need for informed consent, arguing that the majority of web sites, discussion boards, and chat rooms cannot be considered private spaces but are constituted as public domains” (p. 43). In the present study, I have used the textual content freely provided on public non-password protected web logging domains. I chose to only access web logging communities that were easily searchable and made openly accessible to the public viewer by both the host site and the writer. This effort was made in order to ensure that content was only being used from those contributors who expected, and wanted, their content widely shared.

Yin (2009) indicates the importance of considering the vulnerabilities and sensitivities of the research participants. Weeden (2012) emphasizes that “researchers should take into account the purpose of the postings and discussion forums in an effort to gauge whether participants view their communications as public or private” (p. 43). In the present study, the participants were required to agree to the public domain requirements of the individual websites prior to use. Creswell (2009) specifies that in certain cases “some participants may not want to have their identity remain confidential” which allows them to assert their independence (p. 90). All of the participants who were

selected for this study asserted on their weblogs that they created and maintained the spaces in order to reach and support viewers. Their clear intention was to speak honestly and openly about their experiences identifying as LGBTQ. For this reason, I aimed to provide the participants full recognition of their work—something that would not have been possible through the use of pseudonyms. The web loggers chosen for this study made calculated individual choices to reveal the amount of personal information online that they were comfortable with. Only public, easily viewable information was accessed. Some of the participants opted to use obvious pseudonyms as their screen names, whereas other users chose to reveal more information about themselves. I chose to respect the decisions of the selected participants with regards to anonymity; all directly stated their desire to publicly support their readership. In this qualitative research study, participants took special consideration of what elements they wished to remain public or private.

It was additionally important to consider any potential harm to the participants of the study. Eynon et al. (2008) emphasize that special care must be taken to ensure that participants do not come to harm through online investigations. While no definitive guide exists for considering the ethical use of public domain Internet content, the British Psychological Society indicates that “it can be relatively easy to trace quotes which have been published from source material” (p. 18). This concern is also noted by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (2014); they mention that because of this consideration, “researchers are also responsible for the data and content remaining unchanged” (p. 7). Because, in this case, those included in the study wrote specifically about a desire to reach viewers and provide support, it was evident that they desired their words to be heard. I felt ethically responsible to provide recognition to

these writers, as well as accurately including quoted content from their spaces.

Consulting the literature on the use of the Internet in research, I have attempted to honour the integrity and sincere contributions of the authors of the weblogs presented here. While no specific guideline is present, issues of privacy, permission, and safety have been discussed in relation to use of public domain Internet content. I examined the Human Ethics Research Board form and procedures for Brock University, finding that this procedure only needed to be undertaken when researching human participants. This study investigated the textual and video content posted on public domain websites with the preauthorized website participation of the participants, therefore this secondary review of text did not require further ethics clearance.

### **Summary**

This section has addressed the methodological procedures of the study examining the web logging behaviours of LGBTQ identified higher education students. Research was undertaken using a qualitative, descriptive, comparative case-study design. This design allowed the researcher to gain in-depth and robust data over a period of 1 year for each of the web logs examined. Participant recruitment and information was outlined. Following this, data collection and analysis procedures were explained. Finally, a discussion of study limitations, strengths, and credibility was included. Ethical implications, though minimal for non-human participant research, were considered. In Chapter 4, the study findings are presented in connection with the literature and theoretical framework.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This study investigated LGBTQ identified higher education students who chose to participate in online blogging and vlogging, in order to understand how their sexual identities impact their daily and educational lived experiences. Etengoff and Daiute (2015) indicate that the Internet is an increasingly relevant space where sexual identity formation takes place, thus emphasizing the importance of this research. The blogs or vlogs of seven LGBTQ identified young people were examined for a period of one year within the participants' higher education experience (Average Gay Dude, 2010-2011; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009-2010; Jessica Tay, 2015-2016; Kevin, 2012-2013; Kris, 2012-2013; Matt, 2011-2012; SOCRKID17, 2010-2011). Textual content analysis was used to qualitatively develop salient themes based on D'Augelli's (1994) lifespan model of sexual identity development.

Evidence of D'Augelli's six stages, which occur simultaneously for LGBTQ identified individuals throughout their lives, were found within each of the seven participants' online spaces. The stages of D'Augelli's lifespan model served as primary themes for this comparative case study, with the addition of a seventh primary theme entitled "university experience." These stages included: "exiting a heterosexual identity"; "developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status"; "developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual social identity"; "becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring"; "developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status"; and "entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community." Initial secondary themes were developed through an inductive process of pattern matching (Yin, 2009) within and across each primary theme. Within their blogs and vlogs, participants engaged in crafting and expressing their identities in ways that

both reinforced and challenged normative expectations for gender and sexuality.

The blogs and vlogs included in this study transgress heteronormative boundaries to create spaces where queer identities are present and visible. Queer theory emphasizes the fluidity of gender and sexual categories (Pascoe, 2007; Temen & Lahman, 2012). LGBTQ identified bloggers and vloggers participate in queering online environments by taking back these spaces for themselves and shifting the heteronormative culture through individual self-expression. In her work on queer theory, Butler (1993, 2004) brought to readers' attention the changeability of cultural norms. Norms surrounding sexual identity are malleable; the seven blogs and vlogs examined used their online spaces as transformative tools to shift heteronormative cultural expectations. Queer heterotopias are places that are part of everyday interaction that encourage normalizing cultural practices to be questioned (Jones, 2009). In this way, the bloggers and vloggers examined in this study have both consciously and unconsciously contributed to online queer heterotopias.

### **Exiting a Heterosexual Identity**

The initial stage that D'Augelli (1994) introduces in his lifespan model is "exiting a heterosexual identity"; the stage "involves personal and social recognition that one's sexual orientation is not heterosexual" (p. 325). Evans et al. (2010) indicated that this stage involves personally coming to terms with the fact that one is not heterosexual, which can be a lengthy and complex process. Each of the seven participants included in this study discussed their process of "exiting a heterosexual identity" at length. This process also involves "coming out," or disclosing one's identity as LGBTQ to others. Coming out is an ongoing process, and one must develop skills and strategies for repeatedly making this assertion throughout their lives. The seven participants were at

varying stages in their identity disclosure processes. For several of them, their online spaces were a way to test the waters of coming and living out.

### **Self-Recognition**

Arguably one of the most integral parts of “exiting a heterosexual identity” is “self recognition,” or coming to terms with the fact that one identifies as LGBTQ. This personal admission allows the individual to begin to realize the importance that identifying as LGBTQ will have in their lives, and to make decisions accordingly. Asakura and Craig (2014), in a study of resilience in LGBTQ adults, found that “Coming out to self allowed these participants to shift their experience from vaguely feeling/knowing about being LGBTQ to making their internal struggle known to themselves” (p. 260). Several authors found that online social communities provide invaluable safe havens and means for support for LGBTQ identified individuals during this time (Gray, 2009; Gregg, 2008; Lupton, 2015). The seven participants who were incorporated into this study each included reflection on their process of realizing they identified as LGBTQ.

Many participants reached back into their memories, providing descriptions of their childhood or teenage experiences with attraction to other same-sex peers or other personal indicators of an LGBTQ identity. Average Gay Dude (2010-2011) described a process of first recognizing his early same-sex attractions, then considering himself bisexual, ultimately to arrive at a comfortableness with personally identifying as gay. He confided in his readers, saying:

I was first attracted to a guy in 8th grade, when I was 13. At first it scared me because it was like a switch that went off and randomly, out of no where, I

started doing double takes at guys. (Average Gay Dude, 2010, August 5, My Story, para. 2)

About half of the participants included personal reflection stories early in their blogging careers. These stories elaborated on how the students had reached their current point in their sexual identity recognition journey. In his vlog, AwesomeDudeErik (2009) described his early sexual attractions in similar form to Average Gay Dude (2010), reflecting on his middle school experience:

In seventh grade, around seventh grade I really started to notice I liked guy's faces a lot, like I was attracted, I liked looking at them and I was attracted to them and I probably started to realize I was gay then and I know by eighth grade I knew I was for sure gay. (April 18, My Coming Out Story, 5:20)

In a similar fashion, Matt (2011) mentioned that his sexual recognition began to develop in the 10th grade, when peers began to date and his romantic and sexual attractions differed from that of heterosexual friends. Additionally, Kevin (2012) described his lack of traditionally "masculine" pursuits as a child and indicated that he "probably" knew he was gay, but subconsciously suppressed this knowledge. All four of these participants mentioned that they tried to initially ignore same-sex feelings and concentrate on distractions such as schoolwork, sports, hobbies or groups, and friendships, ultimately coming to the realization that self denial was no longer helpful to their mental health. Average Gay Dude (2010), Matt (2011), and SOCRKID17 (2011) directly stated that emerging from a state of self-induced suppression prompted them to begin their blogs in search of emotional support.

For some participants there was a tendency to recognize homosexual attraction as

“just a phase” early in their sexual identity development process. Two noted that they underwent a period of trying to “will” the reality of their sexual identity away in order to fit in with norms expressed by peers (Average Gay Dude, 2010; Matt, 2011). This tendency is reflected in a comment made by Matt (2011):

Anyway, up until my recent realization that I am at least bi, like most bi/gay guys who feel attraction to men, I always thought it was just a phase, that I would get over it and things would be alright for me. (May 21, Where It All Began, para. 1)

Similarly, Average Gay Dude (2010) also mentioned that he initially experienced his homosexuality as “just a phase.” After his initial reflection on his budding attractions, he wrote that he “figured this sudden attraction to guys was just a phase, which would pass by” (August 5, My Story, para. 4). The recognition of homosexual desires as “just a phase” for these individuals was fleeting, and they came to more holistically embrace an LGBTQ identity over time as bloggers.

While participants mentioned their journey to self-realization (sometimes simultaneously occurring while blogging and sometimes as a reflection), all participants ultimately made a declaration of their coming to terms with their identity as LGBTQ on their blogs or vlogs. Kris (2012) went as far as to assert that self recognition as LGBTQ happens in steps, suggesting that “When you come across truth—that yes, you may very well be a lesbian—then you have to take the next step. You have to come to terms with your sexuality” (July 7, LESSON ONE: LESBIAN 101 – SO YOU MIGHT LIKE GIRLS, para. 13). Not every participant chose to identify categorically initially, however, all participants chose to assert their homosexual attraction. Reflectively, AwesomeDudeErik (2009) described his own realization process by saying:

I remember one day I was driving in the car and I made myself say that I was gay. Like, “I’m gay, I’m gay,” and it was really hard to say it at first but, it’s even still kind of hard to say it, but it’s a lot easier now. (April 18, My Coming Out Story, 2:16)

For each participant, the realization and confirmation that one was not heterosexual was peppered with anxiousness. SOCRKID17 (2010) purposely communicated with his bloggers that he identified as non-heterosexual, however he mentioned that he did not prefer saying out loud that he was gay when trying to come out to friends. He wrote in his blog: “I dont like saying ‘Im gay’ out loud and he [roommate] said I should practice it lol Both times coming out, I just said ‘I dont like girls.’ Its just more comfortable for me I guess” (December 6, Finals Week, para. 2). While each participant showed overt evidence of self-recognition of an LGBTQ identity, a process of internal truth-seeking towards a solidification of one’s identity was evident for all bloggers.

As time progressed, some bloggers chose to describe their sexuality more explicitly as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. After several months of blogging and identifying mostly as bisexual, Matt (2012) indicated that he felt more comfortable identifying as gay than he had during his initial posts. In a March post, he addressed his readers by saying:

It might not be a surprise reading some of my more recent posts, but I've taken on the gay label over bisexual recently. It's not that the bi label is wildly inaccurate now, but I just find that I can relate more to the “gay” label than I could before. (March 28, Bi to Gay, para. 1)

Similarly, Average Gay Dude (2010) began to more frequently identify as gay as his posts progressed. As he grappled with his personal recognition, he wrote “Until about

four months ago, I considered myself bisexual. I wasn't necessarily lying to myself, rather; I liked the word better" (August 29, Gay Obstacles, para. 2). Jessica Tay (2016) noted that she felt somewhat tongue-tied by the social pressure to identify as well; this is evident in her vlog when she says: "I have an issue with, not like just being like 'Oh I'm gay,' but just mentioning it in general...and I'm not ashamed! Like I am not ashamed, I'm not ashamed of my girlfriend or who I am or anything like that" (May 12, I'M STILL COMING OUT!, 2:20). Jessica Tay's hesitancy demonstrates the emotional complication of admitting a minority sexual identity in a heterosexualized world. When coming to terms with an identity as LGBTQ, one may consider factors of personal and social safety, as well as needing to reestablish certain views and goals. Self-recognition as LGBTQ is challenging in a world that assumes heterosexuality, and these bloggers' and vloggers' dialogue surrounding how they identify indicate that a compartmentalized, heterosexualized approach is a barrier to self-awareness.

### **Stress**

Six of the seven participants expressed that significant stress was associated with exiting a heterosexual identity (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2016; Kevin, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2011). Evans et al. (2010) emphasize that "societal oppression can lead to feelings of panic, anxiety, and denial when individuals first become aware of thoughts and desires indicating same-sex attraction" (p. 305). Shyam Sundar et al. (2007) and Nardi et al. (2004) indicate that online communities allow users to work through personal stressors, an assertion that is mirrored by the findings of this study. The participants each used their diary-like entries to record their own personal stresses while making efforts to support other online users.

A constant awareness of the need to “hide” one’s identity produced heightened levels of stress for most participants in the early stages of exiting a heterosexual identity.

SOCRKID17 (2010) made obvious the extent of this pressure when he wrote: “Living a lie is a hard thing to deal with. I think about it everyday what it would be like if people knew about me” (April 23, Lies, para. 4). He asked in one blog post, “Why cant I just come out to say somebody?” indicating that he wished to relieve the pressure of hiding that he feels on a regular basis (June 4, Why Is It so Hard?, para. 1). Average Gay Dude (2010), Matt (2011), and SOCRKID17 (2010) all described their initial emotions regarding identifying as LGBTQ as “bottled up.” Matt (2011) expressed the stress of dealing with his emotions surrounding his sexuality on his own, asking:

Right now, I feel as if everything’s okay, but deep down, I know it isn’t...there’s a lot of fear about the past, present, future. I’m even all right with the whole liking guys, being bisexual thing right now...so why is it that I feel compelled to lie to my friends? Why not just come out? (May 23, Mind Games, para. 2)

Kris (2012) addressed the stress that is felt when one feels the necessity to hide their sexuality by writing:

Who wants to live in a closet their whole [life]?! Honestly, no one. No one likes hiding their true self from people, especially family and friends. It involves constant lying and paranoia, and that kind of stress can ruin your life. (September 27, LESBIAN 101 – LESSON THREE: COMING OUT, para. 8)

In a similar expression, AwesomeDudeErik (2010) described experiencing “mental anguish” (March 10, Being Gay is Hard, 2:23). Each of these participants experienced significant levels of stress during the initial phase of coming to terms with their sexuality

and coming out to others in their immediate circles. The process of exiting a heterosexual identity is one that is fraught with private self-doubt, indicating a necessity for effective supports for higher education students who identify as LGBTQ, or for those who are questioning their sexuality.

### **Shame**

In addition to high levels of stress, all participants, with the exception of Kris (2012-2013), spoke of feelings of shame early in their experience of exiting a heterosexual identity (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kevin, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). Participants used their blogs and vlogs as places to express these deeply held emotions and work through them. This process of emotional sharing was also documented in the work of Sim and Hew (2010), who investigated the ways in which higher education students used weblogs. In reviewing the work of Vivienne and Burgess (2012), it is clear that the cultural construction of the “closet” induces shame for those who identify as LGBTQ. Shame was a central theme in the utterances of six of the blogs and weblogs examined; it was a barrier that many participants felt they needed to face while exiting a heterosexual identity and affirming an identity as LGBTQ.

The majority of the participants included in this study described a feeling of underlying shame, both when considering the possibility that they might be non-heterosexual and when trying to express this reality to others. Matt (2011) described his identity as LGBTQ as a “dark” secret (April 18, Lies, para. 1), terminology that Average Gay Dude (2010) also used when he mentioned his “darkest secret” (August 5, THE FIRST TIME I CAME OUT, para. 7). In an early entry, Average Gay Dude specifically

wrote: “I am ashamed to be gay and I dont know why God made me different then everyone else. On my last two birthdays, when I blew out my birthday candles, i wished to be straight” (August 5, THE FIRST TIME I CAME OUT, para. 2). SOCRKID17 (2010), Matt (2011), Jessica Tay (2016), Kevin (2012), and Average Gay Dude (2010) all expressed self-targeted frustration, indicating that feelings of shame were holding them back from more authentic openness. Kevin (2012) rhetorically asked himself “Am I not proud enough to declare my sexual identity?” in reference to his decision to remain in the closet when assumptions of heterosexuality were made about him (July 25, Out and Proud, para. 2). Feelings of shame were most prevalent in initial participant posts. However, as was the case with Jessica Tay (2016), shame was a hard feeling to overcome. Jessica Tay vehemently declared that she was not ashamed of her relationship, while still feeling a frustrating reluctance to declare her sexual identity to others out of self-preservation. Shame was a strong force to overcome for many of the bloggers and vloggers. For participants, feelings of shame arose from social assumptions of heterosexuality.

### **Depression**

A large amount of research has indicated the prevalence of mental health vulnerabilities for LGBTQ identified young people (Asakura & Craig, 2014; Craig, McInroy, McCready, Di Cesare, et al., 2015; D’Augelli & Grossman, 2009; Peter & Taylor, 2014, Wright & McKinley, 2011). These reported high levels of distress are due to the stigmatization that this marginalized group experiences (Waldo et al., 1998). Two participants in particular indicated significant mental health distress.

Both Matt (2011) and Average Gay Dude (2010) mentioned feelings of

depression and suicidal ideation. Ultimately, each of these participants decided to seek help for these challenges from campus counseling services. On the morning after Matt (2011) “came out” to his best friend, he described how he was feeling prior to his disclosure by saying: “Honestly, the days leading up to last night, the 24th of September, were just absolute hell. I don’t think there’s ever been a time in my life where thoughts of suicide were ever stronger” (September 25, *The Biggest Can of Worms (Part 1)*, para. 2). He went on to describe factors contributing to his feelings of depression, which highlighted a lack of communication and what he termed “the big secret” (his sexual identity). Reflecting on his own mental state during the process of exiting a heterosexual identity, *Average Gay Dude* (2010) wrote: “By 19, I knew in my heart that if I didn’t start talking and telling people, I would eventually kill myself” (August 15, *The Mental Pain of Being in the Closet*, para. 8). The serious nature of these participant’s deeply emotional comments make obvious the need for thorough support networks for LGBTQ identified higher education students, both within and beyond campus.

### **Religion**

Religion played a key role in the process of exiting a heterosexual identity for each of those participants who felt an affiliation with a religious community. For *Average Gay Dude* (2010-2011) and Kevin (2012-2013), their religious identities were as much integral to their person as were their LGBTQ identities. They both experienced initial conflict before coming to terms with their religious identities as LGBTQ people. Asakura and Craig (2014) assert that while religion is typically considered a protective factor for promoting resilience, it may qualify as a risk factor for LGBTQ identified young people. On a similar note, Etengoff and Daiute (2015) mention that “The coming-out period can

be challenging for youths from religious backgrounds, as many of their previous support systems do not accept their sexual orientation” (p. 226). In similar ways, each of these participants opted to challenge heteronormative conceptions of Christianity and make mental peace with their God. This involved a challenging process of soul searching.

Average Gay Dude (2010) and Kevin (2012) spoke of their friendship networks stemming from Christian fellowships on campus. Average Gay Dude (2010) and Kevin (2012) both questioned God’s role in their sexuality; Kevin going so far as to try and pray to become heterosexual. Kevin described an incident that occurred within his Christian fellowship by saying:

In senior year [of an undergraduate degree], I had heard that in another fellowship, a girl was asked to resign from her role as a student leader because she had recently come out of the closet. I wasn't even sure exactly how I felt about that, but I know that I was disturbed. This pushed me even deeper into the closet. I didn't want to lose my friends, my community and my role as a leader among other Christian students. (February 24, My Story, para. 8)

Kevin’s observation of a negative experience for his fellow LGBTQ identified peer complicated his exiting a heterosexual identity by increasing his fear of public persecution. Average Gay Dude’s (2010) experience speaking with a homophobic Christian fellowship leader also was initially emotionally triggering for him. Ultimately, both participants came to terms with an identity as both Christian and gay. Kevin (2012) later reflected: “Even if I was to come out of the closet, I knew that God would still love me” (February 24, My Story, para. 9). As a central part of their emotional lives, religion was an important factor for each of these higher education students.

## **Disrupting Binaries**

Many of the bloggers and vloggers who were used as participants in this study directly worked to deconstruct social perceptions of heterosexuality. AwesomeDudeErik (2009), Kevin (2012), Kris (2012), Matt (2011), and Jessica Tay (2015) all used their online spaces to assert that sexuality was a fluid concept and part of a larger intersectional identity. These participants' spaces can be viewed as queer heterotopias because these bloggers and vloggers have directly worked to blur imposed social boundaries. Their accessible online spaces are part of everyday interactions that were used to transgress normative sexual categories. De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2015) emphasized that young people who identify as queer should have the opportunity to "tell their own intimate stories" (p. 778). These bloggers have produced literal "sites of empowerment" that "seek to disrupt heterosexist discourses" (Jones, 2009, p. 2). Butler (2004) mentioned the tremendous power that bearing "truth" and "reality" entails (p. 215). As bearers of their own truths, these bloggers have provided versions of reality that counter normative expectations and work towards a new social understanding of sexuality as unfixed.

Four participants made efforts to outright reject societally imposed binaries, sharing their own thoughts about sexual fluidity while exiting a heterosexual identity (AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kevin, 2012; Matt, 2011). Jessica Tay (2015) decried labels by saying to her followers:

It's hard to fit into these categories for me, like, I kind of find it...I don't know, I don't like the strict categories of things, I just really don't like it. And I...so...

how I define my sexuality right now is, right now I don't define it. (May 29, HOW I DEFINE MY SEXUALITY, 2:44)

As was the case for Jessica Tay (2015), Matt (2011) also pushed against defining his sexuality as exclusively homosexual or heterosexual. Indicating the complexity of this fluidity, he wrote: "assumptions made about your sexuality seem to make relationships and sex a whole lot more complicated" (June 16, Thoughts on Being Bisexual, para. 2). In the description of his blog, AwesomeDudeErik (2009) wrote: "I like breaking down barriers" (April 18, About, para. 1). This comment was later reinforced by his multiple, although not always successful, efforts to question stereotypes. Kevin (2012) reiterated in his post "Reasons for This Blog" (January 28) that his identity was intersectional; identifying as gay was only one factor of many that made up his identity.

AwesomeDudeErik (2009), Matt (2011), Kevin (2012), and Jessica Tay (2015) thus were participating in creating queer heterotopias by refusing to accept everyday gender and sexuality based labels that they perceive the world around them to reinforce. Their spaces provided a visible presence for identities that blur static binary lines. Blogs and vlogs became intentionally resistant to heteronormative social structures. These web loggers' have purposely posted about fluid, intersectional queer identities to create a place for themselves and others who resist heteronormativity.

AwesomeDudeErik (2009-2010), Kris (2012-2013), and Jessica Tay (2015-2016) all made efforts to directly encourage readers and viewers to question socially imposed boundaries on sexuality. Each of these bloggers or vloggers addressed their audiences, assuring them that they too did not have to force themselves into uncomfortable social expectations in order to lead happy lives. Kris (2012) wrote to her

readers with sincerity, saying:

Homosexuality isn't one-dimensional. It's multifaceted. Not every lesbian is butch. Not every lesbian feels the same way. Not every lesbian has the same story. Every human is prone to feel, at some time in their life, that they might be gay, even if it's just a tiny, passing thought that disappears as fast as it formed. But if you are questioning your sexuality, please do not despair. Human sexuality is a fluid, ever-changing aspect of humanity. (July 7, LESSON ONE: LESBIAN 101 – SO YOU MIGHT LIKE GIRLS, para. 8)

Her comments demonstrate her effort to include varied queer identities and support those who do not feel they fit into prescribed sexual identity categories. AwesomeDudeErik (2009) also encouraged viewers to work towards a more queer-inclusive future by saying “if we all come out we are going to realize how many people there are like us and then...so we've got to change this, we've got to come out and stop being afraid. Be yourself!” (August 27, Are You Gay? Don't be Afraid!!!, 1:50). Jessica Tay (2015) empathized with her viewers: “So if any of you guys feel the same way, where you are having trouble defining...fitting into like a description, you don't have to fit into a description!” (May 29, HOW I DEFINE MY SEXUALITY, 3:48). Each of these bloggers and vloggers purposefully demonstrated initiatives to queer Internet spaces by supporting other LGBTQ identified users. Through creating personally unrestricted places to express fluid sexual identity, the bloggers and vloggers engaged in maintaining queer heterotopias that challenge internal and social binary assumptions.

### **Perceptions of Coming Out**

As part of the process of exiting a heterosexual identity, LGBTQ individuals may

use online spaces to construct coming out narratives and test the waters for social responses (Etengoff & Daiute, 2015). Some of the bloggers who were examined within this study were “out” to one or more people prior to beginning their blogging journey (AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012). Others had not yet chosen to publicly declare their sexual identity at the time of blog/vlog initiation (Average Gay Dude, 2010; Jessica Tay, 2015; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). Those who had made the decision to come out were experiencing increasing comfort with their identities as their blogs began and progressed, whereas those who were not yet out often described feelings of anxiousness regarding the coming out process. Asakura and Craig (2014) noted that for many, “coming out (of the closet)” marked a turning point for how their lives started to get better” (p. 260). The flexibility of the Internet as a space for navigating sexual identity disclosure offers users space to dialogue about their emotions and garner support (Etengoff & Daiute, 2015; Stern, 2011). Each blogger indicated a desire to either find support for their own coming out process or give support to those who would come after them.

Every participant chose to devote some of their blog to describing their coming out experience. An overarching theme in discussions of disclosure was fear. Matt (2011) described feeling “fear and paranoia” at receiving personal judgment in public related to potential perceptions of his sexuality (May 19, *A New Beginning?* para. 3). It took him a lot of concentrated personal work on his own self-image with a school counselor before he was ready to disclose. He sought the support of others, but was held back by fear, writing to readers: “Thinking about it more, just coming out to my friends would make life a whole lot easier and I feel as if I could talk to them honestly a lot more, but I still

don't know how they would react" (Matt, 2011, June 6, The Guys, para. 3).

SOCRKID17 (2010) described how he felt that his life was made up of lies, confiding: "I am afraid of getting figured out" (April 17, so i was thinkin..., para. 1). In his writing, he yearns for support and companionship but repeatedly struggles with fear of the reactions of his family and friends. Kevin (2012), mentioned fear about coming out to colleagues, saying: "I think underneath it all, I'm afraid of the fact that my superiors or the people I work are actually homophobic, so they'll treat me differently when they find out that I'm gay" in reference to his medical internship (July 25, Out and Proud, para. 1). AwesomeDudeErik (2009) reiterated the fear that many LGBTQ young people face when choosing to self disclose. He said:

Like, when I first came out I was really, really scared. I couldn't even say the words to anybody, like, I could only write it down. A lot of stuff goes through your mind when you're thinking about coming out. Are the people I tell going to hate me? Are they going to dislike me? Are they going to think I'm weird? How are they going to react? Am I going to be kicked out of the house? Are they not going to love me anymore? These are all things that go through your mind. (July 2, Coming Out Gay = Scary but AWESOME, 0:15)

The heightened fear experienced by participants as they anticipated and reflected on their coming out process point to a necessity for increased support networks to improve the mental health of LGBTQ identified young people. The complexity of emotions surrounding coming out can be overwhelming, and these bloggers created places to find and deliver support to one another. These queer heterotopias strengthen the queer community by offering space that is unregulated by the policing of heterosexual norms.

Though fear to come out was a central theme in the dialogue, most bloggers and vloggers also described feelings of peace upon disclosure. In many circumstances the process yielded much needed support once these individuals could finally make the leap to telling people in their lives. Average Gay Dude (2010) wrote about coming out by saying to readers: “In doing so, you're authenticating yourself and giving your soul the best gift you ever could” (November 2, The Power of Self-Reflection, para. 4). Kevin (2012) mentioned that people had better reactions to his news than he expected of them (although he had still not disclosed to family members). He also indicated that the “coming out” process was necessary for him to move forward when he wrote: “I needed to start accepting myself and living a true life. Sure many people were surprised and shocked, but I haven't had a bad reaction” (January 28, Discovering My Sexuality, para. 7). Other participants also mentioned that the process had gone over more smoothly with loved ones than they had anticipated. AwesomeDudeErik (2009) spoke to the camera, saying: “I was pretty lucky with my coming out story, my family still loves me, nobody hates me for being gay” (April 18, My Coming Out Story, 0:29). Jessica Tay (2016) also described feeling more at peace after her disclosure when she spoke to her audience:

As some of you guys know I'm in, happily in a relationship with my girlfriend Tiffany, and uh, we made our coming out video over a month ago, and the responses we got were so amazing from my family and my friends. Like, I feel so unbelievably lucky to have had such a good transition into this. (May 29, HOW I DEFINE MY SEXUALITY, 1:18)

Overall, “coming out” was a long-anticipated process. Most participants felt a greater sense of peace after disclosure. The most resistance came from the community of

SOCRKID17, which will be further discussed. The decision to disclose that one's sexual identity falls outside of heteronormative expectations is an emotionally heightened one. Finding community to talk through that decision is not always straightforward. Therefore, the Internet is utilized by some higher education students to muster support and courage as they exit a heterosexual identity.

### **Developing a Personal Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Identity Status**

D'Augelli's (1994) second stage in his lifespan model of sexual identity development is "developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status." This occurs as one determines the significance that living with an LGBTQ identity will have on their life long-term (D'Augelli, 1994; Evans et al., 2010). Within this stage a person will give thought to their desires and emotions in consideration of what it means to them to be LGBTQ. Accepting an identity as LGBTQ may propel the individual towards seeking the social community of others who share similar experiences. D'Augelli indicates that this process involves learning "how to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual, with these constructs defined by their proximal community of lesbian, gay men, or bisexual people" (p. 325). The individual may engage in particular deliberate acts of identity performance (Butler, 2004). "Developing a Personal Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Identity Status" also occurs when the individual questions socially constructed myths and stereotypes about the LGBTQ community (D'Augelli, 1994). This may be done through a process of "demythologizing personal contact" with LGBTQ community members (p. 326). D'Augelli's (1994) second stage is about exploring one's identity as LGBTQ on a personal level. The participant vlogs and blogs included in this study all demonstrated efforts to question boundaries, dream for futures, seek community, and reinforce LGBTQ lived identities.

## **Living Within and Beyond Norms**

“Developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status” requires the individual to confront and question norms. The majority of the blogs and vlogs included discussion of perceived norms about sexuality, gender, and race (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015-2016; Kevin, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). These norms all significantly impacted comfort with personally identifying as LGBTQ and fear about perceptions of coming out. In some instances, individuals openly recognized socially imposed norms, and in others, they appeared unaware of how these realities impacted their lives. Living an out life requires a lot of personal identity work and is a long process. Untangling learned barriers is ongoing and complex. Vloggers and bloggers were often able to recognize unjust policing of their sexually diverse identities, however, often these attempts occurred gradually. Ultimately, queer heterotopias were being created as they lived out their realities as LGBTQ in a public forum. Debating the legitimacy of social norms that they came up against every day challenged their own perceptions of reality and those of others. However, in some ways (particularly as they relate to gendered behaviour), some participants were reluctant or oblivious to how their own behaviour could perpetuate stereotypes. The bloggers and vloggers both participated in active resistance to norms and in perpetuating them. Anger about stereotyping non-heterosexual people was expressed by all participants; they challenged these realities openly.

Average Gay Dude (2010), Matt (2011), and Jessica Tay (2016) all identified the pain that normative stereotypes had caused in their lives. They expressed feelings of “difference” from peers because they felt same-sex attractions. Average Gay Dude (2010)

described his anguish by commenting: “The feeling of being different was suffocating for me” (August 5, THE FIRST TIME I CAME OUT, para. 3). Matt (2011) and Jessica Tay (2016) both pinpointed the closet as a socially imposed method to reinforce norms. Matt (2011) expressed frustration when he said: “I want to feel as if I can just let myself go and tell the world how I’m feeling, but the secret I hold and the way I’ve been socialized makes that extremely difficult” (May 19, A New Beginning?, para. 3). Jessica Tay (2016) also recognized that heteronormative patterns of socialization contributed to the necessity of “coming out”:

you never stop coming out because there’s these societal norms that, when you’re born, like, your parents have you and they look at you and they think: “Oh little Johnny, just wait until you get a girlfriend one day” and like I get that, like I probably had those same thoughts. So like, with these assumptions I, I have this like weird fear of letting people down or having people have prejudices of me.  
(May 12, I’M STILL COMING OUT!, 1:32)

Her comments speak to the intensive emotional process it requires to untangle oneself from heterosexual expectations. These bloggers and the vlogger contribute to queer online heterotopias by actively pointing out sexual norms and questioning the validity of such norms. Their recognition of and resistance to these patterns of thinking position them within a stage of “Developing a Personal Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Identity Status” (D’Augelli, 1994). Norms regarding homophobia, gender, and race were recognized and questioned, while at other times they seemed to be bubbling under the surface.

**Gender presentation and homophobia.** Four of the male identified participants in this study struggled to overcome heavily enforced social norms about sexuality and

gender (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). The social cultures that these young people navigated daily continually cemented stereotypes about masculinity and sexuality; reconciling these social realities with an LGBTQ identity was initially quite challenging. Patterns of speech and behaviour socially reinforce a dominantly heterosexual role (Butler, 1997, 2004). Coming to identify as LGBTQ meant that these individuals came to question the patterns of heteronormative thinking and behaviour that were present for themselves and their social networks. Warner (2002) asserted that “heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians, it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life” (p. 194). This stage of sexual identity development involved confronting internalized homophobia for many of the participants.

AwesomeDudeErik (2009), Matt (2011), and SOCRKID17 (2010) all initially purposefully resisted qualities that they perceived to be “gay” in themselves or other potentially LGBTQ individuals. These participants associated effeminate qualities with homosexuality, although they also at times acknowledged that these were stereotypical beliefs. They all openly affirmed that sexuality was fluid, while working to emphasize that they were not effeminate gay men. This was an interesting juxtaposition to observe. While these participants served to create queer heterotopias online by demonstrating diversity in sexual identity, they also sometimes unwittingly reinforced stereotypes. This emphasizes D’Augelli’s (1994) suggestion that sexual identity development is a fluid and ongoing process within which the individual must continuously challenge perceptions that they previously held. These four demonstrated consistent personal work to overcome their internalized homophobia.

After disclosure on their blogs or vlogs, the aforementioned participants made occasional remarks that indicated an internalization of social norms about gender and sexuality. SOCRKID17 (2010) mentioned that he was “personally not a fan of that type” in reference to men that he observed to be “feminine and gay acting” (August 13, Back on the Grind, para. 2). While Matt (2011) openly recognized that effeminate stereotypes were unfounded, he shared: “I even avoided singing certain songs that I knew pretty well, like the Backstreet Boys (no doubt thanks to being a kid in the late 90s...really!) because I didn’t want to seem stereotypically ‘gay’ or the like” with friends (June 6, The Guys, para. 3). The fact that Matt admitted that his behaviour might not be based in sound logic suggests his perception of the inherent homophobia within this decision.

AwesomeDudeErik (2010) expressed feeling alone as a gay man because stereotypes were all that he observed in the larger society, saying:

For me, a guy who is not totally stereotypical: you know I’ve got a deep voice, and I like being outdoors and all those types of things, stuff that maybe you don’t associate with being gay. You know, I think it’s especially hard for guys like me because you see the stereotypes of gay people, um, that gay people like makeup and that they’re afraid to do manly work and stuff like that, but, and so it’s especially confusing for guys like me, I really think so, and especially hard.

(March 10, Being Gay Is Hard, 0:18)

As a masculine presenting gay man, AwesomeDudeErik’s efforts to separate himself from what he perceived to be stereotypically gay indicates his deep resistance to being perceived as effeminate. However, at the same time, he recognizes these perceptions openly as “stereotypes.” He occupied a space in between questioning and affirming social

norms. D'Augelli (1994) emphasized that sexual identity formation is a fluid and ever-changing process. The process of developing a personal lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity status involves recognizing and questioning stereotypes of what it means to be queer. Each of these participants moved in and out of social norms as they began to come to terms with their own identities and choose how significant a role their sexual identity would play during daily life.

**Artificial masculinity.** Average Gay Dude (2010), AwesomeDudeErik (2009), Kevin (2012), Matt (2011), and SOCRKID17 (2010) all commented on masculinity as a performance. These young men actively worked to maintain a masculine performance of gender in order to fit into the culture of their friendships. Butler (1990, 1993, 2004) emphasized that people actively “do” gender in ways that either “pass” as masculine or feminine in order to mimic and fit into social culture. Matt (2011) and SOCRKID17 (2010) were part of friend cultures that associated emotional rigidity with masculinity. They both recognized that this was socially constructed, but continued to participate in the act. Matt (2011) expressed frustration at his friend group for making fun of each other for being “gay” as synonymous with “feminine.” He nevertheless gave in, saying “that’s just how it works with a group of masculine guys; bring the other guys down to make yourself more macho, right?” (June 6, The Guys, para. 5). For SOCRKID17 (2010), masculinity in his friend group was associated with aggressive heterosexuality. He wrote:

It sucks too because its hard when a girl is throwing herself at me and my teammates are telling me to “smash that,” there isn't much I can do. I just say not tonight or I’m not in the mood. Then I have to deal with the guys calling me a pussy and stuff, but its whatever, it gets old. (April 13, The Transition, para. 2)

Both participants recognized the artificial nature of the gendered performances but didn't want to upset their friendship dynamics by declaring them as false and unnecessary.

Kevin (2012) and Average Gay Dude (2010) both suggested that "normal" masculinity was not associated with any type of perceived feminine trait. Average Gay Dude (2010) expressed relief upon meeting a "normal" fellow gay man at his campus LGBTQ centre. For Average gay dude, the man's "normalcy" meant that he was at least partially masculine presenting. Kevin (2012) reflected on his upbringing, wondering if, in part, his sexuality was encouraged by a lack of hypermasculine influence. He wrote:

I think one thing that did play a large influence on my upbringing was the fact that I had an older sister, and all of my family friends were girls. So instead of the usual playing basketball, and other sports that's supposed to make a guy masculine, I played indoor games with them (a lot of board games). (January 28, Discovering My Sexuality, para. 2)

These two participants less overtly recognized the literal "act" of performing masculinity. They associated homosexuality with a failure to perform a masculine identity, or with a tendency to adopt traditionally feminine behaviours. Kevin partially acknowledged the creation of a masculine performance by claiming that sports are supposed to intentionally contribute to a masculine identity. D'Augelli (1994) mentioned that part of "developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status" involves challenging personally internalized norms through contact with other LGBTQ identified individuals. For Average Gay Dude (2010), speaking with another man at the LGBTQ center helped him to enter into this phase. Both participants were working towards reconstructing their self-perceptions after exiting a heterosexual identity.

**Racial identity and cultural reactions.** Matt (2011), Kevin (2012), and Jessica Tay (2016) specifically mentioned that their racial identity was intersectionally entwined with their sexual identity. Jessica Tay (2016) mentioned that being biracial was as much a significant part of her experience as being LGBTQ was. She hoped to devote future a future vlog to a discussion about how her identity as biracial impacted her daily life as a queer individual. Matt (2011) and Kevin (2012) both faced challenges coming out as racial minorities. They felt that the conservative culture they experienced as part of their particular racial communities conflicted with their homosexual identities. Rubin and McClelland (2015) indicated that heterosexism experienced within the cultural groups of some racial minorities may sometimes complicate sexual identity disclosure. Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2004) also noted that the intersections of one's racial and sexual identities makes coming out complex for many. Kevin (2012) expressed concern about telling family members when he mentioned:

Unfortunately, the Korean community is very slow when it comes to being open minded about homosexuality. I basically grew up with the idea that gays didn't exist, or at least in Korea they didn't. It was (and in some parts still is) such a taboo topic, so there was no one I could talk to about my own feelings. (January 29, The Three Hardest Words..., para. 3)

Matt (2011) also expressed concern about his family's perception of his future partner's racial and gender identity. He reflected on a conversation with a friend about disclosing to his family. They discussed whether or not his family would approve of him dating someone who was not of Asian ancestry, something that he felt would be important to his grandparents. Kevin (2012) felt that his experiences with other students

who were Asian at school “led to more suppression of [his] feelings” (January 28, Discovering My Sexuality, para. 6). He wrote that he “was very involved in the Asian community at school, and Asians tend to be a lot more close minded when it came to things like homosexuality” (Kevin, 2012, January 28, Discovering My Sexuality, para. 6). For Jessica Tay (2016), Kevin (2012), and Matt (2011), their intersectional identities were important to consider when developing a personal lesbian or gay identity status. In particular, Kevin (2012) and Matt (2011) felt very connected with family members, friends, and students who were part of the Asian community. They both expressed concern about how their racial community would respond to a disclosure of a queer identity.

### **Self-Acceptance and Confidence**

Once the participants had come to terms with their sexual identities as LGBTQ, a growing sense of self-acceptance and confidence was noted (Average Gay Dude, 2010-2011; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009-2010; Jessica Tay, 2015-2016; Kevin, 2012-2013; Kris, 2012-2013; Matt, 2011-2012; SOCRKID17, 2010-2011). Asakura and Craig (2014) and Craig, McInroy, McCready, DiCesare et al. (2015), confirmed that a sense of connectedness and the decision to disclose helped to promote confidence for LGBTQ young people. Mehra et al. (2004) noted that online communication could have a positive impact on the personal agency of LGBTQ young people. All participants experienced some bumps along the road of disclosure; however, they expressed increased confidence as they moved further in their journey of living out.

Each vlogger or blogger mentioned pride in personal growth. As they came-out to more family and friends, they made life changes that heightened their confidence levels.

Some of these efforts included meeting other LGBTQ individuals, working towards relationships, speaking with counseling services, and working to be more open and honest. Kris (2012), addressing her readers, said: “And when, and if, you accept your sexuality, it will feel amazing. Your confidence level will raise, and suddenly it will feel like you could conquer the world” (September 27, LESBIAN 101 – LESSON TWO: COMING TO TERMS WITH YOUR SEXUALITY, para. 14). After beginning his disclosure process, Average Gay Dude (2010) mirrored Kris’s strong emotions, telling readers: “This summer has been the biggest transformation. I feel like I’m turning into a new person. My paranoia is less intense, my confidence is growing and I’m starting to love and accept myself” (August 12, I CAME OUT TO MY SISTER!!, para. 7). AwesomeDudeErik (2009) commented on his feelings about his identity, saying:

Something that I like about being gay is I think its really pretty awesome that I’m able to be attracted to another guy and that I’m able to share my love with another guy. That’s something that’s really pretty cool, it’s pretty awesome and I wouldn’t change that one bit. (November 20, Your Thoughts on Being Gay, 0:54)

Each of these participants demonstrated personal growth. Their self-perceptions were greatly impacted when they were no longer anticipating homophobic reactions and were taking charge of their disclosure process. Affirming their identity as LGBTQ allowed the participants to move forward and make decisions about how they would begin to live their lives.

### **Questioning Boundaries**

All of the participants began to openly question boundaries surrounding religion, LGBTQ politics, and social norms. As they became more comfortable with their LGBTQ

identities, they began to feel passionately about how this minority group was treated in everyday interactions and as a result of larger systemic oppression. Craig, McInroy, McCready, and Alaggia (2015) indicated that young people who recognize and purposely counter homophobic perspectives may have increased resilience. In reaction to the fact that few states allowed same-sex marriage in 2010, Average Gay Dude wrote:

It should be all 50...it should have ALWAYS been all 50. We're just as much of a U.S. citizen as a straight person is, yet we're treated so differently for something we didn't choose. It just goes to show how narrow-minded our society still is as a whole. (August 8, What's It Like Being Out of the Closet?, paras. 3-4)

On a more day-to-day scale, many participants began to question the small incidents of oppression that they observed around them. Kevin (2012) wrote a post on his frustrations with colleagues assuming heterosexuality of interns and clients. SOCRKID17 (2010), AwesomeDudeErik (2009), Kris (2012), and Average Gay Dude (2010) each questioned why individuals who are part of the broader heteronormative culture feel the right to pry into the private lives of those who identify as LGBTQ; they encouraged readers to follow their own intuition and trust themselves. Jessica Tay (2015) questioned the cultural necessity of adopting a label for one's sexuality, saying: "I'm happy, in the situation I'm in, so like finding a label for myself, it's really not necessary" (May 29, HOW I DEFINE MY SEXUALITY, 0:58). By directly questioning socially imposed norms of heterosexuality, each of these bloggers or vloggers contributed to queer heterotopias by challenging the status quo. They were queering social media by announcing and demonstrating lives outside of the boundaries. In this way, the everyday details of their lives as LGBTQ became transgressive.

## Definitions

In an effort to belong to a queer community, one blogger and one vlogger chose to address terminology associated with the LGBTQ community (AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Kris, 2012). In a similar way to chosen gender presentations, providing “definitions” for what it “means” to be LGBTQ is an act of performance. Butler (1993) emphasizes that there is no single way to perform a queer identity, that queerness as a concept rejects definition. D’Augelli (1994) indicated that during the phase of “developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status” one might make efforts to perform what they think a queer identity should resemble based on their community experience of being LGBTQ. He does not suggest that there is one way to perform queer; rather, one may assert a certain performance based on the LGBTQ community that they observe. It was interesting to observe how AwesomeDudeErik (2009) and Kris (2012) attempted to frame their sexualities using language; this was at once an effort to steadfastly reject heteronormativity, while at the same time attempting to frame queerness, which by the very nature of the concept cannot succeed.

AwesomeDudeErik (2009) and Kris (2012) addressed mainstream terminology that related to the LGBTQ community such as “lesbian bed death,” “straight acting,” and “gaydar.” Following some of her provided definitions, Kris aimed to explain their legitimacy, illegitimacy, or impact on the lesbian community. In this way, while she provided definitions aimed at framing the lesbian experience, she also worked to explain the impact of some of the terminology she used. AwesomeDudeErik (2009) demonstrated a consistent use of the term “straight acting”; he defined this concept when he said:

Today I’m going to talk about something, um, called “straight acting,” and

according to *Wikipedia.com*, uh, “straight acting” is when a person or a gay man does not exhibit the appearance or mannerisms of the gay stereotype. I think that fits me. Like a lot of people don’t like the word, but, I don’t have a problem with it so I’m going to use it. (April 20, Straight Acting Gay Guys, 0:10)

AwesomeDudeErik interestingly used this largely divisive term in his own username, initially to find contact with other masculine presenting men. For Kris (2012) and AwesomeDudeErik (2009), stereotypic definitions were a means of seeking community that was not easily reachable. Use of these terms was perhaps in an effort to learn how to perform a queer identity after exiting a heterosexual identity.

### **Finding Role Models**

For every participant, it was important to have access to LGBTQ identified role models. Whether these were found in everyday life or the media, they provided an example of a successful queer identity. Craig, McInroy, McCready, and Alaggia (2015) and Gray (2009) mention the power of positive LGBTQ media representations to impact the wellbeing of LGBTQ populations. MacIntosh and Bryson (2007) wrote that often these representations are less robust than would be ideal, suggesting the need for increased authentic representation. Craig, McInroy, McCready, and Alaggia (2015) also note that young people who use online new media have access to a wider range of representations than do those who do not access this format. It is clear that positive and authentic role models are a key component of developing a personal LGBTQ identity status.

All participants mentioned either personal or media-based role models. For Average Gay Dude (2010), Matt (2011), Jessica Tay (2015), and Kris (2012), seeing

other examples of successful and happy LGBTQ individuals in their everyday lives made a difference to their self-assurance. For AwesomeDudeErik (2009), Kevin (2012), and SOCRKID17 (2010-2011), social media or televised media role models were influential. Throughout Jessica Tay's (2015) vlogs, her mother and her mother's partner, Michelle, are present members. Jessica's mother and her partner Michelle serve as positive queer role models for Jessica, who experiences a close relationship with her mother. In reference to other bloggers, SOCRKID17 (2010) wrote: "Its awesome to know there are others out there like me. Gay Footballer might be the closest since he plays soccer though lol. Well keep blogging everyone!!" (June 1, Back After a Break, para. 4). He also mentioned Gareth Thomas, an openly gay rugby player, as an important influence. Kevin (2012) spoke about relating to television characters that were LGBTQ, whereas Kris (2012) felt that attending the lesbian wedding ceremony of a friend was a very meaningful example of LGBTQ success. Kris also mentioned that seeing Sally Field's speech about accepting her son's sexuality was very moving for her. AwesomeDudeErik (2010) declared on his vlog: "The Leffews have reaffirmed my notion that I can be a gay man and live a happy life" in reference to a popular family of vloggers headed by two openly gay men (January 19, Re: We Need You! Right to Love, 0:18). For each of the participants, it was essential to see queerness being lived and celebrated in the media and day-to-day life.

### **Determining Life Significance**

Once the participants had accepted an LGBTQ identity, they all went through the process of considering what that would mean in their daily experiences and futures. Determining the significance of an LGBTQ identity for one's life is imperative to

developing a personal identity status as LGBTQ (D'Augelli, 1994). Gray (2009) indicates that “representations of the real” are very important for helping LGBTQ identified young people to imagine their lives as queer individuals. Average Gay Dude (2010) mentioned that knowing his sexuality made viewing his future more challenging and scary. He suggested: “I'm going to have to approach things (that straight people wouldn't have to think twice about) in a different way. Dating, sex, PDA, proposing, introducing my significant other to relatives, marriage, etc.” (August 29, Gay Obstacles, paras. 2-3). For Average Gay Dude (2010), AwesomeDudeErik (2009), Kevin (2012), Kris (2012), Matt (2011), Jessica Tay (2015), and SOCRKID17 (2010), imagining their futures as LGBTQ required some shifting of their original conceptions of themselves.

As they grew in acceptance of their LGBTQ identities, the bloggers and vloggers included began to consider how their futures would be impacted by this reality. Matt (2011) and Kevin (2012) indicated an intention to continue to come-out as time progressed. Matt (2012) was restless for progress, he said: “I wanted to get a move on with what I felt was my stagnant life and that maybe if I addressed this, maybe I could finally at least start to move toward a relationship” (March 15, Confronting My Sexuality, para. 4). A long-term relationship was also very important for Kris (2012) and Jessica Tay (2016), who both envisioned weddings with their current partners. Kevin (2012) desired progress towards a relationship, which was evident when he wrote:

I went to a wedding up in Boston this past weekend. It really got me thinking about my own wedding in the future and of course that started the whole "I really need to start dating and finding a boyfriend" mentality. (August 16, Wow That Was Quick!, para. 2)

On top of wanting to progress towards a relationship, AwesomeDudeErik (2009) told viewers that he also really desired a family. He said in his vlog:

I've known that I was gay for quite a while, since I was young, 12...but I've always had the idea still that I would have children. It didn't matter to me that I was gay; I could still have children. (October 2, I Want to be a Gay Daddy, 0:28)

A key indicator that these participants were indeed “developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity” was their move towards envisioning a future as LGBTQ. This future took on different properties for different online users, however they each considered their goals from a queer lens.

### **Developing a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Social Identity**

D'Augelli (1994) describes a third stage of sexual identity development entitled “developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual social identity.” All of the bloggers and vloggers in this study made efforts to move towards disclosure and acceptance within their social communities. Evans et al. (2010) describe this phase as one that “consists of creating a support network of people who know and accept one's sexual orientation” (p. 317). D'Augelli (1994) emphasizes the complexity of this process, and indicates that it takes time. Finding those who are able and willing to provide social support is imperative. Social support must be authentic; it is unhelpful to LGBTQ individuals to have their communities deem their reality invalid or “alternative.” D'Augelli warns that “tolerance” from others is indeed harmful because it subtly reinforces LGBTQ invisibility. To tolerate a person is to allow them to exist alongside one's community rather than within it. Participants were at varying levels of personal disclosure at the time of posting; their efforts to build communities of support are observable across the year's timeline of the study.

### **Coming Out to Social Networks**

For most of the participants, coming out to friends and siblings involved complex emotions. Several participants underwent the coming out process to these groups during the timeline of their blogs (Average Gay Dude, 2010; Jessica Tay, 2015; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). For others, the coming out process to siblings and friends had occurred before the initiation of their blog, although they were still experiencing coming out to family and colleagues (AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012). Valtonen et al. (2010) suggest that students of the net generation use the Internet as a social tool, a factor that was obvious for these participants as they used their blogs or vlogs for emotional support and expression during this phase. Siblings and friends responded in a variety of ways; all eventually came to terms with the news that their loved one identified as LGBTQ. Friends and siblings became important allies for the participants, providing support networks as they experienced homophobia in the larger world, or came out to family members.

**Coming out to siblings.** For three of the participants, coming out to siblings was an initial foray into testing the waters of living out. Average Gay Dude (2010), Matt (2011), and SOCRKID17 (2010) all either considered telling a sibling first or followed through in choosing them as the first person they disclosed to. Siblings were viewed as potentially safer options for disclosure, and these bloggers hoped to gain some needed support from their siblings in the process of coming out to parents. D'Augelli (2008) notes that young people who had "siblings who knew had lower internalized homophobia scores" (p. 110). This emphasizes the value of a sibling-based support network. Hilton and Szymanski (2011) also found that for heterosexual siblings, having a sibling who

openly identified as LGBTQ helped to deconstruct their prior held normative assumptions about sexuality. In their study, ten participants described becoming more comfortable with a sibling's LGBTQ identity as time progressed. The process of coming out to siblings was discussed by four participants; varying sibling responses to disclosure were noted (Average Gay Dude, 2010; Matt, 2011; Kris, 2012; SOCRKID17, 2010). Siblings were considered a safe option for initial disclosure because participants thought they were less likely to express rejection than friends, and the weight of their response was less heavy as compared with parents. Matt (2011), when considering who to first come out to, mentioned that in choosing his sister he had "a lot less to lose: she's my sister, and she'll always accept me as her brother, unlike Brian who could \*potentially\* (but highly unlikely) drop me as a friend" (December 5, My "Coming Out" Plan, para. 7). Average Gay Dude (2010) spoke of his first disclosure experience to his brother by saying: "When he flew into town, I was so excited because I was ready to come out and I chose him to be the first person I would come out to" (August 5, THE FIRST TIME I CAME OUT, para. 5). After coming out to his brother and sister, Average Gay Dude (2010) expressed surprise that neither sibling had suspected that he was gay. The experience gave him relief and courage to further progress with disclosure to others. SOCRKID17 (2010) experienced less initial support from his sister (the first person he told), but felt comforted by the positive response of his brother. His brother emphasized that SOCRKID17's sexuality didn't change their relationship with one another. In contrast, Kris (2012) felt frustrated by having to compartmentalize her life experiences because she was not out to her older brother. Coming out to siblings helped the participants move forward with their lives living out as LGBTQ people.

**Coming out to friends.** Coming out to their daily social circles was an essential step for each of the participants as mentioned in their blogs and vlogs (Average Gay Dude 2010-2011; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2016; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2011). While all of the participants demonstrated extensive worry about how their friends would react, the responses from most were positive and supportive. Friends became invaluable support networks that could uplift the participants during challenging times and provide authentic outlets for discussing life's milestones. For all of the participants, coming out to friends was an experience that triggered high-intensity emotion that resulted in relief and support. Average Gay Dude (2010) chose to disclose his sexual identity to two of his very close friends at university, describing the experience by saying:

I told them that I considered them my two best friends at school and what I was about to tell them was really personal. They stared at me with such intensity, to the point it felt like they were piercing into my soul. I looked up at them and just said it "Guys, I'm gay." I tried to begin explaining, but they both started hugging me. At that second, it felt like the biggest weight had been lifted. They were both shocked, yet understanding. (August 23, Coming Out to Friends For the First Time, paras. 6-7)

For Average Gay Dude (2010), Matt (2012), SOCRKID17 (2010), and Kris (2012), telling friends was an initially nerve-racking experience; afterwards they felt feelings of success and empowerment when friends responded with positivity. Jessica Tay (2015), Kevin (2012) and, AwesomeDudeErik (2009) all mentioned that the responses they had received from friends and classmates were supportive in nature. AwesomeDudeErik

(2009) made a bold move of coming out to many classmates at once, which he described positively by saying:

I had a speech class once this year in college, and, in front of like 25 or 30 people I was able to tell them that I was gay, and then I talked about other stuff too but I told them I was gay and that, and so, I've never had any, really, hate. (April 18, My Coming Out Story, 5:47)

Making the decision to come out to social circles was one that propelled participants forward in a journey of self-acceptance and living out. All of the participants experienced positive reactions from friends, even those who had observed homophobic remarks from friends or colleagues prior to coming out. In some cases, these friends specifically asked if prior comments had bothered the participant (Matt, 2011). In order for emotional adjustment to be made, developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual identity in relation to a support network of friends, colleagues, and siblings was important.

### **Support Circles**

During and after coming out to friends and colleagues, the bloggers and vloggers expressed a significant appreciation of support and worked to develop personal support networks (Average Gay Dude 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2016; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2011). When others were aware of their identities as LGBTQ participants were better positioned to cultivate relationships that were essential to working through accompanying emotions. Several authors emphasized the importance of online spaces as a component of developing a support network for LGBTQ young people (Gregg, 2008; Downing, 2013; Mugo & Antonites, 2014). Kris (2012) mentioned: "Finding support forums on the internet or talking with someone you

personally know and trust can help you muddle through all the useless stuff and help you find that acceptance” (June 12, LESBIAN 101 - LESSON TWO: COMING TO TERMS WITH YOUR SEXUALITY para. 14). Participants found support both in in-person circles and online.

**Support from siblings.** Average Gay Dude (2010) and Matt (2012) both spoke about how essential sibling support was to their personal journeys coming out as LGBTQ young men. Average Gay Dude (2010) commented that his initial coming out experience to his brother made him feel “comforted and safe” (August 5, THE FIRST TIME I CAME OUT, para. 11). This sense of safety, with his siblings at his side, gave him the confidence he needed to come out to his parents. He knew that even if things did not go as he hoped, his siblings would be there to fall back on. Average Gay Dude’s siblings even provided support by being physically present when he chose to disclose to his parents. Matt (2012) also felt more emotionally safe because of the support of his sister. He wrote: “My sister let me know today that she’s always there to talk and support me, and that nothing I could ever say would faze her. She also told me that she’s always looked up to me, which was really uplifting” (January 22, My Family Knows My Secret, Amongst Other Things, para. 3). For Matt and Average Gay Dude (2010), sibling support was an important initial stronghold as they disclosed to others.

**Support from friends.** All of the bloggers and vloggers held the support of friends as centrally important to their emotional well-being (Average Gay Dude 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2011). Even though in most cases friends did not identify as LGBTQ

themselves, they provided advice and a listening ear. Matt (2011) wrote about the importance of his friend network after coming out, saying:

They've been very understanding and supportive, telling me that they have/are going through the some of the same anxieties (uh, not the sexuality issues for what it's worth). They've gone as far as to offer advice and share their own experiences coping, so it's comforting to hear how they're handling things and how they've gotten through it. (February 14, Still Kicking!, para. 4)

Being able to be open and honest with friends allowed Matt (2011) to feel like he could bring his problems to the table for genuine support and sympathy. SOCRKID17 (2011) expressed feeling much more at ease when his friends knew; he was able to move on and adjust to life as an LGBTQ identified young man. He mentioned feeling “closer than before” with his roommate (October 21, Play-by-Play, para. 7). Average Gay Dude (2010) described the experience of telling his friends as “one of the best decisions I've ever made” due to the support he received (August 23, Coming Out to Friends for the First Time, para. 8). Having supportive friends made participants feel more confident and able to face living out as LGBTQ young people.

### **Homophobic Behaviour**

While all participants ultimately found support in their friendship communities, many noted traces of homophobia either among colleagues or friends prior to their disclosure (Average Gay Dude, 2010; Kevin, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). These vloggers and bloggers tried to gauge reactions to coming out by monitoring these experiences. Ultimately, friends were more supportive than anticipated; however, this trend emphasizes how ingrained homophobic language and discussion is in current

culture. SOCRKID17 (2010) worried aloud about coming out, saying: “One of my roommates hates gays” (August 13, Back on the Grind, para. 5). His friends and teammates often used homophobic remarks to assert their masculinity. Matt’s friends, after his disclosure, realized the hurtfulness of their comments. Matt (2011) wrote about disclosing to a friend (Danny):

Nate and Brian were telling me how relieved they were that I had told him. I guess they were feeling pretty awkward every time Danny made a gay joke with them knowing about me. Brian even got really apologetic about making those jokes around me in the past too, since he must have realized how uncomfortable it was for me, which I really appreciated. I don’t hold any resentment against them, it’s just one of those ways masculine guys tease each other, but I’m glad they’ve seen the error of their ways. (February 16, Telling Danny, para. 4)

Friends were more careful with their homophobic attitudes and comments after they were aware that a person who identified as LGBTQ was a part of their social circle. A clear culture of homophobia existed in some of the participants’ social circles; an issue that needs to be further addressed through increased diverse positive representation. By increasing positive representation of LGBTQ individuals, perhaps the stereotypes associated with homophobic remarks may be decreased.

### **Relief**

After coming out to social circles and creating an affirmative support system, several participants expressed profound feelings of relief (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; SOCRKID17, 2010). Disclosure meant that these bloggers and vloggers could begin to move forward creating open, authentic relationships.

Average Gay Dude (2010) poignantly described the flood of relief he felt when he wrote that coming out was “such an accomplishment! I can breathe. It is the biggest feat that I’ve ever been able to tackle in my life” (August 15, I CAME OUT TO MY SISTER!!, para. 6). SOCRKID17 (2010) expressed similar sentiments after coming out to a close friend, saying: “I felt so relieved to see that she doesnt care at all” (January 10, Now Who to Tell?, para. 4). AwesomeDudeErik (2009) also expressed so much relief that he tried to encourage viewers by suggesting: “Try to find somebody, at least one person you can tell. You’ll feel a lot better” (August 27, Are You Gay? Don’t Be Afraid!!!, 0:50). The relief felt by Average Gay Dude (2010), AwesomeDudeErik (2009), and SOCRKID17 (2010) is an important impact of their efforts to develop an affirmative gay/bisexual social identity. Having an authentically supportive network of family and friends who do not simply “tolerate” the LGBTQ identified individual is essential to the sexual identity development process.

### **Social Authenticity**

After coming out, it was very important to Average Gay Dude (2010), Matt (2011), SOCRKID17 (2010), AwesomeDudeErik (2009), and Jessica Tay (2015) to live an honest and open LGBTQ life. Average Gay Dude (2010) affirmatively stated:

Its about time I start living my life instead of hiding from the world and worrying about what other people will think of me. I know there will be individuals who are going to gossip, but I've mentally prepared myself for that. (August 12, My Turn to Decide, para. 5)

These bloggers and vloggers felt that living their life “in the closet” was inauthentic, contributing to a performance of heterosexuality. For the five aforementioned

participants, the process of “coming out” came a desire to reject heteronormative performances, instead demonstrating queer relationships that did not have to “look” a certain way to be sincere and valid. Matt (2011) even mentioned that he was tired of “having to put on a mask to fit in and maintain a straight guy persona” (May 23, *A New Beginning?*, para. 3). This comment reveals that Matt very purposefully performed what he perceived to be a “straight” identity using certain stereotypical behaviours; an essentialism that he began to reject as he became more comfortable as an out LGBTQ young man. AwesomeDudeErik (2009) repeatedly encouraged viewers to “be themselves” and not conform to social expectations of heterosexuality. Queer heterotopias were being formed through these assertions; these bloggers and vloggers used everyday spaces to purposefully critique heteronormative presentations of self and assert LGBTQ identities. The support of social networks helped to support these LGBTQ identified individuals to be confident in personal self-expression.

### **Becoming a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Offspring**

“Becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring” is the fourth stage of sexual identity development that D’Augelli (1994) included. For LGBTQ identified individuals, restructuring familial expectations is a part of their identity development process. Evans et al. (2010) explained that “becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring” involves disclosing one’s identity as LGBTQ to parents, followed by a period of redefining that relationship. It is a time that can create turmoil for LGBTQ identified higher education students and their parents, particularly as these young people may rely on parents for financial and emotional support. D’Augelli (1994) mentioned that the relationship most frequently returns to the prior level of closeness following a period of adjustment.

However, responsibility is most often placed on the LGBTQ identified individual to encourage families to move beyond a position of tolerance; often families place pressure on the individual to keep private. D'Augelli also noted that increasingly, parents are taking steps to be authentically affirmative and inclusive. All of the bloggers and vloggers included in this study demonstrated how their identity as LGBTQ impacted relationships with parents (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2012; SOCRKID17, 2010).

### **Familial Expectations**

Familial expectations were discussed by AwesomeDudeErik (2009), Kevin (2012), Kris (2012), Matt (2012), and SOCRKID17 (2010). These participants all tried to navigate parental relationships delicately, realizing that their identity as LGBTQ would impact some of the assumptions that parents had developed. D'Augelli (2008) mentions that when LGBTQ identified young people “come out in their families, they disrupt the family system and relationships and they also confront the role expectations family members have for them” (p. 114). This creates a careful balancing act for LGBTQ young adults who are reliant on their parents; it is challenging to confront assumptions that parents have held for most of their lives. SOCRKID17 (2010) wrote that his mother assumed he would marry a woman and have children: “I just don't want to cause any problems during this time of the year [Christmas holidays] but its just really annoying having her ask me about girls every day” (December 13, im home!!, para. 2). Kevin (2012) also described feeling frustrated with parents who pressured him to find a heterosexual partner and have children. AwesomeDudeErik told viewers: “Your parents or your friends, may really have a difficult time adjusting to the sit- to learning that

you're gay, because many of them maybe never suspected, they never imagined that they would have a gay child" (July 2, Coming Out Gay = Scary but AWESOME, 1:27). For the participants included in this study, navigating parental relationships post-disclosure meant that parents had to come to terms with confronting assumptions of heterosexuality for their child. This process was complex and challenging for the LGBTQ young adult.

### **Coming Out to Parents**

All of the participants except Kevin (2012) ultimately made the decision to disclose to their parents and discussed parental reactions on their blogs or vlogs (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2012). Rothman, Sullivan, Keyes, and Boehmer (2012) mentioned that mid-20s is a common age for first coming out to parents, a fact reflected in this study. For some, parents were immediately supportive. For others, it took parents some time to get used to their children's disclosure and they expressed resistance or denial. The prospect of coming out to parents was an anxiety inducing process for all of the bloggers and vloggers, including Kevin (2012). Average Gay Dude's (2010) parents expressed immediate compassion for his situation. He described their reaction by writing: "My parents jumped out of their seats and positioned themselves on the arms of the chair where I was sitting. They both began reassuring me that they still loved me" (December 30, I CAME OUT TO MY PARENTS!!!, paras. 9-12). In a similar way, AwesomeDudeErik (2009) and Jessica Tay (2015) felt immediate support from their mothers. AwesomeDudeErik (2009), Kris (2012), and SOCRKID17 (2010) experienced some parental avoidance from at least one parent. SOCRKID17's (2010) mother initially doubted the sincerity of her son's disclosure. Ultimately, she showed support for him identifying as LGBTQ. For the

majority of participants who chose to come out to their parents, this decision allowed them to move forward, confront parental assumptions, and create new realities within their family relationships.

**Tension, homophobia, and resistance.** For AwesomeDudeErik (2009), SOCRKID17 (2011), and Kris (2012), coming out to parents created some resistance and denial. In SOCRKID17's (2011) case, his mother held some stereotypical assumptions about the gay community. Her homophobia created tension when her son decided to exit the confines of the closet. SOCRKID17 (2011) described one instance where his mother told him not to wear a pair of shoes with pink on them, suggesting that they were effeminate and would make him look "gay" (January 12, Back to School, para. 7). Some of her initially negative reaction to his disclosure may have stemmed from these types of homophobic ideas. AwesomeDudeErik (2009) mentioned that his father "would make remarks about gay people, but once he found out I was gay, you know, now he treats me exactly the same" (July 2, Coming Out Gay = Scary but AWESOME, 0:59). AwesomeDudeErik's comments of being treated "the same" refer to the fact that his father did not treat him poorly or make homophobic remarks towards him after his disclosure. AwesomeDudeErik's own disclosure challenged the homophobic assumptions held by his father by disproving the stereotypes that were part of his rhetoric. While Kris's (2012) parents didn't display direct homophobia, they were resistant to her disclosure, and she described her grandmother as homophobic. She was restricted by family members from wearing anything that had a rainbow pattern or from speaking about her female partner while in the presence of her grandmother. For those participants who experience homophobia from their parents, coming out took on increasing

complexity. Each of these online users ultimately were relieved to have disclosed to their parents, even if some tensions arose.

For AwesomeDudeErik (2009), Kris (2012), and SOCRKID17 (2010), their parents responded with resistance to their disclosure during the initial adjustment period. The parents of both AwesomeDudeErik (2009) and SOCRKID17 (2010) directly questioned the authenticity of their sons' LGBTQ identities, suggesting that they were confused. SOCRKID17 mentioned a discussion that occurred after his disclosure to his mother when he wrote: "she questioned me asking me how do I know and saying it might just be a phase" (December 22, i thought things were good, para. 3). AwesomeDudeErik (2009) described his own experience by saying: "My dad asked my mom if it was true, and then she said yeah, and then he thought I was just probably confused, but of course I'm not" (April 18, My Coming Out Story, 4:02). Both young men were faced with parental denial; it took each of their parents some time to come to terms with a new reality that was different from the future they had imagined for their sons. Kris (2012) mentioned her deep desire for parental acceptance. Tension was present during the process of "becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring" for these three participants. In these cases, parents took a longer adjustment period to come to terms with their children's sexual identities.

### **Relationship With Grandparents**

AwesomeDudeErik (2009), Kris (2012), and Jessica Tay (2015) all had vastly different experiences with disclosure to grandparents. Scherrer (2016) found that LGBTQ identified grandchildren carefully monitored their grandparents' behaviour in order to understand how they might respond to disclosure of an LGBTQ identity. Grandchildren

were found to want to share this part of their identity with grandparents, while also wanting to protect them from knowledge that might cause distress. Kris's (2012) relationship with her grandmother after coming out was fraught with tension. She wrote: "She doesn't like anyone who is different from her, and certainly doesn't like gay individuals" (June 13, GRANDMA ADOLF, para. 2). To avoid this type of reaction, AwesomeDudeErik (2009) chose not to disclose to his grandparents:

I haven't told my grandparents or any of them yet because, they're religious, but I don't think, at least my mom's side would be terribly bad with it, but my dad's side might be more. So I'm just, they don't need to know right now. (April 18, My Coming Out Story, 6:05)

AwsomeDudeErik's decision not to come out to his grandparents is both self-protective and a deliberate effort not to cause upset. Alternatively, Jessica Tay's (2015) grandmother was very supportive of her relationship with Tiffany. In one camera shot, Tiffany is pictured talking candidly to Jessica's grandmother during an evening at home. Grandparents may have a variety of potential reactions to learning of a grandchild's LGBTQ identity, thus prompting grandchildren to carefully consider their decision to come out.

### **Support From Parents**

As previously mentioned, parental support was crucial to many participants' sense of well-being. The parents of Average Gay Dude (2011), AwesomeDudeErik (2009), Matt (2012), Jessica Tay (2015), and SOCRKID17 (2011) all rallied around their children and directly expressed their love and support over time. Asakura and Craig (2014), D'Augelli (2008), and Hillier et al. (2012) all found that supportive reactions from

parents after disclosure were associated with better mental health for LGBTQ identified young people. Average Gay Dude (2011) spoke about his relationship with his parents after disclosure by saying: “I feel more open with them, since coming out to them” (January 7, Connecting With My Parents, para. 3). Matt (2012) also indicated a high level of parental support when he wrote in reference to his mother: “Anyway, what she tells me following every conversation is that she just wants to see me happy with someone, whether it be a man or a woman, that they can support me and for me to equally support them” (January 22, My Family Knows My Secret, Amongst Other Things, para. 5). SOCRKID17 (2011) and AwesomeDudeErik (2009) both had fathers who ultimately expressed love and direct support, suggesting that their relationships would remain strong post-disclosure. For Jessica Tay (2015) her mother’s support was obvious because her mother made repeated and detailed efforts to include Jessica’s partner Tiffany openly in many family experiences. These participants drew strength from their parents’ supportive reactions.

**Parental disclosure.** For parents who chose to support their offspring, they had to choose when and how to disclose their child’s sexual orientation to others. Average Gay Dude (2011) and Matt (2012) mentioned the disclosure process that their parents took part in. Matt’s mother took it upon herself to disclose his sexual identity to his sister and father. He decided he felt “happy that they know, and that they’re supportive and accepting of everything that’s going on” (My Family Knows My Secret, Amongst Other Things, para. 3), even though he said he would have preferred to tell his sister himself. Average Gay Dude’s (2011) parents disclosed to family friends on his behalf after asking his permission. Through their disclosure process, Average Gay Dude and his family

gained allies who shared similar experiences with them. For both young men, having their parents disclose to others made them feel as though their parents were fully supportive of their sexual identity.

**Parental activism.** One way in which parents chose to actively support their LGBTQ identified children was to engage in activism for the LGBTQ community. Scherrer (2016) wrote that family members of LGBTQ children will “seek out information and resources to make meaning of this change” (p. 760). Average Gay Dude’s (2010-2011) parents were very engaged in activism after his disclosure, showing support for the LGBTQ community through a variety of means. SOCRKID17’s (2011) mother also ultimately moved from a position of denial to a position of activism. His mother chose to sign a petition against a company that promoted anti-gay sentiments, aiming to ban them from college campuses. Average Gay Dude (2011) wrote about his parents’ choices to provide their patronage to businesses owned by out LGBTQ individuals. They also chose to purposely inform themselves about LGBTQ issues by attending a play focused on two gay men. SOCRKID17 (2011) and Average Gay Dude (2011) both expressed happiness and pride at their parents’ chosen activism, viewing it as a sign of their acceptance. Becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring is a challenging path to navigate, one that takes time as parents challenge expectations and move towards a new space of acceptance. If parents can arrive at a fully supportive position, their LGBTQ identified child will experience greater resilience.

### **Developing a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Intimacy Status**

D’Augelli’s fifth stage of sexual identity development is entitled “developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status.” Due to the heteronormative structures of

relationship building in society, this stage is particularly complex for LGBTQ young people (Evans et al., 2010). D'Augelli (1994) mentioned that the relative invisibility of LGBTQ relationships complicates the process of finding a romantic partner; he suggested that “The lack of cultural scripts directly applicable to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people leads to ambiguity and uncertainty, but it also forces the emergence of personal, couple-specific, and community norms, which should be more personally adaptive” (p. 327). Each of the participants discussed their desire to enter relationships, as well as their efforts towards finding intimate partners (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2016; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2012; SOCRKID17, 2010). Some of the participants were already in romantic relationships, while others had not yet found an intimate partner but actively discussed their desire to pursue this. For each of them, “developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status” was at the same time promising and intricately challenging.

### **Personal Readiness**

AwesomeDudeErik (2009), Kevin (2012), Matt (2012), and SOCRKID17 (2011) all expressed a palpable desire for intimate connection with a partner. Their restlessness for intimate experiences was very clear. They each felt that it was challenging to find other LGBTQ identified potential partners, at times feeling isolated. AwesomeDudeErik (2010) mentioned this to his readers, speaking to the camera and saying: “I’ve still never been on a date with a guy, and that’s kind of frustrating, it really is. I’d like to think that I’d be a romantic, I’d love to be romantic with another guy” (January 12, Sexually Frustrated Young Gay Guy, 0:42). SOCRKID17 (2011) also wrote in disappointment, saying:

There is no love in the near future unfortunately, just living the single life. I kind

of wish I could find someone though and that would be pretty cool. Its so hard to tell when guys are interested if they aren't noticeably gay. (March 14, Nothing too New, para. 2)

Average Gay Dude (2010) originally mentioned that he wanted to work on his personal confidence with his LGBTQ identity before he would start dating, declaring his readiness to find a partner as time went on. In 2011, he wrote: “I’m ready to start meeting other gay people. But that’s the problem. How do I do it? I’m not into the gay club/bar scene and creating a profile on a dating website is sketchy” (June 20, How to Meet Gay Guys, para. 1). His comments reflect those of SOCRKID17, who felt isolation when seeking a partner. Like Average Gay Dude (2010), Matt (2012) did some self-reflection prior to feeling he was ready to be in a relationship. After some time Matt expressed restlessness by writing: “I wanted to get a move on with what I felt was my stagnant life and that maybe if I addressed this [coming out], maybe I could finally at least start to move toward a relationship” (March 15, Confronting My Sexuality, para. 4). Once these participants felt ready to enter a relationship, they faced challenges finding others who were part of the LGBTQ community.

### **Sexual Experience**

All of the participants, with the exclusion of Matt, discussed their feelings about first sexual experience during the process of developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status (Average Gay Dude, 2011; AwesomeDudeErik, 2010; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; SOCRKID17, 2010). Sexual experience was viewed as an important milestone to developing an LGBTQ relationship and/or self-perception. Some

participants expressed nervousness about entering sexual experiences with same-sex partners. Average Gay Dude (2011) sought the advice of readers about this issue:

I think I'm scared to have sex. I don't know how to explain it. Obviously I'm old enough to be having sex, but I don't feel ready. I need your help. I want everyone's opinion on this topic and what it was like for you when you lost your virginity. Its super scary for me and any type of insight would be extremely appreciated. (June 8, Virginitly and Sex Talk, para. 1)

For LGBTQ identified young people, there are fewer role models, discussions, and sexual education opportunities that prepare them for their initial sexual experiences. Average Gay Dude reached out for this support from the online community. The issues of sexual curiosity and experimentation were addressed by SOCRKID17 (2010) and Kris (2012). SOCRKID17 (2010) mentioned: "I'm not saying I want to go out and hook up with every guy that is in sight, but I want to try things. I'm very inexperienced when it comes to sex: with both genders" (April 13, The Transition, para. 1). AwesomeDudeErik (2009) expressed similar curiosity, and aimed to provide advice to viewers once he had some experiences of his own; this was in an effort to promote awareness and safe sexual choices. Talk of sexual experience was a component of most blogs and vlogs. Participants worked through their desires for connection, asked for and provided advice, and sought support when feeling apprehensive about early sexual interactions.

**Sexuality affirmation.** In some blogs and one vlog, the users viewed sexual experience as potentially affirming for their LGBTQ identities. Average Gay Dude (2011), AwesomeDudeErik (2010), and SOCRKID17 (2010) all suggested that having sexual experiences might "confirm" that they were queer. SOCRKID17 wrote: "I hooked

up with a few girls just to say I did and fit in but it didn't feel right. I wasn't satisfied and felt weird doing it. I didn't do much with them but I knew it wasn't for me" (April 13, The Transition, para. 1). A predominant, binary view of sexuality meant that for these young men, they felt they could not legitimize their sexuality until they had proven it through sexual experiences. Average Gay Dude (2011) wrote that he was tired of hearing people say: "How do you know you're gay if you've never hooked up with a guy before?" (July 21, THE CRAZIEST EXPERIENCE OF MY LIFE!!!!!!!!!!!!, para. 2). On a similar note, AwesomeDudeErik (2010) wrote, after an initial experience kissing a young man: "It felt great, that's for sure. I definitely know that I like dudes" (February 28, Gay Kissing F-ing Hott!, 0:09). Society currently operates under an assumption of "heterosexual until proven otherwise." For these young men, this assumption made them feel that in order to truly affirm themselves as LGBTQ they must have same-sex sexual experiences.

### **Meeting Partners**

Meeting partners was a primary concern for the bloggers and vlogger who were not involved in relationships (Average Gay Dude, 2011; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Kevin, 2012; Matt, 2012; SOCRKID17, 2010). Each of the participants expressed concern that finding a same-sex partner was particularly challenging when they were not surrounded by a LGBTQ community. Finding a partner required strategic effort. As they became more comfortable with their personal identities, all of the aforementioned participants worked towards this goal. Average Gay Dude (2011) asked his readers: "Seriously, how do gay guys meet each other? I'll be out and see an attractive guy and have no idea if he's gay or not. Wondering if he's gay or not is always the first question I

ask” (June 20, How to Meet Gay Guys, para. 4). In order to overcome the issue of having it be unknown whether or not a potential partner was LGBTQ, most of these participants turned to online communities, cell phone applications, or LGBTQ groups. The research findings of Hillier et al. (2012) suggest that many LGBTQ identified young people turn to the Internet when seeking partners. Matt (2012) hoped to meet someone through his campus LGBTQ centre. SOCRKID17 (2010) made efforts to develop a potential relationship with a person that he met through his blog. Kevin (2012) tried the application “Grindr” on his cell phone, but expressed frustration at the seeming insincerity of it because he was ready to work towards a more involved relationship. As time progressed, Average Gay Dude (2011), AwesomeDudeErik (2009), and Kevin (2012) made forays into the dating world. Each of the participants mentioned longed for same-sex intimacy and actively sought it, often turning to online environments for initial contact.

**Hookup culture.** Average Gay Dude (2011), AwesomeDudeErik (2009), Kevin (2012), and SOCRKID17 (2011) mentioned the subtle pressure of “hookup culture” for men who identify as bisexual, gay, or queer. Each of these individuals desired a committed same-sex partnership in the long term. As mentioned above, binary models of sexuality may encourage people who identify as LGBTQ to engage in sexual experiences in order to “legitimize” their feelings of same-sex attraction. AwesomeDudeErik (2009) polled his viewers on the issue by asking:

Sex hookup, or long-term relationship? Some people are really into hookups, some people are really into long-term relationships, and some people are just kind of in between. What do you prefer? Would you prefer a hookup, or would you prefer a long-term relationship? Personally, I’m more of a long-term relationship

kind of guy. I think being in a relationship with someone is quite a bit more fulfilling than hooking up, or sex, with someone. (December 13, Hookups vs. Long Term Relationships, 0:00)

Each of these young men described some early experiences with “hookups.” Kevin (2012) worried that a relationship he was trying to cultivate would not progress beyond casual sexual experiences. SOCRKID17 (2011) was happier to engage in a short sexual experience during his own identity affirmation process. The presence of an overarching expectation that one must gain “sexual experience” in order to truly realize their LGBTQ identity may contribute to a “hookup” culture. In particular, this was discussed on the online spaces created by the three young men mentioned above.

### **Future Marriage**

Being able to marry a same-sex partner in the future was very important to Average Gay Dude (2010), AwesomeDudeErik (2009-2010), Kevin (2012), and Kris (2012). Average Gay Dude (2010) expressed frustration at the restrictions on legally marrying a same-sex partner in the United States prior to 2015. He spoke of his desire for progress, suggesting that he wanted legal recognition when he was ready to marry a partner. When Kevin (2012) attended the wedding of another couple, he reflected on his desire to find a partner to marry. Kris (2012) was already in a same-sex partnership, and openly told readers “I want to marry her” (ENJOYING THE VIEW (AND APOLOGIZING FOR MY ABSENCE), para. 12). For AwesomeDudeErik (2010) the process of coming to terms with wanting to marry a same-sex partner took time:

I’m certain now, you know, that I will marry another guy and be with another guy because, you know, I’ll be happy with another guy. You know, it will be great to

share my love, and to share my life, with another guy, and I know now that that's something I would like. When I was younger, I didn't know that, you know, you know, I think a lot of guys struggle with it inside their minds internally. (March 10, Being Gay Is Hard, 1:04)

The four aforementioned bloggers engaged in work to redefine marriage on their blog or vlog spaces. These spaces became sites of empowerment where long-standing binary assumptions could be challenged. Sharing their future relationship goals contributed to queering socially constructed assumptions about marriage.

### **Entering Relationships**

Kris (2012) and Jessica Tay (2015) had both transitioned into starting same-sex relationships with a partner. These relationships were a very common discussion point on their online spaces. Jessica Tay's (2015) entry into a relationship with her partner was central to her own identity recognition process. She often mentioned that before dating Tiffany, she did not realize she might be part of the LGBTQ community. She spoke to her viewers as part of a larger discussion about how she identified, saying:

And then, all of a sudden I had feelings for Tiffany...and first it was emotional, but then, you know, when you're in a relationship like that it ends up being sexual too...that's just a given. But the thing is, before Tiffany, I didn't have sexual feelings towards girls. (May 29, HOW I DEFINE MY SEXUALITY, 2:14)

Jessica Tay's candidness about her sexual identity development defies binaries; she created a space to affirm sexuality as a spectrum. By being open and honest with viewers about a fluid sexuality she disrupts the assumption that individuals must identify as exclusively heterosexual or homosexual. She occupies a space in between the two,

arguing on a regular basis that sexuality cannot be rigidly defined by binaries and that she fell in love with Tiffany regardless of her sexuality or gender. Kris (2012) entered into a relationship with her same-sex partner in early university; this triggered a period of transition. After her first semester of higher education, she moved in with her partner and made a serious commitment to her. Entering into a relationship was affirming for Jessica Tay (2015) and Kris (2012); developing a lesbian/bisexual intimacy status allowed them to progress as LGBTQ identified young women.

### **Affirmation of LGBTQ Love**

As mentioned, Jessica Tay (2015) and Kris (2012) had entered into relationships at the time of investigation. They chose to profess their love for their partners and share some of the inner workings of their relationships online. These entries offered viewers hope, advice, and a vision of committed, successful LGBTQ love. De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2015) emphasized: “Love is a big theme among youth in SNSs [Social Networking Sites]” (p. 780). For LGBTQ bloggers and vloggers, public examples of LGBTQ love can be empowering messages that confirm that one can move beyond a heteronormative culture. Vivienne and Burgess (2012) indicated that “public expression of marginalized voices opens space for others to speak as, they too, negotiate how and where they fit into the world” (p. 394). Jessica Tay (2015), by making a claim of “I have a girlfriend, who I’m so in love with” (May 29, HOW I DEFINE MY SEXUALITY, 3:33), contributed to an online queer heterotopia by demonstrating queer love on a public platform. Kris (2012) did the same by expressing how meaningful her partner was to her when she wrote:

For the past year and a half I have considered Emily to be not only my girlfriend but my best friend, my confidant, and someone who I am feel completely comfortable with. (June 13, OH MY GOD, I HAVE THE SAME VIBRATOR! WE MUST BE BEST FRIENDS!, para. 2)

Blogs and vlogs are important online spaces where users can dismantle heteronormative assumptions through displays of LGBTQ love. “Developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status” is a desired goal for many LGBTQ bloggers and vloggers who are moving forward in their comfort identifying as non-heterosexual.

### **Entering a Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Community**

An additional step involved in D’Augelli’s (1994) lifespan model of LGBTQ identity development is “entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community.” This is a step that may take an individual a long time to experience; indeed, they may never arrive at this stage. For some, engaging with an LGBTQ community may require too much personal risk (Evans et al., 2010). This stage involves developing individual consciousness of LGBTQ issues and oppression. One may choose to engage in activism and seek a larger LGBTQ social circle. D’Augelli (1994) stressed that deepening one’s understanding of their own LGBTQ identity involves increasing one’s awareness of the contextual barriers that may be present: “To be empowered as a lesbian, gay, or bisexual person involves awareness of the structure of heterosexism, the nature of relevant laws and policies, and the limits to freedom and exploration” (p. 328). Asakura and Craig (2014) suggested that knowing and getting to know other LGBTQ people might be equally powerful to claiming one’s identity as LGBTQ. If one is able to enter this stage, they venture to gain awareness and support, also potentially providing the same to others.

## Online Communities

In addition to providing a plethora of information about their lived experience as LGBTQ identified higher education students, the bloggers and vloggers mentioned how beneficial online communities were to their personal journeys. By starting blogs and vlogs, these users hoped to provide similar support to what they felt they had received online (Average Gay Dude, 2010-2011; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2012; SOCRKID17, 2011). Miller's (2016) work reflects this mentality: "The unique factors of the Internet allow for a more disinhibited discussion of sexuality, including but not limited to increased self-disclosure and selfless time spent offering support to virtual strangers" (p. 606). Several authors found value in the Internet and used it as a space to transgress socially imposed boundaries and construct their identity (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2015; Gray, 2009; Gregg, 2008). In this study, bloggers and vloggers were observed to find comfort and take action in online spaces when constructing their queer identities.

Sharing, reading, and posting were ways in which the users that were studied transgressed heteronormative boundaries and entered a lesbian/gay/bisexual community. The Internet offered a space to users before, during *and* after their initial stages of recognizing an LGBTQ identity and coming out. The bloggers and vloggers expressed gratitude aloud for this space (Average Gay Dude, 2012; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; SOCRKID17, 2010). Jessica Tay (2015) described her vlogging channel as containing her heart and soul, as well as her "blood, sweat, and tears" (July 21, LET'S HANGOUT AT VIDCON!, 1:40). Each blogger

demonstrated heartfelt connection to their followers and online spaces. SOCRKID17 (2010) expressed deep thanks to his readers in the following post:

I do want to say thanks for all the support I have been getting throughout this blog. Everyone's comments really mean a lot to me. This blog has helped me express my thoughts and gain support for the issues I have dealt with. (December 1, some jams, para. 2)

SOCRKID17 (2010) even met Average Gay Dude (2010) in-person as a result of both young men's efforts to communicate with other LGBTQ individuals on the Internet. In reading each blog, it became clear that the users were transformed by the experience of connecting with other LGBTQ individuals online.

Many of the bloggers and vloggers explained to readers and viewers why they started blogging, and how their own initial forays into online communities impacted their sexual development and mental health (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). Matt (2011) included his reasoning when he wrote:

Like so many others, I have spent the last little [while] reading blogs about thoughts and tribulations of other closeted gay and bisexual young guys like myself, and felt inspired to express my own thoughts, feelings, musings and random happenings that I wouldn't have been able to otherwise in real life. (May 19, A New Beginning?, para. 1)

AwesomeDudeErik (2009) also mentioned that watching others' experiences (particularly their coming out stories) was helpful to him as he began to feel more comfortable with his own sexuality. SOCRKID17 (2010) also explained a similar reason for the start of his blog,

saying: “Okay, so I started this blog in order to vent some of my emotions that I can't tell anyone else. Reading other blogs about similar situations has inspired me to do this” (April 10, first post, para. 1). Recording and observing LGBTQ experiences online gave these individuals the strength they needed to move forward through their own journeys.

All of the aforementioned bloggers and vloggers participated in contributing to queer heterotopias by using the everyday space of the Internet to create queer centered environments. Within these spaces, they shared their own personal representations of what it meant to them to be LGBTQ. A queer heterotopia takes the everyday space and demands of it a rejection of heteronormative structures in order to restructure thought processes (Jones, 2009). The stories that readers and viewers consume in these spaces are fluid representations of diverse sexualities. The bloggers and vloggers sought these spaces to gain the courage to both create their own queer heterotopias, and to move towards living transgressive lives every day.

### **Gay Bars**

Two participants considered gay bars as they attempted to enter an LGBTQ community (Average Gay Dude, 2011; Kevin, 2012). Average Gay Dude (2011) went with heterosexual friends; he wanted to gain experience with the gay community and see if it would be an appropriate avenue to meet others. In reference to his experience he wrote: “I went to scope things out and see what a gay club was like” (March 29, MY FIRST GAY CLUB EXPERIENCE!!, para. 5). Kevin (2012) also showed a desire to go to a gay club to meet others. He thought that it might allow him to meet queer men who shared his experiences. For these two participants, gay clubs offered promise of finding others in their community congregated in one spot. Finding others can be challenging for

isolated individuals, or those who are just making forays into the LGBTQ community. The importance of alternative meeting spaces such as online communities was apparent, given that so few participants discussed gay bars.

### **Support Groups and LGBTQ Campus Centres**

Several participants discussed formal support from groups, including LGBTQ campus centers (Average Gay Dude, 2011; AwesomeDudeErik, 2010; Matt, 2012). Matt (2012) and Average Gay Dude (2011) chose to visit their campus centres when they felt secure in their sexual identity and had come out to at least one other person. Both participants experienced nervousness in anticipation and felt relieved when they had taken the step to attend. Asakura and Craig (2014) and Westbrook (2009) found that LGBTQ individuals indicated desire to attend support groups, hoping to find others who shared circumstances and experiences. Average Gay Dude (2011) was happy to meet another student with some similarities, although he did not attend LGBTQ campus center events long-term. He was grateful for the information and presence of other LGBTQ students. He explained his initial contact with a peer at the center by writing: “He started informing me about the LGBT Center and everything it contributes to campus, providing a safe place for students to come to” (February 12, I Went to the LBGT Center on Campus Today!, para. 4). Matt (2012) reflected on his time at his campus center when he said: “Looking back on it, I feel really silly being so worried about everything...I really should be giving people more credit in being non-judgemental and friendly” (March 7, Out on Campus..., para. 2). Matt also took initiative to attend a gay men’s rock climbing group to meet others, which he enjoyed, if still hoping for more meaningful connection. He also mentioned hoping to become more involved in his local LGBTQ community.

AwesomeDudeErik (2010) felt that he probably wouldn't fit in at his campus LGBTQ center, although he had never attended. LGBTQ campus centers are a very helpful initiative to many diverse students on campus, however they also do not reach every sexual minority student as a means of support.

### **Activism**

All of the participants used their online spaces to varying degrees as sites for activism to promote social change (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2016; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2011). D'Augelli (1994) noted that entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community involves confronting political barriers and social norms. Some participants used their platforms to make political statements on a broader scale, while others used them in daily victories with colleagues who demonstrated homophobic views. Becker and Copeland (2016) found that people who connect via social media are more likely to engage in political efforts. Kevin (2012) shared media in support of marriage equality when he wrote:

Just saw this clip on youtube and thought it beautifully portrayed the necessity for marriage equality. I'm still in disbelief that amendment one just passed in north carolina. I can only hope for the day when the government realizes that it is disallowing a basic human right to a portion of its citizens. (May 9, NC Madness, para. 1)

AwesomeDudeErik (2009) was similarly politically active online, asking allies to stand up for LGBTQ causes and offering gratitude for legal victories. He followed the efforts towards marriage equality nationwide in the United States and spoke congratulations frequently as more states legally allowed same-sex marriage.

AwesomeDudeErik also spoke about the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy in the United States which barred openly gay individuals from serving in the military. He spoke urgently about this issue, saying that it was one that “needs to be changed, and it needs to be changed immediately” (July 6, Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell—How About Don’t Discriminate?, 1:43). In contrast, Matt (2011) worked to question the homophobic views on a more personal level. After careful conversation with a colleague he wrote:

I stood up for our community, and I have to say, it felt pretty damn good. Sure, I’m still no activist, but to think that I might have planted that little seed of change in Angela’s mind is pretty rewarding. (August 8, So I Got to Redeem Myself..., para. 7)

Craig, McInroy, McCreedy, Di Cesare, et al. (2015) found that online media allowed LGBTQ young people to engage in critiquing homophobia, a result mirrored by the current study. Engaging as a member of the LGBTQ community to support members on a personal and political scale were obvious goals of all participants.

Much effort was taken to support those who were consumers of the blog/vlog content posted (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2016; Kris, 2012; SOCRKID17, 2011). Vloggers and bloggers frequently reached out with words of support and resources. They emphasized how helpful the online support had been to them, and aimed to return that support to individuals in need. Average Gay Dude (2010) wrote earnestly to his readers:

If you are reading this and you’re still in the closet, just know this: People are sooooo much more accepting then you think. Coming out gives you the ability to blossom into the person you day dream about becoming. You DESERVE

happiness and when you feel ready and comfortable, come out at your own pace. If you don't have anyone to talk to, but you're ready to begin the process, use this helpline: [www.glbthotline.org/](http://www.glbthotline.org/). (October 5, Ten People Know I'm Gay Now!!, para. 6)

Whether through step-by-step advice or simple encouragement, peer support was important for each of the aforementioned participants. SOCRKID17 (2010) justified his writing by commenting: "Over time, I have seen it has helped others so I continue to write and it helps me so its a win-win" (January 13, I do blog!, para. 2).

AwesomeDudeErik (2009) suggested the value of online research for finding support:

And if you're still in the closet and you're watching this, and you, and you're feeling kind of sad. Like, I would encourage you, like if you're not ready to come out I would encourage you to just go on the Internet, and, there's all kinds of websites, I'm sure (I haven't really visited them but), or there's all kinds of people on YouTube. There's all kinds of places, just, I would just, suggest that you find someone to talk to cause it's not good to keep all your feelings inside. (April 21, Sometimes It's Lonely Being Gay, 2:29)

De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2015) emphasize the political and therapeutic relevance of telling one's story online, indicating the Internet's centrality to young people's sexual identity development process. For these young people, blogging and vlogging gave an opportunity to tell their story in order to support other LGBTQ identified users.

The activism in which these vloggers and bloggers engaged shows an effort to queer online spaces and create queer heterotopias. By mobilizing to develop support for others in the LGBTQ community, users are demonstrating an effort to change larger

cultural norms. Identifying as outside a heterosexual binary in a public realm, providing information and resources, and living life in the open as LGBTQ identified people are forms of activism that take charge of online spaces. These spaces become diverse and fluid arenas for a range of sexual identity expression; they challenge the status quo. Jones (2009) wrote that the everyday battles of LGBTQ identified people (in this case, bloggers and vloggers) “shape queer subjectivity and have political consequences” (p. 2). Mugo and Antonites (2014) wrote in a similar vein that transformative discourse on issues of gender and sexuality are being “distributed widely with Web 2.0 technologies” (p. 29). Through this process of everyday activism, queer heterotopias are created and maintained.

### **University Experience**

It was important to consider bloggers’ and vloggers’ discussion of their university experience as an additional theme. As an influential cultural climate at a rapidly changing time of their lives, the campus atmosphere was relevant. D’Augelli’s (1994) six stages of sexual identity development occur over time in a flexible pattern. All of the participants showed signs of these stages during their years in higher education, and likely beyond (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2012; SOCRKID17, 2010). While D’Augelli’s (1994) theory was tied to many key experiences and issues in these users’ lives, it was pertinent to explore how their sexual identity development was experienced as higher education students specifically.

### **Campus Life**

Average Gay Dude (2010), AweseomeDudeErik (2009), Jessica Tay (2015), Kevin (2012), Kris (2012), Matt (2011), and SOCRKID17 (2011) all included discussion of their campus climate; some in reference to their sexual identity development. They

expressed mixed feelings about their comfort level “living out” on campus. This finding was also reflected in the work of Asakura and Craig (2014), who noted that for many, college offered broader community, while for some, homophobic scrutiny produced stress. Participants expressed both positive feelings about increased freedom and concern about homophobic reactions on campus. AwesomeDudeErik (2009) encouraged viewers to attend college if it was a decision that they were considering. He wrote: “Really, in general, college is a great place to be gay. It’s way different than high school, at least for me, for where I go” (August 21, Being Gay in College, 2:28). At the same time, he acknowledged the potential for some struggle when he said:

Still though there’s going to be quite a few gay people in college who say they have to be discreet, or they are not fully out, but, um, the campus and the community and the teachers and students really are quite accepting of gay people. (August 21, Being Gay in College, 1:44)

Jessica Tay (2015) felt very comfortable being out on campus. She expressed happiness at being able to be with her girlfriend visibly. For example, she posted video footage where she was proudly giving her girlfriend a kiss on the cheek on a walk to class. She said openly: “Look guys I have my girlfriend on campus!” (September 30, I’M SUCH A MESS!, 3:47). For some, it was challenging to take the step to be out on campus.

SOCRKID17 (2010) wrote: “The struggles of being a closeted college kid is that I feel like I’m missing out on my college experience” (April 13, The Transition, para. 1). He felt that if he could be more open he might have more of the social experiences that he desired. Average Gay Dude (2010) also mentioned that he had some challenges with the transition into higher education, citing his sexual identity realization as one cause of

stress during that time. The participants expressed varied emotions about campus life as an LGBTQ identified young person; the transition into university gave them more freedom, but socially reinforced norms still caused internal struggle at times.

**Non-LGBTQ groups, clubs, and teams.** Average Gay Dude (2010), Kevin (2012), and SOCRKID17 (2010) had been involved with formal groups on campus (excluding LGBTQ centres, discussed earlier). For all three of these users, formally organized social groups were a source of stress regarding their sexual identity disclosure. Average Gay Dude (2010) had been involved in a fraternity, which he later quit. He experienced his fraternity as a high pressure, low tolerance environment and made the decision to leave because of the lack of acceptance he felt. SOCRKID17 (2010) was involved in high-level competitive soccer on campus. He described being gay as making him feel different from his teammates. He contemplated telling members of this important social circle, saying: “Maybe there idea of a gay guy would change if I came out since I play soccer” (August 24, telling my teammates??, para. 2). The hypermasculinity of locker room culture made coming out to his teammates a particularly stressful factor. Kevin (2012) was heavily involved in Christian fellowships during his undergraduate degree. He wrote: “In fact, I helped lead both groups. So how would I be able to come out when it's such a taboo topic in the church? There were many many many times when I would pray about this” (January 28, Discovering My Sexuality, para. 7). These organized campus groups were not spaces where these individuals felt comfortable disclosing. They felt that the overarching culture was not one of acceptance—that coming out would have resulted in a potentially unpredictable social circumstance.

## Homophobia

Four participants discussed the presence of homophobia on campus (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Kevin, 2012; SOCRKID17, 2010).

AwesomeDudeErik (2009) was actually quite pleased with how open his campus was compared to his high school experience. He shared with viewers:

Last year in college I actually heard the expression “That’s so gay” less than five times the entire year, whereas in high school I could easily hear “That’s so gay” five times in a single day, and probably even in an hour. (August 21, Being Gay in College, 1:28)

His experience differed greatly from the other three aforementioned participants. Average Gay Dude (2010), Kevin (2012), and SOCRKID17 (2010) all spoke of a homophobic campus climate. Average Gay Dude (2010) described the vote-in procedures for his fraternity. He wrote about fellow fraternity members, saying: “A brother thought he was gay, so he **didn’t** give him a vote and said something along the lines of ‘he looks like a faggot, he’ll probably come out of the closet during his pledge ship” (August 27, I HATE MY FRATERNITY, para. 4). For SOCRKID17 (2010), the social climate was equally harsh. He wrote about his teammates views, saying: “If I came out, I know I would be the topic for all jokes. I also just feel weird talking about that stuff” (August 16, The Locker Room, para. 2). Kevin (2012) had difficulty telling others in his university circles that he identified as gay: “I thought it would be easier in college, but I think that's when I repressed my feelings the most” (February 24, My Story, para. 8). For all of these young men except AwesomeDudeErik (2009), homophobia was immediately perceived. This speaks to the need for more widespread anti-homophobia initiatives.

## Counseling

Campus counseling services were invaluable for two participants (Average Gay Dude, 2010; Matt, 2011). They described these services as crucial to their mental health while coming to terms with their sexual identity. Counseling was indeed so valuable to these users that it was a frequent feature on both blogs. Average Gay Dude (2010) described his intake session as “the best 90 minutes of my life” (September 3, I WENT TO COUNSELING!, para. 9). He went so far as to implore readers to access this service at their own higher education institutions, writing:

I’m so happy I mustered up enough courage to go to the counseling center last semester because she is helping me so much. If you’re in college and you have access to a counseling center, I really recommend you check it out! (February 3, Drawings for My Counselor, para. 1)

Matt (2011) described his experience with counseling in a similar way. He initially felt nervous, but worked through a lot of his anxieties about coming out with his counselor, even developing a plan of action. He summarized his feelings about counseling services when he wrote:

I went back to counselling last week, and I’ve got to say it really helped. I’m a lot less anxious, feel a lot more social and I’ve just been more at peace with myself this entire week, which is a nice change. I just feel like I have a plan on where I want to go with my coming out, my relationships and now I’m not so worried about everything. (December 5, No New Conclusions, para. 1)

Matt did mention the challenge of physically attending the sessions due to his commute, which is important to consider for students who live far from campus. Average

Gay Dude (2010) and Matt (2011) experienced much support during the vulnerable initial stages of sexual identity development from campus counseling services. The value of these services to the two users suggests a potential need for LGBTQ specific resources and programs, a fact reinforced by the findings of Evans et al. (2010).

### **Academia**

Six participants discussed academic life (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2012; SOCRKID17, 2011). All of these users, except AwesomeDudeErik (2009), discussed the stress of pursuing a university education. Academic stress was intensified by the process of coming to terms with one's sexual identity; it was hard for many participants to find academic-life balance. Average Gay Dude (2010) described his academic life as a "roller coaster ride"; he mentioned that he was doing his best to achieve balance (August 25, Divine Interference, para. 1). Matt (2012) expressed the challenge of balancing academic and personal life when he wrote:

Things have been better, although some days it's still a struggle to get my emotions under control. School's been the most troublesome issue so far; I've had anxiety attacks just before due dates and I've thought about quitting a couple times since all of this began. (February 14, Still Kicking!, para. 3)

Kevin (2012) also felt stress because he wondered if disclosing his sexuality might impact his practicum grade. He mentioned to readers:

So a couple of months ago, I wrote a post about my inability to come out at work/rotations because I'm afraid it will affect my grade. I wish I could say that this has changed since then, but it hasn't. (October 1, Out and Proud? Part II, para. 1)

SOCRKID17 (2011) indicated that coming to terms with his sexuality helped him to achieve better life balance:

Well over the past year, I have for sure changed. The most obvious is that I have (somewhat) come to terms with my lil secret and have told some family and close friends. There really isn't much else I can do with that besides just do me. Now instead of focusing on that, Im trying to better myself by taking it to the next level in soccer, school, and just me. (January 26, the new me, para. 1)

Handling coming to terms with one's sexuality while trying to succeed academically in higher education was a stressor for many of the participants. Dentato et al. (2014) found that students who were not out felt less support in their academic programs, something that may lead to added stress. It was evident that achieving balance was complex.

### **Broadened Community**

Attending a higher education institution can lead to the broadening of one's community. This was a factor discussed by Average Gay Dude (2010), Kris (2012), and AwesomeDudeErik (2009). Each of these participants mentioned that the campus community provided more varied experiences and friendships. Kris (2012) wrote about her own entrance into higher education, saying: "I've experienced things I've never have to deal with before. It's made me a stronger person" (July 12, A RANT ABOUT THE WOES OF BEING HOME, para. 11). Each of the participants mentioned growing and changing as part of a higher education community, something that influenced their identity development. Average Gay Dude (2010) felt more socially connected, mentioning: "I met so many amazing people and we all finagled our way into living in the same dorm building for Fall and Spring. It ended up being the best and most fun year of my life" (August 5, My

Story, para. 10). AwesomeDudeErik (2009) had similar feelings about university. He felt more connected with the LGBTQ community than he had before, which was reflected by his statement: “College is a really cool place with a lot of good looking guys, so if you’re thinking about going to college, definitely go to college” (August 4, Sexual Arousal in Class, 2:08). For these three participants, higher education offered a broadened community within which they could change and grow as part of a diverse student body.

### **Summary**

This chapter has presented the research findings of an investigation of seven higher education students who utilized blogs and vlogs during their sexual identity development process. Analysis and presentation were framed around efforts to understand how students who identify as LGBTQ navigate their identity formation experiences on web logs.

Attention was also given to learning about how students who identify as LGBTQ contribute to queering the Internet and creating queer heterotopias. D’Augelli’s (1994) lifespan model of identity development was used as an initial deductive framework. Each of these stages appeared relevant in the seven participants’ online spaces. An inductive process of pattern matching revealed sub-themes and an additional relevant seventh theme focused on the higher education experience specifically.

Jones (2009) emphasized that queer heterotopias occur in everyday spaces when individuals work to disrupt normative patterns of speech and behaviour. While it was evident that these norms were ingrained in the lived experience of the bloggers and vloggers, they made concerted efforts to openly live queer identities online and disrupt heterosexist discourse. The web log community was an opportunity for these higher education students to use their voices to create powerful change. A platform to be

socially and politically active allowed them to reach others, both those LGBTQ individuals looking for community and non-LGBTQ Internet users. They were able to publicly assert the diversity of LGBTQ users through sharing their everyday experiences. Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the relevance of online blogging to D'Augelli's (1994) lifespan model and Jones's (2009) idea of "queer heterotopias." It also discusses implications for theory and practice, as well as limitations of the study.

## CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

The focus of this study was to understand how higher education students use blogs and vlogs during the LGBTQ identity development process. I aimed to investigate how seven students used these online social media platforms as tools to affirm their own identities and queer the online environment. A qualitative, comparative case study approach used the public domain texts of the participants to glean information about the complex identity development process. The lifespan model of sexual identity development authored by D’Augelli (1994) was used as a framework to develop primary and secondary themes. The choice to maintain an online platform as a means to find community support and engage in everyday activism demonstrates the value of these systems to LGBTQ identified higher education students. The students involved in this study both intentionally and unintentionally worked to create queer heterotopias (Jones, 2009)—spaces where the voices of people with diverse sexual identities could be heard.

### Summary

An investigation of the online blogs and vlogs of seven higher education students revealed the complex and multifaceted identity negotiations of LGBTQ higher education students. A review of literature determined that much information was available on higher education student use of social media, as well as the identity development and mental health challenges faced by LGBTQ young people; however, the two issues were largely unexplored in tandem. This gap in the literature indicated the necessity of exploring such a topic. Etengoff and Daiute (2015) emphasize that “the contemporary popularity of technologically mediated communication is unprecedented—with the Internet becoming a critical player in the development of sexual minority identity

formation” (p. 279). I observed that young people were increasingly turning to social media for support, camaraderie, information needs, and examples of queer people living out lives. It became obvious through an examination of the literature that this was an area not to be ignored; there is vast potential power in online environments to both reinforce and disrupt norms.

In accordance with this observation, the purpose of this study was to investigate how higher education students navigate their identity development processes as LGBTQ individuals through blogging and vlogging. An effort was made to understand how these communications worked to reinforce or question heteronormative boundaries, potentially queering Internet spaces. The research questions used to guide this study were:

1. How do higher education students who identify as LGBTQ navigate their school and daily life experiences in relationship with their identity on web logs?
2. How do higher education students who identify as LGBTQ reinforce or disrupt heteronormative assumptions regarding sexuality on web logs, and in what ways do these actions impact the potential of queer heterotopias?

These research questions focused on garnering information about how the seven students included in this study used their online interactions to make sense of emerging LGBTQ identities.

A qualitative, comparative case-study method was used in order to gain in-depth information about the lived experiences of seven LGBTQ identified higher education students over 1 year. Directed textual content analysis was chosen because it is an effective strategy for dealing with large amounts of textual data (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005). Blogs and vlogs were examined from their initial inception, or from a particularly

salient entry pivotal to the author's sexual identity development process. Each case was examined individually and across cases to establish relevant themes. D'Augelli's (1994) six stages of sexual identity development served as an initial framework to guide the data analysis process. The stages of this lifespan model were used as deductive primary themes and include: "exiting a heterosexual identity"; "developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status"; "developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual social identity"; "becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring"; "developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status"; and "entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community." An additional inductive primary theme, "university experience," was included because the broad applicability of the model did not address student-specific areas for consideration. Secondary themes were inductively developed using a process of pattern matching. Data were colour coded in accordance with deductive and emergent themes. Salient primary and secondary themes within and across cases were synthesized and presented in Chapter 4.

Analysis of the data revealed the presence of all of D'Augelli's (1994) stages of sexual identity development within the compared cases. Each of these themes were broken down into salient inductive sub-themes. Through examination of the data in relation to D'Augelli's lifespan model, the ways in which the seven participants lived out or disrupted gender and sexuality norms became visible. Butler (1990, 1997, 2004) emphasized the fluidity of gender and sexual identity. She maintained that social members engage in performances of gendered behaviour in order to assert recognizable identities. This was observed for several of the participants who made efforts to conform to particular, socially agreed upon roles. However, efforts to subvert heterosexualized behaviour patterns were also noted; indicating that the bloggers and vloggers engaged in

a complex process of recognizing stereotypes and participating in activism to disrupt them. This was a pattern that D'Augelli (1994) emphasizes as essential to the sexual identity development process, a recognition of marginalization and effort to push against socially imposed boundaries. At the time of investigation, participants were observed to engage in transformative dialogues online by honestly sharing their lived experiences as LGBTQ identified higher education students. These dialogues provided diverse experiences of living queer identities that served to question normative stereotypes through demonstrating a vast spectrum of realities.

Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the results of this study, with particular emphasis given to how the seven participants navigated their identity development processes online to contribute to queer heterotopias. The participants were observed to both consciously and unconsciously engage in this disruption of categorical norms. The online environments used gave power to marginalized voices that may not have been otherwise heard. While the seven bloggers and vloggers were certainly influenced by the social cultures in which they found themselves, they also made efforts to queer the Internet, influencing change in their own social circles and the greater globally connected online community. Implications for theory, future research, and practice are included, with particular consideration given to the campus climate for LGBTQ students.

### **Discussion**

The seven bloggers and vloggers included in this study were each found to be working through the stages of D'Augelli's (1994) lifespan model of sexual identity development. Through this process, the bloggers were engaging in queering the online community, as well other social communities of which they were a part. Queer theory

emphasizes the socially constructed nature of gender and sexual norms (Butler, 1990, 1997, 2004; Jones, 2009). The seven overarching themes and accompanying subthemes of this project indicate that bloggers and vloggers, through daily efforts to assert diverse sexual identities online, transgress normative boundaries, and contribute to queer heterotopias. Jones (2009) wrote that “becoming queer is an individual and everyday spiritual journey and queer heterotopias are simply spaces where these infinite practices go unregulated and are not marginalized” (pp. 17-18). This section will discuss each theme’s relevance to queer theory and queer heterotopias, illustrating how the participants’ spaces challenge norms.

During the stage of “exiting a heterosexual identity” (D’Augelli, 1994), the bloggers actively worked to declaratively separate themselves from a heterosexual social norm. This process was undertaken deliberately on each of the blogs or vlogs; a desire to demonstrate a queer identity was a purposeful act by each participant. D’Augelli (1994) noted that this stage involves one personally and socially recognizing an LGBTQ identity. It requires LGBTQ individuals to position themselves outside of heteronormative structures. Each of the bloggers’ and vloggers’ spaces that were investigated included declarative personal statements of an LGBTQ identity (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). Lupton (2015) found that the Internet was essential to many LGBTQ users to affirm and express their identities, a finding mirrored in this study. By sharing reflective commentary about their unique memories and experiences leading up to this online “coming out,” users emphasized that heteronormative structures are unnatural constructs that inhibit full queer expression. Jones (2009) and Butler (1990)

maintained that it takes demonstrations of fluid sexual and gender representations in order to queer social spaces. By having the courage to exit a heterosexual identity and live in opposition to this norm in a public or semi-public way, users were engaging in the formation of queer heterotopias.

D'Augelli's (1994) lifespan model is not sequential; "developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status" was an ongoing and complex effort for the bloggers and vloggers. This stage involves "coming to an appreciation of internalized myths about non-heterosexuality" (D'Augelli, 1994, p. 325). The person begins to make initial, demythologizing connections with the larger LGBTQ community and determines the personal significance of their LGBTQ identity. Many of the participants demonstrated internalized norms surrounding gender and sexual behaviour; their blogs offered spaces to challenge these stereotypes aloud with the support of readers/viewers (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kevin, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). Once they had begun to question norms on a personal level, they implored readers/viewers to do the same, both through comments encouraging critical thought and through demonstrating an out life. Gachago et al. (2014) mentioned that sharing one's personal story encourages individual questioning of social norms; this was observed to be true for the bloggers. The online spaces investigated in this study were spaces that defied normative heterosexual boundaries through the personal communications of their authors, their commenters, and by demonstrating lived queer experiences. Developing a personal identity status as LGBTQ openly on an online platform created an unregulated, unmarginalized space for queer visibility—a queer heterotopia.

The participants were “developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual social identity” (D’Augelli, 1994) as their online spaces unfolded. Being able to assert one’s authentic self was an important theme noted during this stage (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Matt, 2012; SOCRKID17, 2010). D’Augelli (1994) decried tolerance and emphasized the essentiality of a socially accepting community. Participants contributed to both queering online social communities and in-person social communities. Their voices provided powerful examples of being openly queer; they made use of the unregulated online space to challenge norms in both types of social circles. Valtonen et al. (2010) emphasized that net generation students are making use of the Internet as a powerful social tool. Queer heterotopias were created online through the formation of supportive relationships as a part of social media. For Average Gay Dude (2010) and SOCRKID17 (2010), a supportive friendship carried beyond the boundaries of the online space when they met one another personally. By living in a way that the participants felt was personally authentic to their LGBTQ identities (rather than performing a heterosexual identity), participants were adjusting not only their own misconceptions about sexual binaries, but influencing those of others, as well.

“Becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring” also involved challenging assumptions of heterosexuality. The participants included in this study faced the necessity of questioning long-held parental expectations based on social norms (D’Augelli, 2002; D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2008). All of the bloggers and vloggers chose to discuss familial assumptions online (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010).

Participants shared both the difficulties experienced as a result of heteronormative family assumptions and their personal efforts to change binary parental expectations. Openly including these efforts on their weblogs worked towards the creation of queer heterotopias by providing relatable examples; families had overcome socially reinforced norms to accept an LGBTQ child. A supportive family structure was found to be an invaluable protective factor for the participants, something mentioned in previous research (Asakura & Craig, 2014; Hillier et al., 2012). Many of the blogs examined demonstrate the varied nature of supportive family structures (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). By working to establish a position as an LGBTQ offspring and a valued family member, the bloggers demonstrated the flexibility of the parent/child relationship. Parental assumptions were questioned and changed as a result of many of the participant experiences shared online.

For all participants, D'Augelli's (1994) stage entitled "developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status" was relevant, as they made forays into dating and relationship building. Within this stage, binary heterosexual norms about romantic partnerships were continuously disrupted as participants discussed their fears, hopes, and experiences (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). De Ridder and Van Bauwel (2015) also found that love was central to the discussion on social networking sites for young LGBTQ adults. The participants themselves came to recognize the norms about sexual and romantic behaviour as culturally created, writing their own scripts for intimacy. D'Augelli (1994) mentioned that because of the lack of cultural scripts

available to LGBTQ couples, they develop new relationship structures that are more adaptive. Jessica Tay (2015) in particular queered normative relationship boundaries by leaving her romantic partnership unlabeled, mentioning that she had simply fallen in love with Tiffany as a person. Participants who had not entered relationships and were still seeking them contributed to a queering of culturally imposed norms by conversing about intimacy, future long-term LGBTQ relationships, and queer family structures. Sharing the multiple ways that LGBTQ relationships may be understood and lived reinforced queer online heterotopias that continually questioned heteronormative relationship structures.

An important part of the online dialogue that was examined was “entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community,” D’Augelli’s (1994) sixth stage in the lifespan model. This stage is one that is particularly relevant to creating queer heterotopias online and offline, as well as queering culture and rejecting normative expectations. Miller’s (2016) and Stern’s (2011) research emphasizes that the Internet provided a less heteronormatively regulated space to connect with and support other members of the LGBTQ community. The bloggers and vloggers wrote about their experiences seeking other members of the LGBTQ population online and in person (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). These spaces provided new ways of knowing—diverse examples of queer lives that the participants themselves had not previously encountered. Coming into contact with other LGBTQ identified people was empowering to the bloggers, a fact confirmed in Gray’s (2009) findings. They used their personal empowerment to engage in activism for the LGBTQ community, increasing the visibility of fluid sexual identities.

By also promoting equitable rights for LGBTQ people (i.e., marriage equality) the users' spaces became transgressive queer heterotopias, explicitly demanding a restructuring of homophobic societal realities.

In addition to the six stages of the lifespan model proposed by D'Augelli (1994), a seventh primary theme entitled "university experience" was relevant. The higher education campus was an important cultural milieu for the bloggers and vloggers studied. While in university, coming to terms with one's sexual identity, broadening social experiences, and testing out the waters of living out lives were particularly important experiences for participants (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). Asakura and Craig (2014) and Tetreault et al. (2013) noted that the university campus provided opportunity for a more affirming social climate. Despite a feeling of broadened affirmative community, institutional homophobia was acknowledged as well. Many of the participants worked to change homophobic campus climates through coming out and living out lives on campus and with other students (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010).

All participants also made efforts to change stereotypic and homophobic viewpoints through devoting blog time to political activism such as marriage or employment equality, as well as encouraging others to make use of campus services such as LGBTQ centres. Campus counseling opportunities also helped some participants to question internalized norms about sexuality, ultimately allowing them to gain the confidence to live more openly (Average Gay Dude, 2010; Matt, 2011). As a visible queer LGBTQ presence on campus and online, the bloggers were able to more openly

question heterosexualized norms (such as hypersexualized masculinity in fraternities). Careful but purposeful outness on campus ensured movement was made towards positive, diverse, representations of the student body.

It is relevant to consider how the university setting functions to regulate student behaviours and identity expressions. Students carefully considered the implications of being out on campus for their social and academic communities. Six of the students mentioned striving for success in university (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2010; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2013; Matt, 2012; SOCRKID17, 2010). Academic success was described as at least partially dependent on social-emotional health in relation to coming to terms with one's LGBTQ identity and being out. These students felt personal pressure and responsibility to be "good" students as determined by their achievement in grades. Simultaneously dealing with coming to terms with one's sexuality as well as trying to fit into the role of "good" student expected by the university was particularly stressful for Matt (2012). Drawing on Foucault's discussion of domination, the university disciplines students to fit into an ideal of the competitive, practiced academic who is exclusively responsible for their own success or failure (Grant, 1997). Grant (1997) maintains that it is often challenging for marginalized students to fit into the role of the "good student." This is because external social structures impacting success or failure are not considered; the individual is policed into viewing themselves as solely responsible for their performance. As students began to engage in a process of self-awareness, they were able to more actively resist heteronormative domination through everyday acts.

AwsomeDudeErik (2009) chose specifically to come out to several of his classes on a large scale, resisting the role of the subordinate, docile student. Jessica Tay (2015)

made a vlog walking through campus where she openly kissed her girlfriend, also engaging in everyday activism. A diverse narrative is a powerful act of resistance on campus that disrupts the practice of disciplining students into one role of the “good” academic. A campus climate that includes the active voices of a varied student body gives recognition to how social experiences influence the individual, ultimately impacting the power structure of the university setting. If there is not one practiced type of “good” student that dominates the university setting, a broader climate of support and inclusivity can prevail.

The online spaces of the bloggers and vloggers that were examined in this study gave powerful voice to marginalized LGBTQ students, providing opportunities to transgress norms and move towards the creation of queer heterotopias. By choosing to use their online spaces to question normative expectations and live out lives, the higher education students participated in everyday activism to affirm sexuality as fluid. Through visibility and support for the LGBTQ community the participants were active in disrupting heteronormative social climates. D’Augelli’s (1994) lifespan model of sexual identity development was reflected in each of the weblogs, indicating that similar processes are encountered when individuals detach from heteronormative binary expectations. Butler (2004) emphasized the changeability of norms. Through complex identity work, these young people made efforts to actively change homophobic, binary perspectives and disrupt the “regulatory regimes” of identity categories (Butler, 1993). Regulatory regimes are social norms enacted to police individuals into particular patterns of behaviour. They compel an individual to become attached to, and support, structures that reinforce domination and subordination (Butler, 1993). Each of the participants

included willfully worked to resist being dominated by social norms that kept them in inferior, subordinate roles as individuals who were part of a minority population. They created and maintained LGBTQ affirming spaces as an act of personal and political resistance to subordination. Jones (2009) indicated that queer heterotopias occur within everyday spaces where “radical practices go unregulated” (p. 2). The blogs studied engaged in radical transformative dialogue to promote understanding that sexuality is unfixed.

### **Implications for Theory and Future Research**

This study has particular implications for theory and future research concerning how sexual and gender identity development are reproduced and questioned online. Much work has been done to discuss how sexual and gender identity are shaped through everyday performative actions (Butler, 1990, 2004). Performative actions constantly work to affirm socially constructed gender and sexual norms (Butler, 1997). Individuals may engage in conscious acts of identity performance, as well as unconscious performative acts that equally confirm steadfast heterosexual discourses. Foucault (1983) described “technologies of the self” as spaces that allow the user active agency in the maintenance of their identity performance. Online spaces provide a platform for individuals to engage in identity performance—they give users power to construct and present particular versions of themselves. This may be done with critical consciousness about disrupting norms. It may also equally serve to reinforce norms. Examining online spaces in order to understand how they influence identity maintenance may increase awareness of how these spaces function to question or affirm norms in our cultural lives.

The findings of this study suggest that identity politics are accelerated by the online space. Many bloggers create specifically themed content to discuss a particular issue—in these cases, the construction and maintenance of one’s sexual identity. D’Augelli’s (1994) framework suggests a particular, though fluid, pattern of sexual identity development over time. Individuals included in this study all followed this pattern. This indicates that while living an out life online works to transform heterosexualized binary assumptions for readers, viewers, and the bloggers themselves, an LGBTQ life is still lived in relation to other LGBTQ community members. There are particular patterns to the conversations had online; one may view the “coming out” story as it relates to parents, siblings, and friends as a common theme. Online environments provide support that may serve to speed-up the sexual identity development process. For those who may not have had access to a supportive network in other life circumstances, the online environment can function to create scripts that give one the tools to share their story. Butler (1990) emphasized the power of language to reinforce or question norms. It is important for theorists and researchers to consider further how stories shared online function to accelerate sexual identity development and maintenance. Further questions that could be asked are: How are sexual identity politics changed by online consumption? Does access to a global stage change how identity is shaped and expressed?

Two particularly salient purposes were identified for the online spaces of LGBTQ higher education students. Firstly, they are a place to transgress boundaries. Secondly, they are a space to perform. Each of these areas deserve further theoretical investigation. How do the two processes work in tandem, or as influential to one another? How are LGBTQ online performances transgressive in-an-of themselves? Online spaces provide a

visible platform for many ways to “do” queer. More varied examples of queer identities are available online than may be accessible to many young LGBTQ identified people in offline communities. This may serve to help bring viewers/readers to an awareness that there is no one particular way to “be” LGBTQ. The diverse lived experiences of the participants, as well as various and sometimes shifting ways of identifying along a spectrum of sexuality, demonstrate the fluidity of an LGBTQ identity. While scripts for “coming out” or other common LGBTQ discourses may be obvious tools, there is a broader range of queer visibility online that works to defy stereotypes. One must consider how online spaces can mobilize LGBTQ communities to be more fluid and diverse; as well as how they are used every day to counteract normative frameworks.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study has particular implications for practice with LGBTQ higher education students and others within the higher education community. It was found that while LGBTQ campus organizations were accessed by some, they were often only marginally attended; and some participants had reservations. Additionally, these options were used once the individual had done a lot of personal reflection and come out to at least some of their community (Average Gay Dude, 2011; AwesomeDudeErik, 2010; Matt, 2012). This leaves a large percentage of the LGBTQ population unsupported. Many researchers indicated that the mental health of LGBTQ students is particularly vulnerable (Asakura & Craig, 2014; Craig, McInroy, McCready, and Alaggia, 2015; D’Augelli & Grossman, 2009; Peter & Taylor, 2014; Wright & McKinley, 2011). Common themes found during the process of exiting a heterosexual identity were stress, shame, and depression. These concerns, as well as the finding that those who accessed campus counseling benefited

greatly, call for a reexamination of how higher education institutions are reaching out to support their LGBTQ populations. It is also important to consider how schools are currently using social media, with an eye towards how the growing use of Web 2.0 technology could contribute to queering educational spaces. Implications for LGBTQ supportive practices on campus are discussed further below.

### **Current Use of Social Media in Higher Education**

Some effort has been made to include social media in the classroom in order to encourage information sharing and awareness of diversity. This study found that users sought online spaces for community development, activism, and support. It is relevant to consider how current use of social media in higher education could be expanded to more robustly meet the needs of net generation students, particularly those who identify as LGBTQ. Luther and Pickering (2015) recognized the value of Web 2.0 technologies for learning in higher education; they integrated blogs into a preservice teaching course on diversity education. Graham (2014) also noted that social media networks “have enormous potential for teaching and learning in Higher Education, with their core function premised on connecting groups of people worldwide and encouraging them to create and share information” (p. 17). His research found that many students enjoyed the social dimension that online spaces could provide in a higher education setting. Social media provided the participants of this study with places to engage with others and express critical thinking. While some effort is being made to incorporate social media into academic and social campus settings, a more pointed effort could be made to include purposeful applications of social media. As a tool that gives power to student voices,

particular efforts could be made to ensure social media opportunities that connect marginalized voices on a scale broader than the classroom.

### **Restructuring Campus Supports for LGBTQ Students**

**A bridge to pride organizations.** For all of the bloggers examined, online communities were a significant means of connection to the LGBTQ community (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). As previously mentioned, LGBTQ groups in their current incarnations reach only a small segment of the student population. The users examined in this study ventured into LGBTQ specific group atmospheres only after a complex process of sexual identity work. Szulc and Dhoest (2013) found that prior to coming out, Internet use was significantly higher for young people, indicating the value of online support communities. Participants expressed some hesitation at being seen in attendance at LGBTQ groups, as well as speaking concern about finding others that they would “fit in” with (AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Matt, 2012). Providing an online social component to LGBTQ organizations could potentially reach a far greater number of individuals. Schaller (2011) wrote about a particular participant who was able to perceive an LGBTQ community on campus, while still feeling disconnected. She emphasizes that “To improve this, the informal communication within the student body has to be facilitated” (p. 110). She also mentions the need for privacy for LGBTQ participants, creating much challenge in developing appropriate supports. To address this issue, Miller (2016) suggests that “it might be useful for LGBTQ organizations to consider integrating more online community spaces where individuals can connect, anonymously and openly, in addition to offline events and programming” (p. 622). The desire for community

connection expressed by the bloggers indicates that such a space could reach a much larger number of marginalized students.

In addition to the aforementioned difficulties with accessing campus groups, students who commute or engage in online learning may not be having their needs for community and support appropriately met. Matt (2012) had trouble accessing on campus resources because of a commute to school. An online, anonymous, or password protected component to pride organizations would reach students who commute or learn online. Information needs could also be met online for those who may not have a regular connection to a campus library, or who might prefer additional privacy. Schaller (2011) found that having privacy “to access LGBTQ information secretly seems to be important for LGBTQ college students” (p. 109). Online spaces could provide vital information and support. Etengoff and Daiute (2015), Hillier et al. (2012), and Dentato et al. (2014) all emphasized the potential benefit of online spaces to support LGBTQ young people’s well-being, mentioning that these spaces provide transgressive narratives that position LGBTQ identities in a positive light. Currently, only a small portion of the LGBTQ campus community is able to access the important resources and supports available. An online, private component to pride groups would reach a much broader population.

**Supporting resilience.** The resilience of LGBTQ higher education students can be supported through efforts to improve mental health, sexual health, and opportunities for activism online. Each of these areas were touched on by all of the participants included in this study (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). As mentioned previously, stress, shame, and depression were felt by the bloggers as they exited a

heterosexual identity. Etengoff and Daiute (2015) found that bloggers reported: “online sense-making communications were healing” (p. 295). Average Gay Dude (2010) and Matt (2011) spoke about the value of support received from campus counseling services. An online component to campus counseling services would also serve to support a greater range of the student body, including those struggling with sexual identity challenges. Wright and McKinley (2011) mentioned that “proactive campuses” need to do “more to promote LGBT well being” (p. 145). Craig, McInroy, McCready, and Alaggia (2015) “found that media, especially online media, may be a catalyst for resilience” for LGBTQ identified young people (p. 269). Including an online, LGBTQ specific component to campus counseling services would help to improve resiliency.

As part of an effort to create an LGBTQ specific online system for support, issues of sexual health could also be addressed to promote resilience. Sexual relationship dynamics were discussed in each of the blogs or vlogs examined (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2015; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). Several participants asked readers sexual health questions, looking for advice (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; SOCRKID17, 2010). Hillier et al. (2012) found that for young LGBTQ people, “the Internet provided information about same-sex attraction and sexual health that was not available offline in sex-education classes or from parents” (p. 241). Providing safe, accurate, and useful sexual health information would support the well-being of LGBTQ identified higher education students as they navigate personal identity and relationships. Bond, Hefner and Drogos (2009) supported the need for this information when they “found that 70% of their gay, lesbian, and bisexual college sample used the Internet to gather sexual

orientation information” (as cited in Etengoff & Daiute, 2015, p. 279). Szulc and Dhoest (2013) also indicate that the Internet was frequently used to access sexual health information. The results of these authors, as well as the results of the current study, suggest the value of a concentrated online system to access community, counseling, and sexual health information.

Online systems also provide a mobilizing force to unite LGBTQ voices in activism. All of the bloggers’ spaces included in this study were used to support LGBTQ activism (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2016; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). Activism was both direct (such as speaking about LGBTQ marriage and employment rights) and indirect (visibly living out lives and providing support to LGBTQ peers). Becker and Copeland (2016) emphasized that “engaging in discrete connective acts, such as meeting new LGBTQ friends online or discussing LGBT issues in online forums” contribute to valuable networked publics (p. 26). These “networked publics offer an online space for a community of people to gather, connect, and mobilize others to action” (p. 23). The bloggers and vloggers included in this study were able to mobilize other online users to action by working to inspire them to develop similar online initiatives. Many of the posters involved suggested that they were motivated to create and maintain their spaces after finding similar weblogs helpful during their own sexual identity development (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2011). Having an online component to pride organizations that included support for mental and sexual health would help facilitate the sharing of marginalized voices. This process could create positive change for LGBTQ individuals and the campus beyond.

## **Queering the Campus**

Offering a comprehensive online community space for LGBTQ identified individuals to socialize, as well as access support and health information, could provide an avenue to combat homophobic attitudes. Providing a tool for increased connection can build student resilience and courage, potentially also leading to a more defined larger campus presence. In the cases examined, online participation was a bridge to living an out life (Average Gay Dude, 2010; AwesomeDudeErik, 2009; Jessica Tay, 2016; Kevin, 2012; Kris, 2012; Matt, 2011; SOCRKID17, 2010). Connecting with others online, reading stories, and gaining information helped individuals to feel more comfortable with their sexual identities. They then made efforts to help others who were experiencing similar challenges. Craig, McInroy, McCready, and Alaggia (2015) found that “active engagement online...allows LGBTQ youth a way to actively respond to environmental stressors and negative messages that they find empowering” (p. 266). Purposefully uniting queer voices online can work to disrupt the hegemonic heterosexual structures functioning in higher education institutions. Providing an online space that meets the needs of individuals at various stages of the coming out process would increase the visibility of more varied perspectives by including the voices of students who may not feel comfortable accessing current support models. A wider and more inclusive support option for LGBTQ individuals would allow for flexibility in expressing and affirming diverse queer identities. A well-supported, diverse LGBTQ population on campus, who experience less barriers to accessing community and health information, could lead to more visibility and a greater likelihood that heteronormative practices would be challenged.

Providing an online community aimed at the needs of the LGBTQ student population would be facilitating an online queer heterotopia. The presence of such an option would emphasize the value of a diverse student body. Jones (2009) suggested that “By creating queer heterotopias individuals are creating spaces where they force the larger heteronormative society to recognize queer bodies as viable on their own terms” (p. 6). Such spaces could function to critique social power imbalances that continually reemphasize a heteronormative experience. Tetrault et al. (2013) found that simply recognizing the experiences of LGBTQ students can help the higher education community to work towards a more inclusive climate. The presence of a more comprehensive online support network for LGBTQ higher education students would increase visibility on campus, both for the benefit of LGBTQ identified students and for heterosexual students. An atmosphere of acceptance of varied identities would challenge the status quo, dismantling assumptions of heterosexuality and binary reinforcing regulatory regimes.

Unfortunately, Wright and MicKinley (2011) noted that “LGBT targeted communications were the exception, rather than the norm” (p. 145). A targeted online effort towards supporting connection and sexual/mental health for LGBTQ students would provide the recognition necessary to begin to challenge heteronormative structures on campus. For LGBTQ identified or questioning students, a safe online space for community and information would allow them to feel valued and maintain mental and physical health. An initiative towards developing such a space would in turn potentially allow this population to feel more comfortable being visible on campus. Heteronormative perspectives of non-LGBTQ identifying students would then be challenged by a larger

campus atmosphere of support for diversity, as well as increased visibility and integration of the LGBTQ population.

### **Conclusion**

The higher education years are often a critical time in the sexual identity development of LGBTQ individuals (Asakura & Craig, 2014; D'Augelli, 1994, 2002; Evans et al., 2010). During this time, many young people are able to begin to question socially imposed norms (Stern, 2011). Increasingly, higher education students use social media in their everyday social and academic lives (Lupton, 2015; Valtonen et al., 2010). Higher education institutions can make use of online social media tools such as blogs and vlogs to support the student population. For marginalized members of the university community such as LGBTQ identified students, online environments offer a place for powerful narratives to be spoken. The online spaces of the individuals included in this study were places to work through coming to terms with and living a life as LGBTQ. They offered an avenue to transgress normative boundaries, both through simply “living out” and through direct efforts at activism. Stern (2011) emphasizes that the work towards queering online spaces can “spill out” to offline communities. Working towards queer heterotopias online can serve to positively deconstruct assumptions in the broader societal setting. The online spaces of higher education students who identify as queer are important places of social support and progress.

This study examined the blogs and vlogs of seven LGBTQ identified higher education students over a period of one year. It aimed to understand how they navigated their school and life experiences as LGBTQ online, as well as how they worked to queer online spaces. D'Augelli's (1994) lifespan model of sexual identity development was

used to frame the findings of the study. Evidence of each of the six stages were found within all of the blogs and vlogs examined; an additional seventh theme focused specifically on the university experience. Participants contributed to queer heterotopias online both through everyday acts transgressing the boundaries of sexual norms, and through purposefully questioning heteronormative social practices. Online social spaces offer community and agency to LGBTQ higher education students. Complex identity work took place for the users examined; it was clear that the online social world was an essential part of their sexual identity development journeys.

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